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Redefining Masculinity in Afghanistan

Summary

- Afghans are physically and emotionally distressed from over three decades of war and violent conflicts.

- During times of violent conflicts, survival takes precedence, forcing people to adopt violent and aggressive behavior. As a result, violence has become an acceptable way of resolving conflicts throughout Afghan society.

- Social norms are highly influential in shaping individual's behavior, including the use of violence. Thus, the concept of masculinity in Afghanistan needs to be redefined, with an emphasis on the rejection of violence and praise for those who resolve conflicts with peaceful solutions.

Introduction

More than three decades of political instability, violent conflicts, and foreign invasions have shaken Afghanistan to its core. Nearly two million have been killed, over a million disabled or orphaned, and a million women widowed. Today, Afghanistan is faced with the consequences of decades of violence, mass exodus, and displacements: it is insecure, intolerant of diversity of views, and home to nearly two generations that have grown up surrounded by conflict and war. Violent and aggressive behavior—particularly from young men—has become an accepted norm of Afghan society.

Since 1987, when Afghanistan's population was an estimated 11.5 million, the country's population has nearly tripled to 29.2 million, according to a recent estimate by the Afghan Census Bureau. (The CIA World Factbook puts the figure even higher, at over thirty-four million.) As a result, Afghanistan is one of the youngest and fastest growing nations in the world.[1] Approximately 60 percent of the country's population is under the age of twenty-five and roughly 46 percent is under the age of fifteen, according to the World Factbook.

Decades of lost educational opportunities, widespread destruction and disintegration of communities and families, and pervasive unemployment combined with insecurity and ongoing violence have placed a tremendous burden on the youth population, particularly young men who are often forced to assume the role of breadwinner at a very young age.

Youth, Instability, and Conflict

Generally speaking, young people in Afghanistan—especially young men—have few restrictions on where they go or who they associate with. Like young people everywhere, they are adventurous and in search of meaning and purpose in their lives. Unfortunately, given the current situation

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in Afghanistan, the Afghan government has not been able to effectively channel this youthful energy, creativity, and motivation into positive actions that can empower youth to become positive change agents within their communities.

Given the government's inability to effectively address unemployment, a significant number of young men are without jobs and therefore unable to fulfill societal expectations of providing financial support for their immediate and extended families. As a result, a significant number of Afghan youth have become involved in organized crime or other illegal—and often violent—activities to fulfill their perceived obligations and duties to family.

Social scientists have observed a correlation between countries with burgeoning youth populations and those that are prone to violent conflicts. In a study of youth, instability, and conflict, the Peace Research Institute Oslo noted that "the statistical risk of conflict is increased in countries with very young populations."[2] A similar correlation in developing countries was documented by American political scientists Gary Fuller and Jack A. Goldstone. According to a 2007 report published by Population Action International, "Between 1970 and 1999, 80 percent of civil conflicts…occurred in countries in which 60 percent or more of the population was under age 30."[3] The Council on Foreign Relations noted that, in 2007, there were sixty-seven counties with youth bulges (the term coined by German social scientist Gunnar Heinsohn to denote populations dominated by people ages fifteen to twenty-nine), and sixty of them were experiencing social unrest and violence.[4]

Recognizing the significant role of youth in peace and security as well as in violence, the UN Security Council in December 2015 adopted Resolution 2250 urging member states to consider setting up mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes and dispute resolution.[5] Equally important, however, are opportunities for young men to denounce violent masculinity and aggressive acts and behavior at a personal level. In many parts of Afghanistan, displays of aggression and intimidation represent a rite of passage for adolescent boys and a symbol of manhood for men. The social acceptance of such behavior, however, heightens the risk that intolerance of diversity and interpersonal violence, including violence against women and children, become an everyday fact of life.

