

# Islam-Muslim Women “Saving” Muslim Women from their own culture: Three case studies of humanitarian intervention

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts inspired by Western principles of emancipation in comparison with indigenous relief efforts. Specifically, cases relating to Muslim women will be shown to exemplify general problems associated with humanitarian efforts on behalf of “other women.” This paper argues that Western humanitarian interventions are ineffective acts of cultural imperialism, and that interventions by local women’s agencies, combined with international support and media coverage, yield much better results. It also argues that international aid work should be grounded in the local cultures, whereas local NGOs should adopt Western modes of operating.

**KEYWORDS:** *Muslim, Humanitarianism, Women*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Humanitarianism is widely regarded as a universally valid principle despite its Western origins. Humanitarianism provides incentive to challenge local customs and practices, and overturn hierarchies of ethnicity, religion, and gender in ways that may be foreign to the societies it targets.<sup>2</sup> In the case of women, who are traditionally seen as submissive and in need of masculine support, the stereotype of helpless females struggling under social constraints often garners support for idealized interventions, while the perspective and struggles of actual women are not considered.

This paper analyzes the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts inspired by Western principles of emancipation in comparison with indigenous relief efforts. Specifically, cases relating to Muslim women will be shown to exemplify general problems associated with humanitarian efforts on behalf of “other women.” First, I discuss the origins of the idea of “emancipating” Muslim women, focusing on its two parts: humanitarian ideas about saving women, and Western ideas about “modernizing” the “other.” Then, I present four case studies: Yugoslavia’s local justice courts, international NGOs concerned with cosmetics and beauty ideals in Afghanistan, Pakistani local initiatives against honor killing, and the Malala funding phenomenon. In each case, liberation is promoted through varying methods, but with the same goal—supporting women. This paper argues that Western humanitarian interventions are ineffective acts of cultural imperialism, and that interventions by local women’s agencies, combined with international support and media coverage, yield much better results. It also argues that international aid work should be grounded in the local cultures, whereas local NGOs should adopt Western modes of operating.

Note: this paper does not distinguish between ‘human rights’ and ‘humanitarianism’, concepts that have been converging in recent years in the field of humanitarian care.<sup>3</sup> It will refer to them, in general, ‘humanitarian interventions’.

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2 .MARK DE VRIES, “Justin Vaïsse, Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011, \$19.95). Pp. 376. isbn978 0 6740 5051 8.,” *Journal of American Studies* 46, no. 4 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021875812001703>.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Moyn, “Human Rights and Humanitarianization,” *Humanitarianism and Human Rights*, 2020, pp. 33-48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108872485.002>.

### **Saving Christian Women: The Armenian Genocide**

Before the late 20th century, when Western humanitarianism set its sights on "rescuing" Muslim women, European women had long been the target of its efforts. The Armenian genocide in 1915 set a precedent for gender-based humanitarian action, marking the first time that the concept of "rescuing women" appeared in humanitarian writings.<sup>4</sup>

During Genocide the Ottoman government murdered approximately one million Armenians in an effort to ethnically 'cleanse' the six provinces of Eastern Anatolia. Armenians were subject to mass deportation. A far larger number of Armenian women and children were subjected to additional physical and sexual abuses.<sup>5</sup>

Female survivors told tales of deportations, separations, forced religious conversions, human trafficking, repeated rapes, and involuntary pregnancies, followed by years of forced servitude as agricultural workers, domestic servants, concubines, or coerced wives. The League of Nations (LON) intervened on behalf of "vulnerable" Armenian Christian refugee women and children (especially girls) in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> These humanitarian efforts were known as "The Rescue Movement"<sup>7</sup>.

The Armenian Genocide shaped the modern concept of humanitarianism, giving rise to a new gender-specific human-rights discourse. Western ideologues recognized violations of the human rights of women and children. In the Armenian case, violations against women were seen as distinctive from those against men, and treated differently. Thus began the process of addressing gender-specific issues.

