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Getting Connected? The politics of mobilizing a transnational feminist response to the war on terror

by Krista Hunt

Abstract

This paper examines the essential role that the Internet has played in mobilizing a transnational feminist response to the war on terror. The use of the Internet by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and feminists opposed to the war on terror exemplify the power of this technology to give voice to women who have in many different ways been silenced off-line. This timely case study illustrates how crucial the Internet can be to gain international attention regarding human rights abuses, to solicit transnational support, and to provide an international forum for those who are politically disenfranchised. However, the Internet remains a tool that only women with the privilege of connection hold – a privilege that runs along lines of gender, class, race, and location. As such, the potential to use the Internet to fight for women’s rights must be weighed against issues of unequal access and the politics of knowledge production that structure the digital divide between women. In particular, feminists must resist equating RAWA as the ‘authentic’ voice of Afghan women just because this is the predominant group garnering international attention.

It is significant that feminists continue to stress the importance of the Internet to link women worldwide when the ability to get connected depends on factors like race, class, geographical location, literacy, education, infrastructure, language, time, skill, and cultural norms, in addition to gender.[1] Although they recognize the inequalities that structure access to this global communication technology, Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Taggart maintain “[w]ith regard to political empowerment, information and communication technology is perhaps the most important tool that women have gained since the franchise”. [2] Echoing this, the United Nations has ranked access to information technology as the third most important issue facing women worldwide.[3] For feminists involved in transnational politics, the Internet has the potential to facilitate the speedy transfer of information across borders, make links between activists in various countries, create databases about the work being done in particular locales, and forge transnational coalitions in response to global crises. Arguments that a global women’s movement is impossible without the Internet, or that this technology allows feminists to “work together in more cooperative, crosscultural ways than ever before”, push feminists to examine more closely the potential of this technology for transnational feminist practice.[4]

In this paper, I critically examine these claims about the potential of this technology for transnational feminism by posing the following question: Is the Internet connecting women globally or is this yet another global environment that privileges western feminists? This question

stems from the reality that gaining access to the Internet depends on multiple factors including race, class, geographical location, literacy, education, infrastructure, time, skill, and cultural norms, in addition to gender.[5] According Hafkin and Taggart, ‘more than 90 percent of Internet users are in industrialized countries’[6]. In contrast, they report that:

Most women within developing countries are in the deepest part of the [digital] divide – further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share....Most women Internet users in developing countries are not representative of women the country as a whole, but rather are part of a small, urban educated elite.[7]

As such, this reality raises serious questions about using the Internet to make transnational connections that avoid the divisiveness of having western/elite women speak for all women. Through an examination of the role that the Internet has played in gaining international attention to the situation of Afghan women and mobilizing transnational feminists in response to the war on terror, I argue that the Internet both facilitates connections and intensifies disconnections between different groups of women, leading to ambiguous conclusions about the political potential of the Internet.

In terms of facilitating connections, the Internet has provided a space to contest the war on terror. The use of the Internet by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) and feminists opposed to the war on terror exemplify the power of this technology to give voice to women who have in many different ways been silenced offline. However, this technology also intensifies disconnections. As I will show, the visibility that connected women gain through the Internet can translate into assumptions by themselves and others that they are able to represent/speak for particular groups of women. For instance, while RAWA’s virtual activities have greatly contributed to increased international attention to the situation of women in Afghanistan, their political positions on the future of Afghanistan are not representative of all Afghan women. However, the transnational presence afforded by the Internet has led to assumptions that RAWA is the ‘authentic’ voice of Afghan women since this is the voice that has most often been heard in cyberspace. That western feminists have so readily embraced RAWA must be discussed in terms of the politics of knowledge production. Specifically, when women who have historically been marginalized within feminism gain access to the Internet, to what extent are they expected to act as the ‘authentic native informant’? These issues serve to complicate technotopic claims about the potential of the Internet to ‘globalize’ the fight for women’s rights. As such, this paper explores the potential of the Internet in light of these disconnections.

