

Reframing Local Agency: Contestations of Liberal Peacebuilding in Post-9/11 Afghanistan

Tokoyo Okubo *

Abstract

This article examines how the construction of “the local” shaped legitimacy and effectiveness in post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Although international actors emphasized participation and local ownership, their interventions often institutionalized a narrow, donor-aligned notion of local agency dominated by urban, Western-educated elites. Drawing on discourse and document analysis of Afghan and international policy frameworks, the study situates Afghanistan within postcolonial critiques of liberal peacebuilding to reveal how external narratives shaped knowledge, legitimacy, and representation.

The analysis identifies three interlinked dynamics undermining legitimacy and effectiveness: (1) structural urban–rural disparities, where development gains and women’s empowerment programs were concentrated in cities; (2) parallel governance systems, as customary authorities retained everyday legitimacy alongside donor-driven state institutions; and (3) normative and epistemic frictions, as liberal norms clashed with Afghan social orders and sidelined alternative epistemologies. Selective recognition of “representative” locals produced a “legible local” conforming to external expectations, silencing diverse voices and reinforcing existing hierarchies. The study concludes that sustainable and legitimate peacebuilding requires engaging plural localities, recognizing diverse epistemologies, and adopting more context-sensitive partnerships.

* Tokyo Okubo holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Peace and Conflict Studies from the International Christian University, Tokyo Japan.

I. Introduction

This study examines how the notion of “the local” shaped legitimacy and effectiveness in post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan (2001–2021). Legitimacy is understood as the degree to which governance is accepted as rightful by diverse constituencies, while effectiveness refers to the capacity to deliver security, justice, and services (Chandler, 2006; Paris, 2004; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Scott, 1998). The analysis draws on policy document review, discourse analysis, secondary sources, and elite interviews to examine how international community (IC) aid actors constructed, engaged, and contested “the local” in ways that shaped peacebuilding outcomes.

The post-9/11 intervention in Afghanistan unfolded within the broader framework of the United States-led “War on Terror,” which redefined global norms of intervention and state reconstruction. Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Bonn Agreement established the political and institutional foundations of what became the *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*, grounded in the liberal peace paradigm and prioritizing democratization, human rights, and market reform. Supported by UNAMA, NATO, and major donors such as the World Bank, these efforts sought to integrate Afghanistan into the liberal international order. Yet peacebuilding advanced alongside counterterrorism operations, producing overlapping military and developmental agendas that often undermined one another. The exclusion of key actors from the early peace process, the concentration of authority and aid in urban centres, and dependence on external assistance generated structural tensions that persisted throughout the following two decades. Understanding these dynamics is essential to contextualizing how liberal peacebuilding strategies were framed, implemented, and contested.

The core research question is: what constitutes “the local” in post-9/11 peacebuilding, and how has its construction affected legitimacy and effectiveness? In practice, liberal frameworks recognized and institutionalized only a narrow subset of “the local,” predominantly urban, Western-educated elites aligned with donor agendas, while marginalizing or excluding others. This selective recognition shaped the politics of local agency, legitimizing certain actors while

sidelining alternative voices, and in turn raises questions about the inclusivity and sustainability of liberal peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

II. Constructing “the Local” in Liberal Peacebuilding

1. Liberal Peacebuilding and the Rise of the “Local Turn”

Following the Cold War, liberal peacebuilding emerged as the dominant paradigm guiding international interventions in post-conflict societies. This model draws on liberal internationalist assumptions: that peace is best secured through democratization, respect for human rights, the rule of law, good governance, and market-oriented economic reforms (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2006; Chandler, 2006). IC aid actors, including donor governments, the UN, and international financial institutions, promoted this vision through comprehensive interventions, often under the authority of external agencies.

The liberal peace framework became institutionalized in key UN initiatives, most notably *An Agenda for Peace* (1992), which outlined standardized components of peacebuilding such as disarmament, demobilization, elections, and governance reforms. These blueprints were operationalized through UN missions in Cambodia, Somalia, Bosnia, and later Afghanistan and Iraq. The liberal peace model, as Oliver Richmond (2009) argues, functions as a “discourse, framework, and structure” rooted in Western epistemologies, exporting a universalist vision of peace shaped by liberal democratic norms.

