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'Powerless, poor and needy?': Reproducing colonial discourses of gender and Muslim women through educational interventions by I-NGOs in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

International development initiatives in the Global-South are often shaped by Western and Eurocentric constructions of gender, female agency and empowerment embedded in popular narratives of universal rights and white mainstream feminist ideals. Through a qualitative desk-study and documentary-analysis, this paper explores the cases of two I-NGOs: Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan (CW4WA) and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to unravel how colonial discourses of gender and educational development, and homogenous and pathological notions of Muslim women are mobilised in Afghanistan to deliver various political agendas and reproduce patriarchal relations, as well as wider Global South/North divisions and entrenched inequalities. We engage with epistemic shifts. We argue that I-NGOs educational interventions take bottom-up approaches informed by local knowledges and contexts and decolonised notions of gender, power and participation, which promote and sustain a more socially just and transformative education in the developing world. We also argue that epistemic shifts are required informed by post-colonial and critical realism approaches to gender and development, both in terms of research/theory and policy formulation.

Introduction

This paper engages with critiques of the assumed gender neutrality of development discourses and unfolds the politicisation of educational initiatives in the Afghan post-civil war context and its instrumentalisation for legitimising Western intervention and control through the reproduction of colonial discourses of gender and Muslim womanhood. 'Western' and 'Global South' in this paper do not simply mark geographical demarcations but they signify a long history of imperialism and relations of exploitation sustained through military control and epistemic violence, predicated on the legacies of modernity, the enlightenment, and modernisation. Within these paradigms, both emancipation and progress are based on the notion of a universal liberal autonomous subjecthood, yet exclusionary of the non-Western Other and manifested in practices of racism and colonialism as in disparate needs for liberation, freedom and improvement (Abu-Lughod & El-Mahdi, 2011; Kandiyoti, 2007; Mishra, 2007). In her famous thesis 'Under Western Eyes' (1986), Chandra Mohanty strongly criticised how Western mainstream feminism treated Global South women as victims of

various factors such as familial relations, patriarchal systems, religious ideologies, and colonial and development processes. Such assumptions encompass also constructions of Muslim women as pathological and particularly restricted and are pivotal in configurations of education and development in post-conflict zones, as allegedly vehicles for transformation, empowerment and an aspirational life for Muslim women based on Western mythological ideals and universal rights.

In this paper, we focus on the education projects of two I-NGOs: Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan (CW4WA) and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to demonstrate how colonial discourses of gender and empowerment were mobilised to deliver different political agendas and shape gender relations in post-war Afghanistan. The reference to Southern and Northern I-NGOs in this paper relates to a geographical distinction between the two targeted I-NGOs which BRAC is located in Bangladesh and the CW4WA in Canada. While the issue of gender and women empowerment has been tackled through the work of post-colonialist scholars such as Mohanty (1986), Spivak (1988), Bhabha (1992), Said's (1978), less work has been done in relation to the use of gender-focused aid through I-NGOs as an

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approach for the reproduction of colonial agendas (Kandiyoti, 2009).

The process of colonial (re)production of gender through a particular approach of targeting Muslim women has a long history in the Muslim world. For example, as part of a 'mission to civilize' (*mission civilisatrice*) the nineteenth century French colonial authorities persuaded and even coerced Algerian Muslim women to remove their headscarves, as it was considered a sign of backwardness and oppression (Wiles, 2007: 704). Thus, the clothing, or Hijab of Algerian Muslim women was used as an instrument to achieve their colonial agendas and to facilitate the integration of Muslim women into French culture. We argue that there is a strong line of continuity between colonial modes of gender reproduction and the work of some I-NGOs that take a top-down universalist feminist perspective. The instruments of such agendas may have changed from dress and clothing to stories, images, and narratives, but the outcomes still remain as the (re)production of colonial discourses based on specific stereotypes and objectification of women 's agendas.

The role and scope of I-NGOs in post-conflict contexts

Overall, I-NGOs are playing a crucial role in terms of mitigating the post-conflict and humanitarian crisis in fragile and intra-nationally conflicted countries. However, the scope of their contribution depends on several factors. These factors can be the role and relationship of the host country with the international donor community, the geo-political interests of international communities, and the affiliated donor organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the International Bank for Reconstruction. It also depends on several indigenous or internal factors, such as the ways in which local people perceive the actions and operations of INGOs, issues surrounding their cultural and religious sensitivities, and the scope of damage that the civil wars caused to the infrastructure of a state. Therefore, the success or failure of I-NGOs' work does not solely depend on their own agenda.

From a practical point of view, the questions about the role of INGOs in countries that have just come out of a war are very case-based. But because of the way power works between the international community and the (post-conflict) country being helped, there is a trend toward a top-down approach. In several cases, I-NGOs' prioritisation of development programmes is not based on feasibility studies, or there is a conflict of interest and priorities between the local and international donor communities.

The scope of cooperation and collaboration of I-NGOs with local NGOs or Implementing partners (IPs) as well as with the host nation state is a vital component for successful service delivery. Theoretically, the aim of I-NGOs is to facilitate global agendas for sustainable development goals (SDGs). However, the work of INGOs shall not only focus on a top-down approach to achieving the SDGs but also be aligned with national development frameworks, particularly in a post-conflict context. A bottom-up approach that gives full consideration to cultural and socio-political sensitivities within a post-conflict context will lead to more sustainable development.

In a post-conflict context, Mafa et al. (2019) studied the deteriorating effect of INGOs' funding on the work of local women's NGOs in Zimbabwe. Using dependency theory and a qualitative paradigm, the study looks at a sample of women's NGOs in Zimbabwe. It argues that the stability and effectiveness of women's NGOs in terms of empowering women are strongly linked to the difficulties of being very dependent on donor funding. This shows that the work of INGOs can create a "donor-dependency syndrome" (Mafa et al., 2019: 43) that not only leads to the financial instability of local women's NGOs, but it can even push the women's NGOs to close down or drift from their mission.

Moreover, through ethnographic research into three NGOs in the context of Bosnia during 1997–2000, Helms (2014) provides a critical perspective, rejecting arguments against women's NGOs as too simplistic. Helms also rejects the 'generalisation to condemn NGOs' on a collective scale by rightly insisting on the complexity and diversity of NGO forms and their working situations, particularly in a post-conflict

era (ibid: 43). Helms demonstrates that many women NGOs are ineffective and short-lived; incorporated by the state or turned into professionalised service providers and thus only minimally and transiently acting as agents of social transformation. However, there are some NGOs that push for legislative reform, public awareness and the enabling of local communities to raise their critical voices in a way that may change dominant gender relations and cultural norms (ibid). The study also focuses on both feminist and non-feminist organisations' desires to help women as victims of war and to support their cause in post-conflict Bosnia. For Helms, 'Women NGOs would not have become activists at all had it not been for foreign interventions' (ibid: 45). In a post-conflict context, this is a valuable study showing the various roles of NGOs in development, reconstruction and democratisation. It also crystallises the diversity in the role of NGOs in female empowerment, rejecting generalisations. However, the evidence presented would have been enriched if the author had discussed local women beneficiaries as well as the staff and activists working for women's NGOs. It would have enabled her to analyse the views of local women on the role and effectiveness of targeted NGO interventions for women's empowerment.

Overall, the role and scope of INGOs' work in post-conflict contexts are complex. It heavily depends on the context of each case. Power relations among the various stakeholder groups are crucial. The power dynamics between host countries and donors, donors and INGOs, INGOs and local NGOs or Implementing partners (IPs), as well as local NGOs and beneficiaries, are crucial in determining the function and reach of INGOs in a post-conflict environment. Their role and scope are also influenced by the development models and approaches that they employ. As a result, each I-NGO's situation differs from the next. In the following section, we discuss the dynamics of INGOs and gender norms and relations in the context of Afghanistan.

