



The University of
Montana



AFGHAN WOMEN

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING AN AFGHAN WOMAN'S ROLE IN HER SOCIETY



DEFENSE CRITICAL LANGUAGE
AND CULTURE PROGRAM

THE MAUREEN & MIKE MANSFIELD CENTER
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA



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Caption for the image on the cover:

A woman from the Wagel Valley brings her daughters with her to assist in carrying items distributed during a humanitarian mission in Dudarek, Afghanistan. An interpreter from the Nangarhar Provincial Reconstruction Team, left, makes sure the villagers receive all of the items available.

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INTRODUCTION

Typically village women in Afghanistan do not speak with men, especially foreign men in military uniforms. Afghan women are restricted by their culture and are sensitive to cultural issues. They accept their lives and rarely question the restrictions placed on them by society, religion and Afghan culture. To open up communication with this half of the Afghan population, female military personnel must understand common cultural practices, social norms, and possess basic language skills in order to engage appropriately with Afghan women in villages.

This book is designed to help American military personnel learn about Afghan women, the socially constructed norms that affect women's lives, and Afghan cultural practices. Moreover, this book provides female military personnel with knowledge of women's issues in Afghanistan prior to deployment in order to help them avoid culture shock and cultural misunderstandings.

The contents of this book will also assist female military personnel in building trust and strengthening relationships with Afghan civilians, in particular Afghan women. In addition, female military personnel can gain a better understanding of women's concerns and feelings about the US military. This information will help the US military direct activities that meet the people's needs that, in turn, will help them win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. Furthermore, the effective engagement with Afghan women will lead to the improvement of the lives of Afghan women.

Most Afghan village women live in silence as they have no voice or choices. American female military personnel can give Afghan women a voice and a sense of recognition that can influence the behavior of Afghan men towards them. American female military personnel can be a liaison between Afghan

village women, non-profits, and other organizations designed to help them. Because US female military personnel often travel to places that no one else does, female military personnel can relay information from remote villages to organizations that help women.

With knowledge of Afghan women's lives, female military personnel can better interact with Afghan women which will allow them to gain access to information. Sharing this information with their units lessens the chances that American military personnel will act in a way that creates hatred and fear of the American military.

The information in this book is based on the personal knowledge of the Afghan instructors at the DCLCP all of whom have experienced the social and cultural changes in Afghanistan during three decades of war and poverty. This document reflects their and their family's experiences both in the rural and urban settings. This book is in no way meant to represent all the experiences of Afghan women but only to serve as a guide to assist US military personnel when interacting with Afghan women. The sole purpose of this material is to help build better relations between Afghans and the US military.



Female Afghan National Police members listen to a speech during an ANP female recruiting conference. The two-day conference covered how to recruit and train an additional 5,000 women.

THE AFGHAN FAMILY

In Afghanistan the family is the most important element of a woman's life. Often an Afghan family is made up of a woman, her husband, sons, daughters, father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, grandmother, grandfather and grandchildren, and they all live under one roof. A typical Afghan family has from six to ten children. While families in cities tend to be smaller, people still live with their extended families. The senior woman, usually the mother-in-law, controls the household affairs including overseeing the other women in the house.



An Afghan family walks in the market with their three boys.

However, men control the financial affairs. Men are responsible for the family's financial affairs since most women do not work outside the home. Men work and provide everyone in the family with food, clothes and other needs. The woman's duty is to stay home, cook, clean the house, raise the children, weave, and sew. In some parts of Afghanistan, women make rugs

and carpets for sale, although the money from the sale of these rugs and carpets is controlled by the men. Still, some women sell eggs, milk and spices from the family farm, and they often keep this money for themselves, which they tend to spend on their children or contribute to the household if needed. In big cities, women work as doctors, lawyers, teachers, nurses, engineers and civil servants. Some women work for local and international NGO's.

Out of 23.6 million people in Afghanistan, 48.9% are female.

Women head 2% of Afghan households.

(UNIFEM Afghanistan Fact Sheet 2008)

Reputation is also very important in the family, and women are the primary source of a family's reputation. A woman's reputation depends on her obeying and respecting the rules and regulations that have been established by the men in the family. Men make decisions for all members of the family including their children. However, in some families the senior women such as the mother-in-law is also involved in family decision-making. The men in the family always look after women and girls, and when girls grow into old women, their sons look after them if their husbands can no longer do so. Women cannot make independent decisions on their own at any time in their lives.

GREETINGS

Greetings in Afghanistan vary according to gender. For example, Afghan women do not kiss or shake hands with most men, but they do shake hands with close male family members such as their fathers, brothers and uncles. When unrelated men greet Afghan women, they put their hands on their own chest and say “Salam alaykum.” Men do not say a woman’s name when greeting. Instead they will call her “hamshera” in Dari or “khorī” in Pashto meaning “sister” However if they greet older women, they will call them “mother jan” in Dari or “mori” in Pashto meaning “mother.” The most important point for men to remember when greeting Afghan women is that they must never touch an Afghan woman, even to shake hands, must keep their distance and must not say the woman’s name.

US military women have more flexibility in greeting an Afghan woman. The most common way for women to greet in Afghanistan is three kisses on the cheeks. A typical Afghan greeting lasts at least five minutes because they will ask about you, your health, and your family members and so on. A short hello or wave like an American greeting would be considered offensive, and the person might think that you are upset with them. Also a younger person would kiss an older persons hand in greeting, especially among close family members. The younger person begins the greeting.

