The *khana-yi aman*, often translated as “shelter” or literally “home of peace,” is a form of safe house in Afghanistan that was instituted to host women who are undergoing criminal trials for sexual transgressions or moral misconducts and who are on their way to or from prison. The *khana-yi aman* is one of the first institutions in post-Taliban Afghanistan to allow women to access the public without a male supporter and to register their protests without the threat of immediate retaliation. It is an exceptional space where women designated as promiscuous or adulterous wait to die or to be circulated back into the honor system of *pashtunwali* (Pashtun customary law) and Islam. By some accounts, there are approximately twenty such spaces across Afghanistan, mostly funded by nonlocal international and NGO sources. Despite the outside funding, the shelters or *khana-yi aman* are managed by local women and operate under the aegis of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which authorizes their rules, guidelines, and policies.

In the media, the *khana-yi aman* is posited within the conflict between a Western feminism epitomized by individualism and freedom and an Afghan social ethos characterized by patriarchal codes of honor. The *khana-yi aman* has drawn global scrutiny, perhaps because the actions that lead the women there cloud the distinction between what is deemed lawful and local, and what is seen as dangerously close to prohibited and outside. This chapter is based on ethnographic accounts documented at a *khana-yi aman* in Kabul during fieldwork undertaken during 2011 and 2012. The chapter explores the narratives of accusation and rejection that surround sexually promiscuous women in Afghanistan, as well as how

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*I have sinned a rapturous sin*
*in a warm enflamed embrace,*
sinned in a pair of vindictive arms,
arms violent and ablaze.

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225
some women construct, inhabit, and navigate their marginalized worlds. Focusing on the life stories of five women who ended up at the *khana-yi aman* for varying reasons, the narrative histories drawn on in this chapter elucidate the anxieties and ambivalences that undergird conversations across Afghanistan about Islam, sexuality, gender, and transgression. The precarious life histories of the women who administer and inhabit the various *khana-yi aman* illustrate how unfamiliar and dangerous forms of sexual expression may be rendered culturally and Islamically intelligible through clever social maneuvers.

Drawing on my ethnographic work, the chapter traces the positioning of a particular *khana-yi aman* in Kabul within the broader institutional framework of politics, Islam, and feminism in Afghanistan. The *khana-yi aman* situates itself cumbersomely into this contested framework as it appropriates the vocabulary of Islam toward a modern politics of feminism. The *khana-yi aman* demonstrates that the production of gendered knowledge regarding a proper Islamic moral ethos has to do with modern systems of power and their enactment in everyday life as much as it does with specific interpretations of Islamic texts. Hegemonic discourses undoubtedly shape cultural stances but cannot completely explain the attitudes and relations that are manifest in everyday life. There is a possibility of transformation by inhabiting the norms toward different ends than they are intended for. The state does not recognize some *khana-yi aman* practices as Islamic, and through this refusal, women lay claim to a hegemonic religious discourse that has historically excluded them. That is to say that there are always schisms between the societal ideals of Islam that the community has imagined for itself and how these norms are enacted in everyday practices. For example, the *khana-yi aman* women create religious subtexts that are attached to the dominant Islamic discourses but nonetheless potentiate spaces for different forms of communal relations.\(^6\) For instance, as the ethnographic data reveal, while enacting their sexual promiscuity, deemed as un-Islamic, the women pray five times a day and fast during Ramadan. By rendering marginal the conventional practices of praying and fasting, the women create spaces in the Islamic honor system within which they can fashion their own worlds.

**INHABITING PROMISCUOUS PERIPHERIES**

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has argued that the state of exception inextricably entwines the logic of inclusion to the logic of exclusion. Thus, the state is bound not by the social bond “but rather on the dissolution, the unbinding it prohibits.”\(^7\) The women at the *khana-yi aman* were outliers regardless of the community to which they belonged. This loss of belonging underscores the failure of integration for promiscuous female actors across communal groups. These ostracisms, ambiguities, and ambivalences render the *khana-yi aman* a zone of
social abandonment, in that it disrupts and unbinds the social logics that undergird principles of honor and sexual propriety. The topographical differentiation of gender, piety, and class is suspended when women enter the khana-yi aman, since as noted by a resident called Huma, they become collective whores living in exile there. Although modes of interpretation varied, the narrative motifs surrounding each inhabitant’s life story shared the cultural scripts of promiscuity, abandonment, and marginality.