However, these humanitarian efforts were directed at persons similar to the activists themselves—Caucasian Christians. These activists were especially affronted by unions between "white" Armenians and "Asiatic" Turks, whether forced or voluntary, viewing them as fundamentally immoral.<sup>8</sup>

The LON set up rescue homes, to which they relocated children and women affected by the war. The personnel within these rescue homes distinguished Armenian (Christian) children from their Turkish counterparts and returned these "determined" Armenian children to the care of their respective communities. Record shows that very few of these children were determined to be Muslim (or Turkish), far less than the percentage of Turkish children and women that were also devastated by war. These actions were partly fueled by Western notions of Islamic oppression and cultural backwardness. W.A. Kennedy, a relief worker in Istanbul, noted in a contemporaneous League of Nations General Assembly report that "an entire people is an accomplice to this crime [i.e., the Armenian Genocide] . . . Rape, violence, fraud, the force of inertia, bad faith—all are employed by [Muslim] men who manifest a particularly odious form of fanaticism in carrying off [Christian] women and children to captivity and degradation."<sup>9</sup> Kennedy faulted the entire Turkish nation, while asserting the purity and innocence of Christian Armenian women. Thus Western rhetoric to do with the Armenian humanitarian crisis was an instance of cultural, even religious, exceptionalism. It was also the first highly visible publicizing of the idea of women as victims.

### **Liberal Internationalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror**

At the end of the 20th Century, the idea of "rescuing women" evolved into "rescuing other women" in the western humanitarian discourse, driven by the US's imperialist political interventions in the Middle East. The idea was shaped by three historical forces: the rise of Liberal Internationalism; and of Neoconservatism; and the War on Terror in the early 21st century.

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<sup>4</sup> Keith David Watenpaugh, "The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (2010): pp. 1315-1339, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.5.1315>.

<sup>5</sup> Rouben Paul Adalian, "Armenian Genocide (1915-1923)," *Armenian Genocide (1915-1923)*, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.armenian-genocide.org/genocide.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Keith David Watenpaugh, "The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (2010): pp. 1315-1339, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.5.1315>.

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<sup>8</sup> Keith David Watenpaugh, "The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (2010): pp. 1315-1339, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.5.1315>.

<sup>9</sup> Keith David Watenpaugh, "The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 5 (2010): pp. 1315-1339, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.5.1315>.

Liberal Internationalism, the idea that liberal states should liberate political objects in other sovereign states, pervaded mainstream thinking by the late 1990s, at the end of the Clinton presidency (US) and during the Blair prime minister-ship (UK). A series of humanitarian disasters, including the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the 1995 wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, prompted concerns about a world besieged by ethnic conflict, and the need to establish a liberal and democratic world order.<sup>10</sup> Confident of its exceptionalism, the US government naturally took the lead in promoting Western democratic values, deploying both humanitarian aid and military force across the globe.

An important related concept is that of neoconservatism: the promotion of democracy (in particular, in the Middle East) through American hegemony. Although liberal internationalism originated from the liberal left, neoconservatism from the right, they have much in common. Both ideologies support Western interventions in local regions and affairs.<sup>11</sup>

The War on Terror in the 21st Century further elevated the discourse on humanitarianism. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration, referring to the opposition between good and evil, commenced a war against "terrorism." US military interventions manifested notions of liberal internationalism and neoconservatism. Western media and political leaders enlisted women in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq to legitimize American military actions not as attacks upon civilians but upon terrorists.

First wife Laura Bush famously said, "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, we see how the focus of Western humanitarianism shifted over time from saving Christian women from oppressive Islamic rule to emancipating Muslim women, and women in general, from their societies and cultures. The "rescue" of Muslim women took several forms, including the acceptance of international beauty standards and practices, the elimination of allegedly "backward" cultural norms, and access to education. I now consider three case studies of Western humanitarian attempts at emancipating women.

### **Beauty Without Borders**

After 9/11, the US government initiated its campaign on the War of Terror, focusing on Iraq and Afghanistan. The US-led "Operation Enduring Freedom" convinced the world that freeing Afghan women required intervention. Since then, Afghan women and their bodies have remained at the center of a debate about tradition and modernity. On November 17, 2001, former First Lady Laura Bush delivered a national radio address, charging that "the brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists."<sup>13</sup> Bush underscored women's right to wear makeup and control their own bodies. And their right to education and healthcare. "Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish," she said. The media ran with this idea, portraying Afghan women's bodies as signifiers of emancipation and modernity, and the US as liberator.