In family life, women are in charge of hospitality. If a female guest comes to the family home, the male member of the family will only say “Salaam” and then call the women in the family to come to the door to receive the guest. Then, after a long greeting among the women, the guest would be taken into the house and asked to sit down away from the door. Placing a guest as far away from the door is a sign of respect. The elders, who are the most respected people



Navy Lt. J.G. Tamora Holland, Paktika Provincial Reconstruction Team medical officer and Female Engagement Team leader from Pittsburgh, PA, greets an Afghan woman at the province's first women's shura.

in the family, and guests are always seated far from the door. Children sit closer to the door since they are lower on the hierarchal ladder in Afghan society.

Tea will be made immediately upon the guest's arrival as a show of respect and goodwill. Guests also accept tea as a reciprocal sign of respect. The men will leave the room, but the children, especially the younger children, may stick around. While they will be curious about the American women, they will probably be shy. Some may stay in the room, especially the younger ones, and others may leave the room, but still peek out at the American women from time to time. If a child approaches a guest, it is okay for the guest to speak to the child and even to touch the child on the arm or shoulder as a sign of warmth and assurance.

Saying goodbye is the same as saying hello with kissing, only you don't say "Salaam." You say "Khuda afiz" which means "Good bye."

REPUTATION AND SHAME OF THE FAMILY

Women carry the family's reputation, and men keep the honor of the family by strictly controlling the women so that they do not bring shame to the family. Since women are the primary source of a man's shame, women try at all costs to avoid actions that bring shame to the man or the family.

Women are expected to be as modest as possible. Their faces must be covered and only revealed to the husband, some close male members of the family and other women. For men the most important elements of life are women, money and property. If any sort of transgression occurs regarding women, money or property, the owner will be dishonored, and will seek revenge by committing serious actions against the



A local Afghan woman, along with her children, are searched by Army Sgt. Peggy Hart, 176th Engineer Brigade combat medic, before entering the room where the first women's shura was held.

transgressor. These actions could include killing, beating or repeating the transgression that occurred against him or his family.

Among some Afghan tribes in southern Afghanistan, a shame that is brought upon one family is a shame brought upon the entire tribe. For instance, if a young woman has a boyfriend and runs away with him, this will bring dishonor to the entire extended family group. If the family does nothing to regain the honor of the family, members of the tribe will come to the family and demand that they do something to restore the honor of the entire tribe. This is one of the most serious dishonors, and in order to regain the family honor, the boy and the girl who ran away might be killed. If the boy cannot be found, a woman in his family might be kidnapped or given to the other family to end the animosity. This back and forth feuding to regain honor could go on for years. Sometimes a tribal Jirga is called to end the animosity between the families. Daughters, sheep and/or money may be exchanged to end the bad blood between the two families.

MAKING FOOD FOR THE FAMILY



A group of Afghan women and Air Force Capt. Jillian Torango of the Panjshir Provincial Reconstruction Team, participate in a women's shura in Sangee village, Anaba District, Afghanistan, Aug. 4, 2008.

Food preparation is an important part of Afghan culture and is typically a job for women. Women spend a lot of time in the kitchen cooking for the entire family and are expected to be good cooks. However, in restaurants and at big ceremonies such as weddings, men cook, though cooking is still one of the most important skills for a woman. Sometimes a man uses alleged poor cooking skills of his wife as an excuse to marry another woman. In some families men get angry

at the women if the food is not well cooked. Afghans often take guests out to restaurants for dinner or lunch, but they also like to bring guests home. Serving guests food at home is common as Afghans love to have guests. Also a man takes pride in his wife's cooking ability in the presence of guests; therefore, poor cooking skills bring shame to men in front of other men.

Women often use wood for cooking especially in villages where they do not have electricity or gas. It is a woman's job to make meals three times a day for the family. Serving three meals a day on time is a sign of discipline in the house and shows the woman's ability to serve the family. The three meals a day include breakfast that usually consists of tea, sugar, milk, eggs, and bread fried in oil called "nani roghani." Lunch is usually lamb soup, "shorba" with tandoori bread, while dinner often consists of rice with lamb and vegetables. All meals are served in the dining area on the floor called "destarkhwan." In some families, men and women eat separately. The men eat first and whatever is left goes to the women.

Most Afghans do not use silverware. Instead they eat with their right hand. Eating with the left hand is considered improper since it is used for washing private parts. Since food is considered sacred, using the right hand shows respect. Before eating, the host will bring water so that guests can wash their hands. After everyone washes their hands, the elder person starts the meal by invoking the name of God. Everyone else will repeat after the host and then start eating. At the end of the meal, they will again thank God and say a prayer for the host family. Only the women of the family clean and wash the dishes. After the food is finished, tea with some candy will be served.

Some famous and delicious Afghan food includes "qabili palau" which is rice with chopped and fried carrots and raisins, beef dumplings called "aushak" and vegetable dumplings which are called "bulanni." These are the most delicious Afghan specialties, and only special guests are served this food. "Awasana" means special food. In Afghanistan, expected and unexpected guests are always welcome. Guests are served as well as possible. This is an important part of Afghan culture.

FETCHING WATER

As mentioned before, Afghan women and girls cannot go outside their home without the permission of the men. When they are allowed to go out, it is usually to bring water from the river since there is no running water inside village houses. Women usually put containers of water on their heads and bring them home. Women usually fetch water in the morning and late afternoon as a group. The river is a place where village women get the chance to talk and interact with each other. Therefore, fetching water is not unpleasant work. Rather it is fun because it gives women a chance to see each other. Women mostly get village news from each other when they go get water. They chat and talk about issues going on in the village such as what happened to some families, who is getting married and so on.



A local Afghan woman holds her child while gathering water from a river in Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, river water is not clean, but village people do not have any other choices. Sometimes women wash clothes, carpets and other things in the river while downstream other people drink the same water. Another problem with drinking river water is that most river water is from melted snow. Since this water lacks iodine, many women get goiters.

