



## Working Paper 18

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### Women in resistance: avatars of Afghan and Mexican women in their daily fights against contemporary violence

by

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## **Abstract**

The next reflection has the purpose of analyzing the resilience strategies of Afghan women and girls throughout the 21st century to compare them with those other strategies that many Mexican women and girls from rural and urban communities have to use on a daily life to survive in the midst of different types of conditions of marginalization, discrimination and violence. The communication compares the representation and construction of negative female stereotypes originated in the most traditional visions of Islam and Catholicism to analyze the response that contemporary, resilient, and combative women have offered to fight against these cultural assumptions in search of greater freedoms, rights, and opportunities to live with dignity. This cultural comparison has the purpose of looking at women as active subjects, capable of responding and acting in situations of oppression, discrimination, and daily mistreatment in patriarchal societies where violence against women is one of the social, political, economic and cultures of most urgent attention.

## **Resumen**

La siguiente reflexión tiene el objetivo de analizar las estrategias de resiliencia de mujeres y niñas afganas a lo largo del siglo XXI para compararlas con aquellas otras estrategias que mujeres y niñas mexicanas, de comunidades rurales o urbanas, deben utilizar en su vida cotidiana para sobrevivir entre diferentes tipos de condiciones de marginalización, discriminación y violencia. Este artículo compara la representación y construcción de estereotipos femeninos negativos originados en las visiones más tradicionales del islam y el catolicismo, para analizar la respuesta que mujeres contemporáneas, resilientes y combativas han ofrecido para luchar contra estos supuestos culturales, en busca de mayores libertades, derechos y oportunidades para vivir con dignidad. Esta comparación cultural tiene el propósito de observar a las mujeres como sujetos activos, capaces de responder y actuar en situaciones de opresión, discriminación y maltratos cotidianos en sociedades patriarcales donde la violencia contra las mujeres es uno de los problemas sociales, políticos, económicos y culturales de mayor urgencia.

# Women in Resistance: Avatars of Afghan and Mexican Women in their Daily Fights Against Contemporary Violence

*Estela Roselló*

## **A world in transition: desolation and hope in the global south**

The world we live in today is confusing, uncertain, insecure. In the last three years, the transit through the COVID 19 pandemic has left humanity more aware than ever of its enormous vulnerability. In all regions of the planet, men, women and non-binary people of various ages and conditions have had to face the fragility of their existence. But to tell the truth, SARS COVID is not the only horseman of the apocalypse that devastates the lives of human beings who inhabit the Earth in this first quarter of the 21st century; on the other hand, it is not that this desolate situation is absolutely new or unknown to contemporary humanity.

Undoubtedly, the economic, social, political, environmental, and cultural origins of the deep world crisis in which we are participants today date back to the last twenty years of the 20th century<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 2010, Tony Judt warned the world how something had gone deeply wrong in the last decades of the 20th century and was still wrong in the first decades of the 21st. The materialism and selfishness of contemporary life had plunged humanity into a period of profound crisis (Judt, 2010, p. 11).

(Judt, 2010, p. 11). However, although they are not new, the inhospitable conditions that are contrary to human survival that surround us are increasing day by day, and thus, currently -beyond the pandemic- wars, the proliferation of authoritarian regimes, the polarization of societies, the increase in religious fanaticism and political fundamentalism, the devastation of biodiversity or the harmful effects of climate change exacerbate suffering, pessimism, and violence of all kinds (JASS, 2020). However, and at the same time, as has happened in other moments of historical transition, the chaos and discouragement in which we live do not annihilate the possibility of looking with hope at some human manifestations that make us believe that things could always be otherwise.

The resilience and resistance strategies with which many women from the most disadvantaged regions of the world face the hostile realities of this moment are, without a doubt, part of that repertoire of opportunities that keep faith alive in the human being and in the possibility to preserve the continuity of life. This text has the purpose of making visible the nature of some types of daily violence lived by women in Afghanistan and compare them with those of other Mexican women and girls, who also suffer from multiple types of marginalization, discrimination, poverty, and mistreatment that threaten their physical, emotional, and mental integrity.

