



# Feminist Revolutionary Advocacy in the Afghanistan Conflict Context

A Qualitative Content Analysis of a Political Feminist Organization  
RAWA's Documents and Statements

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# Abstract

This study explores how feminism and women's rights as concepts can look in Afghanistan and how a political organization RAWA interprets them. This study focuses on specific armed conflict contexts in Afghanistan, and it was chosen because women's rights have been violated by many actors in the conflicts. I aim to study what kind of factors influence RAWA's interpretation with the use of qualitative content analysis as a research method. Post-colonial feminist theory was chosen to help understand and contextualize RAWA's status as an Afghan Women's organization and rhetoric. Material includes RAWA's documents from its official website where it has published feminist political statements on different subjects. The post-colonial feminist concept of "Third World" woman works as a theoretical frame of this study. This theoretical standpoint of post-colonial feminism was chosen to help analyze the main research question of how RAWA interprets feminism. Mainstream feminism is still primarily understood from the Western liberal feminist point of view, focusing on a broad sense of gender equality, suffrage rights in a democratic system, and fighting the patriarchy (e.g. man's supremacy). Though, liberal feminism is criticized for forgetting women's experiences outside the West. Thus, post-colonial feminism has had the important duty of relieving of experiences of "Third World" women and staying as a critical voice against liberal feminism. Hence, we need multiple feminist concepts and theories to reveal different human experiences to gain equality and understand different forms of oppression. This thesis' main academic interest is to research how feminism can differ from time and place. Hence, the paper then examines hegemonic power dynamics inside feminism and analyses how women in old colonies could determine their versions of feminism.

*Keywords:* Afghanistan's conflicts, Post-colonial feminism, "Third World" Women, Orientalism, Qualitative content analysis

Words: 12 240

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# 1. Introduction

Conflicts in Afghanistan have lasted several decades and their dynamics have evolved continuously. One could argue that Afghanistan seems to be one of the most complicated conflicts from the Cold War period which wars still continue today. Because Afghanistan continued after the Cold War period it also has Mary Kaldor's "New Wars" elements which have made warfare even more complicated than before. The conflicts in Afghanistan have included varying combinations of state and non-state networks and intervening two superpowers to test their leverage in the region of Afghanistan. Moreover, Afghanistan has been one of the most followed conflicts in the media. Afghan Women have been pictured as a "veiled oppressed" homogenous group who cannot act in conflicts where active agents are seen to be state forces, fundamentalist groups, warlords, the U.N peace-keeping forces, etc. This has created a situation that women are seen as mere victims and lacking agency. The conflict has been mainly pictured from the male perspective, whereas Afghan women are left out of the discussion and are only represented from the "outside".

## 1.1 Research Problem

Gender has been considered more closely than before in global politics, even though the change has been slow. For instance, the Security Council's resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) aimed to highlight women's role in peacebuilding. Hence, there is also a growing need for more research on women's organizations protesting and working for sustainable peace security and justice in conflict areas.

Afghan women have been pictured as victims of Afghan "brown men" in the West who need outside saving. Spivak (1988) describes in her text "Can the Subaltern Speak" this narrative where "white men are saving brown women from brown men" (Gandhi, 2019, pp. 94). This similar problematic narrative can be seen also in Western relations with Afghan women. Hence, this study seeks to

study this phenomenon by researching the feminist political organization RAWA and how they challenge the portrayal of "Third World Woman" by adopting their version of feminism. Feminist scholars have debated women's agency and potential for action, however, there is a need for more research on feminist organizations' action in conflict areas and their understanding of feminism.

## 1.2 Research Aim And Questions

This research aims to study how the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) interprets feminism. The main research point will be to concentrate on how RAWA interprets feminism from their point of view. I will focus closely on researching what kind of feminist features RAWA has internalized in its understanding of feminism. This paper contributes to previous research on RAWA, post-colonial feminism theory, and civil actors in achieving social change. The main research question in this study is: "How does RAWA as a political organization interpret feminism and women's rights in their revolutionary work in the Afghanistan armed conflicts context?"

RAWA has been researched before from different angles, however, there is a gap in of deeper analysis of how RAWA interprets feminism in their own terms. Studies have focused mostly on how RAWA advocacy entails and how it operates in Afghanistan and global level. Due to the previous research on RAWA on how it has been communicating and working with Western feminist organizations and other women's movements, I want to research what kind of features of each feminism it has internalized. I am interested if there are Western elements in their notion of feminism, or could it work as a counter-act to hegemonic liberal feminist discourse. This study takes part in the research previously done and hopefully brings new insights and challenges the hegemony of liberal feminism. Thus, besides my main research questions, a sub-research question will be: "How different notions of feminism have influenced RAWA's interpretation of feminism?" and "Does RAWA include specific feminist rhetoric in their announcements and what kind of elements do they include?"

## 1.3 Relevance to Peace and Conflict Studies

Peace and Conflicts' relevance is strong in this paper because the chosen topic relates to women's rights violations in the prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and gender works as an important research perspective to help to understand conflict dynamics. Afghanistan's conflicts have a complicated history because many actors are involved, thus, it needs a growing examination of the motives and ideas behind the actors, inside and outside of Afghanistan. Achieving sustainable peace is not visible in the near future and it seems that the U.S. has "given up" on fixing the situation in Afghanistan without sustainable results. Lederach's (2005) theory on the importance of bottom-up peace-building has influenced why I chose to study RAWA's non-violent feminist action in Afghanistan with a gender focus.

Gender focus is vital when examining conflict dynamics to reveal their complexity. Gender has been dismissed in many schools of thought before because of biased thinking in academia. However, Peace and Conflict studies have included gender studies theories to challenge how conflicts are researched. Post-colonial feminism debate in academia has acknowledged more and more the experience of the "Third World" women and how Western feminist scholars have written about them. Many feminists' academic writing has included Eurocentrism, and it is important to acknowledge how Western hegemony in academia is affecting how "the East" is seen and how the knowledge production of conflict areas is produced. Especially in Peace and Conflict Studies, because many studied conflicts are located outside of Europe and the US. As a Peace and Conflict student, I argue that it is vital that if we continue to study conflict areas outside of Europe and the US, we must acknowledge Eurocentric bias. Moreover, it is worth noting that I will discuss "Afghanistan conflicts" rather than "conflict" because different conflicts in Afghanistan are related to each other and the conflict has not been argued to be over after the U.S. departure in 2021.

## 1.4 Thesis Outline

First, the outline of multiple Afghanistan conflicts focusing on women's rights is presented to contextualize RAWA's feminist political advocacy work. In the previous research chapter, feminism history is discussed with the wave metaphor theory and it is divided into examining those different timelines to observe how complex it is to define feminism. In the analytical framework, the post-colonial feminist theory was chosen as the main theory because of the need to understand Afghan women's resistance in the previous British colony and later, the USSR's and the US's influence in the territory. In the method section, I will discuss my methodological choices and present my coding frame. Further, in the main analysis part, the results of my coding process are presented and analyzed with the chosen theory. In the end, I will discuss briefly the conclusions of the study.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Outline of Multiple Afghanistan Conflicts and Women's Rights

To understand RAWA's developed work with women's rights in Afghanistan, it is necessary to outline the history of Afghanistan's multiple conflicts and examine how women's rights have been treated over the years by holding powers. Various reasons for Afghanistan's prolonged instability can be explained by multiple civil and proxy wars between different parties, including external factors like the superpowers The USSR and the US. Afghanistan has suffered from increased poverty making it depend on external donors and women's rights have been politicized by different parties for different motives. The history of Afghanistan is complicated and there are various shifts when comes to women's rights.