I-NGOs in Afghanistan

International Non-government organisation (I-NGOs) have occupied a previously unprecedented profile in the context of Afghanistan since 2001. However, this issue has led to a certain amount of controversy regarding their role and their effectiveness in short-term humanitarianism and long-term development. Afghanistan is also known as one of the largest 'gender-focused aid interventions' of the contemporary era (Abirafeh et al., 2008: 5). The international community, particularly the US and its alliances, had various geopolitical, ideological, and economical objectives for intervening in Afghanistan in the post-9/11 context. In theory, one of their objectives was to liberate Afghans—specifically women and girls—from the brutal Taliban regime (Marsden, 2009). However, in reality the dynamics of such an intervention were multi-faceted, passing from state building to nation and civil society building, and from humanitarianism to militarism. Western communities instrumentalised female empowerment discourse through NGOs, not only as a leading strategy, but also as a mechanism for 'justifying their interventions' (Abirafeh et al., 2008: 1).

As Judith Butler (2004: 41) argued, the Bush administration used feminism as a 'trope in the service of restoring the presumption of first world impermeability', through the context of gender-focused aid in Afghanistan. Such an instrumentalisation of feminist discourse not only creates 'new politics of gender' (Chishti, 2010: 253) in the context of US foreign policy, but also (re)produces a new image of Afghan women in the Global North. As a result, it paradoxically leads to the further objectification of Afghan women. The case study presented in this paper, reinstates such a reproduction, which not only introduces Afghan women as 'exoticized victims' (Kandiyoti, 2009: 3), but also undermines their resistance and agency whilst dislocating them from their historical context through the (re)production of a colonial discourse of gender.

Afghan women have a long history of resistance. Although this requires a detailed analysis, the scope of this paper does not allow that. We intend to briefly touch on the historical resistance of Afghan women from three historical eras. To begin, it refers to the 1920s, during King

Amanullah's attempt at forcible modernization and the abolition of veils. Amanullah's 1923 women's status reforms were met with strong opposition not only from Afghan men but also from Afghan women, resulting in the end of his reign (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). As King Amanullah defeated the British in the third and final Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, the British also contributed to fueling protests against King Amanullah's monarchy as part of their "divide and rule" agendas. For instance, the British distributed images of Queen Soraya dining with foreign men and having the president of France kiss her hand in an effort to incite hostility and opposition among the tribal groups (Stewart, 1973).

The second era could be referred to as the "post-monarchy" era, where kingship was replaced by a republican state. Hence, Prime Minister Mohammad Daud learned from the mistake of his predecessor, King Amanullah, and declared veiling a "voluntary option" in order to mitigate the resistance of Afghan women and rural men (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003: 6). Afghan women made steady progress into the workforce by becoming nurses, doctors and teachers, until the Daud regime was toppled in 1978 and replaced by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) (ibid).

The Third Era was marked by the rise of the Afghan Mujahidin and the beginning of 30 years of civil wars that the West supported to fight against the PDPA, which was backed by the Soviet Union. Afghan women again contributed in the fight against Russia's invitation and had their agency in the workforce until the Taliban gained power. Since then, Afghan women have always been socially, politically, and historically active and have resisted the political upheavals. However, as part of a global mission after 9/11, the West intended to exploit the historical resistance of Afghan women to create a gap and justify their involvement in Afghanistan mainly based on the liberation of Afghan women. Hence, there was a need to utilise INGOs in this mission.

Certain literature on international aid and NGOs in Afghanistan referred to the deliberate overlapping of military and civilian interventions in Afghanistan, which produced certain intentional and unintentional consequences (Abirafeh et al., 2008; Chishti, 2010; Donini et al., 2004 & Kandiyoti, 2007). *Firstly*, the intended consequences of the so called 'hearts and minds operations'² (Marsden, 2009: 187), led to the ideological victory of the Bush administration in toppling the Taliban regime rather than addressing indigenous peoples' needs and priorities (Chishti, 2010). *Secondly*, the international community aimed to achieve short- and long-term objectives to facilitate the processes of democratisation and civil society building.

Conversely, the duplication of military and civilian intervention had certain unintended consequences. *Firstly*, the politicisation of NGOs undermined their legitimacy, neutrality and impartiality, as well as the effectiveness of their activities (Donini et al., 2004). *Secondly*, it impacted the relationship of the NGO sector with their host-states. Afghan government officials not only blamed NGOs for fostering corruption and misusing scant development funds, but also referred to their work as 'economic terrorism'³ (cited in Stapleton, 2006: 6). The huge amount of funds going to Afghanistan for Afghan women is often either mismanaged by the I-NGOs through unsustainable short-term female development projects or misused by corrupt public officials (Chishti, 2010). Such a paradoxical relationship reproduced the public 's perception of NGOs as facilitators of military intervention (Abirafeh et al., 2008). *Thirdly*, the instrumentalisation of NGOs as part of a bigger military intervention programme victimised and threatened NGO staff to the extent that it sometimes led to the deaths of NGO aid workers. According to Human Rights Watch (2006: 18) approximately thirty-one aid-workers were killed during 2005. 81 NGO staff members were killed

between 2004 and 2006', compared to 'less than ten people between 1989 and 2001' (Marsden, 2009: 191). *Lastly*, a top-down, prescriptive NGO approach undermined the effectiveness of their activities, particularly in terms of female empowerment (Abirafeh et al., 2008) and the provision of educational interventions. It pushed female-oriented NGOs to engage in service delivery rather than advocacy which, by engaging women in short-term projects, also prevented them from creating a bottom-up feminist discourse to challenge existing gender inequalities and norms.

This paper aims to address a number of gaps in the literature. Firstly, despite the fact that numerous studies identify common challenges and obstacles to the process of women's empowerment in developing countries (Edna & Bose, 1990; Bhatt, 1998; Niaz, 2003; Cohen, 2006; Mosedale, 2005: 2), there is a lack of adequate research on the main factors behind the successes and failures of I-NGOs' interventions on the daily lives of Afghan women (Chishti, 2010), and how I-NGOs can lead to the (re)production of colonial discourses of gender through their educational interventions. Secondly, despite certain studies' focus on the role of NGOs in female empowerment (Hunt & Kasynathan, 2002; Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Mayoux, 1998; Swainson, 2000), few have focused on the role of NGOs in advancing this empowerment in the specific context of Afghanistan through their educational interventions (Standal, 2008). Thirdly, the enormous focus of the international community led Afghanistan to become one of the 'largest gender focused aid recipient' (Abirafeh et al., 2008: 5). The vast quantities of gendered aid have certain ramifications for both Afghan women and the NGOs themselves. Firstly, gender-focused aid produced and reshaped a new image and discourse for Afghan women. However, such a reproduction could potentially happen by expressing 'Afghan women with no agency' (Abirafeh et al., 2008), seeing them as 'vulnerable victims' (Kandiyoti, 2009); or 'oppressed people' (Resource Booklet, 2005). Secondly, gender-focused aid made the local women NGOs dependent on external funds, meaning that their existence depended on the hands of international donors, and whenever the donors pulled out, the local women NGOs struggled to survive. However, such an approach and (re)production have 'strong lines of continuity between colonial and development discourse and policy' (Bicuum, 2005: 1006).

Attempting to conceptualise 'empowerment'

Conceptualising empowerment is a difficult task in gender studies (Rowlands, 1997). However, there have been attempts—mostly by drawing a direct correlation between empowerment and power relations. Power is defined as 'control over resources, people and institutions' (Parpart et al., 2002: 8). But Naila Kabeer (1994) rejects such a liberal and Marxist definition, arguing instead that power entails the ability to control discussions, discourses and agendas (ibid). She takes a feminist standpoint to power, which emphasizes power 'within', rather than power 'to' (Kabeer, 1999: 438).

