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Abstract

Two weeks prior to the complete withdrawal of the United States/NATO troops from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021, the Taliban took over the country. Focusing on the airport scene, the media presented a picture of chaos and volatility, caused by the failure of the US-trained Afghan military force to protect the people. Barely any mention was made of how women sustain their families and communities in everyday life, a site of my ethnographic research conducted in the fall of 2008 and 2009, respectively. To acknowledge women’s survival strategies, I focus on testimonial photography, a genre that recognises that the past is present and can be collectively recalled through photographs. Photographs have their own language, motivating us to imagine alternative ways of being. Layered reading of images allows unacknowledged violence to come to light. Viewers are then motivated to engage into critical reflection.

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Testimonial Photography and Thinking through Violence – 'we do not eat fruit because our garden was burnt

Parin Dossa

Introduction

It is with heartache and pain that I watched the Taliban take over Afghanistan, two weeks prior to the complete withdrawal of the United States/NATO troops on 30 August 2021. The media focused on chaotic scenes at the airport and cited the failure of the United States-trained Afghan military force to protect its people as reasons for the volatility. But hardly any mention was made of women and how they were managing everyday life to sustain families and communities.

In the fall of 2008 and 2009, respectively, I conducted ethnographic research in Kabul, Afghanistan. At the time the dominant narrative was that the military invasion led by the United States (US) would save the people of Afghanistan from the brutality of the Taliban and al-Qaeda, responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US. The accounts barely ever mentioned the decade-long war that the former Soviet Union and the United States had fought on Afghan soil (1979-1989). The world had chosen not to remember the reality of how this armed conflict 'destroyed Afghanistan and wounded its people', as Afreen, one of my research respondents, expressed it. My research at the time explored this counter-narrative, capturing the memories of the women in Afghanistan (Dossa 2014).

The withdrawal of the international military forces from Afghanistan on 30 August 2021 has come to be linked with a second counter-narrative, again one remembered by the women. It is a narrative of two decades of military occupation that further destroyed the country by failing to fulfil the promises made of restoring infrastructure, especially that of health care, education, and livelihoods. Instead, the occupation subjected women and their families to more protracted conflict and violence. Speaking in a testimonial voice – calm, determined and aware of her position as somebody relaying a collective situation – Rima remarked:

> *I am an example of other ladies. If you go to each lady, she has the same story: the wars had a negative impact on everyone. Some of our neighbours have lost their family members and close relatives due to ongoing wars and conflicts in Afghanistan.*

Embodying generational knowledge on nurturing and sustaining families, women are best positioned to rebuild lives from the bottom up. They are the ones who pick up the pieces within spaces of devastation (Das 2007; Dossa 2014). In this chapter, I trace how this task is accomplished collectively

through an act that Beverley (1992) calls 'testimonio'. Testimonio is characterised by an urgency to communicate an issue and a need to articulate 'a problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives. The situation of the narrator in testimonio is one that must be representative of a social class or group' (Beverley 1992: 95; Dossa 2014, 13-14). Testimonio is integral to active remembering where the past and the present are fused, as when Rima points out that 'we do not eat fruit because our garden was burnt'.

In the context of testimonial communication, the genre of testimonial photography is of special value as it draws viewers to stay with the image rather than moving on. Photographs capture scenarios that otherwise remain socially invisible and thus allow us to move beyond the textual. They take us into the existential realm of what makes us human, integrally linked to pathways for a just world. Photographs of war-torn countries do not merely capture a scene. By invoking a wide range of senses, such as seeing, hearing, and feeling, they call for an ethics of co-existence, recognising human vulnerability on different scales. By evoking multi-vocality of responses, they open spaces for the co-construction of knowledge that does not reach a point of closure. Testimonial photographs are not frozen in time. With their potential to nurture bonds of solidarity across socio-cultural and politicised boundaries, they motivate us to read visual language.

How does one use testimonial photography in research? In a war-torn country like that of Afghanistan, it is difficult to work with predetermined research parameters. When I visited the homes of women, they relayed their stories of pain and suffering arising from protracted violence. They were keen that their stories reach the outside world; they were well aware that their everyday lives were socially invisible. Fatima said: 'Even NGOs [foreign non-governmental organisations] do not understand how we feed our families and the work we do inside our tiny homes and outside to earn a bit of money.' I owe a debt of gratitude to my research participants who informed me that photos were a unique method to bring home the realities of their lives. Their pain could not invariably be expressed through words. In our conversations, women shared photos of the past stating "see what our lives have become like."