Richmond’s typology of peacebuilding identifies this paradigm as part of the third generation of peacebuilding approaches, “liberal peacebuilding and state-building,” which combine top-down state reconstruction with limited attention to human needs. Richmond classifies liberal peace into three subtypes: (1) the conservative model, prioritizing security and sovereignty through military dominance; (2) the orthodox model, combining state-building with limited recognition of civil society; and (3) the emancipatory model, emphasizing bottom-up processes and local ownership (Richmond, 2011). In practice, however, the conservative and orthodox models have predominated, especially in the U.S.-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While initially seen as a comprehensive and progressive approach, the liberal peacebuilding model soon came under critique for its mechanistic application and failure to produce sustainable outcomes. Critics highlighted its top-down nature, overreliance on elite negotiations, and neglect of local cultural, social, and political dynamics (Belloni, 2012; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Liberal peace increasingly came to be viewed as a form of epistemic and political dominance, one that often imposed a singular blueprint of peace onto diverse societies.

2. From Liberal Hegemony to the “Local Turn”

In response to these critiques, scholars and practitioners began calling for a “local turn” in peacebuilding. This shift was grounded in the recognition that externally designed liberal models frequently lacked legitimacy on the ground and failed to resonate with local populations. The local turn emphasized the centrality of local actors, institutions, and knowledge systems in building sustainable peace (Mac Ginty, 2010; Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). In this respect, local communities are not passive recipients of peace but active agents with their own visions, resources, and practices (Lederach, 1997; Rupesinghe, 1995).

However, this rhetorical shift often remained superficial (Mac Ginty, 2011; Paffenholz, 2015). In many cases, “the local” was instrumentalized and invoked to provide legitimacy but rarely granted meaningful power. IC aid actors frequently selected specific elites or civil society actors deemed “representative” or “manageable” within donor frameworks (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). For instance, gender mainstreaming initiatives such as the *National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan* (NAPWA) and UNSCR 1325-based programmes sought to promote local participation and women’s empowerment, but largely reflected donor-driven priorities and Western feminist assumptions, often excluding grassroots women’s organizations (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Mohanty, 2003). This selective engagement reproduced many of the liberal peace’s original power dynamics, despite the appearance of bottom-up inclusion.

Therefore, the construction of “the local” in peacebuilding is not neutral. It is shaped by global discourses, institutional imperatives, and bureaucratic

categories. Following James C. Scott's (1998) notion of *legibility*, the process by which states and large organizations simplify and standardize complex social realities to make them administratively visible and thus governable, local actors were often rendered visible only in ways that aligned with the goals and procedures of international organizations. This process produced a "legible local," a curated and simplified version of local agency that could be measured, monitored, and controlled, often at the expense of the richness, diversity, and autonomy of actual local practices.

Postcolonial scholars have expanded this critique by showing that the very process of defining and rendering "the local" legible is embedded in unequal power relations and epistemic hierarchies. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of *Orientalism* (1978), which reveals how the Global South is often represented through reductive and exoticizing lenses, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of *subalternity* (1988), which questions whether marginalized voices can truly be heard within dominant discourses, these critiques emphasize that liberal peace reproduces hierarchies of knowledge, authority, and representation.

In the context of liberal peacebuilding, these theories help expose how the representation of 'the local' often serves external narratives while silencing alternative epistemologies. As Richmond (2012) observes, liberal peacebuilding is bounded by Western political theory and often fails to engage with indigenous or non-liberal epistemologies. It marginalizes local cultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and relational ontologies, thereby reinforcing a global hierarchy in which Western norms are privileged.

In this sense, non-Western and context-specific ways of knowing, such as Islamic, customary, or relational frameworks, that challenge the liberal peace's universalist assumptions about legitimacy, rationality, and progress may be understood as 'alternative epistemologies.' These critiques inform this study's examination of how 'the local' was defined, represented, and contested in post-2001 Afghanistan.

The liberal peace has largely exhausted its coherence as a paradigm, as contemporary peacebuilding increasingly operates through fragmented, hybrid,

and negotiated forms rather than a unified liberal framework (Mac Ginty, 2025). Building on this recognition, this study examines how such hybridity in Afghanistan was structured by enduring epistemic hierarchies that determined which actors and knowledges were rendered legitimate.

3. The Politics of Representation and the Limits of the Local Turn

One of the central dilemmas in the evolution of peacebuilding theory is the question of who speaks for “the local.” While the local turn emerged as a corrective to top-down liberalism, it has raised enduring questions about representation, legitimacy, and power. Effective peacebuilding must go beyond liberal templates to embrace locally grounded processes, institutions, and knowledges (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Yet the local turn has faced significant critique, particularly regarding conceptual ambiguity and representational politics. “The local” is often presented as a unified, positive category, whereas in reality it is diverse, fragmented, and frequently contested (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). The term encompasses actors ranging from village elders, women’s groups, and traditional authorities to urban elites, warlords, and NGOs, each with distinct, and sometimes conflicting, interests and legitimacy.

