

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN HUMAN SECURITY

Gendering Human Security in Afghanistan

In a Time of Western Intervention

Ben Walter



Gendering Human Security in Afghanistan

This book employs the concept of human security to show what the term means from the perspective of women in Afghanistan.

It engages with a well-established debate in academic and policy-making contexts regarding the utility of human security as a framework for understanding and redressing conflict. The book argues that this concept allows the possibility of articulating the substantive experiences of violence and marginalisation experienced by people in local settings as well as their own struggles towards a secure and happy life. In this regard, it goes a long way to making sense of the complex dynamics of conflict which have confounded Western policy-makers in their ongoing state-building mission in Afghanistan. However, despite this inherent potential, the idea of human security still needs refinement. Crucially, it has benefitted from critical feminist and critical social theories which provide the conceptual and methodological depth necessary to apprehend what a progressive ethical programme of security looks like and how it can be furthered. Using this framework, the work provides a critical reconstruction of the effect of the US-led Western Intervention on women's experiences of (in)security in the three provincial contexts of Nangarhar, Bamyan and Kabul. This reconstruction is drawn from a wealth of historical and contemporary sociological research alongside original fieldwork undertaken in Delhi, India, during 2011 with women and men from the country's different communities.

This book will be of much interest to students of human security, state-building, gender politics, war and conflict studies and IR in general.

Ben Walter is Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia.

Series: Routledge Studies in Human Security

Series Editors: Mary Martin

London School of Economics

and

Taylor Owen

University of Oxford

The aim of this series is to provide a coherent body of academic and practitioner insight which is capable of stimulating further consideration of the concept of human security, its impact on security scholarship and on the development of new security practices.

The European Union and Human Security

External Interventions and Missions

Edited by Mary Martin and Mary Kaldor

National, European and Human Security

From Co-Existence to Convergence

Edited by Mary Martin, Mary Kaldor and Narcís Serra

State Responses to Human Security

At Home and Abroad

Edited by Courtney Hillebrecht, Tyler White and Patrice McMahon

Human Security, Changing States and Global Responses

Institutions and Practices

Edited by Sangmin Bae and Makoto Maruyama

Gendering Human Security in Afghanistan

In a Time of Western Intervention

Ben Walter

Gendering Human Security in Afghanistan

In a Time of Western Intervention

Ben Walter

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2017 Ben Walter

The right of Ben Walter to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-64064-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-63649-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Wearset Ltd, Boldon, Tyne and Wear

**For my parents whose love and support made
this book possible**



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 Introduction	1
2 Gendering human security	19
3 Community, tradition and gender in Afghanistan	48
4 Modernisation and fragmentation in Afghanistan	71
5 Nangarhar Province	91
6 Bamyan Province	111
7 Kabul Province	133
8 Conclusion	160
<i>Glossary</i>	170
<i>Index</i>	173

Acknowledgements

The completion of this book would not have been possible without the help of many supportive colleagues, friends and family members. Thus, in no particular order, I would like to extend heartfelt thanks to the following people. To my supervisors, Martin Weber and Andrew Phillips, whose engagement with, and support of, my project has been nothing less than extraordinary, I would like to say thank you for all the advice and encouragement you have given me from the time I started my thesis through to the publication of this book. I could not, in my wildest dreams, have wished for a better team to have helped me undertake this project.

I must also thank my good friends Shannon Brinnecatt, Tim Aistrophe and Lina Abirafeh for going above and beyond the call of duty to help me with their comments on draft chapters. Though these three busy scholars had a variety of their own projects to work on in 2016, each of them gave up their time to read multiple copies of my chapters and provide me with extensive feedback. In my theoretical discussion of Critical and Feminist Theory in Chapter 2, Shannon and Tim provided me with many helpful suggestions on clarifying and framing my argument. Lina Abirafeh, an accomplished feminist scholar and committed feminist activist, provided me with a series of constructive suggestions based on her years of experience in researching gender dynamics in Afghanistan.

