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Being an agent in your own narrative of [in]securities: creating safe spaces

Interpreting the life stories of Afghan women, a qualitative study.

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Table of contents

Abstract

With the recent take back of the country by the Taliban, Afghan women's experiences of [in]security have again become top-of mind for many. Yet, this renewed focus perpetuates an existing imagery of Afghan women as powerless victims, with a few rebellious heroines. This image, instrumentalizing women's experiences, fuels different political agendas that are often not helpful to the women. To provide a more authentic image of the women's sensemaking and experiences of [in]security, I therefore interviewed five Afghan women using a life-story methodology where the women were included in all stages of the research process. During this project, I took a feminist and critical approach to security: the woman herself defined the concept, its impact on her life, and how she managed it. Contrary to other similar research projects, I asked the women about times they felt safe instead of unsafe to lessen any re-traumatization, and to emphasize their opportunity for agency. Listening to the women's stories, I interpreted the every-day as a site where they enhanced their agency in the face of loss of control brought on by pervasive insecurities, something they described as a continuous process to create safe spaces. During this process, I identified an analytical pattern of how the women understood, and thus went about creating these safe spaces, that of adjustment and resistance. Albeit with movement between the two. This pattern shows how complex the women's understanding and reaction to insecurities were as well as their responses, which is key to understand for any future support for the women of Afghanistan.

Key words: Afghanistan, Feminist Security Studies, Life-Stories, Enhancing Agency,

1. Introduction

I was sitting on the steps outside of my grandma's house, enjoying some of the last days of Swedish summer when I first heard the news. It was not unexpected, yet the speed with which it had happened seemed to chock even the most renowned experts and possibly even the group itself. For months, I had been receiving messages expressing worry and anxiety from friends I made while living and working in Kabul. But the message always had a hint of that unwavering, at times incomprehensible to me, hope I had come to associate with my Afghan friends. This is not to downplay the experiences of grief or exasperation I also saw amongst my friends. But somehow the hope for a brighter future, whatever that entailed for them, was always there, if only superficially. However, on the 15th of August 2021 when the Taliban was outside the 'gates' of Kabul again, ready to enter and take back the power the movement had lost 20 years earlier, this hope was nowhere to be seen. Instead, panic radiated from the messages, news reports, and images that came out from the country.

Once the immediate panic had subsided, an uneasy calm settled over the country. Citizens and outsiders were equally puzzled at how this take-back could have happened so quickly and confused about what would happen next. When the Taliban were previously in power, they ruled with absolute authority, and practiced what transnational feminist movements called 'gender apartheid,' with strict divisions between men and women across all societal functions (Fluri, 2011, p. 521). But after the Taliban were ousted in 2001, there were many gains made in the society regarding rule of law and gender equality, albeit with many challenges remaining. In particular, the constraints of 'gender apartheid' were slowly being removed. Women attained more personal freedoms, such as education and accessibility, and were more represented in public decision-making (Grau, 2016, p. 414). Hence, a question loomed: what would happen to these gains now when the Taliban returned, and would any of them remain?

In the weeks that followed, Taliban leadership announced that they would keep some of the changes made if they were within the perimeters of Islam. Women would be able to continue studying and working as long as this was allowed by Islam. Yet, on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media channels, reports were surfacing telling a less inclusive and accepting story than the one portrayed by the Taliban leadership. Women, girls as young as 12-years-old and widows were pressured into becoming 'wives' of fighters, all-girl-schools were forced to close, and women were fired from their work in the regions where the Taliban regained control (Barr, 2021).

Two narratives arose from the stories coming out of Afghanistan: one more inclusive and progressive portrayed by the Taliban leadership most likely to achieve international recognition, and another resembling the previous Taliban time, 1996-2001, of repression and 'gender apartheid.' Both narratives relied on the position of women within the country to attempt to create a reaction from an external political audience (Wibben, 2010). Although, when writing this paper, not many months have passed since the Taliban officially took back control of the entire country and thus it is difficult to properly analyze these narratives. We simply do not know what will happen in the next few months. Yet, considering the previous scholarship on women, Afghanistan, and security, it would not be surprising if the future included more conflicting, politicized, narratives of women's lives.

In Afghanistan, for the past 100 years, if not more, there has been a strong trend of instrumentalizing women's insecurities for broader political agendas. This began at least as early as in the 1920s, often without taking into consideration women's actual lived experiences and the effects that the political agendas might have had on them. Regardless of what focus the agendas might have had; to legitimatize military interventions; to push for an effective aid apparatus; or to [re]build the state; they all relied on the instrumentalization of women's experiences as an essential part of different processes. This approach ignored the feminist ideals of movement-building and, importantly, the individual woman's everyday experiences by framing women's issues as a macro-level development or governance problem (Grau, 2016, p. 420).

1.1 Research problem

The instrumentalization of women's experiences in these agendas has, however, seldomly led to sustainable 'improvement' for women's security. On the contrary, these different agendas have sometimes worsened the situation of women. They have pushed their experience to the center of politics without properly understanding them, and exposed women to more risk and maintained a continuum of insecurity even 'post-conflict' (Abirafeh, 2009; Shepherd, 2006). Moreover, to continuously represent a group as victims, feminist post-colonialists have argued, can limit or take away their agency even more, regardless of intentions (Amin & Alizada, 2020, p. 363). Consequently, we have seen and continue to see many different narratives coming out of Afghanistan focusing on increasing women's security, but we also see women experiencing increased insecurities. This increased has become particularly obvious with the take-back by the Taliban.

There are many, probably interdependent, reasons why these agendas claiming to aim for women's increased security have not resulted in sustainable change. A common underlying theme cited frequently by feminist or critical security scholars is that the focus has not been on the women's experiences of security, regardless of what is said, but on the more traditional understanding of security related to the state and its survival (Abirafeh, 2009). Because women's insecurities have been raised by different actors in a rhetoric fashion, this has resulted in de-prioritized and de-funded projects once their agenda has been 'approved'(Awotona, 2019, p. 106). Focus has been on territorial control and state survival, instead of gender-based or domestic violence, which is an endemic and everyday event for many women across the country (Abirafeh, 2009; Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018). Further, even when policymakers have attempted to understand the insecurities women experience, they have relied on a built-in assumption of 'Muslim women in need of saving from Western men,' which perpetuates a colonial perspective that is harmful to the women rather than helpful (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 29; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Consequently, there has been a disconnect between what is said and what is done by different actors to increase women's security.

Having worked in Afghanistan, I met many people 'in the field' that are sincere about promoting women's security. But I have also seen how this becomes less important at higher levels. Not all higher levels of course, but enough to create an environment where it is possible to tamper with certain outcomes in favor of others, more traditionally security-driven, or at least to prioritize these. This environment combined with a tendency of people 'in the field' to fall into the 'white savior trap' even if they are aware of the complex itself, makes it hard to create lasting, sustainable change. The only way to get around this is to listen to the women themselves with an open mind and become aware of this tendency.

A body of literature dedicated to listening to the women themselves, has started to grow in the past few years. A growth that began earlier in other countries, but is still nascent in the context of Afghanistan (Firchow & Urwin, 2020). Yet, many of the individual narratives told in the context of Afghanistan have been colored by the international perspective of what it means to be 'local,' missing the complexities that this position encompasses. Most portray women as either victims or heroines, putting too much or too little emphasis on their agency and means of resilience (Awotona, 2019., p. 106; Firchow & Urwin, 2020). Therefore, despite a body of literature growing in response to the essentializing, top-down, use of women's

experiences, there is still little information available that portray women as complex and multidimensional.

Thus, the knowledge of women's individual experiences and understanding of security in the Afghan context is still limited, and the knowledge that does exist is incomplete. This knowledge focuses mainly on violence and suffering, placing the women in a precarious position where they are identified or bound by their pain. Also, this knowledge is often two-dimensional, situating the women within dichotomies such as victims or heroines, granting agency only to the 'heroine.' This simplifies a complex issue making it difficult to fully understand how the women navigate their [in]securities in an Afghan context, which in turn makes it hard to comprehend the failure of different agendas to create sustainable change, or to imagine what might be next for the women of Afghanistan.

1.2 Aim and research question

Thus, this thesis aims to build on this literature of individual women's experiences and understanding of security in the Afghan context, focusing on safety instead of violence and suffering to gain insights into a more daily and inclusive agency exercised by the women. This use of agency and individual stories is especially important now, considering that a dichotomy of voiceless victims and agency-strong heroines has yet again been exacerbated by the Taliban take back. This material can then serve as a background for an empirically grounded conversation on how these individual narratives could be used to better understand what might come next for the women of Afghanistan, where their understanding of safety is crucial.

To further enhance the individual and everyday perspective, as well as increase the authenticity of the material, I use an individual-centered methodology called life-stories. In this method, I map the understanding of security by Afghan women, as they narrated their life stories. This mapping is done through a qualitative abductive process, where I interview five women who have lived most of their lives in Afghanistan. The interviews are conducted in a conversational style and the interviewees are later asked to give feedback on my first interpretation of their stories. During the interview, I ask the women to tell me about times they felt safe, secure, and what this amounted to, as well as the definition, values, and conditions they put into 'feeling secure.' Hence, this thesis aims to answer the overall research question; how do Afghan women understand security and define 'feeling' safe in the face of constant insecurities?