There were times when I could not hear women's full stories because of crises of everyday life. At times, a participant did not continue with her story because of worries that her children had not come back from school at the expected time; others had heard of a bomb blast nearby that led to concerns for my safety in which case participants suggested that I should leave quickly so as not be caught if there was further violence. Without testimonial photography, crisis situations would have been difficult to retrieve. Fleeting encounters common in war-torn countries convinced me that photography would complement and enhance women's testimonial narratives.

I am mindful of my position as an ethnographer visiting a war-torn country. The question of appropriating stories of my interlocutors was uppermost in my mind. As a Muslim refugee from Uganda, I established some affinity with my participants in terms of greetings and Islamic rituals along with cultural norms. At the same time, I was aware of my privileged status. Residing in Canada, I could no help but feel that I too was complicit in the destruction of Afghanistan. My minimal contribution is then to write as an 'activist' in the way of bringing home women's stories in the spirit that I learnt from them. Their courage, bravery, and engagement in care economy has taught me lessons of life that will remain with me and, hopefully, the readers as well.

The article first provides some historical background to the women's narratives. I begin with a glance at the media representation of the takeover of the country by the Taliban, and respond to the question as to why the world was taken aback when the Taliban was once again in charge despite the 2001 US/NATO invasion to topple this regime. Whilst the media sought to grapple with the question as to whether twenty-year-military occupation was worth it, Afghan women already had an answer that was not publicly heard, such has been their silencing. A Spivakian take on this would be that subaltern women can only speak if they resort to alternative genres that go beyond colonial methodologies and discourses (Spivak 1988). Towards this end, Afghan women were aware of their societal position of non-acknowledgement of their work; hence they resorted to alternative genres such as memory work, storying, language of the body, art, and testimonial speaking. Ayesha, who speaks of a testimonial photo as tapestry in the making; and Hamida, encapsulate two-time frames: life under US military occupation and under the current Taliban regime. The article elaborates on these time frames through an examination of food consumption and landscapes of devastation.

The irony of history

The world watched with disbelief as the Taliban cemented their hold on Afghanistan with the capture of Kabul on 15 August 2021, fifteen days before the withdrawal of the last US troops from the country. The irony of the situation was palpable. Nearly two decades earlier, the US and NATO occupied Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime under the call of waging 'War on Terror'.[1] The goal of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, by which the international community pledged to assist Afghanistan deal with terrorism was 'to end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability, and respect for human rights in the country' (United Nations 2001). This remains an unfulfilled pledge.

1 Critics consider the launch of the war on terror as part of US geopolitical agenda (Jackson, 2020).

One of the war's stated goals was to ensure the security of America and its allies from further terrorist attacks. Indeed, this concern dominated all others. The way in which the war was fought paid no attention to the plight of Afghans, thousands of whom died, at the hands of the American troops under the pretext of collateral damage and because of brutal retaliatory attacks by the Taliban. Whilst the media focused on chaos and volatility following troop withdrawal, it often overlooked the reality that the twenty-year-occupation intended to 'liberate' the people of Afghanistan, including women, did not materialise. The American forces concentrated on training and creating an Afghan militarised force – 'militarized peacekeepers' (Dossa 2014: 26). By the time the US and NATO troops left the country, there was minimal infrastructure and even that was fragmented.

Presently Pakistan is the only country that recognise the Taliban regime. The US has retaliated by freezing 'nearly $9.5bn in assets belonging to the Afghan central bank and stopped shipment of cash to the nation' (Mohsin 2021). Whilst Afghanistan is subject to humanitarian crisis, the US and its allies have not taken responsibility for an act that punishes the people through starvation and insecurity.

Testimonial photography: tapestry in the making

Fig. 1. Ayesha. Photo: Parin Dossa.

