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Book Review: A women's place: U.S. Counterterrorism since 9/11

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Cover Page Footnote

N/A

Cook, J. (2020). *A women's place: U.S. Counterterrorism since 9/11*. Oxford University Press. 564 pp. \$49.95 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-19-750655-4.
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In *A woman's place: U.S. counterterrorism since 9/11*, Joana Cook aims to examine how, where, and why women have become visible in discourses and practices related to the United States (U.S.) counterterrorism efforts since 2001. She argues that the diverse actors contributing to counterterrorism efforts increasingly consider and impact women as agents and targets of their work, yet there is a void about how and why counterterrorism efforts evolved as they did concerning women. She further illustrates that "women have never been more relevant to broad counterterrorism considerations," but this relevance is "conspicuously undocumented and underexamined" (pp. 8-9). She identifies shortcomings in the accessibility of gendered security studies and tries to bridge the gap between the academic world and government actions regarding security and its relation to women's position. Accordingly, Cook provides a framework to organize and assess how women can be involved into all security aspects, particularly countering terrorism. This review will highlight different aspects of the U.S. agencies' work concerning women and will mostly reference examples of Afghanistan from the book.

Cook's work describes the changing dynamics of terrorism and counterterrorism. This is obvious in the work of the U.S. when it used the status of Afghan women to justify its invasion of Afghanistan to save Afghan women from the Taliban's fundamentalism. In addition, she points to the gender dynamics in Muslim courtiers and cultures, such as Afghanistan, that affected the U.S. military's interactions with the local Afghan women and clarifies the need for American women's involvement in the Department of Defense to assist with these efforts. Assuming the local women could easily trust them, American women entered the frontlines of war and conflicts. In addition, female American soldiers engaged with women in the cultural support roles and training of Afghan/Iraqi women in the National Police and military, because their feminine presence appeared to soften the image of the U.S. military for local women. In describing counterterrorism, Cook emphasizes that while the U.S. counterterrorism efforts made local and American women's roles visible, they, at the same time, negatively impacted local women's status in countries such as Afghanistan. One of these instances is the violations of human dignity by female American soldiers at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons. Women's involvement in these abuses, among others, added a layer to the shame experienced by the families of the prisoners.

To analyze U.S. counterterrorism's positive impact on women's visibility, Cook focuses on the ongoing discussions of the Department of Defense regarding

women's inclusion in security sections. This department has been trying to enable women to join the security forces and govern Afghanistan with "good enough" security (p. 182). However, reading with a transitional feminist lens, one can easily criticize the author's approach regarding the lack of information on the situation of Afghan women in security and defense forces. Afghan women in these forces are among the lowest level positions, mainly in service sections; they didn't have proper uniforms and struggled with the highest rates of sexual harassment in their workplaces. I believe there were improvements regarding women's inclusion in the security department of Afghanistan, but were these efforts enough for highlighting "the other" and "over there" women's roles from a transnational feminist¹ perspective? How could we reduce the influence of "one size fits all" and bring attention to including the diverse narratives, cultures, and experiences of those women while trying to make their roles visible? These are essential questions to discuss, specifically in graduate-level courses, including but not limited to transnational feminist theories, feminist teaching and learning, and collective action. Cook's perspective incites questions and prompts additional research on this matter. Thus, it can be a good resource in gender and women's studies departments for analyzing the role of power structures in making "other" women's roles visible/invisible and differentiating the impact of white/dominant feminism and transnational feminisms regarding women's place as a result of the U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

In units four and five, Cook does a comprehensive examination of the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) services concerning Afghanistan by stating that despite significant investment of money for supporting Afghan women, the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) didn't develop any coherent strategies. OTI's efforts mainly consisted of small and seemingly haphazard projects that were rarely spent on the real empowerment of these women in Afghanistan. In the last chapter, Cook looks at the current state of ISIS and Al-Qaeda in countries that have targeted counterterrorism efforts. Unit six references the U.S. troops' withdrawal, the peace talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the lack of meaningful participation of Afghan women in these negotiations. However, there is a void regarding the U.S. strategy for peace negotiations and the policy of compromising Afghan women's rights, advocacies, and achievements over the last 20 years. From a feminist pedagogical perspective, it will be efficient for the instructors to pay attention to

¹ Transnational feminist perspectives focus on the diverse experiences of women; they transcend nation-state boundaries and speak to a wide range of interacting forces that have an impact on gendered relationships in a geopolitical context. Transnational feminist theory seeks to destabilize notions that the world's women share the same types of experiences, oppressions, and privileges; they explore differences and inequalities between women, such as different priorities and ways of understanding gender issues (Enns et al., 2021).

the current situation of Afghanistan, women, and other minorities that, as a result of the United States abrupt and un-strategic peace negotiations, are suffering from the cruelty of the Taliban once again. This will help the class to be aware of the gendered impacts of counterterrorism efforts and power structures' role in determining women's place in societies like Afghanistan.

Reference List

- Cook, J. (2020). *A women's place: U.S. Counterterrorism since 9/11*. Oxford University Press.
- Enns, Carolyn Zerbe, et al. (2021) Transnational feminist theory and practice: An introduction. *Women & Therapy*, 44(12), DOI:10.1080/02703149.2020.1774997.