This diversity complicates the identification of “authentic” local voices. International actors often selectively engage with those deemed legible to donors, professionalized, or ideologically compatible, effectively making them the public face of “local ownership.” Such selectivity can marginalize rural, conservative, or informal actors, reproducing the exclusions and hierarchies of liberal peace under the guise of inclusivity. Even seemingly local institutions may be co-opted, elite-driven, or primarily accountable to donors rather than communities (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013).

The binary framing of “the international” versus “the local” further oversimplifies complex realities. Many so-called local actors operate within transnational networks of aid, governance, and power. The local has been described as a “hard-to-catch” and messy domain and warned against being romanticized as inherently peaceful or community-oriented (Öjendal & Ou, 2015; Paffenholz,

2015). Actors such as militias, mafia networks, or donor-dependent NGOs may claim local legitimacy while being embedded in asymmetrical power relations.

These critiques also extend to the hybrid peace framework, which seeks to combine liberal and local elements. Shani (2019) argues that despite its normative reorientation, the local turn remains embedded in Enlightenment assumptions and liberal modernity, reproducing a colonial imaginary of development and governance. Such transformation, he contends, requires epistemological and ontological shifts that challenge not only who participates in peacebuilding but also how peace, agency, and knowledge are conceptualized.

In sum, while the local turn addressed critical shortcomings of liberal peace, it has not consistently delivered on its emancipatory promise. Without attention to which localities are empowered, how they are chosen, and what knowledge systems are privileged, the politics of representation risk perpetuating the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. These dynamics shape not only theoretical debates but also tangible outcomes, influencing the legitimacy of interventions, the effectiveness of aid, and the persistence of exclusion.

III. Fragmented Localities and the Limits of Representation

1. Urban–Rural Divide and the Concentration of Power

The post-9/11 peacebuilding project in Afghanistan was marked by a persistent urban–rural divide that significantly undermined the inclusivity and effectiveness of liberal peacebuilding strategies. While donor reports progress in infrastructure, women’s education, healthcare, and political participation, these gains were concentrated in urban centers such as Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, leaving rural regions marginalized (Barfield, 2010; Pain & Huot, 2018). Urban growth was driven by international investments, government projects, and the concentration of economic activities, transforming cities into hubs of opportunity. In contrast, rural areas remained economically stagnant, dependent on agriculture with significant land inequality, limited employment, and poor access to markets and services (Pain & Huot, 2018; World Bank, 2014).

Infrastructure development vividly illustrates this disparity. Urban areas

benefitted from major road projects, schools, and hospitals funded by IC aid actors, including the Kabul–Kandahar highway, which facilitated trade and mobility in urban corridors (Maihan & Öcalir, 2023; Nazirov & Mukhammadsidiqov, 2020). In rural provinces such as Kunar, however, the absence of paved roads, reliable electricity, and market linkages perpetuated economic isolation and limited the delivery of essential services. Inaccessibility, combined with ongoing insecurity, deterred sustained development interventions, further entrenching marginalization (Drew et al., 2012).

The divide was equally stark in women’s empowerment programs. Initiatives such as the U.S.-backed Promote Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (2015–2020) created jobs and educational opportunities for women in cities, boosting their economic independence and political visibility (Roshan, 2020). A study in Balkh Province found that while urban women accessed training and employment, rural women faced persistent barriers rooted in traditional gender roles, restricted mobility, and limited access to safe public spaces (Khurram, 2020). Women’s business programs showed measurable impacts in urban settings but struggled in rural districts, such as those in Uruzgan, due to a lack of financial services, market access, and cultural resistance (Wafeq, 2020).

These spatial inequalities carried significant political implications. The liberal peace model’s urban bias privileged Kabul-based elites and donor-aligned actors as “the local,” sidelining rural governance systems such as *jirgas* and *shuras*, which continued to hold legitimacy in their communities (Barfield, 2010). This selective inclusion eroded perceptions of fairness and ownership, particularly in rural areas where state authority was often viewed as externally imposed (Suhrke, 2011). Scholars have critiqued this approach for reproducing dependency and failing to build autonomous, context-sensitive institutions (Chandler, 2006, 2010; Richmond, 2010; 2011). The overemphasis on centralized, urban-centered development deepened spatial inequalities and left rural populations underrepresented in decision-making. Furthermore, liberal peacebuilding often neglected local political economies, allowing corruption and patronage networks to flourish, while calls have been made for people-centered strategies that reflect

the aspirations of rural communities (Pugh, 2010).

Addressing Afghanistan's urban-rural divide requires rebalancing investments, integrating rural governance structures, and adopting equitable development strategies that reflect the diversity of Afghan society (Dorronsoro, 2005). Without addressing the structural features that privilege urban growth at the expense of rural inclusion, peacebuilding risks entrenching exclusion, weakening legitimacy, and limiting the prospects for a sustainable, context-sensitive, and broadly owned peace.

