

Manly Honor and the Gendered Male in Afghanistan

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In Afghanistan, one of the most commonly mentioned reasons for imposing restrictions on one's womenfolk is "culture," particularly the concepts of *namus*^[1] and *gheirat*.^[2] Many have taken a soft approach to gender equality to avoid treading in this cultural quagmire and tackling such sensitive issues, egged on by local counterparts equally eager to avoid the imagined dire consequences. In fact, the focus of gender studies and indeed the term "gender" for Afghans has come to be associated almost exclusively with women by Afghans, as by people in other parts of the world. This near exclusion of men from gender discourse — often sanctioned by the biased interpretations of religious texts — has led to a negative perception of gender as synonymous with women, and the process of seeking gender equality as a threat to men's privileges and an attack on a way of life.^[3] In the worst cases, discussions of gender lead to open hostility and retaliation for what is seen as foreign intrusion. The net result has been slow progress in gender mainstreaming.



Many men participate in the maintenance of unjust gender relations and sexist practices, becoming gatekeepers of the gender order and using social constructions of masculinity and male identity to justify it.^[4] In Afghanistan, it is becoming increasingly clear that the concept of honor, and how it plays out in changing structures of opportunity, is critical for transforming gender relations.^[5] Misrepresentations and interpretations related to the issue of honor are central to gender interactions and need to be carefully unpacked and understood. The difficulty until now has been finding an appropriate entry point to begin such discussions with men and to find a way to develop the realization that men too are gendered beings. In the Afghan context, little or no attention has been paid to "liberating" men, as well as women, from the constraints of gender roles and expectations as prescribed by narrow definitions of "culture."

In recent research on gender equity within a national project, we^[6] have tried to look at gender relations at the community level from a male perspective. Findings are preliminary but indicate that there is tremendous social pressure on men, especially younger men, to adhere to stereotypes of masculinity; for example, disallowing womenfolk to emerge from the confines of the house and enter the public domain. The most frustrating exhibition of such behavior is denying women their own names in public (i.e., women can only be known as "mother of A," "wife of B," or "daughter of C"). Peer pressure among men takes the form of verbal harassment and, in the worst cases, persecution. Jokes, slights, and name calling which indicate that the male in question has lax morals or lacks the masculinity to control his womenfolk form a critical, insidious, and at times painful part of socialization.

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Many argue that it is necessary to convince influential groups and gatekeepers that gender equality is enshrined in the tenets of Islam, but such discussions become exercises in rhetoric for some publics while other views are presented elsewhere. When we enquired of an important *maulavi*, whose opinion on social and religious matters is sought at the regional level, how he would view or describe men who allowed their wives to go to work or participate in government and non-governmental organization (NGO) programs, his answer was disturbing: He responded succinctly that such men should be regarded as nothing more than pimps who prostitute their wives. Men are guardians of a notion of communal honor and punishers of those men whose women do not follow prescribed gender roles.

In Parwan province, a young man explained that his peers often insulted him about his grandmother's connections with external bodies, including the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). His grandmother is a community activist, and he is proud of her achievements. Yet, his peers claimed that all the soldiers in the PRT knew his grandmother's name. He did not feel slighted and would retort by pointing out how his grandmother's actions were benefitting female relatives of the man insulting him: "It is because my grandmother went to see the PRT that we have a clinic so your wife doesn't die in childbirth." In another case in Parwan province, a young man was placed under pressure by his peers to stop his mother from being active in community affairs. Even on the day he was interviewed, other young men in the room joked that our male team members from Kabul had heard of his mother and come to visit her. As his father was dead and he felt powerless, the young man regularly approached his older relatives to put pressure on his mother to stay at home. This strategy did not work, so he tried a direct approach with his mother. She proudly informed the research team that she gave him a good nose bleed in the ensuing fist fight and that is where the argument ended.