Facilitating Connections

The use of the Internet by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) illustrates how women in the most oppressive environments are seizing the tools of the Internet in order to make their voices heard and foster transnational alliances in response to the

oppressive conditions that structure their lives. Although RAWA has overcome great obstacles – not only to gain international recognition, but also just to get connected – they represent a very exclusive group of women who have access to this global medium. By virtue of being connected, they gain the ability to circulate information about the condition of women in Afghanistan and disseminate their political positions to an international audience of connected elites – something that almost all Afghan women lack. As a result of this, RAWA has become the ‘face’ of Afghan women’s activists on the Internet, with the power (and program) to speak for all Afghan women.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan was founded in 1977. RAWA founders were urban, university-educated women whose long-term objective was to “involve an increasing number of Afghan women in social and political activities aimed at acquiring women’s human rights and contributing to the struggle for the establishment of a government based on democratic and secular values”.^[8] To this end, RAWA became involved in creating clandestine schools for women and girls, providing health care, and creating income generating projects within Afghanistan and the refugee camps in Pakistan. RAWA’s work continues to be based on the belief that the only way to achieve a stable peace in Afghanistan is to establish freedom, democracy and social justice.

In 1996, RAWA became the first Afghan political group to get connected to the Internet.^[9] However, getting connected was and continues to be no small task. The group learned how to use the Internet from scratch and still relies on donations from supporters to upgrade hardware, maintain their site, and pay for the domain name.^[10] RAWA members based in Pakistani refugee camps have depended on support from administrators in Pakistan in order to maintain their headquarters in cyberspace.^[11] As a result of the assassination of their leader by fundamentalists and the Afghan branch of the KGB (KHAD) in 1987, as well as continuous threats to other members, RAWA operates in secrecy.^[12] They have no official office, the location of their web-server is a secret, and their only headquarters are in cyberspace. RAWA’s activities within and beyond cyberspace are extremely risky; during Taliban rule, RAWA members risked losing their hands for the information they posted on the web.^[13] Thus, RAWA has always struggled to maintain their virtual connections and, for security reasons, to remain virtual.

While RAWA members based in these refugee camps have managed to access the Internet, their members located within Afghanistan itself remain unconnected. Years of civil war have destroyed telephone infrastructure, in addition to the fact that new information technologies are unaffordable for most Afghans.^[14] RAWA reports that only the UN, the Red Cross, and a few other NGOs have Internet access within Afghanistan.^[15] Therefore, RAWA members in Pakistan have to maintain their virtual connections to the outside world and post reports from members in Afghanistan. In order to address the digital divide between its members, RAWA also downloads information from the Internet to print and distribute in refugee camps, as well as to members and supporters within Afghanistan.^[16]

RAWA's Internet activities attempt to bridge the gap between Afghan women and the international community by providing "the only alternative to state-controlled media".[17] One RAWA member states that the reports on their website are unavailable anywhere else "because [RAWA receives] reliable and authentic reports directly from Afghanistan".[18] During Taliban rule, freedom of the press was non-existent, and RAWA's reports "provided the world with some of the only accounts of Taliban atrocities".[19] Since the overthrow of the Taliban, the current Afghan government has created a law guaranteeing freedom of the press. However, the law includes a clause that "bans coverage of 'subjects that could offend Islam,' 'subjects that could dishonor the people' or 'subjects that could weaken the army of Afghanistan'".[20] There are fears that this clause will be applied to limit dissent, fears confirmed by reports from journalists that they have experienced censorship and intimidation from the government about what they write. Therefore, even in post-Taliban Afghanistan, RAWA's ability to provide independent news through the Internet about the situation in Afghanistan remains an important resource for the outside world.

According to RAWA, the Internet allows them to represent the realities of life for Afghan women.

The main reason for having a website is to make people around the world aware of the untold atrocities committed by Islamic fundamentalists in our country....A great number of people from the outside world who did not know anything about the situation of Afghanistan got their first glance of the ugly reality through our website.[21]

Beyond highlighting the struggles faced by women in Afghanistan, the Internet serves as an international forum to expose the lack of support by international protectors of human rights (including the United Nations) and to lobby for international attention to the plight of women in Afghanistan. The website is used to raise money for their social programs, including clandestine schools for girls and mobile health care units, and to lobby the international community to actively work on behalf of Afghan women's rights. In essence, RAWA's virtual activities are an extension of their commitment to "act as witnesses and record what is going on inside the country".[22] RAWA member Sohaila Danish states that "[w]ithout the Web, it would have been most difficult to make ourselves seen and heard".[23] Against many odds, RAWA has been able to seize this technology and use the Internet as "a weapon for social justice".[24]