Meet Ayesha (Figure 1). An elderly woman from Bamiyan. She has experienced violence throughout her life: Soviet and U.S. occupation (1979-1989), the Civil War (1992-1996),[2] US military occupation (2001-2021). She will tell you, 'I have not seen peace in my country'. If you were to ask her to share what it was like to have lived through protracted violence, her response would be:

> *See the wrinkles on my face. Each wrinkle forms part of a tapestry[3] that the women of Afghanistan are weaving so that the world will remember what we are going through. Sit with the women and listen to their stories. Each one will tell you how violence has impacted our lives. The tapestry will not be completed until Afghanistan is rebuilt by its people, not foreigners.*

Now that the international troops were in the last steps of leaving Afghanistan, more than a decade later, I wanted to touch base with my respondents again. This was made more urgent by the military advances of the Taliban. I got in touch with Farah, my long-time research assistant, and we set in motion the preparations to re-connect with the women in Rehmani[4] (a mixed neighbourhood housing well-to-do and poor families) with whom we had worked previously. Indeed, some additional women came forward to tell their stories and provided photos to accompany them. Seated in a circle or semicircle, women felt free to come and go as time permitted. This led to more spontaneous sharing as opposed to the obligation of having to stay. Each participant contributed to the tapestry in the making by adding texture, colour, and shades. Consider some of their observations:

> *We share stories. There can be sad stories or happy stories, but we like to share whatever we have. We sometimes share our problems, and they may be solved by even some good advice from some other woman, so this way we try to keep contact with each other and be happy for a while. (Malia)[5]*

> *Yes, when the ladies sit together, they for sure share stories and talk a lot with each other. As I mentioned before, I am washing their clothes. So, whilst washing, I also talk to the ladies sitting around, and we share stories. They can be different stories*

2 The civil war and the subsequent rise of the Taliban were the result of Afghanistan being rendered into an "armed camp" once the US and Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989.

3 Ayesha here refers to the traditional Afghan art of weaving.

4 Rehmani is a fictive name to maintain confidentiality.

5 Farah interviewed 10 women who were all mothers with three to six children each. These women nurture their families and seek to earn an income from sewing, embroidery work or selling eggs or milk from livestock kept in the yards. They exchange home-grown vegetables with neighbours to vary their meals.

> *about our family, situation of Afghanistan, some school lessons or some preparations for some specific occasions like [the celebration of] Eid. (Farhnaz)*
>
> *Sometimes the ladies talk and share about challenges and difficulties they face and had faced due to wars and conflicts. I see that everybody has suffered harm and damage from the wars in our country. Here are some houses which have very scary view as they have been destroyed with tons of bombs and fires. There is no place left safe during the wars in the country. At each three to four kilometres, you will find destroyed and fallen houses, all due to the wars either internal or external.*

Hamida is a robust woman in her forties. When she told her story, two of her neighbours had joined Farah in the circle:

> *Now that the Taliban are in power, my life has changed. I can no longer work in the school. All that I have now is my old and sick husband, my younger son, and my daughter. My eldest son ran away. He could not live in the dingy home that the school director provided us. I do not know where he is or whether he is alive. I pray to Almighty Allah to keep him safe.*

Eager to share her story, she continued: 'We have lived with violence as long as I remember. Now that the Taliban are in power, I do not think that *we* will see better days. Not as long as I am alive' (her emphasis). Her usage of 'we' constitutes testimonial speaking whereby the speaker captures the lived experiences of others whilst maintaining her own individual colours in the tapestry of life. Hamida revisited her life narrative noting how her family was compelled to leave 'our beloved country' due to the frequent bombing. 'We went to Iran where we worked on the streets and cleaned Iranian homes for eight years.' Upon their return to Afghanistan – which she again referred to as 'our beloved country' – they discovered that their house had been destroyed. 'We were homeless.' The principal of a nearby school came to their rescue and hired her husband as gatekeeper and her as cleaner of the school, and they were provided with accommodation. She was unhappy however, that she also had to clean the director's house. Also, they were paid little and the accommodation turned out to be a dingy structure, wet and dark with no kitchen or toilet. And yet Hamida did everything to maintain and nourish her family. Her everyday routine speaks to this endeavour. 'As was the case during America's war, I wake up at 5:00 in the morning. I perform ablution with little water that is cold and say my prayers.' She then sweeps the floor, symbolising a fresh start to the day, and prepares breakfast. She says: 'It is not real breakfast as we can only have tea and *naan* [bread].' When I visited her early one morning in 2009, I observed how she folded the sleeping mat-

tresses and blankets and piled them neatly on one side, keeping one mattress for visitors to sit on. This act speaks to her effort of making a home, regardless of the dinginess of the room. Whilst the family had rice, vegetables and beans during the US occupation, this is no longer the case. 'Sometimes we do not have milk for tea', she noted, 'and for our meals we can only have potatoes and zucchini, like many of our neighbours. And when we have no food, we have *naan* on the *desterkhan*, embroidered cloth laid on the floor during mealtimes.' Usually, four to five dishes are placed on a *desterkhan* for a meal for the family or guests (see Figure 2). Only having *naan* speaks to the level of poverty that the family is compelled to endure.

