Geopolitics of gender and violence ‘from below’

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A B S T R A C T

This article examines geopolitical violence, gender and political constructions of scale from the site of the body to international discourse and politics. The political constructions of scale and body-politics analyzed in this study draw on feminist and political geographic analysis and an empirical study of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). This study includes an examination of state, military and paramilitary violence from below as articulated through the lens of RAWA’s documentation and political framing. RAWA clandestinely used photographic and video technologies to document the corporeal results of state/military violence and politically constructed scale by way of linking this violence to international discourses and political action. A number of opportunities, challenges, and pitfalls are identified as part of RAWA’s geopolitics of violence from below. The post 9-11-01 U.S.-led military invasion of Afghanistan demonstrates a significant shift in the management and manipulation of RAWA’s documentation. Both the U.S. and RAWA politically constructed scale and drew upon western-led “universal” moralities and human/women’s rights discourses for alternative purposes. This paper also discusses the use of gender politics and its various manipulations to resist, criminalize, or legitimize the use of violence in the name of human/women’s rights.

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Kofman et al., 2004). Feminist researchers examine the personal, private and everyday scales of resistance to existing power hierarchies and the role and power of reproduction as significant geopolitical projects (Martin, 2004). Exploring politics within the spaces and scales not generally considered political or powerful remains central to feminist critiques of geopolitical research (Hyndman, 2007). This includes examining informal as well as formal forms of political action and mobilization (Secor, 2001).

The political use of violence discussed in this paper focuses on the body and gender politics “from below” as part of a social morphology of counter-violent politics to resist, produce and reproduce political subjects. Political resistance and epistemologies of violence as discussed in this study draw upon the theoretical concept of “situated knowledges” as discussed by feminist political geographers. Situated knowledge recognizes perspective and position as significant factors in determining knowledge claims (see Haraway, 1988). Examining disparate political situations and motivations provide alternative understandings and experiences of place and politics (Rose, 1997; Staeheli & Kofman, 2004). For feminist geographers, situated knowledge includes corporeal and lived experiences of place and space, which are integral for reworking theoretical concepts of nation and nationalism, territoriality, and globalization (Hyndman, 2004; Mayer, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Wasti-Walter & Staeheli, 2004). Epistemologies of violence as articulated by RAWA are situated based on location, scale, vision and political motivation. The following sections examine RAWA’s methods and epistemologies for constructing scale, gender politics and geopolitics of violence from below.

Research methods

RAWA was chosen for this study because of the organization’s political stance, interest in nonviolence as a method for political change, and transnational links to donors and supporters (including many within the United States). This study focuses on RAWA’s use of still and video documentation of civilian injury and death during the civil war (1992–1996) and Taliban (1996–2001) eras, and the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan (2001).

The data for this article was collected from RAWA’s website (www.rawa.org), political magazine (Payam-e-Zan, Women’s Message), and still and video footage they provided to me during two separate field visits to their operations in Pakistan (Peshawar, Islamabad, Rawalpindi) during the summer of 2003 and winter of 2004/05. During these field visits I also conducted semi-structured interviews with RAWA members, supporters, and children living in RAWA-run orphanages. In the summer of 2006, I conducted follow-up interviews with RAWA members living in Kabul. This study also includes data gathered from RAWA’s transnational supporter network in the US.

Overview of RAWA

Meena, a 20-year-old student at Kabul University, founded RAWA in 1977. The founder and early members of RAWA were part of Afghanistan’s urban educated elite and experienced significantly different opportunities for education and mobility compared to women living outside Afghanistan’s major cities and from other socioeconomic, ethnic, and education backgrounds. Meena’s social and political ideas for improving the status of women in Afghanistan focused on increasing women’s education and public life. In general, Afghanistan’s social structure is a form of “classic patriarchy”, where the male head of household retains authority over women and men in his kinship group (Kandiyoti, 1988; Moghadam, 1999, 2002).

Women within this system gain power through their relationships with men, and as they age women have more authority and respect within the family. Government led policies to modernize through the emancipation of women have historically failed in Afghanistan or remained available only to women in the capital city, Kabul and among the urban educated elite (Moghadam, 1997; Zulfacar, 2006). RAWA’s founding members sought to attend to these gender imbalances in society as well as other social inequities. This included actively recruiting women from lower socioeconomic classes and a variety of ethnic groups. (Benard & in cooperation with E. Schlaffer, 2001; Brodsky, 2003).