Empowerment is considered a 'process of change' (Kabeer, 1999: 437), albeit from an individualistic point of view. For Batliwala, empowerment is 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (1994: 130). Overall, empowerment refers to the process of empowering 'to exert power over, to make things happen' (Parpart et al., 2002: 5). This is an abstract concept, as it does not clearly indicate who has power over whom, or how it is measured. However, almost most of the definitions of empowerment are based on a Foucauldian articulation of 'power as an exercise rather than a possession' (ibid: 4). While certain scholars (Sen, 1990; Parpart et al., 2002; Kabeer, 1999) defined empowerment as a process of changing power relations and as an outcome with a clear achievement. What remains contested is not the process of empowerment, but the outcome and the means through which those outcomes can be measured and expressed. This enables us to consider different ways in which policy actors narrate the outcomes and to what extent those narratives are compatible with realities on the ground. Various

² According to Marsden (2009), 'Hearts and Minds' approaches aim to buy off the population with aid and development, which accords with the strategic interests of the intervening powers rather than the real interests of the Afghan people.

³ A term used by (Ramazan Bashardost Minister of Planning in 2004).

stakeholders—states, institutions, and even individuals—define empowerment based on their own understandings and perceptions.

For Muslim women, and particularly Afghan women, the concept of “empowerment” differs from that based on western, white feminism (Abirafeh et al., 2008). Because of this, how empowerment is approached depends on the context, and in any empowerment conversation, issues like “Whose conceptions of power?” come up. Whose power was used against whom? How active are or were Afghan or Muslim women in the empowerment processes? Whose objectives and discourses affected and impacted the formation of empowerment processes.

Women's clothing in general, but especially Muslim women's clothing, has always been a means of measuring their agency, voice, and “liberation.” This has always been the case with colonial powers, where wearing clothes similar to those in Europe was seen as a sign of progress and modernity. Through definitions by clothing, there is an intentional process of “othering” going on in order to define backwardness based on the modes of clothing (Wiles, 2007). Similar legacies were reproduced in the context of post-conflict Afghanistan. Where an exogenous understanding of female empowerment referred to *chaddari* [1] as a symbol that displayed the “weakness of Afghan women” (Abirafeh et al., 2008: 164). As part of the global (Western) attempt to build a state and nation in Afghanistan, not only I-NGOs institutionalised Afghan *chaddari* as a symbol of oppression, but also the media and individual white feminists played a critical role in the mutilation of Afghans in *chaddari* as a symbol of oppressed and needy women requiring the West's help to liberate and empower themselves. Immediately following the post-conflict era, the majority of white western feminists articulated a specific form of Afghan women through literary work, with books and reports featuring images of Afghan women in *chaddari*. These books are typically written in English for a non-Afghan but Western audience or readership. Similarly, the removal of the *chaddari* or veil was instrumentalized as a symbol of advancement, empowerment, and freedom. Such an approach not only pathologized a specific type of gender-focused aid in Afghanistan, but it is also used to measure empowerment, implying that removing the veils liberates the women and Western powers achieve their goal of “empowering” or “liberating” Afghan women. However, in reality, the choice of veil or *chaddari* for Muslim women, and in particular Afghan women, has several historical, religious, and cultural justifications. Even at a personal level, women feel more secure in public spaces and anonymous when using the Bourka (Abirafeh et al., 2008). From a historical point of view, even during Afghan resistance and holy wars, Afghan women used the Bourka or *chaddari* as a way for anonymous transportation of letters, food, and weapons to support the Afghan battles and resistance against foreign occupations. While removing it could cause harm to individual women's identities, family honour, and freedom of movement, Therefore, a Eurocentric definition of empowerment that sees Afghan women in burkas as a symbol of backwardness and oppression is irrelevant to Afghan and Muslim women.

According to an Afghan woman interviewed by Abirafeh, ‘the world views Afghan women just like animals in bourkas’ (ibid). Another Afghan woman said: ‘Afghan women do not see the Bourka, foreigners only see bourkas’ (ibid). Conversely, a male Afghan NGO director once said: ‘For us to judge Afghanistan as a backward society where women have no say is totally wrong’ (ibid: 37).

The international community objectified Afghan women as ‘exoticized victims’ and used them as ‘instruments of war propaganda’ to justify military intervention in Afghanistan (Kandiyoti, 2009: 3). This process created a new discourse of Afghan women's empowerment through gender-focused aid, which ultimately denied the agency of Afghan women and ‘abstracted it from their historical and social contexts’ (Abirafeh et al., 2008: 38). Overall, this indicates the importance of considering the various facts when conceptualising discourses of empowerment.

Unfortunately, women have frequently been used in Afghanistan's

political agendas. The situation of Afghan women today is a clear manifestation of this argument. We can see that Afghan women, and in particular girls' access to schooling and education, are instrumentalised as a tool for the Taliban's compromise and demands for international legitimacy and recognition. Although the general perception was based on the ideal that today's Taliban has changed in comparison to their first regime, the banning of girls' secondary and higher education shows that not only have they not changed ideologically, but they still utilise girls' and women's access to education in their international geopolitical bargaining and negotiations. However, it needs clarification that Western feminism also created a particular image of Muslim men as dangerous and brutal to Muslim women (Mishra, 2007). Overall, Western feminist and non-feminist literature constructed Muslim men in general as oppressive, dangerous and also able to brainwash and ‘turn’ and convert women (ibid).

In most cases, the Taliban do not represent Afghan Muslim men, and their treatment of Afghan women is neither Islamic nor based on Afghan morals and values. There are lots of political issues surrounding the Taliban's ideological doctrine. One has to think, “Where did they come from, and who created them?” It is obvious that the Taliban are a western by-product of the Cold War era who have received extensive training and indoctrination in extremist Madrasas (religious schools) in rural Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, the West orchestrates invasions and conflicts, and the unintended consequence of such atrocities is civil wars, conflicts, and subsequent systematic violence against women.

NGOs and feminism

There is a direct correlation between the rise and scope of NGOs' activities and feminist discourses. However, there is a shift away from feminism as women's social and political movement and struggle toward the rise of professionalised NGOs targeting female agendas. Sabine Lang phrased such a transformation as the ‘NGOization of feminism’ (cited in Bernal & Grewal, 2014: 1). Lang defined, NGOisation as a ‘move from movements to projects’ (ibid, 224). However, the ‘NGOisation’ is critically analysed by other scholars. For example, Roy (2004: 41) referred to NGOisation as a ‘hazard facing mass movements’. Conversely, Saida Hodzic (2014) rejected feminist critiques of NGOisation and argued that female-run NGOs are hybrid forms of both organisations and movements. According to her, the idea of NGOs as neoliberal instruments that depoliticise feminist discourse is flawed (ibid).

The variety and complexity of issues related to NGOs and feminism has led to a rise in controversial theorizations of NGOs in general. From an analytical standpoint, some scholars are very optimistic about the role of NGOs, considering them as ‘agent[s] of neoliberalism, grassroots alternatives to the state and parts of local civil society’ (Hodzic, 2014: 3). However, scholars such as Kamat, 2004; Funk, 2006; Hearn, 2007 see NGOs as elements of neoliberalism and imperialism, undermining social contracts between citizens and the state.