Although the differences between the Asian and Latin American countries are many and obvious, violence against women is a common denominator between them. Both in Mexico and in Afghanistan, female bodies are besieged, mutilated, murdered, abused, and are exposed to extreme situations of all kinds, which threaten the women who live in these territories incessantly. Despite the economic, social,

and cultural differences between these nations, it is evident that in both, the presence of strong religious traditions is a fundamental factor in the construction of cultural meanings deposited in the bodies of their women.

Therefore, in the first part of this text, a brief summary of the negative representations and stereotypes of women and the female body from the most traditional views of Islam and Christianity is presented. This, with the purpose of better understand the cultural substratum of a misogynistic common sense that affects the security of many women in different dimensions and that makes it impossible for them to enjoy different types of freedom, which hinders the possibility to recognize women as subjects with rights, a common sense that nullifies for them the opportunities to live with dignity.

In a second part, this document makes visible some of the main types of violence that Afghan and some Mexican women experience in their daily lives, forms of discrimination, subjugation, physical, emotional, mental, and environmental insecurity, generally so extreme that they put end to the life of those human beings whose only fault is to have been born in a female body destined to suffer humiliations, blows, insults, aggressions, mutilations, misery, hunger and consequently, certain death. As can be seen in the following pages, the types of violence experienced by women on each continent are particular and different, and yet they share pain and injustice with women who live thousands of kilometers apart geographically but very close in terms of existential dramas.

At the same time, although the economic, political, and social realities of these female subjects are different, the truth is that many of them share the strength and the will not to let anyone annihila-

te them, their children, or their lands. The last section of this paper presents a brief conclusion about the importance of recognizing that the female battles and struggles for freedom, dignity and security are plural and diverse.

This cultural comparison has the purpose of looking at women as active subjects, capable of responding and acting in situations of oppression, discrimination, and daily mistreatment in patriarchal societies where violence against women is one of the social, political, economic and cultures of most urgent attention. At the same time, the reflection presented below also has the purpose of insisting on the plurality of women's struggles in our world, on the diversity of the needs of women who have to find specific solutions to economic, social, cultural, particular historical, local and regional policies, very different from each other.<sup>2</sup>

However, although it is true that each territory of our planet has different living conditions, it is also true that the feminine realities that are lived in the global south, to which Afghans and indigenous Mexicans belong, have similarities that it is essential to take into account in order to close ranks in an empathetic and supportive manner, and thus, with this, be able to contribute to the search for solutions, responses and lines of action that meet the specific demands and requirements of women who repeatedly demand that the world not forget about them.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper is inspired by the ideas of decolonial feminism of authors like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Rita Segato and Margara Millan Moncayo, who pose the importance of avoiding the monocultural paradigms of Western feminism.

## **The feminine at the service of men: Eve at the origin**

The idea that God created woman from Adam's rib while he was carelessly sleeping is recorded in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic holy books. Both the Koran and Genesis reproduce this revealing image of the symbolic feminine subordination present in both religious conceptions. For centuries, the belief that women were created from the male body and not independently of it reinforces the place in which many men and women who profess these book religions have placed themselves throughout time. It is from this different origin that the fact that, for both Muslims and Christians, the justification for the existence of women is subordinated to that of men is evident. And it is that if Eve was created by God, this was to keep man calm, to provide him with help and company, as well as to make possible the reproduction of the human species. In other words, in these cultural traditions, the value of the woman lies in the fact that she is useful to her husband and indispensable for the regeneration of the community. Under this conception, women are not valuable by themselves, but as precious goods to satisfy the needs of men and society.