WASHING CLOTHES

Washing everyone's clothes in an Afghan family is also a woman's job. Usually the younger women in the family wash clothes by hand, and then put them in the sun to dry. Then she irons them and gives them to the men of the house when she is asked. If a man's clothes are not washed or ironed well, everyone says that it is his wife's fault. If a man wears clean and ironed clothes, people, especially the man's friends, will compliment him for having such a good wife.

There are washing machines in Afghanistan, but only rich families with electricity have washing machines. In the village, women wash clothes outside the home in nearby rivers. They often call each other and go wash clothes together as a group. Every woman washes her own family's clothes, but going as a group makes this hard work more bearable because the women tell jokes and make fun of each another. Together, they turn the work into a social gathering. Women rarely get the chance to go out, so this gathering is one of the only times where they can talk and interact with women outside their families. This is also a place where women talk about their husbands, their children, their concerns and their problems as well as gossip about their mothers-in-law and other women.

Though you may see women at the river washing clothes and socializing, it is best if soldiers and marines, even females, do not approach them at the river. A female wearing full body armor after having just arrived in a Humvee approaching the women may frighten them.

FEEDING LIVESTOCK

Feeding livestock is another household responsibility for women. Cows, goats, sheep, and chickens are the most common livestock in Afghanistan. Women in the family feed and clean these animals and make sure they produce enough milk for the children. Extra milk is sold to the neighbors. Selling milk is one of the few ways in which women can make a little money. Some families don't even give the milk to their kids. Instead they sell the milk and buy other food instead. Women and girls also make yogurt, cheese, sweets and other milk products to sell at the local markets. Culturally, this is a respected job for woman, especially widows without other means of support. This is the only way they can earn money and get food to meet their family's basic needs.

Women often help each other when their cows or other animals are sick because there are few veterinarians available in the villages. However, there are many NGOs such as Oxfam International that train women on basic medical care of animals.

Income through livestock is very important for women in Afghan villages. A woman's contribution to the family's income increases her status. Without this financial contribution, women and girls are considered consumers, so girls will often be given in marriage at an early age since they are regarded as an economic liability. On the other hand, sons are considered economic resources. Sons provide for their parents later in life. Good food, health, and education for sons are considered an investment for the parent's future when they get old.

SUPERSTITIONS AMONG AFGHAN WOMEN NOT RELATED TO ISLAM

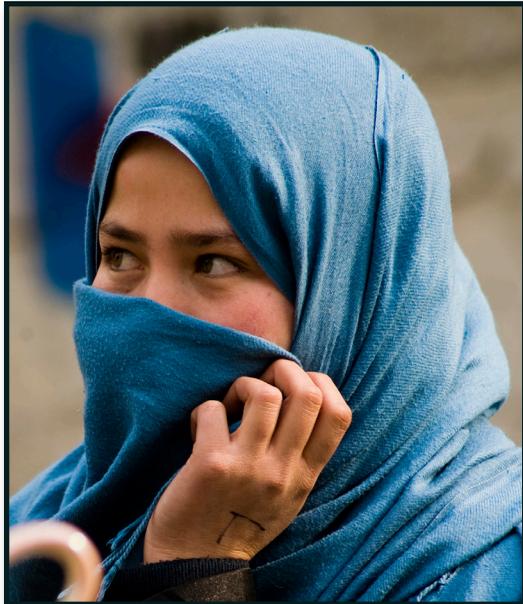
As in many cultures, the Afghan people hold a variety of superstitions based on ancient culture and old wives' tales. Here is a list of the most common old wives' tales.

- Sweeping the house at night is a sin.
- When a bride leaves her parents' house, no cleaning should be done right away.
- When someone travels out of the country, women at home do not sweep that day.
- When someone in the family dies, women do not wash their clothes for three days.
- Women should not go out of the house for forty days and, in some cases, for one year after a family death.
- When a bird comes to the tree in the yard and sings, news from a traveler will come.
- When a cat washes its face, a guest will come.
- When a dog cries, bad news will come.
- When kids touch a broom, guests will come.
- You should not cut your nails at a friend's house.
- You should cut your hair at your friend's house if you are very fond of the friend.
- Girls shouldn't wash their hands when going to their father's home the first day after their own wedding.

- When the right palm itches, that person will receive money. When the left hand itches, that person will lose money.
- When a new bride comes to her in-law's home and good things happen, she is thought to bring good luck to the family. When bad things happen, she is considered bad luck for the family.
- You should hang an onion on the neck of the person who is suffering from jaundice.
- It is said that people get tuberculosis and vitiligo (depigmentation of patches of skin) because God is upset with them.
- When a person suffers frequently from any kind of sickness, people say God is upset with him/her.
- If children do not keep their parents happy, they will never be happy in life.
- When women have bad dreams they should not share them with any one. They should only tell them to the river or another water source.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN AFGHAN VILLAGES

Women's lives are challenging in Afghan society because of the different social expectations for men and woman. These expectations are harder on women and differ from city to village life. There are more limitations on village women than in urban areas. For instance, women must wear a burqa in public and little girls must wear veils. Old women only wear either a white or black veil. Village women have limited access to education and work. They cannot go out alone. If people see a woman alone in public, even if she is wearing a burqa, they will judge her to be a bad woman. Young women are most vulnerable to this scrutiny so when they go outside their home to shop or to visit relatives, they must be escorted either by an older woman or by a young man from their family.



An Afghan woman sells pottery at a women's bazaar in Kabul, Afghanistan, January 28, 2011.

The village people do not respect women who go out after dark. Women may not even be allowed by their family to go out at dusk or early evening. Even if they need to go out, they have to wait until the next day. Village women constantly live in fear of poor security and personal safety as well as negative

judgment by society. Therefore, they avoid speaking loudly, laughing, wearing fancy clothes or talking with each other in public. They often avoid going out because village men might recognize the women from the color of their clothes and burqa and judge them.