In listening to and giving agency in the translation to Afghan women themselves, we also gain a more in-depth and detailed understanding of individual security in the Afghan context. Importantly, by letting the women tell their own life stories, this study also becomes part of the feminist conversation on inclusive and bottom-up gendered narratives in Afghanistan (Abirafeh, 2009; Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2014; Firchow & Urwin, 2020; Hilhorst et al., 2018) while also responding to the criticism of how simplistic the women have been portrayed in the past. In life-stories, there is space for the women to be both heroines and victims, and anything in between.

2. Background

As mentioned above, different narratives of women's experiences in Afghanistan have been used throughout the past century, possibly longer, to further political agendas of certain actors. This has been true for both domestic politics of the 20th century, as well as the Soviet and US invasions, and their aftermath. Even the propaganda used by the Taliban themselves in the 90s relied on this gendered narrative, as their origin 'myth' is premised on the feminine virginity and vulnerability of Afghan women and the masculine protection/heroism by the religious scholars turned fighters (Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018, p. 91).

Current scholarship on the Afghan context often begins with the Soviet invasion in 1979, but the use of women's experiences to push for political agendas has a much longer history. As early as in the 1920s under King Amanullah, women's experiences were instrumentalized to push for a modernizing agenda. (Schütte, 2014, p. 1179). But as many scholars documented, any success from these reforms was limited to the urban areas and only increased the contradiction between religion, customs, and reform in the country (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 13; Hyman, 1983, 1985, pp. 306–339). The Soviet invasion only divided the country further, introducing an aggressive agenda for gender equality, including mandatory literacy programs, women's right to work, to choose their spouse and serve in the army. This made women's experiences, yet again, instrumental but also situated them in between western concepts of modernity and Afghan codes of culture, which led to violent protest and strong resistance (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 14).

When the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989, civil war followed. Different Mujahedeen groups, supported by the 'West,' fought for control over the country. This conflict ended when the Taliban took control of the country in 1996 (Ray, 2017; Schütte, 2014, p. 1179). During the first Taliban period, the narrative reported externally was one of female victimhood and

oppression. However, this narrative often neglected to portray how women resisted this, or how some of their experiences were not new. The Taliban, such as other actors, manipulated the already existing patriarchal system in their favor. They used a narrative of women in need of saving and protection to gain and uphold power, throughout their entire first period in power from 1996 to 2001, first from the aggressive Soviet policies and later from themselves (women) and society—to ensure they were not let astray, and that their honor was upheld (Abirafeh, 2009). Hence, multiple simplistic, but contradicting, narratives of women as victims circulated.

This simplistic narrative persisted and was used as part of the rhetoric legitimizing the US invasion in 2001. But in the aftermath of the invasion, it quickly became clear that the rhetoric of 'liberating' Afghan women was just that, rhetoric. The invasion might have removed the Taliban, temporarily, but the Bonn Conference of 2001 held to begin a democratic reconstruction of the country, was accused of simply replacing one bad status quo with another. The transitional government formed during the conference to democratize the state was filled with Mujahedeen fighters accused of war crimes, including crimes against women. These warlords then granted each other impunity, and any justice for the insecurities women had faced during the past decade became more and more elusive (Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018, p. 88). Therefore, in working with these warlords, often belonging to the societal elite, the state-building initiative took priority over women's security and justice. Also, these elites, often, continued to exercise traditional methods of control over women while simultaneously 'supporting' the 'liberal' state-building initiative pushed by the international community, which had a secular understanding of women's freedoms (D'costa, 2016, p. 422). Women became 'stuck in the middle' again and it was clear that the narrative about 'liberating Afghan women' was used to push for various political agendas, not taking into consideration their actual lived experiences.

Moreover, the aid apparatus that grew after the US invasion followed a similar logic of sidelining and capitalizing on women's experiences. Initially, women's plight was highly publicized to campaign for their rights, portraying the Afghan woman in her chadri (full veil) as a prison of oppression and symbol of insecurity. Yet seldom were Afghan women included in planning these campaigns and many were uncomfortable with the public, targeted, attention (Abirafeh, 2009). Concurrently, more aid money was coming into the country and multiple organizations sprung up to manage these funds. To be granted funds, gender equality became a buzz word and groups started competing for funding through creating programs for

women's rights. Hence, the influx in funding created competition rather than solidarity, and in operationalizing gender equality it became women's issues (Grau, 2016, p. 421). The focus on women's issues created resentment among men and often led to more problems for women on an individual level. The aid apparatus, albeit with good intentions, ignored important norms and structures, and implemented/supported a gender equality agenda that was not contextualized (Abirafeh, 2009).

However, the aid apparatus made one important addition to the narrative of 'women in need of saving,' and that was that of the 'super woman' portrayed as a 'success story' of international aid. The 'super woman' 'saved herself' as she was the "secret matriarch[s] dominating home-life" (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 37; Daulatzai, 2008, p. 432; Firchow & Urwin, 2020, p. 11). In this contrasting narrative, the woman had a secret, but complete, agency over her household and relatives. Yet, both narratives portray a simplistic version of reality that ignored the complexities of every day where a woman can fit in both narratives at the same time. The assumptions that amount to these different simplistic narratives have been accused of causing the failure of many aid interventions (Firchow & Urwin, 2020).

Therefore, ascribing women complete agency if they fit within what is ascribed as a 'heroine' role also simplifies the experiences of women. These essentialized narratives, ascribing certain roles to women, regardless of being derived from real experiences or not, have been abused to achieve specific political agendas. These historic, often simplistic, and dichotomous narratives of women's experiences thus exemplify the endemic stereotyping of women in this context. It also shows how persistent the use of women's experiences has been without creating any lasting change for them in terms of increase security or access to right, which indicates that individual women and their way of experiencing and understanding security has often been ignored or not paid enough attention.

3. Theory

As described above, this endemic use of women's experiences to justify different political agendas often relies on women's assumed [in]security. This usage is not surprising as the country has a long history of conflict. Yet, until recently, women's lived experiences of [in]security were rarely included in the discussion. Instead, the focus was on conflicts over controlling territory and state survival, regardless of how the state was constituted (Abirafeh, 2009). The main security challenges identified were the insurgent groups such as the Taliban (now in power), and the Islamic State Khorasan Province (Kamminga, 2019), and not gender-

based violence or domestic violence that in many parts of the country were rampant and everyday events for women (Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018). Neither did concerns such as food or financial insecurity register in the conversation until recently, and as such the subjective, individual, security was paid little attention.

Furthermore, even when women's security was given attention, the focus was on including women, not changing practices or underlying norms that were harmful to women. For example, attempts were made to include female police officers or appoint female delegates for peace talks and negotiations (Kamminga, 2019). Albeit these were both good things, but without a tangible, long-term, agenda for change, little would happen except for 'adding women and stir.' For example, with female police officers, male police officers continued to view women's issues as 'soft' and domestic violence as a family matter, delegating to their female colleagues without taking the matter seriously. Meaning that to 'add women and stir' did not create change, and even caused some more danger for the women themselves (D'costa, 2016, p. 421). Consequently, when invoking security of women in narratives the everyday experiences of insecurity or the structural challenges were seldom highlighted. Instead, the physical violence that directly threatened and/or could be controlled/managed by the state was prioritized.

That the individual security of Afghan women was long ignored is not surprising as historically the concept of security has been considered a concern of the state. It was something that authorities imposed and managed, from the top-down, ensuring that the state was protected from international threats. It was not until the 1990s that critical and feminist scholars began to question this 'traditional' understanding of the concept seriously, and it became more human-focused and multi-dimensional (Liotta & Owen, 2006). Feminists and critical scholars questioned how the knowledge of security was formed, and who or what could be the referent object for security. Further, while some individuals questioning the security agenda ended up reproducing the state and elite-ism that the traditional concept contained, some critical, but mostly feminist scholars shifted the focus to the individual and the social structures that s/he was engaged in daily. Thus, they employed a bottom-up approach where gender, and individual positionalities, were central tools of analysis for security concerns (Hagström et al., 2021, pp. 3–4).

In my thesis, I follow this shift in investigating the 'ordinary' of security, looking at the everyday as a site where the women redefine and resist their surroundings. I take a critical, but importantly, feminist, perspective on security. In this perspective, I invite the women to

share their individual security narratives through their life stories. In these, the women themselves define what security means to them, based on their everyday lived experiences as well as positionalities (Wibben, 2010), and importantly, how they should respond to them. I do this through the chosen methodology, as my method includes the continuous feedback by the interviewee to ensure I have captured her sentiments accurately, and by taking a feminist standpoint.

Similarly, by focusing on safety instead of violence and suffering like much of the previous research, I see the everyday as a site where women can enhance their agency and increase their security, where they can be the agents in their own narrative of [in]security. In the everyday, they continuously negotiate and make sense of security (Hedström, 2021). Here the women defy the simplistic ways in which they have been portrayed above as they can be both heroines or victims, or anything in between when negotiating for their safety. In this process, the private becomes the public and the public, private, as the [in]securities permeate all levels of life (Mannell et al., 2021, p. 1872).