Occupying the middle ground, liberal scholars, such as Batliwala and Brown (2006) suggest that NGOs are part of ‘transnational civil society’. This suggests the presence of controversy and a division of viewpoints among scholars. But none of these arguments is fully satisfying. Certain factors are vital when analysing the relationship of NGOs to feminist discourse. Firstly, gender relations and norms—the cultural sensitivities and the history of feminism in the context in which NGOs work—need to be studied. Secondly, the NGO's goals, the scope of activity and their relation to donors, host-states and other key stakeholders has to be considered. By considering such factors, over-generalisation and narrow interpretations of NGOs and feminism might be avoided.

Patriarchy and gender relations in Afghanistan

Gender is the ‘social organization of sexual difference’ (Scott, 1988: 2). Such a conceptualisation indicates that gender norms are first and

foremost socially constructed and also specified in the context of various social relations and male and female social orders. However, gender norms in Afghanistan are based on a system of 'classic patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1988). Abirafeh (2008: 31) argued that besides patriarchal norms, it is vital to understand other factors such as 'class, ethnicity and age group'. Moghadam (1992) argued that patriarchy in Afghanistan is 'more tribal than Islamic', in contrast with various patriarchal systems in Muslim countries.

However, none of the literature focused on an ethnographic perspective of how such tribal patriarchies are formed in Afghanistan, and how they shape gender relations. The literature also neglected the impact of historical foreign invasions such as the first and second Anglo-Afghan wars in the 19th century, the USSR invasion in the twentieth century, the Cold War and civil wars, migrations and famines (Jefferson, 2010). The political consequences of such factors had a direct impact on social and gender relations. Afghan political elites aimed to create what Anderson (1983) calls their 'imagined communities'. This can be seen in the case of King Amanullah Khan, who forcefully attempted to modernise Afghanistan based on a Western model. His gender reform policies, which included 'abolition of the veil, restriction on marriage age and prohibition of polygamy for government officials', received high levels of criticism and provoked a backlash from the conservative and rural elites in the 1920s (Jefferson, 2010: 202). Although King Amanullah's top-down reforms were implemented decades ago, they left a clashing legacy between modernism and tribal (conservative) ideologies about female roles and empowerment. This also re-emphasized the ideas that 'tribal and ethnic relations take primacy than the individuals' in framing Afghan social norms (ibid: 17). In some cases, however, resistance and reforms were shaped in opposition to aggressive Western modernisation paradigms. While King Amanullah's modernist initiatives were heavily influenced by Atatürk's reforms in Turkey, regional reform agendas in the Middle East, notably Iran, were also underway (Bishku, 2020). Turkey and Afghanistan not only signed Treaties of Alliance in 1922, but Turkey also provided direct assistance to Afghanistan in the form of military and technical training as well as educational initiatives (ibid: 241). This also highlights how Afghanistan's military and educational infrastructure have been significant to regional and global players, as well as how educational interventions have played a role in regional political and diplomatic relationships over time.

Overall, social relations in Afghanistan grew from 'patriarchal contract based on mutual responsibilities rather than individuals' (Kabeer & Khan, 2014). This argument also questions the effectiveness of a right-based approach as a means for women's empowerment (Srivastava, 2010). The right-based approach traditionally focuses on individual empowerment and development, but in Afghanistan, alternative kinds of development and women's empowerment based on community resistance and comprehension of patriarchal norms are required. As a result, the effectiveness of any attempt at women's empowerment through the forceful articulation of gender relations from a top-down approach may lead to paradoxical and unexpected results.

This may be due to neglecting gender sensitivities and disconnecting gender relations from their historical roots. However, it also prevents the emergence of a bottom-up, collective resistance of Afghan feminism based on a vivid understanding of existing tribal, religious and gender relations and norms. As a result, gender relations have a direct impact on the effectiveness of NGO work in advancing women's empowerment in Afghanistan. Conversely, through the case study, we strongly argue that ignoring cultural and gender norms has a reverse impact on projects and programmes advancing female empowerment.

Materials & methods

The research method used for this paper is based on a 'case-oriented approach' (Potter, 1997: 32). The resources utilised in this work are drawn from Sulaiman Haqpana's master's dissertation, which he submitted in 2016 for his MSc in Social Policy and Development (NGO) at

the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). However, both authors' central commitments to this study are shaped by their feminist perspectives. The first author's contributions and arguments are also influenced by his work as a practitioner in Afghanistan in the fields of women's empowerment and gender mainstreaming. During 2003–2007, he worked as a 'Project Coordinator' for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in Afghanistan, which impacted his epistemic view of universalist women's empowerment based on western feminism. The second author is a Global South feminist academic working in the Global North and committed to promoting intersectional and decolonial approaches to gender, education and development. Although she does not come from Afghanistan, as an outsider, both culturally and professionally, she played a crucial role in supporting the development of a more critical approach to the main arguments and analysis of this paper.

We have selected two I-NGOs, one called Canadian Women for Women of Afghanistan hereafter (CW4WA), and the other, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee hereafter (BRAC). The rationale for the selection of the two I-NGOs was based on the following reasons: firstly, BRAC was chosen to examine the assumption that southern I-NGOs have a better understanding of local contexts in the global south. As a project coordinator for the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in Afghanistan and a novice researcher, I am always interested in understanding the nature and dynamics of the relationship between the donors and the NGOs. In addition, I have a deep understanding of Afghan culture because I am an insider with a feminist commitment, but I was also affected by the patriarchal regime and the western invasions and interventions.

Canada had a major military involvement in Afghanistan until 2014 (Paris, 2014), CW4WA was selected to test the assumption that some northern I-NGOs are instrumentalised through a top-down approach to justify their affiliated donor countries' military involvement in Afghanistan through the (re)production of colonial discourse on gender and gender focused aid. This research focused on two project/programme per I-NGO and we have intended to select BRAC and CW4WA as they had a common donor, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) for the programmes we studied. This in a way enabled us to study the power dynamics between I-NGOs and their donors and to demonstrate how the Anglo-phonetic or Global North states could manipulate women/gender discourses in order to justify their military interventions in the case of Afghanistan. Also, CW4WA was chosen as it was a member based I-NGO predominately active in Canada, through the cases of Afghan women. While our intention for the selection of two cases was to test the above-mentioned assumptions, we understand that an open approach for selection of I-NGOs would enable a less pre-determined approach to the data. However, issues around their scope, aims, donors, programmes and intentions would limit the comparative analogy of the cases. For example, we could not study the case of I-NGOs like IRC (International Rescue Committee) in comparison to smaller sized I-NGOs, due to its direct affiliation with USAID and other US donors.

The data process was based on a desk-study and documentary analysis of the relevant literature and papers related to the interventions of both BRAC and CW4WA, including their annual and impact reports. Although, both organisations' annual and impact reports were very optimistic and self-congratulatory about their actions and achievements, neither seemed to question the real effect of their interventions on beneficiaries' daily lives. We also used a mixture of other documents, articles and sources of evidence focused on the projects and programmes of the targeted NGOs. A number of peer-reviewed articles that focused on the projects and works of both NGOs were used, for example, Butler (2009) in the case of CW4WA and Islam and Anwar (2012) in the case of BRAC. Other research papers were obtained from the websites of each I-NGOs. A mixture of sources enabled us to combine 'complementary data' and 'conduct counterpart analyses' (Yin, 2014: 67). The advantage of such an approach would add to the validity and support of the data

analysis.

We do not intend to generalise the work of a huge number of I-NGOs that provided various services for Afghan women, however, by taking an explanatory approach, we intend to analyse the causes of their effectiveness or ineffectiveness on women's empowerment and how such causal factors (re)produce a stereotypical image of Afghan women engineered through colonial discourses of gender. It is worth mentioning that this paper does not wish to declare the victory of one I-NGO over another but seeks instead to compare and critically analyses the dynamics of each NGO's interventions, inputs, and their effectiveness on women. The conclusions are based on an in-depth analysis of two project/programmes for each NGO.

