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Telling NATO's story of Afghanistan: gender and the alliance's digital diplomacy

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Abstract: NATO's public diplomacy plays an important role in constituting the alliance's identity in global politics, yet has remained marginal to many scholarly accounts of the alliance. This article considers NATO's increasing footprint in digital diplomacy and the role of gendered narratives in shaping it. The central point of analysis is NATO's 'story of Afghanistan', told in the web-documentary *Return to Hope*, which was released to much acclaim in September 2014 to coincide with the drawdown of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan. It finds personal narratives given precedence over historical events, key temporal omissions and the silencing of Afghan women. As such it provides an important critique of the masculinist protection logic underpinning NATO's efforts, which has served to instrumentalise (Afghan) women and falls short of expectations given the alliance's commitment to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Key words: NATO, digital diplomacy, Afghanistan, gender, UNSCR 1325, women

In September 2014 NATO released an interactive web-documentary, titled *Return to Hope*, which was simultaneously supported by social media content on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The documentary was released to mark the draw down of NATO troops from Afghanistan and sought to tell 'NATO's story' of the country (NATO, 2014b). It represented a move to a more sophisticated engagement with the web by the alliance, which had previously

been described, by former NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (2007), as being in the 'stone age' when it came to digital diplomacy. Such a development echoed a wider engagement with digital platforms across NATO member and partner states militaries, making it a now common phenomenon (Crimley 2016: 51).

This article uses Return to Hope as a site for analysis of the gendered nature of NATO's digital diplomacy in respect of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) intervention in Afghanistan. The article makes two key contributions. Empirically, it contributes the first in-depth case study of the alliance's approach to digital diplomacy in Afghanistan. This is important because although the use of digital diplomacy by state military actors has received increasing scholarly attention, NATO has remained under examined and provides an important site for understanding the regional context. Theoretically, it draws attention to the importance of a gender sensitive framework for studying public diplomacy in order to uncover the way in which hegemonic power structures are constituted through both the elevation, and marginalisation, of gendered narratives concerning both 'low' and 'high' politics. In so doing it also makes a key contribution to emerging feminist knowledge of the alliance. As the article goes on to argue, Return to Hope is underpinned by a masculinist protection logic, which marginalises Afghan women's stories and agency, and belies NATO's stated commitment to the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda.

NATO's engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda

The nature of NATO's commitment to the WPS agenda, encapsulated in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and the seven follow-up resolutions, is important to understand when analysing the alliance's approach to digital diplomacy. The WPS agenda has been perceived as a 'feminist achievement' (Cockburn, 2011), given its aspirations and the role of

feminist actors in realising its adoption by the Security Council. It recognised for the first time that gender is of relevance to the maintenance of international peace and security; including a need to improve the participation of women, while also acknowledging the disproportionate impact of conflict on women. NATO adopted its first policy on WPS in 2007 (NATO, 2007), and in recent revisions the Public Diplomacy Division has been given a role in the alliance's implementation of the agenda. However, until the 2016 revision of the policy, this limited the role of the Division to increasing the visibility of NATO's engagement with the WPS agenda, rather than seeking to mainstream gender perspectives into the alliance's public diplomacy initiatives (NATO 2016; NATO 2014a; NATO/EAPC 2014; NATO 2011). Thus for the time period when *Return to Hope* was produced WPS served an instrumental purpose as a public diplomacy tool, rather than as a means to support the increased representation of women.

A significant body of feminist work has examined the implementation of the WPS agenda across the globe, yet until recently NATO has been omitted from such analysis. In part, this is because feminist IR more broadly is grounded in pacifism, which has meant feminist scholars, such as Cockburn (2011), assume that the only outcome of NATO's adoption of UNSCR 1325 can be a co-option of the agenda, thus failing to account for the possibility of other outcomes. This is not to say that feminist scholars have not sought to challenge this notion and use the military as a site of analysis, Duncanson (2013: 18), for example, examines feminist debates about how militaries and soldiers can be used to support peace. However, attempts to conceptualise a feminist theory of NATO have to date been temporally fragmented, and only recently has a sustained feminist scrutiny of the alliance begun to emerge (Enloe, 1981, 1983; Hurley, 2016; Wright, 2016). This article contributes to that body of work with a consideration of the gendered nature of NATO's digital diplomacy.