However, and despite the common acceptance that women exist for the service of others and that they are valuable insofar as they allow the procreation of the species, there are doctrinal differences on the feminine conception and the meaning of being a woman in each religion. In this sense, it is worth noting that in the Christian and therefore Catholic tradition, Genesis makes clear the responsibility that Eve had in the expulsion from Paradise and in the subsequent curse inherited by all her children, due to Original Sin. It is Eve, indeed, who tempts the innocent Adam and convinces him to follow the De-



vil's invitation to taste the forbidden fruit. According to this perspective, the original mother is the cause of all the ills of humanity and inherits that first universal and eternal guilt and stain to all her progeny.

In contrast, for Islam, Original Sin does not exist; no one can inherit the guilt of another, much less take responsibility for the actions of others (Brown, 2011). In that sense, both Adam and Hawa share the responsibility of having disobeyed the divine command not to eat the forbidden fruit. However, there is a *hadith* that narrates how the Prophet Mohammed warned his faithful to “keep women on the right track” “because they were raised from a rib and the most crooked of the rib is its upper part”, so if you try to “straighten it” it would break, and if you “left it, it would remain crooked”; in this oral tradition, the Prophet enjoined “taking good care of women” (Brown, 2011). In the Islamic cultural context, taking good care of women does not only mean maintaining and providing daily sustenance for them, but also guiding them to submit to the obedience and silence characteristic of the more traditional Islamic stereotype of the virtuous woman.

Although for Christianity, Eve is the origin and source of all female temptation and Hawa is not for the faithful Muslims, in both traditions the ideal woman is one who serves men, who does not repair on gender inequity, and the one who is simply content to be kind, demure and careful of family and male needs, even at the cost of forgetting her own life.

Obviously, there is no single Christianity and no single Islam. In both religions there are more traditional and strict currents than others and in both religions there are critical movements against everything that limits the freedoms, well-being and rights of any human being. In this sense, it is important to point out that the feminine

stereotypes that in both traditions restrict the possibility of a dignified life for women obey the most fundamentalist and conservative views of these faiths. And it is that for the most radical Christian and Muslim interpretations of the divine word, that the female body is a fertile territory that must be put at the service of others and therefore used, controlled, and monitored.

Currently, both in Mexico and in Afghanistan, there is a religious cultural origin in the asymmetrical relationships between men and women, in the inequity of the rights of some and the obligations of others and vice versa, and in the masculine belief that the female body is a public good or personal property of men. And it is that all of the above is legitimized, consciously or unconsciously, from the most radical interpretations of religious doctrines and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that arise from that universe of ideas, beliefs and representations typical of Christianity and the Islam and that have remained alive and in force in many contemporary expressions of machismo and misogyny.

In the case of Christianity, this vision of the female body as a usable body at the service of the community is present in biblical texts of the New Testament, such as, for example, the second epistle of Saint Paul to Timothy, where it is clearly established that “the woman learns in silence with all subjection. Because “it is not allowed that the woman teach or exercise dominion over the man, but to be silent... the woman, being deceived, fell into transgression. But he will be saved by begetting children, if he continues in faith, love, and sanctification with modesty” (This quote comes from the Bible, Timothy 2:11-15, in Brown, 2022).

In other words, for the Christian religion, the error of Eve, a symbol of feminine transgression and of sin embodied in women, had as a consequence the need to silence the latter, at the same time that it justified that women could only clean their guilt when her body was dedicated to begetting children (Saint Saens, 1991). This idea was very popular within the early church fathers, including St. Augustine, who insisted that women's only function in salvation history was to conceive children.

In this sense, the female body was the property and good of men, who had to ensure that their women (wives, daughters, sisters) did not lend their bodies to other men outside of marriage, nor permit that they exhibited themselves or provoked in others with their dresses, gestures, or movements any type of lustful thought that could lead men into temptation. For the Christian religion, women must learn to temper their passions and bodily desires, as well as repress all attempts of seduction, in order to maintain the necessary virtue to achieve eternal salvation and avoid condemnation in hell (Gonzalbo, 2009)<sup>3</sup>.