The margins are the places of abandonment and instability where the honor discourse is constantly disintegrated. Applying to the khana-yi aman concepts that have emerged in recent academic studies of abandonment brings nuance to the binaries (normal/abnormal, legible/illegible, inclusion/exclusion, legal/illegal, center/periphery) that have dominated the study of the Afghan state and its presumed margins. Examining sexually promiscuous actors purported to be outside the boundaries of Islamic morality and honor helps us realize that this is precisely where the discursive systems of Islam and pashtunwali are placed in negotiation and contestation. Far from concealing the perversity of sexually promiscuous actors and their actions, the khana-yi aman reveals and illuminates the robust nature of a vibrant political configuration that allows for difference and conflict. Rethinking the concept of the margins in these terms moves us away from prevalent descriptions of the Afghan state as fragmented, failed, and unstable to an understanding that ultimately lawlessness and illegibility are constitutive of any political project.

**ISLAM AS AN OBJECT OF FEMINISM**

The relationship between what is understood as feminist politics and what has come to be theorized as Islam has been increasingly the focus of anthropological scholarship and academic debate. Conceptualizing the relationship between Islam and feminism not only engenders the framework for analyzing everyday life in Afghanistan but also reveals the attitudes and beliefs that undergird the relationship between feminist politics and everyday Islamic practices. The khana-yi aman fits into this contested framework, because it appropriates the vocabulary of Islam toward a politics of feminism. Since the refuge enables women to initiate nikah (legal marriage contracts) and talaq (legal divorce contracts) without consent from their relatives, it is viewed as promoting communal anarchy by disrupting the most essential societal unit in Islam: the family. In this sense, the khana-yi aman underlines the old Afghan struggle between feminist activism and religious reform. When the Afghan ruler Amir ‘Abd al-Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901) imposed restrictions on underage marital unions and bride prices, he legitimated these reforms as “an attempt to align customary social practices with the prescriptions of Islam.” Thus, even when major reforms were initiated, they
were meticulously sourced to specific interpretations of Islamic principles. More recently, the main method used to consolidate power by the Taliban was to implement stringent measures against sexual transgression. Individual indiscretions in the private realm now necessitated social retributions in the public.\textsuperscript{13} However, the conflict surrounding the *khana-yi aman* is not merely limited to visibility of women in the public but is a fundamental threat to social cohesion and communal harmony. The familial conflicts that embattle the lives of the women who end up at the shelter lead to unanticipated and unpleasant consequences. Running away brings shame and embarrassment to families and forces them to negotiate with the women via the family courts. A *khana-yi aman* administrator called Wahida told me that the intention was not to disrupt family values or damage the family reputation but to achieve legislative ends, invariably via divorce or marriage. Although the legislative ends of marriage and divorce are not outside the bounds of Islamic principles, they still threaten to disintegrate traditional Islamic notions of the family.

It is for these reasons that the relationship of the Afghan state with the *khana-yi aman* unfolds on the registers of Islam, law, and sexual ethics. Promiscuous relations have rarely been meaningfully integrated into any Afghan or Islamic symbolic system, as familial relationships are configured around the traditional, monogamous, heterosexual marital unit. Symbolic anthropology has taught us that all familial units are somehow fictional, albeit rendered intelligible within their own symbolic universe.\textsuperscript{14} Reading cultures as webs of significance, interpretive anthropology would have us focus on making visible the underlying structures that make social actors and their social actions manifest.\textsuperscript{15} Since kinship relations pivot on the marital unit, which forms the basis of institutional configurations, its analysis saturates most works of anthropology.

Moreover, most institutional configurations map the social contract onto the sexual contract. The mapping of the social contract onto the sexual contract allows the state to order and organize appropriate gender relations as it regulates feminine bodies in the public.\textsuperscript{16} Female sexual fidelity is a primary attribute undergirding marital unions and familial relations. Since the familial unit grounds itself on the chastity and sexual propriety of the female, promiscuous women are unfit to be mothers, wives, daughters, or sisters. These normative conceptions of propriety and morality are embedded in various social and historical texts that seek to produce the ideal woman at the center of the Afghan family.\textsuperscript{17} Such narratives assign the capability for legitimate procreation as a feminine obligation. Thus, the *khana-yi aman* is closely linked to moral corruption and parental disobedience. This connection was made palpably public when the Afghan Minister of Justice gave these comments about the shelter: “Mostly they were encouraging girls, saying, ‘If your father says anything bad to you, don’t listen to him; if your mother says anything to you, don’t listen. . . . There are safe houses for you where you can stay.’
What safe houses? What sort of immorality and prostitution was not happening at those places?”

Even the Afghan Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which has the ostensible responsibility of protecting the shelters, has severe perceptions of the moral degradation seemingly encouraged by the shelter’s staff. These suspicions translate into close monitoring policies such as psychological tests and monthly medical examinations. In addition, the extensive examinations instituted by the government in order to regulate access to the *khana-yi aman* now include virginity tests conducted on admission. This insistence on regulating and disciplining feminine bodies at the shelters is based on apprehensions that women are being misled about their Islamic rights and obligations.

