Local-Global Feminist Translation:  
Agency and Temporality in the Liberal Peace  

WORKING PAPER: Do not cite or circulate without permission.

Abstract
The discourse of Western-based transnational feminist organizations (TNFOs) was key in bolstering support for women’s empowerment projects in the War on Terror. I argue that TNFOs’ reliance on a liberal modernity makes their discourse vulnerable to appropriation for goals that transnational feminists themselves might disagree with. I show how transnational feminists value local-global translation, but limit it to a shallow translation of concepts rather than a deep translation of the various forms that empowerment can take. Their starting assumptions are based in a liberal framework that assumes a linear relationship between freedom and time and the ability to convey agency across borders. As a result, transnational feminist discourse makes both direct and indirect contributions to locally ineffective, disempowering projects. I review how transnational feminist discourse was first appropriated to legitimize violence in Afghanistan and demonstrate its subsequent use to promote women’s empowerment. I explain how these projects relate to the liberal peace model and begin to explore an alternative approach to transnational feminist engagement and peacebuilding. This approach incorporates expansive notions of agency and modernity, and could serve as a model for others engaged in peacebuilding and projects that bridge the local-global divide.

Introduction
A November 2001 opinion piece in The New York Times entitled “Liberating the Women of Afghanistan” claimed that “America did not go to war in Afghanistan so that women there could once again feel the sun on their faces, but the reclaimed freedom of Afghan women is a collateral benefit that Americans can celebrate.” The article goes on to detail the oppression of women under Taliban rule, particularly in terms of the wearing of the burka, and optimistically describes the many benefits of women’s “empowerment,” including economic growth, democracy, and religious moderation. US political and military leaders emphasized the empowerment of Afghan women as well, including Secretary of State Colin Powell, who stated, “the recovery of Afghanistan must entail the restoration of the rights of Afghan women. Indeed it will not be possible without them. The rights of the women of Afghanistan will not be negotiable” (Powell 2001).

While the empowerment of Afghan women might be considered a promising byproduct of an otherwise violent and contested invasion, the lack of public support for the war, along with the unclear articulation of strategic and political objectives (Steans 2008), brought the oppressed Muslim woman into focus as a core justification for the War on Terror (Cloud 2004; Kapur 2002). Feminists have pointed to the US government's lack of interest in the plight of Afghan women prior to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as well as the CIA’s historical support for the Taliban regime, as evidence that the cooptation of women’s rights and feminist discourse was a strategic framing of a project with much more nebulous and potentially unpopular objectives (Hunt 2002). Indeed, numerous feminist scholars have

Nevertheless, the notion of women’s empowerment in the War on Terror, specifically in Afghanistan, has loomed large in public discourse over the past fifteen years. The pervasiveness of this women’s empowerment narrative is puzzling, given the emphasis that many transnational feminist organizations (TNFOs) place on challenging the binary that underlies liberal projects such as the War on Terror. In their international work, TNFOs often engage in local partnerships and translation of liberal concepts to result in hybridized versions of feminism that draw on global norms while achieving local relevance. On the surface, TNFO’s deliberate engagement with the local seems like a useful model for other liberal and modernizing projects, but this model has some important flaws that help to explain why TNFO discourse was appropriated in the War on Terror.

In this paper, I argue that TNFOs contributed both directly and indirectly to the civilizing discourse that formed the basis of the women’s empowerment project in the War on Terror. Indirectly, TNFO discourse is vulnerable to appropriation for violent or locally damaging projects because of its reliance on a liberal framework as the starting point. Directly, TNFOs have failed to engage in deep translation of the concept of women’s empowerment. By this, I mean that TNFOs have focused on translation of liberal concepts (how to talk about women’s rights so that they are locally relevant) while largely failing to consider or engage with translation of form (what are alternative modalities of exercising agency for women in the local context). Recognizing and overcoming these obstacles is important for the transnational feminist movement, especially as it relates to gender-inclusive peacebuilding. If they are able to overcome these challenges, TNFOs have the potential to serve as a model for other groups seeking to engage in local-global translation that goes beyond the liberal project.

The paper begins with an explanation of the liberal project, its reliance on a dualistic modernity, and how it manifests in liberal peacebuilding. I emphasize the importance of universal human rights in such projects, and show how these rights rely on the assumption of a linear relationship between freedom and time, rather than allowing for the possibility of multiple trajectories of modernity. Next, I review the principles of transnational feminism and TNFOs’ potential to challenge a linear relationship between freedom and time in their work. I focus on the liberal assumptions of TNFOs and the translation work that they engage in, demonstrating how a deeper translation would challenge the liberal framework by allowing for alternative forms of agency. Using the example of the War on Terror in Afghanistan, I briefly review how transnational feminist discourse was appropriated to legitimize violence, and focus on its subsequent use to promote women’s empowerment for international security and peace. I argue for an approach to feminist

---

1 Feminist scholars have done important work explaining the various forms that agency can take in a non-Western context, including in Muslim societies (Abu-Lughod 1998; Deeb 2009; Khurshid 2015; Mahmood 2005; Rinaldo 2014; Salime 2008; Shitrit 2013).
engagement and peacebuilding that relies on expansive notions of agency and modernity to better promote both local feminist projects and local-global feminist translation. Such a model would increase the effectiveness of TNFO projects while also reducing the likelihood that TNFOs and their discourses contribute directly or indirectly to violent or disempowering projects in the future.