Sometimes women of the family get permission from the mother in-law to go shopping, but they must return before the men of the family come home. In most families, women are beaten if they go out without permission. Sometimes, families do not even allow women to go shopping and men bring them whatever they need. In some families where there is no older woman available, the men of the family lock the young women at home when they go to work for the day. Older women at home are considered to be protection for younger women.

There are some public places where only women can go, such as women's gardens and shrines where women come together and pray. There they often bring sweets such as "alwa" to share with each other.

Of the 1,547 sitting judges in Afghanistan only 62 or 4.2% are female.

Of the 546 prosecutors, 35 or 6.4% are female.

Of the 1,241 attorneys 76 or 6.1% are female.

(UNIFEM
Afghanistan Fact Sheet
2008)

There are no women members in the Supreme Court Council.

(UNIFEM
Afghanistan Fact Sheet
2008)

WOMEN'S CLOTHES

Dress is one of the most important elements of Afghan culture. Women are encouraged to wear modest, long and loose dresses. Typically a woman's dress consists of pants "tombaan," an overdress "perahaan" and a head covering, "chadar." However, in the cities, women dress more modern, but they still must cover their entire body, especially in public. Village women wear very colorful clothes although old women wear darker colors, and young women wear shiny, bright colors. Widows, regardless of age, are supposed to wear darker colors because traditionally married women wear nice and colorful dresses that are attractive to their husbands while widows do not have a husband so they must wear very modest clothing. Women of high status or newly married women wear more expensive fabrics.

Village women mostly buy material and make their own clothes, but usually there is also a local female tailor who makes clothes at home with the material women bring to them. Young girls also generally wear the same style of clothes, i.e., tombaan, perahaan and a little chader. Some women make clothes for their children from the same material that they buy for themselves. If one sees young girls wearing the same color and fabric as a woman, then they know that those girls belong to that woman.

For some women, expensive dresses show their love from their husbands. Other women may say that their husbands love them a lot because the men buy them nice things and expensive clothes. Jewelry, such as gold, is also very common. Women wear a lot of gold, mostly for special occasions, during which women show off their jewelry and expensive clothes. This gives their husbands a sense of pride. Women generally congratulate each other on their new clothes and jewelry by saying, "May you wear your new clothes happily. "



An Afghan woman from the north in a red party dress.

CELEBRATIONS

There are many festivals and celebrations in Afghanistan and women's roles in these celebrations are important. "Nawroz," first day of the New Year, falls on March 21. Women do extensive cleaning of the house one week leading up to Nawroz. They make "aft mewa," which is seven kinds of dried fruits, and serve it to the family after breakfast. Before serving aft mewa, everyone in the family gathers in one room and prays for the family's happiness, safety and long life. After that people go to each other's homes.

Women also go out to kick and walk on the spring grass, "sabza laghat." Another part of the celebration is cooking "samanak," sweet pastries made from germinated wheat. Women have a special party while cooking samanak singing songs from nightfall until daylight. This is not only a party; it is a special party that is connected to women's wishes, beliefs and emotions. Young girls come to this party and pray to find a suitable husband. Mothers also make wishes for their children.

Eid Al-fitr (Eid Roza) and Eid Al- Adha (Eid Qurban) are two other important Muslim festivals in Afghanistan and other Islamic countries. Eid Al-fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan and lasts for three days. Again, women in the family lead these celebrations making delicious food, cookies and cakes. The night before, women and girls paint henna on their hands. People also make new clothes and men go to the mosque for special prayers while the women stay at home and finish cleaning. They want to have everything ready before the men return from the mosque. Children get "eidi," money from elders. Some women also get eidi from their husbands.

Two and a half months after Eid al-Fitr is Eid Al-Adha. This is also a three-day celebration with feasts of sacrifice commemorating the Prophet Abraham's devotion to God. People sacrifice goats, sheep, or cows and distribute the meat to poor families and relatives. Afghans also celebrate this festival by visiting each other.

MARRIAGE

In Afghanistan, marriage is of the utmost importance. Afghans say, “Without marriage, life and faith are incomplete.” Therefore, there are few unmarried people in Afghanistan. Parents are always trying to find suitable partners for their sons and daughters. Marriage is traditionally a union of two families, rather than of two individuals.

In Afghanistan there are many types of marriages including love marriages, exchange marriages, forced marriages, arranged marriages, and child marriages. The most common marriage is an arranged marriage in which the bride and groom share the same ethnicity, social class and level of reputation.

In Afghanistan, marriage starts with the boy’s family going to the girl’s family to ask for her hand. Then the boy’s family visits the girl’s family from time to time. Sometimes, the girl’s family does not give an answer right away to the boy’s family because a quick answer implies that the girl’s family is eager to get rid of her. If the boy’s family thinks that the girl’s family is eager to marry her off, the boy’s family may think her worth less, and they too may value her less.

In many families, it is too much of a dishonor for the family if the girl says no. Sometimes a girl’s own family will kill her if she dishonors the family by saying no to an arranged marriage or if she tries to escape a forced marriage. In general, however, most men can say no to the proposed bride, and men can have multiple wives even over the objections of their first wives.

Afghan weddings are very costly in relation to a family’s income. In some tribes, a wedding can last for seven days and nights and the groom’s family pays all the expenses.

In cities, weddings are expensive since they take place in fancy hotels with

many different kinds of food. Village weddings occur in the homes of both the bride and the groom, and the ceremony is separate for men and women. The family also does not send invitations to people. Instead, women get together and go from house to house inviting people. People give the women some kind of sweet or other small token as a reward for inviting them to the wedding. But these days, given the poor security situation in much of Afghanistan, people just announce that there will be a wedding the next day and that all the villagers are invited.

70% to 80% of women face forced marriage in Afghanistan.