In this process, agency becomes something more complex and encompassing, including the acts to change one's life situation as well as the structures around the actor [the woman] that allow change. This means that it is not a single act that constitute agency, but a process that is interconnected with the position the woman finds herself in, the structures around her, through which she navigates life. Hence, agency takes on many complex forms, and should not be misunderstood as "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2009, p. 15). This indicates that adjusting to or accepting certain things around oneself to stay safe can also be a form of agency. Within this definition of agency, resistance does not need to be active. Instead, like post-colonial feminists, I focus on dispersed or productive resistance as well. In this type of resistance, the women do not need to be actively engaged in open resistance, but they are instead engaged in a continuous negotiation to respond or resist power which they find confining (Amin & Alizada, 2020). Using these definitions, I see the search for a safe space described by the women in my interviews as a process to enhance their agency. In this process they both resist and adjust to their surroundings based on their position at the time, where both ways are complex forms of agency.

Finally, I am also aware of the paradox of a white Western feminist telling the story of Afghan women, although this 'Western' white feminist has both lived and worked in the country. The ways that I describe or understand certain aspects come from my positionality,

and this could hinder an accurate understanding of how the women's descriptions of security. I attempt to circumvent this by acknowledging it openly, and candidly discussing my reflexivity. I also give power to the interviewee in the interpretation process, as will be described in more detail below, to hold me accountable in my analytical process.

4. Previous research

The study of the everyday as a site to enhance agency and strive for security is something that has been studied by feminist and critical securities scholars for roughly two decades. However, in the case of Afghanistan, this turn is more recent, and if women's individual experiences have been included previously, it has been to capitalize on these to promote different political agendas as described above (Mannell et al., 2021). What follows is a brief description of the literature that has begun to grow in the Afghan context, beginning with two articles that are accredited for laying the groundwork for this pivot.

In 2002, as a response to the colonial, gendered, liberating rhetoric used by the US, Lila Abu-Lughod wrote an article outlining the dangers in essentializing the other (Afghan women) in the 'war on terror.' This article, although mainly relying on secondary material such as speeches and media narratives, warned the international community about this tendency, while also not falling into cultural relativism. Instead, we need to be aware and respectful of the differences (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Together with an article released the same year by Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood called "Feminism, the Taliban and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002) Abu-Lughod lays bare three tropes used in constructing the gendered narratives of the 'West' explained above. Those were "(1) the suffering Afghan woman; (2) culture, as a deterministic explanatory device; (3) Islamic fundamentalism (in the form of the Taliban) as a scapegoat to summarily account for all forms of distress in Afghanistan" (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 420). Both articles describe how these tropes when operationalized have the potential of being detrimental, or at best hindering, rather than helping to 'liberate' women.

These two articles were accredited, by future scholars, for laying part of the foundation in exploring Afghan women's individual everyday experiences, although they do not look at the experiences themselves. They instead highlight the stereotypes, the tropes, used and the dangers of falling into this essentializing practice. However, Daulatzai in her article takes this argument further, claiming that these tropes require understanding not only because they create the narratives, but because they have moved from the realm of discourse into the everyday lives of Afghan women (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 431). She then concludes that there is

“a substantial lack in current knowledge on the everyday life and subjectivity of Afghans” and that “coming to grips with Afghanistan by exclusively relying on this limited set of perimeters” makes understanding the suffering of Afghan women impossible (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 419). Thus, with these words Daulatzai introduced the small, but growing, literature on the everyday experiences of Afghan women.

Further, Daulatzai introduces the emphasis on agency and freedom to get away from what she claims to be a narrowly focused preconceived understanding of ‘culture’ and ‘gender’ in Afghanistan. To ‘capture’ this, she proposes a methodology that allows for “the study of hopes, desires, and anxieties, of sensibilities, affects, and insecurities, [...] of the impacts of violence inflicted by forces within and without, as well as of kinship structures, social networks, and the reproduction of meaning” (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 429). However, throughout the article, she mainly focuses on the suffering of Afghans, and how tracing genealogies of suffering both in the history of the country, but also of those international actors who participated in Afghanistan’s ‘reconstruction’, can allow for a better understanding of this suffering (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 430).

Other authors have then continued to focus on agency as a form of resistance and using this individual-centered methodology in the following years. In 2014, Stephan Schutte writes about how women are navigating their agency to create resilience to urban poverty under patriarchy. Particularly, Schutte discusses the spatial constrictions and opportunities within these constrictions that the women have to use their agency which he means takes place at a household level—a site representing familiar and societal, patriarchal structures— but acknowledges it is also affected by material circumstances. Importantly, Schutte also used an explorative, storytelling approach in his interviews, allowing women to describe and reflect on their positionalities concerning gender and urban poverty (Schütte, 2014). However, his focus was exclusively on the urban household unit and women within this. Similarly, I too discuss the household as an important site however, my focus is broader and less spatial.

In 2020, Sara Amin and Nazifa Alizada also confirm the primacy of the household as a site for women to exercise their agency as a form of resistance. Amin and Alizada in particular, researched how women have exercised agency to take advantage of the employment and educational opportunities that were offered to women post (the first) Taliban regime. They also want to show the details in how individuals understand and operate their agency to portray how these can diverge from dominant gendered discourses. Women are using their agency to resist openly, to resist through negotiation, and to resist subconsciously (Amin &

Alizada, 2020). The study finds that the 'gendered power' is situational and that the family is the source for negotiating this 'power,' while the resistance can also be supported by the family, as there is a relational dimension to resistance and change. Further, they also use a similar interview technique to the one employed in this thesis which allows women to tell their life stories, but they focus on the women "accessing education and employment, as well as the experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of education, employment, and gender relations" (Amin & Alizada, 2020, p. 365).

Picking up on the lived experiences, Anasuya Ray investigates the everyday experience of violence by Afghans (men and women) through in-depth interviews, showing how these experiences have become 'normalized.' Importantly Ray discovers how sociopolitical realities, often changing throughout life, have a great effect on how an individual reacts to violence, and how it is 'normalized' (Ray, 2017). In 2018, Lida Ahmad and Priscyll Avoine follows Ray in her research on everyday violence but focuses on sexual and gender-based violence of women and girls. Ahmad and Avoine also use a similar approach to the one employed in this thesis by analyzing interviews as 'life stories' (Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018). Yet, their focus is solely on violence, and survivors of violence, while my design tries to capture that which the women themselves understand to be security. They find that fourteen years after the US invasion women have yet again been 'forgotten' and that there is an evolved form of misogyny now spread out across Afghanistan often sponsored or at least ignored by international actors (Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018, p. 97).

Finally, early in 2021, Jenevieve Mannell, Gulraj Grewal, Lida Ahmad, and Ayesha Ahmad wrote a piece together on the relationship between conflict and domestic violence. In their article, they explore women's lived experiences of this violence through semi-structured interviews. It builds on previous research with a methodology of investigating lived experiences but, similar to those studies described above, it focuses on violence and the direct impact of the conflict on this 'type' of violence (Mannell et al., 2021).

Therefore, my study is situated within this growing literature on women's individual experiences in Afghanistan and part of a response to the simplified gendered narratives used, and the harm these can have, relying on faulty tropes. Hence, in conducting this study I attempt not to essentialize, to ascribe simplistic attributes to, the woman participating in this manner, even though arguably by only talking to Afghan women I do leave out a crucial part of the gendered dynamic—that of the male experiences. Men have, of course, suffered in the conflict as well and experienced other forms of violence and insecurity due to their gender.

Gender in this study means the feminine and masculine norms and behaviors taught by society and reinforced by the communal structures around the individual (Al-ali & Pratt, 2016). In Afghanistan, these norms are deeply embedded into societal behaviors and communal structures, and Afghan masculinity also comes with potential dangers (Abirafeh, 2009). However, the narrative used currently by both the Taliban themselves, and the international community, focuses on women's experiences and future risks, thus these are the ones I choose to highlight in turn. If a study has more resources, it is always possible to build on this research by conducting similar in-depth interviews with Afghan men for comparison or enriching the narratives coming out. But considering the time constraint of this research, women's stories of security will be the focus of this study.

5. Methodology

I use a life-story methodology where the narrative, as well as the interpretation of the woman herself, are central to understanding security. In this approach, I as a researcher, and the participant herself, trace her understanding of the concept security through how she narrates her life story together. This implies a qualitative and abductive methodology where the knowledge is created together with the participant as she steers the conversation and is actively involved in the interpretation (Söderström, 2020, p. 5). This emancipatory framework gives the research participant more equal weight to the researcher as she is included in all stages of the research (Clough et al., 2004, p. 60). Knowledge is therefore produced by the individual herself based on how she makes meaning of events that happen around her as well as together with the researcher during the process of telling her story (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Consequently, in addition to being a qualitative study, it is also an idiographic and hermeneutic research endeavor, more interested in the private, individual aspects of life while capturing the meaning a person gives to the events around her. This means that the study will not allow for generalizations. But it will give more specificity to our previous understanding and present authentic, real life, stories of and by the Afghan women themselves. It will take note of the language employed by the participants to construct their own realities (Clough et al., 2004, pp. 97–98), something that to a large extent has been missing in the context of Afghanistan.