**Modernity and the Liberal Peace**

The War on Terror has often been described as a “civilizing mission,” a project with modernizing objectives. Modernity is a way of understanding both social institutions and everyday life that has consequences from the global to the individual level (Giddens 1991). Giddens and Pierson (1998) define modernity in its simplest terms as industrial, modern civilization. It encompasses a range of attitudes towards the world, including the potential for humans to transform it, certain economic institutions such as industrial production and a market economy, and certain political institutions, including nation-states and democracy. “Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order” (Giddens and Pierson 1998, 94).

While modernity is a global force (Gille and O Riain 2002), it also has a distinctly reflexive, local component, suggesting that the notion of a single, universal modernity that a society either achieves or does not is inaccurate. Giddens (1991) argues that modernity is characterized by “an increasing interconnection between the two ‘extremes’ of extensionality and intentionality: globalizing influences on the one hand and personal dispositions on the other” (Giddens 1991, 1) and that a central component of modernity is the belief that humans can transform the world (Giddens and Pierson 1998). This highlights the role of reflexive local-global encounters in the production of multiple iterations of modernity.

These local-global dynamics involve tensions that can be constraining or can contribute to new and creative outcomes. Modernity simultaneously expands and contracts the possibilities for future projects (like feminist projects or peacebuilding) by simultaneously placing them within a liberally progressive global framework and a locally specific social and historical context. At the same time, modernity is tied to the notion of progress and “seeks to constitute itself through a continuous and unfolding idea of time…. (where) personal liberties are conceptualized within that notion of a continuous and unfolding realization” (Butler 2008, 20). Butler’s understanding of modernity reminds us of the power that hegemonic understandings of progress can have, but we can also imagine how locally-specific values can affect what counts as progress and how that is enacted in a modern framework. Modernity is fundamentally reliant on agency and reflexive participation, and this means that it can take multiple forms and be hybridized with more traditional ways of life and of understanding the world. Scholars have argued that hybridization and translation are especially central to the forms of modernity that appear in the Middle East, where European colonization was incomplete but the influence of European modernization persisted (Abu-Lughod 1998).

Despite the existence of multiple forms of modernity that result from the hybridization of traditional and liberal approaches, the ideal type of modernity is defined by liberal,
Western norms. Powerful international actors approach modernity as a dualistic concept, something that a society has either reached or has not, that it is inside or outside. This decisive understanding of modernity, combined with the belief that those outside of modernity are “uncivilized” and thus pose a threat, is key to justifying a range of international interventions, the emphasis of which range from good governance to human rights, capacity building, and peacebuilding. The liberal peacebuilding model, implemented in Afghanistan and in most contemporary conflicts, is a framework for exporting and imposing modernity in societies that are experiencing violent conflict. As such, this model is premised on the same notions as modernity, including individualism, democracy, free markets, human rights, and justice, all supported by appropriate institutions that can be subjected to the scrutiny of transnational actors who subscribe to a universal normative framework (Richmond 2006).  

**Human Rights and Freedom**

The human rights principles that underlie both modernity and liberal peacebuilding rest on an assumption that freedom increases with time. Butler argues, “a conception of freedom is understood to emerge through time... which is temporally progressive” (Butler 2008, 3). A society is assigned to a non-modern point in time when it is perceived as having less freedom (as defined by liberal ideals), while a society that has achieved a certain threshold of freedom is considered modern (Figure 1). When modernity is defined in liberal terms, failure to achieve the expected standard of freedom places one outside of modern time (freedom is held constant). Alternatively, if one assumes that multiple iterations of modernity are possible, a deviation from the expected trajectory demonstrates a different way of being in the modern time (time is held constant).  

---

2 The liberal peace has been criticized as a top-down, coercive model (Mac Ginty 2010) that promotes the ideals of hegemonic international actors (Jabri 1996, 149). While the governments and international organizations that export the liberal peace typically subscribe to the ideal-type binary of modernity, in practice, these projects undergo varying degrees of hybridization (Mac Ginty 2010).

3 Muslim societies are often portrayed as pre-modern, not yet arrived in our time, or undeveloped (Butler 2008), an argument based on the assumption of a linear progression of freedom and time. Arguments that Islam is incompatible with or even hostile towards modernity originate both within and outside Islam, including in the interpretations of some Muslims of Islam as “unitary, timeless, and unchanging” (Soares and Osella 2009, S2).
Saba Mahmood provides an example of how alternative modalities of agency can challenge the assumption of a linear relationship between freedom and time. Following extensive ethnography among women’s piety movement participants in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) suggested that agency should be decoupled from freedom. She emphasizes that it is “not only the hierarchical structures of social relations, but also the architecture of the self, the interrelationship between the constituent elements of the self, that make a particular imaginary of politics possible (Mahmood 2005, 152). Mahmood’s piety movement participants demonstrate the value of individual transformation and the ways in which the shaping of the self is a pure and meaningful expression of agency. Projects of self-improvement, such as piety movements, may be out of line with Western notions of women’s empowerment, but the conscious effort to align the internal and external self in an environment of complex interplays between tradition and modernity, the local and the transnational, or religion and politics are important demonstrations of agency at both the individual and collective levels.

