

Unpacking Afghan Truths

Saman Farah

Abstract: Decades of war, and yet Afghans continue to face adversity anywhere they go. This narrative sheds light on the current struggles of my experience as a Canadian Afghan Muslim woman who has been trying to educate those around me about the power imbalance and unethical divide between international communities and how Afghan women are viewed. This narrative discusses the importance of an intersectional approach while working with marginalized communities, such as Afghans, and practicing cultural humility, ethical reflexivity, truth-telling, and self-awareness.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, girl, decolonization

Beautiful Afghanistan. To many, this phrase may seem like an oxymoron, but to me, it is a phrase I grew up hearing. I am a Canadian Afghan Muslim woman who was born and raised in Canada. Ironically, even though my family fled a Western occupation, they fled to a Western land. In this narrative, I will provide some background on my upbringing and the difficulty that came with watching my homeland be bombed for decades. I will then highlight the struggle between my Afghan roots and Canadian culture that I constantly faced as a Canadian Afghan Muslim woman in Canada, a struggle many Canadian Afghan women face. This narrative will highlight intersectionality as a framework and the importance of cultural humility and sensitivity.

With gunshots ringing in their ears, and nothing but their clothes on their back, my parents fled war-torn Afghanistan to Canada. Living in a foreign country where they did not speak the language and their education was disregarded, my family persevered.

I often think to myself what my life would be like if my parents did not risk it all to give us the future that we currently have. My mother and father are both educated people that gave up all their dreams to flee their once-haven, Afghanistan. My siblings and I grew up listening to the wholesome stories of Afghanistan, how progressive it was—how much women had a voice, how they could work and go to school, and how they were allowed to dress how they liked. As a matter of fact, all of that was encouraged.

The complex political and economic insurgence has impacted Afghanistan throughout the years so intensely that it has led to the current humanitarian crisis where the Taliban have taken over the whole country, limiting opportunities for all citizens, especially women. After the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, the country was filled with weapons and terrorists that were educated and supported by Pakistan and the United States (Çetin, 2013). The United States, Canada, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China, and other neighbouring countries played a crucial role in the war on terror which has led us to the current situation in Afghanistan (Rubin, 2015). The US and Canada going into Afghanistan was not for the wellbeing of the Afghans, nor to build peace on the land; it was for their own political agendas post-9/11 (Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada [LCSC], 2021). The Global North spent billions of dollars, and approximately 90

percent of it went towards the military, not towards the Afghans suffering nor organizations that could help gain some sort of peace and stability (LCSC, 2021). Afghanistan's government, under heavy influence from the US government, accepted a peace deal in February 2020 after intense negotiations to withdraw all NATO and US troops within 14 months—but this had little benefit for Afghans and more advantage for the US, as the Taliban made it known that they would continue using violence throughout the country (Boni, 2021). The Taliban claimed that they would have new and diverse rules for all citizens but did not explain the implications for women (Boni, 2021). Many barriers presented themselves as soon as troops were withdrawn, and Afghanistan is now, more than ever, in dire need of support (Boni, 2021).

Seeing this occur was a mixture of emotions; even though I have never been on Afghan land, I can say that this takeover left my family, loved ones in Afghanistan, and the whole Afghan diaspora in utter shock and disbelief that this was happening in the 21st century. The entire world watched while Afghans continuously suffered and were tortured. The world was silent; I only saw fellow Afghans speak on such matters. Our community did come together—however, what about everyone else? Many “non-Afghan friends” watched and turned a blind eye. Why did it not matter to them? Human beings were dying. Children were dying. Their pleas fell on deaf ears. Perhaps because it was not happening to those friends and their families? Was it because the victims were people of color? Muslim? “Uncivilized”? Why has poverty, abuse, violence, malnutrition, and preventable death become so normalized to watch in Afghanistan? It was clear that human lives that deserve attention are “civilized” white communities; I feel when Ukrainians needed our support, we funded them, raised awareness, and welcomed them into our countries with open arms. As we should have—they needed our support and that is what should be expected of international communities. However, why is it that when Afghan lives, Yemeni lives, Palestinian lives, and Syrian lives are the ones in question, the same support does not seem to be offered? International communities that have caused this war can easily sleep at night, and we must continue to suffer? The harm caused by colonialism, white supremacy, racism, sexism, capitalism, ableism, ageism, and other social relations based on systemic inequalities and greed are continuously growing and we have done nothing for our marginalized communities (Kennedy-Kish (Bell) & Carniol, 2017). The Western world continues to hide behind the war that they raged as a “war on terror.” Instead, this was a war on civilians; Afghanistan is now stained with the blood of not terrorists, but innocent lives. Innocents with hopes, dreams, and fears just like you and I.