2. Parallel Governance and Local Legitimacy

Post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan unfolded in a context where formal state structures rebuilt with substantial international resources coexisted and routinely competed with entrenched informal authorities. These informal systems, such as *jirgas* and *shuras*, were not only remnants of pre-2001 governance but products of a much longer historical tradition in which tribal, ethnic, and religious leaders mediated disputes and distributed resources, particularly in rural areas beyond the reach of the central state (Barfield, 2010).

Liberal state-building after 2001 prioritized centralized institutions, rule-of-law reforms, and market liberalization, yet these templates had limited traction outside urban centers and rarely supplanted or meaningfully integrated customary institutions, which retained deep social embeddedness and everyday legitimacy. The attempt to transplant formal governance without accommodating these established authorities generated parallel governance systems that were structurally embedded from the outset.

A central driver of this hybridity was aid dependence. Throughout the period, more than 70% of the Afghan state budget was financed by external assistance, narrowing the fiscal base and reinforcing the perception that Kabul's institutions were extensions of foreign agendas rather than nationally accountable bodies (WB, 2020; Goodhand & Sedra, 2010). This created a causal chain: heavy aid dependence shifted accountability upward to donors, which reduced responsiveness to citizens, ultimately eroding the local legitimacy of state

institutions. The rapid rollout of ministries, provincial offices, and courts, often designed to meet donor benchmarks, proceeded with weak coordination with local governance practices, leaving customary mechanisms intact and, in many areas, preferred (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010; Suhrke, 2011).

At the same time, warlords and militia commanders were incorporated into the post-2001 political order as governors, police chiefs, and parliamentarians in the name of stability and inclusivity. While this secured short-term bargains, it entrenched patronage networks that diverted public and aid resources to factional ends and sustained private militias alongside formal structures (Suhrke, 2011). Corruption permeated everyday interactions with the state: bribe requests clustered around police, judicial officials, and local administrators, illustrating how public services became sites of rent extraction rather than legitimacy building (UNODC, 2016; SIGAR, 2009). Coordination failures among IC aid actors compounded these dynamics, as divergent donor agendas and top-down centralization clashed with Afghanistan's mosaic of local authority (Barfield, 2010; UNAMA, 2022a). The appointment of "capable" outsiders as governors or administrators often destabilized existing balances among tribal and religious leaders, provoking resistance and undermining local ownership (UNGASC, 2009).

These dynamics reinforced what hybrid political order theory identifies as the negotiated nature of legitimacy: it does not automatically arise from institutional transplants but from everyday relationships among diverse actors (Mac Ginty, 2011). Yet international interventions frequently privileged urban elites and NGO representatives able to navigate donor discourses, treating them as the "representative local," while religious and customary authorities were mobilized instrumentally or sidelined altogether. By narrowing "the local" to donor-compatible actors, interventions not only weakened inclusivity but also misread the relational and contested nature of legitimacy, undermining the long-term sustainability of peacebuilding efforts (Barma, 2016; Mehran, 2018). This dependency was not merely financial but epistemic, as donor-defined indicators and reform benchmarks came to shape domestic policy priorities, reinforcing external accountability while marginalizing locally grounded definitions of

legitimacy.

3. Cultural and Epistemic Friction

Post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan was not only constrained by material and institutional limitations but also by profound cultural and epistemic frictions. These tensions emerged from the collision between externally promoted liberal norms, centered on democratization, human rights, and market liberalization, and Afghanistan's plural and deeply embedded social, religious, and cultural orders. Such frictions were not peripheral challenges; they were structural impediments shaping the legitimacy and sustainability of peacebuilding interventions. Externally driven governance and development strategies often underestimated or ignored the centrality of tribal authority, patriarchal social structures, and Islamic jurisprudence in everyday governance (Barfield, 2010). Liberal peacebuilding's preference for top-down, centralized institutions frequently clashed with Afghanistan's decentralized, customary mechanisms, such as *jirgas* and *shuras*, which retained everyday legitimacy in many rural and peri-urban contexts (Mac Ginty, 2011; Richmond, 2011). National programs promoting standardized legal frameworks often supplanted or marginalized these customary systems without securing local buy-in, thereby eroding perceived legitimacy and reinforcing the view that Kabul's institutions served foreign rather than national agendas (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010; Suhrke, 2011).

Beyond cultural misalignment, interventions were shaped by epistemic assumptions rooted in orientalist and universalist discourses. Narratives portraying Islam as inherently oppressive to women and Muslim women as passive victims in need of "saving" informed donor agendas and program design (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Kandiyoti, 2007). This framing, embedded in strands of Western liberal feminism, privileged individual rights over collective or faith-based interpretations of gender justice, sidelining Islamic feminist perspectives that sought to advance women's rights through religiously grounded approaches (Moghadam, 2002). Such epistemic hierarchies narrowed the policy space, excluding local voices that did not conform to donor-compatible feminist norms.