5.1 Method

To trace the meaning that individual women give to security, I conduct in-depth interviews with five Afghan women where they are prompted to tell their life stories with a focus on security. The interviews were conducted in a conversational style, where I asked the interviewee open-ended questions, to describe different stages of her life and what made her feel safe during these periods. Often, I began by asking about her childhood and then let the interviewee herself steer the conversation in a manner that made sense to her. Sometimes this meant she would tell her life story chronologically, other times the story jumped between different events and times in her life. Throughout the interview, I would ask questions about her understanding and definition of security, rephrasing what she had said or asking for clarification to make sure I had understood her way of interpreting security in the specific story she was telling. I would also prompt her to talk about different periods in her life—childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Listening to how she talked about these things also allowed me to capture how she discussed feeling secure, what she put into security, and how this feeling corresponded to any of the life events she was describing. Once I felt she was content with the stories told, I asked her questions that would spark a comparison of her understanding of security with individuals around her. Finally, to make sure I had fully captured her description of security, I asked her to associate freely with the word security. This often served to summarize and end the interview pedagogically.

The interviews lasted for roughly 2 hours and afterward I drew a life diagram where I compared events in her life to the level of security felt. Initially, the idea was to draw these diagrams together during the interview, but I quickly realized that the technology I used to conduct the interviews did not allow for this exercise. Therefore, I drew the diagrams while I was transcribing the interview and shared it with the women for feedback after the interview. The diagram thus became more of a tool for me in conducting an analysis true to their stories than a tool to help them reflect more in-depth on their understanding of security during the interview. I also shared the first interpretation of their stories with the women, to ensure they were included in all stages of the research, and as such the women's feedback on both the diagram and the draft became part of the information generation process as well.

Together with the transcripts, recordings, and feedback from the women post-interview, the diagram served as material for analysis. I began by looking at the stories individually to see how the woman discussed security, how and when she described feeling safe, and what she felt gave her more safety. I also traced what she felt were the sources of, structures for, and

events of insecurities throughout her life. Then, when I had a good grasp of the women's descriptions, I compared them with each other as well as different dominant, external security narratives. This led me to see patterns of similarities amongst the stories, more than I had expected. I concluded that violence was omnipresent in all their lives, but that only focusing on violence ignored the multidimensional nature of [in]security. They detailed this nature in their stories, where gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic characteristics were reoccurring themes of how they made sense of and experienced insecurities. I also saw that despite, or because, of these insecurities, they were engaged in a continuous process to create a safe space for themselves, something they did through adjusting or resisting the structures and events around them that they associated with insecurities.

5.2 Reflexivity

The stories told were those of the women and not mine, yet as a researcher, I am part of the knowledge-making process. As the interviewee is narrating her story, I am also conceptualizing what she is sharing with me based on my own experiences and knowledge. Thus, the following analysis should be read with that in mind.

To begin with, I am not an Afghan woman, and even though I have lived and worked in the country longer than some other scholars writing on similar topics, I am not free from bias or assumptions. On the contrary, some would argue I am subjective by nature, having developed a strong connection to the country as well as to the people there, and they would be right. Listening to my friends and colleagues telling you how they are fearing for their lives, living in hiding, always thinking that the next knock on the door will be someone coming to take them or their loved ones away to an unknown future; or feeling the floor shake as a bomb goes off, and the relief of being alive, while your Afghan friends start their regular 'phone-tag' to make sure their sister, brother, and mother, are still alive as well; or being fortunate enough to show up the next morning in the office after multiple car bombs go off during rush hour the day before: these are not experiences that you can easily forget or that make you objective. But these are all experiences that help me understand the context, particularly that of security, that the Afghan women have had to negotiate daily. These are experiences that make me a more suitable person to listen to their life stories and to make sense of their meaning-making process related to security. Not that I am claiming to fully understand the complexities of navigating and processing this as an Afghan woman. I had vastly different circumstances when I was living there, including security advisors, armored vehicles and, crucially, I could leave. I did not live with collective or continuous trauma. I went back to

Sweden, safe, calm Sweden, to a place where I could walk freely, express myself freely, and the risk for suicide or car bombs was minimal if not non-existent. Consequently, while my experiences might make me a better researcher for both the topic and the method, there are still hidden assumptions and biases in the process and findings, and the study should be viewed through that lens.

Further, when I began conducting the interviews, I believed I would be able to keep an emotional distance from the women, while still being engaged in their stories. This would allow me to process all the information they shared with me and focus only on their reactions and manners during the interview. But it quickly became clear that this would be harder than I thought. The women were genuinely open with me, inviting me to feel their raw emotions of heartbreak, anger, despair, etc. And to distance myself from this would mean I missed an important part of the 'data generation process.' When Aadela and Gulnoor told me about their sisters dying, I was heartbroken for them. Or when Benesh told me about being stuck inside the university as multiple bombs went off, or Imama being caught in an explosion seeing body parts falling all around her, or Farzaneh driving over dead bodies to get to safety, I could feel their fear and dread. Emotions helped me to better understand what made them feel insecure or afraid, and thus what could make them feel safe instead. This understanding helped me visualize their quest to create a safe space.

5.3 Material and limitations

The data I relied on for analysis was the information given during the interview but also the interview itself as well as follow-ups. Information collected (the transcripts) in this type of method is hard to distinguish from the information generation process (the interview) (Söderström, 2020, p. 4). Therefore, I took into consideration what the women said but also how they said it.

I found the interviewees through a snowballing effect, where I approached some women in my network developed from working and living in the country. I told them about the study and its purpose as well as how I would protect their data. They could then choose to participate themselves and, if they felt comfortable, refer me to their friends. Most, however, chose to only participate themselves, which made the process of finding interviewees harder than I first imagined. Albeit I was in a better position than most while doing this study as I already had developed connections in the country, which is difficult to do right now after the Taliban have taken back power.

To ensure I had women from different backgrounds I reached out to different types of networks that I have in the country. This led to five women agreeing to participate. Although their backgrounds were quite different, they were not too different in their values and ideological convictions. Most were liberal, educated women that had either worked/studied in the 'West' or worked directly with 'Westerners' in Afghanistan. Most were sympathetic to 'Western' ideas of universal women's rights and justice. This meant that, even though they expressed clear disappointment, sometimes even anger, at the 'West' and focused on different 'types' or 'areas' of security when we talked, they still viewed certain security events in Afghanistan similarly to that of the 'western' international community. They were also of similar age, around 30, and all but one spoke fluent English and thus, had been exposed to 'Western,' 'secular,' culture through the English language for most of their lives.

Furthermore, five interviews is a very small sample size. Yet, the purpose of the study was never to get a broad sample, but an individual, in-depth understanding of their meaning-making of security. Therefore, five comprehensive interviews were enough for this study.

Moreover, the interview settings created some problems as I would have preferred to do the interviews in person but were unable to as the distance between me and the participants was too much. Therefore, we had to conduct the interviews digitally with the crucial element of encryption for security. Initially, I wanted to use Teams with video, but due to licensure issues as well as connectivity problems, this was not possible. Instead, we ended up using WhatsApp video call. This worked, but every interview would start with some technical issues making both me and the interviewee a bit uncomfortable. But as the connectivity held and the interview progressed this became less of an issue.

5.4 Ethical concerns

Besides the technical and representational issues, this type of study also came with ethical concerns. Interviewing people that have lived through conflict is a sensitive matter, and interviewing people that have not only lived through conflict but are still experiencing it, is even more delicate. The risk for re-traumatization is large, and so is the need for protecting their personal data so it would not fall into the wrong hands. Therefore, I tried to find ways to mitigate this risk before, during, and after the interviews.

Before, I made the decision not to interview women still living inside the country, as I did not want to risk someone still in danger being re- or further traumatized. My only requirement thus was for them to have lived most of their life inside Afghanistan. I also made sure we used

a secure and encrypted channel for communication before their interview, and after an initial connection over Facebook, if necessary, we would quickly turn to WhatsApp or other encrypted channels.

To conduct the interview, we used encrypted WhatsApp, to make sure their stories could not be heard by a third, unwanted, actor. During the interview, I allowed the women to steer the conversation as much as possible. If they felt uncomfortable at any time we would stop and talk about something completely different, such as common friends, shared love for the Afghan mountains, or where they were now (hopefully safe). Then when they felt comfortable again, we could return or just skip that topic. Most of the time they would return to finish the story once they got a bit of distance. Here, our shared network was crucial, albeit it also allowed for me to keep guiding them through intimate stories even though they were vulnerable, something that might question my neutrality or ability to truly allow them to tell their stories.

After the interview, I would make sure the material collected was also anonymized and kept in safe storage offline. I would also follow up with them regularly to make sure they felt included as well as had the opportunity to process any feeling that might have come up since our last conversation. This gave them the power to decide how I should represent their stories in the thesis, and to let me know if they felt I had not concealed their identity well enough.

6 Findings

In the findings section below I will briefly describe each of the women I interviewed, their life story, highlighting what they verbalize as their understanding of security as well as when, in their lives, they have felt the most secure versus insecure. To ensure that my descriptions were as true to the women's understandings as possible, I asked for clarification both during the interview, but also after, through email conversations. In these brief descriptions, we begin to see a picture of how the women's stories are connected, yet different. I will then expand on this picture in the analysis section by describing the patterns that I saw while I was processing their information.

6.1 Stories

Common for all women is that they are educated, around 30 years old, and have had some form of interaction with the international community inside or outside of Afghanistan. They are all living outside of Afghanistan currently but spent most of their lives inside the country. There are also some differences amongst the women, such as when they left Afghanistan,

where they grew up, and the type of education (occupation) they had. These are aspects to keep in mind as I present my analysis of their stories as I might have found more differences and similarities between their individual stories of security, if it was possible to, first, interview more women, and secondly, interview women from more diverse backgrounds.