Fig. 2. Chai with the host family, the author and her daughter, served on a *desterkhan*, 2 October 2008. Third adult from left: author's daughter with two of the hosts' children. Fourth adult from left: author with one of the hosts' children. Photo: Parin Dossa.

The deteriorating situation that Hamida and her neighbours are subjected to is attributed to the Taliban, an offshoot of foreign occupation. When this regime came to power on 15 August 2021, Hamida stopped working: 'I was afraid to go to the school. If something happened to me, who would look after my family?' The international reaction to the regime has exacerbated Hamida's family life. In this situation, illness becomes particularly challenging: 'In the case of any small illnesses like a headache, cold, or flu, we buy some medicine if we have money. If not, then we do nothing and we wait until the pain goes away by itself.' She summarises her situation with the words: 'Day comes, night ends, but for me is always night.' But she refuses to give up: she

cleans houses in her neighbourhood and is available to undertake 'small jobs' (such as sweeping the streets) for a small pay. This is her means of survival, for herself and her whole family. Holding two schoolbooks that she has kept neatly in a corner, she says: 'When things get better, my children will go to school. Our lives are finished but theirs are just starting.' Her unwavering faith in Allah and her resolution to keep on striving gives her hope: 'We know that everything is in the hands of the great God, but we have to try, work hard, and give education to our children so that they can have a *zindagi khob* [good life] and *ayenda dorokhshan* [bright future].'

Hamida foregrounds her role as mother. She bears testimonial witness to the effects of structural violence on her children. Violence, experienced at the core of her being and family life, positions her to give a politicised meaning to her story. Related straight from the heart, this story has poignancy and depth. Hamida embodies history in the flesh, revealed in the pain that she experiences every day because of the 'loss' of her eldest son who left and because of her struggles to feed her family.

> *Human suffering on the scale brought about by war and violence requires a societal response that could mitigate one's pain. But this does not happen. Survivors of violence find themselves isolated and alone; they are expected to pick up the pieces and move on in the wake of harsh circumstances. Those who testify seek to engage a listening audience. (Dossa 2014: 56)*

As we continue to witness the crisis unfolding in Afghanistan, we need to remember that the superpowers have left behind a wounded country. The wounds are born more acutely by the women engaged in the task of sustaining families and the care economy embedded within networks of relationships. We may ask if this is also the case with other war-torn countries such as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. In Afghanistan, the issue is availability of material resources and moral obligation to give *zakat* [obligatory donation]. Women's resourcefulness and ingenuity guide them to determine the extent to which they can sustain a care economy in the context of everyday life. The latter is critical in relation to how relations are formed and how *zakat* is donated: if not materially than in terms of moral and social support (for background information refer to Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2004).

Through the testimonial mode, complemented with photographs, the women share their lived experiences. They have spoken. Hence, they can legitimately make a claim for acknowledgment and validation of their suffering and loss; not excluding their agency in remaking their worlds, however precarious these may be. Testimonials are not monologues, and therefore the stories they embody have the potential to engage a listening audience. I echo Hua's observation that people who are subjected to violence 'often attempt to maintain at the centre of national [international] memory what the dominant

group would often like to forget' (2005: 201). Oppositional memorialising, she argues, can convert 'individual ownership of memory into collective remembrance, turning personal grief and mourning into a call for social responsibility, social change and activism' (Hua 2005: 201). Testimonial narratives, shared by the women in this study, will not achieve closure if their suffering is not publicly acknowledged.

The fire of the heath will not be extinguished

'Food locates us. Discussions about place steer us homeward, and home inevitably leads to the hearth – the focus of the household' (Ray 2004: 131). My choice of the term *hearth*, as a starting point from which to link testimonial photography with food, is informed by my interlocutors' reference to 'keep the fires of the hearth burning'. In other words, regardless of food scarcity, the women continue to cook, and what they prepare is not bereft of cultural and symbolic dimensions. Though a private and domestic space, the hearth is a locus of warmth and hospitality. It is from this site that food is cooked and served to families and visitors, including ritual occasions (Dossa 2014: 94).

During the US/NATO military occupation, the women I worked with prepared minimalist foods. They made use of seasonal and inexpensive vegetables [*sabji*], soft rice and lentils [*sohelleh*], and beans accompanied by *naan*. Drawing upon generational and gender-based knowledge, the women varied their meals. This is illustrated by Khadija.