Before September 11th, RAWA's virtual activities were most effective at gaining international attention from feminists who became aware of the condition of women in Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The Internet served to end the isolation of RAWA from the outside world, allowing them "unrestricted scope for looking around, finding, contacting, and getting to know other women's organizations and sharing our aims and objectives".[25] It has also provided the tools for visibility and open communication – both of which have been severely restricted offline. RAWA's website became their "face shown to the world"; a face that could not be revealed within Afghanistan.[26] That the Internet provided RAWA with the power to expose the

Taliban's oppression of women to a global audience and network with women's groups from around the world shows the value of this technology for transnational feminism. Most importantly, their virtual activities are a means to affecting change offline, both in terms of raising money for their social programs and by gaining international support for their struggle for democracy and women's rights.

Since the events of September 11th, RAWA's website has been bombarded by visitors trying to find out more about the situation of women in Afghanistan.[27] RAWA reports that after 9/11, they received more than 2000 unique visits every day, compared to previously receiving approximately 150 per day.[28] In particular, RAWA's website has provided information to the international public which, until now, had largely been unaware of the situation in Afghanistan. According to BBC correspondent Fiona Symon, "renewed media interest in Afghanistan in the wake of the bombings in Washington and New York has focused attention on RAWA".[29] As evidenced by increased traffic after September 11th, RAWA's website has been used 'to awaken the world to the plight of women in Afghanistan'.

The increased demand for information on the Internet not only increased RAWA's audience, but also made it possible to raise awareness about the effects of the war on terror for Afghan women, the problems with US support for the Northern Alliance, and their positions about how to achieve peace and security in Afghanistan. In addition, RAWA provides the connected world with a very different picture of Afghan women than is available through the news media. In contrast to dominant representations of Afghan women as faceless, voiceless, victims covered by the burqa, RAWA provides the international community with images of Afghan women risking their lives to actively struggle against misogyny and oppression.

Currently, RAWA's website is an important link in an expanding network of feminists who are building transnational opposition to the "war on terror". Feminists from around the world adopted RAWA's pioneering efforts at seizing the tools of the Internet in order to subvert the silencing of dissent in the news media that occurred directly after the September 11th attacks.[30] In response to this political climate, connected feminists have used the Internet to vocalize their dissent about the war on terror. Since September 11th there have been a flurry of reports, feminist analyses, calls for action, and petitions regarding the crisis in Afghanistan and the status of Afghan women.[31] In particular, the Internet has been used to facilitate feminist discussions about the effects of war on Afghan women, the cooptation of women's rights to justify the war, and the necessity of having Afghan women represented in government.

After September 11th, feminists began using the Internet to rally each other to resist the war on terror. The Canadian Association of Sexual Assault Centres and the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies issued a statement via the Internet:

The roots and ramifications of recent global events on our movement are deep....It should come as no surprise that women's groups are among the first to call out in opposition to violent

retaliation to the September 11th events. We wish for no more deaths in the flurry of international unrest....We call on everyone in this country, individuals and organizations concerned about the struggle for equality, peace and justice, the right to free speech and participatory democracy, to link their voice with ours in this critical time.[32]

Canadian feminist Sunera Thobani reiterated this goal to mobilize transnational feminists against the war on terror. Online, Thobani argued “there will be no emancipation for women anywhere until western domination of the planet is ended”. [33] She stated “in the current climate of escalating militarism, there will be precious little emancipation for women, either in the countries of the North or the South”. [34] These calls for action expose the ways that this conflict affects women around the world and serve to mobilize feminist opposition to the war on terror.