This discourse is not new. The US government has a long history of promoting Western beauty standards abroad.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the Muslim headscarf has sparked debates about face-to-face communication in public spaces (e.g., schools), the separation between church and state, the presence of religious symbols in the public, the limits of toleration, and politics in a climate of multiculturalism. Western media and intellectuals decry the oppressive nature of the headscarf. Yet supporters assert that it is not only a sign of female emancipation (i.e. a sense of security for them to be at ease in public spheres), but also a symbol of religious acceptance.

The Western linking of "beauty" and "empowerment" was intensified in the recent War on Terror. Certain American beauticians, acting on an evangelical urge, opened beauty academies in Afghanistan to promote American standards of beauty. One case was chronicled in Liz Mermin's 2006 documentary *The Beauty Academy of Kabul*. This documentary analyzes the tactics and attitudes of three groups in the beauty academy of Kabul:

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Wertheim, "A Solution from Hell: the United States and the Rise of Humanitarian Interventionism, 1991-2003," *Journal of Genocide Research* 12, no. 3-4 (2010): pp. 149-172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2010.522053>.

<sup>11</sup> On neoconservatism see for instance: Justin Vaïsse: *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Other? Optional.

<sup>12</sup> Laura Bush, "Laura Bush on Taliban Oppression of Women," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, 2001), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext\\_111701.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html).

<sup>13</sup> Laura Bush, "Laura Bush on Taliban Oppression of Women," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, 2001), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext\\_111701.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html).

<sup>14</sup> Kathy Peiss, "Educating the Eye of the Beholder: American Cosmetics Abroad," October 1, 2002.

white American beauticians, their Afghan-American counterparts, and Afghan students. The white instructors display feminist neo-imperial individualism by insulating the Afghan women from their larger social context. Lacking cultural sensitivity, the beauticians assumed that U.S. beauty standards have universal appeal and will be accepted without question. 15

Consider the case of Ms. Grauel. A former Vogue stylist versed in U.S. ideals of women's wellness, Grauel promoted beauty routines focusing on leisure, meditation, exercise, and quality sleep heedless of the disparities between typical American middle/upper class lifestyles and those of her impoverished Afghan subjects. She failed to account for the difficulties Afghan women face every day from unrelenting schedules and demanding families. Grauel's cosmetic suggestions, though well-intentioned, were culturally inappropriate. The same held for her beauty sessions. For example, Grauel suggested that women contact "a professional" about "a sign of depression," failing to consider the Afghan cultural taboo against counseling. In addition, the beauticians advised their students not to dwell on the past, thus presenting imperial modernity as a mode of forgetting and the beautification process as a means of powdering over the blemishes of history. Yet Afghan women embrace Muslim cultural beauty and history. They don't consider it to be a defect. Asked to accept new beauty standards without fully understanding them, the students faced familial prohibitions and self-doubts. In fairness, the American instructors' cultural sensitivity grew over time. One of them, Ms. Turner, even adopted Afghan beauty practices. However, the beauty academy remained a locus of cultural contestation, stemming from fundamental misunderstandings.

In the documentary, three Afghan American instructors -- Sima Calkin, Shaima Ali, and Anisa Aximi -- took a different pedagogical approach than their colleagues, actively striving to bridge the gap between students and the teachers by seeking to understand Afghan culture and history. Calkin shared her own experience of exile, finding kinship with those who stayed in Afghanistan. When Grauel complains about students favoring small, tighter perms over the looser, wavier look popular in the U.S., Calkin explains that "everyone uses small curlers because everyone wants their perm to be real tight and to last a year," clarifying student's cosmetic preferences in relation to their financial constraints. When Grauel persists, Calkin responds, "did you hear what they said? There's a saying that someone who's riding a horse doesn't know how the guy who's walking feels." The rapport between Afghan American instructors and both American workers and local students was critical to the functionality of the beauty academy.

The beauty academy shut down after certain instructors capitalized on their experience in best-selling memoirs and national book tours. These put Afghan women's lives at risk by circulating pictures of them without headscarves, a violation of Taliban custom. Some instructors abruptly parted Afghanistan, leaving the academy in thousands of dollars of rental debt.