When I entered Khadija's house, she was cooking sticky rice (inexpensive compared with the superior basmati), which she planned to serve with lentils. When I asked if she makes this dish the same way every day, she replied: 'No, I cook it differently. Otherwise, my family will not feel that they had a proper meal.' She changes the recipes as much as possible: one day it is plain rice with beans, another day it a *palao,* a dish traditionally made with of rice and meat. 'I cannot buy meat. It is too expensive, so I use peas and carrots. Other days, I just add herbs and onions. It creates a different flavour.' On the rare occasion that she has guests, such as her in-laws from the rural areas, she cooks eggplant [*banjan*]. She recalled the times when her mother served this dish as a substitute for meat: 'My mother would laugh and say: "Here is a one-legged chicken."' She continued: 'In the past, life was hard. Now, it is harsh. Our struggles for food do not end.'

Indeed, the struggles for food have got worse. Under the current Taliban regime, it is not uncommon for families to merely have *naan* and tea for a meal. Gulalai put it this way: 'One thing I want to mention that if there is nothing to eat, we Afghans have at least *naan* on our *desterkhan*. We have different *naans*, and the most delicious one is the *Uzbeki*, in my opinion, but I love them all' (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. 'If there is nothing to eat, we Afghans have at least *naan* on our *desterkhan*.' Photo: Farah Habib.

Women talked about their struggles to secure food. The latter is so scarce that they are unable to vary their meals as was the case during foreign occupation of their country. At that time there was one significant avenue to secure food: they were engaged in paid work. Under the Taliban, this is no longer the case. But this must be seen against the failure of the US forces to maintain and build up the infrastructure and the US sanctions against the country in the form of freezing of Afghan bank assets. This amounts to punishing the people of Afghanistan in the name of taking revenge on the Taliban. Below are some testimonial collective food stories shared by women in the post-US withdrawal period.

> *I make some porridge out of grated wheat or potato and or some vegetables. My kids most of the times ask for good meals like meat, rice, and beans. But I tell them to wait until I can find a good job to prepare them all of their favourite meals and [meet their] needs. (Shabnam)*
>
> *I make soup with two eggs and some accessible vegetables or* shola *[soft and starchy rice]. (Zara)*
>
> *We normally have some potatoes, grated wheat or some vegetables on our* desterkhan*, but for the breakfast we every day have the same, bread and tea.*
>
> *The most inexpensive* [qemmat] *vegetables that all poor families have access to are potatoes, zucchini, and green beans; also the small short rice. We make* shola *from it. We normally prepare these meals because it costs less. (Amina)*
>
> *The foods we serve most of the times are potatoes and rice because they do not cost too much for us. (Sadaf)*
>
> *I cook some grated wheats for my kids which I prepare it just with water, salt, and a little bit of oil, just to fill the stomach, and or some zucchini mixed with tomatoes and onions. (Leila)*

We can see that there is no room for the research respondents to vary the meals. This is on account of the collapse of the fragile infrastructure following troops withdrawal. Noteworthy, however, is their collective effort of care and compassion. Pareesa put it this way: 'Even if we do not have much to share, we help each other. *This is the Afghan way*' (her emphasis). Whilst revealing violence in the inner recesses of life, one cannot overlook the significance of food as being more than a material item. It is an integrated unit where the material, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions are intertwined. In a situation of violence of war, the multifaceted nature of food is brought into sharper focus through everyday struggles for survival. A critical aspect that the participants foregrounded was the aspect of helping each other, the 'Afghan way', as Pareesa expressed it. If you were to visit the neighbourhood of Rehmani, you will come across the following scenarios.

Shenaz bought a cow with money she borrowed from neighbourhood shopkeepers. Selling its milk enables her to earn a small amount every day. Occasionally, she donates some milk to a family that has not had any food that day. She says: 'The satisfaction of helping someone a little is more than earning a bit less." At weddings, neighbours and shopkeepers assist the celebrating family materially and in kind such as building a tent or lending cutlery. 'This way we can celebrate an important occasion with family, friends, and neighbours' (Selma). On special occasion, *Paraki naan* is baked: 'In the

weddings and or big parties, they order *Paraki naan* because it is very flat, soft, delicious, and round to put on the top of the dish' (Farzana).