A 2009 report jointly published by the UN's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights described violence as "an everyday occurrence in the lives of a huge proportion of Afghan women."[6] More recently, a 2017 case study by Save the Children International noted that physical violence against children remains high in Afghanistan, with boys more likely to experience some form of physical violence at the hands of their parents, relatives, or teachers compared to girls. The study also found that "children from urban areas reported experiencing a higher number of different types of violence at home than children in rural areas."[7]

An example of how violence has become accepted as an everyday fact of life is the gruesome lynching of a young Afghan woman in the heart of Kabul in March 2015 by more than a hundred men. Those who committed this heinous crime were ordinary Kabul citizens that one might encounter on a daily basis. They came from different walks of life. They were shopkeepers, high school and university students, security personnel, and passersby who did not pause to question the veracity of the alleged crime but proceeded to participate obediently in its barbaric punishment.

While this tragedy was a wake-up call for many young men who have since taken the initiative to promote peaceful behavior and say no to violent masculinity, the fact remains that a majority of Afghans are exposed to violence beginning at an early age, including physical abuse at home by parents and relatives as well as the liberal use of corporal punishment at mosques, madrassas, and schools. Children witness their mothers and sisters being violently abused at the hands of family members, which comes to be accepted as a social and cultural norm, resulting in the acceptance of violence as a first—and sometimes only—option for resolving conflicts.

Learning a Nonviolent Sense of Masculinity

Recognizing the need to work with young men on the narratives of masculinities, in 2015 the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) began implementing a two-year pilot project to stimulate in-depth self-reflection and to engage young men emotionally and intellectually. With the support of Afghan civil society and government representatives and international experts, the project focused on four provinces: Balkh, Nangarhar, Herat, and Kabul.

In Afghanistan, men and boys are discouraged from discussing their emotions and fears. This project provided a safe platform for them to speak openly and honestly about how the years of armed conflict and violence have affected their values, attitudes, and behaviors. In these gatherings, the young men talked about family and cultural expectations, their own personal aspirations, and how they view their masculine identities. Project participants exchanged personal stories about having grown up in war and witnessed from a very young age different forms of violence, both in the home and outside, and how that has shaped their behavior toward others. The project tried to achieve this through training workshops with groups of thirty men in each of the four provinces. Participants attended workshops on peaceful concepts of masculinity, tolerance, and positive social behavior, where examples from other conflict and postconflict countries were shared with them.

USIP engaged with the project's participants to assess potential or actual shifts in their view-points and attitudes on definitions of masculinity. Although the focus of the discussions was on men's roles, identities, and experiences during the country's violent conflicts, participants also discussed their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis women. Most, but not all, participants stated that having power and control over members of their family was an important aspect of how they defined masculinity. As one participant said, "In order to show the world that a man is in control, he must have control or power over the members of [his] family. It means that you have control over them. Others are sure that you have the ability to rule over tribe or community."

Participants also talked about how their conception of masculinity has affected their interactions with the female members of their families. One person said, "I want to feel like the boss of [my] family. I have advantages over [the] women members of my family. What I say must be accepted by others because I am the breadwinner of my family." Others shared their frustration that even as they were trying to change their aggressive behavior, their mothers and sisters were the ones taunting them and labeling them as "womanish" and that "being kind to one's wife and children is seen as not being an honorable man." A young man from Herat said, "From a very young age, our mothers teach us about the accepted qualities for an honorable man. They tell us to be brave, not to show emotions, and to be a person that others will fear."

While it is too soon to measure the long-term impact of the opportunity and knowledge USIP has provided to the young men in the target provinces, participants and their colleagues and family members have reported changes in the trainees' behavior. One participant, a madrassa student from Nangarhar, said, "The main takeaway for me [from this project] is to critically assess my personal action and words toward others. In a way, I am relearning the true meaning of manly behavior." Another participant from Kabul said, "I am finding it challenging to change myself [to change my behavior] as for more than twenty years the society imposed on me a narrative of masculinity that was based on aggressive and unkind behavior to be a tough man. I have to remind myself every day to adopt a peaceful narrative of masculinity."

One indirect impact of the project was to instill critical thinking about the need of young Afghan men to identify positive examples and role models in the region who have advocated for tolerance and peaceful behavior. Participants dedicated several meetings to a discussion of the philosophy of nonviolence promoted by Abdul Ghaffar Khan, who was given the title Bacha Khan (the King)

by his followers. Born in 1890, Bacha Khan—sometimes referred to as the Muslim Gandhi—committed himself at a very early age to eradicating poverty in British India and promoting the importance and value of education and literacy for men and women. Khan expressed a belief that people should earn respect based on their deeds rather than their class or social background.