Gendering NATO's digital diplomacy

The gendered underpinnings of NATO's approach to public diplomacy are nothing new. For example, in the 1960s, NATO produced a propaganda movie called *The Atlantic Decade* warning of the dangers of Soviet expansion and specifically targeting women, with the narrator introducing Turkey by saying 'here too women have been liberated' (Risso 2009: 509). Today, NATO's approach to public (and now digital) diplomacy continues to be underpinned by narratives, whether they concern individuals, states or the alliance itself. As Wibben (2010: 43) argues, narratives are political, they enable and limit representation and these representations shape our world and the possibilities within it, challenging the link between 'experience, meaning, and knowledge'. A narrative approach is a useful means to challenge traditional conceptions of security concerned with creating meaning and imposing value in what is viewed as an 'anarchic world' because it makes 'explicit the operation and production of particular kind[s] of meaning, and... draw[s] out the implications this understanding has for human existence' (Polkinghorne 1988: 16 quoted in Wibben 2010: 44). A deconstructive approach necessitates consideration of the way they are 'read, understood and located institutionally' because, for example, the existence of narratives of women in the third world does not necessarily equate to a challenge to established hegemonic histories and their subjectivities (Mohanty, 1991 quoted in Cooke, 1996: 292).

The mediatisation of war means that the 'delocalised world' of TV, newspapers and the internet is where battles over 'legitimacy, effectiveness and consequences are fought' (Behnke, 2002: 198). Therefore, understanding NATO's engagement with digital diplomacy and the narratives which underpin it is important, yet NATO's public diplomacy efforts have been left on the margins of scholarly analysis of the alliance. This is significant given that, as Ringsmose and Borgesen (2011: 524) argue, in a world of international cooperation and international media,

national narratives are not formed in a vacuum. It also leaves work on the use of strategic narratives by both governments (Ringsmose and Børgeesen, 2011; Jakobsen and Ringsmose, 2015) and militaries (Crisley 2015; 2016) separated from the wider regional security context. The use of digital platforms by governments and military actors is on one level an attempt to engage the media and at its most successful this can contribute to the formation of successful strategic narratives, which turns the media into a 'conveyor belt transmitting elite cues to the public' (Jakobsen and Ringsmose, 2015: 217). However, it can also be viewed as a means to circumnavigate the traditional dissemination of information through the media in order to engage directly with consumers (Crisley 2016: 55). The remit of NATO's Public Diplomacy Division supports both of these purposes, with the division tasked with complementing information activities within each member state and addressing issues related to the public perception of the alliance (Public Diplomacy Division, 2006: 333).

The recalibration of NATO's public diplomacy to engage with digital platforms came in part as a result of the NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan and the Taliban's ability to grab both the Afghan and international media's attention with civilian casualty numbers (Betz, 2011: 622). To address this issue, NATO created a specific media centre hosted in Afghanistan, the web-based NATO TV platform, and appointed Michael Stopford as Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Strategic Communication. Stopford had been credited with bolstering Coca-Cola's image and reputation in his previous role as an executive for the company (Castle, 2008). This resulted in a change in NATO's approach to public diplomacy through a shift to direct engagement with publics through digital platforms.

The alliance now has a significant digital presence across multiple social media platforms, for example, NATO TV (now hosted on YouTube) features short explanatory clips on NATO,

NATO's military capabilities and short documentary style stories, including on Afghanistan. NATO TV provides a useful insight into NATO's approach to digital diplomacy, and while the primary video featured on the channel is one detailing what NATO is and why it exists, the three most viewed videos across the site are on ballistic missile defence, female prisoners in a prison in Herat and the food scene in Kabul (NATO, 2017). This demonstrates that NATO's digital diplomacy strategy is not just concerned with selling NATO and NATO's 'hard power' but has utilised more contextualised narratives to inform outreach initiatives. It also draws attention to the way gender narratives are utilised to support NATO's digital diplomacy strategy.