The staff at the *khana-yi aman* told me that these measures were taken by the government to appease the Taliban, since gender rights were the foremost bargaining chips to be used in governmental negotiations. Feminists often accuse the government of threatening the shelters every time it seeks to appease the Taliban or conservative social elements. However the vulnerability of the *khana-yi aman*’s social position within Afghanistan may be traced back to a pre-Taliban era when the Afghan state reluctantly began instituting religious reforms but refused to actuate practical transformations regarding gender laws. Nancy Dupree has explained this reluctance in terms of political expediency, as a way of appeasing the conservative elements in society and tapping into their social clout. The concerns of many contemporary feminists have echoed this sentiment by pointing to the perilous sharing of power and precarious negotiations conducted between the Taliban and the Karzai government (2001–14). Even when women are afforded a seat at the table, the shelter is the first institution that comes under attack and the one that many female politicians are eager to forsake.

Islamic discourse has a distinct potency for influencing and mobilizing political activism in Afghanistan. Even women’s-rights organizations, such as the Afghan Women’s Network, have tactically deployed Islamic discourse to advance feminist agendas. But modern institutional formations proximate to the *khana-yi aman* have triggered negative reactions, particularly since such establishments are viewed as contradicting Islamic principles of morality. The administrator Wahida emphasized that the way she understood Islam was not as a static or homogenous entity but as a means of fashioning oneself toward one’s highest ethical self. Since religious conservatives often introduce Islamic theology in political negotiations as a means to implement unfavorable laws toward women, the strategy of invoking Islam for opposite ends is an astute one. Although not venturing too far from the prescriptive codes of Islamic moral behavior, the *khana-yi aman* has demonstrated unexpected maneuverability in nuancing and expanding strict interpretations of Shari’a family law, specifically as they pertain to sexual comportment and gender organization in the public. In these political negotiations surrounding the *khana-yi aman*, Islam emerges as a discursive tradition that connects and creates
the formation of moral selves or, in the words of Nile Green, as a “body of terms, concepts, and categories for rendering the world knowable, but which however influential and even hegemonic is never the sole frame of reference for any society.”

INVERTING SECULARISM, SUBVERTING ISLAM AND PASHTUNWALI

Conventionally *pashtunwali* has been read as a centralized discourse expounding the rules of conduct for ordinary Afghans. Reading *pashtunwali* from its extremities, from within the worlds of the women, demonstrates its pervasiveness and persistence and why, despite attempts to reconcile it to state apparatuses, it continues to persist as separate and distinct, and is mobilized effectively within marginal spaces such as the *khana-yi aman*. *Pashtunwali* enacts principles of self-mastery—such as *milmastiya* (Pashto: hospitality), *nanawatai*’ (Pashto: protection’), and *sabat* (Pashto: loyalty)—that would lead to a properly cultivated being through an individualized personal ethic. *Milmastiya* is one of the ways of transforming monetary capital into social capital. The *hujra* (Pashto: communal area) is the primary space for enacting *milmastiya* and is an exclusively masculine domain. This narrative of hospitality is intricately entwined with shelter or protection (*nanawatai’*), in which turning away those who ask for shelter is akin to having no dominion over women’s mobility. Both behaviors are marked by social embarrassment and as such are better avoided to maintain respect in society. In appropriating these principles of self-mastery for purposes radically other than are usually intended, *khana-yi aman* women seek to disrupt the ethical formation of *pashtunwali*. Thus, inhabitants of the shelter orient the discursive practices of *pashtunwali* toward ends that were not anticipated in the hegemonic male discourse. It is in this maneuver of inversion that the ingenuity of the *khana-yi aman* can be seen.

The uncomfortable positioning of the shelter within Afghan society, where it is at once hidden and visible, underlines the anxieties and apprehensions surrounding conversations of gender and sexuality. The *khana-yi aman* delimits the parameters of signification that are available to female actors by befuddling the frequent representation of the Afghan woman as docile and obedient. The women find tactics and maneuvers that complicate and challenge hegemonic discourses of both Islam and *pashtunwali*. Moreover, they agitate the continuity and stability with which they have been positioned within various social and political formations. The *milmastiya* (hospitality) practices in which the women of the *khana-yi aman* participate bind them together in complex ways. With regard to Yemen, Ann Meneley has shown that Muslim women can exchange and accumulate social capital through complex social relations called *khuruj*. As she explains, “*khuruj* is a competitive practice in that one’s family’s place in the community—their
honour—must continually be recognized by regular visits from those with whom one has connections.” These social relations pivot on hospitality practices that cultivate the female subject position and condition feminine culture. At the *khana-yi aman*, for example, there are elaborate rules for sharing food and space regardless of the inhabitant’s social status. Women participate in practices of hospitality, friendship, and refuge that condition the formation of their community and protect it despite its marginality.