The first woman I talked to was Aadela, and her understanding of security was that of financial stability which allowed for freedom and independence. She grew up in a rural village with a large but poor family of Hazara origin. Once the Taliban were driven out of the country, she managed to test well on the university entry exam and moved to Kabul to study. In Kabul, she finished her degree and got a job with a national NGO and eventually with an international NGO. Once she had a stable economy, she moved all her family to Kabul and supported all her siblings' education. Last year, her sister was killed in a Taliban attack on the University for which she demanded justice officially. This led to many threats being directed against her and her family, and early 2021, she left Afghanistan due to these threats. The time following her sister's death she says was the most insecure time for her, while now, living and working abroad is the most secure.

Benesh described security more as a quest to create a safe space for herself despite all the insecurities around her, finding hope, calmness, and possibilities. She moved with her family to Iran during the first Taliban period, only to return directly in 2001 to continue her education in Afghanistan. The time when the family returned, she described as the time she felt the most secure, a feeling that returned every time she visited her home in Mazar, even when the fighting came closer and eventually inside the city. Benesh then proudly talked about how she used all the opportunities that her country offered and moved to Kabul to study. At her university, she was caught in an attack by the Taliban, which had a big emotional impact on her. But she eventually graduated and stayed in Kabul to work as a photographer, freelancer, and researcher with different international NGOs. She stayed there until a few months before the Taliban took back power when she left for further studies abroad. Now, after the Taliban take-back, Benesh feels the most insecure.

For Farzaneh security was social, and she expressed that having a bad image, people speaking ill of you, was the source of insecurity, both concrete and conceptual, for most women. Like Benesh, Farzaneh fled Afghanistan during the first Taliban period, but went to Pakistan where her family lived in extreme poverty to provide an education for her and her sister. This she describes as the time she felt the most insecure. But once they returned to Afghanistan, her father got his old, prestigious, job in the government back and the family lived well for most

of her adolescence and adulthood. She then finished university where she experienced a lot of social insecurities, began working for an international NGO and married her cousin as he gave her the sense of trust and protection that her family had before. After getting married, Farzaneh described feeling the most secure. She and her husband later moved to the US due to a lack of opportunities and health care in Afghanistan, a few years before the Taliban took back the power of the country.

Gulnoor expressed fear of the word security itself as it had always been associated with danger, and she believed "*good security*" was the absence of this fear and the freedom to be able to go where you want when you want. Like Benesh and Farzaneh, Gulnoor left Afghanistan in her childhood. She also fled to Pakistan, but contrary to Farzaneh she describes living a happy and safe life there. She tells me this was the safest time of her life. Returning, she continued her studies and eventually graduated with a degree in a medical profession that she was not able to pursue due to security concerns. During her studies, her sister died at home when a faulty oil lamp exploded, the use of which was necessary only because Kabul experienced regular electricity outages. This had a big impact on her, and she described herself as sensitive with physical manifestations of her traumas. She also told me this is when she felt the most insecure. Eventually, she started working at an international NGO and got married. With her husband and brother, they left for India a few months before the Taliban took back the country and now live there, happily.

Finally, I talked to Imama, who grew up in northern Afghanistan, where she tells me she felt the most secure. She tells me that at this time she focused on the social issues of her country such as the oppression of women, and only learned of the physical insecurities related to conflict later in life when she moved to Kabul. In Kabul, she studied at the university, becoming a journalist after graduating. As a journalist, she covered bombings and was directly exposed to the violence that conflict brings. However, when I asked her to verbalize her understanding of security, she included both the absence of violence and the lack of objectification of women in what she thinks safety looks like. Imama, contrary to the other women in my study, stayed in Kabul until the Taliban took back power, and was evacuated with her family a few weeks after. She told me she worked until the day the Taliban entered the city, and that this period directly after the Taliban take-back is when she feels the most insecure.

7 Analysis

While listening to the different life stories shared by these women I see two main patterns, closely connected. First, that to use women's experience of security in different political agendas such as described above simplifies the multi-dimensional nature of security that the women live through every day, dependent on socioeconomic, ethnic, and gendered factors. Secondly, that the women, in the face of these insecurities feel a sense of loss of control, and therefore, in the words of Benesh, are constantly trying to "interpret what is a safe space? And how can I create this safe space for myself?" A process that is continuous—taking place over space and time— with the women resisting or adjusting to the structures around them that create insecurities. I interpret this continuous process to create safe spaces as a way for the women to enhance their agency in the face of this loss of control, which further means that agency is always there, regardless of which form this takes.

7.1 Multiple insecurities and loss of control

As mentioned above, the first thing that struck me when listening to the women describing their lives from a security perspective, was how much of an impact violence, or the fear of violence, has had on the women. It has always been there to interfere or interact with their lives, never possible to completely disregard. Aadela tells me that "most of the days when I was leaving every morning from my home, I didn't accept that I come back alive back to home at night." Imama similarly noticed that "every day when I was going to work, I had the fear that it might be the last day of my life and then, out of this fear, I would go and kiss my mother." In an even more direct statement, Gulnoor says that "to be honest, seeing my environment in Afghanistan, I never felt to be secure [there]." Violence was so prevalent in the society that it became a natural part of their lives.

In fact, all women expressed that this insecurity "became part of my daily life and I had to just accept and live with it every day" (Imama, 2021), and that "we don't have much control on that [war], you just need to live with it" (Farzaneh, 2021). Indicating a lack of control, which both increased the feeling of insecurity but also induced a sense of fatalism. For example, when Gulnoor tells me that she has never felt secure in Afghanistan, she follows this sentence directly with "but overall, we are Muslims, so we have hope always, being on that side, so we always, we rely on Allah." Invoking a sense of trust in a higher power to deal with the uncontrollable insecurity or a sense of acceptance to process the trauma that comes with experiencing continuous danger. This did not surprise me, as I saw this everyday nature of violence firsthand when I lived and worked in the country.

Yet, it became clear that most of the women, even Gulnoor, had not fully 'normalized' or accepted the violence as they all expressed increased loss of control and 'fear' or overwhelming 'sadness' when something came 'too close' to their safe spaces. Mainly this sadness was present when a family member died, or their hopes or ambitions were stopped by insecurities. As such, even though the violence was every day and 'naturalized' there were still limits to how 'normalized' this could be.

That the women mention violence when discussing security is therefore not surprising. Afghanistan has suffered war for decades and as Aadela tells me "for the past 40 years, no one has [had] security in Afghanistan, no one has." Or Imama replying "that peace is war because we never got to know what peace was in Afghanistan," when her Swedish teacher asks what peace is. Additionally, it is also not surprising that the women describe violence as so central in their interviews now, considering the recent take-back of the country by the Taliban, triggering old and creating new traumas. It was in fact hard to get the women to discuss security at all, as they would talk excessively of insecurity during our interviews. Often, I had to ask prompting questions about what, amid an intense feeling of insecurity was helping the woman to feel more secure, with both Imama and Benesh describing how now, after the fall of the Taliban, is the most insecure time of their lives. It was clear that violence was at the forefront of their thoughts.

However, it also became clear that the use of women's experiences of security by different political agendas, solely focusing on violence, simplified the multi-dimensional nature of security which the women lived through daily. In the descriptions of the women, I saw how they lifted other dimensions of security as well, such as socioeconomic, ethnic, and gendered characters, when describing their understanding of security as well as its impact on their lives. These dimensions were then crucial in how the women navigated security and importantly these also had an impact on the women's sense of loss of control.

As for socioeconomic conditions, poverty, and lack of opportunities were important for the women's understanding of security. Aadela describes how growing up in poverty was a big source of insecurity for her. She tells me how the lack of opportunities and the illiteracy of her father—leading to their family's financial and social status— had a greater impact on her life than the Taliban government in charge during her childhood. Similarly, Farzaneh describes how living in extreme poverty in Pakistan was the period when she felt the most insecure, even when she compares it to the everyday impact of conflict later in life.

Most of the women also mention their ethnicity as a factor that increases their exposure to insecurities. Aadela tells me about being treated harshly and discriminated against at university and later in the office, as she was of Hazara origin. Similarly, Imama describes how

> *"*as an Afghan woman, as a Hazara woman, I also am mindful that there's a lot of insecurities that exist. That is caused by external factors. That is caused by different regimes and different militia groups that are going against my safety, against my safety as a woman, against my safety as a Hazara woman."

Even Gulnoor highlights "this Pashtun and Hazara thing" when discussing insecurity in her childhood. She describes how her father, as a Pashtun living in a non-Pashtun area during the first Taliban period, was persecuted due to his ethnicity.