The prominence given to women's stories on the YouTube challenge has been the subject of critique, this concerned the alliance's apparent 'failure' to explicitly link a video showing Afghan women voting in the 2015 presidential election to the alliance's ('hard power') actions to support this (Seib, 2014: 98). However, this analysis misrepresents the purpose of NATO's public diplomacy, where in respect of public information campaigns the intention is not to sell 'hard power', nor to engage in promoting the alliance to individuals already supportive of its agenda but rather to permeate a wider audience¹. In relation to public diplomacy campaigns linked to NATO enlargement in Central Europe, this was also evident, with discussions of

¹ Measuring the success of digital diplomacy initiatives is a challenge, particularly as NATO does not release audience data, but the fact that governments and NATO continue to support them indicates they see value in them. The most popular videos on NATO's YouTube channel have received over 300,000 views (NATO 2017), however, it would be difficult to reliably ascertain what audience was being reached given that social media relies on users to populate their personal data.

NATO framed ‘around the notions of rights, peace, culture, and values’, rather than defence (Kuus 2007: 271). As NATO’s Head of Communication has stated, the intention of such content is for individuals to be drawn to it not because it is about NATO, but because of the issue it addresses (Inside Agency, 2014). In applying feminist analysis it is possible to see how gender narratives are instrumentalised by the alliance to support (in this case) a tacit association of NATO with women’s rights. This in turn reinforces the secondary justification underpinning the war in Afghanistan, that the action was taken in order to liberate Afghan women (Shepherd, 2006).

The (continued) instrumentalisation of (Afghan) women

Afghan women have been central to Western involvement in Afghanistan, far predating the 2001 intervention. Efforts to ‘modernise’ women’s status in Afghanistan go as far back as the early twentieth century (Kabeer and Khan, 2014: 5). However, the Western approach to Afghan women has been far from consistent, underscoring its instrumentality. For example, during the rise to power of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul and the subsequent Soviet occupation (1979-1989) efforts were made to emancipate women (Kabeer and Khan, 2014: 1). At this time, the US conveniently left women’s rights off the agenda in formulating its opposition to Soviet actions, although the US was drawing upon women’s rights to oppose other regimes at the time (Enloe, 1989: 57). The selective and instrumental use of women’s rights in US foreign policy, was reinforced when the US-backed mujahidin came to power in Afghanistan in 1992 and ushered in one of the worst periods of human rights abuses the country had seen. The subsequent overthrow of the mujahidin in 1994 by the Taliban led to severe restrictions on women’s rights, including to movement, work and education (Kabeer and Khan, 2014: 2). As Kandiyoti (2007: 505) argues, women’s rights have ‘become implicated in the geopolitical

manoeuvrings of powerful global actors’ and this makes the invocation of the ‘principled politics solidarity’, which has emerged in the War on Terror, extremely problematic.

The discourse surrounding the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, and subsequent NATO-led ISAF operation has been noticeably gendered. As Messerschmidt (2016: 167) identifies, Bush and Obama drew on a masculinist protection logic in their articulations of the War on Terror, which constructed a particular gendered villain-victim-hero discourse in order to gain support for their actions both globally and regionally. Their speeches constructed the hero-villain relationship as unequally gendered, with the hero – the US - occupying a hegemonic masculinised position as ‘civilised, virtuous, just and peaceful’; while the subordinate masculinised villain – the Taliban - was ‘uncivilised, cruel, unjust, and violent’. In contrast, all ‘other’ people in the world were feminised, framed as ‘passively dependent, innocent, uniformed, vulnerable and unable to protect themselves’ (Messerschmidt 2016: 169). Feminine subordination in the masculinist protection model is not submission, rather it is undertaken willingly, with adoration expressed for the protector (Young 2003b: 3). This saw Afghan women framed as victims and as such in need of rescue, along with the rest of the world.