Evaluating the efforts of the Kabul Beauty Academy yields a mixed verdict, on the one hand showcasing the failure of Western efforts to "save" Muslim women "...with a great deal of fanfare, good intentions, and little actual knowledge of the local culture..."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the graduates of the academy have better incomes, and higher status in their families. Yet, the program was sui generis, not part of a systematic attempt at uplifting Afghan women. The academy, like other Western NGOs, are essentially disengaged albeit warmhearted onlookers, instillers of unwelcome ideas. In the beauty school case, the learning should have been mutual: while students were asked to absorb Western beauty ideals, instructors should have deepened their understanding of local cultural norms and sought to integrate them. The rigidness ideas and complacency of the Western humanitarians were responsible for the venture's failure. Rather than empowering Muslim women students, the school left many of them worse off than they were before.

The hegemonic framework of liberal international thinking is deeply flawed, privileging Western beauty ideals over non-western ones. The effect is to elevate Western culture while encouraging non-Westerners to disconnect from their own cultures. Liberating Muslim women by means of beauty practices helps promote consumerism and to open local markets to western business interests. And new beauty practices do give Afghan women greater freedom to do as they please with their bodies; however, such practices can also create false feelings of empowerment, potentially distracting Afghan women from essential political goals and further reinforcing gender hierarchies.

Further complicating matters, only few Afghan women even benefit from such freedoms. In Afghanistan, maternal mortality rates are among the world's highest; girls' access to education is curtailed by violence and political intimidation; many women live in extreme poverty and are forced to become beggars or sex

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<sup>16</sup> Purnima Bose, "From Humanitarian Intervention to the Beautifying Mission: Afghan Women and Beauty without Borders," *Genders* 1998-2013, February 22, 2017, <https://www.colorado.edu/gendersarchive/1998-2013/2010/01/03/humanitarian-intervention-beautifying-mission-afghan-women-and-beauty-without-borders>.

workers. Although cosmetics can empower, most Afghan are concerned with basic survival. The Western ideological associating of “beauty” and “empowerment” is thus more rhetorical than real.

Granted, the demands of global branding have increasingly prompted American cosmetic firms to promote a diversity of beauty ideals with reference to distinct ethnic imagery. Local beauty experts help bridge the gap between American beauty ideals and ones closer to home. These approaches, amplified by empowerment rhetoric, have motivated the U.S. beauty industry since 2000. Even so, the Western beauty ideal remains culturally dominant. For example, American firms market skin lighteners to darker skinned Muslim women, suggesting that such products will enhance their class mobility. Such trends risk leading Muslim women to deny their identity and hinder their efforts towards political and cultural empowerment.

### **Merging the Local and the International**

There is considerable humanitarian focus on Muslim women’s education. Such education is essential to women’s autonomy, the preservation of rights and health, and the improved prospects of the next generation. In parts of the Muslim world, girls’ education is simultaneously under attack and used to foment religious extremism. Many NGOs promote girl’s education as a basic women’s right.

One such organization is the UNESCO Malala Fund for Girls’ Right to Education, established in 2013 following the assassination attempt against Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani teenager and activist for girls’ education<sup>17</sup>. An international initiative, the Fund has projects in several countries, aimed at addressing gender norms, demystifying stereotypes, and promoting girl’s and women’s empowerment through education. Its projects range from gender-sensitive training for teachers to awareness-raising about the need for girls’ education. Some projects are delegated to local activist “Education Champions” whose understanding of the local culture and, often, status as girls themselves, makes them better able to import human rights ideals into their home countries. Malala initiatives are specifically designed to recognize regional cultural distinctions and the challenges they raise. I shall now consider the Malala Fund’s work in Afghanistan as a case study of international human rights projects grounded in local cultures.

Afghan community advocate Deema Hiram, a female Afghan student, promoted girls’ education when girls were banned from attending schools in the 1990s. Deema temporarily migrated to Pakistan with her family to further her education. These experiences raised her awareness of the uncertainties girls face in Afghanistan’s education system and of the reasons for their soaring drop-out rates. Deema received a Malala Fund grant to develop community-based education and accelerated learning programs for internally displaced children. Deema assessed 55 schools across Afghanistan, identifying 20 with the highest dropout rates, and mobilizing groups of students, parents, teachers, community leaders to discuss ways of improving educational access for girls.<sup>18</sup> In response to local family concerns about the lack of female teachers exacerbating drop-out rates, Deema struck agreements with district and provincial education officials to recruit larger numbers of female teachers.