Gender policy offers a concrete case study of these frictions. NAPWA, developed under UNSCR 1325 (MFAA, 2015) was promoted as milestones for gender equality. While these frameworks signaled progress in international forums, their implementation often relied on urban NGOs and elite women's networks, leaving rural constituencies marginally engaged or alienated (Kandiyoti, 2007). In some cases, programs triggered backlash or superficial compliance, as communities perceived them as externally imposed and misaligned with local norms. The result was a widening gap between formal gender policy achievements and lived realities, with implications for both legitimacy and sustainability.

Cultural and epistemic frictions highlight that legitimacy in peacebuilding cannot be engineered solely through the transplantation of institutional models or the imposition of universalist norms. In this regard, legitimacy is negotiated within specific historical, cultural, and epistemic contexts. Overlooking these contexts risks reinforcing parallel governance systems, privileging donor-compatible elites, and deepening the disconnect between formal institutions and the communities they aim to serve. Addressing these frictions requires epistemic humility, inclusive dialogue with diverse local actors, and an openness to multiple, context-specific pathways to peace.

IV. Contestation and Silencing: The Politics of Local Agency

1. Selection, Exclusion, and Contestation

Post-2001 peacebuilding in Afghanistan was embedded in a state-building project heavily dependent on international assistance. This aid dependence entrenched an externally driven reform agenda, with key priorities, such as electoral processes, constitutional reforms, and market liberalization, defined largely by donors rather than emerging from domestic consensus (Goodhand & Sedra, 2010). While these reforms aimed to create a liberal-democratic state, they often remained disconnected from the everyday realities and priorities of much of the population, particularly those in rural and conflict-affected areas (Suhrke, 2011).

Underlying these approaches was the liberal peace assumption that

democratization, market reforms, and top-down “good governance” inevitably lead to sustainable peace. This is a simplistic and universalist premise that fails to account for the complexity of political authority in contexts such as Afghanistan, where governance has long been negotiated through a mix of formal and informal, state and non-state, mechanisms (Öjendal & Ou, 2015).

Within this framework, the liberal peace tends to conceptualize the international system in dichotomous terms: the “international” or “liberal” on one side, and the “domestic” or “local” (“non-liberal”) on the other (Rampton & Nadarajah, 2017). In peacebuilding practice, this mindset frames interactions between international and local actors as pre-defined encounters between fundamentally different categories. This dichotomous thinking justifies the imposition of liberal rule and institutional templates in so-called “non-liberal” spaces, positioning the international actor as the bearer of legitimate order and the local as its recipient.

However, such a binary obscures the more constructive and relational aims of peacebuilding, which should focus on addressing structural issues and transforming the long-term relationships between conflict parties (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). The central question of peacebuilding should not be how to adapt non-liberal states to liberal democratic models, but how to identify and address the root causes of conflict in ways that foster inclusive and sustainable peace.

In Afghanistan, this binary logic directly influenced the formation of what became the “legible local.” Drawing on the notion of “legibility” (Scott, 1998), IC aid actors tended to privilege those Afghans, often urban elites, NGO leaders, and Western-educated professionals, who could operate within the normative and bureaucratic frameworks of liberal peace. By contrast, actors whose authority derived from religious, tribal, or customary legitimacy were often excluded from formal peacebuilding processes. This selective inclusion narrowed the spectrum of voices considered “representative” and reinforced a vision of the local that was curated according to donor expectations. The result was a representational gap that not only undermined the legitimacy of post-2001 institutions but also entrenched contestation over whose vision of peace would prevail.

2. Silencing, Postcolonial Critiques, and Whose Peace?

Post-9/11 peacebuilding in Afghanistan cannot be understood solely as a technical process of institution-building; it was also a political and epistemic project shaped by deeply embedded assumptions about what constitutes legitimate governance, order, and peace (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Shani, 2024). These assumptions often constructed a binary between “international” (or “liberal”) actors and “domestic” or “local” (“non-liberal”) actors, reflecting and reproducing a long historical trajectory of Western “civilizing missions” and “colonizing tendencies” in which governance models, legal systems, and societal norms rooted in liberal democratic ideals were imposed on non-Western contexts with little adaptation to local realities (Chandler, 2006).