Gestures and statements made at the *khana-yi aman* seek not only to dismantle the gender hierarchies that are inherent in Islamic jurisprudence but also to disintegrate identity politics that have long characterized what it means to be a Muslim woman, a Pashtun, and an Afghan. By deliberately abandoning any form of respectable or Islamic politics, the *khana-yi aman* opens up radically unprecedented possibilities for feminism. While various forms of female discontent in Afghanistan and other Muslim societies have been studied, rarely have these forms destabilized the hegemonic discourses in any meaningful manner. The everyday life of the *khana-yi aman* both represents and disrupts the moral orders that it inhabits. The *khana-yi aman* stands apart from other forms of social discontent as the only form of feminist struggle that actively seeks to reject honor distributions in their current formations. There is in this disavowal both a reification and rejection of the power hierarchies in which the shelter is situated: the women residents accept the accusations leveled against them while rejecting those moral judgments as the only arbitrators of their moral worth. *Khana-yi aman* supporters form the only movement that promises an uncertain future. In embracing accusations of selfishness, narcissism, and anarchy, the *khana-yi aman* reimagines the possibilities of communal belonging. Promiscuity, then, becomes the mechanism not of achieving equality with men but of reimagining equality itself.

Most feminists and activists outside the shelter viewed the women who ran it with suspicion and repulsion. I befriended Nahida, who managed an NGO for gender equality and yet was quick to separate herself from the “whores of the *khana-yi aman*.” After emphasizing her Muslim identity, she began underscoring the disparaging woes of modern secularism, the foremost among which was the promiscuity of women. Elevating herself above the riffraff whom she considered the *khana-yi aman* women to be, Nahida underscored the difference between piety and promiscuity, affluence and depravity. In her comments, she noted that her economically respectable family and followers of Islamic precepts of piety would never indulge in sexually permissive actions. Here, promiscuous behavior was tied to economic disenfranchisement. Nahida’s statements reveal the dominance of negative stereotypes that are associated with promiscuous women, who are automatically relegated to a lower-class status. Slowly, I started to understand the political potency of the verbal and physical expressions of rejection, which were deliberate attempts to situate the shelter at the margins of society. The
ethnographic excerpts from female parliamentarian Nurzia provided later in this chapter demonstrate that more than economic disenfranchisement and social impoverishment bound the women of the khana-yi aman. Some women there, such as Nadia, who had left her abusive husband, were hoping to join the female police force for gainful employment. Ironically, one of the purposes of the female Afghan police force trained by the American army was to enforce laws against sexually promiscuous women! Women like Nurzia and Nadia are therefore caught within power networks that reinforce each other in organizing hierarchical gender relations. In finding ways to negotiate these power networks, the khana-yi aman women face tremendous obstacles and have to navigate complex subject positions to find spaces for political action.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCE OF PROMISCUITY

Many inhabitants at the khana-yi aman admired the poetry of Furugh Farukhzad (Forugh Farrokhzad, 1935–67), and conversations were often interspersed with verses from her popular poems. The epigraph to this chapter is one of her poems. Passionate love that relinquished the world for the sake of the beloved had a coveted status among young girls, most of whom had studied classical poetry and could recite their favorite verses with fervent enthusiasm. Whether we understand this experience of love as a historical effect of reading Persian literature or as a product of popular cinema, it inevitably conditioned their subjectivity to dissent with reckless abandon. The life story was often told of Rabia bint Ka'b al-Quzdari (fl. ca. 914–43?), the beloved semilegendary Afghan poetess who tragically gave her life for the love of a Turkish slave. The emphasis was placed on how her life had been ended by her own brother Haris, who found the relationship intolerable and set out to punish both Rabia and her lover, Baktash. Since most women were at the khana-yi aman because of analogous violent confrontations with their own close kin, such historical narratives resonated in deeply meaningful ways.

The khana-yi aman has organized itself around the cultural logic of love, hospitality, and friendship, in which the shelter readily accepts even those who may disintegrate its very foundations. The administrator Wahida emphatically emphasized how she would take these women back again even if their love adventures met with failure, even if they destroyed the shelter. Huma, another inhabitant, explained that:

We are stuck, first with our fathers, then with our husbands. Our brothers stifle us. Why can’t we choose whom to marry? Who says our fathers, brothers, uncles know us best? They don’t. We know we are used by our fathers and brothers to gain respect in their communities. We are not stupid. Don’t listen to those outside. We came here
ourselves. We are not stupid. Here, look around me. These women here are my father, my brother, and my uncle, my god, my religion. I don't know anyone else, anything else. We are seen as whores just because we dared to step outside. Our transgressions bind us.