In summary, while liberal projects reference Western ideas, they are not implicitly Western in their products. The basic premise of modernity presupposes the existence and legitimacy of multiple, contested trajectories resulting from the assertion that the established social order is not implicitly legitimate. Individuals are expected to consider a range of futures, as the cultural projects of modernity rely on “a conception of the future

---

4 The piety movement is a movement in many Islamic societies, concerned with the forces of secularization and Westernization, and aiming to increase the religious knowledge and daily practice/embodiment of Islamic principles and virtues by ordinary Muslims. Piety movement participants strive to embody Islamic virtues in a “teleological program of self-formation” (Mahmood 2001, 833).

5 While Mahmood emphasizes the value of these individual projects, others (see, for example Shitrit 2013, Lahej 2011, Haniffa 2008) have argued that piety movements have the potential to contribute to broader social transformation, including collective women’s rights movements.
characterized by a number of possibilities realizable through autonomous human agency” (Eisenstadt 2000, 3). Western concepts are often hybridized in the process of global-local norm diffusion (Gille and O Riain 2002; Levitt 2001), and the production of multiple trajectories of modernity results from translation, local-global contestation, and hybridization. As we will see, this process of contestation and hybridization is likewise a key component of projects pioneered by transnational feminist groups.

**Feminist Projects: Across Time and Space**

Over the past thirty years, networks of TNFOs and national or regional women’s rights organizations have worked hard to place women’s empowerment on the international agenda. As a result of their efforts, women’s empowerment has become increasingly central to interventions in the global South, whether in the form of democratization, human rights campaigns, or peacebuilding projects. The importance of including women in peace processes, in particular, has received extensive international attention since gender-inclusive peacebuilding was institutionalized via United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325. Transnational feminist organizations (TNFOs) have been involved in both the drafting of UNSCR 1325 and the widespread implementation of gender-inclusive peacebuilding (Hill et al. 2003).

In the context of violent conflict, women’s inclusion is often premised on human rights or instrumental justifications. The rights-based argument is that women’s inclusion is valuable on its own merit, because gender equality is a universal human right and women are half of the population (de Alwis et al. 2013). The instrumental argument for women’s inclusion relies on an essentialist argument that women are different than men, and because of these differences, women’s participation has important benefits for society, such as promoting democracy, peace, and economic development. While rarely mentioned explicitly, there is a third reason for including women in such processes, which is symbolic. The status of women is frequently adopted as a proxy for a given society or community’s placement inside or outside of modernity (Abu-Lughod 1998; Deeb 2009; Soares and Osella 2009). International actors portray women in “non-modern” societies as victims of traditionalism, fueling the notion that the West, having achieved modernity, has a responsibility to liberate women from their own societies. This argument relies on the assumption that men in competing cultures are violent, and women are helpless victims. It contributes to a civilizing discourse that has the potential to be used for coercive or violent projects by governments and other international actors. Therefore, including women in public life where they have been excluded before is a hugely symbolic action.

Many transnational feminist organizations resist the simplicity of the civilizing discourse and strive to understand local conditions and engage in partnerships that allow for the construction of locally relevant projects. In general, feminists have problematized

---

6 Eyben and Napier-Moore (2009) argue that instrumental justifications for women’s empowerment (primarily associated with economic growth) are currently more pervasive than women’s empowerment associated with collective action and social transformation.

7 Transnational feminist organizations are those based in the global North/West that assist women in the global South. These organizations may partner with or provide resources to local women’s groups in less developed countries, and often participate in active dialogue with these groups.
dichotomies, such as man/woman or modern/traditional as reductive, and as “rhetorical devices that serve political interests” (Brohi 2008, 135). Because of their feminist values, most of these organizations are critical of power, and individually or collectively reflect on the power differentials between their leadership and local partners (Thayer 2010b). This results in a sensitivity and openness to local contexts that may challenge liberal, modern ideals. Transnational feminist organizations expand and complicate the range of possible feminist projects by importing ideas and practices, which are processed constructively and transformed for local use (Sperling et al., 2001). This explicit practice serves as an example of the process of translation, contestation, and hybridization that occurs in liberal, modernizing projects. Because of their engagement with the local and resistance against simple binaries, transnational feminists are uniquely situated to challenge the assumption of a linear relationship between time and freedom as this relate to women’s empowerment.

Translation of Liberal Feminist Concepts
The process that many transnational feminist organizations use to navigate local-global differences is referred to as translation. Translation is a discursive process by which local and transnational versions of feminism interact and shape one another, typically favoring complexity over reduction (Thayer 2010b). The translation process is ideally “not just one of ‘diffusion’ of liberal institutions and practices, but one through which the preferences and identities of actors engaged in transnational society can be mutually transformed through their interactions with each other” (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 100). Thayer (2010a) argues that theories and norms must be translated between contexts, since they are rarely sufficient and comprehensible in both. Via translation, concepts that have multiple, distinct meanings in the local and the global context are contested and may be integrated or rejected from local projects in full or in part. Translation is likely to play an important role in the processes of acceptance, rejection, or hybridization of liberal women’s rights frameworks and can significantly shape how global norms are framed and implemented.