Fieldwork in Daikundi province, which is a remote mountainous province with a Hazara majority, showed a very different social context where men and women — even men from beyond the community — sit together and discuss development matters freely. When we asked why there was such a striking difference between these communities and others in Afghanistan in terms of *pardah*, men replied that they did not have to prove their manliness through strict and brutal control of their womenfolk. In a discussion in Herat, male NGO staff discussed how even provinces can take each other on in terms of masculinity. They provided an example of the presence of a Herati woman who, appearing in the popular TV program *Afghan Star*, distinguished herself by singing and dancing — shocking behavior, to conservative Afghans. These Herati men claimed that: "Kabul simply asks Herat: 'Which province does Setareh on Afghan Star come from?' We know that just by asking us they are insulting our *gheirat*." Ismail Khan, a well-known Herati commander lauded as a hero years ago for his wartime exploits, is also said to be very disgruntled that a woman who sings has been referred to as a Herati "hero."

Men need to understand the oppressive effects of gender inequality on themselves as well as on women, accepting their responsibility to renegotiate gender relations because of the unjust privilege they hold. They have an ethical obligation to act in support of the elimination of that privilege.^[7] It is in men's interests to change. Although gender equalities privilege men, they also impose long-term costs.^[8] Frequent deaths

of women and girls in the community because of the lack of qualified female healthcare professionals can be directly linked to conservative attitudes denying girls an education. Similarly, an environment which is considered "backward" and oppressive for women is not attractive for educated, urban professionals looking for work. The result of the high rate of female deaths inevitably involves emotional, financial, and other costs for men and boys in the community. Another benefit of highlighting the pressures of dominant but negative models of masculinity in Afghan society is to use the opportunity to examine and promote positive male role models. These could include just and benevolent fathers responsible for and engaged with both women and girls in families and communities, associating with concepts such as "Father of the Nation," a title granted to Zahir Shah, a much loved and respected monarch who represents one of the few periods of uninterrupted peace in Afghan history.

In a country where customs and even languages can differ from one valley to the next, "tradition" is discussed as if it is a constant — immutable over time and space. This rich diversity notwithstanding, there are currently very few contexts allowing men and boys to discuss the positive and negative impact of tradition on their relations with women and girls. Men and boys rarely have the space to safely and privately discuss the grievances and victimization they face as gendered beings trying to change gender relations. Additionally, we have found that the widespread lack of awareness about pressure on men to be masculine and the negative consequences of such pressures make it difficult for them to articulate their feelings with ease.

Conclusion

If achieving gender equality is not work which can simply be left to women but requires the active involvement of men who need to change their attitudes and behaviours, then we need to find ways to engage Afghan men that go beyond rhetoric. Ownership of change-related interventions at family and community levels is critical for men as well as women if long-lasting changes are to become institutionalized. Providing space for men to "decompress" as gendered beings may be an interesting entry point for exploring men's inertia to engage with gender issues and to effect changes in gender relations. In beginning to discuss these issues with men and studying masculinity in Afghanistan as an integral aspect of gender, we are at the beginning of a new and exciting — though long — process.

[1]. According to Edwards, "The concept of *namus* ... signifies those people (especially his wife, mother, sisters, and daughters), objects (e.g., his rifle), and properties (especially his home, lands and tribal homeland) that a man must defend in order to preserve his honour." David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

[2]. "Manliness" is an inadequate translation, as *gheirat* also can be translated as honor.

[3]. Emily Esplen, *Engaging Men in Gender Equality: Positive Strategies and Approaches — Overview and Annotated Bibliography*, Institute of Development Studies, October 2006.

[4]. Michael Flood, "Mainstreaming Men in Gender and Development," presentation to AusAID Gender Seminar Series, Canberra, December 8, 2005.

[5]. Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam *et al.* *DFID Understanding Afghanistan — Poverty, Gender and Social Exclusion Analysis: 4.4.2 Gender Inequality Final Report*, The Recovery and Development Consortium, November 2008.

[6]. The author is leading a team of Afghans in this research, which is taking place in six provinces of Afghanistan.

[7]. Flood, "Mainstreaming Men in Gender and Development."

[8]. Flood, "Mainstreaming Men in Gender and Development."