In that same sense, although with its differences, the most conservative doctrine of Islam, maintains that the value of women and their bodies lie in the fact that they are essential to keep family union and the procreation of the species. This means that the bodily behavior of women must be shaped by the principles of modesty and purity and obviously, also, silence and obedience (Vizcarra and Serruto,

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<sup>3</sup> Among other historians, Pilar Gonzalbo has studied the cultural processes by which Catholic feminine stereotypes were built within the New Spanish culture, stereotypes that give origin to many contemporary Mexican prejudices around the meaning of "good" and "bad" women today.

2020). The woman is only valuable insofar as she adequately fulfills her role as a good wife and mother, and her body must always be at the service of her husband and her children (Tarrés, 2019).

The fact that the existence of women and the female body is justified on the basis that they are bodies available to satisfy male and collective desires is reflected in the Koranic image of heaven or paradise where men will receive as a reward “gardens where rivers flow... pure wives... demure-looking women with beautiful big eyes... virgins and affectionate... always the same age (Fernández, 2011)”.

If the value of the female body is measured in terms of its effectiveness in serving husbands and children, it is not surprising that both Islam and Christianity have insisted over time on dress and the need to cover certain parts traditionally associated with desire. For some Christian theologians of the Middle Ages and also of the Early Modern Age, female necklines were considered “the gate of hell”, so virtuous women should avoid them and dress modestly and cover the parts of the body that could incite other men to lust. The same happens with the Islamic recommendations around the female dress code or hijab. According to Islam, women who do not cover themselves with different types of veils can easily become objects of male lust and therefore, they must wear such garments in order to be protected from the gaze of impure men who can destroy or harass them (Lamrabet, 2014).

Although the subject of Christian and Islamic stereotypes of female virtue is subject to in-depth study, for now it is enough to point out that these traditional ideas about the value of women as public goods, about female bodies as bodies usable by men, as well as bodies that if not covered and carried modestly and demurely can be legitima-

tely mistreated, used and discarded are at the bottom of many types of violence that attack contemporary Afghan and indigenous women.

Beyond the fact that in principle, and unlike what happens with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, in Mexico, the rule of law is based on the existence of a secular regime, the truth is that in the Latin American country, many men who do not actively profess the Catholic religion have inherited many prejudices and cultural stereotypes from the gender roles promoted by that religion, which is still very present in the common sense of Mexican society.

For its part, in the case of Afghanistan, these religious stereotypes around the female body are the ones that the Taliban regime in power demands to comply with. In any case, both in the secular Latin American State and in the Islamic-style Asian State, the origin of a large part of the sexist and misogynist practices and behaviors lies in the mentality and religious imagery that has given meaning to life in these societies for many centuries.

## **Nullified bodies, oppressed bodies, murdered bodies**

As Rita Segato explains in many of her articles, books, conferences and interviews, currently, female bodies have ceased to be in a marginal place and today they occupy increasingly central positions when it comes to practicing different types of violence in different countries of the world (Segato, 2013, p. 57). The crisis of capitalism and democracies, the proliferation of wars, the seizure of political control by organized crime groups and fundamentalist religious groups, the increase in male frustration at the inability to meet the cultural expectations of the Western masculinity mandates, as well as the effects of

climate change and the pandemic have increased countless manifestations of violence of which the main target and material repository is the female body. This is very evident both in Mexico and in Afghanistan, countries where the numbers of women raped, sexually abused, mistreated, mutilated, and murdered are higher every day and are increasingly visible in the international press (Barragán, 2021)<sup>4</sup>.

In the year 2021, the abandonment of the US armed forces from Afghan territory to clear the way for the Taliban, who regained political control of that nation, once again opened a window for the world to peer into that daily universe of oppression and suffering in which thousands of women and girls from that country live. For several months, the global media focused its attention on the inadmissible violence suffered by Afghan women and girls in their bodies, violence that has its justification and its origin in the patriarchal and more radical and fundamentalist interpretations of the Sharia and the Koran. But violence that also emerges from the miserable economic conditions in which this Asian country has been forced to live, affected by years of civil war, foreign invasions, armed interventions by the West and economic sanctions that not only affect the Taliban, but also to the innocent population that lives in this said nation. In this sense, poverty is, in addition to the fundamentalist religious culture, one of the most important sources of the multiple types of violence that affect women and girls in Afghanistan.