In November 2001, Laura Bush made history when she became the first First Lady to give the President’s radio address, shortly after the start of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom intervention in Afghanistan. She drew heavily on the experiences of Afghan women in making her case in support of the intervention:

Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror -- not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us (Bush, 2001).

The address invoked the emancipation of Afghan women as supplementary to the primary justification that the intervention was a necessary defensive action to protect American people following the attacks of 9/11 and was framed around the masculinist protection logic. As Cooke (2002: 485-486) points out the rationale presented was that to ‘defend our universal civilisation we must rescue the women. To rescue these women we must attack these men; These women are to be rescued not because they are more “ours” than “theirs” but rather because they will have become more “ours” through the rescue mission.’

Following the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, women became beneficial not just in rhetoric but in both doctrine and practice to population centric counter-insurgency (Dyvik 2013: 412). This was most visible in the military’s use of Female Engagement Teams (FETs) intended to engage local populations. FETs both mirrored essentialised notions of women as peaceful and instrumentalised gender as a ‘new strategic asset’, enabling women to engage in the post-9/11 masculinist protectionist narrative (Pratt, 2013:778). The gendering of counterinsurgency also served to demonstrate that the US was ‘no longer fighting its new battles with outmoded methods’ (Mcbride and Wibben, 2012: 200). FETs were a new initiative but as one member of a FET later reflected ‘we were tourists, unable to solve problems with units that changed every 12 months. Everything was temporary, except Afghanistan’ (Pope, 2016).

The preoccupation of the Western interveners with ‘rescuing’ Afghan women has both imperialist undertones and political implications (Khan, 2013: 105). The centrality of Afghan

women to the NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan has pervaded every element of the intervention, with public diplomacy and strategic communication no exception. This is exemplified in a classified CIA document released through Wikileaks (2010) which notes:

Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role in combating the Taliban because of women's ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences under the Taliban, their aspirations for the future, and their fears of a Taliban victory. Outreach initiatives that create media opportunities for Afghan women to share their stories with French, German, and other European women could help to overcome pervasive scepticism among women in Western Europe toward the ISAF.

There are parallels between the CIA statement and the strategy later pursued in *Return to Hope*, as this article goes onto discuss. The important point to note here is that this draws attention to a paradox in Western approaches to Afghanistan, where the 'the over-determination of gender in addressing [or instrumentalising] the suffering of Afghans has led to an impasse, thereby creating the conditions of impossibility for acknowledging this very suffering' (Daulatzai 2008: 428).

There is a further cost to focusing on Afghan women to explain 'the people, the land, and the nation-state of Afghanistan' (Mackie 2012: 118), it means that they can only be perceived as women in Afghanistan and are denied agency. Moreover, the focus on Afghan women as victims of their culture makes a spectacle of them and intensifies stereotypes about the Third World, and in particular, Islam (Khan, 2013: 107). As Butler (2004: 143) argues it is necessary to exercise caution before championing the 'liberated' faces of Afghan women and 'to ask in what narrative function these images are mobilised' (Butler, 2004: 143). In doing so, it is possible to uncover the contradiction between the apparent humanisation of these women and

their simultaneous dehumanisation through the denial of their experience of decades of suffering in conflict. These same considerations need to be applied to the use of Afghan women's stories by NATO.

NATO's story of Afghanistan: Return to Hope

Fifteen years prior to the production of *Return to Hope*, NATO's public diplomacy strategy in Kosovo drew on narratives and metaphors which served to move responsibility away from NATO for the death and destruction, and to designate Milosevic as 'evil', thus upholding NATO's moral legitimacy as the enforcer of humanitarian values (Behnke 2002: 136). *Return to Hope* offers an interesting analogy to this in respect of Afghanistan, however, unlike NATO's real time response to the unfolding events in Kosovo, the documentary offers a static reflection to commemorate NATO's 'journey' in Afghanistan. The analysis presented here interrogates the tropes used to confer NATO's moral legitimacy, including the designation of the Taliban as 'evil' through the use of select gendered narratives, and the articulation of a masculinist protection logic.

Return to Hope is a web-documentary, primarily hosted on a website but with components also shared on social media, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, making it both flexible and adaptable as a digital diplomacy tool to tell NATO's story of Afghanistan. The documentary represents a sophisticated use of the web, utilising web 2.0 to best effect. It has its own URL (www.returntohope.com) and is not immediately identifiable as a NATO project beyond the full title appearing briefly as the loading video plays: 'Return to Hope: NATO's Journey in Afghanistan'. The distinctive blue NATO logo has been shrunk and toned down to a muted sand colour to complement the dusty pictures of Afghanistan in the background, and the 'compelling human stories' told by six individuals take prominence (NATO, 2014b). The story presented is largely a homogenised 'NATO' experience, although where NATO soldiers are

featured they are predominantly American, except for under the section titled 'The Fight', which details individual state contributions.

The focus on using individual stories draws parallels with the leaked CIA memo discussed above which called for a strategic communication programme to engage publics back home through the stories of Afghan women (CIA [Wikileaks], 2010). As Chris Riley, Principal Editor in the Public Diplomacy Division explains the intended audience for Return to Hope was:

not Afghanistan followers, they're not experts, and they're not people who are necessarily politically active. They [the intended audience] are those people who may have seen that Afghanistan has been on the news over the last few years and maybe have a vague view but are interested in personal compelling stories and that through that storytelling we interest them in the subject (Inside Agency, 2014).

The focus of NATO's efforts are therefore on storytelling, rather than in engaging in broader debates about Afghanistan among people knowledgeable of the country. This supports NATO's contention that successful digital content builds an emotional connection with the consumer (Voves, 2015). The story the Public Diplomacy Division identifies that people will care about is not one of the 'high politics' of ISAF, nor of NATO's 'hard power' military capabilities but that of six individuals. In this respect it is 'NATO's story' only in the sense that it is NATO dictating the parameters of the narrative.

The stories of the six individuals featured on the landing page are the focus of the documentary, they have either lived or served in Afghanistan, their stories are not told on their own merit but included because they can be related to the broader narrative surrounding NATO's involvement in Afghanistan. The first three individuals featured are: Nancy Dupree, the 'Grandmother of Kabul', an American who moved to Afghanistan with her husband in the 1960s; Josh Pitcher, 'The Wounded Warrior', an American hero who made a miraculous recovery after being

injured in service; and Roya Mahboob, 'The Entrepreneur', who returned to Afghanistan after her family fled Taliban rule. The next three are: Ahmad Sarmast, 'The Music Maker', an Afghan who left the country in the 1980s and was unable to return when the Taliban took power; Mohammad Ali, 'The Commando', part of an elite unit in the Afghan army; and Mujeeb Arez, 'The TV Star', who had lived in Kabul under the Taliban. All the individuals' stories have one thing in common, their lives changed when they encountered the 'evil' Taliban. For the Afghans featured this meant either leaving their country and seeking refuge in neighbouring states or lying low until it was safe to resume their lives in Afghanistan (following the 2001 intervention), serving to support NATO's role as a masculinist protector.

The American soldier's story is presented differently from the others, beginning with the heroic triumph of his exceptional return to the field after a life-changing injury at the hands of the Taliban. As his story narrates: 'Lieutenant Josh Pitcher was not most soldiers. Quitting wasn't an option for him – he never allowed himself to consider it for a moment' (NATO, 2014b). Pitcher's return to duty is seen as 'exceptional even for a soldier' and he is described as a 'stronger, fitter, better soldier' as a result of losing his foot. The presentation of Pitcher's story reinforces the notion that military masculinity is as much about performance, as it is about action (Partis-jennings 2017: 3). The masculinised heroic qualities he is framed as embodying construct a particular form of masculinist protector logic. We are told that Pitcher remains focused on his mission and ensuring the safety of his men, in spite of his life changing injury. He is framed as a hero who has the agency to change his situation and to triumph over the villainous Taliban.