The rise of communist intellectualism in Kabul city during the 1970s and subsequent invasion by the Soviet Union (1979) significantly impacted RAWA’s organizational growth and political standpoints. In 1978 The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA, later renamed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) incited a coup and took control of the central government in Kabul (Edwards, 2002; Rubin, 2002). The DRA’s platform included the promise for women’s liberation; however, women did not play an appreciably prominent role within the leadership. DRA rule in Afghanistan was met with resistance in several provinces outside Kabul particularly around issues of land tenure reform and women (Edwards, 2002; Rubin, 2002). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was due in part to concern over the growing unrest and instability of the new regime caused by rebellions in the provinces and fighting among the DRA leadership.

Several resistance factions fought against the Soviets such as royalists, democratic groups, socialists, and Islamists (both traditional and fundamentalist—see Olesen, 1995). Islamic groups (known as the Mujahidin) lead the fight against the Soviet Union, receiving the bulk of international assistance. The Mujahidin groups did not however form a cohesive nationalist struggle against the Soviets; rather they competed with one another for funds and weapons. Among the more extremist groups of the Mujahidin, women were by in large excluded as active participants. The extremist factions emerged as the primary leaders of the resistance due in part to the considerable amount of financial assistance provided by the United States and Saudi Arabia, and the distribution of weapons through Pakistan (Mamdani, 2004; Olesen, 1995; Rubin, 2002). Despite the Soviet Union’s ‘promise’ of women’s emancipation, RAWA members (defining themselves as nationalists) did not support the foreign presence and occupation of the USSR. Conversely, they initially supported the Mujahidin, while this support waned as the insurgency became more religiously extremist.

RAWA’s political actions included public demonstrations and marches against the Soviet occupation, the formation of its political magazine–Payam-e-Zan (Women’s Message), and the development of social programs for displaced Afghans in refugee camps and settlements in Pakistan. Social programs became the political sustenance and strengthen of the organization. RAWA-run orphanages and schools developed into central sites for articulating its feminist nationalist politics and reproducing the organization (Fluri, 2008a). For example, in RAWA’s orphanages, food, shelter, clothing, and education are provided; while simultaneously instructing the children in RAWA’s political ideologies (i.e. women’s rights, democracy, secularism, and nonviolence).

After the death of Meena (1987) and as conditions worsened for Afghans during the Mujahidin civil war (1992–1996) and the rule of the Taliban (1996–2001), RAWA’s resistance methods became increasingly covert. As part of their operations, RAWA members clandestinely photographed and videotaped the corporeal results of war such as physical injury to the body, poverty, lack of resources and the destruction of homes and communities. These images were used to discredit the legality and political legitimacy of violence
and fundamentalism during the civil war and Taliban eras. Documentation was also used to politically mobilize support for RAWA’s sociopolitical projects.

RAWA’s political magazine and Internet website (starting in 1996) provided a political forum for publicizing this documentation locally, regionally, and internationally. RAWA’s documentation of civil war Mujahidin and Taliban violence was presented publicly in order to convey “visual truth” statements that situated knowledge about war’s spoils in order to voice opposition to political violence in Afghanistan. RAWA simultaneously juxtaposed these images with their own sociopolitical solutions (i.e. healthcare, schools, and income generating projects). RAWA’s use of documentation politically constructed geographic scale, which effectively bypassed the state and provided them with significant financial support from sympathetic individuals and organizations. RAWA’s methods for documenting political violence required a tactical form of surveillance as resistance.

**Surveillance from below and the political construction of scale**

RAWA’s visual capture of state (and civil war military/paramilitary) violence integrated a mobile and clandestine use of surveillance technologies (i.e. photography and video). The chador (burqa) provided women with the corporeal-privacy and public mobility required for this type of covert documentation particularly during the civil war and Taliban eras. The use of a burqa-clad body with hidden photographic and video technologies inverted panoptical surveillance and constructed an alternative epistemology of violence from below. RAWA’s surveillance of the state included politically framing images (or video) with text to situate the knowledge of war and violence at the site of the body and through its own political lens. For example, in one of its publications, RAWA includes photographs of Taliban soldiers committing acts of violence with the following text:

Taliban are barely literate, consider photography, television, cinema and an endless list of modern everyday needs and practices as satanic, but love to flog and humiliate, and own expensive latest model vehicles. RAWA has pledged to fight fundamentalist terror and tyranny perpetrated in the name of religion (RAWA c. 1998).