I also need to acknowledge the help I received from the wonderful people I met in Delhi during my fieldwork research trip there in June of 2011. In particular, I must thank Said Reza Huseini, Ankita Jnu and Mansoor Ehsan, my friends at *Jawaharlal Nehru University* who enthusiastically helped me organise and conduct my focus group discussions with different groups of Afghans living in Delhi. On this matter, I must also thank the refugee women and men from Afghanistan who, during the focus group discussions, willingly took time out of their own lives to provide me with their informative understandings of Afghanistan's history of social change and gender dynamics. Furthermore, I am particularly indebted to John Mohammed Butt for his help in understanding the social history of Afghanistan through the competing discourses of Islam and Pashtunwali during our many detailed conversations.

The transformation of this book from a PhD thesis would not have been possible without the very adept translations of the focus group discussions (FGDs).

For this I must extend a very special thanks to the following people: Said Reza Hussein who translated the Hazara mixed sex and men's FGD; Mansoor Eshan who translated the Tajik mixed sex and men's FGD; Lima Hadi who translated the Pashtun women's FGD; Abdul Ahad Mohammadi who translated the Tajik women's FGD; and Masuma Hussaini who translated the Hazara women's FGD.

I also need to extend heartfelt thanks to my parents Kay and John Walter whose love and support for me over the years have given me the ability to keep pursuing my dreams. To my mother, Kay, and Aunt Jill I also owe a huge debt of gratitude for proofreading this manuscript countless numbers of times for clarity and copy errors. It is thanks to their earnest readings of the manuscript chapters that the book reads as well as it currently does.

I must also thank my wife's wonderful parents Bill and Donna Nackers for sharing their home with us and giving us a wonderful opportunity to pursue our dreams in academia. While we initially moved into their home to help her parents through a hard time in 2015, we ended up being helped far more by their kindness and generosity.

Finally, I must thank my wife, Kimberly Nackers, whose love and friendship have made it possible for me to deal with the many pressures involved in completing this project. I look forward to sharing the rest of my life with her.



Map of Afghanistan's provinces
Source: United Nations profile map of Afghanistan (Map No. 3658 Rev 7, June 2011).

1 Introduction

At its heart, this book attempts to tell a story about furthering security in Afghanistan in the time of Western Intervention that was occasioned by the overthrow of the Taliban in October, 2001. The story of security that I tell here refers to much more than just the abatement of armed violence wrought by warring factions. It is more thoroughly concerned with the pursuit of a holistic vision of security premised upon the well-being and happiness of people in their own communities.

Given the priority of human beings in this story, it was a straightforward decision for me to engage with the framework of human security. This concept prioritises the lives of concrete human subjects in counter-distinction to long-standing practices of national security aimed at securing the abstract bodies of states. In so doing, it makes security democratic by highlighting subjects' own perspective of security and, potentially, revolutionary in its challenge to dominant and institutionalised practices associated with national and international security.

Nevertheless, to make human security a viable vehicle for engagement in Afghanistan, it must present an account of security which is meaningful to human subjects themselves. For this reason, I build my account of what human security is through an exploration of the lives of women and their experiences of oppression and marginalisation in Afghanistan. Women's experiences of gender-based violence, whether physical, economic or emotional, provide a substantive account of security that speaks to the conflicts and hierarchies of power which jeopardise the well-being of society in Afghanistan more broadly. In so doing, the story of women speaks also to the lives of men and the insecurities and challenges they face within existing hierarchical gender structures.

Engaging in this reconstructive account of what human security means in Afghanistan from the perspective of women and men is not a simple task. To begin with, the expression of what security means in any given context ultimately involves an ethical claim which enjoins societal action to urgently redress harm. Thus, the possibility of arriving at a legitimate expression of security involves philosophical and sociological reflection about how ethics should be practised in global politics. At the same time, the heterogeneity of the social landscape of Afghanistan defies attempts to define or characterise it. People's

2 Introduction

social identities in Afghanistan exist at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, language, religion and socio-economic considerations. What makes this research even more difficult and ethically fraught is that women's lives in Afghanistan are all too often objectified and caricatured for the agenda of an external agent.