The purpose of translation and local engagement is to honor the agency and worldview of the intended beneficiaries of transnational feminist organizations. TNFOs often consider these beneficiaries partners, and translation is a key process for deconstructing power inequalities, challenging histories of oppression, and forming partnerships based on trust and respect. Alvarez and de Lima Costa (2009) argue that translation is “politically and theoretically indispensible to forming feminist, prosocial justice and antiracist, postcolonial, and anti-imperial political alliances and epistemologies” (557-558). The forms of power brought to bear in translation illustrate that agency is both temporally (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and locally specific. It is impossible to understand or measure anyone’s degree of agency without the context of her lived experience, and what counts as choice or a challenge to social structures varies.

---

8 Translation can occur at multiple levels and is both a top-down and bottom-up process. In her study of women’s human rights and local activism, anthropologist Sally Engle Merry argues that “intermediaries such as community leaders, nongovernmental organization participants, and social movement activists play a critical role in translating ideas from the global arena down and local arenas up” (Merry 2006, 38).
In her study of Egyptian women participating in the local da’wa movement, Mahmood developed an expansive understanding of agency, arguing that it must not be understood primarily in terms of those actions that defy social norms, as there are other “modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse” (Mahmood 2005, 153). Such variation illustrates the importance of TNFOs translating not only concepts of empowerment, but also considering alternative forms of empowerment. While transnational feminist organizations work hard to translate the ideas of liberal, Western feminism to make them acceptable or useful for the women they partner with, they are less open to alternative ways that these ideas might actually be enacted in a different context. It is only through this deeper translation that transnational feminist organizations can honor and reflect the nuanced ways in which women exercise agency in a given context.

However, the starting point of Western-based transnational feminists presents an obstacle to successful translation. TNFOs tend to rely on a liberal framework, a rights-based approach to women’s empowerment that inherently supports the linear relationship between freedom and time in liberal modernity. Although many TNFOs value cross-cultural engagement and translation that makes their projects locally relevant and recognize the agency of their intended beneficiaries, the reliance on a liberal framework constrains the success of translation and facilitates the appropriation of transnational feminist discourse for non-translation based, politically-motivated projects. In other words, even though TNFOs typically go to great lengths to translate liberal ideals and expect their projects to be hybridized, others who have access to their discourses will not necessarily do so. Expanding their assumptions of what concepts such as empowerment and agency mean, in addition to what they look like, will not eliminate the need for local-global translation. However, it will facilitate the translation and hybridization process for TNFOs and their local partners, while simultaneously reducing the likelihood that TNFO discourse be appropriated for harmful or coercive liberal projects.

In summary, the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of TNFOs originate in their dual objectives of promoting liberal rights in a transnational context and achieving local relevance, which are often in tension. I argue that Western-based feminist organizations can most effectively promote local empowerment of women by incorporating alternative understandings of temporality and agency into their projects. Feminists engaging in transnational projects must consider alternative modernities if they wish to promote peace and engage in translation work that is locally relevant. This new strategy relies on expanding TNFOs’ starting assumptions and engaging in deep translation of both concepts and forms of women’s empowerment. This shift is especially important in relation to preventing war based on liberal, civilizing missions and promoting effective and locally relevant gender-inclusive peacebuilding.

Eyben and Napier-Moore (2009) emphasize the “fuzziness” of women’s empowerment as a concept in international development. They argue that this ambiguity is a strategic choice, allowing international development organizations to “create and sustain a broad-based policy constituency and to manage conflicts therein” (288). We could explore this variation or fuzziness in the different versions of women’s empowerment that TNFOs present when talking to local partners, supporters in their home country, funders, or political actors.
The Case of Afghanistan

To understand how TNFOs can do better and even serve as a model for other groups interested in the hybridization of liberal projects in recognition of multiple forms of modernity, it is useful to first review how they directly and indirectly contribute to projects that do not entail these objectives. I draw on the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in the War on Terror and the ongoing peacebuilding project there as an example. Initially, Western leaders used transnational feminism as a rhetorical instrument for justifying violence against a society that was viewed as both threatening and outside of the modern context. Numerous feminist scholars have critiqued this appropriation and the TNFOs complicit in it, so I will limit myself to a brief review of these critiques, focusing on how they help us understand the weaknesses in TNFOs’ local-global translation. Subsequently, we see how hegemonic liberal ideas of statebuilding and peacebuilding ultimately served to reinforce certain understandings of women’s empowerment and agency. Afghanistan provides a striking example because it encompasses both an intervention and peacebuilding phase, and the discourse of women’s empowerment has been instrumental throughout.