This publication also illustrates poverty, displacement, and corporeal violence as visual examples of Taliban rule. RAWA offers a vision of its sociopolitical programs as an effective counter to violence and a opportunity for alternative governance. RAWA’s use of image and text illustrate public (civil war and state) violence in stark contrast to images of its own sociopolitical programs. Visual mediums (such as photography and video) became essential components of RAWA’s resistance tactics and methods for communicating and circulating its political message. RAWA sought to situate knowledge through its “visual truth” statements about the spoils of political violence and Afghan politics and conversely illustrate viable alternatives such as its own sociopolitical projects. The structure of RAWA and its collection of visual data typify a tactical “below the radar” resistance (as defined by De Certeau, 1984). These resistance tactics include the use of public media beyond RAWA’s magazine to increase the spatial distribution of its message. Local, regional, and international media also publish articles and other documentation issued directly by RAWA or in some cases appropriated from its website (RAWA, 2002a).

RAWA’s inverted panoptical surveillance framed violence through place-based destruction at the scale of homes, businesses and bodies. RAWA’s surveillance of state violence politically constructed geographic scale by way of linking its resistance to international human/women’s rights discourses. RAWA identified Taliban (and civil war Mujahidin) violence as human rights abuses, which was also articulated by internationally respected watchdog groups (i.e. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch). Additionally, RAWA recognized and highlighted the links between Afghan Mujahidin and Taliban with political influence and weapons from outside powers. For example, in RAWA publications, the Taliban and extremist factions of the Mujahidin are continually identified as politically linked to or manipulated by foreign countries, most notably the United States, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia (see RAWA, 1997: 52–66). Thus, RAWA’s inverted panoptical surveillance of violent governance, sought to de-legitimize these powers by politically scaling their use of violence to internationally defined human rights abuses and international intrusion on Afghanistan politics (RAWA, 1997, 2000, 2002b, 2002c).

RAWA’s inverted panoptical surveillance provided a corporeal place from which to criticize the Taliban (and civil war Mujahidin) as legitimate state leaders. This tactical use of place and scale incorporated RAWA’s situated knowledge of violence from below. These tactics also provided RAWA with transnational support (both political and financial) because its visual data of Taliban violence and corresponding use of internationally recognized human/women’s rights discourses resonated with individuals in various locations both in and outside Afghanistan. RAWA’s political construction of scale enacted western defined “universal” standards for human rights as a valuable tactic for developing international political support and increasing financial donations from individuals (most notably from North America, Europe, Australia and Japan).

RAWA’s documentation of Taliban-dominated Afghanistan illustrated a form of state violence that was beyond the limits of acceptability or legitimacy—as defined internationally. RAWA attempted to rescale justice and bypass the Taliban (as the de facto state government) through the use of the Internet and its correspondences with human rights organizations and transnational supporters. However, RAWA’s political message filtered through media, and Internet technologies came in tandem with a distinct loss of control over the use, meaning, and the situated knowledge or “visual truths” RAWA sought to communicate.

**Multiple truths: re-situating and re-scaling political knowledge**

The public use of RAWA’s documentation, which is available through their website (http://www.rawa.org) allowed for multiple truths, knowledges, and solutions to be drawn from images of civil war and Taliban violence. Most notably, the spatial shift in U.S.-led international attention toward Afghanistan after 9-11-01, was a pivotal turning point both for RAWA’s immediate increase in recognition internationally and the subsequent loss of control over its political framing of state/military violence.

Prior to 9-11-01 RAWA’s documentation was sent to various international media outlets with the expectation that the images would “shock” the international community and discredit the Taliban as a legitimate government. The now infamous image of a burqa-clad woman shot in the football (soccer) stadium in Kabul was filmed by RAWA. This video was taken well before 9-11-01 but not shown on global media networks (i.e. CNN, BBC) until after 9-11-01.

The video of Zarimeen’s execution was documented well before 11th September, but no one from the BBC or CNN would show our footage... They said it was too graphic for viewers. Then after 11th September it is on all these stations and more, repeated again and again. In the beginning they gave RAWA...
credit and wanted to hear our opinions, but now they use it without our permission, and they do not include out ideas for change in Afghanistan (RAWA member 2004).

U.S.-led international political and military interventions in Afghanistan (post 9–11–01) distinctly re-politicized gender politics and Taliban corporeal violence, by way of linking the “savior” of Afghan women to U.S. military action. Geographic critique of the use of violence and justifications for America’s ‘‘new war’’, highlight the discourse of a ‘‘universally’’ held morality, security, and fear based urgency as central components of the U.S. war-on-terror strategies. (Dalby, 2003; Flint & Falah, 2004; Hannah, 2006). Moral uses of violence and essentialist dichotomies of masculinity and femininity are also identified as hallmarks of gender politics during war or political conflict (Enloe, 2000; Giles & Hyndman, 2004). Feminist scholars have also critiqued the gendering of U.S. military violence in Afghanistan, which relied upon the use of women’s rights discourses through masculine-defined security and the “saving women” trope (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Hunt, 2002; Tickner, 2002; Young, 2003).

RAWA’s documentation of Taliban violence when used by the U.S. in a post 9–11–01 context re-politicized women’s rights in order to identify a new “visual truth” of U.S.-led coalition violence as a force of benevolence. Situated knowledge of violence from below was re-scaled from above both discursively and militarily through bombing. The “new” visual truth of 12 Taliban violence gendered the victims as female through the repetition of images that focused on women rather than men as primary victims of Taliban violence (Whitlock, 2007). However, on closer inspection of RAWA’s cadre of images, men rather than women represent the primary recipients of corporeal violence (such as amputations and public executions), with a ratio of 5:1 (men: women). Representations of male victims did not meet the re-situation of knowledge or “visual truth” articulated in the U.S. (i.e. male-Taliban perpetrator/female-Afghan victim). Male victims distracted from the gendered assumptions and geographic framings of Afghanistan that included “saving and liberating” Afghan women.

RAWA’s political scaling of its documentation through its links to U.S.-based feminists also focused on the Taliban’s compulsory requirement that all Afghan women wear the burqa (chadori) as visual testimony of state-sponsored misogyny. The image of the burqa-clad suffering Afghan woman proved effective for rallying public support in the U.S. against the Taliban, which was also crititized for further essentializing Afghan women (see Azarbajani-Moghadam, 2004; Fluri, 2008b). RAWA’s feminist politics when scaled internationally simplified Taliban violence and inscribed it onto women’s bodies, rather than illustrate the complexities of the Taliban’s gendered violence, which is more pronounced in RAWA’s politics locally.

As argued by feminist scholars, the burqa’s symbolism of women’s oppression, effectively garnered U.S. and international support for the local victims of “terrorism” in Afghanistan, namely women. The violence and suffering of Afghan women under the Taliban provided the visual empathy necessary for enacting the “saving women” trope to further legitimize the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Corporeal violence first captured and politically scaled by RAWA was re-politicized in the U.S. by similarly linking Taliban violence to women’s rights abuses by way of a “universally” held morality. The solutions to state violence sought by RAWA included nonviolent international assistance and support for its own sociopolitical projects. Conversely, the re-politicization of RAWA’s documentation in the U.S. post 9–11–01 subsequently constructed Afghan men as barbaric in stark contrast to the civilizing mission of U.S.-led coalitions forces.

The expectation that military invasion and sociopolitical occupation through foreign aid/investment would save and liberate Afghan women discounted existing gender relations and the social and political aspects of Afghanistan’s diverse communities. The social fabric of Afghanistan’s ethnic and tribal groups, the power of local Mullahs (religious leaders), Maliks (local tribal leaders), a weak central government, and strong reverence for private space and family decision making have continually prevented central governments and international influences from effectively altering gender norms in Afghanistan beyond the capital city, Kabul (Kandiyozi, 2005; Moghadam, 1997, 1999, 2002; Zulfarac, 2006). For example, RAWA (despite its transnational politics) insists that women’s rights can only come from women and men within Afghanistan; otherwise these rights would be subject to seizure and violation. RAWA also remains suspect of international intervention within its own organizational structure and therefore only indigenous Afghan women (who live in Afghanistan or in refugee areas in Pakistan) can become members.5 Although men are also barred from membership, RAWA retains a large network of male supporters both locally (through kinship, friendship, and education) and transnationally.

Rights based agendas and moral uses of violent technologies were not articulated in the U.S. exemplify civilized or moral violence in contrast to existing spaces of irrational violence (Dalby, 2003; Gregory, 2004). Similar to stripping the burqa form it spatial, contextual and cultural histories in order to rally support for women through their symbolic unveiling; images of corporeal public violence documented by RAWA were re-politicized. This enacted a politics of violence from above by way of bombing and discursively invoking the saving women trope.