57% of girls are married before the legal marriage age of 16.

(UNIFEMAfghanistan Fact Sheet 2008)

Cousins marrying cousins is very common in villages because of inheritance rules and because most Afghans do not like a new person to come into their family. For this reason, they prefer marriages among cousins, even first cousins.

A simple wedding consists of three different parts: the shab-e-henna, the wedding ceremony including nikah, and the takht jami. Shab-e henna happens one or two nights before the wedding night. At the shab-e henna, all the women get together to put henna on their hands. The wedding ceremony is after sheb-e henna. Nikah is the most important part of the wedding ceremony. Nikah is the religious part of the wedding that officially completes the marriage contract. A mullah and three male witnesses perform the nikah where the families of the bride and groom agree upon the marital contract. The bride, who is dressed up in green during nikah, cannot participate directly until nikah is finished. Instead, the three male witnesses go to her and ask her to pick a representative called “pather wakeel” who represents the bride’s wishes and decides the amount of money or property as maher.

Takht jami is the last party, and it is usually three or seven days after the

wedding. This is also the women's party where the bride's family will bring her dowry and other gifts. The other relatives also bring gifts for the bride. When this party is over, the bride is ready to start working around the house and get to know everyone and everything in her new home.



A local Afghan National Police Officer invites the Marines to his wedding because of the friendship created by the Police Mentor Team. Other Marines are invited as well and more than 30 attend the wedding.

MAHER AND DOWRY

Maher is an obligatory amount of money promised by the groom to the bride at the time of the marriage contract. According to Islam, this money is like a gift (not the price) to the bride and she can spend it as she wishes. Sometimes this gift could be other things than money such as a house, a piece of land, a garden, gold or silver. The man may give only half of the Maher to the woman when they get married, and he pays the other half on a specific time agreed between parties. Payment of Maher is not conditional to divorce, it means the bride can ask for the full Maher or half or a portion at any time after marriage. If divorce happens after marriage and before consumation of the marriage, the bride shall be entitled only to half of the full maher. Based on custom in Afghanistan, usually grooms do not pay maher until divorce happens. Many families make this amount large enough so the man cannot afford to divorce the woman. A woman can also tell her husband that he does not have to pay the maher at all.

Unfortunately because of the bureaucracy and male-dominated judicial system in Afghanistan, it is very difficult for women to get their Maher when they divorce. In Afghanistan, where most women are uneducated, many women do not even know about this right, so they never even receive any part of their maher.

Dowry is the gift given to the bride by her family, which is optional, not obligatory. This gift includes expensive clothes, gold, jewelry and household items. Often in an Afghan village wedding, few families give dowry, but all families must give pillows, blankets and a mattress to the bride called “pest-e-khwab.”

BRIDE PRICE

The bride price is the amount of cash or property given to the bride's family by the groom's family in order to obtain sole rights to the bride for economic, sexual, and reproductive services. While bride price is not a part of Islam, it is a common custom in Afghanistan. Bride price reflects the value of a woman. It goes up if the woman is very beautiful and has many valuable skills such as cooking and sewing. Among Turkmen tribes in Afghanistan, the bride price can be very high because the women can make carpets, a valuable skill for economic reasons. Some poor families force their girls to marry at a very young age to get the bride price so some marriages consist of a child bride with an adult groom, who in many cases has multiple wives.

A lot of domestic violence in Afghanistan is associated with the bride price. Often when a girl's father asks for a lot of money for his daughter, the groom-to-be goes to Pakistan or Iran and works for years to make the money, but after the wedding, his family often does not treat the bride well. Often in this case, she is forced to do most of the work around the house. If she has skills such as making carpets, she is forced to make as many carpets as possible so that her husband can regain the money that he paid to the girl's family.

Sometimes people living in the same village argue over whether the bride price is too high or too low. For example, if a family pays more money in comparison to a previous wedding in the village, a villager may go to that family to say that the price they paid was too high for the village, and it is making life difficult for them. Also if a girl's family takes less money than the last wedding in the village, families with more girls will come to their home and complain that the bride price was too low.

DIVORCE

Divorce is allowed in Islam, but most of the rights lie with the men; however, women do have the right to divorce under specific conditions and circumstances. In Islam, women can insist on their rights for divorce at the time of the marriage contract, “nikah.” For instance, she can tell her husband that she will marry him under the condition that he gives her



An Afghan woman from central Afghanistan.

the right to divorce him. In Afghan culture though, divorce is not encouraged, and most Afghan women do not even know their rights when it comes to filing for divorce. Also, since family is so important, divorce is considered breaking not only the relationship of two people but also the ties between two families.

Life is extremely challenging for a divorced Afghan woman. People look down on her and think that she is not a good woman since a good woman never leaves her husband. Plus she becomes a burden for her family since most Afghan women do not work outside the home. Also her father’s family never wants to face the judgment and gossip of the people of the village. Therefore, they encourage their daughters to be obedient to their husbands, put up with difficulties and avoid separation. Only in cases with extremely valid reasons for divorce is a woman supported by her family in a divorce.

WIDOWED WOMEN

According to the United Nations Fund for Women (UNFW), there are more than one million widows in Afghanistan. Most of them live in poverty and are dependent on financial handouts from their relatives. Most widowed women in the provinces are illiterate and unable to support themselves. Men rarely marry a widowed woman, and only a widowed man would marry a widowed woman. If she has children, there

is less chance for her to remarry. In some cases, if the widowed woman is young, her family might remarry her. Then either she or the dead husband's family takes custody of the children. If the dead husband's family takes the children, she will not be able to see her children nor will she have rights to them. Most widowed women prefer to stay with their children, yet in most cases, they do not have that choice.