Overall, the paper's analogy is based on a feminist standpoint, particularly through the approach of Kabeer (1999) on measuring the process of women's empowerment. Unlike the other theories, which focus on economic development as a means for female empowerment (Duflo, 2012) or education as a means for female empowerment (Stromquist, 2002), this paper draws on Kabeer (1999) theory of change, by analysing empowerment through dimensions of resource, agency and achievement. Such an advantageous standpoint allows the measurement of effectiveness and the transformations that NGOs' work has led to in terms of women's lives in Afghanistan as seen from a qualitative standpoint. Qualitative data will enable us to assess more intangible means such as the 'identity, trust, confidence, belief and perception' of Afghans of both genders on the work of NGOs in enhancing female empowerment discourses (Bogdan & Taylor, 1987: 183–192). In addition, the study utilised the Paris Declaration's (OECD, 2005) principles on 'aid effectiveness' (Banerjee, 2010) to highlight how educational interventions based on colonial gender discourses were (re)produced in Afghanistan.

Findings & results

This section begins with an overview of BRAC and CW4WA. Firstly, it explains their goals, scope and objectives in Afghanistan. Secondly, it focuses on an in-depth analysis of two projects or programmes for each organisation. Lastly, it evaluates their effectiveness through its chosen analytical framework. CW4WA is a member-based NGO founded in 1996 in Canada that established its office in Afghanistan in 2004. The overall goal of CW4WA is twofold. Firstly, 'to raise awareness in Canada of the need to secure and protect human rights and opportunities for Afghan women', and 'to support the empowerment efforts of Afghan women in education, health care and skills development' (Butler, 2009: 218). In terms of the NGO's projects, this paper focuses firstly on 'Teachers' Resource Kits' (CW4WA, 2005: 8), and secondly on 'Fanoos: Teacher Education for Afghanistan' (CW4WA, 2014b: 9). Both projects were funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) (CW4WA, 2005).

BRAC, in contrast, was established as a development NGO in 1972, immediately after Bangladesh obtained its independence (Islam & Anwar, 2012). It began its first international mission in Afghanistan in 2002 (ibid). The overall goal of BRAC Afghanistan is to 'alleviate poverty by empowering the poor'¹. In terms of BRAC's projects, this paper will focus on its 'Community-based schools' (CBS) programme and its 'National Solidarity Programme' (NSP), which is a joint rural development programme organised by BRAC, the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and the Community development Councils (CDCs) (BRAC, 2014). The rationale for selecting two programmes for each I-NGO was based on similarities in their goals and objectives for women's empowerment, as well as similar funders and geographic specifications.

The fundamental difference between the two INGOs is in their approaches to women's empowerment projects in Afghanistan. CW4WA was created specifically to support Afghan women and raise funds from its members and the Canadian government by using the case of Afghan women in a post-conflict context. BRAC was initially established in

Bangladesh after its independence in 1972 to target economic development mainly through microfinance, education, women's empowerment, health, etc. Therefore, BRAC not only had gender-focused interventions but also had projects and programmes in different sectors. BRAC's discursive focus in Afghanistan was also intended to replicate the effective approaches and programme designs that it had implemented in Bangladesh and other south Asian contexts. While CW4WA took a top-down approach by utilizing the power of white feminism to depict, produce, and reproduce an exoticized image of Afghan women, hence leading to such a particular discursive model of women's empowerment.

CW4WA's Teachers' Resource Kits and the reproduction of Afghan women: a critical analysis

The 'Canadian Teachers' Resource Kit' (CTRK) titled 'Understanding Human Rights in Afghanistan: Canadian Students as Global Citizens' was an academic kit for Canadian teachers teaching social studies for Grades 4–12 in Canada (CW4WA, 2007: 17). The kit contained materials such as a booklet, PowerPoint slides, CDs and role-playing games. The main objective of the kit was to educate Canadian students about their rights and the universality of human rights' by studying the case of 'Afghan women and their families' (ibid).

This research seeks to analyse the effectiveness of the CW4WA programme in advancing female empowerment in Afghanistan, and the ways in which it (re)produced the stereotypical image of Afghan women through the (re)production of colonial discourse on gender. Despite CTRK being the largest project of CW4WA, its effects on enhancing Afghan women's empowerment were very minimal for a variety of reasons. Predominately, CTRK served the 'strategic choice' objectives of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) by reproducing the victimised and oppressed image of Afghan women—even in a post-Taliban regime—in order to 'legitimise and justify Canada's military presence in Afghanistan' (Butler, 2009: 221). By articulating the case of Afghan women in terms of human rights violations, CW4WA not only aimed to promote 'global citizenship' discourses among Canadian students but also reproduced a particular form of knowledge and image of the Afghan women without their will or consent (ibid). This can be exemplified in their 2002 information bulletin titled '*Beyond Poverty & Oppression: Afghanistan*', or their 2005 bulletin entitled '*Afghanistan Today: Canadians As Global Citizens*' (CW4WA, 2005: 13). A total of 500,000 of these information bulletins were printed both in English and French and then disseminated throughout Canada. These activities were also funded by CIDA. Such agendas clearly indicated that the case of the Afghan women's narrative was instrumentalised predominantly to reinstate the need for Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan through the (re)production of a culture of global citizenship and responsibility among Canadian families and communities.

The Teachers' Resource Kit was developed by non-Afghan volunteers, students at Calgary University and teachers from various schools around Canada (CW4WA, 2007). No Afghan women or men were involved in the process of the Kit's development (Resource Booklet, 2005: xix-xx). However, none of the participants considered the ethical aspect of the language used in the Kit. For instance, the kit referred to Afghan women as 'oppressed people' (Resource Booklet, 2005: ii). Narrating such a knowledge discourse for political ends is paradoxical both to the neutrality of an NGO by definition, and to the realities about Afghan women, which re-confirm Kandiyoti's argument that Afghan women have been objectified through the reproduction of a particular image as 'exoticized victims' (Kandiyoti, 2009: 3) that serve political and militaristic purposes.

The CTRK emphasized 'similarities between Afghan families and Canadian families' (Resource Booklet, 2005: ii), without making any reference to the varied dynamics of gender relations and norms in Afghanistan. For example, CW4WA's 2014 theme was 'Why do we care? Because human rights are universal!'. Whilst we do not disagree with the

universalization of human rights, we strongly believe that it requires a bottom-up realisation that should be claimed by Afghan women rather than a top-down dictation from a foreign power with vested interests. Kabeer et al. (2011: 33) concluded that, according to the studied group of Afghan women's narratives, the gender roles in Afghanistan are more affiliated with discourses of society and citizenship, setting them much closer to the 'communitarian vision of mutual responsibility than the liberal one of equal rights' (ibid). This crystallised the various visions of gender relations and differences between Afghanistan and Canada. The programme did not transform any power relations for the benefit of Afghan women. Because the project was not executed in Afghanistan and Afghan women were not informed about it, there was a lack of evidence about how Afghan women felt about it. Instead, it demonstrated the power of the Global North over the Global South, through which the Canadian government instrumentalised CW4WA as part of a broader civil society through the reproduction of gender discourses that can support political and military ends. In addition to CW4WA, CIDA—either intentionally or unintentionally helped instrumentalise Canadian students as a mechanism for disseminating messages about Afghan women to Canadian families, thus reinforcing the need for the Canadian military to be involved there. Therefore, as Meyda Yegenoglu (1998: 89–90) argued, this case helped reinstate the power of orientalism, in that it not only distorted the reality of the Orient, but through its power, it 'constructed the very object it spoke about' and 'produced a regime of truth about others'.