The post-2001 Afghan peacebuilding agenda, anchored in the Bonn Agreement and supported by major donors, can be read as a contemporary iteration of these imperial logics. The privileging of liberal democracy, market reforms, and “good governance” as universally valid templates mirrors earlier colonial narratives in which modernization and civilization were defined by Western benchmarks. Such reforms often function as technocratic projects aimed at “reforming and civilizing” the native, with little democratic consent from the governed.

In this regard, some have argued that equating modern UN-led peacebuilding with classical colonialism is misguided, emphasizing that contemporary interventions are rooted in an “anti-colonialist ethic” and are not primarily designed for material extraction (Paris, 2010). However, even where motives differ, the structural effects, cultural insensitivity, neglect of local contexts, and privileging of external templates, nonetheless echo the hierarchies and exclusions of colonial governance (Darby, 2006; 2009). Liberal peacebuilding’s epistemic dominance often marginalizes non-Western forms of knowledge and authority, rendering them invisible or illegitimate within formal peace processes.

From a human security perspective, the language of protecting individuals from fear and want has been used to legitimize deep intervention into the domestic affairs of “post-conflict” and “developing” societies (Shani, 2015; 2024). In

practice, these interventions often reflect Eurocentric notions of sovereignty, rights, and “civilized” political order, continuing the logic of the civilizing mission under humanitarian and developmental guises. In the “war on terror” context, populations framed as “not-yet-Human” were positioned as needing elevation to “full humanity” through adoption of Western norms, securing the Western way of life while reinscribing hierarchies of civilization (Marhia, 2013).

Feminist critiques intersect with this postcolonial analysis by interrogating the androcentric underpinnings of human rights discourse (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 2003; Bahri, 2009). The figure of the “Third World woman” has often been constructed as a passive victim, requiring rescue by liberal, often male-coded, international interventions (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 2003). In Afghanistan, this trope was repeatedly mobilized to justify policy agendas, sidelining Afghan women’s own diverse voices and strategies.

These silencing dynamics are reinforced by dominant peace theory frameworks. The influential distinction between “positive” and “negative” peace has been critiqued for universalizing Western ideals of social justice and harmony while overlooking culturally embedded forms of “cultural violence” and resilience (Galtung, 1969; 1996). A phenomenological understanding of peace has been proposed to embrace the inevitability of difference and the necessity of living with tension, rather than seeking to erase it (Behr, 2018). Others warn against the “black hole” effect of state-centric analysis, which overlooks memory, dialogue, and non-state actors (Nandy, 2019), while also advocating a multidirectional peace that emerges from everyday practices, translation, and cross-cultural negotiation (Richmond, 2010; Hinton et al., 2019).

In the Afghan context, the notion of a singular “Afghan local” has been dismantled, highlighting the profound diversity of Afghan society, across urban–rural divides, ethnic groups, and gendered experiences, and the danger of liberal peace models that treat this heterogeneous landscape as a monolithic category (Manchanda, 2020). Urban Kabul residents may prioritize economic growth and security sector reform, while rural communities may value traditional dispute resolution, local autonomy, or religious authority. Ethnic and cultural identities

further shape what “peace” means and how it should be pursued.

A key outcome of these selection and contestation processes was the systematic silencing of actors whose values, identities, or governance modes conflicted with dominant liberal frameworks (Hinton et.al, 2018; Manchanda, 2020). Rural women, conservative religious leaders, and actors opposing the liberal peace agenda were rarely included in policy dialogue or donor consultations. Their exclusion was often justified by claims of incompatibility with human rights norms or lack of capacity for formal governance, echoing postcolonial critiques of the “civilizing mission” in international interventions (Said, 1995; Spivak, 1988).

This non-representation reflects epistemic hierarchies privileging certain knowledge systems. By constructing a narrow image of the “representative local,” international actors reinforced a politics of recognition where legitimacy depends on conformity to external standards (Behr, 2018; Hinton et. al, 2018). Such dynamics call for peacebuilding approaches that recognize the plurality of local agency, challenge epistemic exclusions, and broaden criteria for legitimate participation beyond the liberal-democratic mold.

Bringing these strands together, the question of whose peace becomes central. In Afghanistan, as in other post-conflict contexts, peace is not a singular, universally agreed-upon goal, but a contested terrain of meanings, practices, and authorities (Richmond, 2010; Manchanda, 2020). The constructed version of “the local,” often privileging urban, donor-aligned actors, undermined legitimacy among communities whose priorities and governance traditions were excluded from the peacebuilding agenda. This selective inclusion weakened the effectiveness of interventions, as initiatives designed without meaningful engagement from diverse local actors often lacked broad-based support and long-term sustainability (Manchanda, 2020). The selective recognition of certain actors and agendas, while silencing others, reveals that the politics of local agency is inseparable from the politics of knowledge and representation. Addressing this requires not only widening the spectrum of who is heard, but also rethinking the epistemic frameworks that determine what counts as legitimate peace.