RAWA’s loss of control over the use and manipulation of its own documentation also presented the organization with significant challenges. RAWA’s long-term censure of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan fueled its 2001 criticisms of the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan and the U.S. led political and military cooperation with former Mujahidin groups (most notably the Northern Alliance).

RAWA’s documentation of the corporeal affects of aerial bombing similar to that of the Taliban, included their politically charged “visual truth” statements of violence from below. Civilian deaths were the platform from which RAWA critiqued the military methods used by the U.S. to fight the Taliban (RAWA, 2001). By documenting images of civilian deaths as a result of bombing, RAWA sought to articulate a similar inverted panoptical surveillance of state-military violence. (RAWA, 2001) RAWA’s existing network of supporters in the United States were also instrumental in RAWA’s formal presentation to the U.S. Congress:

Bombing would really not root out terrorism. It might get rid of Osama bin Laden or the Taliban or terrorist camps in Afghanistan, but still that does not mean that is has done the job. We believe that there should be stoppage of financial, military, and political … or any other kind of support for the Taliban as well as to other groups who are involved in war in Afghanistan. And that is the only way to eradicate terrorism and bring a peaceful and prosperus society for our country. (Faryal, 2002).

This presentation was largely symbolic and did not have a significant impact on congressional or military decision making toward Afghanistan. RAWA’s politics and popularity in the U.S. presented a political enigma to the representations of Afghan women as burqa-clad victims in need of savior. RAWA’s post 9–11–01 political critiques of U.S. foreign policy disrupted existing gendered dichotomies namely; male-Taliban violence against female-Afghan victims. Subsequently, RAWA moved from the spotlight as radical women resisters who dared to face the Taliban, to marginalized victims in need of U.S. led–international savior.
This political use of gender attempted to displace the agency of these Afghan women by scaling their victim-hood to the local spaces of Taliban control, and conversely rescaling their savior by way of U.S.-led coalition forces. The political construction of scale, from the body-as-victim to international intervention, provided a space for rearticulating a message of military invasion and occupation as morally just. Conversely, Afghan men became the displaced victims of Taliban violence and subsequently (re)scaled as a dualistic agent of either international terrorism or a local-nationalist ally to the U.S. led coalition.

RAWA members’ lived experiences of war and violence in addition to the organization’s documentation of violence from below was ineffectual for changing the course of U.S. military policy in Afghanistan. RAWA (post 9-11-01) gained significant media, supporter, and some government attention, while loosing the ability to manage and control the meaning or “truth” they desired to communicate with their documentation. The use of human/ women’s rights discourses by both RAWA and the U.S. exemplify the power of this discourse and gender tropes to shape public understanding and political action. It also illustrates the difficulties of content control and the ability of visual data to convey any absolute truth (also see Crang, 1994; Rose, 2001). RAWA’s transnational successes through the use of the Internet and other technologies include a clear weaknesses associated with the management and maintenance of constructing geographic scale and gender politics.

However, RAWA’s politics resonated beyond the Afghan and U.S. states respectively. RAWA continues to influence the political information disseminated electronically (and in print) in the U.S. through its supporter network. RAWA’s critiques of U.S. foreign policy have influenced its supporters living in the U.S. Similarly, many RAWA supporters found RAWA through its critical approach to U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan. The U.S. citizenry critical of U.S. foreign policy and influenced by RAWA’s political standpoints are also the individuals from whom RAWA draws some of its largest financial support. These transnational linkages between RAWA and their supporters in the U.S. by in large remain within the sphere of informal political action and fund raising. Transnational support also includes the publication of articles and books about RAWA and Afghanistan, which 1) mirror RAWA’s political framework, 2) are published and sold outside Afghanistan, and 3) are written by current and former RAWA supporters (see Brodsky, 2003; Herold, 2001, 2004; Kolhatkar & Ingalls, 2006; Zoya, Follain, & Cristofari, 2002). This transnational network exemplifies RAWA’s political scaling and transnationalism from below.

As stated earlier, despite RAWA’s international networks and attempts to politically scale their documentation internationally, this organization remains local and nationalist in its political goals and ambitions. RAWA’s organizational strength and sustenance remain spatially focused on local and national issues, which manifest in seemingly apolitical sites such as homes, schools, and orphanages (which it continues to operate below the radar of the state). These places are central to the production and reproduction of its political ideologies.