Mutual exchange is common. Rahima keeps chickens to sell eggs. 'I do not have good feed for them. My neighbour brings me feed from a house where she has a cleaning job. I give her eggs for the feed.' Continuing the conversation, Beheshta observed:

> *We Afghans are very social. Even if we are poor, we try to help each other when we see that someone needs something. When I am invited to a wedding, I ask my neighbours if I could borrow some clothes. They lend me sure. They are not rich or have expensive dresses, but they help me with whatever they have. I give them back. They do not give me forever but to help me at that moment. (Beheshta)*

> *When we do not have anything to give or exchange, we make time for each other and share stories. They can be sad stories or happy stories, but we like to share. We sometimes share our problems and maybe solve them through good advice. This way we try to keep contact with each other and stay happy for a while. (Deeba)*

Both losses and endurance are embedded in shared stories. Mutual aid and intangible care nurtures solidarity amongst individuals and groups subject to multiple displacements and dispossession, as has been the case with the people of Afghanistan. Zarowsky (2004), for example, observes that interconnectedness in times of crisis leads to the formation of moral webs, implying duty to extend care and compassion. These qualities generate neighbourly ties, groundwork for rebuilding and reconstruction of communities and, by extension, the nation. One can then imagine a future where there is light amidst darkness.

Food as an item extending beyond the materiality of life makes violence knowable in the inner recesses of life. Testimonial narratives of women reveal everyday exercise of care, mutual aid, and compassion. As part of their survival strategies, they form the basis for remedial work from the bottom up. Engaged anthropology requires that we do not allow violence of war to escape our attention. Bottom-up attempts at recovery can remain buried. This is the reason why Ayesha suggested that I look at women's lives in the form of a tapestry. Each thread woven into the whole matters.

Landscapes of destruction

Amongst the many stories that we collected, not one failed to refer to the destruction of the urban landscape – roads, shops, houses – let alone death and the maiming of family members. The following vignettes set the stage

for a critical viewing of photographed landscapes of devastation. As Finnegan (2015) has noted, photography matters; the stories that photographs capture cannot be contained in words. More importantly, they evoke readers to engage in critical self-reflection and collective reflection for transformative change.

> *Most of our neighbours have received* zarrar *[damage] during the wars and conflicts, some of them have lost their family members, some have lost their houses or some other properties. The area we live in is* kharaba *[destroyed]. This is the impact of the wars in this community. The street was destroyed during the internal wars [1991-1995], but it has not been reconstructed yet. Thus, we face a lot of problems during the winter, and transport cannot move [is not operational] in this area. There is no bus station close to the area. We have to walk long distances to reach the* istgah *[station]. There are a lot of problems in this area, but we try to cope with life. (Munira)*
>
> *Sometimes the ladies talk and share challenges and difficulties they face and have faced due to wars and conflicts. I see that everybody has [experienced] harm and damage from the wars in our country. Here are some houses which have very scary view as they have been destroyed with tons of bombs and fires. There is no place left safe during the wars in the country, at each three to four kilometres you find destroyed and fallen houses, all due to the wars, either internal or external. (Sayiddah)*
>
> *Most of the Afghan families are poor and vulnerable and they all have received damages due to wars and conflicts in our country. There are a lot of ruined and destroyed houses, and these are the signs from the wars in the country. (Rabia)*

These statements call for an ethical and sincere understanding of the impact of the violence of war. It is in this vein that I present my reading of photos, with the hope that readers will view these in solidarity with Afghan women and others subjected to the violence of war.

Testimonial photos

The critical reading of photos is multi-layered. At one level, we engage with seeing that which is displayed in the image before us; at another, we need to fill in the context – both structural and personal; at yet another, we must go beyond the frame and reflect on how photos of war and violence impact the lives of people. Ultimately, they evoke issues of justice and accountability; they call for testimonial reading that implicates all of us inhabiting Planet

Earth. In this vein, photographic encounters have the capacity to make present what can otherwise remain out of site.