Afghanistan gained its independence from the British in 1919 and it joined the non-aligned movement in the post-war era (Samar, 2019, pp.149). For comparison Afghan women were first eligible to vote in 1919, only a year after women in the UK gained the right to vote, and a year before women's suffrage in the United States (Amnesty, n.d). Afghanistan went through internal power battles that eventually led to the Soviet Invasions of 1979 (Samar, 2019). Before the invasion, there were some signs of development for women (Samar, 2019). Afghanistan had several women in the cabinet, women were going to school and there were women within the police force (Samar, 2019). In the 1950s purdah (gendered separation) was removed, and in the 1960s a new constitution brought equality to many spheres of life, including political participation (Amnesty, n.d). However, the upcoming years took gained development backward during coups and Soviet occupation in the 1970s, through the civil conflict between Mujahideen groups and government forces in the 80s and 90s, and then under Taliban rule (Amnesty, n.d).



When the Soviet Union retreated in 1979 to control a communist leader, the resistance (the mujahedin) spread and had massive support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, China, and Iran, among others (Rubin, 1997, pp. 285). The resistance movement deported the Soviets, but it did not unite the country (Rubin, 1997). The Pakistan-US policy of aiding many parties, combined with the incoherence of Afghan society, ensured that no national leadership emerged (Rubin, 1997). A UN effort to establish a transitional coalition government was weakened by different group activities (Rubin, 1997). The massive arms supply still held by both the Soviet-aided army and the resistance fighters ensured that a civil war continued, however, the former pattern of conflict influenced by the Cold War (communists versus mujahedin) was changed to conflict based on ethnic lines (Rubin, 1997).

Taliban emerged in 1994 after years of conflict (Amnesty, n.d). Many of their members were former Mujahideen fighters who had been trained in Pakistan during the civil war in the '80s and '90s (Amnesty, n.d). Their goal was to make Afghanistan a fundamentalist gender segregation Islamic state, and they ruled in Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001 before the US invasion (Amnesty, n.d).

Taliban decreased in multiple ways women's rights in Afghanistan by enforcing their version of Islamic Sharia law. Women were banned from going to school or studying, working, leaving the house without a male escort, accessing healthcare, being involved in politics, or speaking publicly, and the requirement of burqa (covering women from head to toe) (Amnesty, n.d, Rubin, 1997). Overall, women were banned from active participation in the public sphere and were imprisoned in the private sphere, in their homes. Taliban's mission was to make women invisible, making rules that if a woman leaves their home, they need to wear a full body veil (burqa) escorted by a male relative (Amnesty, n.d). Women and men were separated in public places like hospitals, which is an extreme form of gender segregation.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the US intervened in Afghanistan with the motivation that Afghanistan would not become a safe haven for terrorists by allowed by the Taliban. Moreover, the human rights violations of Afghan women

worked as a justification for the West to intervene. Taliban was defeated by the end of 2001 (Amnesty, n.d). In the following international intervention, women's rights were advanced from the Taliban rule. Many schools opened doors again to girls and women went back to work (Amnesty, 2023). A new constitution in 2003 enshrined women's rights, and in 2009 Afghanistan adopted the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Amnesty, n.d).

However, the developed steps in women's rights faced backlash when the Taliban came to power again in August 2021. Even though the Taliban has commented that it will not restrict women's rights under Islamic Law, its action does not match its words (UN Women, 2021, pp.3). According to Amnesty Report on Afghanistan (2023), the Taliban has again limited women's freedom of movement with a requirement of a male escort, restrictions on clothing ( e.g. requirement of hijab), and access to secondary school until the Taliban Ministry of Education adjusts new educational framework with a line Taliban's understanding of sharia law, university studies have banned from women, limited women general working and working for UN, NGOs and in the law sector.

## 2.2 Feminist Organization RAWA and Women's Rights in Afghanistan

Founded in 1977, RAWA, "The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan" is an "independent, political/social organization of Afghan women fighting for human rights and social justice in Afghanistan" (RAWA, n.d). Already for two decades before September 11, 2011, RAWA had worked from their forced exile in the border areas of Pakistan and Iran to bring international attention and consciousness of atrocities in Afghanistan under the occupation of the Soviet Union, the warlords of the Northern Alliance, and the fundamentalists of the Taliban (Farrell and McDermott, 2005, pp.34). RAWA has brought up human rights violations in Afghanistan with feminist advocacy work to mobilize the West in general, and U.S. feminists, on behalf of their cause (Farrel and McDermott, 2005). Back then RAWA claimed to represent the silenced voice of

Afghan Women, and it eventually became recognized globally by sovereign states and human rights organizations as the resistance force “behind the veil” (Farrel and McDermott, 2005). After the events of 9/11, growing interest started towards Afghan Women in the U.S. which produced a struggle that challenged RAWA’s authority to represent the “real” experience and interests of Afghan Women (Farrel and McDermott, 2005).

RAWA was founded by several Afghan woman intellectuals under the leadership of Meena (RAWA, n.d). She was a nine-teen-year-old middle-class Afghan law student at Kabul University (Farrel and McDermott, 2005, pp.36). Meena created the organization within the context of a student movement centered at Kabul University following the uncertain end of a period of Western-influenced monarchist rule by King Zahir Shah (1933-1973) (Farrel and McDermott, 2005). During that time RAWA located itself as a broad-based independent women’s organization structured to appeal to the widest possible range of women in Afghanistan (Farrel and McDermott, 2005). RAWA had to fight over to make a distinction from the male-dominated radical student movement which helped to shape RAWA’s image as an autonomous authority and agency on behalf of Afghan women (Farrel and McDermott, 2005). Quickly after the establishment of RAWA, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, provoking a nationalist struggle for Afghan sovereignty (Farrel and McDermott, 2005, pp.36). RAWA started to include the struggle for women’s rights and the nationalist liberation elements in their advocacy against the occupying forces (Farrel and McDermott, 2005, pp.36-37).

## 3. Previous Research

In this chapter, I will discuss previous research on feminism and what have been the main stumbling blocks in defining feminism as a concept. I will analyze the previous feminist research by widespread “wave” metaphor to outline the history behind feminism and the focus will be on the theoretical debate around liberal feminism and post-colonial feminism.

### 3.1 Concept of Feminism and Gender Equality

According to the UN Women’s study about the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 “Achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls” by the year 2030 will not be happening. It could take close to 300 years to achieve true gender equality in a global sense if the current rate of progress continues (UN News, 2022). This data reveals how important it is to have more gender focus in academia and utilize feminist theories as lenses to help discuss the challenges of a globalized world. However, it is vital to acknowledge that even though we live in a global world, gender relations are not homogenous or something that should be generalized. It is vital to understand local surroundings and that positive change should come inside of the communities, and not from outside forces.

Today’s feminist debate still hangs on issues around the concept of feminism and how it is defined. Inside feminism, there are various perceptions of the definition depending on context and what kind of social change people want to achieve with feminism. As a major intersectional feminist voice bell hooks (2015) who passed away in December 2021 stated: “The feminist movement continues to be one of the most powerful struggles for social justice taking place in the world today.” Indeed, the feminist movement continues to shape its form and find ways to construct societies for more non-oppressive and peaceful ones. The struggle did not start easily and will not probably never end, at least without constant work in academia and outside of it. Feminism as a concept should be understood as an

umbrella term that includes different branches of thought. I argue that feminism should be conformed to its surroundings and culture shaped by its own people.

## 3.2 Three Waves of Feminism

The feminist movement is often discussed and theorized through different waves that work as metaphors to represent various timelines. All waves have different points of view on women's rights and in goals they try to achieve. The metaphors describe illustratively the development of the feminist movement and help to understand how gender equality looks today. Even though the first wave concentrates mainly on the progress of Western feminism, I think it is vital to outline the development of how feminism has been understood hegemonically in the past and how it has developed to a point where post-colonial feminism views have challenged it.

The first wave was a movement for civil and political rights, such as property ownership and suffrage, dating from the first women's rights convention in the United States (the 1848 meeting in Seneca Falls, New York), to the ratification of women's voting rights in 1920 (Kathleen, et al., 2010, pp. 76). The suffrage period split white and black women into two, because of racist Jim Crow laws. Back in 1851 at the start of the first wave of feminism, Sojourner Truth, abolitionist and women's rights advocate in the USA, claimed in her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman" how civil rights should also involve women of color.

The second wave began in the mid-1960s, and it included activism that broadened the concept of equality to include questioning women's and men's social roles in society. It ended in the mid-1980s with criticism from women of color and lesbians, that asserted that privileged, white heterosexual women defined second-wave goals, ideologies, and strategies to represent only their issues (Kathleen, et al., 2010, pp. 77). Most second-wave white feminism in the West – liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, or "care-focused feminism" – include an assumption that women everywhere face similar oppression merely by virtue of their sex/gender (Herr, 2023, pp.4).

The third wave describes the consciousness of younger women and men to acknowledge the binary sex and gender determinist thinking that has been included in feminism before to change it to include awareness of broader sex/gender identities, and multiple identities of age, class, race, and sexual preference (Kathleen, et al., 2010, pp.77). All these factors can be understood as intersections and as a bigger standpoint of intersectional feminism. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw created the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to define how systems of oppression overlap to create different experiences for people of many identity categories (JSTOR, 2020). She argued that the oppression that black people face, cannot be understood only by the terms “racism” or “sexism”, as they would be framed as an either/or proposition (JSTOR, 2020). After that intersections of human experience have been taken into closer consideration when analyzing oppression in feminism. Hence, third-wave feminism advocates for widespread social justice and champions feminism grounded in intersectional analysis (Maxwell and Shields, 2018, pp.4)

Moreover, the third wave included the inclusion of post-colonial feminism which focused criticism on mainstream liberal feminism and post-colonialism (Herr, 2023, pp.1-2). Post-colonial feminism (also spoken of as Third World feminism) focuses on revealing Third World women’s points of view and experiences. Post-colonial feminism and transnational feminism are two of the most vital notions of feminism relating to Third World women (Herr, 2023). Both emerged in opposition to mainstream second-wave feminism, which included the false idea of universal oppression against women merely by virtue of their sex/gender (Herr, 2023). By this narrow view of women’s oppression, white second-wave feminism excluded Third World women’s multiple and complex double-oppressions in their various national contexts, which are not solely compounded by race and class but also by imperialism and colonialism (Herr, 2023).

Even though there is a similarity between Third World feminism and transnational feminism, they are different. Post-colonial feminism was started by Chandra Mohanty’s strong critique of liberal feminists’ generalization of women, and hence mischaracterization of Third World women’s oppression. Post-colonial

feminism stresses the importance of Third World women's activism in local/national contexts and writing reliable feminist analyses of their diverse forms of oppression and different notions of resistance on the ground (Herr, 2023). Transnational feminism, on the other hand, is interested in feminist organizations, networks, and movements occurring outside and beyond individual nation-states at the transnational level (Herr, 2023). It includes a thought that nation-states and nationalism are harmful to feminist agendas, whereas Third World feminism is neutral to, and at times approving of national-states and nationalism (Herr, 2023).

Partly as a response to second-wave criticism, some white feminists began to assimilate “global feminism” in the 1980s and attempted to recognize diversity in women’s oppression across the globe (Herr, 2023, pp.4). However, white global feminism leans on the assumption of shared oppression “universal patriarchy” which is based on white women’s experiences in the West (Herr, 2023). Global sisterhood is an idea of the coordinated resistance movement that is based on shared biology and a common “enemy” which is patriarchy (Herr, 2023). They tend to rely on the “feminist savior complex” where they forcibly try to apply Western feminist values outside of the West. Even though the cause can be altruistic, without first concerning the local women’s organizations' opinions, it can do more harm than good. The outcome of post-colonial feminist criticism and black feminism enabled us to question the hegemonic position of white liberal feminism and to change it to be part of the plurality of feminisms, each with a specific history and set of political objectives, as well as sharing some common ground (McEwan, 2001, pp. 97).

## 4. Analytical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that will work as an analytical lens when the material is analyzed and interpreted. As in the previous research chapter, I pointed out how a multitude of interpretations of feminism exist, still, white liberalist feminism is dominating. It is vital to expand our understanding of feminism and analyze what factors can influence the construction of various forms of feminism. I will start by explaining the starting points of post-colonial feminism. After that, I will discuss in detail the post-colonial theory of Said's Orientalism and how it is connected to post-colonial feminism's "Third World" woman concept. Understanding Said's post-colonial theory on Orientalism and post-colonial feminism reveals how feminism includes hegemonic power relations and how it is vital to uncover them to expand what feminism as a concept can mean.

### 4.1 Post-Colonial Feminism Theory

Post-colonialists focus on colonial relations of domination and subordination, established under European imperialism in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Tickner, 2014, pp. 262). Postcolonial, as a term, suggests resistance to colonial power and its discourses that continue to shape different cultures, including those whose revolutions have already overthrown formal ties to their previous colonial rulers (Tyagi, 2014, pp.45). Post-colonialists claim that this dominance persists and that they are built into the way Western knowledge portrays people and countries in the South today (Tickner, 2014). Postcolonial theory, therefore, concentrates on subverting the colonizer's discourse that attempts to distort the experience and realities, and describe the inferiority of the colonized peoples in order to exercise full control (Tyagi, 2014).

Post-colonial feminism makes similar claims, however, it has criticized post-colonialism for excluding women's experience and the influence of gender. This has created a situation where "the Third World women" are left out of theorizing



the colonial battle and their experiences are neglected. Hence, it includes a focus on the construction of gender differences in colonial and anti-colonial discourses, and the representation of women in anti-colonial and post-colonial discourses (Tyagi, 2014). According to postcolonial feminism, double colonization as a term means double oppression from patriarchy and colonial power. Moreover, post-colonial feminism includes strong critique against the hegemony of Western feminism and that it only represents white women's perspectives. The theory of postcolonial feminism stresses the importance of bringing women's voices heard in old colonies. According to Sharoni (1993), "In order to make feminist sense of Middle East politics, it is not enough to record a wide range of images and representations of women in struggle. One also needs to examine the social construction of such images, listen to the multiplicity of voices and silences, identify common themes and contradictory meanings; and address differences, tensions, and changes in political interventions carried out by women in the Middle East".

## 4.2 Orientalism and Redefining the "Third World" Woman

Edward W. Said 1978 "Orientalism" launched an important post-colonial debate about how "the East" is represented by "the West" and how it helped Europe to define its superior identity compared to "the Other". Orientalism includes a study of how the relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, domination, and varying degrees of complex hegemony. Abu-Lughod (2001) explains that one of the most vital thoughts that Orientalism has enabled is that the division between East and West is to be understood not as a natural geographic or cultural fact but as a product of political and historical encounters of imperialism. She continues her argument by that the first assumption includes a thought of cultural purity, and the second underestimates the formative power of colonialism in the development of the region.

Said highlights that Orientalism does not solely mean representation of the Orient, but rather many angles from the hegemony of the society to Foucauldian

understanding of academic knowledge production. He explains that without understanding Orientalism as a discourse, one could not understand how Europe was able to control and produce the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Lila Abu-Lughod (2001) argues that Said's work has had an important impact on later studies on Middle Eastern gender and women's studies, even though Said did not concentrate on his writings on women's experiences.

Even though Abu-Lughod (2001) points out that Said has not concentrated on gender in Orientalism, he brings up an illustrative example of an "Oriental Woman" who is pictured as "typically Oriental" as quiet, unemotional, and unseen, and who was represented by a wealthy white foreign man's point of view. Moreover, it was not only "white men's burden" to save women from colonies, there is an extended history of "a tortured relationship between powerful white women and subjugated women of colour" (Syed and Ali, 2011, pp.352). Often white women worked as saviors in the colonial context by taking a mission of relieving the patriarchal plight of women in the colonies and their role as enlightened agents helped to assert their own political rights and agency (Syed and Ali, 2011, pp. 352).

Abu-Lughod (2001) stresses the question related to power domination in academia: "First, we have to ask what Western liberal values we may be unreflectively validating in proving that "Eastern" women have agency too". This question is relevant for feminist scholars to stay critical because we cannot escape the discourse of Western values and ideas about feminism that we have been surrounded by. Abu-Lughod argues that the problem is about the production of knowledge in and for the West. She claims that as long as Western scholars are writing about "the Other", they are implicated in projects that establish Western authority and cultural differences. A core insight that Said (1978) explains in Orientalism is that "the Orient" is a Western construction that highlights its feeling of superiority over it.

Golley (2004) argues that because the orientalist portrayal of Arab women complicates representing realistically Arab women and achieving positive change

in their lives Still in the West, a mainstream idea of an Arab woman is a “veiled oppressed woman who cannot speak for themselves”. Golley points out how some Western feminists have described Arab women’s lives as being so deviant that they cannot possibly develop any kind of feminism. This thought only represents how there is constant work to do with revealing hegemonic Eurocentric thinking from feminist conception. The consciousness of Orientalism in feminist theory helps to understand how Western thinking has shaped how feminism is understood today and how it is still seen mainly from the Western point of view, even though post-colonial feminism has challenged liberal feminism.

Mohanty (2003) analyses in her text the construction of “Third World” Woman made by Western feminist academia. Her main argument grounds to highlight how there is no homogenous group of women or a universalized category of women. She criticizes how some scholars make biased assumptions of “Third World Women” as mere victims and as a homogenous shared oppression group lacking agency. She analyses the assumption of implementing the universal category of women as an already constructed, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic, or racial location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy that can be applied universally and cross-culturally. Similarly, feminists in general have criticized Western knowledge for being knowledge constructed mainly from men’s perspective, post-colonial feminists see similar issues coming from feminist knowledge that is based largely on the experiences of relatively privileged Western women (Tickner, 2014, pp. 262).

Mohanty does not deny that women’s rights violations would not be happening in the “Third World”, however, she stresses that for real academic validity, it is vital not to fall into these pitfalls of universalizing women into homogenous groups of people or picturing the “Third World” women only through victimization by global capitalism or local patriarchal culture. Mohanty argues that generalizing the “Third World” woman into “women as an oppressed group” robs them of their historical and political agency. Hence, according to Mohanty, when analyzing oppression, it is vital to study and understand the context, history, and local gender relations of the studied group to get a valid picture. Mahmood (2001)

analyses the relationship between feminist theory and analyzing “Third world” women. She argues that the liberatory goals of feminism should be rethought because the desire for freedom and liberation are historically situated desires that must be analyzed considering other desires, aspirations, and capacities that inhere in a culturally and historically located subject. She continues her argument: “I would contend, is that in analyzing the question of politics we must begin with a set of fundamental questions about the conceptual relationship between the body, self, and moral agency as constituted in different cultural and political locations, and not hold one particular model to be axiomatic as is often case in progressivist narratives”.

### 4.3 Feminism in The South

Feminism is not autonomous, but bound to the signifying network of the national context which produces it. (Golley 2004, pp.529)

Abu-Lughod (2001) raises the question of whether local feminism, should be considered “indigenous” or imported, liberated, or disciplinary. She argues that this debate has consequences for current discussions about what kind of feminism is appropriate for the Middle East. Also, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (2004) discusses in her paper “Is feminism relevant to Arab Women” how feminism and women’s movements have developed in modern Arab countries. She argues how in the Arab World, feminist consciousness has developed hand in hand with national consciousness since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century which was also the beginning of the Arab Renaissance.

In many cultures (especially in the South) feminism is associated with cultural imperialism (McEwan, 2001, pp.97). Golley analyses the same issue of how there have been arguments for feminism in Arab as a Western import, but she argues that feminism in the Arab world is an indigenous project. Although there has been a reaction to Western imperialism and the connection with feminism, accounting that “feminism is an illegal immigrant and an alien import to the Arab world and,

as such, is not relevant to the people and their culture". Golley argues that even though the women's movement in the Arab world has been affected by women's movements from other parts of the world, it does not make it alien to Arab culture as such. Arab Women have been active in national liberation struggles and at least these examples should destroy any claim that they are completely secluded, passive, and domesticated beings (Golley, 2004, pp.256). Women have been part of many nationalist struggles in all Arab countries, including Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, and Palestine (Golley, 2004, pp.526).

## 5. Method

In this chapter, the methodological framework of the study is presented. This chapter outlines the research design, data analysis method, data collection, and material, the coding process, coding frame and finishes with ethical considerations of the research and the positioning of the researcher. Throughout, I discuss the choices of method and transparently present how I have conducted all parts of the content analysis.

### 5.1 Research Design

I chose a qualitative research design as it enables me to discover RAWA's interpretation of feminism by examining their old statements (eg. documents). In qualitative data analysis, the study is conducted in-depth and sensitive to context where data is collected from interviews, observations, and documents (Chambliss and Schutt, 2019, pp.266). Meaning is analyzed related to feminism, and I have chosen post-colonial feminist theory as an analytical lens to understand it. According to Chambliss and Schutt (2019), good qualitative data analysis focuses on the interrelated aspects of the setting or group, or person, under investigation (e.g. the case). The case here is RAWA's and its understanding of feminism.

### 5.2 Data Analysis Method

I have chosen qualitative content analysis as a research method to conduct this study. The qualitative content analysis includes a versatile approach to verbal data from documents, statements, and interviews that the research has collected. The qualitative content analysis origins started with the quantitative one, however today it can be utilized in analyzing qualitative data as well (Schreier, 2012, pp.9). Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data (Schreier, 2012, pp.8). The method is suitable for all data that require some degree of interpretation (Schreier, 2012). Research is done by

classifying parts of the data into the categories of a coding frame which works as the heart of the method (Schreier, 2012).

RAWA has written a lot of material and published them on their website. I wanted to avoid "getting lost in the data", so utilizing a content analysis was a solid choice because it reduces data and narrows the topic. My research question is purely descriptive and it reduced large amounts of material to a specific angle. This helped me to find relevant data for my specific research question and reduce unnecessary information. Focusing on selected aspects of material is what distinguished QCA from many other qualitative methods for data analysis (Schreier, 2012, pp.4). I concentrated on RAWA's understanding of feminism which reduced material to focus on those themes. My research question specifies the angle from which I examine the data, hence offering a deeper analysis of the phenomenon.

### 5.3 Data Collection and Material

In this study, I decided to utilize RAWA's rich collection of documents to research how they interpret feminism. On RAWA's official website, the organization has documented through its reports and photos what is happening in Afghanistan to spread consciousness. Moreover, RAWA brings up civilian casualties and war crimes. RAWA's mission has been to give a voice to Afghan women through the internet and spread information about what is happening realistically in Afghanistan. The material is secondary data collected from RAWA's website where they have published their statements.

First, I selected my material from RAWA's published texts to "relevant" and "unrelevant" to data reduction to focus only on related themes in my research (i.e. feminism and women's rights). I went through all RAWA's own documents that they have published from the year 1995. They included mostly statements about various issues happening in Afghanistan and in global politics related to it. I left out all other statements that did not focus on women's rights in Afghanistan and feminist themes. Here the content analysis is a solid choice because my aim was

to sort out specific concepts of feminism in RAWA's rhetorics. Moreover, my goal was to describe my material in detail related to that.

## 5.4 Analytical Coding Process and Coding Frame

I followed Margrit Schreier's (2012) guided steps for doing a qualitative content analysis. After preparing data into Nvivo Software, I started to create the coding frame which is the heart of the method. QCA's focus will always be on working with categories (main codes and subcodes) and developing a category system (eg. coding frame) (Kuckartz, 2019, pp.183). I coded RAWA's material into three themes based on their statements related to women's rights and feminism. The research problem shapes the focus of this study, and with this coding frame, my aim is to find results on how RAWA interprets feminism.

QCA is especially helpful when a researcher is dealing with large amounts of qualitative data and wants to describe what is in that data through classification (Schreier, 2012, pp.168). I have chosen thematic categories in this study to refer to certain concepts, topics, values, arguments, and schools of thought to capture RAWA's understanding of feminism. Categories are basic concepts of knowledge, generally speaking, a commonality between certain things: a term, a heading, or a label that designates something similar under a certain aspect (Kuckartz, 2019, pp.184). I have developed categories used in this research by mixing concept-driven ('deductive') and data-driven ('inductive'). First, the starting point of a coding frame is deductive codes and then inductive ones. I have presented the coding frame as a table that can be observed in Figure 1.



Name	Description	Files	References
Feminist Advocacy	RAWA's thinking related to feminist advocacy. Feminism is a social movement and ideology that aims to enhance women's position as equal to men's position in society. Feminism is an umbrella term and there are many kinds of different feminism around the globe.	55	174
Goals		20	32
Resistance		37	76
Solidarity		32	51
Values		10	15
Social Change and Governance	RAWA's thinking related to desired social change and governance. Social change means a profound change in the social interactions, institutions, and political system.	64	226
Afghan Nation building		12	15
Emancipation		17	22
Opportunist Afghan women		19	24
Revolution		36	66
Secular democracy		18	29
The US and Nato		37	70
Women's Rights	RAWA's thinking related to women's rights. Women's rights are human rights that have gendered aspects.	62	188
Basic rights		7	9
Fundamentalism		44	107
Oppression		32	45
Patriarchy		8	8
Women's rights violations		15	19

**Figure 1.** Coding frame from Nvivo Software (Pinja Suorsa, 2023)

## 5.5 Reliability and Validity

Before conducting the actual study, I implemented a pilot phase to ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis. The coding frame is considered reliable to the extent that the results of the analysis remain stable over time (e.g. consistency)” (Schreier, 2012, pp. 167). Moreover, it is valid to the extent that the categories adequately represent the concepts under study (Schreier, 2012, pp. 175). I edited and elaborated the main categories in the coding frame to describe more specifically theme patterns in RAWA’s texts. First, I had only two main categories, however after the pilot phase I decided to add one more often repeated main category “Social change and Governance” a data-driven way to picture better how RAWA thinks about feminist governance. Some of its sub-categories were under “Feminism” and “Women’s rights” but adding one more main category made the coding frame more comprehensive and clear. These actions made sure that the coding strategy was coherent.

The goal of QCA is to go beyond individual understanding and interpretation when classifying the material according to the coding frame (Schreier, 2012, pp.6). QCA being a highly flexible method, in this study I have partly tailored my coding frame to the material because the goal is to have a reliable study but also valid results to the extent that I have captured what it sets out to capture. As Schreier (2012) argues, the coding frame can be regarded as valid to the extent that the categories adequately represent the concepts in your research question, and to achieve this the researcher has to adapt the frame to fit the material. Because of coding frame has to match the material, coding frames in QCA are always partly data-driven (Schreier, 2012, pp.7).

## 5.6 Delimitations

Although I have taken the needed measures to ensure the reliability and validity of the coding frame, this is a qualitative study that aims to interpret and is subjective by nature. I am aware of my own bias when conducting the research, however, I have not let it influence how the study was conducted. Hence, the pilot study worked as an important phase to increase the reliability and validity of this study to recognize stumbling blocks before the actual coding process. When presenting the results and the main analysis, I acknowledged the selective plausibility, where one mainly selects quotations that clarify the alleged connections between categories, while contradictory examples are not considered.

This study does not aim to generalize the results but rather proposes an example of locally defined feminism and how it can challenge the hegemonic position of liberal feminism as the only "truth" in feminist knowledge. Hence, this study aims to highlight post-colonial countries' women's voices and positions as active agents in social change.

## 5.7 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics should be based on a realistic evaluation of the overall potential for harm and benefit to research subjects (Chambliss and Schutt, 2019, pp.87). According to Creswell (2018), it is vital that the researcher understands their role in the study and does self-reflection. As the main instrument of data collection and analysis, I have a responsibility to reflect on my own position in the context of the research and its potential harms. I acknowledge my privileged position as a Western woman student and how it has shaped my understanding of feminism. Thus, I have been surrounded mainly by white feminism in the past, however, after university studies in Malmö and Gothenburg and discussions with other students all over the world, I have gained critical knowledge from many schools of thought about hegemonic Western production inside of feminism. I think it is

still vital to acknowledge my background as a researcher and how I make an analysis of Afghan Women's understanding of feminism. I have chosen post-colonial feminism theory as lenses to help me stay critical and structure RAWA's views related to feminism with respect and sincerity. It is vital to pay attention to context rather than seeking universal generalizations (Chambliss and Schutt, 2019, pp.266).

According to Sharoni (1993), the calls for ethically responsible research and the situatedness of "the author" in the process of knowledge production have recently led feminist scholars and activists to "construct projects that more directly and immediately benefit the women who are researched". Calling attention to the lens through which women's lives and struggles are interpreted and stressing the locations and political contexts that inform the writer is essential for ethical research. Hence, context on Afghanistan's multiple conflicts, previous research on feminism development, and theory about post-colonial feminism are presented to help me as a researcher to give a holistic view of RAWA's interpretation of feminism and women's rights in the rights context.

## 6. Analysis

The following chapter presents the most significant themes found in the material and they will be analyzed by post-colonial feminism theory which was presented as the theoretical framework in this study. I present a deep analysis of the construction of RAWA's feminism based on post-colonial feminism theory and find connections between categories. I decided to present a coherent analytical text where categories are discussed together with the theory, however, the coding frame of this analysis can be reviewed in Table 1 from the method section.

Post-colonial feminism theory is utilized to understand RAWA's position as a women's organization in an old colony in Afghanistan and how different forms of oppression have shaped their understanding of feminism. Further, the analytical framework explains how RAWA challenges a Westernized portrayal of the "third-world woman" as merely a victim. Moreover, I will discuss how other forms of feminism (eg. liberal and transnational feminism) have influenced RAWA's interpretation of feminism.

### 6.1 RAWA's Representation of Afghan Women

The Westernized narrative has included an orientalist idea of Afghan women as merely "veiled victims" of traditional fundamentalist patriarchal systems and incapable of action. This narrative has created a conflict in the global feminist movement where white liberal feminism has been seen as the "truth" and its values have been tried to apply to Afghanistan. Hence, this has complicated the development of feminism growing natively in Afghanistan. Mohanty's post-colonial feminism criticism applies in the case of Afghan women when they are simplified into one-dimensional beings from the Western perspective and rob their historical and political agency. However, when examining RAWA's statements on its feminist political action, it does not integrate with the "veiled victim" mentality. Hence, RAWA's existence in itself challenges the oriental narrative. As

post-colonial feminist theory grounds the importance of making the Third World women's voices to be heard, RAWA has created a public channel for Afghan women to express themselves transnationally to the rest of the world with the power of the internet and demonstrations.

RAWA (2006) describes itself as "the oldest political and social organization of Afghan women, struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in fundamentalism-blighted Afghanistan since 1977.". RAWA bases its feminist formation on promoting women's rights through nonviolent action. Moreover, RAWA has continued to operate also in other levels of Afghan society: "the organization has evolved - it now runs schools, orphanages, mobile health-care units, adult literacy classes, income-generating projects, and it provides emergency relief in refugee camps." (RAWA, 2006)

In Afghanistan as one of the most backward and traditional countries of the world women's rights have always been ignored and they were subjected to every kind of horrible male chauvinism; in short, women are discriminated in society in every aspects. Therefore, to raise the voice of the Afghan women in an organized and effective manner was a necessity and a problem to which an answer should have been given. And the establishment of RAWA was the right answer. (RAWA, 2006)

Orientalist women" can be seen in the representation of veiled Afghan Women who would be in need of outside "saving". This can be seen in the USA's rhetoric when justifying the intervention in Afghanistan with the imperialist idea of the concept of "white man's burden" to save Afghan women. Also, white feminist discourse includes the idea of rescuing Muslim women from oppression (Syed and Ali, 2011, pp. 358). All these form a reality where Afghan women would not be able to gain their rights in their own hands. To this white savior complex, RAWA argues "that there is no savior, no one is going to rescue us; our freedom is only possible with our own struggle and not by relying on the so-called international society and foreign invaders. (RAWA, 2017)

RAWA does not portray itself only through oppression, even though it reports atrocities against Afghan women. They want people around the world to know

what is truly happening in Afghanistan behind that imported "women's rights" speech and the Taliban's false announcements of Afghan women's rights.

The Taliban are trying to pretend to be "changed" in order to gain global financial and diplomatic support, recognition and the lifting of sanctions. They even issue fatwas in "defending women's rights"! How can one expect "change" from a medieval and alien mercenary group whose whole life is associated with bloodshed, suicide, explosions and savagery? (RAWA, 2021)

Islamic/Sharia law is vague and construed in different ways by Islamic regimes to benefit their own political agendas and rules. Furthermore, the Taliban would also like the West to acknowledge them and take them seriously, and all these claims are part of painting a whitewashed image for themselves. Maybe after a few months they would say that we will hold elections since we believe in justice and democracy! These pretences will never change their true nature, and will still be Islamic fundamentalists: misogynist, inhuman, barbaric, reactionary, anti-democracy, and anti-progressive. In a word, the Taliban mentality has not changed and will never change! (RAWA, 2021)

As a counterweight to reporting of women's rights violations, RAWA motivates Afghan women to fight together against oppression and describes Afghan Women as having great potential for resistance: "To resist means to live. And we shall win by resisting," (RAWA, 2017). Hence, RAWA portrays Afghan women as active change-makers in their feminist revolutionary work.

## 6.2 Revolutionary Feminist Actors

For these and many other standpoints we have always been told, and there are still people who continue to tell us that the word "Revolutionary" in our name sometimes scares people away. In response, we have always maintained that the struggle of women for liberty and democracy in a country suffocating under native and international terrorists, and in conditions of extreme oppression and persecution, cannot but be revolutionary. Being irreconcilable against fundamentalism is revolutionary. (RAWA, 2002)

RAWA describes that its revolution is based on against three types of oppression: patriarchy, fundamentalism, and imperialism. RAWA grounds its feminist existence strongly on resistance against this triple oppression. Post-colonial feminism explores these multi-dimensional forms of oppression and how they affect women's lives. RAWA describes itself as being "a veteran of over two decades of intrepid struggles "in the face of death" and for "democracy, women's emancipation, and empowerment" (RAWA, 2002).

RAWA describes how its founder and martyr Meena, did not surrender to the patriarchy and fundamentalism. RAWA bases its feminist ideology on resistance to Meena's martyrdom and her ideas. Meena portrayed Afghan women as: "Afghan women are like sleeping lions, when awoken, they can play a wonderful role in any social revolution." (RAWA, 2014). Moreover, even though Meena had children and loved family, she put the political struggle first. Meena represented a different role for Afghan women, where women can be politically active and struggle for women's rights.

She was directly involved in the difficult and dangerous struggle with her personal life never being a hindrance to her activities, and she did not fall into the trap of extravagance or banality. She even left her education to pursue her political activities. This is why today, Meena is one of the most successful women in Afghanistan's history in her struggle and leadership. (RAWA, 2014)

RAWA believes that Afghan women have great potential to struggle against fundamentalist, imperialist, and patriarchal powers, therefore they should be at the forefront of it. RAWA's main goal is to spread awareness and it claims that they have succeeded in it somewhat. They believe that the movement will grow even more in the future.

Afghan women have gained awareness that today they are at the forefront of the fight against fundamentalism for freedom and justice, albeit at a rudimentary level. We strongly believe that these day-to-day protest actions will become more widespread and roaring. The success of this wave of protests requires the rejection of compromisers, traders, and self-serving elements. (RAWA, 2021)



## 6.3 Power of Education as a Tool Against Fundamentalism

The people of Afghanistan must learn from the bloody history, especially the last twenty years, that justice, freedom, human rights, and democracy are not gifts given to them by the foreign countries. These human values can only be institutionalized in the society through the struggle and efforts of the people of a nation, in which case no force will be able to threaten and take it back. (RAWA, 2021)

The foundation of RAWA's feminist perspective lies in the importance of achieving women's rights in Afghanistan. According to RAWA, as long as the fundamentalists and imperialists are in power, there will be no end to the oppression and atrocities against Afghan women.

The Taliban fundamentalist terrorists aim at psychologically beating half of the society's population to pulp through systematic humiliation. As long as they retain political power they will arrogantly question women's human dignity in order to squash and silence any defiant women's movement or voice. In this the most backward country on Earth, the fundamentalists bind the tongues and minds of some 10 million girls and women in the name of the Koran and Islamic Sharia law with unscrupulous use of religion and Kalashnikovs. They well know that religion as a means for intimidation is no less awesome than the gun. (RAWA, 1999)

RAWA's main goal is to fill the education gap that fundamentalists have denied from the Afghan people. Moreover, RAWA counts education to be the most effective tool to increase political feminist awareness among Afghan women. RAWA states that it is "alone fighting for enlightening the minds of people" (RAWA, 2006). Their main goal is to make people politically aware (especially women) and inspire them to believe that freedom is possible from the hands of fundamentalism and imperialism. RAWA believes that without education and

feminist awareness, Afghan women cannot fight for their rights if they are not "equipped with this sharpest weapon against ignorance and fundamentalism" (RAWA, 2006). With the power of education Afghan women's rights could not be ignored by any government in Afghanistan.

As a women's organization we are opposed to violence and believe in human suffrage, therefore we have concentrated our work on increasing awareness among women and encouraging them to struggle for gaining their basic rights. As far as our economical means allow us (which are critical at this moment) we have engaged in organizing demonstrations, conferences, publicity campaigns through our normal publication and also Internet. We have gained experience using these means to deliver the voice of our women to the people of the world and we have had some success in it. (RAWA, 2006)

RAWA states that fundamentalists have always been enemies of the literacy and awakening of women, and fear the power that women will gain by achieving political feminist consciousness. Hence, raising awareness and consciousness of women has always been central to RAWA's feminist thought. RAWA claims that hundreds of women in different parts of Afghanistan have become literate through RAWA's course and are the only teachers, nurses, and midwives in the most isolated provinces. RAWA states "We want Afghan women to gain awareness, organize and become a force against fundamentalist pigs, of the Jehadi, Taliban, and ISIS kind. These courses were established to achieve this goal." (RAWA, 2017). However, RAWA stresses that these actions do not come without consequences: "Our outspokenness, along with our activities in educating and economically empowering women, has put RAWA members at great risk." (RAWA, 2006). By educating Afghan Women, RAWA achieves more active members and people in their public demonstrations to raise their voices.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) believes that March 8 is the day to raise the call for justice and renew commitment to organizing a serious and united struggle of women to eradicate the roots of oppression and injustice in this patriarchal society. So let us not allow the reactionism and imperialism, by taking this day hostage, empty it of its combative content to the point of making a fuss and expressing false love to

women in order to hide their misogynist nature behind it. Let us unite and put an end to gender oppression with progressive and radical demands. (RAWA, 2022)

RAWA stresses the importance of the unity of Afghan women to protest against injustices of fundamentalism, imperialist, and, patriarchal system. RAWA describes Afghan women as "courageous" and highlights how the Taliban is incapable "to hold Afghan women captive in their tyrannical chains like they did under their previous period of rule." (RAWA, 2021). RAWA characterizes Afghan women as having "deep hatred" and even though they are victims of criminals, they will protest and not remain in the role of a mere victim (RAWA, 2021). RAWA claims that the Taliban are on the alert of Afghan women's ability to struggle against its policies.

The repression of women protesters, their captivity and the subsequent forced confession of several women indicates that the Taliban are extremely terrified of the power and political mobility of women and are trying to suffocate their justice-seeking actions by using any fascist and savage methods. But just as Afghan women have borne the brunt of over 40-year war and terror, therefore have a deep grudge against the perpetrators of barbarism and tyranny and will not easily succumb to the pressure, oppression and restraint of Taliban. (RAWA, 2022)

RAWA grounds its resistance movement to democratic elements and justice. It calls "all nationalist, freedom-seeking and revolutionary individuals and forces to join the struggle and use every possible window, even if dangerous, to play their role in healing the deep wounds on the body and soul of our homeland, and to fight honestly to mobilize the masses. Those who evade this vital cause under any pretext will be shamed by history." (RAWA, 2021)

RAWA points out that the struggle is not safe, but the end results are worth it and the only way out of oppression. Even though Afghan women are more vulnerable to the tyranny and oppression of fundamentalists, RAWA stresses then the importance of resistance against it.

Understanding the difficulties and the extremely dangerous path we have taken, as always committed to the uncompromising struggle against fundamentalism and anti-imperialism, we will not neglect to expose the traitors and their pen-men and to inform and mobilize women. Despite the gloomy and suffocating atmosphere of the society, there is no way out of the current miserable situation except the struggle for justice. (RAWA, 2021)

RAWA highlights women protesters being brave and fierce to struggle against the Taliban takeover.

However, the women of our country proved that no force could impose their reactionary ideologies or hold them captive inside their homes. Afghan women made history by raising the flag of struggle against the Taliban and for freedom and justice. Since the first days of Taliban's takeover, these women protested on the streets without any fear of guns or whiplashes; they were suppressed, threatened, and humiliated, but bravely continued their fight. (RAWA, 2022)

RAWA says that despite all the tragedies that have happened, Afghan people have not yet lost hope for the future. RAWA references Meena's saying that "our cries should never be silenced under any circumstances, and if the banner of independence, freedom, democracy, and social justice falls, we Afghan women should break the arduous barriers that face us and attain our rights. " (RAWA, 2016)

## 6.4 Secular Democracy and Afghan Nation

RAWA invites all the Afghan people to struggle against fundamentalist powers, not only women, even though its rhetoric targets Afghan women to struggle. Often RAWA speaks of the "Afghan Nation" and "Afghan people" who are struggling against fundamentalists as united. RAWA believes that Afghan women and men can achieve their rights only through organized struggle. Because of that, RAWA asks all freedom-loving and anti-fundamentalist figures and groups to "prove their pledge to democratic values and women's rights through a practical, unwavering struggle against fundamentalism." (RAWA, 2002). Further, RAWA

highlights that "human rights" should not become a tool in the hands of fundamentalists to polish their outer shell.

The hearts of the people of Afghanistan, like all other peoples of the world, beat for democracy, welfare and progress, and that the Afghan nation will never consent to putting the reins of their destiny in the hands of cretins who believe that schools are "gateways to hell"; radio receivers are "Satan's boxes" and TV sets are "Satan's mirrors"; who warn of blowing up our priceless historical heritage; who savagely and preposterously deprive women of the right to education and the right to work; and who even debar women from going to bath-houses in conditions where these are the sole and only facilities available for personal hygiene! The people of Afghanistan, notwithstanding their agony under traitors and fundamentalists of different hues and denominations, will never stoop so low as to allow their destiny to be shaped by creatures of such intellectual caliber as Taliban leaders who do not know whether the head of government of the United States is a king or a President, or, for that matter, what the different between the two might be! (RAWA, n.d)

## 6.5 Western Women's Rights - a Failed Import of Goods?

RAWA does not think that women's rights issues are separated from other issues in Afghanistan: "RAWA always believes that women's problem is a political issue and we cannot tackle it separately from the current catastrophic political situation. Without the overthrow of the current puppet regime, which is becoming more mortal and odorous than before by the inclusion of Taliban and Gulbuddini murderers, none of the thousands of the problems of our unhappy people will ever be solved." (RAWA, 2010). This view represents RAWA's revolutionary ideal of a secular feminist Afghan state to bring prosperity and peace to Afghanistan.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) on the International Women's Day announces to all the women in Afghanistan that our freedom from the grasp of foreign occupiers, Northern Alliance mafia, vicious

Taliban and other anti-women elements, is only achievable by our unity and struggle. It is impossible that domestic violence, rape, beating, and self-immolation among women be ended by seminars or some discussions of the NGOs. It is only attainable by the organization of women of all ethnic backgrounds and tribes into an anti-fundamentalist movement against the occupation. (RAWA, 2012)

RAWA's mission is to reveal different forms of oppression that Afghan women are facing. In the material, RAWA often repeats the importance that women's rights are only achieved by women themselves, not outside forces. They do not accept the US version of women's rights as legitimate because it has not been achieved by Afghan women themselves. Imported "women's rights" are seen to be vague and not working in practice to affect positively Afghan women's lives. This is at the core of RAWA's understanding of feminism, they do not want imported Western feminism to create women's rights in Afghanistan. Their feminism can be interpreted to grow locally to utilize feminism as a tool to educate women for resistance.

The women of Afghanistan should know that until they do not recognize that their rights have to be snatched with their own hands, they will not witness a better day with the slightest improvements in their condition. We women should get united and instead of burning ourselves, burn the very roots of oppression. Women in no country in the world have attained their rights with the blessings of others, without struggling themselves. We have been experiencing the gifted rights of the US and NATO for the past twelve years, and it has been nothing but enslavement and deception. (RAWA, 2013)

They believe that without women's own struggle against fundamentalist and imperialist powers, emancipation is not possible for women. RAWA believes that given "democracy" and "women's rights" from outside forces are not legitimate. They want that all Afghan women and men would struggle for independence, democracy, and social justice.

Post-colonial feminism expounds on how colonial forces impact still post-colonial countries with a focus on women's experiences. Even though Afghanistan has not

officially been a U.S. colony, RAWA utilizes rhetoric of its action as "imperialist" because of its intervention and neocolonialist agendas. By not accepting the "imperialists" version of women's rights, RAWA's feminism includes post-colonial feminism elements where the social change is achieved by women whom the oppression affects. If RAWA would only utilize liberal feminism which concentrates on fighting only the Westernly understood patriarchy, it would not describe truthfully what Afghan women's life are between double oppression (eg. imperialism and patriarchy).

RAWA wants to truly achieve women's rights in Afghanistan. We believe this is only possible with the struggle of women. The claims of women's rights achievements in the past 12 years by the US occupiers and their puppet government, is another one of the many white lies told. (RAWA, 2014)

## 6.6 Secular Democracy and Feminism

For this purpose, and attaining freedom, democracy, social justice, our people have no other choice but to unite, mobilize, and stage a vast uprising. And naturally the important half of the masses in this uprising will be women. (RAWA, 2014)

RAWA's main values are freedom, secular democracy, women's rights, and the right to education. RAWA stresses that it believes in a true secular democracy with many guaranteed freedoms and highlights that Afghan people are not so different from Western people. RAWA's core values are: "Everyone must respect all human beings regardless of language, religion, race, color, etc. There is no difference between people; no human being is superior to any other because of class, color, language, race, or religion. All human beings do not have to think alike or live the same way. It is to the benefit of society that all human beings live in peace, understanding, and harmony." (RAWA, n.d)

RAWA does not accept human rights violations justified by the name of "tradition". They say the following: "Tradition cannot and must not be regarded as something sacred. Many inhuman traditions and customs have been done away

with throughout historical development. What goes on in Afghanistan -and termed "Afghan culture" by apologists of fundamentalist savagery- are inhuman practices stemming from imposed ignorance. RAWA has never given in to such "traditions" and has always struggled to the best of its ability to have them rooted out in the shortest possible time." (RAWA, 1999). Hence, RAWA can be interpreted to create a modern separation between politics and religions and traditions.

RAWA claims that they are not alone in these beliefs and that there are many people in Afghanistan who are working under the threat of death to make these beliefs into a reality for secular democracy: "We are writing in the hope that people in the West will realize we are not so different-we are fighting for the freedom, democracy, and safety that are the very cornerstones of your existence." (RAWA, 2006). RAWA's values can be interpreted as being Westernized, however, they claim that those are "great universal values" and not only in the possession of Western countries. RAWA's feminism can be analyzed to include liberal feminist elements when, for instance, RAWA describes their feminism to be "democratic feminism". Universalizing democracy and feminism have been criticized in post-colonial feminism theory, however when analyzing the RAWA's statements, RAWA's internalizing of democracy does not seem to be a direct reproduction of Western democracy but rather a particular democratic system that answers to issues in Afghanistan. For instance, RAWA's idea of the democratic system does not allow any kind of fundamentalist powers to exist in Afghanistan.

RAWA has repeatedly and consistently asserted that under the prevailing circumstances no power except the Afghan people themselves can or will succor them against fundamentalism, and there is no precedent in history wherein a foreign nation or nations who have themselves been patrons and abettors of agents of bondage and fundamentalist affliction have granted liberty to a nation held in thrall by those very same agents. (RAWA, 2021)

Whereas RAWA describes its ideal secular democratic Afghan nation, the Taliban and Northern Alliance have considered freedom and secular democracy values as "the western feminist community's own values" (RAWA, 2002). RAWA answers to this criticism:



If democracy and women's freedom are "western values" then why women in the East and especially Islamic countries are not burning forever, in the flames of religion, traditions and culture? Can in today's "global village" these general and grand humanitarian values such as democracy, secularism and women's freedom be devaluated -according to the fundamentalists- as "western values"? In our view as without air life cannot exist, without real democracy and women's freedom, development and progress of a society is not possible. (RAWA, 2002)

This statement highlights how RAWA entangles secular democracy and the emancipation of women to the progress of the Afghan nation. Without secular democracy and freedom, it does not see that peace, justice are achievable. RAWA interprets that democracy and women's rights are not solely Western values, but also belong to Islamic countries to fight different forms of oppression.

RAWA defends itself when they have been criticized for being "Westernized radical" and including "Western values": "Secondly if by being "westernized radical" she means our disunity with the fundamentalists, and our demonstrations and other activities, yes we do have a "westernized radical" approach and are proud of it. We have learnt from the West the struggle against fundamentalism, the vital importance of democracy and freedom, and equality of women." (RAWA, 2002) Moreover, RAWA continues: "It might be favorable to Seema Wali and the like that if they like clothes, computer, airplanes and cellular-phones, would never call them "Western" and throw them away, so they should consider the great universal values such as democracy, secularism and feminism cherished a thousand times more and stop making excuses to abide from the struggle for these values by saying they are "Western". This kind of hypocrisy should be left to the fundamentalists who are interested heartily in receiving weapons from the "West" but seem hysteric against its democracy and secularism. This can be the least example of learning positively from the West. (RAWA, 2002)

## 6.7 Solidarity - a Transnational Connector between Feminist Organizations

If the enemies of democracy and peace unite why shouldn't the anti-fundamentalist and freedom-loving people all over the world get united? Please raise your loud and firm voice with us together against injustice and to defend democracy and freedom. To quote a well known saying, "the silence of good people is worse than the action of bad people. (RAWA, 2006)

RAWA bases its feminist advocacy strongly on solidarity between women's movements around the globe. RAWA's interpretation of feminism leans heavily on solidarity between women's organizations around the globe to connect with similar values and goals. Even though RAWA criticizes the U.S. policies in Afghanistan, it tries to hold solidarity between Afghan women and Western people. This includes transnational feminist elements where states are forgotten and the focus is on the social movements and organizations. RAWA has focused on building relationships with secular and revolutionary personalities, institutions, and organizations around the world. RAWA highlights the importance of solidarity: "These groups have stood by Afghan women in the most difficult times and have supported us in our cry for freedom and democracy. It can be said for sure that without the material and moral support of these conscientious and conscious people, RAWA would not have become a prominent Afghan women's organization in the world." (RAWA, 2020)

RAWA's experience in fighting fundamentalism, particularly during the past 10 years, motivates us to be all the more persistent in our attempts to mobilise women even in the most remote corners of our country. At the same time, we shall not desist from pursuing an irreconcilable policy towards fundamentalism and standing in solidarity with all pro-democracy forces. (RAWA, 2002)

RAWA highlights the importance that every women's movement must defend women's rights and struggle against fundamentalism, imperialism, and secular democracy on their agenda. If not then "the uprising will be "swallowed up by

traitorous rulers" (RAWA, 2022). RAWA's goal is to connect with other women's movements around the world and support each other. RAWA highlights the importance of transnational connections with building a global feminist movement on their own terms with mutual respect. RAWA claims that fundamentalism is a global enemy of all women.

We are not alone in our difficult and tumultuous struggle against the "Northern Alliance" and their Gulbuddini, Talibi and Al-Qaeda brothers. Women of Iran, Kurdistan, Palestine, Turkey, Latin America and other countries are in combat for democracy and against the plague of fundamentalism and war. We sympathize with them and we must assist the movement of women in rest of the world by intensifying our decisive struggle against fundamentalism and their supporters in the region. (RAWA, 2006)

RAWA believes that it is human nature to resist and history bears witness of it.

We have the glorious examples of US struggle "Occupy Wall Street" and "Black Lives Matter" movements. We have seen that no amount of oppression, tyranny and violence can stop resistance. Women will not be shackled anymore! Just the next morning after the Taliban entered the capital, a group of our young brave women painted graffiti on the walls of Kabul with the slogan: Down with Taliban! Our women are now politically conscious and no longer want to live under the Burqa, something they easily did 20 years ago. We will continue our struggles while finding smart ways to stay safe. (RAWA, 2021)

## 7. Concluding Discussion

According to the coding results, RAWA has internalized elements from both liberal feminism and post-colonial feminism to create its own version of native feminism. RAWA describes that it struggles against three types of oppression: patriarchy, fundamentalism, and imperialism. RAWA has created its own version of feminism to fight against oppression coming from multiple levels. Even though RAWA occasionally has liberal feminist rhetorics and has announced that they have been influenced by the Western feminist movement and democratic values, their feminism cannot be understood to represent solely liberal feminism.

RAWA has not adopted Western feminism as "imported" but rather inspired by it, hence creating their native feminism to appropriately fit their local conditions. RAWA refuses to embrace imported liberal feminism to represent issues of Afghan women because it does not picture the same forms of oppression that Western women are facing. RAWA does not compare the womanhood in Afghanistan to be identical to Western women, but rather speaks continually about "Afghan Women's own feminist struggle".

It would be easy to put feminism into a box where it would represent all categories of women from the Western local level to the globe as "global feminism". This only creates a discrepancy in that the reality that the "Third World" women are experiencing is neglected and replaced with Western liberalist feminist realities and values to hold an idea of false sisterhood. This does not mean that there is no "sisterhood" but local differences should be taken into consideration. RAWA bases its feminist ideology strongly on solidarity between women on transnational borders, hence what can be seen as based on "sisterhood" with mutual respect and support.

I have argued in this thesis that feminism should be constructed as appropriate for local conditions and made by its own people who understand the violence and abuses related to these themes. Taking liberal feminism to represent issues of the "Third World" women does not work, and it predisposes easily to the "white savior" complex which is

seen in the development work and with the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan with "women's rights" when local conditions are not enough to be taken into consideration. I view that RAWA has succeeded with its feminist ideology to picture Afghan Women's realities at a transnational level and draw attention to different forms of oppression in creative revolutionary ways.

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