Among some Afghan tribes, such as the Pashtuns, a widowed woman cannot remarry outside her husband's family. It is considered a dishonor to the family if she does. She is forced to marry the brother of the dead husband even if he is much younger than her. And later, this man will marry a second woman who has never been married before.

“There are 1 million widows in Afghanistan with an average age of 35 years.

(UNIFEM
Afghanistan Fact Sheet
2008)

WOMEN'S RIGHTS UNDER ISLAM

Women all over the world, in both Islamic and non-Islamic societies, have long struggled for equality. In Afghanistan, the inequality between the sexes is especially large. Women's lives are extremely controlled, and many people think that these restrictions come from the fact that Afghans are Muslim. Actually though, most of the restrictions on Afghan women's lives are cultural, not religious. For instance, forced marriages and restrictions on women's education are not from Islam. These practices are based on cultural norms. Islam gives women many rights to enjoy a better life such as the right to marry and the right to divorce. According to the Quran, men and woman are equal in the eyes of God.

Islam forbids female infanticide which was often practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia and other parts of the world. Islam also instructs Muslims to educate daughters as well as sons and insists that women have the right to refuse a prospective husband. Islam also give a woman rights if her husband divorces her and women have the right to a divorce in certain cases. Furthermore, Islam gives women the right to own and inherit property.



Local girls sing a song celebrating their mother's contributions to society during the International Women's Day celebration in Khowst City, Khowst Province.

EDUCATION

Under the Taliban, women were denied any kind of rights, including the right to an education. Girls were forbidden to go to school, and all schools for girls were closed. Currently, girls are allowed to go to free public schools. However, there is still fear of the Taliban in remote villages, so many people do not want to send their daughters to school. In the villages, families are afraid of male teachers, so they prefer schools with all female teachers.

There are separate schools for boys and girls in Afghanistan, even in the cities, and there are few male teachers in girls' schools. In some remote villages where no schools exist, people send their young girls to the mosque for their education. In many villages, people think that girls have had enough education by the age of 13 and that the only education that girls need is to be able to read the Quran and pray, so they send their children to the madras or mosques.

On the other hand, they believe that boys need to be educated in all subjects. There is higher school enrollment for boys than girls, but according to the United Nation Development Programs (UNDP), Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest literacy rates which is around 34% (male 49% and female 18%).

Only 19% of schools are designated as girls schools.

In 29% of educational districts there are no designated girls schools at all.

Only about 28.4% of teachers in Afghanistan were women in 2005.

(UNIFEM Afghanistan Fact Sheet 2008)



An Afghan woman teaches a class in Bamyān, Afghanistan. The classes are made available to Afghan women, many of whom have never attended a class in their lives. She is writing “Allah is one” on the board.

WOMEN'S HEALTH



U.S. Army medic attached to a coalition Female Treatment Team treats patients during a women's clinic held at Staging Area Tinsley, Uruzgan Province, Afghanistan.

In most villages, women are faced with many problems including depression, dying in childbirth and having too many children, and household responsibilities. Mental health is not considered a sickness unless it is very serious. Rather it is considered an excuse for women to get some rest.

Women being barred from seeing male doctors, and early marriages have contributed to the high maternal death rate. According to the UN, 1,600 out of every 100,000 pregnant women die each year due to poor health facilities.

In Afghanistan's male-dominated society, women encounter various psychological pressures. They suffer greatly from the harsh mistreatment imposed on them by family members. Their suffering associated with mistreatment is usually considered fake. On some occasions, the long-term torment leaves these women desperate for survival. Some women who struggle with the above-mentioned problems express a belief that they have "jinn." One way of explaining and justifying psychological abnormalities is claiming to have been visited by jinns, the evil demons believed to possess supernatural powers. Local people greatly fear jinns and show great respect for people thought to be associated with jinns.

Women are under great pressure to have baby boys because boys are considered a great blessing for a woman especially if it is the first baby. Women who have baby boys receive more attention from their husbands and are taken care of by the family. They also have the choice to rest as long as they want and can request gifts from their husbands. The men are also proud of them for having a baby boy. They buy clothes for all the women who helped their wives during labor. The family also sends sweets to relatives and neighbors. If a baby girl is born, women feel embarrassed and their husbands value their wives less. Women who deliver baby girls provide their husbands with a good excuse to marry another woman.

The average life expectancy for women in Afghanistan is 44 years.

The average woman had 7.4 children in 2004.

Out of the 25,000 Afghans who die from tuberculosis each year, 16,000 are women.

(UNIFEM
Afghanistan Fact Sheet
2008)

One woman dies every 29 minutes in child birth (1,600 to 1,900 deaths per 100,000 live births, the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world).

(UNIFEM
Afghanistan Fact Sheet
2008)

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Women's unhappiness as well as violence against women at the family level is due to poverty, competition among multiple wives, not receiving enough attention from husbands, disagreement with mother-in-laws, and having limited say in household affairs. Women often clash with the other women in the family living in the same house. Often the women's unhappiness is so severe that they light themselves on fire to escape their misery. The self-immolation (setting yourself on fire) rate is very high especially in the southern part of the country.

The practice of "bad marriages" is a common cultural practice that brings more anxiety to the life of women. A "bad marriage" is forced on a daughter when a conflict between two families results in death. As a result, one family is forced to marry a daughter to the other family to end the bloodshed. The woman is disgraced for the duration of her life with the other family and the marriage is called a "bad marriage."

Even in marriages that are not "bad marriages," Afghan women are completely dependent on their husbands both financially and emotionally. If a husband is dissatisfied with his wife, he will marry another woman and bring her to live in the same house. This practice also contributes to conflict at home.

Women take turns doing household jobs. A woman from a wealthy family with lots of brothers and sons is more respected because if she is not treated well, she can return to her father who has enough money to take care of her. Also if she faces violence, her brothers may seek revenge, beating her husband or other men in her in-law's family. Women from poor families often fall victim to violence at their in-law's homes since their families are too poor to help them.