After the defeat of the Taliban, connected feminists used the Internet to lobby for Afghan women’s inclusion in the political process. For instance, the Belgian Transnational Radical Party set up a website with the following statement: “[t]he presence of women in the government is a necessary condition – although not sufficient in itself – to ensure the civil, social, human, juridical and political progress...”. [35] They proposed a fast on December 1, 2001 in support of non-violence and the inclusion of Afghan women in the provisional government. The Canadian Voice of Women for Peace (VOW) made similar statements through their letter writing campaign. The letter, which was sent to Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, U.S. President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, stated:

It is unthinkable that Afghan women [would] not be invited to participate fully in all aspects of Afghanistan's recovery. But the record of the Northern Alliance in regards to women leaves little room for optimism that women will be invited without concerted and determined leadership from the United Nations and from all those involved in the present crises. We call on those now involved in discussing post-Taliban Afghanistan to ensure prompt and effective action for the participation of Afghan women in government, in transitional and future arrangements, and in all stages of decision-making in other conflict resolution and peace processes. We reject absolutely that any complexities whatsoever in the Afghan situation can justify the exclusion of women from participation in these matters.[36]

VOW distributed their letter through the Internet and e-mail asking feminist organizations to lend their support in co-signing the letter. Using their virtual connections, the UN Division for the Advancement of Women sent out a call for information on Afghan women’s groups in their efforts to have women represented at the Bonn meetings.[37] During the Bonn talks, the U.S. based Feminist Majority Foundation updated connected feminists about the role of Afghan women in the new government.[38] At the end of the Afghan Women’s Summit for Democracy in Brussels, which produced a list of demands including access to education, information, and the full participation of women in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, the proceeding were posted on the Internet. In the ‘Declaration of Solidarity’, the Summit participants expressed their commitment to “mobilize a worldwide demand for the implementation of the Brussels

Proclamation issued by the Afghan Women's Summit", something that has been facilitated through the use of electronic spaces.[39] Through the Internet, feminists pressured the international community to put into practice their self-declared commitment to Afghan women's rights. In different parts of the world, feminists began linking their voices in support of Afghan women through efforts to lobby their respective governments to ensure the inclusion of Afghan women in the future of Afghanistan.

Following the establishment of the interim Afghan government, the Internet was used to discuss questions of women's representation in the new government. In response to the fact that after the first month of a six-month term Minister Sima Samar had yet to receive office space, staff, or funds to set up the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development has initiated an Internet-based letter writing campaign urging Canadian Prime Minister Chretien and his Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham to support the ministry.[40] Likewise, the Feminist Majority Foundation website posted an e-mail letter urging UN Secretary General Representative to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, to provide adequate resources to the ministry.[41] While Minister Samar remarked that having women in the interim government is a positive development, she also stated that in order to accomplish the work that is needed to improve the situation for women in Afghanistan, "[w]e will need a great deal of support and solidarity from women all over the world".[42]

The Internet has provided an important political tool for RAWA to expose human rights abuses and build alliances within the international community regarding the situation of women in Afghanistan. Since September 11th, the Internet has provided a space for critics of the war on terror to resist their silencing in the mainstream media, expose the strategic co-optation of women's rights discourse to legitimize the war, and call on world leaders to make good on their commitments to have Afghan women represented in government. Feminist responses to the war on terror have been facilitated by Internet technology, which has provided a space for feminists to disseminate ideas that challenge the war on terror.

Intensifying Disconnections

Although the Internet has been an essential medium through which to make transnational feminist connections pre and post September 11th, its use has also intensified disconnections. Through the Internet, RAWA has become internationally recognized as the voice of Afghan women. However, in contrast to assumptions by RAWA and their supporters, the information posted on their website and their anti-fundamentalist, democratic political views are not representative of all Afghan women. The danger of considering RAWA to be 'the face of Afghan women on the Internet' is that this homogenizes Afghan women's voices and political positions and sets RAWA up as the native informant for western feminists. These disconnections complicate easy conclusions about the potential of the Internet for transnational feminism.

Since September 11th, those seeking information about women in Afghanistan have turned to

RAWA. As noted above, in the weeks following September 11th, RAWA's website was flooded by visitors. In addition to this, they conducted over 500 interviews with international media, including *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *the BBC*, and *CNN*.^[43] For feminists in the west, RAWA has become "the voice of the people" and continues to be "the basis of much knowledge that Western groups...have about the atrocities in Afghanistan".^[44] Polly Toynbee points to RAWA as the group that could bring the lives of Afghan women into discussions about the war on terror.^[45] Judy Rebick states that RAWA is "arguably the only credible voice of Afghan women".^[46] Echoing this, Wani Muthiah comments that RAWA is "the most credible organization representing the voice of the Afghan masses at the moment".^[47] International observers turn to RAWA as the representatives of Afghan women and the legitimate source of information about the situation in Afghanistan. As Valentine Moghadam remarks, RAWA has become "the darling of the media and the feminists".^[48]