CW4WA's second-largest project was the 'Fanoos Teacher Education Program' (FTEP), which provided methodological and pedagogical training for 'over 5,000 in-service men and women teachers since 2008' in Kabul and three other surrounding provinces (CW4WA, 2013: 10). We seek to analyse factors of causation between FTEP and Afghan women's empowerment. Kabeer (1999: 437) defines empowerment as a "process of change" that allows those who were previously denied the ability to "to make strategic live choices" to do so. Thus, FTEP's effect on women's empowerment has been construed as minimal due to certain reasons. *Firstly*, the majority of teachers were already 'in service' male teachers (CW4WA, 2013: 10), who traditionally teach male students rather than female ones (Alvi-Aziz, 2008). According to CW4WA's impact report (2013a: 8), out of 1040 trained teachers, 895 were men and 145 were women. This is a ratio of 86 % male teachers to 14 % female teachers. *Secondly*, to apply Kabeer's approach to measuring empowerment, this project provided only the 'resource' (educational capacity building) aspect of empowerment and little in terms of agency and achievement was observed in terms of women's empowerment. More specifically, if we apply Stromquist's (2002) theory of empowerment through education, it can be observed that some women teachers gained 'psychological (feelings of self-esteem)' from education. There was no evidence of 'political, cognitive, and economical' aspects of female empowerment through education. For example, Saifora, a mathematics teacher, expressed the psychological effect of the education programme by saying, 'Now I feel more confident in my job' (CW4WA, 2014a: 12). *Thirdly*, even if we apply OECD (2005) aid effectiveness measurement principles, we can observe that the principle of 'ownership' is questionable in the case of CW4WA. *Firstly*, the CTRK and FTEP projects were designed by non-Afghans. Not one Afghan's involvement in the policy process was indicated in any relevant project document. In the basis of the 'alignment' principle, CTRK was fully aligned with the objectives of the Canadian government rather than the Afghan government. FTEP was partially aligned with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) (Butler, 2009). The reason we argue that it was partially aligned is because the agenda and contents of the project were neither designed nor led by Afghans. The third principle of aid effectiveness (harmonization) was a common problem for the majority of donors and I-NGOs in Afghanistan (Rahmani, 2012). Therefore, CW4WA also lacked harmonization in its interventions. Through harmonization, NGOs working in the education sector may empower women more effectively. For example, NGOs could harmonise to target

the same group of women, which could have two major impacts: projects could have been more sustainable and longer term and investing in the same group of beneficiaries might be better in order to fully empower them from different dimensions rather than targeting various groups through short-term projects with minimal effect. One NGO could target the 'cognitive' impacts of education, others could consider 'economic' approaches, and others could explore 'political' dimensions, albeit for the same group of beneficiaries. However, due to a lack of harmonization, each NGO targeted different groups of women, resulting in overall ineffectiveness in terms of their projects and programmes, as no beneficiary was fully empowered by education as a process of change. Lastly, by analysing the final principle—which is 'managing for a result'—we could conclude that CW4WA was fundamentally instrumentalised to serve political ends rather than obtain technical and measurable results (Butler, 2009). Hence, CW4WA's top-down approach also led to a lack of systematic means and approaches for measuring their projects' outcomes in relation to their aims and objectives.

To sum up, the female empowerment agendas of CW4WA were politicised in order to justify the military presence of Canada in Afghanistan. This objectification of women's aid and agenda had certain intended and unintended consequences. The intended consequence was to support CIDA through implementation of their political agendas in Afghanistan, and to support the government of Afghanistan through a post-war reconstruction period. It is worth mentioning that CW4WA massively contributed to the education sector of Afghanistan by training its 'in-service teachers'. The unintended consequence of their interventions was *firstly*, the reproduction of Afghan women as 'powerless, poor and needy', 'oppressed' and 'exoticized victims' (Kandiyoti, 2009: 3) with no agency as indicated in their information bulletins and documents (CW4WA, 2005:13, Resource Booklet, 2005: ii). However, such reproduction of Afghan women's image mainly served political ends rather than serving Afghan women's intrinsic needs in any meaningful way. *Secondly*, through a top-down process of needs and rights articulation, CW4WA's interventions served to prevent bottom-up women's resistance and feminism, as it engaged women in short-term technical projects rather than creating a space for women's collective consciousness. Additionally, instead of changing the existing patterns of power and gender relations for the benefit of women, it created more resistance from tribal 'conservative and religious' forces (men) who saw such a top-down approach as 'imperialist and contradictory to their cultural, tribal and religious values' (Johnson, 1998: 121). Such resistance is more visible in current political climate of Afghanistan, particularly since the full withdrawal of NATO forces, and regaining of several territories by hardliners and Taliban. *Lastly*, while education may produce the requisite for women's empowerment, it does not automatically change existing power relations. As Mosse (2005: 19) argued, such 'interventions rarely challenge existing patterns of power'. Therefore they had a minimal effect on Afghan women's empowerment.

BRAC's Education and community development programme and their effects on women empowerment

The main objectives of BRAC's development programmes were to increase girls' and adolescents' access to education, improve their skills and knowledge, create employability for local women as teachers and strengthen the capacity of the existing Afghan education system through capacity-building, leadership skills and management training (Islam & Anwar, 2012). It also aimed to change general perceptions about girls' education (ibid). *Secondly*, BRAC focused on a 'National Solidarity Programme' (NSP). The main objective of this was to develop local communities by establishing community development councils (CDCs). Through these, local communities proposed their infrastructural projects such as irrigation canals, rural roads, electrification, or female income-generating activities (BRAC, 2014).

By analysing these two programmes, we argue that such programmes have had a visible effect on various dimensions of female empowerment

and community-level power relationships. Overall, there are certain fundamental factors underpinning the success and effectiveness of BRAC's programs on women's empowerment. Fundamental to these was the strategic operational establishment of BRAC in Afghanistan. In 2002, a team of BRAC delegates entered Afghanistan on a 'fact-finding mission' to 'assess the viability of extending BRAC's intervention in Afghanistan' (Islam & Anwar, 2012: 58). This was a strategic initiative for BRAC in order to analyse risks, assess needs to be addressed and explore the feasibility of duplicating its successful CBS and community development models, which it had implemented 'in a post-conflict Bangladesh, 30 years ago' (ibid).

Through CBS, BRAC provided two models of community schools. One model was its 'girls and adolescents education programme', which prepared seven- to nine-year-old girls to enter formal schools. The second model was 'Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) which provided education for girls aged ten to nineteen who have dropped out or never attended school before. However, as of 2012, BRAC opened 4025 CBSs in 20 provinces, of which 84 % of the pupils were girls (Islam & Anwar, 2012). Therefore, there are specific factors by which the effectiveness of BRAC's education programme can be judged in terms of women's empowerment. *Firstly*, the majority of beneficiaries were girls, and the programmes were designed in a way that reintegrated girls (who were denied access to education during the Taliban's rule) into the educational system. *Secondly*, it recruited and trained local women as CBS teachers, empowering them economically and socially. A total of '4300 local women were recruited as CBS teachers' (BRAC, 2016: 1). This indicated that through CBS, BRAC had introduced a vast number of women into the workforce (Islam & Anwar, 2012). For example, Farida was 19, and finished 12th grade before becoming a CBS teacher. She found dignity in teaching and gained communal respect (BRAC, 2014). Financially, she supported her entire family and paid for the education of her younger siblings (ibid). To consider the impact of education on Farida's life, it could be argued that education empowered her from different 'cognitive, psychological, and economical' dimensions (Stromquist, 2002). Similar impacts could be observed in other CBS teachers. A major cause of women's rights violations is domestic violence in Afghanistan (Zand, 2011), studies suggested that the sort of empowerment Farida described here had a direct impact on the household and reduced domestic violence (Duflo, 2012). It also affected women's ability to exercise decision-making powers at the household level (Lairap-Fonderson, 2002).