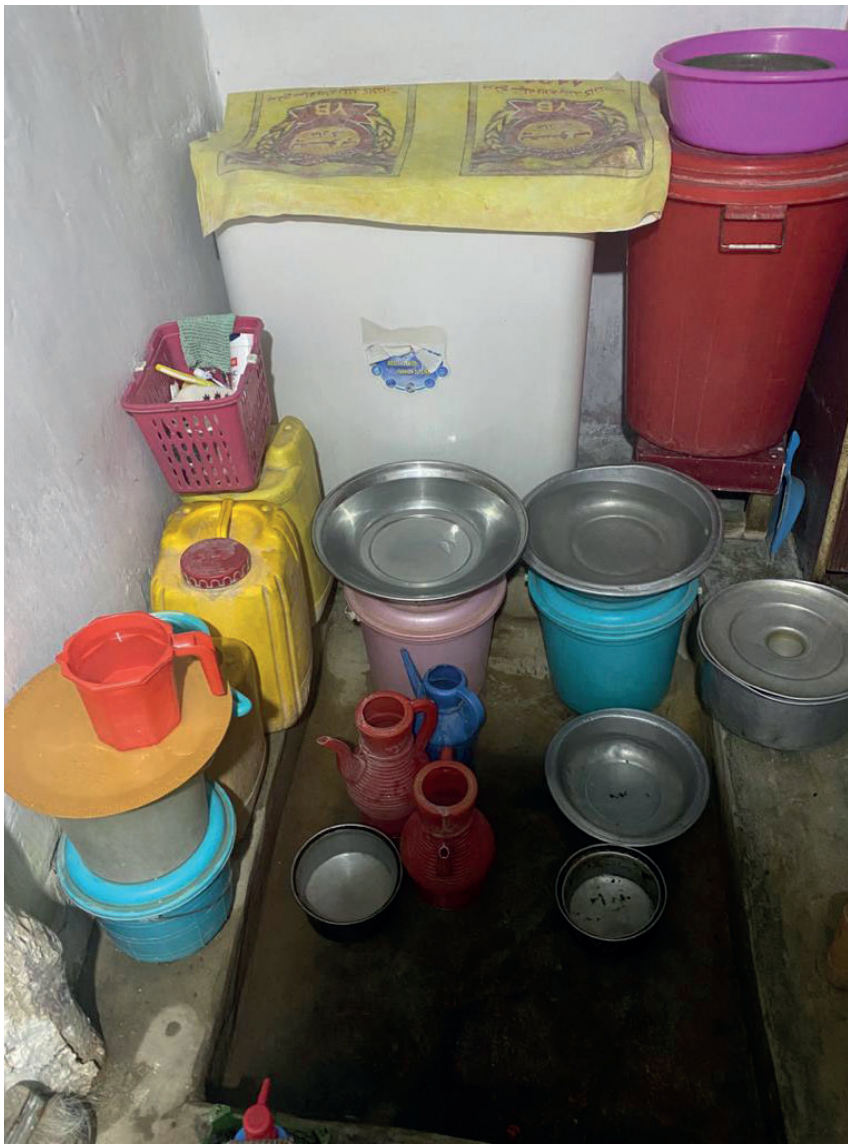

Fig. 4. Make-shift kitchen, July 2021. Photo: Farah Habib.

Pots and pans meet the eye when we first encounter the photo of a make-shift kitchen (Figure 4). Our attention is drawn to the seemingly random arrangement. It speaks to the lack of space in the 'make-shift' homes that many of the women referred to. The utensils are worn, salvaged from destroyed homes or survivors of multiple displacements. Two water buckets show that water is drawn at a pump or a well. Signs of destroyed landscape are evident on the left- and right-hand sides (rubble) of the photo. Women use the pots and the pans to prepare a meal from bare and minimal ingredients. Empty and cramped pots speak to the suffering and pain inflicted by scars of war.