The Malala Fund utilizes faith-based advocacy methods to promote education in rural communities. In 2016, it granted Rahmatullah, an organizer of the Social Association for Development of Afghanistan (SADA), funding to implement his “inclusive community-based approach to bring about fundamental change.” Rahmatullah believes that certain long-held misinterpretations of the Qur’an and Islamic beliefs are at the root of local communities’ reluctance to provide girls’ education. Rahmatullah does not reject religion, but rather conducts village-level advocacy through coalitions of parents, religious leaders, and village elders that challenge social norms by redefining religious beliefs. He notes, for example, that the Quran does not prohibit girls from going to school, despite a common misconception. Rahmatullah has succeeded in raising girls’ enrollment rates and lowered their attrition rate. He is now the executive director of SADA and leads a team of 64 workers across southern Afghanistan.

A distinctive feature of the Malala Fund is its belief that advancing girls’ education requires action at multiple levels — sub-national, national, and global. The Fund places special emphasis on the local level and local activism. This requires considerable flexibility. Malala enterprises are diverse in structure and in strategy, adept at supporting grassroots initiatives, mobilizing Muslim women to action, and at pushing local education officials to take measures to measures to promote girls’ education.

Another Western organization that also promotes women’s education, though less effectively, is the Central Asia Institute (CAI). Founded by humanitarian activist Greg Mortenson, this organization has built over a

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<sup>17</sup> “Malala Yousafzai Speaks Today and Announces Malala Fund to Support Girls' Access to Education,” PRWeb (Vocus PRW Holdings LLC, February 4, 2013), <https://www.prweb.com/releases/2013/2/prweb10393724.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> Deema Hiram, “Deema Hiram, Education Champion: Malala Fund,” , Education Champion | Malala Fund, 2019, <https://malala.org/champions/deema-hiram>.

hundred and seventy schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, that serve approximately 30,000 students -- three quarters of them girls<sup>19</sup>. Mortensen's goal is to build schools in all the rural economically unstable areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Mortensen wants to win the "hearts and minds" of the Islamic world, and to promote peace through mutual understanding. In lectures at American military academies and discussions with senior military officers, he advocates the view that Islamist extremism is best fought through female education, quoting an African proverb, "If you educate a boy, you educate an individual. If you educate a girl, you educate a community."<sup>20</sup> Mortenson cites facts: in areas where women are educated infant mortality rates are lower, population pressures are lesser, and community health is better.

However, despite CAI's laudable intentions and their positive impact on girl's education, the organization has also experienced major setbacks on account of faulty strategy.

A main criticism of CAI is that many of the so-called schools it helped build were not actually schools. CAI and Mortenson place great weight on statistics—number of schools, number of girls in target regions, etc. Yet, they often lose sight of their educational goals. Mortensen, in his book *Three Cups of Tea*, writes at length about building schools yet says little about such essentials as recruiting and training teachers, designing curriculums, and promoting girl's enrollment rates.<sup>21</sup> It also neglects to discuss such cultural issues families' disinclination to send girls to school. The risk is building schools that attract no students. Lacking long-term strategies and strong local support systems, CAI schools are unsustainable as designed. Mortensen's wife, Tara Bishop, refers to Mortensen's "myopic passion"<sup>22</sup>—a devotion to a cause that has outstripped his management abilities.

Another criticism has to do with corruption. CAI, though officially a non-profit organization with an independent board of directors, is essentially operated by Mortenson himself. Mortenson has great sway over decisions about where to build schools and what type of humanitarian aid to disburse. Mortensen's largely unchecked power has led to charges of mismanagement of funds. Reporters for CBS's "60 Minutes" news show claim that nearly half of the 30 CAI schools they visited were "empty, built by someone else or not receiving any support." They also alleged that CAI spent more money on promoting publications than they did on building schools. Former associates of Mortenson accused him of using CAI as his own "private ATM."<sup>23</sup> Although Mortenson denies these claims, they do raise serious concerns.

A comparison of the Mala Fund and CAI, both aimed at advancing female education, makes clear that a mission's success depends on understanding local cultures and on utilizing grassroots activism. Though Mortenson claims to build bonds with local communities, he nonetheless seeks to impose the perverse thinking—that success in promoting education is a simple function of the total number of schools. Mortenson did not attempt to understand the power dynamics of local society or address the inevitable conflict between traditional ideas about gender roles and women's passion for education. CAI's efforts are imperfect short-term fixes only. Stock needs to be taken of whether and how they are influencing actual girls' lives than what a set of statistics may be saying. In contrast, the Malala Fund focuses on issues like teacher training and raising local awareness of the importance of girls' education. In 2019 alone, the number of Malala Fund Champions (local advocates) was increased to 40 personnel in Afghanistan, Brazil, India, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Turkey.