Homosocial bonding has a long history in Muslim societies. Among the Taliban, male connectedness was promoted to form cohesive communities and build trust among its members. Such homosocial bonding was also ever-present at the khana-yi aman, where women inversely connected with each other in many ways, from their shared precariousness to the doctrinal discourses that marked them as dangerous. The norms that shaped the everyday routines of the khana-yi aman community were in some ways gendered, and they reproduced the gender hierarchies outside the shelter. These included wearing the burqa when stepping outside the shelter buildings. But in many ways the norms and routines of the khana-yi aman challenged and inverted the gender organization of everyday life in Afghanistan. Some women admitted having adulterous affairs or participating in other illicit actions that would have caused moral panic in another institution. When socially rebellious actions were discovered, the shelter’s staff handled them in an uncannily calm manner. The marginality of their actions drew the khana-yi aman women together and strengthened their bonding.

When I first obtained permission to live at the shelter in Kabul, a staff member called Halima escorted me to the building. We walked past a garbage dump, jumped over several gutters, and finally stopped in front of a nondescript gate. The building was locked from the outside, so she asked me again if I was willing to step inside. Everything had to be done quickly so as not to raise the suspicions of the neighbors, who didn’t have much information about the khana-yi aman. Halima explained that I could not bring any visitors to the shelter and that I must stay there for lengthy periods of time. Short-duration stays were discouraged. Every woman who entered had to relinquish all her worldly belongings, right down to the clothes on her back. Families would often direct their anger both at their daughters and at those who were trying to help them at the khana-yi aman. Amara, one of the managers, spoke of an instance when she was waiting in the car for one of the shelter’s inhabitant to obtain identity documents when she realized that there was a gun pointed at her head. The man holding the gun was the girl’s father, who accused Amara of corrupting his daughter and humiliating his family. Amara’s driver saw the encounter through the rear-view mirror and stepped on the gas before shots could be fired. Amara and other staff members told me that such incidents were not unusual. It was for these reasons that the women were not allowed to have cell phones or any communication with the outside world. This was taken very seriously: the khana-yi aman was constantly under attack. Indeed, as I later came to realize, it was not uncommon to wake up to the sound of shooting and gunfire. On
one such occasion after the predawn meal (suhur) during Ramadan, I woke up to loud banging noises and shattered glass. As I sat up on the floor, a supervisor who lived at the khana-yi aman called Gulala’i gestured me to go back to sleep. Later that day, the guard told us that the British consul nearby had been bombed.

When I first arrived at the shelter, a female doctor, Huma, gave me a tour of the building. Huma had received her medical training in Pakistan and lived with her extended family, who thought she was working at a woman’s clinic. I asked her how she knew about the khana-yi aman. “I read the newspaper,” she laughed. “My husband doesn’t read anything, but I am educated.” Even as they sought to help them, Huma and the managers had a certain disdain for the actions of the women. The four lawyers who fought the women’s cases were young and enthusiastic, willing to go to extraordinary lengths to win their day in court. But they too shared a certain contempt for the actions of the promiscuous women at the khana-yi aman. It was often implied that they were “mentally unstable” and in need of religious and psychological counseling. Indeed, the rehabilitation program at the shelter included mandatory psychological counseling and Islamic classes. Every word and sentence used to describe the women marked them as socially other to a mythical system of Islamic honor. A female psychologist would make weekly visits and counsel the women. Yet these sessions were complemented by Quran circles in which women would read and discuss specific Quranic verses and Hadith.

In Ramadan, after the breaking of the fast (iftar), we would make a circle and reflect on the difficulty of a summer Ramadan; we would exchange anecdotes about how we all ended up at the khana-yi aman; we would narrate ongoing administrative and court encounters; we would go over details of pending court proceedings and predict their outcomes; we would comfort those with particularly difficult cases. On one early morning in Ramadan, I sat with Huma and Amara in one of the bedrooms on the first floor when Suhaila came in, visibly upset. She was holding the strands of the threads and pearls that she used to weave handicrafts. A brilliant craftswoman, she used these to weave miniature handcrafts either for her own amusement or for sale to outsiders. She sat down and protested at having to continuously answer the question why she was here. I remembered reading her file, which said that she had run away with her teacher, that she was jailed while she was pregnant, and that her husband and child had died in prison. Amara gestured for everyone to leave the room. Huma motioned me to stay. Suhaila continued:

I am tired. I say I am tired. I am so tired. I lied. I have lied. My husband did not impregnate me. My father’s brother did. My father’s brother raped me. My father didn’t want to go after his brother so he forced my qalin-bafi ustad [carpet-weaving teacher], Muhammad, to marry me. I liked Muhammad. I did. We used to joke sometimes. My father threatened him, and he had to marry me. The child was not his. The child was not Muhammad’s. My uncle knocked at the door one day when I was home alone. I opened the door. He came in, hit me, and raped me. I lost con-
When Muslims Become Feminists

consciousness. When I woke up, no one was there, and I was wearing clean clothes. Did my father punish me for joking with Muhammad? Then we were jailed, Muhammad and I, because I was pregnant at the time of marriage. We both went to jail. The baby died. The baby died in my arms. My baby died in my arms. Muhammad left me. He is not dead.