That RAWA is considered to be a reliable and representative source of information about Afghan women is not surprising. RAWA is a long established organization whose members continue to work in the trenches of Pakistan's refugee camps and throughout Afghanistan, risking their lives in order to educate girls, provide medical attention, document human rights abuses, and find ways for women to support themselves financially. Information about RAWA is also easily accessible to western feminists – specifically because they are more likely than not to be connected to the Internet and that the site is in English. The fact that many western feminists are turning to RAWA to ask how they can contribute, instead of taking up the cause of 'saving Afghan women', is an attempt to avoid the colonial and hegemonic tendencies of western attempts to speak for Afghan women or to presume to know what Afghan women need. Turning to RAWA is considered to be the best way to overcome the problems that have plagued global feminism, especially the tendency for western feminists to embark on colonialist projects of saving objectified, helpless, third world women.

This acute awareness of and resistance to hegemonic and imperial feminism is exemplified by the following critiques of the Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF). The FMF has initiated various campaigns in the name of Afghan women, including a fundraising drive that sold pieces of burqa-like cloth with the message: "Wear a symbol of remembrance for Afghan women".^[49] This particular campaign has been criticized by Sonali Kolhatkar, Vice President of the Afghan Women's Mission, for representing Afghan women as helpless victims rather than political actors. Kolhatkar argues that approaching Afghan women as victims not only overlooks the work being done by activist groups like RAWA, but also exhibits the tendency for western feminists to act as the saviours of inferior, Southern women.^[50] Similarly, Elizabeth Miller condemns the FMF for embodying "hegemonic, US-centric" feminism after an article profiling them was published in *Ms. magazine* (which the FMF now owns).^[51] In the article, the Feminist Majority Foundation is credited for their part in "bringing an end to gender apartheid in Afghanistan".^[52] Miller criticizes the article for suggesting that:

...[the FMF], other Western women, and a handful of expatriate Afghan women have single-

handedly freed the women of Afghanistan from an oppression that started and ended with the Taliban. What is missing from this telling of the “Feminist Majority Story” is any credit to the independent Afghan women who stayed in Afghanistan and Pakistan throughout the 23 year (and counting) crisis....[53]

In particular, Miller strongly denounces the FMF for not recognizing the work of groups like RAWA. Once again, the FMF is criticized for representing themselves as the champion of passive, victimized Afghan women. This representation of Afghan women as victims, rather than activists, not only bolsters Bush’s rhetoric about saving Afghan women, but also reinforces the imperialistic tendencies of western feminism. As Gayatri Spivak states, “[t]he most frightening thing about imperialism, its long-term toxic effect, what secures it, what cements it, is the benevolent self-representation of the imperialist as saviour”. [54] In resistance to the representation of western feminists as the saviours of Afghan women, Kolhatkar and Miller argue that attention must be focused on feminists within Afghanistan – namely RAWA.

However, looking to RAWA as the authentic voice for the women of Afghanistan is not a straightforward solution to issues of representation or the tendency of western feminists to speak for other women. To begin with, RAWA is only one of many women’s organizations working within Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although their connection to the Internet (something that virtually all other Afghan women’s organizations lack) has made them the most internationally recognized Afghan organization, this does not make them the most representative.[55] Fundamental tensions exist between women’s rights activists within Afghanistan. As Fariba Nawa reports,

With little coordination among the various women’s activists, the emergence of a unified, broad-based women’s movement appears unlikely. While united in their concern about the future of women’s freedoms in Afghanistan and their frustration over their exclusion from the ongoing negotiations, Afghan women’s groups are deeply divided on numerous other issues.[56]

There are stark divisions between those pushing for the radical transformation of Afghan society and those set on granting women rights and freedoms without dismantling traditional assumptions about gender.[57] The existence of these divisions between Afghan women’s rights activists indicates the vast differences between Afghan women about their visions of the future for women in Afghanistan.