Women in Afghanistan beneath a Western gaze

Consider the image of a woman clad in a blue *burqa* (Arabic word for full body covering garment) in Afghanistan. Following the rise of the Taliban in 1996, and especially after their fall in 2001, this image became embedded in Western imaginations. As Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood (2002: 339–341) observed, in the weeks and months after the September 11 attacks this image saturated Western media coverage of Afghanistan. It was routinely championed by a variety of prominent public figures, including male political leaders and first ladies (Weber, 2005: 371), feminists (Russo, 2006: 557–558) and talk-show hosts (Fluri, 2009: 245) as exemplary of everything at stake in the West's impending intervention into Afghanistan.

The very facelessness and voicelessness of this feminine figure invoked ideas of oppression, victimisation and backwardness: through no fault of her own, this woman was subjugated, brutalised and held back by violent and ignorant men as personified by the Taliban and other patriarchal authority figures (Moghadam, 2002: 245). Yet, at the same time, the existence of this woman's all-veiling *burqa* also presented the possibility that she could be unveiled. Thus, she existed in Western imaginations as a subject in transition from the personification of a barbaric and backward time to that of a modern liberated citizen of a democratic Western-liberated Afghanistan.

As many critical feminist scholars observed, this well-worn discursive framing of Afghan women helped Western governments legitimise the military intervention for their domestic audiences (Shepherd, 2006: 19–21). At the same time, these feminist scholars repeatedly raised concerns about the way in which this objectification of women in Afghanistan served to silence the voices of women and obfuscate their perspectives on the Western Intervention (Daulatzai, 2008: 420–421). Crucially, the framing of Afghanistan entailed in this image had even wider ramifications beyond merely being a rhetorical argument that legitimised war. This crude depiction of a burqa-clad victim was emblematic of the broader objectifying gaze Western politicians, policy-makers and academics used to perceive and, even more worryingly, problem-solve gender politics in Afghan society. Gender politics here refers to the discourses and practices within society which organise gender relations, gender identities and gender roles. In this regard, gender politics is concerned with the way in which power, position, choice, opportunities, access and rights are afforded to women and men in society.

Unfortunately, the narrowness of these conceptual lenses meant that the complexity of gender relations and gender politics in Afghanistan remained largely invisible to Western eyes even as their dynamics played out in full view. At the same time, the normative content attached to this vision of gender progress for

women was highly problematic. According to this moral framework, women were cast as “victims” in need of “empowering” while men were characterised as patriarchal, if not misogynistic, figures who, as a sexual class, were holding back women’s liberation. Much of the normative content which informed this analysis of Afghanistan was overtly Orientalist in its depiction of the Afghan subject as an alien “other”. Here, Orientalism refers to the process in which Europeans characterised the lives of different societies as alien and “other” and incorporated this caricatured account of “Orientals” into their own worldview (Said, 1979: 72–73).

At the same time, the Western Intervention relied implicitly on the universalising and Eurocentric assumptions of Enlightenment-based philosophies like liberalism and modernisation theory. Based on these philosophical traditions, many politicians, academics and policy-makers maintained that sexual inequality between women and men in Afghanistan could be socially and technologically problem-solved through building a democratic government that enshrined women’s rights and protections and gender-specific aid programmes that promoted women’s empowerment.

The clumsiness of this attempt to socially transform gender relations in Afghanistan was not lost on the people of Afghanistan themselves. As Lina Abirafeh (2009: 55–57) observed from her own interviews with women and men in post-Taliban Kabul, there was a widespread anger at the way in which gender programming treated men and male viewpoints as patronising and an obstacle to women’s empowerment. Moreover, such efforts to transform gender relations were not new in the Afghan context which had experienced similarly intrusive gender programming during the rule of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan and the Soviet Occupation during the 1980s. As in the past, the present intervention fed into a highly gendered social and political landscape which was already shaped by competing hyper-masculinist discourses of custom and religion. This coming together of foreign and local gendered discourses has served to make women’s and men’s lives a daily exercise in navigating a gendered battleground within which infringements are violently policed.