As Suhaila said this, her entire body shook with the vigor of her words. She formed her words in chants as she rocked her body back and forth, her head sideways. “Yes, I speak to him. I speak to him when the moon comes out. The moon gives him my messages.” Then she continued, now reciting poetry in Dari Persian:

*Life upon me has brought cruelties, while upon others it brings tranquilities.*
*The best days of my youth were spent under the locks of a prison.*
The magnitude of my sorrows saturates my soul.
Youthful looks conceal the decrepit depths of my soul.
Happiness did not visit me in my youth.
The fate of my youth was thus destined.
The storms of tears fill the sorrows of my heart.
The laughter on my lips obscures the secrets of my soul.
Life has rendered you sinful unto me.
The prison of my youth has separated me from you, you from me.

Showing no intention of interrupting Suhaila’s chants, Amara held her in a tight grip as she rocked back and forth. Huma and I sat on each side watching the pearls scatter across the carpet. Amara gently tugged at Suhaila’s hair and placed her head on her shoulder. As they moved with the rhythm of the verses, we all cried. Huma and I began picking the scattered pearls and placing them back in Suhaila’s hands. Then Amara started speaking, softly but forcefully, moving the pearls in Suhaila’s hands. She said:

You are not answerable to anyone about why you are here. Look at me. This is your home. We are your family. We are your friends. If anyone asks you again, send them to me. You can weave the pearls of your life story any way you like. You have the permission to tell the story of your life the way you want.

Then she added with a smile, “Now, whose turn is it to cook tonight’s dinner?” A few hours later, I saw Suhaila peeling potatoes on the front verandah for that evening’s dinner. She saw me looking at her, smiled, and waved at me with a nonchalance that turned the earlier melodrama into a fantastical memory.

In Afghanistan, narratives of poetic protest are often read within the gendered paradigm of self-sacrifice according to which demonstrating continuity is imperative for social cohesion. The stories of all the women at the *khana-yi aman* underlined a break in such continuity and cohesion, a failure of conciliation and negotiation. Suhaila’s verses ostensibly communicated self-sacrifice, despondency,
and resignation, which in conjunction with her bodily gestures suggested expressions of wretchedness and abandonment. But her presence at the shelter signifies more than self-sacrifice and resignation. It can also be read as a rebellion and revolt against systems of gender organization. Her poem questions her subjugation through social norms while also noting the complicity of her family in perpetuating societal standards based on Islamic ideals of honor. These blatant gestures of running away and confrontation do not fit into the archetype of continuity and cohesion. Instead, they register a defiance that is rarely visible in public.
Such capacity for resilience and rebellion is central to understanding the subjectivity of the khana-yi aman women. Suhaila’s story was hardly unique there: it resonated with other narratives of violence that I heard and witnessed. After meals, it was customary to sit in circles and recount stories of love and violence. These often led to deep conversations about women’s position vis-à-vis the legal justice system in Afghanistan. Some women would sit beside the circle and knit or watch television. All the women recounted their stories of love, violence, and abandonment with trepidation and anticipation. Rahmin had circled her house ten times before she found her way onward. “I kept seeing my husband’s shoes through my burqa and I knew I was back in the same place. It took me two hours to orient myself. I did not know what was out there, but I knew I could no longer bear what was in there.” Suhaila told the story of love but had been in fact been raped and subjected to unthinkable violence. By highlighting the rigor of the norms undergirding gender organization in her family, norms that caused her to run away, Suhaila underlines the marginality and abandonment she experienced. The fact that her child had died in her arms and that she was forced to bury him in jail expresses the sense of emotional and physical captivity that imprisoned her youth. The poem communicates her marginal positionality within the gendered social and cultural order, a positionality that limits her emancipatory capacities and that places restrictive demands on her youth.