RAWA’s position that radical change is necessary in order to restore and protect women’s rights in Afghanistan is one that differs from almost all other Afghan women’s groups.[58] RAWA also stands apart from other activists in their demand that all fundamentalists including the Northern Alliance be excluded from present and future Afghan governments. They are one of the few women’s groups working to transform the political situation in Afghanistan by establishing a secular, democratic government. Their staunch calls for an anti-fundamentalist, democratic government has led to critiques of the interim government. In particular, RAWA has criticized

the two women appointed to the interim government because they are closely tied to fundamentalist parties. According to RAWA,

The existence of one or two showpiece women in the transitional administration (one belonging to a party infamous for being a lackey of the Iranian regime [Samar] and the other a former high-ranking member of a party which epitomises treachery to the motherland [Seddiqi]) is more an insult to Afghan women than a symbol of the restoration of their status and legal rights.[59]

RAWA maintains that until there is a government that includes people committed to democracy and women's rights, the situation for women in Afghanistan will not improve.

As a result of their challenges to the political establishment in Afghanistan, RAWA has been accused of extremism. Sima Wali of the organization Refugee Women in Development argues that RAWA is a group on the extreme left of the political spectrum and that their activities and principles are very controversial.[60] According to Wali, RAWA does not “represent the Afghan norm”.[61] RAWA is also accused of creating barriers to solidarity between Afghan women's groups, resulting from their harsh criticisms other women's activists in the country. According to Noy Thrupkaew, “RAWA has denounced numerous other Afghan women's groups as insufficiently critical of fundamentalism. It has also publicly attacked prominent Afghan women activists...”.[62] As such, RAWA is not considered to be a group that can create connections to other Afghan women's rights groups. Wali argues that,

The ability to work with others, build coalitions and use tactics that are in keeping with the more moderate “Afghan norm”...are crucial skills for making the transition from resistance to reconstruction – and they are skills that RAWA seems to lack.[63]

As a result, many other activists are unwilling to work with RAWA and “most Afghan women [do not] feel that RAWA represents them”.[64]

While RAWA member Mariam Rawi admits that they are considered radicals, she maintains,

...but we are the voice of our people, especially the voice of our women. What they feel and what they say is much stronger than what RAWA says. If you go and interview an ordinary woman, whose son was killed by one of the factions, whose husband was killed, whose daughter was raped, who has lost everything, and then was not allowed to have a job, and had to become a prostitute or start begging in the street to survive, what she feels and says doesn't even compare to our position.[65]

RAWA members believe that they can and do speak for Afghan women. According to Sahar Saba, RAWA “represent[s] half of the population of Afghanistan”.[66] She continues, “[w]e believe that the goals we have – the objectives - which are women[’s] rights, democracy and secularism is what our people and our women want”.[67] For RAWA, the capacity to represent

the women of Afghanistan hinges on denouncing fundamentalism in all its forms and refusing to compromise with the warlords. Even though RAWA takes a revolutionary stance, calling for the political, social, and economic transformation of society, they contend that they are the only group capable of representing the views of Afghan women.

These debates highlight the diversity of positions that Afghan women hold regarding political change. Thus, to consider RAWA the voice of Afghan women ignores the diversity of perspectives of Afghan women's rights advocates and the women that they represent. RAWA is differentiated from other Afghan women not only because of their virtual connections, but also because of the fact that it is an organization made up of educated, internationally connected women calling for radical social and political changes. Although RAWA provides transnational feminists with information about the situation in Afghanistan that is otherwise unavailable, it is crucial to remember that women in Afghanistan do not all share their political objectives. Building transnational feminist alliances to contest the war on terror "must reflect the differences not just between women in [the] North and South, but between women *within* the North and South".[68] Feminists must not consider RAWA the 'authentic' voice of Afghan women just because theirs is the voice most often heard in cyberspace.

Beyond the fact that RAWA does not represent the views of many Afghan women, it is necessary to further examine the reasons that feminists in the west have so readily embraced RAWA. I argue that it is not simply a result of their connection to the Internet that RAWA has garnered so much attention. Although their presence in cyberspace has granted them international visibility, this does not account for the political support that they have received by western feminists who have vocally taken up their cause. In contrast to liberal discourse, getting connected to the Internet does not automatically translate into political power and international allies. A major factor that has determined RAWA's political connections through the Internet has been the content of RAWA's positions, and their convergence with those of their largely western audience.