Moreover, the women also described that their gender heavily influenced what types of insecurities they needed to navigate. These insecurities, according to the women came from balancing certain limiting gender norms within the Afghan society. Importantly, this risk was not limited to those with families upholding the norms, but the society around the women could serve as dangerous enough despite having 'liberal' families. Both Aadela and Gulnoor described how they broke or wanted to break certain rules for women working outside the household, but that this was either not 'allowed' due to 'security' or made life more financial unsafe. Aadela tells me that "in Afghan way of life my brothers can go outside and work, but not all my sisters*"* indicating that if there was financial hardship, she, and her sisters, would have to rely on her brothers to survive. Gulnoor explains how, when she applied to work in rural areas, a potential employer told her that "if I send you to that rural place […] the people there will eat you," since she was a "little girl." Similarly, her father would not allow her to work in the rural areas, scaring her by saying that "they will give you [only]one chance, so the first, second day something will happen with you, not only killing, they kidnap you, rape you." Even Farzaneh indicated that she had to limit herself out of fear to break certain norms placed on her as an Afghan woman. Although this was more social, to avoid giving her and her family a bad reputation. She tells me that "women are more vulnerable, and they are more insecure, unprotected because in Afghanistan the first thing that people believe is that a girl, a woman is the household honor." Indicating that protecting the honor, embedded in societal norms, was crucial for the family to stay safe. On the contrary, both Benesh and Imama did not limit themselves, but they acknowledged that by challenging these norms, they exposed themselves to more danger. Imama tells me that "to be a journalist in Afghanistan is a challenging profession, and then to be a woman journalist is even more challenging,"

describing how she was limited in movement and opportunities. Benesh explains how "women are actually paying the high price both for security and for insecurity and are the people who suffer the most by feeling insecure." Thus, these gendered insecurities controlled the women's lives to a greater extent than those of violence, albeit they were exacerbated or even upheld by the violence in the first place.

That the women viewed their individual narrative of security, including these socioeconomic, ethnic, and gendered insecurities as equal or more important in their lives than that of violence, albeit the latter influenced the former, is visible in the combined life diagram below.

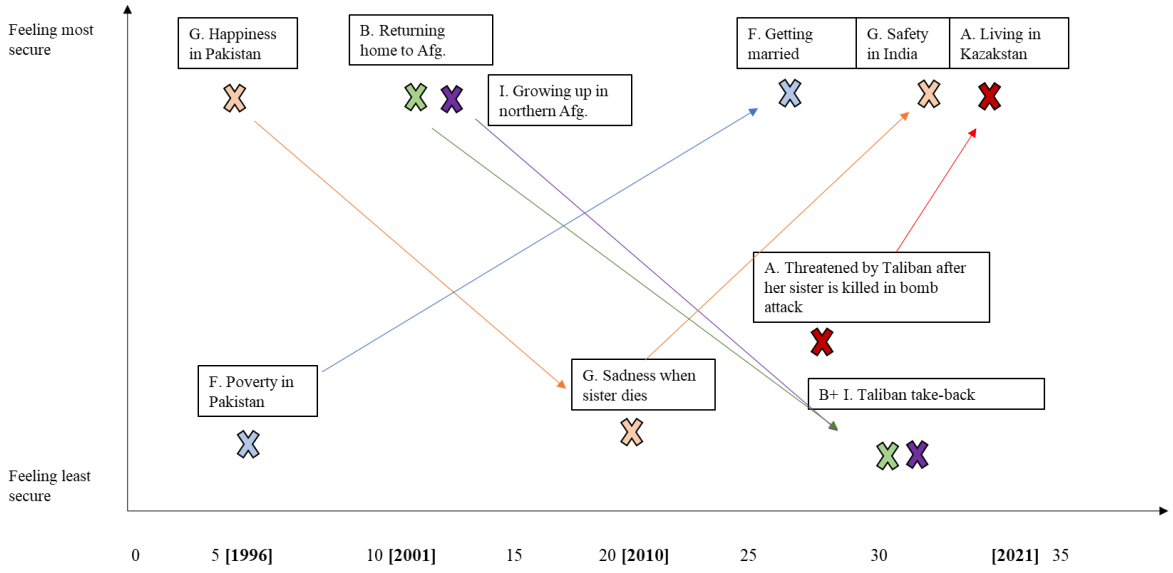

Figure 1. A graph showing the instances when the women felt the most vs the least secure, along a timeline, with arrows of direction. Blue = Farzaneh; Yellow= Gulnoor; Green= Benesh; Purple= Imama; and Red= Aadela.

Important to note is that when drawing this diagram, I relied on the transcripts and follow-up questions where the women themselves compared events or times in their lives to see when they felt the most versus the least secure. Hence, the measurement of 'feeling secure' is subjective and based on the stories of the women. The lowest and highest points of security for the women are not comparable to each other in intensity, so they are simply marked in the lower or higher realm of the diagram. However, since the women are all around 30 years of age, the timeline is comparable. It is also comparable to the official accounts of the conflict, and to facilitate this comparison, I have included some key years on this line. These events include: 1996 when the Taliban first came into power, 2001 when the US invasion began, 2010 as a midpoint in the 'Western intervention', and Taliban take-back (2021). Each woman has two points on the graph for when they felt the most, versus the least, secure, except for Gulnoor who has three, as she insisted that the two points of 'feeling the most secure,' were of

equal weight. These times of ‘feeling’ the most versus the least secure are extremes in their narratives and not exhaustive of times when they felt secure or insecure, but they were indicative for me in interpreting how the woman made sense of security.

In determining at what time the women felt the most versus the least secure, I was helped by our follow-up conversations as the women would sometimes say one thing and emphasize another. For example, Farzaneh spent most of her interview talking about the social insecurities that she had to navigate throughout life, and she felt the most secure after getting married as she no longer had to navigate these social insecurities after. Yet, when I presented an interpretation to her of her least secure moment being an instance of this social pressure, she disagreed and instead highlighted living in extreme poverty in Pakistan as the time she felt the least secure. This indicates that the women see a difference between a cataclysmic event and persistent insecurity, although they both create uncertainty and loss of control.

Consequently, as visible in the diagram, the women focus more on their own immediate, individual, surroundings when telling me their life stories, rather than the continuous violence. This indicates that security is not understood so simplistically as the dominant political agendas would suggest. The women are navigating a multitude of factors such as socioeconomic, ethnic, and gendered positionality, that give meaning to how they interpreted and experienced insecurity. An insecurity that can be something structural that persists and that the women always need to negotiate, or a one-time disastrous event with its reverberating consequences. Regardless, these insecurities create a sense of loss of control which generates constant uncertainty and everyday terror.

7.2 Creating safe spaces

In response to this loss of control, it became evident through their stories that all women persisted in making “sense of security” and asked themselves “how can I create this safe space” (Benesh, 2021). To create this safe space seemed to be a conscious process for some and more subconscious for others, but regardless it was central to their stories. Benesh tells me that “we don’t have any other option” and Farzaneh describes this need to build a safe space since “if you're in a jungle, you need a weapon with you, that's what you need, and the society in Afghanistan wasn't less than a jungle.” I interpret this continuous process as a way for the women to enhance their agency when experiencing the loss of control that the insecurities brought, indicating that there is always agency in the behavior of the women, be it in resisting or adjusting to what is happening around them.

Based on my interpretation of their life stories, I have identified two ways used to create this safe space and enhance their agency. These are resistance and adjustment. Further, I see that the path chosen—resistance or adjustment— depends on how the women make sense of the safe space in the first place. How the women did this, I deconstructed into three common components to show patterns of similarity and divergence amongst the women. These are 1) persons included in the safe space, 2) definition of the safe space, and 3) rationale for the safe space. The first one relates to which individuals the woman includes in her sphere of security, if she strives to create a safe place for herself, her family, community, or wider Afghan society. I describe these as inclusive or exclusive in the analysis below. Secondly, with these people included, what should the space 'look' like, and how do the women understand it. This I call conceptual or concrete, where conceptual refers to a more mental or spiritual understanding of a safe space, and concrete, a physical understanding. Finally, why does she think there is a need for such a space in the first place, what is the rationale behind it, is the space necessary because of externally (international powers) or internal causes (from within the Afghan community/society). All three components together make up an understanding of the space itself, and therefore how to reach for it or uphold it.

When putting these components together, I interpret the way the women understand a safe space and how that relates to their way of creating this space. Here I see that the women who resist the structures and events of insecurities around her, understand her safe space as more inclusive and conceptual while viewing the rationale as externally imposed. Security for her is closely connected to identity, hope, and a feeling of belonging. Concurrently, the women who adjust to their surroundings to limit insecurities instead understand their safe space as more exclusive and concrete, while viewing the rationale as less important or internal. Security for her is related to freedom of movement, freedom from violence, and financial stability. Hence, these different components give us an idea of how security is understood by the women and how they strive for it.

However, it is important to note that this deconstruction is a way to show how the understanding of, and the process to create a safe space is multilayered, as are the insecurities themselves. Thus, the components are not exhaustive, and the women might 'rely' on both resistance (in different forms) and adjustment when navigating their life situations to create this safe space. As will be described further below, both are ways to enhance agency, and the one used will be the one most suited for their positionality at the time. But, as I mentioned

above, I did see more similarities amongst the women than I initially thought, and as such there are three women that most often rely on adjustment and two on resistance.

Finally, before describing these two ways of creating safety in more detail below, I would like to highlight another important factor to bear in mind when reading my interpretation. This is the different attitude towards individual versus collective that I, and others before me, have seen in the Afghan society. The collective, including the nuclear family, relatives, and even closes community, takes a much larger space in one's individual identity than it does in the 'West.' This means that when I describe a more exclusive safe space below, where the individual comes first, it should be noted that this is already broader than what might be assumed by 'Western' readers.

7.2.1 Adjustment

Based on the components described in the text above, of how the women make sense of a safe space, I conclude that three of the women I interviewed view this as a more exclusive and concrete space while viewing the rationale as less important or internal. To reach for or uphold this space, the women thus adjust to the structures or events around them to limit insecurities. These women are Farzaneh and Gulnoor and to some extent Aadela.