In 1929, Khan founded the Khudai Khidmatgar ("Servant of God") movement to foster a nonviolent approach to the sociopolitical problems of the people, including illiteracy, blood feuds, crime, the use of intoxicants, and factionalism. Part of the reason why the message of Bacha Khan resonated so strongly with the young men in the project was because he was from the region and came from a similar cultural background. As one participant said, "Bacha Khan is the opposite of warlords and self-centered politicians of my time. I want to follow Khan's way of life, which was based on tolerance and respect for all."

Recommendations

To replace the violent sense of masculinity that is ingrained in Afghans' social and cultural norms, education and support should be provided to those who want to create change from within. There is a need for more in-depth study of the links between domestic violence and societal violence as well as the negative impact of corporal punishment in the education sector. The concept of masculinity must be reintroduced into society with a new definition that rejects violence and praises those who resolve conflicts with peaceful solutions. In addition:

• There is a need for in-depth study to better understand the perceived correlation between youth bulge and the rise in criminal and violent activities. The Afghan government's youth strategy must reflect the complex reality of the country's youth bulge and the needs of young Afghans in order to find ways to channel the energy of youth into positive and meaningful actions.

• Efforts should be made to spread the message of peace and peaceful behavior with examples from the country or the region, such as Bacha Khan.

• Women play a pivotal role in shaping a child's worldview and personality, and they are often behind the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Programs to educate women in parenting skills and the power of their influence on children's behavior should be embedded in different sectors, including health and education and the mainstream media.

• Relevant state institutions—such as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and the ministries of women's affairs, education, and hajj and religious affairs—and their provincial departments in collaboration with civil society organizations must take proactive steps to educate women about the consequences of gender stereotyping that inevitably lead back to violence against themselves.

• Community elders and mullahs—key messengers in Afghan society—need to be engaged in spreading messages of peaceful masculinity through Friday prayers and public gatherings.

• Efforts should also be made to work with school students, whose personalities and modes of behavior are still developing, to teach them about tolerance, peaceful masculinity, and basic conflict resolution and peacebuilding skills.

• Government and nongovernmental organizations should undertake public awareness campaigns to promote ideas of nonaggressive masculinity through new and existing mediums.

Notes

1. James Burton, "30 Countries with the Youngest Populations in the World," WorldAtlas, April 25, 2017, www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-youngest-populations-in-the-world.html.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief summarizes the initial findings of a pilot project to assess the impact of decades of conflict and violence on young Afghan men and the effect of efforts to teach them tolerance, peaceful masculinity, and basic conflict resolution and peacebuilding skills. Sponsored by the Asia Center at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the project is one of many ongoing USIP efforts to conduct programming on men, peace, and security in conflict zones. Belquis Ahmadi is a senior program officer in USIP's Afghanistan program. Rafiullah Stanikzai is a senior project officer in USIP.

2. Kari Paasonen and Henrik Urdal, "Youth Bulges, Exclusion and Instability: The Role of Youth in the Arab Spring," *Conflict Trends* 3 (Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2016).

3. Elizabeth Leahy, *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World* (Washington, DC: Population Action International, 2007), p. 10.

4. Lionel Beehner, "The Effects of 'Youth Bulge' on Civil Conflicts," Council on Foreign Relations, April 7, 2007, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/effects-youth-bulge-civil-conflicts.

5. United Nations, "Security Council, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2250 (2015), Urges Member States to Increase Representation of Youth in Decision-Making at All Levels," news release, December 9, 2015, www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm.

6. UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Silence Is Violence: End the Abuse of Women in Afghanistan," (Kabul: UN Mission in Afghanistan & Office of the High Commisioner for Human Rights, 2009), www.ohchr.org/Documents/Press/VAW_Report_7July09.pdf.

7. Save the Children International, "Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices on Violence and Harmful Practices Against Children in Afghanistan" (London: Save the Children, 2017) https://resource centre.savethechildren.net/library/knowledge-attitudes-and-practices-violence-and-harmful -practices-against-children.

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