The research puzzle

The goal of this book is to revitalise the concept of human security by making it meaningful to women who, as a sexual class, represent some of the most subjugated and insecure subjects in Afghanistan. The way I go about this task is with recourse to the conceptual and methodological insights of feminist, critical and post-colonial theory. Conceptually, these theories help re-vision a lens of human security (hereafter HS) such that the experiences of marginalised women can be apprehended. Methodologically, these theories allow insight into the way in which progressive moral agendas, such as those associated with redressing inequitable gender relations, can be furthered.

Like feminist theory, HS emphasises the need to focus on the lives of concrete human subjects as opposed to artificial bodies, such as the territorial state, which

4 *Introduction*

assume precedence in national and international framings of security. However, as many feminists point out, despite its seeming overlap with feminist theory, the mainstream iteration of HS still suffers from problematic assumptions which stem from Enlightenment-based philosophy. Most importantly, the individual human subject who informs its analysis and prescription is for all intents and purposes a masculine agent. Thus, rather than providing an account of security which is sensitive to gender dynamics, the HS concept inevitably universalises the social, economic and political needs of an idealised masculine actor.

Despite these issues, a growing number of feminist practitioners have contributed to a constructive discussion on how HS can be re-visioned and re-purposed within feminist theory. This book seeks to both borrow from, and contribute to, this theoretical discussion with the intention of showing how a feminist HS framework could respond to pressing normative questions, such as those associated with redressing hierarchical gender relations in Afghanistan.

The insights I make use of within this feminist framework are drawn from a variety of critical literatures of global politics as I will articulate in Chapter 2. Obviously, feminist scholarship on the concept of HS plays a major role in the very instigation of this argument. At the same time, this framework benefits from the insights of post-colonial theory which shares the robust normative commitment of feminist theory and provides strong insights into understanding the political and cross-cultural differences entailed in post-colonial settings. Furthermore, the feminist politics advocated in this framework benefits greatly from recourse to the insights of critical feminist and social theory regarding the possibilities of apprehending and engaging with a moral debate.

The central message which emerges from these complementary, critical theoretical endeavours is that any attempt to articulate ethics must incorporate a very strong understanding of society itself. For, if it cannot articulate an ethic that is immanent to the societal relations of the world, it will remain a utopian project. Thus, the key to promoting a positive conception of security is through exploring the societal setting which forms the context in which people's lives are variously made secure or threatened. Within this setting, efforts to improve security involve challenging and transforming the hierarchical relationships of power which threaten people's lives and constrain their ability to go about their lives freely.

When I write this argument about Afghanistan, I write at a time of Western Intervention. The US military has now been engaged in America's longest running war in the history of its Republic, having spent 15 years fighting the Taliban and anti-government factions there. The US has held the greatest material influence on Afghanistan's post-Taliban history through its military and economic support. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a broader coalition made up of NATO and other supportive states, international organisations and humanitarian agencies have participated in what could be broadly dubbed a "Western Intervention".

It is this external intervention which provides the context within which I attempt to articulate what HS in society looks like from women's perspective.

I am keen to explore the disjuncture between a rhetorical promise to improve women's lives with the way in which this intervention has impacted women, and their communities, at a local level. In this exploration, I am not attempting to provide an explicitly policy-oriented account for problem-solving human insecurity. However, I am interested in showing the possibilities for ethical progress that are revealed by people's own struggles and challenges for change. Such instances reveal areas in which external agents could gainfully converge to discuss mechanisms for change; however, the actual form and content of such a dialogue-driven policy-making would need to unfold organically and reflectively.

My positionality as a researcher

Prior to elaborating on the specific methodological framework employed by this monograph to re-conceptualise HS, it is important to discuss how this research project came into being and what is my relationship to it as a researcher. This is all the more important given that I am a non-Afghan, white, male researcher, trying to understand women's lives and gender relations in Afghanistan. As suggested previously, Afghan women's subjectivities have perennially been misappropriated by external agents for their own ideological agendas historically and contemporaneously. The dangers of trying to "save" Afghan women or presume to speak for them has always been a pressing issue of concern to me as such exercises of power can occasion epistemic as well as concrete violence to these subjects.

