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A Closer Look at Men and “Masculinities”: Their Proactive Contribution to Gender Equality

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The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) undertook a collaborative study to inform both policy and practice on how to address masculinities in Afghanistan. Masculinity is defined as how people perceive male-ness. The overall goal of this research is a comprehensive understanding of different notions of being a man in Afghanistan and how they contribute to gender inequality. The study addressed boys’ and men’s roles; equality, power and control; and violence against women, which are the most compelling perspectives on masculinities vis-à-vis gender equality, peace and sustainable development.

It is imperative to address disparities in both domestic and community opportunities afforded to Afghan women and girls. As one of the United Nations’ 193 signatories, Afghanistan needs to further solidify its policies and programmes as a blueprint to improve the lives of women and children.

Afghanistan retains a definition of masculinities and femininities that has been passed down from generation to generation. The present threats to Afghan girls and women occur in a context of traditional practices that suppress them and make them vulnerable to violence. Despite Afghan gender-based policies, inequalities persist, including unequal access to education, healthcare and employment. Policies still fail to accommodate the research that highlights the advantages of including men and boys in equality programmes that prevent gender-based violence (GBV). Gender equality is a prerequisite for overall health and development and, thus, a driver of the economy, as is clearly pointed out in SDG number 5—“Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”—and embedded in other goals.

There is an unacceptable silence surrounding the widely known discrimination and violence against girls and women. Such a notion is confirmed by the study findings that reveal many women’s acceptance of a masculinity-based culture of violence. This indicates how deeply rooted these perceptions are and highlights the value of increasing girls’ and women’s awareness about the roles they can play in re-instating self-esteem and confidence. A report sponsored by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) claimed that silence implicitly supports those who are intent on maintaining their authority by confining women to household chores and a lower status in life; further, it endorses discriminatory systems that condone violence against women.

To be silent is to abandon women who are conscientiously taking risks to play an active role in their communities and in Afghan society to advance the rights of women.¹

The pervasiveness of Afghan masculinity necessitates including men and boys in talks on its impact on them, and its consequences for women’s lives. The responsibility is on men to create a paradigm shift, and to challenge each other to break the social acceptance of “toxic masculinity.” Without this debate, silence is a form of consent; men are part of the problem, and they are also the solution. The debate has started in the region, but must now gain momentum, become widely mainstreamed and be backed by government policy.²

1 UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Silence Is Violence End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan,” (UNAMA: 2009). Retrieved from <http://goo.gl/yPUwMA> (Accessed 22 September 2015).

2 Natalie Gyte, “Masculinity Defines Men, Rather Than the Reverse’ - Why the ‘Masculinity’ Debate Is So Important,” Huffington Post (2013), <http://goo.gl/q787Fj>. (Accessed 12 July 2015).

Policy Implications Engaging Men and Young Boys as Gender Equality Partners

1. A need to revisit all laws in Afghanistan that are anchored on such international agreements as the Sustainable Development Goals, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform of Action, Convention on the Rights of Children and other protocols, to ensure that they clearly respond to such gender violence issues as domestic display of aggressive behaviours and girls and women being vulnerable to *baad*³ and *badal*⁴.
2. A need to open a judicial debate on Islamic notions of social justice that forefront women's interests, such as equality and equity of women's opportunities vis-à-vis both domestic and community leadership. There is also a need to deconstruct the belittling of women embedded in Afghan masculinities. An example is the pejorative label "*Zancho*"⁵ in Dari and "*Narkhazai*"⁵, or "*Narshazai*"⁵ in Pashto, applied to men who assume women's tasks.
3. An imperative to review the Family Law on tribal codes and norms to combat the harmful practice implicit in Afghan masculinities that women cannot claim inheritance without severing ties with the family. This reflects the research findings that show how a woman asking for her inheritance from her male relatives would create a family schism.

Programmatic Interventions

1. A need to further disseminate the study results to guide policymakers on issues of gender inequality, and gender-based violence that emerge from the rigid construct of masculinity.
2. A need to engage men and boys in masculinity best practices, which is a new development component in Afghanistan. Before designing any intervention, it may be helpful to identify similar actions implemented successfully in parts of the world similar to Afghanistan, like Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. A compilation of best practices can support related programmes in Afghanistan. Both government and non-governmental organisations can be part of this compilation, adoption and review process.
3. A need to initiate attitudinal and behavioural change programmes tailored for men and boys that should also highlight the importance of helping girls and women to build their confidence and boost their self-esteem. These programmes should be designed to break the "hegemonic" and stereotypical masculinity concept both provincially and locally. Each programme can have a series of community dialogues, seminars, conferences, orientation sessions, trainings, article writing, IEC development and dissemination of messages centred on men's equal participation in household activities through suitable communication channels (radio, television, newspapers, posters, billboards, sketches, street theatre and telephone); messages can be based on the teachings of Holy Quran and Hadith.
4. A need to start an education programme that draws on the credibility of male peer groups, leverages the power of role modelling and provides flexibility in meeting diverse needs. Peer education can support young boys and men in developing positive life trends for making healthy decisions. This programme can be designed for schools, colleges, universities and religious institutions. Selected groups of men and boys can be trained as peer educators and gender equality activists.