BRAC's 'National Solidarity Programme (NSP)' and its impact on female empowerment

The overall goal of NSP was to establish community development councils (CDCs) in all Afghan villages to help them 'identify, plan, manage and monitor their own development projects' (MRRD, 2007: 23). BRAC facilitated local CDCs' democratic elections (AR-3_1), helped CDCs to identify and prioritise their infrastructural projects and to design, implement and monitor their community projects (ibid). By 2016, BRAC had established 3401 CDCs in six provinces. 6744 infrastructure sub-projects had been successfully completed (AR-2-1).

BRAC showed key factors of success in terms of both CBSs and CDCs. The fundamental key to their success was their knowledge of local context, which came from their study of communities through 'an extensive pre-intervention survey' (Islam & Anwar, 2012: 60). This enabled BRAC to conduct a needs assessment and gain the trust of local communities by explaining their roles and objectives through two main strategies. *Firstly*, through recruiting local people as much as possible (BRAC, 2009). *Secondly*, through using a particular language to approach gender issues as well as religious and tribal sensitivities, for example, a BRAC manager once mentioned that:

When I explained to a local community that we are here with a mission to help our Afghan brothers and sisters, through our post-

conflict development experience, we were welcomed and adopted by the communities (BRAC, 2005: XX).

BRAC also encouraged its expatriate staff to learn local languages in order to engage further with local communities (Chowdhury et al., 2006). Overall, BRAC studied the feasibility of different local engagement approaches, and implemented those that were the most suitable and effective. This led to BRAC being seen as a 'learning organisation' (Korten, 1980), through which it duplicated its successes in other development contexts.

Overall, the impact of NSP-CDC on women's empowerment had both intentional and unintentional consequences. *Firstly*, the compulsory involvement of local women in both CDCs and in the selection of projects 'enhanced women's participation in local governance' and decision-making (b-1, 28). Local women not only had access to 'resources', but also gained 'agency' in terms of 'identifying and prioritising their projects', which ultimately led to successful 'achievement'. In a study of 500 Afghan villages, Beath et al. (2013) argued that CDCs enhanced female participation and decision-making in economic, social and political activities, including an increase in their mobility and socialisation. *Secondly*, CDCs created a space through which women could gather together, crystallised their problems and exercised their bargaining power to get their agendas accepted. For example Dil Jan, a 60-years-old head of a women's council, said that:

Before the NSP, we women did not gather to talk about things that concerned us. Now we understand that we women should sit together and talk with one another about (these) Issues (Zand, 2011, 21).

However, CDCs also had certain unintended consequences on existing power dynamics. *Firstly*, the compulsory aspect of women's contribution to both councils and project selection affected women's choice for local governance as well as increased women's mobility as they routinely came out of their homes for a collective cause (B-1). *Moreover*, it enhanced women's political contribution to democratic processes via council elections. Through compulsory involvement, it also affected 'the acceptance of female participation in local governance' (Beath et al., 2013: 18). This indicated that men either willingly or unwillingly had to accept women's role in local governance and development, slowly undermining the patriarchal power relations of men whilst increasing women's bargaining power.

Discussions

The following points are discussed below. *Firstly*, the research found that any attempt to generalise the effectiveness of I-NGO intervention in Afghanistan is problematic. Through studying the works and programmes of two different I-NGOs (BRAC and CW4WA), it concluded that the effectiveness of each NGO's work lied in the context of their programmes and projects, policy-making processes, and power relations with donors and other key stakeholders. Therefore, while I-NGOs such as BRAC were effective in advancing women's empowerment in Afghanistan, others like CW4WA were not.

Fig. 1 summarised the factors and reasons for the effectiveness of BRAC's programmes and the ineffectiveness of CW4WA's policies in empowering Afghan women.

The analytical taxonomy shows that I-NGOs must work with rural conservative communities from the bottom up in patriarchal and conservative societies. Rural communities have always been less fortunate in terms of development opportunities, and in the case of Afghanistan, the rural communities have been more in need of awareness and education. They have also been strict about modernist and westernised modes of women's empowerment. Therefore, BRAC took such a bottom-up approach and built collective resistance by including both men and women through their National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and community-based schools (CBS).

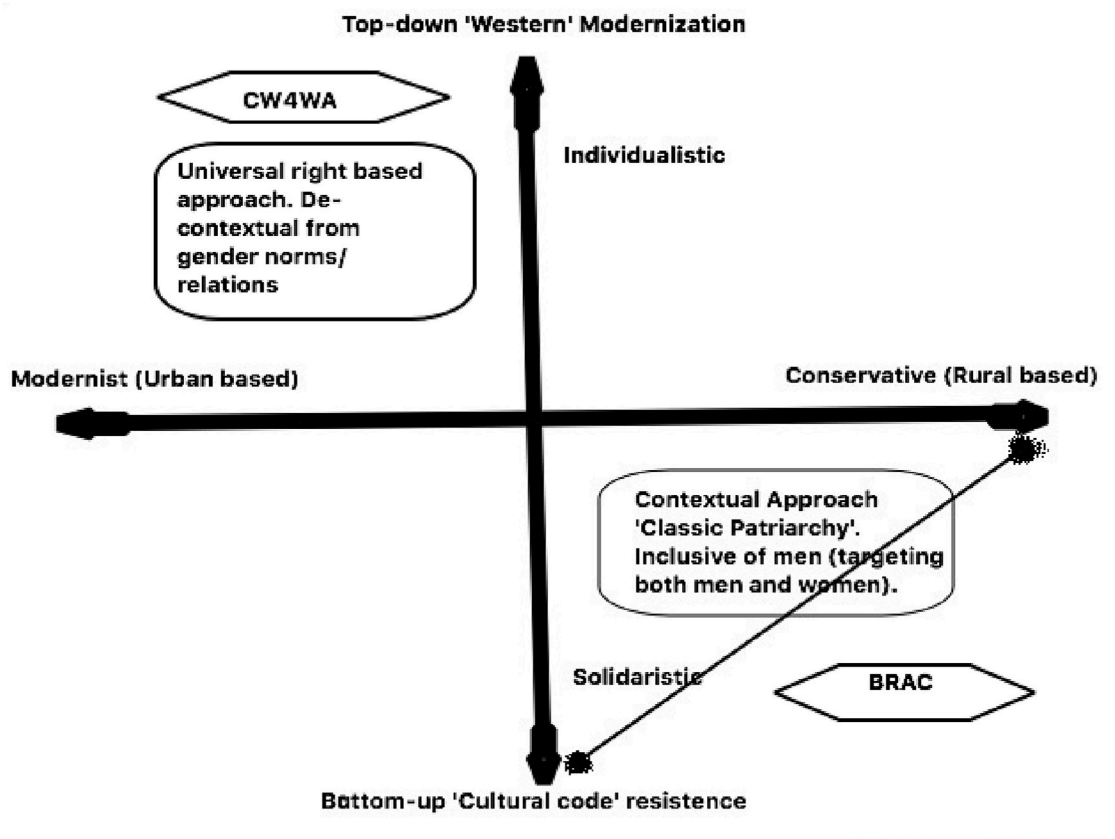


Fig. 1. An illustrative taxonomy of NGOs efforts in advancing women's empowerment in Afghanistan.

While some INGOs, such as CW4WA, took a top-down approach, focusing on specific numbers of men and women in order to promote a universalist human rights agenda without considering existing gender relations. Due to the difficulties and opposition that such an approach faced, CW4WA concentrated on urban areas where residents were more open to modernisation and westernisation. Despite the fact that CW4WA had more male beneficiaries, those men were already working as male teachers in schools. Therefore, it not only had a minimal direct effect on gender relations and Afghan women's employment but also (re)produced a specific image of Afghan women as oppressed, needy, and desperate for western help.