Undoubtedly, in the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century, every time the Western internatio-

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad (SNSP), between January and November 2021, 3 462 women were murdered. This means that ten women were murdered daily.

nal gaze turns to oppressed and violated Afghan women, it focuses on the issue of the compulsory use of the *burqa*, that dark garment, which completely covers women from head to toe, and which isolates the female body from life and from the external reality that surrounds it. Certainly, for secular and modern Western culture, the idea that the female body has to be completely hidden and covered is an absolutely unacceptable form of female violence and silencing (Lamrabet, 2014). It is known that in Afghanistan, not wearing the *burqa* or looking out a window onto the street can cost any woman the sentence of hundreds of public lashes. Beyond cultural codes and respect for cultural plurality, the truth is that harming the physical integrity of any human being in this way is a reality that cannot have a place in a world that is struggling to eradicate any type of violence.

At the same time, it is also well known, that the bodies of many Islamic women who have lived under the Taliban regime have received corporal punishment such as stoning and mutilation when they have dared to disobey the fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia and have used cosmetics, when they have had sex outside of marriage, laughed out loud, or gone out alone, unaccompanied by a *mahram*. In all these cases, the Taliban regime justifies women being abused and mistreated even to the point of death.

In the Mexican case, the violence that attacks female bodies is not minor, although it does manifest itself in other ways. Currently, women who live in urban areas are subject to violence more typical of cosmopolitan societies, exposed to the more secular global Western culture. There are many Mexican women who today suffer from sexual harassment and abuse, who are enslaved or used when they

are captured by organized crime. In recent years, the numbers of femicides have increased alarmingly and unacceptably.

Although the Mexican State is a secular State and some sectors of Mexican society are increasingly cosmopolitan in various ways, there are many aspects of the more traditional Mexican culture that are still governed by their own precepts, values, ideas, beliefs, and prejudices of the current Christian-Catholic mentality among many contemporary Mexicans. Machismo in this country is closely related to Catholic ideas about the value of virginity, the prejudice that there are good, virtuous and respectable women as opposed to others who are bad, sinful and disposable; the conviction that women should be at the service of her husband and her family without objection, as well as in the belief that women are guilty of being raped, used and killed for provoking the desire or rage of men.

Although sexual and bodily violence linked to the traditional and more fundamentalist stereotypes of both Islam and Christianity very frequently affect Afghan and Mexican women, there are many other types of violence that also generate oppression, pain, suffering, extreme hardship, danger, and death for the women of these two countries.

In the first place, we should think about the effects that various manifestations of climate change have had and still have, which affect the most disadvantaged communities in these countries, and which also generate new female responsibilities that are added to the enormous list of factors on which gender inequity is based. In this way, for example, it is worth mentioning the consequences of the terrible droughts that affect various territories of Afghanistan. The severe droughts experienced in that nation generate hunger and thirst for the population; as in many other regions of the global south, it is women



and girls who have to walk for hours to find wells or sources of drinking water for daily life and food to ensure food security for families (UNHCR, 2021). Faced with malnutrition, many mothers are even unable to breastfeed their children, as their bodies are unable to produce milk.

In Afghanistan, the drought also generates forced displacement that produces new care responsibilities among women who find it necessary to save their children and families from hunger, insecurity, thirst and even heatstroke in the desert. As it is easy to see, all these daily situations of vital precariousness violate Afghan women's security and well-being permanently (UNHCR, 2021)<sup>5</sup>.

For their part, in the case of many women from Mexican indigenous communities, they suffer many types of daily violence also generated by the effects of climate change (ILO, 2017). Like other female indigenous populations in the global south, many indigenous people in Mexico suffer from five conditions that increase the insecurity, pain, danger, discrimination, exclusion, and labor exploitation of these women.