TNFOs and Feminist Discourse for the War on Terror

While the language of TNFOs in general was vulnerable to appropriation for the women’s empowerment project in Afghanistan, certain TNFOs played a crucial role in garnering public support for the War on Terror by emphasizing the importance of this project. In the United States, the Feminist Majority Foundation and their Campaign Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan has been crucial in championing the cause of Afghan women’s empowerment among a US constituency (see Feminist Majority Foundation 2014a). The Feminist Majority Foundation has been critiqued by numerous feminist scholars who argue that they have failed to consider the historical and geographical variation in the experiences of Afghan women (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002), discounted the role that the US played in promoting the oppression of Afghan women during the Cold War (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Russo 2006), denied agency to Afghan women, painting them as victims (Shepherd 2006), and supported political projects with imperialistic objectives (Russo 2006). The President of the Feminist Majority Foundation, Eleanor Smeal, has responded to a range of critiques (Smeal and Cho 2011), including the Feminist Majority Foundation’s support of military intervention in Afghanistan, which stands in stark opposition to their stated mission to promote nonviolence (Feminist Majority Foundation 2014b). While the Feminist Majority Foundation is undoubtedly well intentioned, their depth and authenticity of their engagement with Afghan partners has

10 Butler (2008) argues that certain types of freedoms are privileged in “modern” cultural contexts, and the state appropriates such freedoms to exclude other, “lesser” freedoms, which are undesirable in that cultural context. In this way, the agency of one group precludes the agency of another group via a hierarchy of rights. In this way, collective rights are constructed as mutually exclusive, and to truly retain their agency, those at the “top” of the hierarchy must be cognizant of the ways in which their own freedom and acceptance into the realm of modernity can be used to justify violence and exclusion. The privileged decide which cultural and religious perspectives modernity includes, and equate “cultural presumption of progress with a license to engage in unbridled destruction” (17). Force is used to impose an appropriate image of the other that then coerces that other to engage with a modern trajectory.
been questioned (Rich 2014), and their explicit reliance on a liberal framework of universal rights made their discourse a particularly useful political tool.¹¹

The discourse of feminist organizations, whether appropriated by the media and politicians or offered directly as in the case of the Feminist Majority Foundation, was used to reinforce prevailing Western notions of Islam as uncivilized and outside of modern time.

“The evocation of liberated Western women and oppressed Muslim women has been useful in the project of casting the United States as a beacon of civilisation and in constructing, reinforcing and reproducing an “us versus them” polarity between the West and the Islamic world” (Steans 2008, 160).

One can argue that the US invasion sought to empower women in order to “speed up” Afghanistan’s progress towards modernity. The project to free and empower Afghan women serves as both an end and means for achieving liberal peace. Empowering Afghan women serves as a justification for violence in the short-term, and if successful, is crucial for promoting Western notions of progress and democratic ideals of freedom, which are perceived as critical for international security. The binaries constructed between freedom/Western women and oppression/Afghan women served to conceal the actual dichotomies motivating the US invasion, namely a struggle between civilized/modern Western men and uncivilized/traditional Afghan men (Hunt 2002).

While numerous feminists critiqued the women's empowerment project in this and similar ways, and others like the Feminist Majority Foundation stood behind it, perhaps the most unexpected and prominent response by feminists in the West was silence. Hunt (2002) argues that silence on the part of the vast majority of American women signaled consent regarding the use of violence for feminist objectives and was in direct contradiction to the image of the free and autonomous white woman, the supposed model for a free and empowered Afghan woman. Hunt argues that, in the US, the Bush administration was able to “embed” feminism in order to pitch the War on Terror as a “civilizing mission” that would empower and liberate Afghan women (Hunt 2007, 52-53). This embedding of feminist discourse went largely unchallenged by TNFOs and Western feminists because it was based in the liberal idea of human rights and freedom from which they start. TNFO’s starting point of a reductive understanding of agency and a linear relationship between time and freedom prevented them from forcefully and cohesively recognizing the imperialistic, counterproductive, and largely dehumanizing nature of the feminist discourse appropriated by the US government in the War on Terror.

Response and Consequences

¹¹ Similarly, Butler (2009) shows how Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan reinforced an Orientalist, rights-based logic that the Canadian government used to justify their involvement in the War on Terror. The organization promoted a discourse that was “at odds with feminist efforts to reconceptualize the gendered nature of war and national identity”, disseminating this discourse not only through the media but also through schools (Butler 2009, 217).
The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), a leading Afghan women’s rights organization, directly opposed US military intervention in both Afghanistan and Iraq, “arguing that their feminist movement does not need ‘help’ in the form of bombs and military occupation” (Cloud 2004), and that the Taliban must be ousted by internal forces (Steans 2008). In other words, RAWA argued that outsiders cannot simply grant agency, and the political struggles of the Afghan people require local resistance. The project of Afghan women’s empowerment was not new, since “Afghan women have always struggled against sexist cultural traditions and misogyny” (Redmond 2011) and there have been multiple waves of women’s movements in Afghanistan. For example, in 1980, when Afghanistan was under Soviet control, thousands of women protested to “demand the freedom of their country as well as their own freedom as women” (Brodsky 2003, 63).