The personal triumph narrative underpinning Pitcher's story stands in contrast to Roya Mahboob, Ahmad Sarmast, Mohammad Ali and Mujeeb Arez's stories, where they are denied

agency – their latter success is predicated upon the Western intervention in Afghanistan. As Ali's story tell us:

The Taliban was now in control. Although things were relatively calm, Mohammad Ali remembers it as a dark time, both for his own family and for the country as a whole. But dark times were nothing new for Afghanistan. Before the Taliban came to power there had been the civil war. Before the civil war there had been the Soviet occupation. [emphasis in original] (NATO 2014b)

Here the hero-villain-victim relationship, also evident in Bush and Obama's speeches, is articulated, with the villain masculinity subordinate to that of the hero (Messerschmidt 2016: 169). The hero, NATO, has freed the victims, Afghan people, from the villain, the Taliban, but also from themselves. Western intervention is presented as a necessary civilizing mission to enable Afghans to gain control of their lives, which it is tacitly implied they are incapable of doing themselves.

A timeline of progress

In addition to the individual stories featured, a timeline is included among the nine thematic chapters. This seeks to place NATO's intervention in temporal perspective and suggests progression, so its inclusion warrants an examination from where, and to what end. The timeline dates back to the 1973 coup overthrowing King Zahir Shah and thus represents a significantly condensed history of Western involvement in Afghanistan. For example, there is no reference to the British wars in Afghanistan dating back to 1839. The next date featured is 1978, which is described in just two sentences: 'Saur Revolution communist takeover. Daud is killed and replaced by communists close to the Moscow leadership'. The narrative presented is a simple one and can be read against NATO's role as a Cold War alliance. The 1978 section also notes that this is when Nancy Dupree (one of the six individuals featured on the landing

page) was expelled from Afghanistan. We are given far more information about her story than that of the communist takeover, with an embedded video and an invitation to ‘read more’. This places her narrative (as an American woman) as more important to ‘NATO’s story of Afghanistan’ than the broader political-historical context of the state NATO is intervening in.

For 1979 and 1983, the next two time periods featured, we see a similar pattern of individual narratives taking priority over issues of political importance. The Soviet invasion of 1979 is mentioned in one sentence, as if it requires no further explanation or comment, while the story of Dr Ahmad Sarmast (the fourth individual highlighted) also invites us to ‘read more’. In a similar pattern, 1986 - the birth of the sixth person featured, Mujeeb Arez – is given prominence over the 1989 withdrawal of Soviet troops. As Mamdani (2002) notes, accounts of political outcomes have a tendency to dehistoricise issues and by focusing on cultural aspects, including through ‘authentic’ individual narratives, overlook the issue of power. In placing narratives in a broader historical perspective it is possible to expose their political underpinnings (Wibben 2010: 45).

The next section in the timeline acknowledges the start of the Afghan civil war in 1992 before moving to focus on the rise of the Taliban, pinpointing this to 1994. It again provides a superficial and simplistic account of Afghanistan’s history. In doing so, *Return to Hope* overlooks the CIA’s creation of the mujahidin and embrace of both Bin Laden and the Taliban and frames contemporary Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ as a traditional cultural leftover, rather than a modern political project resulting from an imperial encounter (Mamdani 2002: 772). The timeline then turns to make the first mention of Afghan women, through the story of the third individual Roya Mahmoob, who we are told ‘fled the brutal Taliban regime’. This sets the scene for the broader narrative surrounding the US intervention in Afghanistan in support of women’s emancipation but overlooks the culpability of the US in supporting the mujahidin’s

rise to power in 1992. For example, at the time the US government ignored feminist calls to put pressure on the Taliban government over women's rights (Young 2003b: 18).

For 2001, the timeline is unsurprisingly at its most populated given its significance to the War on Terror. Here, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in March 2001 by the Taliban leads directly onto the attacks of '9/11' on the US. This reproduces the broader construction of the Taliban as 'evil', and implicated in 9/11. The next entries on the timeline all detail progress, from ISAF's expansion, to a major defeat for the Taliban and the establishment of a NATO training mission. From 2010 onwards the timeline focuses on the theme of transition, culminating in the presidential elections and ISAF's withdrawal in 2014, following on from the 'death of Bin Laden' in 2011. The final entry is for a NATO training mission to 'advise' and 'support' Afghan forces starting in 2015. The latter part of this history seamlessly overlooks the difficulties NATO faced in one of its most challenging and drawn out interventions to date.