Throughout my entire first semester, I was the only person who spoke on the atrocities of Afghan people, especially Afghan women, to social workers. How have these issues not made others reconsider what is wrong with the world? Why can we not open our eyes to see that the world we presently live in has more issues around lack of humanity than we know?

To think that professionals are going out into the world, without the humility or recognition that we are all part of the problem, speaks to the internal issues we must raise our voices about. If we are not as a collective working together, adversity anywhere will never stop. Social workers that are being educated within institutions need to be aware of what is happening in Afghanistan and around the world, and how they can help.

I have had difficulty walking in my female, Muslim, Canadian Afghan identity. Though I know how privileged I am in the positionality I hold, I often find myself feeling extremely guilty to see the Global South fall apart.

I see money being taken away from this country to fuel more violence within it. I see greed, power, and privilege taking over, because they can.

My heart also feels extremely heavy for the many women who have been stripped away from their passion, their education, and their jobs. These women are me; I am these women. I see my mother, my sister, my cousins all reflected within these women. These women once had dreams, dreams of going to school and pursuing further education to break their cycle of poverty, dreams to work meaningful careers, dreams of having food on the table and a safe place to sleep.

These women dream to practice freedom of speech without the worry of their wavering voices being the reason for their death.

Afghan women want to be known for more than their traumas and oppression. The discourse around Afghan women needs to change; the world needs to understand that Afghan women, like all other women, are strong, capable, and worthy.

As a Muslim Canadian-Afghan woman, I feel that many Afghan women have never felt heard or valued, and their truths are never told. Their stories never heard. Their tears never seen. Their cries never felt. The practice of decolonization connects back to our social work Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2021) as the dignity of the people we work with come first, along with social justice which includes economic, social, political, and environmental justice (Kennedy-Kish (Bell) & Carniol, 2017). Further, anti-oppressive ethical practices acknowledge the past and allow space for it through understanding the histories that have led to individuals' intersecting oppressions, which is exactly what needs to happen for communities such as Afghans and Afghan immigrants.

Accepting history, allowing space for it, and decolonizing is an active and ongoing practice that we all must engage in to interrupt the continuing oppressive cycle that we live in. This itself is an ethical response when working with communities with intersecting determinants (Kennedy-Kish (Bell) & Carniol, 2017).

The framework of intersectionality is vital to deconstructing and understanding the ongoing power imbalance, privilege, along with the implicit and explicit violence that such marginalized communities like Afghans have been facing (Bubar et al., 2016). Intersectionality locates an individual's social positionality, including their race, gender, class, sexuality, and how these all interact with one another. Intersectionality connects such factors back to the structures and larger systems responsible for oppressing marginalized identities (Bubar et al., 2016). Bubar and colleagues (2016) note in their article words of Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* stated, "intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (p. 18).

We must avoid the individualistic framework that is pushed on North Americans because we can make a difference and put pressure on international communities to intervene and stop injustices happening worldwide. As Kennedy-Kish (Bell) and Carniol (2017) state, when beliefs created through the -isms are psychologically internalized generation after generation, it further disempowers the already oppressed populations—for example, the Afghans who do make it out of the country—by continuously normalizing the divide of one community having an unethical privilege over the other based on multiple layers of oppression.