RAWA’s position suggests that the War on Terror’s instrumental use of the empowerment project was violent and ineffective. Such projects can also be counterproductive. By defining women’s empowerment in liberal terms and failing to engage in local-global translation of concepts or forms, the women’s empowerment project in the War on Terror could serve as an impediment to the success of the projects that Afghan women themselves aspire to. For example, the US declaration that Afghan women have been liberated and the exclusive focus on extremely repressive Taliban rule as the primary obstacle that Afghan women face in exercising agency precludes a conversation regarding the complex and comprehensive needs of Afghan women (Berry 2003). In addition to religious fundamentalism, women face economic and social concerns that may disproportionately affect some women, for example women living in rural areas or of certain ethnicities.

In addition, the militarized, violent, and imperialistic strategies associated with Western feminist discourse in Afghanistan might create a backlash around women’s rights in general since it positions women’s empowerment in terms of Western understandings of modernity. Cynthia Enloe (2002) points to the unsustainability of coercive measures, arguing that, “in so far as Afghan women’s rights – including their right to have an effective voice in the rebuilding of ‘post-bombing’ Afghanistan – is tied to the wagon of war (that is, is militarized), those women will not have secure rights. They will have merely rights-of-convenience” (Enloe 2002). In a 2011 press release, RAWA emphasized the continuing struggles of Afghan women, similarly arguing that “war and occupation make the struggle for women’s liberation more difficult... and the insecurity that war foments all force women to focus mainly on the survival of their families, not the struggle for equality” (Redmond 2011). Thus, while proponents of the War on Terror sought to frame their mission in terms of women’s empowerment, by imposing a liberal agenda and failing to engage in local-

---

12 RAWA is a women and human rights organization founded in 1977. Their goals are to assist and empower Afghan women and contribute nonviolently to the creation of a secular democracy (Brodsky 2003, 2).

13 Some people consider ideas associated with secular, liberal feminism an affront to traditional Islamic beliefs and practices, and to existing power structures in Afghanistan. Western models of feminism and women’s empowerment are sometimes viewed as locally incompatible and imposing these projects risks triggering a backlash against advances in women’s rights in any form (Borchgrevink et al. 2007).

14 In a 2012 report from the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, David Cortright and Kristen Wall also argued that a militarized environment precludes the realization and security of Afghan women’s rights.
global translation, this project distracted from and undermined the empowerment projects supported by Afghan women.

**Women and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan**

In Afghanistan, as in many other societies experiencing violent conflict, the international community emphasized the importance of empowering and including women in the peacebuilding process by practicing gender-inclusive peacebuilding.\(^\text{15}\) There is widespread support for gender-inclusive peacebuilding among funders, international organizations, and academics. Research suggests that the disruption of normal social patterns and the shift towards democracy provides an opportunity for changes in gender relations in society (Pillay 2001). The entropic nature of war plays an important role in weakening community structures that support discriminatory practices, while simultaneously creating space for women to try new roles and for women’s organizations to build capacity (Smet 2009). In her study of Moroccan women in the War on Terror, Salime found that liberal feminist groups embraced the “war policy as a valid framework for action” (Salime 2007, 21), and in Afghanistan, women capitalized on this opportunity by mobilizing early rather than waiting until the “post” conflict phase (Kuehnast et al. 2012). This strategy fostered local leadership for women’s empowerment. – For example, women who ran literacy courses during Taliban rule have consistently emerged as important leaders of peacebuilding and women’s empowerment projects (Cardona et al. 2012).

In Afghanistan, the emphasis on gender-inclusive peacebuilding proceeded directly from the justifications for invasion and encompassed the Western understanding of modernity, especially democracy and women’s rights. Women’s inclusion in peacebuilding in Afghanistan was largely symbolic, an attempt to place Afghan society in modernity by forcing women’s freedom to align with the prevailing modern standard. This is interesting, considering that masculinity is viewed as violent, traditional, and generally problematic by the international community in many of the societies, such as Afghanistan, where gender-inclusive peacebuilding is employed, and the reliance on formerly “powerless” women is a rather indirect way of dealing with threatening masculinities. Nevertheless, filled with their (supposedly) newly granted freedom and agency, Afghan women have been tasked with a central (instrumental) role in a long term project of cultural translation and social transformation intended to promote international security.

Even where women’s inclusion is proceeds from a rights-based framework, this is premised in liberal notions of universal human rights. The rights-based approach argues that women should be included in peace talks and processes not because of any inherent or unique characteristic that they embody, but because of the simple fact that they are half of the population (de Alwis et al. 2012). This argument is rooted in democratic ideals and is compatible with the liberal peace model. In practice, it is often combined with the

---

\(^{15}\) It is not my objective to provide an overview of the specific peacebuilding projects that Afghan women are engaging in independently or with international partners. However, others have done so. - See for example Kuehnast et al. (2012) and Moghadam (2005b).
essentialist argument. However, as discussed before, the rights-based approach, since it adheres closely to hegemonic Western understandings of modernity and freedom, might be harmful to local women's projects, especially when these existing projects are not integrated into gender-inclusive peacebuilding. Because of its close ties to hegemonic, Western notions of feminism and modernity, gender-inclusive peacebuilding grounded in the rights-based approach might also alienate Muslim feminist groups and deepen the existing divisions between feminists in Afghanistan, particularly between secular and Muslim feminists. Because gender-inclusive peacebuilding in Afghanistan was a natural extension of the War on Terror strategy, and in fact gender-inclusive peacebuilding was instituted in the statebuilding process before the War on Terror had officially ended, there was a lack of TNFO engagement and the local-global translation they could provide.