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<sup>19</sup> Dominic Rushe and Jason Burke, "Three Cups of Tea Author Greg Mortenson in Schools Fraud Row," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, April 18, 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/18/greg-mortenson-three-cups-tea>.

<sup>20</sup> Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Extraordinary Journey to Promote Peace -- One School at a Time* (Rearsby: W F Howes, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Peter Hessler, "What Mortenson Got Wrong," *The New Yorker*, 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/what-mortenson-got-wrong>.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Sieff, "Mortenson Returns to Afghanistan, Trying to Move Past His 'Three Cups of Tea' Disgrace," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, October 12, 2014), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/mortenson-returns-to-afghanistan-trying-to-move-past-his-three-cups-of-tea-disgrace/2014/10/12/9774ae90-402f-11e4-b03f-de718edeb92f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/mortenson-returns-to-afghanistan-trying-to-move-past-his-three-cups-of-tea-disgrace/2014/10/12/9774ae90-402f-11e4-b03f-de718edeb92f_story.html).

<sup>23</sup> Andy Court, Maria Usman, and Kevin Livelli, "Questions over Greg Mortenson's Stories," CBS News (CBS Interactive, 2011), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/questions-over-greg-mortensons-stories-19-04-2011/>.

The Fund is truly helping break down the barriers that keep girls from learning, by, for example, disseminating sermons on the subject of girls' education and educational materials to nearly 5000 mosques across Afghanistan; providing 418 out-of-school girls with classes in literacy, numeracy, and life skills in Nigeria; and prompting the provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to allocate 70% of its budget to girls' education initiatives. These achievements were all driven by local women, who, by sharing their stories, will help fuel future change.

## II. CONCLUSION

In this essay I analyzed two case studies, showing how different Western humanitarian organizations employ the "rescuing women" narrative. Beauty Without Borders and CAI are international organizations, with a Western-centric focus, while the Malala Fund is glocal, with a strategy of building on local initiatives to effect broad change internationally.

As this essay shows, to be successful international humanitarianism must have a deep understanding of local realities. The rhetoric of "westerner[s] saving powerless and oppressed Muslim women" rhetoric is counterproductive to the goal of improving the lives of Muslim women. Such rhetoric is a very unstable foundation to build on. When the passion for humanitarianism specific efforts diminishes, there is a tendency for providers to precipitously withdraw from regions, often leaving huge messes for locals to deal with. Humanitarian efforts stemming from such doctrines are flawed. As the case of the Malala Fund demonstrates, operating within local cultures is much more effective.

International organizations must not ground their work in such notions as "saving" or "emancipating" Muslim women. Instead, they should empower local women to act on their own behalf, helping them acquire the needed skills and the mindset. International organizations must always beware of the eventuality that the international forces that make their work possible may one day leave, and that someone -- local women themselves -- will need to carry the torch forward.

The most effective way for local organizations to counter existing beliefs, is to bring international pressure to bear on them. By using the media to publicize local narratives to the international community, local organizations can significantly widen understanding of the urgency of issues confronting local women, perhaps even spurring national governments to take action -- if only to avoid international condemnation.

Not only is the importance of local initiative gaining traction at the international level, however, it is also doing so among Muslim women. In past years, many Muslim women that were pro-Western feminist ideas rejected feminist views that sprung from their cultural and religious upbringings and believed strongly in the universality of female experience. These women tend to borrow intrinsically "colonial" forms of feminism, looking at the West for solutions. The Western nations, especially the US, operated from that standing point. In recent years, the rescue narrative has been increasingly rejected by Muslim women in favor of indigenous solution-seeking. Muslim women want to foment their own change, while simultaneously asserting their solidarity with women worldwide. They welcome support from international aid organizations, not management.

Muslim women are increasingly reclaiming their own agency. This trend foreshadows the future of human rights and of humanitarian efforts oriented towards Muslim women: that local women will continue to grow more empowered, and that successful humanitarian organizations will be those that most effectively collaborate with players at the local level.

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