As the International Labour Organization (ILO) reports point out, and as happens to other indigenous peoples in the world, Mexican women who belong to these groups suffer from the following problems: first, they live in the economically poorest and most vulnerable communities in the country; second, their survival depends largely on renewable natural resources; third, the ecosystems they inhabit are especially vulnerable to climate change; fourth, poverty coupled with

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<sup>5</sup> According to UNHCR, 80% of Afghan population is affected by these droughts. The same source tells us that 45% of the population suffers famine. In 2018, 260 000 Afghans had to abandon their lands and homes in search of places with water to live.

the devastation of their environment, force them to abandon their territories in search of other more inhabitable lands where they only find discrimination and abuses of power. Finally, gender inequality is manifested in the large number of unpaid jobs that indigenous women have to perform in their communities; this, not to mention that faced with the effects of climate change that damage their territories, women are the last to be taken into account for decision-making in search of community solutions (ILO, 2017; Bugacoff, 2011)<sup>6</sup>.

### **Regional violence, particular resistance: alternatives to western feminism**

Despite the possible similarities between the violence suffered by these women and that of many of their peers, indeed, the daily violence that Afghans and indigenous Mexicans of the 21st century have to face are due to very different historical, social, economic and cultural conditions. Although in some points, the pain and suffering they face may be similar or may even have a similar origin, the particular experiences of each region are faced from local feminine solutions or responses, which seek to face specific conditions of subalternity, and power relations typical of non-Western societies (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2011)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Within the Mexican indigenous women which have protested against their exclusion on the UN Conferences of Climate Change, there are the “Defensoras de la Tierra”. This group of ten women talked in Glasgow last year to remind the world the need to recognize that indigenous peoples are the most important preservers of biodiversity in our time.

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui insists on the importance to dignify women from different perspectives, and avoid the West paradigms to explain realities that obey to very different experiences, cultures and needs.

As different authors concerned with rescuing the particularities of feminism in the global south have pointed out, such as Márgara Millán Moncayo, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui or Rita Segato, Afghan and indigenous Mexican women protest and combat abuses of power stemming from patriarchy, racism, or classism, from paradigms different from those of feminist struggles originating in the capitalist, modern and white enlightened world (Millán, 2020, p. 214)<sup>8</sup>.

In this sense, it is enough to recall some strategies with which the women of Afghanistan and Mexico face situations of violence that affect them, their families, their land, daughters, mothers, sisters, and friends. When one looks at these forms of struggle and protest, it is clear that they obey worldviews, interests and daily problems that are not the same as those of white women in the West.

According to all said, there are many Afghan women who defend their right to exercise their religion, freeing themselves not only from the patriarchal interpretations of the Taliban's fundamentalist Islam, but also from Western Islamophobic prejudices. Thus, many of them wish to use the veil in defense of their decolonial identity; for these women, the abuses of power typical of the West and of white societies that push them into poverty and daily marginalization weigh as much as the abuses of power of Afghan men who assume chauvinist and misogynist precepts that subjugate and annihilate them on a daily basis.

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<sup>8</sup> In Millán's words, it is necessary to: "Understanding gender as a construction of a reciprocal nature to the society that produces it provides the basis for not universalizing a specific definition of difference. It is a historicizing principle that bases the current decolonization of the hegemonic category of gender" (Millán, 2020, p. 214).

For their part, many indigenous Mexican women are forced to confront the discrimination, racism and classism exerted on them by westernized white men and women and choose to make the defense of their traditional languages as one of their most important feminist banners. For them, forgetting their languages means the impossibility of connecting with their own bodies from emotions, sensations, pains, and relief that cannot be named in Spanish.

In this way, it is essential that academies from different parts of the world attend to the historical, cultural, economic, social, and political particularities of the violence that affects women in Asia and Latin America, in order to listen to their real needs and local demands. Only in this way, the academy will be able to generate empathetic and useful knowledge for women who, living in the global south, struggle day by day to recover feminine dignity from the multiple meanings that this condition of true emancipation can have in very diverse realities.

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