Two Afghan women in white burqas accompany each other outside their home since village women are not allowed to go out alone.

WOMEN'S LIVES BEFORE 30 YEARS OF WAR (PRE-1980)

Before war came to Afghanistan in the 1980's, it was a peaceful country where men and women could pursue jobs in different fields and interact freely with each other in society. Women's education was compulsory, and many women went to university. There were women in the Afghan government cabinet as well as female doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Child marriages and polygamy were outlawed. Women dressed in Western clothes in the cities. Covered women in urban areas were considered old fashioned. Even in the provinces in which women worked, they had access to many literacy resources. They also could go outside of the home without male members of the family.

Before three decades of war, even in the villages, women's lives were not as restricted as they are now. For example, in the 1970's in provincial capitals, women went to movies, shopping and to outdoor concerts. In villages, women could walk from one village to another for weddings or to visit relatives. There were always people who thought women's roles and movements in the cities and the villages should be restricted, but before the three decades of war, the government was strong enough to influence people's thinking. With progressive thinking being a part of the government's policies and therefore a part of Afghan culture, people's mindsets began to change. Under the ruling parties of the past thirty years, conservative thinking has been enforced and adopted by many Afghans.

Afghan women also played influential roles in Afghan history. Notable Afghan women include Malalai who carried the Afghan flag during the second Anglo-Afghan war and Queen Soraya, an Afghan woman who appeared without a veil in public bringing change in the lives of other women. She also established the first magazine for women.

AFGHAN WOMEN'S LIVES DURING THREE DECADES OF WAR

Afghan women have suffered tremendously during the three decades of war. Each ruling force from the Communists to the mujahedeen to the Taliban treated women differently. The Communist regime abolished bride price and forced marriages. The Communists did not force the wearing of the veil and women were encouraged to get educated. Literacy courses were offered throughout the country. Western dress became common among women in the big cities and women enjoyed many rights and freedom under this regime. However, women in the provinces lived under tribal cultural norms. In some parts of Afghanistan, the mujahedeen killed unveiled women during the Communist regime. When the mujahedeen took power in 1992, they forced all women to follow the Islamic dress code, including wearing veils. During the bloody four-year civil war, women often were kidnapped, raped and killed by men from other ethnicities. NOTE: It must be noted that it is hard to define the mujahedeen as just one group. While some – such as Hekmatyar's and Sayyaf's groups – were very harsh towards women doing things such as throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women, others, such as Jamiat, were better regarding women's issues, and even supported girls' schools.

The lives of women became even worse during the Taliban regime when they were forbidden to go to work, school or even go out of their houses without a male chaperone. Burqas became compulsory and women were beaten on the streets if they did not wear it properly or wore attractive clothes under the burqa. White was also forbidden because it was the color of the Taliban's flag. Women who wore white shoes or high heels were lashed by the Taliban because white or high-heeled shoes were considered attractive to men. Women were forced to stay home and the men were told to paint the windows at the house so that other men could not see the women inside.



Elizabeth Carver, a resident engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, hands out gifts to Afghan women as part of International Women's Day, March 4th, in Kabul.

WOMEN'S LIVES BETWEEN 2001 AND THE PRESENT

Since the fall of the Taliban, the new government with the support of the international community has provided some help to Afghans intent on improving the status of women in Afghanistan. The Afghan government has signed many national and international treaties in this regard. According to the Afghan constitution, Afghan men and women have equal rights. Moreover, the Afghan government signed CEDAW (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). There are women in the cabinet, police force, media, parliament and other governmental sectors. Women also have the chance to run their own NGOs as well as work with international agencies. There is also a Ministry for Women's Affairs to monitor other ministries' plans and policies to make sure women are included in all plans and programs.

Women are no longer imprisoned in their homes so they can go to school, study abroad, and work outside the home. However, all these developments are limited to women in the cities. Eighty-five percent of Afghan women live in rural areas so they have benefited little from these programs.

Cultural norms and practices are still very dominant. Village women suffer from forced marriages, violence, abuse, poor health and lack of education. Cultural norms are more powerful than the law or even religion, and each tribal family has their own norms and roles for women. Basically, families treat the women in their families any way they want regardless of the new laws. This is due in part to the inability or the reluctance of the Afghan government to enforce its own laws. In some parts of the country, the Taliban are regaining power, and people are again afraid to send their daughters to school.

CHANGES THAT SHOULD BE MADE FOR WOMEN

The most important work that could change the lives of Afghan women is to help them become self-sufficient. In order to become self-sufficient, they must have good security and safety so that they can bring changes to their lives without fear. International women's rights organizations should put more focus on economic empowerment of Afghan women because women can live without education, but they cannot live without food. Girls in provinces should be allowed to attend school and be educated safely without fear of the people's judgment and Taliban attacks. Families should be forced to live under the rule of law that allows women to benefit from the rights that Islam and the Afghan government have given them.

Women represent less than 1% of employees in police and military services.

There are 259 women in the Afghan National Army, which is 0.6% of approximately 43,000 military personal.

(UNIFEM
Afghanistan Fact Sheet
2008)

Constant war in Afghanistan has led to emotional and psychological trauma among Afghan women. They have lost their sons, husbands, brothers and fathers during the war. Therefore, beside security, Afghan women need encouragement, empowerment, self-confidence and mental health services so that they can bring changes to their lives

ASSISTANCE THAT THE US MILITARY CAN BRING



(Center standing) Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Tamora Holland, Paktika Provincial Reconstruction Team and Female Engagement Team medical officer, speaks to local Afghan women with the help of her translator.