It is a well-worn metaphor to liken the research process to a journey. Nevertheless, this framing neatly captures the many different paths I explored and the many moments of consciousness-raising and self-realisation I experienced on the way to finding a promising road of enquiry. In late 2008, after having completed my master's programme in International Relations (hereafter IR), focussing on mainstay courses like international security, foreign policy, arms control and IR theory, I entered a doctoral programme with a "hard-nosed" interest in understanding armed violence and security in Afghanistan. However, during my first-year review of the literature on conflict studies and empirical examinations of conflict in Afghanistan, I became increasingly dissatisfied with the story being told by this field in which conflict boiled down to the armed violence between government forces and insurgents or anti-government elements. In the context of Afghanistan, people's identities were summarily classified according to little-understood ethnic categories, such as Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara, and their political subjectivities were framed simplistically as either being for or against the US-supported government of Kabul. What particularly struck me reading this literature was the extent to which it was written by Western scholars and researchers for Western policy-makers to better "problem-solve" the ongoing foreign military interventions in which their governments were enmeshed.

My "light bulb" moment for resolving this dilemma came midway through 2009 when I took a moment to reflect more seriously on the people who most needed security in Afghanistan. I realised that the human beings in most need of

6 Introduction

security and well-being were Afghan women. This initial realisation was attended almost immediately by the observation that, for all the rhetorical concern expressed by Western leaders about women's lives in Afghanistan since 2001, there had been very little effort made to find out whether Afghan women felt their lives had improved after the intervention. Thus, in a rather happenstance fashion, I came to a realisation which had already been elaborated upon and unpacked at great length by critically-minded feminist scholars. As I found out through exploring this literature, these feminist scholars had shown how masculinised discourses helped facilitate a war in the name of "saving" Afghan women with the effect that Afghan women's lives and voices became instrumental objects. I felt that my own project could productively contribute to these established feminist critiques by initially exploring how women's lives had been affected by the intervention and, subsequently, by providing a deeper analysis of gender relations and gendered hierarchies of power contributing to women's, but also men's, human (in)security.

Despite this potentially interesting subject matter, I still felt ill-prepared to meet the conceptual and methodological challenges in undertaking a feminist-oriented research project on post-colonial subjects. How could I meaningfully comment on women's and men's lives in Afghanistan and claim to know their voices and aspirations from my secluded office desk at the University of Queensland in Brisbane? How could I be sure that my research would not facilitate further epistemic violence to Afghan women by appropriating their subjectivities to legitimise more destabilising interventions in the name of "saving" women in Afghanistan? Unsurprisingly, the answers to these questions did not avail themselves to me instantaneously. Instead, I began to read feminist literature relating to IR more carefully. Ann Tickner (1997: 611–613; 2005: 3–4) furnished me with an immensely important critique of the way gender inflected the meta-theoretical assumptions of IR. As Tickner (1988: 432) suggested, IR's ontology was filled with androgynous (but inherently masculine) individuals and state actors whose existence was posited as reflecting an objective and universal condition. Meanwhile, when engaging with the question of Afghan women's subjectivity, I found the scholarship of Chandra Mohanty (Mohanty, 2002: 409–503) extremely useful in understanding the post-colonial dimension of feminist theory. This work laid bare the heterogeneity of feminisms contained within the effacing label of the "Third World" as well as the danger in straight-forwardly assuming the existence of solidarities between Western and non-Western feminisms.