All three women described security as a concrete freedom from something they see as limiting, from poverty (Aadela), from violence or fear thereof (Gulnoor), and from rumors (Farzaneh). They further described security during our interviews in such a way that I inferred that they view this safe space as more exclusive including themselves and their families. Farzaneh describes her main source of insecurity clearly throughout her story as something concrete that she can prevent and includes her family in the people she needs to make a safe space for. She views the social insecurity of women as the most important, where a bad image makes the women "feel very insecure." Besides the woman herself, she says that "if she goes against the norms, the norms binding our society […], the entire family is bad," as "in Afghanistan, the first thing that people believe is that a girl, a woman is the household honor." Indicating that the woman's family is also affected by her actions as she would 'destroy' the family honor if she acts in a certain way. Important to note is that honor is vital in many parts of Afghan society. Gulnoor similarly describes violence as what makes her, and her family the most insecure, causing loss of control, and she follows her family's direction in staying safe. They are central to how she relates to security, and for example, when her sister passed (the least secure she has been), it was family who helped her rebuild this safe space. Her fear of the violence even gave her physical ailments, as she describes a "pain in my left hand […]

that slowly, slowly it got worse" which the doctors said, "was because of some kind of depression," due to worrying too much about the violence happening outside the household. Similarly, Aadela describes concrete finances as her main cause of insecurity and thus lack of control, as well as her family being central in creating a safe space as she tells me "life was very peaceful inside the family" and that once she started making money she brought her family to Kabul to feel safer. Hence, it seems like all three view a safe space as exclusive, including her and her family, as well as concrete.

Arguably, the rumors, or the social restrictions on women, that Farzaneh described could be viewed as less concrete and more conceptual. Similarly, if focusing on the freedoms which financial stability brings to Aadela, this could also be questioned. But, by listening to how the women discuss their sources of insecurity and how to navigate them to create this safe space, I interpret their focus as something more immediate, tangible, that they can achieve with practical measures. Furthermore, both women described feeling the least secure due to physical constraints, such as extreme poverty (Farzaneh) and threats from the Taliban (Aadela). Hence, combined, I interpret their view of safety as more concrete than conceptual. Albeit all women relate to both ways of understanding security at some point in their stories.

Additionally, the women did not discuss the rationale for a safe space much, and when they did, it came across as more internal. Aadela tells me that her sister getting killed (her least secure moment), was due to "this religious, or shitty religious issue," referring to the strict interpretation of Islam by the Taliban that women were not allowed to go to school. Also describing that "the main cause [of violence] we can say is that they fight against each other [different Afghan ethnicities]." Farzaneh similarly describes this rationale for creating a safe space as internal since Afghan women are taught to hide, while Afghan men are allowed to break norms since it only reflects on the woman and not himself. Gulnoor, mentions the electrical outages in Kabul as an indirect reason for why her sister had to use the oil lamp which led to her death. But the way she talks about this, I deduce that she puts little emphasis on why it happened and more on the fact that it did, and how she recreated a safe space afterward. Hence, the rationale for creating a safe space, if discussed, is discussed in terms of national interpretations of religion and internal inequalities.

Consequently, in creating this concrete and exclusive safe space, the women adjust to their surroundings to limit their insecurities. Farzaneh describes how this fear of breaking the norms 'made' her behave in certain ways to avoid increasing her as well as her family's insecurities. For example, at university, she says "everybody was seeing me as a very

aggressive, very rude person because I wasn't socializing, I wasn't talking to anybody, I wasn't sharing my notes" to avoid starting any rumors. She also talks about how effortless it was for her to adjust to her family's protection as this was central to her finding this safe space. She tells me that "in our family, we have to protect each other, we don't limit ourselves, but we have to protect each other." A protection that was then 'transferred' to her husband as "he was giving me the same feeling of protection." Likewise, Gulnoor adjusted to her family's directions to stay safe. She listened to her aunt when she came to push her out of bed and back to life once her sister had died without qualms, and she abandoned her dream profession at the request of her parents, despite it making her intensely sad and disappointed. Thus, both women mainly enhanced their agency by finding ways to adjust to their immediate surroundings.

Contrarily, when it comes to creating this safe space, Aadela does not fit as easily within this framework. I interpret her safe space as both exclusive and concrete, yet I see how she uses both ways, resistance and adjustment, to reach for the safe space. She tells me how she had to adjust as a child and teenager to her parents and the Taliban leaders in their village, but she tells me this with anger in her voice. As soon as she was able to leave home, she did. This indicates more resistance towards the limitations of her family, defying the structures keeping her in poverty by pushing for education and eventually a well-paying job. Things that in themselves challenge the gender norms which increases insecurity for women. Further, with the death of her sister, she did not back down but demanded justice which eventually made her flee Afghanistan due to threats. This also indicates more of a resistance to the structures upholding insecurities, than adjustment. Yet, how she describes these things makes me think she resisted for herself and her family, not out of a sense of duty or to create a more inclusive safe space as Imama and Benesh in the following section. She also talks about her family in such a way that it makes me think she would have adjusted to their views unless she had managed to get the financial upper hand. For example, talking about how she would have given up educating her sisters if she did not have enough money for all her siblings to go to school. She would have done this as it is harder for Afghan women to go outside the household and work, while men can, and she would need to maximize the family income. As such, I have still chosen to include Aadela's story in this section.

Aadela's narrative, however, highlights that the women at times move between the two paths, enhancing their agency in whatever way possible. It promotes a more complex understanding of agency, where the form you use to enhance agency might change throughout life. For

example, all women described adjusting to their surroundings as children, since they were either dependent on their parent's support or were not aware of the insecurities at the time. Aadela describes being unhappy in her childhood as "whatever the parents tell to their children, the children must obey," leaving little room for her to do anything but adjust. While Imama tells me that "you do not understand that much when you are a kid" accrediting "childhood innocence." Similarly, Gulnoor describes that "when you are a child, you always think that when you're next to your parents, you're the safest." Indicating that during this time in their lives, they all adjusted to their surroundings to stay safe. Even later in life, Gulnoor persisted in studying what she wanted, even though she was unable to pursue it after graduating, and Farzaneh resisted social norms but with the support of first her parents and then her husband. Hence, there is a movement between the two paths, which depends on the women's situation at the time as well as how they perceive their safe space.

7.2.2 Resistance

When putting together the three components of a deconstructed safe space — individuals included, the definition of, and rationale for the safe space— I can tell that the remaining two women in my study view this as an inclusive and conceptual space. Contrary to the others, they also view the rationale as more important and externally imposed. Thus, to reach for or uphold a safe space, the women resist or challenge the structures or events around them that they connect to insecurities. These women are Imama and Benesh.

For both women, security seems to be closely connected to identity, hope, and feeling of belonging, and they include a wider group, sometimes even most of the Afghan society, in their safe space. They also express more indignation towards what is happening around them than the other women and therefore seem to see the need to create a safe space as externally imposed. When reaching for or upholding this safe space, they also describe it as if it were a duty to resist or challenge the structures upholding the insecurities, particularly those of a gendered nature. A duty that also seems to provide the women with some sort of comfort, and a sense of safety, when pursued. A safety that seems to come from contributing to the collective, an altruistic behavior. Benesh tells me that contributing "fulfills this good feeling, […] it gives a sense of mission, and at the same time hope and an essence of being." Equally, Imama mentions that helping "Afghan girls, and […] the poor, the needy" are "some of the reasons that give me positive energy, motivation, and happiness to some extent," and that "I feel this as a duty." This indicates that they view this safe space as inclusive, and conceptual,

linked to fulfilling this duty, while also responding angrily to the loss of control that the externally fueled insecurities induce.

Further, this sense of duty to resist or challenge the structures becomes most visible in their choice of profession. Both decided to take up a journalistic profession. Imama tells me that she decided to be a journalist so she could use "pen which is education, and the lenses of a camera to raise awareness" of the insecurities that women experienced, and "to teach the society, to show the society that woman is equal part of the society as men. And [that] they have also [the] same fundamental human right as a man." Benesh similarly worked with reporting and documentation but from the perspective of a citizen journalist, and as a freelancer with different international NGOs. She told me that she had to push through these insecurities "so that I can write about it so that I can research about it, I can make sure these voices [of other Afghan women] are heard in one way or another," and that she and others are "constantly fighting to bring that sense of comfort for ourselves and our fellow woman."

Not until the take-back of the Taliban did both women feel the most insecure, like the battle had been lost, at least temporarily. Benesh tells me that when it happened, she felt like she was "absolutely shattered without words. I did not know how to explain myself or how to make sense of what's going on. I simply could not believe it. So that was my most insecure moment of life." She talks about the take-back in disbelief and anger. Turning some of that anger on to the international community, telling me how 'we' as well as Pakistan are to blame for both the Taliban and the corruption. Similarly, Imama tells me that "after the fall of Kabul at the hands of the Taliban, I, no matter wherever I go in the world, there is this vacuum inside me, and there is this emptiness." She sounds despondent when telling me this, comparing it to when she lost her brother in a swimming accident. I can tell that she, right now, is living through one of the hardest times in her life and that the mental incapacity that this creates overshadows any sense of concrete safety she has gained in moving to a European country. Indicating that both women see a conceptual safe space, of identity, hope, and feeling of belonging, as more important than being free from violence, and that this space is highly connected to their Afghan identity. Indicating that the conceptual safe space includes even a wider Afghan community. Albeit Imama describes how "when I moved to X it was, of course, a very positive and good thing [...] physically, yes, I feel safe," implying that she still values concrete security, and that lack thereof can lead to trouble finding a conceptual safe space as well.