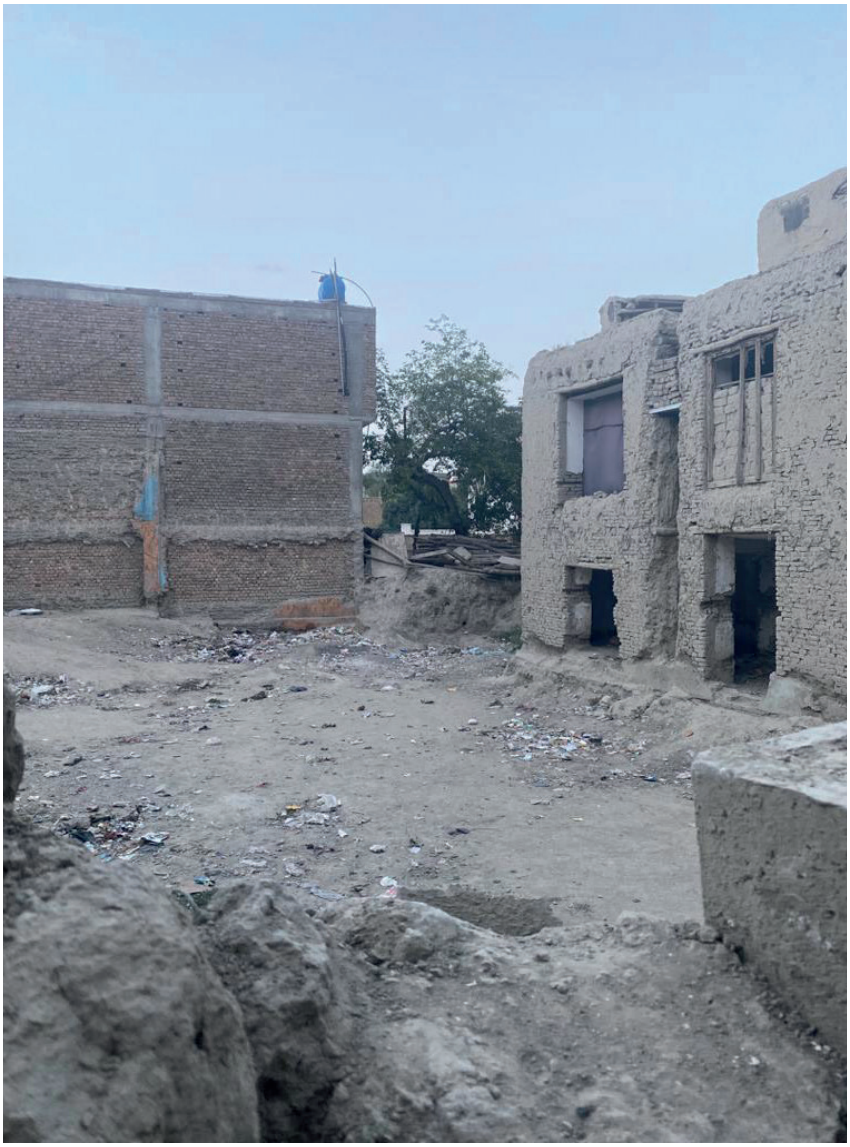

Fig. 5. Destruction and devastation, July 2021. Photo: Farah Habib.

Two words encompass the photograph of ruins (Figure 5): destruction and devastation. Public spaces and streets were not spared random bombings. Houses stand in ruins; roads are covered in rubble. The people who lived here have been driven out. The trunk of the tree in the background is bent, not even nature is spared. Although taken in July 2021, the photo speaks to past violence.

It is this documented encounter between us, the viewers, and the photograph that makes us realise the harm caused by violence. Following Azoulay (2013), I argue that the photo in the vein of ethical engagement constitutes an event, one that cannot be reduced to what we see. Its eventfulness can make us imagine that once there were people inhabiting this devastated landscape.

What kind of lives they must be leading and how many times they must have been displaced moving from area to area in search of a home? How do women continually make and remake their everyday worlds, glimpses of which we discussed above. We need to acknowledge the capacity of photography to produce presence of what would otherwise not come to light in a way that evokes our attention. Photos do not merely constitute evidence of violence of war; they activate affect, allowing us to be 'present' in a way that can motivate us to act.

Conclusion

The superpowers must be implicated in the humanitarian crisis that has engulfed the people of Afghanistan, not only at the withdrawal of the US troops in 2021 but across the four decades of militarised occupation, each of which was emanated from the previous one and was conjoined with the next. The world has not acknowledged this larger narrative; but the women of Afghanistan remember. Testimonial photography reveals multiple ways in which the violence of war becomes entrenched in the inner recesses of everyday life. Every day is eventful. Comprised of fragile moments, this form of life generates a shared language of connectedness and solidarity along with mutual care and compassion. The examples drawn from storied lives – with each thread forming a part of the tapestry in the making – the food talk and the enduring landscapes of devastation reveal scars of protracted violence. Whilst the women we met live with the suffering and pain of foreign occupation, they are at the same time engaged in rebuilding their country in small but not insignificant ways. Stephen captures this sentiment:

> *The experiences of testifying, listening to, and reading others' testimonies are key to how political perspectives develop not only in individuals but also in how these individuals connect with others to analyse the world from a partially shared optic (often cognisant of difference at the same time), and in how groups of people can participate in shifting public political discourses and perceptions. (Stephen 2021: 57)*

Afghan women invite us to remember the larger narrative of militarised occupation, the destruction it has wrought, and how they have gone about rebuilding their country – drops in a stream that eventually grows in size and force.

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