Where are the women?

In considering the prominence of Afghan women to Western understandings of Afghanistan, a 'feminist curiosity' (Enloe, 2004) necessitates asking where are the women in *Return to Hope*? It would seem to follow from the role of NATO's Public Diplomacy Division in implementing the WPS agenda, that women would be given a central role, however, of the six individuals given prominence on the landing page, just two are women and only one is an Afghan woman. In part, this reflects the very real dangers women in Afghanistan face if they are seen to be working with the intervening forces. This probably led NATO – somewhat ironically, if NATO is to be understood as a liberating force - to avoid featuring identifiable Afghan women in order to protect their security. The issue of just how representative the experiences of those portrayed in the documentary are, particularly for women is a pertinent one. For example, the Afghan woman featured, Roya Mahboob, was not brought up in Afghanistan as her family fled when

the Taliban took power. Mahboob's story portrays her as a victim of the 'evil' Taliban, only able to return to her home following NATO's intervention and frames NATO in a masculinist protector role. This aligns more readily as a continuation of the instrumentalisation of Afghan women by the West to support a justificatory narrative for intervention, rather than one supportive of women's greater participation in line with the WPS agenda.

In the nine thematic chapters, much of the narrative is weaved from the individual stories featured on the home page, however, the section title 'women's struggle' warrants particular attention for the purpose of this analysis. This section appears to be the Public Diplomacy Divisions' attempt to ensure WPS is integrated into all public diplomacy efforts, which at this time was measured through the 'number and scope of public diplomacy efforts including website and NATO TV Channel stories' (NATO/EAPC, 2014), rather than the substance of such efforts². The 'women's struggle' section opens with a quote:

Under the Taliban, Afghan women were deprived of basic human rights, education and the right to work. Much has changed since then. Many women have seized the new opportunities created for them. But life is still a struggle for Afghan women. (NATO, 2014b)

This supports Young's (2003b: 4) conception of the seemingly more benign masculinist protection logic, where the feminine woman has adoration for her protector in the return for the promise of security, and is constituted as a worthy subject through his willingness to take risks for her. The final section details the challenges left to achieving women's full participation in Afghan society, specifying the particular difficulties of instigating change

² As previously noted, the 2016 NATO/EAPC Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 goes further than just a 'tick box' exercise for measuring the integration of WPS in public diplomacy.

within a 'patriarchal society' (NATO, 2014b). The viewer is left with a sense that there is something intrinsic to Afghanistan, which makes it impossible for the West to truly liberate Afghan women. Moreover, even if it were possible, through what lens would Afghanistan be understood by the West if not through Afghan women's suffering given its over determination in both rhetoric and practice.

The 'work ahead' section within the 'women's struggle' theme features interviews with a number of individuals who contribute to telling Afghan women's story. It is significant to note that five of the nine individuals featured separately are Afghan women, although only two (both MPs) are named in the videos themselves³, with the other three left nameless. The two Afghan women MPs (who are named) are asked about the broader political situation. Amina Afzali is interviewed about the significance of the 2001 Bonn Conference for Afghan women, having been one of the delegates. The other, Farkunda Naderi, speaks about the 2014 Afghan elections. This selective history is intriguing because it overplays the significance of the Bonn Conference for women's rights, where the provisions for the participation of Afghan women fell short of those demanded by Afghan civil society (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2002: 603). It also omits to mention the 2012 NATO Chicago Summit, which was a critical space for deciding Afghanistan's future. This is because at the same time as NATO was reaffirming its commitment to WPS at the summit, Afghan women were conspicuous by their marginalisation. Afghanistan's President Karzai's initial delegation was comprised solely of men before a last

³ The principle of the school featured in one of the videos is not given a name plate in the video clip itself, however, her first name (only) does feature in the brief text descriptor of the video. If the video is viewed as a feature in itself on another social media platform, she is effectively nameless, and regardless is given a lesser status than the man whose full name is included on a name plate.

minute adjustment ensured two women participated, following lobbying by Afghan civil society and Amnesty International (Afghan Voice Agency, 2012). The absence of Afghan women from the table deciding the future of their country, was made visible by a shadow summit organised by civil society, in which Afghan women participated alongside former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright and US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, Melanie Verveer (Amnesty International, 2012).