VI. Conclusion: Beyond Singular Localities

This study has shown that the construction of “the local” in post-9/11 Afghanistan was neither neutral nor inclusive. IC aid actors often framed “the local” as a coherent, singular entity, but in practice engaged selectively with urban, Western-educated elites aligned with donor priorities. Such selective recognition not only marginalized rural, religious, and other non-aligned actors but also reinforced existing power asymmetries, limiting both the legitimacy and effectiveness of peacebuilding interventions.

By tracing how inclusion and exclusion were operationalized through policies, institutional arrangements, and funding priorities, the analysis revealed that legitimacy, understood as governance accepted as rightful, and effectiveness, measured by the delivery of security, justice, and services, were deeply contingent on whose voices were amplified and whose were silenced. The Afghan case illustrates how liberal peacebuilding’s reliance on externally defined templates risks reproducing hierarchical relationships between international and local actors, even when framed in participatory language.

Moving beyond singular, homogenized conceptions of “the local” requires an approach that recognizes the multiplicity and contestation inherent in local agency. This entails not only engaging a wider range of actors but also accepting forms of governance and legitimacy that may diverge from liberal norms. Such an orientation demands epistemic humility, sustained dialogue, and a willingness to negotiate political authority in ways that reflect Afghanistan’s social complexity rather than impose external blueprints. Ultimately, the Afghan experience underscores a broader lesson for peacebuilding theory and practice: without an appreciation for fragmented, plural localities, interventions risk undermining the very legitimacy and effectiveness they seek to promote.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), 783–790.
- Bahri, D. (2009). Feminism and Postcolonialism. In S. Makdisi, C. Casarino, & R. Karl (Eds.), *Marxism beyond Marxism*. Routledge.
- Barfield, T. J. (2010). *Afghanistan: A cultural and political history*. Princeton University Press.
- Barma, N. H. (2016). *The Peacebuilding Puzzle: Political Order in Post-Conflict States*. Cambridge University Press.
- Behr, H. (2018). Peace-in-difference: A phenomenological approach to peace through difference. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12(3), 335–351.
- Belloni, R. (2012). Hybrid peace governance: Its emergence and significance. *Global Governance*, 18(1), 21–38.
- Chandler, D. (2006). *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building*. Pluto Press.
- Chandler, D. (2010). *International statebuilding: The rise of post-liberal governance*. Routledge.
- Darby, P. (2006). *Postcolonizing the international: Working to change the way we are*. University of Hawai'i Press.
- Darby, P. (2009). Rolling back the frontiers of empire: Practicing the postcolonial. *International Peacekeeping*, 16(5), 699–716.
- Dorransoro, G. (2005). *Revolution unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the present*. Columbia University Press.
- Drew, J. N., Klein, J. H., & Winner, J. H. (2012, July). Railway Development Plan: Executive Summary & Key Findings. *Afghanistan: Resource Growth Corridors*. The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/182461468185375731/pdf/797160WP0P12820B0x0379789B00PUBLIC0.pdf>
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191.
- Galtung, J. (1996). *Peace by peaceful means: Peace and conflict, development and civilization*. PRIO.
- Goodhand, J., & Sedra, M. (2008). *Afghanistan: The Challenge of Lasting Progress*. Clingendael Institute. https://redesign.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2016-02/20060800_cru_goodhand_sedra.pdf
- Hinton, A. L., Shani, G., & Alberg, J. (Eds.). (2019). *Rethinking peace: Discourse, memory, translation, and dialogue* (Critical Perspectives on Religion in International Politics). Rowman & Littlefield International/Bloomsbury.
- Kandiyoti, D. (2007). Old dilemmas or new challenges? The politics of gender and reconstruction in Afghanistan. *Development and Change*, 38(2), 169–199.
- Khurram, B. (2020). An analysis of women's empowerment in Afghanistan: A case study of Balkh