Another resident, Gulnaz, came to the khana-yi aman directly from jail.\textsuperscript{30} As I made my way to the shelter from the main office one day, I saw several journalists lined up outside the office. Such visits were common when the life story of a particular khana-yi aman inhabitant gained international attention, as did occasionally happen. This time it was the story of Gulnaz, who had been imprisoned for adultery and had given birth to a daughter while in jail. This story circulated news outlets and made headlines worldwide. President Karzai himself announced a pardon for Gulnaz in a rare and bold political act that eventually saw her released from jail. Although the case of Gulnaz shared many details with other life stories of those at the shelter, it was not unusual that only a few women here received global attention. I had the opportunity to spend time with Gulnaz while she was at the khana-yi aman. She spoke of her circumstances with a measured poise and a composed pragmatism that would elicit admiration from the most hardened souls. Not unlike Suhaila’s, her rape had become public because of her pregnancy. Although it was not clear if it was a condition of her release from jail, she said that she had agreed to marry her rapist. I asked her if she felt afraid or insecure about this decision, and she replied, “I am not afraid of the consequences of my decision, or what the future holds.” She noted how the system must account for her and would eventually take care of her.

One morning Gulala’i called me, hardly able to hide her excitement. She told me to come to the shelter immediately as she had a big surprise in store for me.
“Come quickly,” she said impatiently; “Someone very special is at the shelter today.” She hung up before I could ask any questions. I cut short my break and hurried to the khana-yi aman. As Gulala’i opened the door, I could hear excited chatter from one of the rooms on the first floor. “A parliamentarian is here. A real parliamentarian,” Gulala’i laughed as she led me to the room. As she opened the door, she whispered in my ear, “And we thought we were the only wretched ones!” Nurzia was perhaps the most influential woman I encountered at the shelter. On this exceptional occasion I saw the bed in use. Nurzia sat perched high on it like a queen. I joined the captivated circle of admirers on the floor. Nurzia immediately had the awe and respect of all the women, who would often gather around her bed asking questions about her role in parliament. As Nurzia had helped a woman who had just obtained permission to marry her lover with her bridal clothes and makeup, she educated the rest of us on the art of dressing well and commanding respect. Gulala’i introduced me as a researcher from the United States, and Nurzia immediately turned her attention to me. “I am proud to be an Afghan. Do you understand? I do not want to belong to any other country.” She went on to narrate the violence she had experienced. She said she had spent her youth focusing on her career but eventually decided to settle into a marriage. Then, the way her husband treated her came as a surprise. “One day, my husband held a knife to my throat and banged my head several times into the wall.” She said her family had proposed reconciliation with her husband, which is why she ended up at the khana-yi aman. “My male family members are friends with him and on his side,” she said.

In order for their voices to be heard and for the khana-yi aman lawyers to fight their cases, the women must leave their homes and enter the domain of the public. When they run away from home they leave behind the private realm (dakhili) or the family (khanawada). This entrance into the public marks the beginning of something new and unprecedented in Afghanistan. Their ostracism exemplifies a severe form of punishment and discloses the breakdown of negotiation. The anxious conversations surrounding these promiscuous actors reveal the unlikelihood of their integration while continually working toward assimilation. They also demonstrate the hardships faced by sexually aberrant persons as they seek to reintegrate in the social and cultural order. The fact that reintegration is rendered impossible by their illegitimate actions reveals the limits of the social scripts available to women for sexual expression. The burden that the khana-yi aman places on the hegemonic discourses forces us to reevaluate the explanatory frameworks through which promiscuity and illegitimate sexual relations are understood in contemporary Afghanistan. Running away consigns the typically concealed acts of rebellion and defiance to the realm of the public, where they must be registered and accounted for in unprecedented ways. It is this exceptional status of the khana-yi aman that announces the possibility of something new in Afghanistan.
Ostensibly, the fact that the families were present at the family-law court already signifies a failure of familial negotiation. However, when I witnessed these public confrontations, it was apparent that unlike the state regulations that consolidate and confine the scripts of gender relations and sexual expression, the family negotiations in court involved labyrinthine bargaining entreaties and protracted melodramatic performances that unlocked the space for dissent and difference. Husbands whose wives had initiated divorce would often be accompanied by their cousins, relatives, parents, and first wives. Parents whose daughters had run away to get married would often bring multiple family members for support. Everything was available for contestation and debate in these lengthy negotiations. During the deliberations, families would come in with presupposed notions about honorable identity, such as “ghayrati [honorable, prideful] father” and “nang [honorable, prideful] brother.” As the conversations continued, all these assumed identities became visible before being questioned, negotiated, or challenged. By forcing family courts to account for worlds and attitudes that they had not anticipated, the presuppositions and frames of reference that undergird relations of gender and sexuality were shaken to the core.