Cultural sensitivity and humility play a big role in ethical practice of intersectionality, as understanding, learning, and appreciating other cultures can begin to bring forth new changes within our society. Jisrawi and Arnold (2018) wrote a powerful article on the importance of cultural humility and mental health care among Canadian Muslim communities that highlights the collective impact of individual and institutional accountability. Holding yourself and the institution you work for accountable for creating safe spaces that allow for a culturally sensitive approach to healing is essential to supporting marginalized communities. It allows for a more genuine and stronger therapeutic alliance to form. Jisrawi and Arnold (2018), in paraphrasing Ratts et al. (2015), stated:

The purpose of ongoing introspection is for practitioners to critically analyze their own biases, prejudices, assumptions, and preconceptions, and to identify how their upbringing and cultural conditioning produces a worldview that can be reflected in their work which is sometimes to the detriment of the client. (p. 46)

Graduate students must be exposed to training on cultural humility throughout their education in institutions they work for and from the professors they are learning from (Jisrawi & Arnold, 2018). Jisrawi and Arnold emphasized the importance of cultural humility and—when practiced at an institutional level—the amount of change it can bring forth to practitioners, clients, and communities.

Being culturally aware allows you to understand the marginalized populations in a more effective manner that validates their traumas and history. Actively engaging in decolonizing through practicing cultural sensitivity, cultural humility, active listening, truth-telling, ethical reflexivity and self-awareness will allow us a chance to rebuild relationships and alliances with marginalized communities (Kennedy-Kish (Bell) & Carniol, 2017). Applying this to Afghanistan, we will be able to help Afghan immigrants and refugees understand and process their trauma.

This anti-oppressive social work lens will break the barriers and biases that affect us as social workers in the field. This will allow us as social workers to engage more ethically on micro, mezzo, and macro levels through ethical client interactions and ethical effective policies by welcoming the application of an intersectional framework.

Through this narrative, I have showcased the challenges Afghanistan has consistently faced for decades. To tackle these difficulties, we must critically analyze through an intersectional framework and approach marginalized communities with cultural humility and sensitivity. As

Afghanistan has persevered, my family has too. Through war and violence, Afghans have remained resilient. Through colonizing, Afghans have remained true to their culture. Through decades' of turmoil, Afghans have emerged stronger than ever.

References

- Boni, F. (2021). Afghanistan 2020: The US-Taliban peace deal, intra-Afghan talks and regional implications. *ASIA MAIOR*, XXXI(2020), 465–478. <https://www.asiamaior.org/?p=1347>
- Bubar, R., Cespedes, K., & Bundy-Fazioli, K. (2016). Intersectionality and social work: Omissions of race, class, and sexuality in graduate school education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(3), 283–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2016.1174636>
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Hyman.
- Çetin, H. C. (2013). War on terrorism: What went wrong in Afghanistan? *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 10(2), 532–543. <https://www.j-humansciences.com/ojs/index.php/IJHS/article/view/2602>
- Jisrawi, A. N., & Arnold, C. (2018). Cultural humility and mental health care in Canadian Muslim communities. *Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy*, 52(1). <https://cjc-ccc.ucalgary.ca/article/view/61133>
- Kennedy-Kish (Bell), B., & Carniol, B. (2017). A two-road approach to ethical practice. In E. Spencer, D. Massing, & J. Gough (Eds.), *Social work ethics: Progressive, practical, and relational approaches* (pp. 270–281). Oxford Press.
- Laurier Centre for the Study of Canada. (2021). *Alistair Edgar | Give war a chance: Are peace-building and stabilization a bust after Afghanistan?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv-TfkdEa9o>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2021). *Code of ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Ratts, M. J., Singh, A. A., Nassar-McMillan, S., Butler, S. K., & McCullough, J. R. (2015). *Multicultural and social justice counseling competencies*. The Multicultural Counseling Competencies Revisions Committee. <https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/competencies/multicultural-and-social-justice-counseling-competencies.pdf?sfvrsn=20>
- Rubin, B. R. (2015). *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*. Oxford University Press.

About the Author: Saman Farah, MSW, RSW (she/her) is Graduate, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada (saman.farah.sf@gmail.com).