- Province. In *Women and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan Post-2001: Analyses and Lessons, Volume 1*, 92-112.
- Leonardsson, H., & Rudd, G. (2015). The local turn in peacebuilding: A literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(5), 825-839.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2025). *The liberal peace is over and it is not coming back: Hybridity and the emerging international peace system*. *Third World Quarterly*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2025.2559376>
- Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. (2013). The local turn in peacebuilding: Critical agenda for peace. *Third World Quarterly*, 34(5), 763-783.
- Maihan, R., & Öcalir, E. V. (2023). Urban Mobility and Transportation Strategies for Sustainable Cities: A Case Study in Kabul, Afghanistan. *International Journal of Engineering Applied Sciences and Technology*, 7(10), 29-36.
- Manchanda, N. (2020). *Imagining Afghanistan: The history and politics of imperial knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.
- Marhia, N. (2013). Some humans are more human than others: Troubling the “human” in human security from a critical feminist perspective. *Security Dialogue*, 44(1), 19-35.
- Mehran, W. (2018). Neopatrimonialism in Afghanistan. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 13(2), 91-105.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan [MFAA]. (2015). *Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325- Women, Peace and Security*.
- Moghadam, V. M. (2002). Patriarchy, the Taliban, and politics of public space in Afghanistan. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 25(1), 19-31.
- Mohanty, C. T. (2003). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In C. T. Mohanty (Ed.), *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (pp. 17-42). Duke University Press.
- Nazirov, M., & Mukhammadsidiqov, M. (2020). Central Asia: Involvement Of Afghanistan In Regional Development Processes. *The American Journal of Social Science and Education Innovations*, 2(12), 266-272.
- Öjendal, J., & Ou, S. (2015). Is it the “local” that is good? Reframing the debate on the “local turn” in peacebuilding. In S. Milne & S. Mahanty (Eds.), *Conservation and development in Cambodia: Exploring frontiers of change in nature, state and society* (pp. 157–172). Routledge.
- Paffenholz, T. (2015). Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: A critical assessment towards an agenda for future research. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(5), 857–874.
- Paris, R. (2004). *At war's end: Building peace after civil conflict*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pugh, M. (2010). The Political Economy of Peacebuilding: A Critical Theory Perspective. *International*

- Journal of Peace Studies*, 10(2), 23-42.
- Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., & Miall, H. (2011). *Contemporary conflict resolution* (3rd ed.). Polity Press.
- Rampton, D., & Nadarajah, S. (2017). "A Long View of Liberal Peace and its Crisis." *European Journal of International Relations*, 23(2), 434-456.
- Richmond, O. P. (2011). *A Post-liberal Peace*. Routledge.
- Richmond, O. P. (2009). A post-liberal peace: Eirenism and the everyday. *Review of International Studies*, 35(3), 557-580.
- Richmond, O. P. (2006). The problem of peace: Understanding the 'liberal peace'. *Conflict, Security & Development*, 6(3), 291-314.
- Roshan, Z. (2020). PROMOTE: A case study of women's economic empowerment program in Afghanistan. In *Women and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan Post-2001: Analyses and Lessons, Volume 1*, 123-140.
- Rupesinghe, K. (1995). *Conflict transformation*. St. Martin's Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Scott, J. C. (1998). *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press.
- Shani, G. (2024). Postcolonialism. In R. Devetak & D. McCarthy (Eds.), *An introduction to international relations* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Shani, G. (2019). Beyond the hybrid peace: Post-Western peacebuilding and the decolonization of peace. *International Peacekeeping*, 26(3), 336-362.
- Shani, G. (2015). Civilizing process or civilizing mission? Toward a post-western understanding of human security. *The Journal of Social Science*, 79, 45-63.
- Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR]. (2021, August). What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>
- SIGAR. (2009, December). *Afghanistan's High Office of Oversight Needs Significantly Strengthened Authority, Independence, and Donor Support to Become an Effective Anti-Corruption Institution*. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/2009-12-16audit-10-02.pdf>
- Suhrke, A. (2011). *When more is less, the international project in Afghanistan*. Columbia University Press.
- United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA]. (2022a). *Mandate*.
- UNAMA. (2022b). *Mission Statement*. <https://unama.unmissions.org/mission-statement>
- United Nations General Assembly [UNGA]. (1992). *An agenda for peace: Preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, and peace-keeping*. A/47/277 - S/24111.

- United Nations General Assembly Security Council [UNGASC]. (2009). *The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (A/63/892–S/2009/323)*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/658568?v=pdf>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC]. (2008). *Afghanistan: Implementing alternatives to imprisonment, in line with international standards and national legislation. Assessment report*.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.
- Wafeq, M. (2020). Peace through business: Women's business programs and their role in peacebuilding in Afghanistan. In *Women and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan Post-2001: Analyses and Lessons*, Volume 1, 63-82.
- World Bank [WB]. (2020). *Policy Notes: Priorities for Inclusive Development in Afghanistan*. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/8033eefca38ca8af7b653869a3469087-0310012021/original/Policy-Notes-report-Jan-12-2021-Final-version-2.pdf>
- World Bank [WB]. (2014, June). *Agricultural Sector Review: Revitalizing Agriculture for Economic Growth, Job Creation and Food Security*. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/245541467973233146/pdf/Afghanistan-Agricultural-sector-review-revitalizing-agriculture-for-economic-growth-job-creation-and-food-security.pdf>