CONCLUSIONS

The ways in which khana-yi aman inhabitants and administrators mobilize restricted legal resources to achieve favorable juridical ends and maneuver positive social outcomes enable them admittance into a public to which they have typically been denied access. Within these seemingly ordinary maneuvers lies the extraordinariness of the khana-yi aman. Elsewhere it has been argued that admission to the public does not necessarily result in sexual progress and gender equality. For example, Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown that when women accessed the public realm in Iran, the sexual richness and complexity of their linguistic expression vanished and became rescripted into bodily restraint and chastity.\footnote{Deniz Kandiyoti has made a similar argument with regard to Turkey.} While the shelter engenders the public by opening a space for feminine representation, close ethnographic observation reveals a similar trajectory of co-option and coercion by the Afghan state. When state representatives call the khana-yi aman women prostitutes and the khana-yi aman itself a brothel, their rhetorical tactic is to subjugate certain forms of sexual expression by marking them as threatening.\footnote{However, the modalities of action displayed at the shelter in Afghanistan are qualitatively different from those of Turkish or Iranian narratives. At the khana-yi aman, the women challenge hegemonic discourses by manipulating the very techniques and apparatus of power that seek to subjugate and position them as inferior.} Power apparatuses are inextricably tied to sexual relations.\footnote{In this way, the sexual promiscuity of the khana-yi aman women may be read as a capacity for}
action that disrupts the relationality through which Afghan power hierarchies operate. The shelter thus enables us to engender Afghanistan’s history by creating a space for rupture and irregularity, because it forces us to question traditional representations of sexually rebellious actions. These traditional representations explain moral aberrations through unchanging and continuous schemas that place undue emphasis on conformity and continuity. The khana-yi aman creates a space of negotiation and difference where kinship connections that accentuate lineage and procreation can be negotiated and reproduced. What counts as kinship can be reoriented toward unknown horizons.

On the one hand, running away to the shelter creates a radical rupture with the familial unit by directly inserting the authority of the Afghan state. On the other hand, the gesture of refusal and the vigorous social drama that it entails in public repositions khana-yi aman women as active agents involved in a process of self-determination. Since the shelter’s residents actively inhabit the cultural repertoire of rejection and refusal, they show that Afghan women are not voiceless or passive victims deprived of agency, unable to influence the social hierarchies that implicate them.

Given the unpredictability of their stay there, the associations that women forge with each other at the khana-yi aman are transitory. The shelter has a permanent side for cases that last for more than three years, and a transit side for shorter litigations. It is this transitory nature of the alliance that gives it its political potency and renders it unlike other institutions that enable female bonding, such as dormitories and workplaces. Most of the women whose life stories are shared in this chapter have now moved out of the shelter, as a result either of reaching a resolution through court proceedings or of attaining settlements through personal negotiations with their families outside the courtroom. Other institutions that allow women access to the public (such as dormitories, schools, and workplaces) enact restrictions on proper comportment and gender interaction that may not challenge the social order. In these other spaces, gender hierarchies are reified by making women the protectors of their own moral propriety. Not unlike the Iranian women about whom Afsaneh Najmabadi has written, in these other Afghan cases access to the public sphere is entwined with self-policing of sexual chastity. This holds true for most public institutions in Afghanistan. The only exception I found was the khana-yi aman. Although it adheres to broad rules of gender interaction (for example, its residents sometimes wear a burqa in public), the shelter does not place limitations over allowed or prohibited sexual actions.

The women I met there were at once free and imprisoned, driven to the shelter by individual choice and yet bound by the social logics of culture and community. Taking an ethnographic stance toward the khana-yi aman enables us to move away from the binaries of lawful/prohibited, individual/social, or freedom/oppression that dominate studies of gender in Islamic contexts. Even though the shelter was a closely monitored space when I studied it during 2011 and 2012, it nevertheless
provided runaway women with an opportunity to construct a new lifeworld in which they could obtain legal, economic, and social resources to design their own destinies. Within the confines of the *khana-yi aman*, women expressed themselves freely; they danced and played music; they debated controversial issues; they watched television; they took part in contested conversations. Relative to wider society, the *khana-yi aman* symbolizes what is, relative to the rest of society, an open space where women choose between multiple subject positions and show remarkable maneuverability to negotiate their futures. For these reasons, it fosters anxieties about imperial influence and exploitation of Afghan women, which in turn push it further toward the peripheries of society.

This chapter's attempt to reconsider the question of the Afghan state through its peripheries not only maps the rationalities and administrative realities of bureaucratic politics. It also highlights the gaps and ruptures where the state has failed to integrate and socialize its subjects. Today the study of margins is more relevant than ever as anthropological scholarship has moved away from culture or society as the foremost explanatory paradigm to explain institutional forms, personal behaviors, social relations, or self-representations. By contrast, the anthropology of difference and suffering focuses on the schisms and silences that interweave hegemonic states and force them to account for dissolution, abandonment, and violence within their territories. The focus here on the *khana-yi aman* dislocates the question of how to maintain order in orderless societies to emphasize instead how to study failure, disintegration, and anarchy as constitutive parts of any political project. The *khana-yi aman* forces the Afghan state to account for its failures and to confront its peripheries.