Of the unnamed Afghan women featured in the 'work ahead' section, we learn that one is a school principle and the other two are local women who outline the struggles they face in their day-to-day lives. The omission of their names is not for security reasons, given that the film features their faces prominently. The other contributors include the Swedish Ambassador and Croatian Gender Advisor to ISAF. The prominence of the Swedish Ambassador is in one sense surprising, given that Sweden is not a NATO member⁴ (and this is 'NATO's story'), however, it draws attention to the external facing nature of NATO's commitment to WPS (and gender issues) with Sweden given a prominent role in supporting the WPS agenda at NATO (Wright, 2016: 356). We also hear from an Afghan man, Wadood Pedram, in three separate film clips, where he addresses his role as a women's rights activist, the patriarchal nature of Afghan society and the progress for Afghan women over the previous 13 years. In contrast to two of the three unnamed Afghan women, Pedram is allowed to address broader substantive issues, whereas the story we hear from the two women in Herat is of their lived experience. He is also given a name (and job title), elevating his status above the Afghan women. The other individual we hear from is Samina Ahmed, who works for an international NGO. She is featured three times, first talking about life for Afghan women under Taliban rule, then on the changes for Afghan women in society and finally detailing what progress is needed. It is therefore a man

⁴ Sweden is a NATO partner and troop contributor to the ISAF mission.

and an international observer who are given the most central role in detailing the work ahead in respect of Afghan 'women's struggle' and are positioned as experts on the topic. Although Afghan women are included in the documentary, the showcasing of these two individuals serves to side-line their contribution. This highlights the importance of asking not just whose stories are told but how they are included and understood.

Conclusion

Return to Hope represents a move to a more sophisticated approach to digital diplomacy by NATO. The analysis presented here contributes an important case study on the role of public diplomacy in the alliance's identity construction, something which has remained on the margins of NATO scholarship. It provides the first in-depth evaluation of the use of digital diplomacy by an international security institution, and a useful addition to work focused on national military actors. This in turn adds to the growing body of feminist scholarship on the alliance, and in so doing demonstrates the importance of a gender sensitive analysis for unpacking both the practice and narratives underpinning digital diplomacy.

The analysis presented here demonstrates that NATO's approach to digital diplomacy is not just concerned with selling the alliance's 'hard power' capabilities and that the alliance takes a more sophisticated approach to reaching target audiences. The focus on individual narratives, even when discussing broader issues – such as women's rights – serves to depoliticise NATO's story of Afghanistan. This draws attention to the necessity of contextualising individual narratives within the wider framework in which they are presented. In addition, the temporal focus to the documentary gives an impression of progress and triumph for NATO and is supported through the omission of key historical events, which may not appear as glaring omissions to a target audience unfamiliar with Afghanistan. The result is that the Afghan

experience is presented in Return to Hope as one of feminised victimhood but also contingent empowerment by NATO, and thus supportive of the masculinist protection logic.

In taking the long view of Western intervention in Afghanistan, and the centrality given to Afghan women to interpret the country, it is possible to understand their place in NATO's digital diplomacy. Afghan women are both marginalised from Return to Hope and given prominence in the 'women's struggle' section. There is little consideration given to their representation outside of this section and this undermines NATO's broader commitment to WPS, while remaining in line with NATO's 'tick box' approach at this time. This saw WPS utilised as a public diplomacy tool to engage publics, rather than as a means to support the representation and participation of women in international peace and security. So while the integration of WPS considerations into public diplomacy initiatives should be welcomed, attention needs to be given to the ways in which this is realised.

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