Collateral bodies and political subjects

RAWA members, local-Afghan supporters, and children living in RAWA run orphanages have all experienced loss and displacement due to political conflict. Descriptions of violence whether perpetrated by Taliban or U.S. bombings are expressed with similar anger and frustration. For example, fear and animosity toward the Taliban by children and their adult caregivers, were discussed in tandem with the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan as irrational, brutal, and an increase rather than decrease in physical and emotional pain. These emotive responses to violence are an important component of RAWA’s articulation of nonviolence and the development of war victims into political subjects. RAWA members and supporters define and describe violence as ineffectual despite the political intentions of states. For example, in RAWA influenced places, such as schools and orphanages, young men and women express politically charged comparisons between the U.S. and the Taliban.

They bomb us to find Bin Laden and Omar (leader of the Taliban) and now they are still free. We know where Bin Laden is – he is with Bush as they are brothers. Bin Laden brings terrorism to our country and Bush acts as his brother by bombing us (Female-Afghan Student in a RAWA school, 2005).

This quote and similar statements made by other students (and graduates of RAWA orphanages who are now members or male supporters) exemplify the political subjectivity developed and reproduced in these sociopolitical places. These sites are central for developing RAWA’s geopolitics of (non)violence from below. The survivors of political violence are the subjects from whom RAWA draws local support. Although it is evident from various political frameworks that violence perpetrated by the Taliban, U.S., or other groups may be classified as politically distinct. For the victims of political violence in living in a politically charged site (such as a RAWA orphanage) civilian deaths are defined and described as explicitly similar, and politically linked

These connections help to foster RAWA’s political criticism of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan both in historic and contemporary contexts. RAWA members also continue to express fear, anger and frustration with fundamentalist groups, coupled with both a desire for international assistance and critiques of its shortcomings and failures. For example:

We understand the need for and we want international help. That is why we documented these human rights abuses by the Jihadis and the Taliban. We thought that if the world saw how we were suffering, they would provide more assistance to Afghanistan. But the use of bombs and the increase in violence is the same as when the U.S. supported the Taliban [before 9–11–01]. Now after 11th September, to get rid of the Taliban they used bombs, the Northern Alliance and other warlords (RAWA member, 2003).

Three years after this interview RAWA members articulated similar frustrations with the role of international and U.S. military forces in Afghanistan:

There is a need for military because there is a fear of civil war. The military knows that they are needed and they take advantage of this need; this empowers them. They are powerful and they are free to do anything … [If we were in power] RAWA would first stop international countries from supporting—Puppet regimes, jehadists, and fundamentalists—some seem to be democratic but they are not. Countries continue to give money and power to these people. These countries need to support [only] the people of Afghanistan (RAWA member, 2006).

RAWA recognizes “the need” for and shortcomings associated with international military and other “assistance” in Afghanistan. RAWA also highlights the increase in civilian deaths, the rise of the Taliban in the south, the growing power of warlords, continued abuses of women in public space, lack of security, and declining power of the central government as visual and textual data for its current political critiques. Civilian deaths are the geographic nodal points for RAWA’s political construction of scale, geopolitics of violence from below, and the production/reproduction of political subjects. Civilian lives and deaths also shape transnational supporters’ political epistemologies of Afghanistan and U.S. foreign policy. RAWA’s inability to influence macro-level political changes at national and international scales, despite their attempts identifies

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ties and human/women’s rights discourses. The resistance methods political violence from below. The political construction of scale for collateral damage and human displacements. Civilian bodies are international in order to reach beyond the control of the state. Geographies were politically scaled from the site of the body to the alternative lens through which to examine the spatial and social destinies operations.

organization or its programs, and its continued insistence on clan-assistance that request or demand social or political influence on the needs and concerns of Afghan supporters (both existing and potential). On the one hand RAWA “went public” internationally by scaling their political solutions and goals were shaped locally to address the threats based on the use of Afghanistan by Al Qaeda. Solutions to the violence and totalitarian rule of the Taliban were politically scaled by both RAWA and the U.S. through the purview of international intervention with decidedly different critical stances and methodological solutions.