While familiarising myself with feminist literature in 2010, I was fortunate to obtain a copy of *Bartered Brides*. This informative anthropological text by Nancy Lindisfarne (then Tapper) explored the lives and gender systems of the Maduzai Durrani Pashtun tribes from Sar-e-pul in northern Afghanistan (Tapper, 1991). Not only did this work provide me with an intimate understanding of the traditional operation of gender through masculinised honour codes within Pashtun societies but it also gave insight into the complexities of social and political life within the kinship-based system of Pashtun tribes. After reading

this work, I further discovered the extensive and critically reflexive anthropological literature on various peoples and regions within Afghanistan. Special mention should also be made here of Nancy Hatch Dupree whose extensive fieldwork and reporting on gender dynamics in Afghanistan prior to, and during, major war and upheaval provided me with major insights into women's and men's changing lives and relationships. This was particularly apparent in her eloquent and powerful coverage of the "family crisis" in Afghanistan as a consequence of decades of displacement and disruption.

Even though the empirical side of my research project into women's contemporary (in)security in Afghanistan was finally taking shape, I still lacked a comprehensive methodological explanation to account for my research process. At the end of 2010, during a mid-candidature review, I was very helpfully pressed on this matter by a feminist PhD peer at my alma mater to more fully explain how I could meaningfully access the voices of Afghan women and do so in a non-exploitative fashion.¹ My response to this query at the time was that I would be as humble and self-reflexive as possible in carrying out my research. This was not a flippant response designed to avoid a more serious discussion but reflected my own growing awareness that meaningful and ethical research required that the researcher engage in a constant process of self-reflection and circumspection about their own positionality.

This reflexive disposition towards my own research process was vitally helpful to me when I was unexpectedly given the opportunity to undertake fieldwork with Afghan participants in Delhi, India. Although I had reconciled myself that I was unlikely to be able to undertake fieldwork research for my doctoral thesis, a chance event in early 2011 changed my calculations entirely. While listening to AM radio on my routine car drive into the University of Queensland one day, I was lucky enough to hear a BBC world report by Nadene Ghouri (2011) on the remarkable life and accomplishments of John Mohammad Butt. Up until this point, I had been in a dilemma as to how I might arrange fieldwork research in Afghanistan considering the likely insurmountable ethical and logistical hurdles I would encounter in order to conduct research on a vulnerable group in a dangerous setting.

However, as I listened to the story of a British hippy who travelled to Afghanistan in 1969 and became accepted by the region's border tribes as a native Pashtun and later was revered as an Islamic scholar, it dawned on me that John Butt could offer me a wealth of insightful understanding from his own life experience as well as facilitating access to the many expatriate Afghans living in New Delhi, India, where he now resided. Upon hearing of my research project, John graciously agreed to my interview requests with him specifically and, after my arrival, helped to place me in touch with Said Reza Hussein, an enthusiastic and keenly intelligent university student, studying at Jawahrl Nehru University (JNU). Through Reza, I met several other kind and thoughtful students at JNU, including Dr Ankita Halder and Mansoor Ehsan, who became my friends and collaborators in assisting my field research and understanding of Afghanistan. These participants' accounts were interpreted and triangulated with reference to

a variety of historical anthropological scholarships² as well as a large range of contemporary sociological research³ and feminist ethnographic literature on Afghanistan.⁴ Though not without its challenges and difficulties, this research fieldwork proved immensely beneficial in my being able to learn first hand from different expatriate subjects about their understandings of the way gender relations had changed between women and men over time during Afghanistan's tumultuous history.

Gendering human security in Afghanistan

Prior to the formal articulation of human security (HS) in a 1994 United Nations Development Report, feminist theorists and activists were already engaging with some of its core themes through their efforts to “people” the discipline of IR (Pettman, 1996: 10–15). Here, feminist practitioners highlighted the inadequacy of realist and liberal models of IR whose statist ontologies remained abstract from the social and political relationships which made up human life (Peterson, 1992: 134; Enloe, 2014: 8–10). Given their shared focus on concrete humans, as well as their critique of the hierarchal forms of rule bound up in national security agendas, feminist practitioners were seemingly predisposed to embrace the HS concept. However, in the two decades following the enunciation of HS, this concept has attracted support and criticism from feminist scholars in equal measure. Natasha Marhia (2013: 20) best captured feminists' mixed response to the discourse on HS when she wrote that the existing literature was “decidedly ambivalent in its slippage between celebration and critique”. As Marhia (2013: 20) noted, feminist proponents of HS argued that the concept could be repurposed to align with feminist approaches to politics and could advance feminist ethical agendas such as the transformation of gendered hierarchies of power. At the same time, she observed (Marhia, 2013: 20) that several other critically-minded feminist scholars had highlighted the problematic and gendered knowledge which underpins mainstream iterations of this concept.