Hence, the ineffectiveness of CW4WA in advancing female empowerment through the reproduction of neocolonial discourse of gender in Afghanistan can be demonstrated by locating its projects and programmes at the top left of the taxonomy model. As presented in the case study, CW4WA took a top-down, universalist rights-based approach based on western modernist ideologies. This was ineffective firstly because it served the political purposes of CIDA. CIDA instrumentalised CW4WA to produce a new Afghan women's discourse in order to express and justify the need for Canada's military presence in Afghanistan. The discontinuation of CIDA's funds for CW4WA certified this claim since 'Canada's military mission in Afghanistan officially ends in March 2014' (Paris, 2014).

The politicisation of CW4WA's intervention undermined the I-NGOs' effectiveness, neutrality and legitimacy as non-governmental organisation (Donini et al., 2004). Additionally, CW4WA experienced certain technical problems, which led to its ineffectiveness in advancing women's empowerment. Afghan women were not involved in its policy processes, leading to the reproduction of an image that allowed the further objectification of Afghan women (Butler, 2009). Based on a colonial mode of the (re)production of gender, this created periphery and core power dynamics, expressing Afghan women as needy and

oppressed and Canadian students as 'global citizens' who will 'save' Afghan women. This offered a powerful demonstration of the power dynamics of white mainstream feminism in the articulation of specific imagery regarding southern women via texts and narratives (Mohanty, 1991). Through its education programme, CW4WA contributed massively to the building of 'in-service' teacher posts. However, the effectiveness of its education programme on female empowerment was not measurable. Considering Naila Kabeer (1999)'s dimensions for measuring women's empowerment, despite providing the 'resource' dimension of empowerment, it did not lead to any 'agency' or 'achievement'. Overall, the interventions of CW4WA were minimal in advancing women's empowerment in Afghanistan, as they brought no change in power-relations or in the day-to-day lives of Afghan women. However, it affected the education sector of Afghanistan enormously through training 'over 5000 in-service men and women teachers on methodology and pedagogy (CW4WA, 2013: 10).

The interventions of BRAC in advancing women's empowerment were effective due to certain factors. Firstly, the taxonomy model locates BRAC's programmes in the lower right corner, indicating that strategically, BRAC's establishment in Afghanistan was based on a fact-finding mission, enabling it to study the context of Afghanistan and analyse the country's patriarchal codes and gender relations (Islam & Anwar, 2012). Understanding the local context enabled BRAC to design and implement its programmes in a way that affected local power relations in two major ways. Firstly, through its education programme, it reintegrated girls and allowed them to catch up with boys through an accelerated learning programme, as girls were behind in terms of formal schooling. Through its education intervention, BRAC also aimed to change general perceptions of girls' access to education by involving local religious leaders in the policy processes. This enabled local women to gain employment and earn an income as CBS teachers, which reduced domestic violence (Duffo, 2012) and increased women's decision-

making at the household level (Zand, 2011).

Through its NSP, BRAC massively affected power relations at community levels. From a feminist standpoint, it enabled women to gain power 'within' themselves (Kabeer, 1999: 438) by enabling them to articulate their own agendas and push their agendas for local councils through sub-project mechanisms. It also empowered women politically by offering them a political sphere in local councils and giving them the right to vote. These gains had certain effects on the bargaining power of women and their role in local governance and local democracies. Meanwhile, local councils created a civil society space for women at the community level to gather and discuss their agendas, discourses, and priorities. A visible measure of female empowerment was gained, through which NSP provided local women with the resources (space for negotiating their agendas), the agency (their voice) and the achievement (their priorities and sub-projects). Such factors also enhanced their socialisation and mobility, as they frequently had to leave the house for council meetings (Zand, 2011). This represented a crucial achievement for Afghan women due to the existing patriarchal *Pardah* system, through which the mobility of women was restricted between households and within sight of the households. This had massive effects on existing power relations based on patriarchal codes, and men's perceptions about the role of women in local governance and community development changed.

Overall, through a bottom-up approach, BRAC could better understand the need for accelerated education services for girls who missed several grades during the Taliban's regime. BRAC also involved men and women in their project design stages (Islam & Anwar, 2012) and targeted its projects in remote and rural localities due to the extreme need. Therefore, the conclusion is that BRAC successfully managed to empower women effectively, by offering them resources, agency and achievements. It also directly affected existing gender relations to the benefit of Afghan women, which may ultimately lead to further gender mainstreaming. Future research questions about the efficiency of BRAC's programmes in advancing women's empowerment could analyse the cost and benefits of such programmes in order to explore the feasibility and cost of similar macro-programmes in other conservative and patriarchal societies.

Moreover, this research had implications in terms of policy and research. It demonstrated firstly that understanding local contexts and involving local communities in policy processes has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the projects and programmes themselves. Secondly, it showed that long-term programmes based on local ownership of agenda and discourse—and aligned with states' national development strategies—can be more effective than short-term unstable projects. Lastly, it demonstrated the power dynamics between I-NGOs and their donors. CIDA's instrumentalisation of CW4WA showed that donors can be relentless in their use of northern I-NGOs to support their own political agendas. In contrast, BRAC's funding of CBS and CDCs showed that southern I-NGOs can compromise powerful northern donors in terms of pursuing their objectives.

Overall, the findings suggest that any gender-focused interventions require an in-depth understanding of the context and cultural patriarchal, or gender-related, norms in a country. The study also suggests that, because both INGOs had a similar donor, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), one (CW4WA) could diverge from its mission to satisfy its donor's demand to justify Canadian military presence in Afghanistan through the reproduction of Afghan women's discourse. While, BRAC conducted feasibility studies prior to the programme and took a bottom-up approach.

Conclusion

The core commitment and argument of this study is that educational development interventions based on gender discourses must be decolonized in order to stop pathologizing the Global-South and Muslim women in particular, as well as post-war developing situations in

general. I-NGOs' educational interventions in the Global-South, which are based on a bottom-up approach that acknowledges contextual sensitivities as well as patriarchal norms and gender relations, can be a vehicle for women's empowerment and social transformation. Overall, we argue for an epistemic shift informed by post-colonial and critical realism approaches to gender and development, both in terms of research/theory and policy work.

This paper also concludes with the following policy recommendations for I-NGOs educational intervention in post-war developing countries: firstly, policymakers should involve local women in all policymaking processes. This will enable local women to own their agendas and discourses, to prioritise their needs accordingly and to raise their voices in order to address those needs. Such a participatory approach may lead I-NGOs to combine with local NGOs and other key stakeholders in order to engage with local communities to study local contexts. Secondly, female empowerment policies should include men. They should strategically aim to influence changes in men's perceptions of women's rights, capacities and capabilities and the importance of women's empowerment and welfare. Such an approach could target local men directly, or indirectly through influential community men such as religious leaders, local councillors and village heads. Incentivising influential groups may also lead to changes in the perceptions of other local men, affecting existing patriarchal gender codes and power relations. Finally, policies should target women at an individual level but should also create spaces through which women can work collectively. Such spaces may enable women to advocate for changes in power relations in a communal way, which may lead to incremental gender mainstreaming and greater levels of female empowerment.

Effective female empowerment strategies and educational interventions require long-term, male-inclusive macro-programmes rather than short-term unstable projects. Such an approach may ultimately enable I-NGOs to reach their intrinsic goals and objectives related to women's empowerment and development through educational interventions.

Declaration of competing interest

no potential conflict of interest is reported by the authors.

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n/a.

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