This might explain why the condition of Afghan women has recently been framed both in terms of massive success and massive failure. Successes include a constitutional mandate for gender equality, greater educational opportunities for girls, and 28 percent representation of women in the Afghan Parliament (Hendra 2013). In 2007, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) was adopted (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2007). Organizations including RAWA, the Afghan Women’s Network, and the Afghan Women’s Council work with one another and transnational groups to pressure the government and implement women’s empowerment projects throughout the country (Moghadam 2005). Female leaders, like parliamentarian Fazia Koofi, argue that, while the gains for Afghan women fall short of the ideal and are indeed fragile, it is crucial to recognize the many advances that have been made over the past twelve years. Koofi points out that more women are pursuing education, working in a broad range of fields, and moving freely in public spaces since the fall of the Taliban, and she credits these gains to the support of the international community (Koofi 2014).

At the same time, Koofi and others have pointed out that despite their persistence and these changes in formal policies, continuing insecurity makes it dangerous for women to participate in public life, especially in politics, peacebuilding, and women’s rights movements (Cardona et al. 2012; Koofi 2014). Women holding public positions (in Parliament, civil society, and government) or working as journalists face threats, including death threats, on a regular basis (Borchgrevink et al. 2007). Activists express concern that the gains made for women’s rights are shallow (Barr and Gossman 2014) and will not be sustained once international forces withdraw (Donati 2014; Steele 2015). International

---

16 In other words, we must include women because they are half of the population, but the way they should be included is as mothers, healers, community members, etc. – and more powerful roles for women will be largely token in nature, if they exist at all.

17 She makes a key point that international intervention is not inherently bad. Although many feminists rejected the validity of the women’s empowerment project as introduced in the War on Terror, this is not to say that accepting the position of Afghan women is better. In fact, more thorough engagement between transnational and local feminists is what is needed. For example, Moghadam (2005a, 12) points out that in the late 1990s, the transnational feminist movement experienced a “success” when women’s rights under the Taliban received international attention and Afghan women refugees in Pakistan requested the support of feminists around the world. Brodsky (2003, 7) notes that organizations like RAWA are “inside experts” that can teach outsiders about the types of interventions that work best in the local context.
human rights organizations and local activists have noted ongoing threats to the basic security and human rights of Afghan women (Amnesty International 2003; Donati 2014; Human Rights Watch 2014; Mosadiq 2013; United Nations 2014). They stress the systemic and structural nature of violence against women, noting, “those women who overcome powerful barriers and seek redress (for violence against themselves) are unlikely to have their complaints considered, or their rights defended” (Amnesty International 2003, 2).

Even seemingly successful projects have often failed to bridge the local and the national level, or only address the needs of particular groups of women, failing to consider the needs and objectives of groups such as widows, former combatants, survivors of sexual assault, and women displaced by the conflict (Cardona et al. 2012). For example, Afghan women participating in a workshop led by an international organization explained how educated and professional women and girls have benefited from changes in Afghan society since the fall of the Taliban, while women in rural provinces continue to struggle as a result of their gender (Adrian-Paul and Naderi 2005). This demonstrates the challenge of practicing gender mainstreaming in a way that reduces, rather than reinforcing, intersectional and locally specific oppressions. These are persistent challenges for TNFOs, but the failure to engage in transnational-local translation, perhaps because of the militarized nature of peacebuilding in Afghanistan, has exacerbated the problem. Such shortcomings suggest that coercion on the part of Western-led military, political, and NGO leaders to empower local women may have negative repercussions without the important translation work that provides them with voice and agency in the process.

Conclusion: Gender-Inclusive Peacebuilding in the Context of Multiple Modernities
Throughout this paper, I have discussed how Western feminist discourse is tied to hegemonic notions of modernity that assume a linear relationship between time and freedom and employ a reductive understanding of agency, using the War on Terror in Afghanistan as an example. Their starting assumptions leave transnational feminist projects open to appropriation for violent or civilizing objectives that reinforce traditional gender roles and may be locally inappropriate. More directly, the failure of Western feminist groups to engage in deep translation with local feminisms in other parts of the world reinforces their reliance on a liberal framework and means that projects do not consider the most locally relevant forms of empowerment. Because of the reinforcing nature of the failure of deep translation, and because it is the aspect that TNFOs have the most control over, here I will focus on the lessons that TNFOs can take away from the experience of the women’s empowerment project in Afghanistan, particularly for gender-inclusive peacebuilding. The continuing violence experienced by women in Afghanistan casts doubt on the sustainability of women’s empowerment projects when implemented according to Western norms, and transnational feminists and other organizations that work with women peacebuilders abroad should consider engaging with local, context-specific forms of freedom and agency.

Gender-inclusive peacebuilding is a key component of the liberal peace model, adhering to a rights-based understanding of women but enacting projects using instrumental and essentialist language that reinforces traditional gender roles and Western power and values. The liberal peacebuilding model fails to engage with the concept of multiple
modernities, and has been criticized as reductionist, overly parsimonious, and ignorant of the local (Richmond 2010). Women are coerced to fit their goals into existing paradigms if they wish to participate in the peacebuilding project, a huge barrier to agency and local translation. In the short-term, it is tempting to argue that such inclusion is better than none at all or represents incremental progress. These notions are harmful to both men and women, reinforcing the idea that women are cooperative and nurturing, whereas men in these societies, who continue to hold most of the power in the public sphere, are portrayed as shortsighted and dangerous. This orientation reinforces the divide between civilized/uncivilized or modern/traditional societies, with the status of men and women taken as indicative of progress. Women are portrayed as having a longer, more nuanced view of the future whereas men are not trusted to participate in initiatives aimed at a sustainable public good as understood in terms of the prevailing modernity.

If TNFOs are open to alternative forms of agency and types of empowerment projects, they will be more successful both in terms of promoting gender equality and contributing to a sustainable peace. Mahmood’s (2005) example of alignment of the self as a form of agency practiced in Islamic piety movements provides a new way to think about women’s empowerment in peacebuilding. Although Mahmood argues that Islamic piety is incongruent with liberal feminism, Rinaldo (2014) uses the concept of pious critical agency to demonstrate how Islam and feminism can intersect in ways that empower, and indeed are strategically constructed, by women themselves. Rinaldo (2014) argues that Muslim women who engage publicly with religious texts demonstrate pious critical agency, drawing selectively on religious and secular sources to talk about gender. Depending on the views of the women they partner with, TNFOs could adopt either of these approaches as a starting point for liberal-local translation in transnational feminist engagement.

TNFOs should also consider how their work promotes social transformation in unexpected ways, such as by generating resistance, division, or reorganization of communities, or by providing new barriers and opportunities to both men and women. Unintended and indirect consequences are a common feature of international interventions and liberal projects (Swidler and Watkins 2008). For example, Khurshid (2015) shows how educating women in rural Pakistan created new opportunities for these women, but also reified expectations based on gender and class, causing struggles within (rather than against) dominant institutions. The unexpected consequences of TNFO projects can range from harmful, creating new forms of oppression, to positive, generating new forms of agency.

Where liberal norms are viewed as dangerous or imperialistic, TNFOs that fail to engage in deep translation could promote division within the community or violent backlash that places the women they intend to assist in greater danger. In contrast, by promoting expansive notions of agency and modernity, TNFOs could assist in local-local translation that is crucial for creating solidarity amongst women from different backgrounds. For example, such work might help to bridge divides between Muslim and secular feminists in

---

18 The liberal peace model mirrors the core elements of modernity: Western democracy, good governance, human rights, rule of law, and institutionalized, free markets (Mac Ginty and Richmond 2007).

19 For a critique of the use of gender to militarize and culturally “other” Afghan (men), see Pettman (2004).
Afghanistan, whose collective projects could be strengthened by cooperating on shared goals and thinking through the relationships between individual and collective change in an Islamic society. This function is especially important in settings of violent conflict, where gendered violence intersects locally with class, ethnic, and religious divides (Basu 2000).

TNFOs’ efforts to engage in deeper translation in their women’s empowerment and peacebuilding work could serve as a model of emancipatory (Richmond 2006) or post-liberal (Richmond 2010; Richmond and Telledis 2012) peacebuilding. The emancipatory peace “is negotiated and built on legitimacy and consensus, rather than on an assumption of consensus tinged with moral superiority” (Richmond 2006, 393). Similarly, Richmond argues that the post-liberal model requires liberal-local translation, involving extensive dialogue and research, resulting in ideas that can be “negotiated, accepted, rejected, and constructed” (Richmond 2010, 363) by local actors.20 These new models of peacebuilding align with the principles of transnational feminism and its potential for alternative understandings of modernity, temporality and agency.

In conclusion, transnational feminist organizations, many of which are already involved in gender-inclusive peacebuilding, are well positioned to develop the idea of a post-liberal or emancipatory peace in their collaborations with local actors and in their efforts to build positive peace in societies that have experienced violent conflict. Rather than requiring a change in the values and orientation of transnational feminists, this approach would help them to better apply the principles of equality, translation, and complexity that they already hold in their interactions with local feminists, in order to promote women’s agency and empowerment in a locally relevant manner. The principles of transnational feminism, and the deep and sincere wish of most of these organizations to engage in true partnerships with local feminists, makes TNFOs uniquely situated to lead the charge on expanding our notions of what it means both for women to be empowered and to engage in locally relevant peacebuilding work. Moving to a post-liberal model that engages more fully with the local and recognizes the possibility of multiple iterations of modernity alongside an expansive understanding of agency is an important next step for gender-inclusive peacebuilding and women’s empowerment that can serve as a model for peacebuilders interested in all types of issues.

20 Richmond and Telledis (2012) argue that a post-liberal model is especially fitting in situations where terrorism is a concern. In these cases the liberal model, because it relies on universal normative systems and reinforces the state institutions that have excluded terrorists or other non-state actors, is likely to create more support for terrorist organizations.
References