Whether critical or sympathetic, feminist scholars' engagement with the concept and practice of HS begins with a deconstructive process referred to as “gendering” (Tickner, 2001: 2–3). Gender here exists as a socially constructed system of meaning which is typically premised upon a binary and hierarchical relationship between masculine and feminine characteristics (Pettman, 1996: 135–136). Masculine characteristics here, such as rationality, autonomy and objectivity, are valorised in distinction to feminine qualities such as emotionality, dependence and subjectivity. Feminist scholars note that gendered systems of meaning within dominant traditions of knowledge, like enlightenment philosophy, are implicated in creating a “common sense” (but entirely fictitious and arbitrary) world which is undergirded by unequal relations of power (Runyan and Peterson, 2013: 58–66). In addition to constructing women's and men's gender identities, this problematic binary system of meaning also orders the social, economic and political relations between them in ways that privilege the masculine over the feminine.

By applying this deconstructive approach, feminist scholars can highlight the biases and omissions of existing frameworks of knowledge while pointing to the transformative possibilities through which these frameworks and gender relations could become equitable and non-exploitative. In the case of HS, these scholars have shown that the androgynous individual who populates dominant conceptualisations of HS is, for all intents and purposes, a masculine subject. Moreover, they have emphasised that HS all too often facilitates the support of highly gendered campaigns like human development and traditional security.

In this book, I do not propose to fundamentally resolve this well-established and critically important feminist debate on HS one way or the other. I will not pretend to speculate on whether a gender-sensitive framework of HS could ever successfully transform harmful practices associated with maintaining exclusionary, gendered discourses like national security. My aims in this project are more modest in scope. What I will do is make a few key methodological suggestions pertaining to the task of re-visioning HS as a framework for mounting feminist, ethical critique. This task involves showing how it is possible for feminists to conduct meaningful research into changing gender relations and gender politics in complex contexts like Afghanistan. Also, and no less importantly, it requires elaboration of a framework which could sustain feminist ethical commitments to articulate the moral possibilities for gendered hierarchies of power to be challenged and, potentially, transformed. This methodological approach will then be utilised to provide a reconstruction of women's and men's changing lives and (in)security in Afghanistan.

My own suggestion for advancing a feminist framework is to highlight the necessity of understanding human beings' shared lives, coping strategies and struggles for change. The rationale for this approach is made with respect to the phenomenological methodology outlined in many arguments by Kimberly Hutchings on feminist ethics (Hutchings, 1992; Hutchings, 1999a; Hutchings, 1999b; Hutchings, 2000; Hutchings, 2013). Phenomenology, which literally translates as the science of experience, represents an approach to knowledge formation wherein a researcher acknowledges the inter-subjectively and socially constructed nature of reality. A researcher's consciousness is the product of their social relations and historical period even as their thoughts and actions contribute to the reconstruction of a wider social consciousness. As Hutchings (1999b: 108) astutely notes, this means that researchers must realise that ethical judgements are inseparable from the moral forms of life within which they are embedded. Moral judgements can only be intelligible to protagonists within a moral debate when the language and logic is familiar to them. If it is partially or completely unfamiliar then such judgements become challenging to understand. This disjuncture has been painfully on display in Afghanistan where Western efforts at "gender programming" face a variety of hurdles – not the least of which is that there is no word which conveys the meaning of "gender" in Persian/Dari or Pashtu (Abirafeh, 2009: 50–52). As Lina Abirafeh notes, through its English usage it became a Dari/Pashto word by default but without any meaning or context attached to this important term.