3 A traditional "practice of settling a dispute by marrying a girl from the perpetrator's family to a man in the victim's family to prevent conflict between the families." Here the bride is considered as a blood price. Sometimes, it is also considered socially acceptable for a young girl to elope with a boy who cannot marry because of the restrictions. In this situation, the boy's family should give away a young female member as a form of settlement to the girl's family. "Baad is practiced among communities throughout the country although it is illegal under Afghan Law."

4 Exchange; "A form of marriage where families exchange daughters in marriage, often to avoid paying bride-price."

5 *Zancho* means a man who is behaving in a way that is considered suitable or typical for a woman. In an Afghanistan context, it also implies that a man who helps in household chores is not a real man; it lessens his manhood.

5. A need to create psychosocial support programmes for men and boys. Such would be great help to address issues pertaining to rigid masculinity traits and societal norms. Men are not allowed to cry or express grief, which may have psycho-emotional effects. There is a need to enable boys and young men to break the rigid masculinity trend through professional counselling and psychotherapeutic services that reveal the causes of violent and aggressive behaviour. Through these programmes, men and boys can learn anger and stress management, non-violent communication and emotional health skills. This has a direct link to dealing with positive fathering and gender-based violence. Socio-culturally sensitive mental health programmes for men are needed to prevent domestic and community violence, harassment and misuse of power.
6. A need to establish a National Masculinity Alliance of like-minded organisations with the defined goal of deconstructing masculinity, shaping the life of children as expectant fathers and bringing up boys as non-violent fathers, brothers and elders. This alliance can conduct targeted government advocacy, and mandate programmes that encourage the role of men in fatherhood and caregiving, along with their full participation in maternal and child health and in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).
7. A need to start inclusive programming of men’s and boys’ engagement as part of the national agenda. Since most global and national donors support initiatives that focus on women’s empowerment, there is a need within the development sector to adopt a more inclusive approach. Donors should allocate resources toward engaging men and boys in creating an enabling environment for girls and women, and promoting inclusive programming for gender equality and social justice, including changes to laws and policies. This will further develop synergies among donors.
8. A need to coordinate with civil society and government organisations, specifically the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and the Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC) to enrich programmes that deconstruct masculinity as it pertains to gender inequality and violence against women and children. This life-skills-based education (or comprehensive sexuality education) should involve both men and women as partners in addressing male notions of personal inadequacy for not meeting gendered societal expectations. Implementation of these programmes could reinforce the unacceptability of domestic abuse.
9. Introducing innovative gender mainstreaming curricula in the schools, colleges and universities (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Higher Education) that redefine the roles of men and women, including regarding leadership and children’s rights, such that traditional views that promote gender inequality and violence are disrupted. The curricula need to include a gender-sensitive framework for teachers, parents and students. Academic institutions, curricula/syllabi and teachers shape children’s life-cycle approach. Through their life experience, day-to-day examples and curricula, teachers unwittingly strengthen traditional masculinity notions.
10. Tapping the power of mass media and social networking to promote gender equality among young people. Advisory messages should be circulated as a public service by mobile phone companies to be managed by the MoIC and Ministry of Communication and Information Technology and partnered with private organisations and civil society. There is a need for media training that understands the concept of masculinity involving print, electronic, social and internet media and theatre activists. Best Prizes should be awarded to those documentaries, novels, books or stories, films or theatre that contributed to deconstructing masculinity in Afghanistan.
11. Involving local key actors in the process of changing values and male gender norms in the traditional structure of Afghan communities. These actors include the village *Malik*, *Wakile-Guzar*, elders, religious leaders and teachers and community and youth councils that are considered decision makers or role models. Engaging these figureheads is fundamental to just gender relations. Clergymen, mosque *Imams* and scholars who could be considered powerful attitude change facilitators should be recruited by the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs. Men calling on other men to change and showing how it benefits them is very powerful. Also, some opportunities must be provided for men and women to talk about how Afghan masculinities are affecting men’s well-being and health as consequences of social pressure.

Recommendations

- The present paper provides some insights on the reasons men and women give for domestic violence, but future research may be necessary for the different types of GBV and their triggers. Applying gender-sensitive and participatory research methods may be helpful.
- There should be an in-depth study on the impact of Western military involvement on Afghan gender policies and also men's reactions toward the issues mentioned above.
- Afghan masculinities, along with SRHR, need to be studied from both male and female perspectives, i.e., what are the needs, issues, felt problems and barriers to accessing health services; and what are men's roles and contributions to family planning? Peer research among young people is another approach to be addressed in safe spaces by those with a personal interest, particularly vis-à-vis SRHR and the related GBV and sexual violence.
- Overall, it is a joint responsibility of policy and programmes, civil society organisations, communities and donors to invest in men and boys' changing their behaviour and attitudes toward gender equality.

Suggestion for Citation

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Also it is worth nothing that the full text which is the base of this policy note named "The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan" is available in AREU website through the following links:

<http://goo.gl/z5c6u0>

<http://goo.gl/8kb6ZQ>

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