RAWA's voice has been heard in cyberspace, not because of the revolutionary power of the Internet, but because their voices were 'the voice of difference this western audience longed to hear'.[69] For instance, RAWA's homepage states: "If you are freedom-loving and anti-fundamentalist, you are with RAWA".[70] They argue that peace, democracy, and the protection of human rights – achieved through the support of the international community - are the only way to defeat fundamentalism and terrorism. In their appeals to solidarity with transnational feminists, they continue, "[a]s a battalion of the great army of women partisans of freedom around the world, the women of the world will find us at our posts".[71] This anti-fundamentalist stance coupled with calls for democracy in Afghanistan is a position eagerly supported by many western feminists because it confirms assumptions about the oppression that Muslim women face. As Michelle Lowry argues, "Muslim women are often understood by western society and western standards to be oppressed victims of their patriarchal culture and religion".[72] Not only does RAWA's position confirm this assumption, but it also allows

western feminists to avoid making these critiques of Afghan culture, religion, and politics themselves. As a result, western feminists are seen as simply supporting criticisms of Islamic fundamentalism made by Afghan women. By virtue of this, western feminists are able to circumvent accusations of cultural imperialism – criticisms that have been levelled against them in the past.

The result is that RAWA has become the authentic native informant for their western feminist audience. Sherene Razack defines the native informant as someone who represents or acts as a “stand-in” for “women of colour”.^[73] The western feminist assumption that RAWA represents the voice of Afghan women, coupled with RAWA’s eagerness to develop alliances through the Internet with the west, contributes to this status. Razack states that the role of the native informant “is frequently to help the First World engage in a politics of saving the women of the Third World...” whereby western feminism avoids looking imperialistic by “facilitating the retrieval of Third World women’s voices for the sake of global feminism”.^[74] This is confirmed by the fact that RAWA has become the token Afghan voice in a largely western feminist discussion about the situation of women in Afghanistan that has been taking place on the Internet. According to Radhika Gajjala, women and men from the South often use their connection to the Internet to become “ideal native informants for Northern audiences. In this sense, the Internet [becomes] a space for them to perform to the Northern audience and receive favors for appropriately westernized or sufficiently exoticized performances”.^[75] As such, the ability to forge transnational coalitions through cyberspace is clearly structured by issues of access and knowledge production, which serve to shape the sorts of feminist politics that are reproduced through the Internet. These connected western feminists have privileged RAWA at the expense of other Afghan women’s rights activists. This is the context in which RAWA’s voice is heard in cyberspace.

What is debatable is whether RAWA would have garnered as much support by western feminists if they advocated less revolutionary ideas. Noy Thrupkaew and Sima Wali think not. Both argue that RAWA espouses a “very Westernized radical approach” that is particularly appealing to western feminists.^[76] According to Thrupkaew, “for many Western feminists, RAWA reflects a familiar yet glorified self-image: the fiery words, the clenched fists and protest signs, the type of guerrilla feminism that seems unflinchingly brave”.^[77] As Thrupkaew continues, “RAWA reflects much of the Western feminist community’s own values – a fact that has earned RAWA strong support in the West but few friends in a strongly Muslim country weary of political battles and bloodshed”.^[78] As such, the characteristics that make RAWA so compatible to their western allies are exactly what impede their ability to forge broad feminist coalitions within their own country.

This points to the serious disconnections that are being created between women in the South. In this case, privileged Afghan women with connections, not only to the Internet but also to a transnational coalition of feminists, speak for all Afghan women. Although RAWA has gained solidarity from feminists around the world for their political positions, there is little consensus

between Afghan women about what political changes are necessary to secure women's rights. Afghan women have criticized RAWA for their close relationship with western feminists. They have also criticized western feminists for failing to listen to the voices of other Afghan women. In order to rectify this, Thrupkaew and Wali argue "Western feminists need to support, fund and take their cues from the other 'moderate...diverse voices of Afghan women,' and keep the pressure on their own governments".[79] Opening up this debate to include the voices of unconnected Afghan women's rights activists would obviously necessitate going beyond the limits of cyberspace. As such, RAWA's use of the Internet for cyber-politics serves, on the one hand, to facilitate connections transnationally, and on the other, to intensify disconnections between Afghan women beyond cyberspace. It is necessary to be extremely aware of the political effects of these cyber-connections. In certain cases, the disconnections may outweigh the political connections that the Internet enables. The Internet's role in the fight against oppression depends on its ability to not only bring feminists together in cyberspace, but also beyond.