Furthermore, by pursuing journalism, Imama and Benesh took on roles that were not 'traditional' for Afghan women and continued to travel outside of Kabul, to areas where female journalism was even more dangerous than in the city after the Taliban began to take back districts. They did not stop when their families expressed worry and the community condemnations. Imama tells me that she had to lie to her mother about covering non-state actors' violent attacks, and Benesh describes her brother in the US worrying about her and the family, excessively.

Although it should be mentioned that they both grew up in liberal families, who seem to have a limited say in what they did for a living, something highly unusual in the Afghan context. Benesh does not mention facing any issues with her choice of profession or constant travels around the country from her family. Instead, she mentions that her home was always "a place of sanctuary" that in her home she could "just close my eyes and be blank and still, be so calm in myself." Likewise, she says that her "anchor is, of course, my family." Therefore, it seems like she did not face many obstacles from her family in resisting and challenging the structures or events that she connected to insecurities. Contrarily, Imama did seem to face some push-back from her family in choosing the life she did. Her father "was against what I was doing, my career as a journalist." But almost in the same breath, she says that "now I tell my father that thank you for those hardships, for the challenges, the barrier that he was putting in my way because that made me even further motivated to continue at my work." Both women therefore tend to have families that either accepted what they did from the start or came around when they saw it was not possible to change their daughters' minds. Thus, even though they both resisted actively and passively, challenging structures they connect to insecurity, it would have arguably been impossible or at least much more difficult for the women if they did not have a basic level of support from their families.

8 Conclusion

In this final section of the thesis, I will discuss my findings and analytical patterns identified based on how this study fits within a broader literature. Then I will assess limitations, besides those already mentioned above, and suggest how to carry this project forward.

8.1 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to build and expand on the budding literature of women's everyday experiences of security in the Afghan context by asking five Afghan women to elaborate on their understanding of security, their definition of 'feeling' safe, and listening to how they

detailed this through their life story. In doing this, I found that the women all felt a sense of loss of control in the face of constant insecurities. But that they persisted in creating a safe space despite this, which I interpreted as a process to enhance their agency. A process that was as multifaceted as the insecurities themselves, where the woman's understanding of safety steered her in the direction towards a safe space and where all acts were imbued with agency.

By listening to and describing these stories accordingly I attempted to provide an authentic account of these individual's sensemaking of security to counter the top-down, essentializing, narratives of women's [in]security in this context. These narratives often relied on women's experiences without understanding them and portrayed women as victims, devoid of the power to influence their own lives. These narratives were also built on assumptions of the Afghan woman as the 'other' in need of 'saving' from the 'Western man' such as detailed by Abu-Lughod, Hirschkind and Mahmood in their two articles and later summarized by Daulatzai. Further, in this attempt to give an authentic description of the women's understanding of security, this study, heeded the 'call to action' by Daulatzai to fill "a substantial lack in current knowledge on the every-day life and subjectivity of Afghans" (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 419). This 'call to action' was founded on the work of feminist, and critical, security scholars of the past, roughly, two decades if not more. A work to deconstruct the concept itself and highlight how women's individual understanding has often been ignored in favor of a state-centric traditional definition of security.

Yet, this 'call to action' came many years ago, in 2008, and as detailed in my previous research section a small body of literature has grown since then looking at how the conflict affects the lives of the women in terms of suffering and violence. My thesis both speaks to this literature and expands on it. These previous studies have focused on conditions of poverty (Schütte, 2014), normalizing violence (Ray, 2017), and sexual and gender-based violence, even misogyny in the country (Ahmad & Anctil Avoine, 2018). Together with these studies, my thesis finds and describes how the individual reality of the Afghan woman is affected by conflict in terms of violence, but also that certain positionalities, as well as relationships (familial, communal, etc.), determine how the women will understand and experience security. Further, the previous studies have shown how the women respond to these conditions of suffering and violence highlighted through exercising agency. Similar to my study, they view agency as a broader concept where acts become a process, and the

positionality of the woman as well as her environment are important to determine how she can exercise her agency (Daulatzai, 2008, p. 433).

Like Amin and Alizada's article from 2020 on women's use of agency to access education and employment, this thesis expands on the understanding of how the women use agency. It finds agency to be a more complex and inclusive practice, challenging the notion that it must be a form of active resistance. It also challenges the notion that it must be connected to a 'Western' perspective (Amin & Alizada, 2020). Instead, I saw how the women in my study exercised agency through different forms of resistance and adjustment. I saw how they made every-day decisions to stay safe, which included both resisting and adjusting to structures leading to insecurities, even if 'we in the West' would see these structures as patriarchal or oppressive. Further, I interpreted how they made these decisions based on how they imagined their safe space to look like, and their current situation and positionality. This means, they were navigating different forms of agency at different times. Albeit I saw that most women were relying more on one than the other in their narratives. Hence, this more inclusive or complex understanding of agency provided the women with more room to be self-determinant, and to avoid being portrayed as either a victim or a heroine, when they were both as well as neither.

Furthermore, this thesis also expands on the existing literature by focusing on safety rather than suffering and violence. This focus on safety allowed the woman to choose the role she felt the most fitting at the time, be it a heroine, a victim, or something in between. This in turn, provided her with an opportunity to break free of the tropes of the suffering Afghan woman at the mercy of a rigid oppressive culture enforced by the 'evil' Afghan man (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Daulatzai, 2008; Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002), and as such, it became a process of empowerment.

This focus on safety was also important considering the image today, after the Taliban take-back, of the Afghan woman as a 'suffering woman,' deeply oppressed by the group. This is not to say that the women are not suffering at the hands of the Taliban, but that there are still Afghan women inside and outside the country who are most likely persisting in creating security right now. If possible, the 'Western' aid community should find ways to support these women in their different processes to create safe spaces, be it through supportive networks within the families, to strengthen feminist (or female) movements of sisterhood, or to help build mental resilience. This could then be used to break an impasse expressed by many 'Western' and Afghan feminists, or practitioners, right now regarding working with

women's situation in the country. Hence, this material can allow for a more empirically grounded conversation on how these individual narratives could be used to better understand what might come next for the women of Afghanistan, where their understanding of safety is crucial.

8.2 Limitations

Arguably, by describing this multidimensional process of creating safe spaces in a dichotomous pattern of resistance and adjustment, I also over-simplify a complex matter. Yet, I do this not to essentialize— to ascribe certain roles to women— but to make an analytical comparison of the different stories shared with me. Also, I deconstruct this pattern further, by seeing how it is connected to the way the women make sense of safe spaces, something that is important as it show the many components that goes into the women's decision making to stay safe. For example, Farzaneh made the decision to adjust to the social structures she saw as main sources of insecurity, as she found solace in the protection of her family, but not in the wider society. Also, she did not see the need to push for a removal of the social norms all together if she and her family were safe. Here, her concrete, tangible, as well as exclusive understanding of a safe space resulted in her adjusting to the structures at hand. However, she did not express feeling constrained or pushed to adjust in this way, and as such she presented it as her own decision which means there was agency in all the actions she took. She also, at times, resisted the structures, such as hugging her 'Western' male colleague in front of other Afghans or pursuing a higher education, albeit always supported by her family or husband. Hence, despite presenting this process in a simplistic manner, I still see the agency and power associated within each of the ways—resistance and adjustment—and I acknowledge how the women rely on both as well as different forms of each throughout their lives to create safe spaces.

8.3 Suggestions for further research

This analytical pattern also allowed me to see similarities that would be interesting to investigate in future research. I saw how women that composed their safe space as inclusive and conceptual expressed a 'downward' trend in their feeling of security right now, while those viewing this space as exclusive and conceptual express feeling the most secure now (see figure 1 on page 28 for a visual image). This connection between conceptual and concrete security with larger-scale security events could be further investigated, to see if there are more women who express this type of relationship. This could then be scaled up to a society level to predict the reaction to significant security events. Or if one is to follow this thesis interpretivist approach to knowledge, it would be advisable to conduct more in-depth

interviews with the women expressing this link to see if and how they relate to this possible connection.

In these follow up interviews, it would also be possible to look more at the feeling of security related to identity, and if this can be the culprit for some women feeling more insecure now than before. It would also be interesting to look at the different feeling in security that some of the women expressed in the event of a cataclysmic security incident, such as the death of a family member, injury in a suicide attack, etc., versus persistent insecurities. Both 'versions' created uncertainty and loss of control, but for some, one 'type' was more important than the other, such as the death of Gulnoor's sister, and had a longer lasting effect. This could be related to how the women reacted to the current large-scale security event of the Taliban take-back and could provide us with more information on how to act accordingly.

Finally, throughout the whole thesis I have attempted to stay away from making simplistic assumptions of the women and misrepresenting their stories. Yet, I have also expressed how this is difficult, if not impossible to do, because of my own positionality. Consequently, further research could include an autobiographical perspective throughout the paper, to explore the conundrums of telling the life-stories of Afghan women as a Western white feminist without falling into the same colonialist 'trap.'

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