RAWA’s political construction of scale morphologized conflict and rights, thereby identifying local/state/international violence within a linguistic and acceptable framework of international rights-based discourse. Criticism of international intervention in Afghanistan similarly linked local violence to international intrusion, manipulation and the invasion on Afghan politics by outside powers. RAWA’s transnationalism from below also provided the organization with increases in international recognition and financial support. Their transnationalism from below appealed to western feminists, while their political solutions and goals were shaped locally to address the needs and concerns of Afghan supporters (both existing and potential). On the one hand RAWA “went public” internationally by scaling its surveillance of the state to “universal” human rights discourse. On the other hand its sociopolitical solutions remain fixed to the local, and critical of international political intervention. This is exemplified by its strict membership requirements, the refusal of funds or assistance that request or demand social or political influence on the organization or its programs, and its continued insistence on clandestine operations.

Corporal and place-based scales of political analysis provide an alternative lens through which to examine the spatial and social outcomes of formal and informal politics. Informal politics, resistance, and the situated knowledge of violence exemplified by local geographies were politically scaled from the site of the body to the international in order to reach beyond the control of the state. Locally, RAWA also actively develops political subjects from war’s collateral damage and human displacements. Civilian bodies are increasingly more pronounced on the battleground of asymmetric, insurgent and counter-insurgent warfare, as well as resistance to this use of violence such as articulated by RAWA. Therefore this article has sought to complicate the existing visible scenes of political violence from below. The political construction of scale for both RAWA and the U.S. relied on western-led “universal” moralities and human/women’s rights discourses. The resistance methods and political ideologies of RAWA, and the tactics of civilian survival provide a significant counter-politics to state and inter-state conflict. This case study also highlights the power of gender politics and its various manipulations to criminalize, resist, and legitimize the use military/paramilitary violence.

As argued by feminist political geographers, political movements such as RAWA are indeed relevant for geopolitical analysis because they operate outside the macro and formal political spaces and scales of geopolitics. Critical scholarship on political violence should include examinations of gender and the geopolitics of violence from below. It is within these informal places and sites below macro-scale political frameworks that require additional and further study in order to increase a nuanced understanding of the spatial, social and far reaching impacts of and resistance to local, state, and inter-state conflict.

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Endnotes

1 However, women were prominent in resistance factions outside the pan-Islamic extremist movements, which were subsidized by the United States and Saudi Arabia, and also influenced by Pakistan (2003; Rubin 2002). Also, Edwards (2002) argues that power brokers on various sides of the Soviet-Afghan war sought local influence through the control of women’s lives.

2 The chadori, also known as burqa is a full-body cover, that is worn over clothes when a woman exits her home, the woman’s face is also covered with a mesh screen over the eyes. The fabric of the burqa is pleated and worn loosely to conceal the shape of a woman’s body. Usage of the chadori/burqa in Afghanistan varies by ethnic group, location, and family belief structures.

3 Human/women’s rights are linked in this paper as they are used interchangeably by RAWA and in the U.S. At times women’s rights are identified as separate or unique from human rights as part of gender politics. This is signaled in the paper by using the term women’s rights rather than human/women’s rights.

4 See Olesen (1995) for more detailed information about Mujahidin resistance factions and international influences.

5 High profile RAWA members also do not allow their faces to be photographed or shown in video-taped interviews as part of their own security and clandestine politics.

6 RAWA’s political strengthen remains outside formal systems of governance and political power Internationally and in Afghanistan. RAWA also employs historical data to bolster its arguments against the use of force and violence; most notably, RAWA’s public denouncement of the U.S.’s support of extremist factions of the Mujahidin resistance throughout the 1980s. RAWA also highlights the U.S. support of the Taliban in the early years of its formation in Afghanistan and eventual control of Kabul City (also see Rubin 2002; Rashid 2001). However, one of RAWA’s largest networks of financial supporters is located in the United States.

7 RAWA sends updates to their transnational supports via email list serves and publications. These include critiques of Afghanistan politics, religious fundamentalist and extremist groups, and U.S.-led international interventions. For example in a 2003 publication sent to its international supporters, RAWA included images of Taliban violence along with civilian injuries and deaths caused by the U.S. bombing in its section entitled: Documentation of Human Rights Abuses (RAWA, 2003).

8 RAWA uses the term Jihadis to refer to extremist factions of the Mujahidin.

9 RAWA members must be Afghan women that live in Afghanistan or refugee spaces in Pakistan, rather than part of the extensive Afghan diaspora. International supporters (both male and female) cannot become members. Local male supporters participate actively within the organization but cannot become members or hold leadership positions. RAWA does not allow financial donors to participate in or influence the management and political trajectory of the organization. However, they do provide reports on the use of funds for their social programs and allow major donors to visit and review their operations.

References