Conclusion

As this examination shows, the use of the Internet to generate transnational opposition to the war on terror has both facilitated connections and intensified disconnections between different groups of women. Thus, it is important to return to the question raised at the beginning of this paper: Is the Internet connecting women globally or does this medium privilege certain groups of women? What this particular case illustrates is that the answer is more complicated than the question.

With RAWA and their allies opposition to the war on terror as the case study, I have argued that connected women are using the Internet to make crucial transnational connections, to subvert the silencing of dissenting voices, and to organize against gender-based oppression. These connections have been essential in gaining international attention to the situation of Afghan women, getting feminists in other parts of the world to initiate campaigns against these human rights abuses, and to make connections with other people who oppose the war on terror.

However, the ability to gain a voice through the Internet translates into the power to produce knowledge and direct political action in ways that reflect the agenda and priorities of those with connection. Just as western feminists have been criticized for speaking for non-western women, connected feminists must also confront the problems associated with presuming to represent the experiences and positions of all women. While RAWA has been successful at appropriating Internet technology in order to gain international attention to the abuses against women in Afghanistan, they have used this technology to promote their political agenda – one that does not represent the priorities of many Afghan women. That RAWA is privileged with the power of connection in a way that many feminist organizations in both the first and third worlds are not is particularly relevant when assessing the ability of using the Internet for transnational feminism.

In complex and contradictory ways, the political positions that connected feminists can vocalize

through the Internet are both discourses of those silenced in the mainstream media and those privileged enough to 'get connected'. Yet there are additional power dynamics at work that relate to knowledge production between western and non-western women. RAWA has certainly gained a voice in cyberspace and the power to speak for all Afghan women, and as a result, is considered by feminists outside Afghanistan to be the authentic native informant. RAWA's role as the authentic voice of Afghan women is essential to legitimizing western feminist involvement in political campaigns for Afghan women's rights. As seen in the example of the Feminist Majority Foundation, not including a voice of Afghan women – namely RAWA – results in accusations of practicing western, imperialist feminism. As such, RAWA legitimates these transnational coalitions as they stand in as the voice of difference. RAWA has not only taken it upon themselves to act as the representatives for all Afghan women, but they have also been encouraged by western feminists to do so. That RAWA espouses a commitment to eradicating fundamentalism and calling for democracy in Afghanistan situates this group as, although 'different', similar enough in their political beliefs to make alliances with western feminists much easier to build. These particular connections and disconnections nuance conclusions that the Internet is simply a medium used by western feminists, while highlighting the ways that western voices and perspectives – as well as those considered to be westernized - are most often heard in cyberspace.

Notes

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[3] Poverty and violence against women rank first and second. Hafkin and Taggart 6.

[4] Following Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, transnational feminist practices/transnational feminism does not denote feminism free of the power dynamics of global feminism. Rather, it refers to feminist projects that address globalized processes of power and oppression that operate across nations, with specific attention to how these processes reinforce and intensify inequalities between diverse groups of women. See Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 'Postcolonial Studies and Transnational Feminist Practices,' *Jouvert* 5.1 (Autumn 2000) <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5i1/grewal.htm> (1 October 2004). Sharon Hackett, "Why Surf When We Can March?," *Womenspace Listserve*, womenspace@yorku.ca (6 June 2000); Patti Whaley, "The Public Forum: Potential Contributions of Information Technologies to Human Rights," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, 19:1 (1996) 228.

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[14] For instance, sending a one-page fax abroad costs \$30 US, which is the average monthly salary of an Afghan family. RAWA, "Re: Interview Request," rawa@rawa.org (13 February 2002).

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[18] Howell <http://www.rawa.org/aboutcom.htm>.

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[23] Richtel <http://rawa.org/yahoo.htm>.

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[25] Howell <http://www.rawa.org/aboutcom.htm>.

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