The US military can bring many positive changes to the lives of Afghan women in the provinces. They can visit them in their homes and listen to the problems that they face. By building relationships with Afghan women, female military personnel can help encourage local development and help Afghans build a better vision for their future. They also can provide necessary supplies for schools in the villages so that Afghan girls can learn better. U.S military

personnel can also provide hospitals with supplies and medical training. With better communication, military personnel can build trust among village women and elders, and they can learn about the problems and needs that women have and share this information with Afghan officials. US military personnel can also advocate for Afghan women internationally to gain more support for women's development projects in rural areas. However, the most important thing that the American military can provide is good security and safety.

Sharing a meal with Afghans can open many doors. Guests are considered to be dear to Allah, and the family is responsible for their safety and security while they are there. Small gifts for children in the village bring smiles and happiness to the children. Of course, knowledge of and respect for Afghan culture and cultural boundaries will help make military personnel feel closer to people. When they understand the culture, they can ask appropriate questions and share experiences with them. Actively listening to the women and sending women to speak with women give them a sense of recognition and respect.



Zareen and Kohistani are the first two Afghan women merchants to be contracted by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service in Afghanistan for women's stores at the Bagram Air Field bazaar.

ESTABLISHING GOOD RELATIONS WITH AFGHAN WOMEN IN VILLAGES



Air Force 1st Lt. Emily Chilson, Paktika Provincial Reconstruction Team public affairs officer and Female Engagement Team member from Memphis, Tenn., talks with young Afghan girls while their mothers watch on the side.

Building trust and relationships with Afghan village women is both challenging yet easy at the same time. To reach Afghan women, military personnel should take the following steps. First, female military personnel should wear clothing that identifies them as women. It is difficult for Afghan village women to differentiate between male and female military personnel since they both wear the same kind of uniform. Female military personnel should

wear some feminine looking clothes such as an Afghan-looking headscarf or an Afghan-looking shawl around their shoulders. Female military personnel should avoid wearing sunglasses, chewing gum or eating or drinking anything before being introduced. These actions will have a negative impact on the Afghan women's first impression.

Active listening is very important. Sitting close to the women and actively listening are two things military personnel need to do while visiting Afghan village women. Sitting close, kissing and hugging when greeting or shaking hands are the first tools that open the door to Afghan women. If possible sharing a meal with them is even better; they will think that you like them and the way they live, and that will build trust. Giving small gifts to children such as pens, books and toys is another way to make the relationship even stronger. Toothbrushes and toothpaste would be wonderful gifts as most children in a family share one tooth brush or do not brush their teeth at all.

Sometimes asking direct questions is not effective in Afghan communication. For instance, if you ask an Afghan, "How are you?" she will say that she is fine even if she is not. If you offer an Afghan a gift, she will say no, but it doesn't mean she doesn't want it. You need to keep saying "Please take it" at least three or four times.

Here are some general rules to follow when interacting with Afghan women:

- Do what they do and you won't go wrong; observe and watch them.
- Be pleasant.
- Do not show your confusion in front of the villagers because they will sense your hesitation and you will lose respect.
- Don't show fear.
- Avoid taking pictures while talking to Afghan women.
- Share your faith in general but not in specifics.

- Do not compare faiths.
- If you don't know something, ask politely.
- Celebrate and attend celebrations.
- Be respectful.
- Female military personnel should be recognizable as women when entering houses or talking to Afghan women.
- The reputation of Afghan women must be protected at all times.
- You must provide what you promise.
- Identify girls, boys, women and men with potential and help them develop their skills.
- Listen to Afghan women's needs.

A STEP BY STEP GUIDE FOR ESTABLISHING CONTACT WITH AFGHAN WOMEN

In order to establish good relations with the women in the villages, military personnel must work through the mullah but not directly with the mullah. Mullahs do not want to be seen as working too closely with the military because public opinion is that a mullah should not be directly in touch with foreigners, especially foreign women. To get to the mullah, military personnel need to find a respected elder in the village to communicate with the mullah. After the mullah is informed of the military's intentions and is convinced that the activities are legitimate and beneficial, only then can the military personnel begin to reach out to the village women through the village elders appointed by the mullah. Once a relationship is established between the village women and the female military personnel, then the women will have a chance to speak and express



A group of Afghan men and women walk to the Women Affairs Center near Forward Operating Base Mehtar Lahm, Laghman Province, Afghanistan.

themselves. This outlet is badly needed. The relationship between the female military personnel and the village women can be strengthened by listening to the village women's needs and by providing support to them. The women then need to be visited from time to time.

The following is a list of steps to take when establishing relations with the village women for the first time:

Step one: Have a male military person find a respected elder in the village. If you are working with the ANA or ANP, have an Afghan soldier or policeman first speak with a male elder in the village. Ask this village elder to speak to the mullah about your desires to interact and help the women in the village. The mullah is the most important and influential person in the village. Therefore, it is always good and proper to inform the village mullah that you would like to visit with the women in his village. Briefly explain to the village elder what kind of help you can provide them. Ask him to explain this to the mullah.

Step two: The mullah might then introduce you to the men who have well-known but honorable women in their families. These men will then introduce the female members of the military to the women in their families. The female American military personnel will want to work through the well-known and respected women in the village to reach other women in the village.

Step three: The respected village woman can take you to other houses or invite other women to their homes for a meeting or gathering. There are also women's shuras, councils and a women's department in most villages. You will find it beneficial to use these organizations to interact with women as well.

Note: Be on the lookout for village men who are suspicious of what you are doing. Remember, the notion of female military personnel is quite alien to most Afghan men, especially in the rural areas where you are likely to operate. Above all ensure that you have 'buy in' from the mullah and/or the elders prior to any engagement with Afghan women.



**DEFENSE CRITICAL LANGUAGE
AND CULTURE PROGRAM**

THE MAUREEN & MIKE MANSFIELD CENTER
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA