

Understanding Men and Masculinities:

Towards Creating Egalitarian
Gender Relations in Afghan
Society

Munazza Ebtikar
December 2020



Mia Khan, an Afghan father who drives 12
Km by his motorbike to drop his daughters to
school and waits more than 4 hours till their
classes end and take them back home.



Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Case Study:

Understanding Men and Masculinities

**Towards Creating Egalitarian Gender Relations
in Afghan Society**

Munazza Ebtikar

December 2020

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Foreword

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is pleased to present its esteemed audience with a timely case study paper titled: *Understanding Men and Masculinities: Towards Creating Egalitarian Gender Relations in Afghan Society*. This paper has been produced by the generous financial support of UN Women Afghanistan.

The paper looks at how Afghan men from diverse socio-economic, ethno-linguistic and age groups challenge and redefine masculinities in the face of social-political and economic changes. We strongly believe that understanding diverse and shifting masculinities and the men who practice more equitable gender relations by departing from hegemonic masculinity can help with designing and implementing realistic and effective initiatives to address gender inequality in Afghanistan.

This paper is based on case studies of five men from diverse socio-economic statuses, ethno-linguistic backgrounds, and diverse age groups and geographical locations in Afghanistan. All the case studies were chosen from 18 life history interviews conducted as part of the 2016 partnership between AREU and Promondo.

The paper has come up with a number of practical recommendations for further study, and it recommends that positive co-parenting in a child's upbringing can have lasting effects on the way a boy and girl is socialised. A father's positive engagement with their child must be strongly supported. Equally important is the role that schools, practitioners, civil society, media and religious groups can play in calling on fathers to share the responsibility of raising their children, getting involved, and parenting as a team. These measures can help bring into focus the joint and equal responsibility of both parents in raising their children.

We believe that this paper can be of significant help to those who are involved in designing and implementing gender-based programmes in Afghanistan and a very good read for those who are interested in gender studies.

I would like to take this opportunity and express my gratitude to the author for her meticulous work and to anonymous peer reviewers for their remarkable support providing comments and suggestions that contributed to the enrichment of the paper. I am also obliged to thank UN Women Afghanistan for their continuous support of our research under the gender theme.

Sincerely,



Dr Orzala Nemat,
AREU Director

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	V
Introduction	1
Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan	3
Methodology	5
Rohullah	5
Abdul Karim	8
Nasir... ..	10
Noor Ahmad	11
Mohammad Khan	13
Discussion	15
Conclusion.....	17
Recommendations for Further Study	19
Works Cited	20

Executive Summary

This paper examines how Afghan men from diverse socio-economic, ethno-linguistic and age groups challenge and redefine masculinities in the face of socio-political and economic changes. Understanding diverse and shifting masculinities and the men who practice more equitable gender relations by departing from hegemonic masculinity can help to inform more effective gender-based initiatives.

This report is based on 5 men from diverse socio-economic statuses, ethno-linguistic backgrounds, and diverse age groups and locations in Afghanistan. These 5 case studies were chosen from 18 life history interviews conducted as part of the 2017 IMAGES survey by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU).

The 3 emerging themes among the 5 case studies are: (1) all case studies experienced gender relations that they describe as “positive” during their upbringing; (2) all case studies have an understanding of existing and changing social norms regarding gender; and (3) all case studies challenge and redefine established understandings of masculinities in Afghanistan. This paper demonstrates the ways in which masculinities are constructed, deconstructed, and change over time and space in different ways for different men.

Recommendations for further study

1. Positive co-parenting in a child’s upbringing can have lasting effects on the way a boy and girl is socialised. There must be increased support for a fathers’ positive engagement with their child and shared burden of care by schools and practitioners. Civil society, the media, and religious groups can also promote responsible fatherhood by stressing that not only children and women, but men are also beneficiaries of fatherhood.
2. Developing educational programmes on gender equity in schools and universities can explain the relevance of these topics for boys and men. These programmes must create a safe space to develop empathy, to talk about gender relations, intimacy, armed conflict and violence. They should also promote equality between genders, promote non-violent respectful relationships, and the difficulties that boys and men experience in the face of the current gender order in Afghanistan, especially in their assigned role of provider, protector, and decision-maker. Although this is complex, as some men have thrived in these circumstances, these complexities need to be examined, analysed, and discussed.
3. The media plays a fundamental role in the ways masculinities and femininities are shaped. A comprehensive and culturally attuned communications plan must address the implications of hegemonic masculinity in the everyday lives of men in society. This way, both men and women can better re-evaluate and reflect on gender hierarchies and understand equity between genders as mutually beneficial. The media can also make visible the positive contributions of men within the domestic sphere, work-life balance for both genders, and identify, work with, and promote men who can become positive role models for boys.
4. Local-level women’s activism, both globally and in Afghanistan, has made major advances through alliances with men. Women’s rights activists and women’s rights organisations should work alongside men in Afghanistan to establish more equal and less violent relationships between genders.
5. Profiling positive men, or men who are supportive of women in their families, working environment and broader community and society, can inspire younger generations of men to follow them as role models and agents of change at the community and national level.

Introduction

The 2001 military intervention led by the United States in Afghanistan came with extensive reconstruction efforts, which funnelled billions in aid money into the country. One of the top priorities of foreign assistance efforts has been to invest in women's rights and well-being. An estimated cost of more than \$1 billion has been spent on gender-focused aid initiatives. The largest and costliest is Promote, a \$216 million USAID programme launched in 2013 to assist Afghan women in becoming leaders in government, the economy, and civil society.¹ Yet 18 years later, Afghanistan is ranked 170 out of 189 on the Gender Development Index which measures gender equality and it is the second-to-worst performer in the 2019-20 Women Peace and Security Index, which tracks women's inclusion, justice, and security.²

Gender-focused aid initiatives, policies, and programmes in post-2001 Afghanistan have singled out women as a category, without addressing the relational aspects of gender construction. By neglecting this relational character, women and men are redefined as "different market segments for some service,"³ overlooking the ways in which the lives of men and women are inextricably linked. Feminist critiques contend that Afghan women's "liberation" from oppressive conditions became the moral justification behind the heavy military involvement in the country in post-2001 Afghanistan.⁴ This is rooted in an understanding of women as oppressed subjects or victims, and Afghan men as perpetrators of violence and obstacles to women's development. The perception of Afghan men purely as perpetrators of violence, war, and brutality in Afghanistan can be countered through empirical research on the lives of a range of men who, albeit experience diverse societal anxieties as a result of continuous and prolonged war and conflict, migration, and impoverishment, practice positive and caring modes of being a man.

The study of men and masculinities can improve gender-focused initiatives and policies in several ways. Understanding gender as relational better highlights the experiences of men and women who are disadvantaged or do not fit hegemonic norms.⁵ Moreover, understanding the processes that create masculine ideals among subordinate groups offers insight into how men perceive themselves and their lives. Lastly, since masculinities are just as socially constructed as femininities, they can be deconstructed through effective interventions.

1 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), "Afghan Women: Comprehensive Assessments Needed to Determine and Measure DOD, State, and USAID Progress" (SIGAR 15-24 Audit Report, December 2014); SIGAR, "Promoting Gender Equity in National Priority Programs (Promote): USAID Needs to Assess This \$216 Million Program's Achievements and the Afghan Government's Ability to Sustain Them" (SIGAR 18-69 Audit Report, September 2018); SIGAR, "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress" (SIGAR, October 2016).

2 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security (GIWPS) and Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women (Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO, 2019); UNDP, "Gender Development Index 2019", <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/gender-development-index-gdi> (2019).

3 R.W. Connell, "Change Among the Gatekeepers: Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in the Global Arena," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 31 (2005): 1801-25.

4 Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Julie Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Postwar Afghanistan* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Anila Daulatzai, "Acknowledging Afghanistan," *Cultural Dynamics* 18, no. 3 (2006): 293-311.

5 R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

Work on men and masculinities in Afghanistan is a small yet growing field.⁶ Wimpelmann, Hakimi, and Sadaat illustrate the ways in which men and women, in different yet interrelated ways, are penalized in legal practices for not conforming to gendered ideals in Afghan society.⁷ Marsden follows the trajectories of Afghan traders across Eurasia to illustrate their diverse and shifting conceptions of masculinity against the backdrop of their changing life histories and contexts.⁸ Chioyenda examines how Pashtun men mainly in Nangarhar receive, contest and adapt Pashtun concepts of masculinity within a socio-political context of continuous war and conflict.⁹ Thus far, the most comprehensive research conducted and published on men and masculinities across multiple regions of Afghanistan is the 2016 collaborative study by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan entitled “The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan”.¹⁰ This paper relies on the empirical data gathered in the course of this study.

This paper examines how Afghan men challenge and redefine masculinities in the face of socio-political and economic changes. Specifically, it looks at men from diverse socio-economic, ethno-linguistic and age groups who consider themselves to practice “positive” gender relations in their lives. The data of this paper relies on interviews which were conducted based on life-history methods. Out of 18 in-depth interviews, this paper focuses on five interlocutors to trace how they reflect on their past, and how they understand themselves in relation to gendered ideals and responsibilities in their lives. By looking at the lives of men on the individual level, we are able to see more humanized portrayals of the ways in which men are as sons, husbands, fathers, and community members.

The interviews with all five men share three themes: (1) all men experienced gender relations between men and women during their upbringing that they describe as “positive”; (2) all men have an understanding of existing and changing social norms regarding gender; and (3) all men challenge and redefine established understandings of masculinities in Afghanistan.

Understanding diverse and shifting masculinities, the resulting expectations placed on men, and the men who practice more equitable gender relations by departing from hegemonic masculinities is vital to inform more effective gender-based initiatives. This paper will assist stakeholders, that is, nongovernmental organisations, civil society organisations, and policymakers, to a) take the measure of the importance of men and masculinities in their work; and b) identify ways in which men can be better engaged in achieving gender equity.

6 To name a few, Chona R. Echavez, SayedMahdi Mosawi and Leah Wilfreda RE Pilongo, *The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016); Aziz Hakimi and Torunn Wimpelmann, *Missing from the Picture: Men Imprisoned for ‘Moral Crimes’ in Afghanistan*. (Bergen, Germany: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2018); Magnus Marsden, “Manly Merchants: Commerce, Mobility and Masculinity among Afghan Traders in Eurasia” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 14 (2019): 55-76; Henri Myrtilinen, “Navigating Norms and Insecurity: Men, Masculinities, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan” (Working Paper, International Alert and Peace Training Research Organisation, 2018).

7 Torunn Wimpelmann, Aziz Hakimi, and Masooma Sadaat, “‘He Should Learn That He Cannot Get a Woman for Free’: Male Elopers and Constructions of Masculinity in the Afghan Justice System” *Men and Masculinities March* (2020): 1-18.

8 Marsden, “Manly Merchants”.

9 Andrea Chioyenda, *Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Andrea Chioyenda, “Shaping a ‘Different’ Masculinity. Subjectivity, Agency and Cultural Idioms Amongst Afghan Pashtun Men,” in *Reconceiving Muslim Men. Love and Marriage, Family and Care in Precarious Times*, ed. M. C. Inhorn and N. Naguib (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018); Andrea Chioyenda, “‘The War Destroyed Our Society’: Masculinity, Violence, and Shifting Cultural Idioms among Afghan Pashtuns,” in *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War*, ed. M. N. Shahrani, 179-99 (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018).

10 Chona R. Echavez, SayedMahdi Mosawi, Leah Wilfreda RE Pilongo. *The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016).

Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan

Masculinities, i.e., diverse forms of being a man, are individual learned behaviours and organised social practices.¹¹ Neither masculinities nor femininities are static and singular: they are multiple and diverse, fluid and changing. Because they are changing, in a context of shifting socio-economic and political processes, new forms of femininities and masculinities emerge. According to Connell, masculinities and femininities are relational, as they react to one another. For example, when a woman becomes the sole breadwinner in a household, it does not only create new meanings of femininity, but notions of masculinity also change.¹²

In her discussion of hegemonic masculinity, Connell argues that masculinities are hierarchical.¹³ Hegemonic masculinity refers to dominant forms of masculinity to which men aspire, which are largely associated with social power and authority over femininity and nonhegemonic masculinities within the patriarchal gender hierarchy.¹⁴ Men who deviate from hegemonic masculinity are socially pressured into believing that they are failing on what it means to be a man. Chiovenda demonstrates how, in Pashtun society, being a nartob (manly man) is an ideal shared by many. Nartob is related to ghairat, which is “the willingness and capacity to demonstrate publicly that one is a nar [man].”¹⁵ Hegemonic forms of masculinities, which continue to shift and change, can have very harmful negative consequences not just on women but men as well. Prolonged war and violence forms and enshrines hegemonic masculinities which is translated in engaging in violence over women and resorting to violence to assert and uphold power.

In Afghanistan, decades of prolonged wars, marked by substantial loss of life, destruction of infrastructure, and displacement have profoundly affected Afghan society and, consequently, gender relations. This has placed an insurmountable burden on men who are expected to be the primary breadwinners of their family and nafaqah providers (responsible for the overall well-being of their spouse and children).¹⁶ Azarbaijani-Moghaddam describes these changes by arguing that,

*Economic vicissitudes have steadily transformed attitudes along with the feminisation of poverty, due to loss or absence of male providers, which left many, especially urbanised families headed by females, with little choice but for women to contribute to the household’s cash economy. Previously, it was considered shameful for males to share their responsibility to provide for the entire family and to allow women to come into contact with corrupting influences by working outside the home, but men from rural and provincial families, as well as different income groups, gradually came to realise the benefits of allowing women to earn money or to have contact with foreign organisations that might give them assistance.*¹⁷

11 Connell, Op. cit.

12 Ibid.

13 R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-59.

14 Ibid.

15 Chiovenda, Andrea. *Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

16 Echavez, Mosawi, and RE Pilongo. *The Other Side of Gender Inequality*.

17 Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, “Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-First Century” in *Nation-Building Unraveled: Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan* ed. A. Donini, K. Wermeister and N. Niland, 95-116 (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2004).

A 2016 study conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) found that Afghan men are perceived to be brave and honourable, yet they feel a loss of integrity and worth in their inability to live up to societal expectations, which has caused dishonour/beghairat-i and shame.¹⁸ A beghairat man is one who is unmanly or without honour, as opposed to a baghairat man—an honourable man. Feelings of dishonour or shame continue to force men and women to abide by established gender roles and expectations. These pressures have also led men to resort to violent means against women and other men, both in the domestic and in the public sphere, to fulfil their perceived societal responsibilities and reassert their power and socially prescribed sense of manhood.¹⁹

Study shows that men who join armed groups and engage in violent conflict are usually those who have limited economic opportunities and suffer from poverty. According to a 2018 brief by the United States Institute of Peace in Afghanistan, with the burgeoning youth population facing insecurity and high unemployment rates, young men become increasingly “involved in organised crime or other illegal—and often violent—activities to fulfil their perceived obligations and duties to family.”²⁰ This pattern has been discerned in numerous conflict zones across the world. In the case of Rwanda, Sommers discusses how, within a context of poverty, social inequality, exclusion, lack of education, and immobility, poor and unemployed male youth were easily recruited to engage in the genocide.²¹

Other cases such as Liberia and Sierra Leone demonstrate that young men especially were attracted to war through the promise of marriage.²² Dolan describes this pattern when he contends that young men “defy culture by joining war in order to achieve what they have been denied,” and “since they are denied economic opportunity by elders the youth take shortcuts through taking up arms.”²³ Chiovenda in his study on Afghanistan describes that as a result of prolonged wars and conflict, ruthlessness and *zulum* (cruelty) become a part of the moral landscape, which sets new expectations for masculinities in Afghanistan. As such, “expectations for the expression of manliness and valor are once again being renegotiated, exacerbating the already harshened standards shaped by the three decades of previous conflicts.”²⁴

The men discussed in this paper chose to not resort to violence, and instead challenge hegemonic masculinities and redefine their understanding of gender relations amid shifting social and familial contexts. Understanding diverse forms of masculinities and femininities as social constructions can help us understand how they are not inherited, but can and do shift, especially in the face of changing circumstances.

18 Echavez, Chona R., SayedMahdi Mosawi, Leah Wilfreda RE Pilongo. *The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016.

19 Lina Abirafeh, “An Opportunity Lost? Engaging Men in Gendered Interventions: Voices from Afghanistan,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 3, no. 3 (2007): 82-7.

20 Belquis Ahmadi and Rafiullah Stanikzai, “Redefining Masculinity in Afghanistan” (United States Institute of Peace, Peace Brief 243, 2018).

21 Marc Sommers, “Fearing Africa’s Young Men: Male Youth, Conflict, Urbanization, and the Case of Rwanda” in *The Other Half of Gender: Men’s Issues in Development* ed. Ian Bannon and Maria C. Correia, 142 (World Bank Group Publications, 2006).

22 Paul Richards, “Young Men and Gender in War and Postwar Reconstruction Some Comparative Findings from Liberia and Sierra Leone,” in *The Other Half of Gender: Men’s Issues in Development* ed. Ian Bannon and Maria C. Correia, 142 (Washington, DC: World Bank Group Publications, 2006).

23 Chris Dolan, “Collapsing Masculinities and Weak States—A Case Study of Northern Uganda,” in *Masculinities Matter! Men, Gender and Development*, ed. F. Cleaver, 77. (Durban: Zed Books, 2003).

24 Chiovenda, Andrea. *Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Methodology

The data for this paper is based on 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews using a life history approach. These interviews were conducted as part of the 2016 report by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.²⁵ This is a comprehensive household study developed by Promundo and the International Centre for Research on Women, which was carried out on men's attitudes and practices in Afghanistan. This report focused on the diverse notions of masculinity in Afghanistan and the ways in which it contributes to gender (in)equality.

Among the 18 in-depth interviews, seven were conducted with men in their early adulthood (ages 18-35), seven were conducted with men in their middle adulthood (ages 36-50), and four were conducted with men in their late adulthood (ages 51-65). Five case studies were chosen from these 18 interviews to establish diversity among men regarding their socio-economic status, their ethno-linguistic background, and their age groups.²⁶ These men hail from diverse locations in Afghanistan, ranging from parts of rural Kabul to Nangarhar, Takhar, and urban Bamiyan. According to this report, these locations are associated with different degrees of conservatism and openness vis-à-vis gender-related issues in Afghanistan.

The interviews conducted by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit research team were structured around four main themes: (1) understanding the ways in which **childhood and family** experiences impact participants' views on gender; (2) understanding **participants' views** on gender relations in the workplace; (3) understanding the **impact of violence on participants' life**; and (4) understanding participants' perception of the ways in which they are different from other men in relation to **traditional masculinity**.

A **life-history approach** helps us to understand how gendered attitudes and behaviours are intertwined with, and influenced by, the vicissitudes of an individual's life. This paper offers a contextualised and humanised understanding of men's experiences in Afghanistan in relation to socio-political and economic processes including war(s), forced migration, environmental changes, and shifting gender expectations and relations. It explains how particular events have been formative in each participant's life and the changes in their attitudes in relation to such experiences. It also allows men to speak in their own terms, which provides insight into their interpretation of themselves and their masculinities.

Rohullah

Rohullah is a 38-year-old Hazara man who works as a teacher and a librarian. He grew up in a rural village in the 1980s in Nangor, Ghazni. Rohullah grew up during the Soviet-Afghan war, which changed the gender dynamics in his household. He recalls his father, who was a religious scholar in their village, being absent from his life because he was a mujahid²⁷ who fought in the resistance against the Soviets and the Kabul-based communist regime. As a result, he would be away for long periods of time, so much so that their family anticipated his death on several occasions. Rohullah's father's absence changed the gender roles and responsibilities in their household. His mother assumed the role of both his parents, which influenced his relationship with his mother. Rohullah would help her closely in domestic tasks, which according to him, influenced him positively.

25 Echavez, Chona R., SayedMahdi Mosawi, Leah Wilfreda RE Pilongo. *The Other Side of Gender Inequality: Men and Masculinities in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016.

26 To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms are used to refer to all people in this paper. Specific details of their life histories are also omitted.

27 In this context, the term mujahid refers to someone who engaged in the resistance against the former USSR and the communist regime.

His mother took on the roles and responsibilities of his father, such as collecting fuel during the harsh winters. She became the final decision-maker in the household in his absence. However, when his father was present, he would rarely assist his mother in the home. Instead, he assumed the responsibilities ascribed to men outside the home, such as ploughing the land. And because of his father's religious status within their local community, he was busy in social affairs, such as advising children (of both genders) to attend the local Quran schools.

Rohullah was close to his mother during his childhood and would assist her with household chores. He also tended to his farming responsibilities and attended a madrasa (religious school), the only school in their village at the time. His understanding of gender roles and responsibilities are informed by his childhood upbringing in the midst of war and conflict.

I once saw my mother going to collect fuel for our heater, but her sandal was torn. I said to her, from today onwards, I don't want to attend the madrasa. She asked me why? I said that I will go with you and collect fuel for winter. She gently replied and said, you do not have to collect wood and other fuel for winter. It is not your responsibility. If you want to accept my advice and fulfil my wish, that is enough for me. I want you to become an educated person[...] In my opinion, the role of a woman is vital, especially when it comes to their children in society because a woman plays a significant role in developing the social and educational attitude of a child. My mother and sister played a positive role in my life. They did not allow me to work, they supported me in my education, and they provided me with opportunities to study. I am thankful for my mother and sisters.²⁸

Rohullah's narrative, where his mother encouraged him to study as she took upon a responsibility that was not traditionally ascribed to her, demonstrates the extent to which she influenced his understanding of gender roles. He directly links the opportunities presented in his life and his positive outlook on women to his mother and sisters.

In the 1990s, Rohullah and his family migrated to Iran due to the systematic targeting of Hazaras by the Taliban. Rohullah and his family migrated for both economic and political reasons. As an ethnic Hazara, he and his family faced discrimination both in Afghanistan and in Iran. Afghan migrants face various kinds of abuse and discrimination in Iran: they are only allowed to work in precarious and poorly paid manual labour, and they face major obstacles in their ability to attend school.²⁹ Moreover, due to the anti-immigrant sentiments in Iran, Rohullah recalls feeling social constraints when it came to interacting with Iranian girls, because of the social hierarchy between migrants and locals. When Rohullah wanted to attend school, his only option was to attend a religious school in Qum due to the discriminatory laws against Afghans. He completed his religious education in Qum and returned to Afghanistan. He took an entrance exam and was admitted to Ibn Sina University in Kabul.

The gender dynamics in Rohullah's current household, with his two daughters and two sons, are very different from his upbringing. Yet, according to him, his upbringing and his religious education have had a lasting influence on his current relations with his wife and children.

28 Interview on 2 November 2017.

29 Human Rights Watch, "Unwelcome Guests: Iran's Violation of Afghan Refugee and Migrant Rights," 9 October 2017, www.hrw.org/report/2013/11/20/unwelcome-guests/irans-violation-afghan-refugee-and-migrant-rights (accessed 28 September 2020).

I have taken out the root of the difference between boys and girls. For instance, I work at home and I support my wife in her daily house chores. I cook for my children, and although I want to wash my clothes, my wife doesn't allow it. I do all these chores only to teach my children that in a family there is no superiority between girls and boys, they have to work together and support each other. I have been raising my children with these attitudes and practices. Moreover, when my children were young, I would wash the dishes and their clothes. I have trained my sons in a way where they don't think that their sister is less capable. They must respect each other.³⁰

Rohullah creates gender-egalitarian relations in his household with the understanding of the different ways in which these relations are practiced by others in society. Outside the home, as a teacher and a librarian, Rohullah interacts unreservedly with his female colleagues as he sits and chats with them, especially when they consult him for advice about their domestic issues among other things. He especially encourages female students to study and work hard even against existing social barriers. In a similar vein, he does not believe that work should be gendered.

We cannot limit a girl or a woman to teaching or being a nurse or doctor. They may have other capacities. For example, we now have many women who are engineers, and, compared to men, they are better. We therefore have to allow women and girls to choose their own subject.³¹

Rohullah's exposure to, and engagement with, female students and colleagues influences the way in which he understands gendered work. Although he engages in gender-equitable practices in his household, Rohullah considers himself to be a traditional man. He says that providing an egalitarian household for his wife and children does not mean that he is not traditional. Rather, he does not want his children to grow up in the same way in which he grew up, and he wants what is best for his family in terms of educational opportunities. However, he is aware that others in society may think of him as being non-traditional.

Once, my wife said to me that some relative told me something about you. They said that I became a different person and I am distanced from God. I asked my wife, what did you say to them? And she replied that she didn't react [...] some people believe that I became distanced from God. Sometimes when my friends would come to my house, I would tell them that religion can be used to encourage violence. I showed them an 11th grade textbook which said that if a girl isn't trained by her father, then it is her husband's responsibility to train her. I think that when a girl gets married, she should train her children, she does not need to be trained by anyone else.³²

Rohullah's perception of others has caused conflict in his life, as some of his relatives are not in touch with him anymore. Yet this does not bother him, because he believes that he is following the true path of God, and that it is generally accepted in society that encouraging an egalitarian home environment is beneficial. He mentions that in a patriarchal society, men perceive women to be secondary.

30 Interview on 2 November 2017.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

Abdul Karim

Abdul Karim is a 28-year-old Pashtun man who works in the telecom sector in Kabul. He was born in a middle-class family in Karte-Naw in Kabul during the 1990s. His parents had both pursued higher education and his family members were wealthy before the Soviet invasion. As his early childhood was spent in the 1990s, the Civil War that raged in the capital forced him and his family to migrate to their home province in Nangarhar by foot. After 2 years, they moved back to the capital, where they felt that conditions were better, only to move back to Nangarhar when the Taliban came to power in the mid-1990s. Because of his family's affiliation with the previous regime, and because government jobs became unavailable during the 1990s, his father became self-employed and exchanged currency in the market to support his family.

Abdul Karim describes his family dynamics during his upbringing as being very tense, because his father was anxious about the political situation of the time. There was significant insecurity as a result of the conflicts, and they lived with restrictions over all aspects of their lives. He remembers his father as being very short-tempered and restrictive as a result.

He had to be very strict towards us because the environment that we were living in was terrible. He had to be very strict to prevent us from facing problems in society[...] There were lots of problems such as the kidnapping of children, security issues and most importantly, ethical problems in the society[...] My father had to take care of his kids, whether it is a boy or a girl. It was even difficult for a boy to go outside because there were a lot of ethical problems, if a boy went outside he would fall in the company of wrong people, he would become addicted to drugs, or he may have been at risk of sexual exploitation of by the other boys in the community. Therefore, my father was very strict towards us. He only allowed us to go outside for school, the majority of the time we had to stay home. Now that I am grown up, I understand the logic behind the restrictions that my father made for us; I am happy with those restrictions now I would have had a different life or I would not have become the successful man that I am now.³³

Abdul Karim's narrative highlights the difficulties faced with war and migration. His father's involvement with the communist regime had jeopardised his employment and life circumstances in the new political order after 1992. He also discusses the restrictions his father placed on his young sons in the midst of war and conflict, due to "ethical problems" in his home province in Nangarhar. He described how these ethical problems included kidnapping to be sold as a bacha (a practice that involves child sexual exploitation), gambling, being amidst corruption, or drug addiction. As a result, he recalls only going to school with his brothers during his upbringing, while his sisters could not, as it was banned during the Taliban regime. Abdul Karim stayed home the rest of the time.

The gender dynamics in his upbringing shifted during the Taliban regime, as his mother and sisters stayed home and assumed all household chores. After the Taliban fell, his mother secured a prominent position at a ministry in Nangarhar. His sisters also attended universities. He describes his family as being exceptional within Nangarhar, since the women in his family received formal higher education. They had financial freedom and they were also decision-makers in the family. When his mother was busy working, he recalls his father performing household chores at times. Yet their lifestyle in Nangarhar placed the family in a difficult position within their community.

33 Interview on 20 June 2017.

His family faced societal pressures to discourage the women in their family from working and studying. Abdul Karim mentions that due to Pashtunwali (Pashtun tribal code), it was deemed shameful for their mother to work outside the home, and the men in their family were labelled as *beghairat* by their community. His mother was forced to resign from her position at the ministry after the family received several death threats by armed groups. After her resignation, she became a university lecturer.

We heard from everyone in our community that a woman who works outside has bad character[...]after hearing these comments most of the time, I would ignore it[...] sometimes I would argue with them and tell them that my mother is working outside, and as a result I have the highest education in the family. We are kind to people, and there is nothing wrong with us [...] Our behaviour in the community is better compared to others. Our life condition is better than the majority, and everyone respects us. Even the people in the community who criticised us, they would approach my family, even if the women had any problems, they would approach my mother for a solution, and if the men would have any problems, they approach my father.³⁴

Abdul Karim discusses the societal pressures he and his family faced and their response to them. He understands that despite the negative perceptions of their family, they contributed positively to their community. Abdul Karim attributes the positive gender relations in his home today, such as taking care of his son and assisting his wife with household chores, to his mother. He pays for his wife's university tuition; and when she attends her university during the day as a student of medicine, he hires a caretaker to take care of their child.

My mother is a hero for me. She played an important role in shaping me as a man. I can say that she played an active role not only in my life and in my family's life, but she also played a significant role in our society and reforming our community [...] She played a major role in our [good] manners, and she also played a major role in my education and career [...] She taught us how to behave with people in society and how to serve society and people. She taught us good values and supported and encouraged us in our lives. She taught us how to defend Islamic and Afghan values and teaches us to stand against discrimination. We are Pashtun, and our mother tongue is Pashtu, but my mother taught us how to speak Dari, and now we speak Dari at home because she taught us to not discriminate.³⁵

Abdul Karim states that his mother influenced the man that he is today, in addition to her positive contribution in their family and society at large. He also attributes his good socio-economic status to the education he received with the encouragement of his parents. He was able to study abroad for 4 years. He interacted with his female classmates during his studies regularly (such as going to their homes for dinner), but he mentions that his relationship with women changed when he returned to Afghanistan, due to the social pressures to not meet women in private.

Abdul Karim considers himself to be a traditional man because he says that he follows all the traditions in society. The difference, according to him, is that he does not consider women to be less than men, which according to him is in line with Islamic values and Afghan culture.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

Nasir

Nasir is a 29-year-old Tajik man who works as a teacher in a military training centre. He and his family migrated to Iran at the beginning of the Civil War in 1992, when he was 4 years old. His family's migration to Iran changed the gender roles in his family, as both his parents had to contribute to the household economy. His father worked in a filter-making factory, while his mother sewed buttons and made envelopes every day.

As the eldest of four brothers in his family, he was responsible for most household chores and for helping to raise his younger brother from a very young age while his father was away at the factory all day. Until he turned 8 years old, he would assist his father at the factory by handing him the tools he needed, and they would be paid for the number of filters made. He also assisted his father to sell produce and work as an assistant for a local tailor. As a result, he was not able to attend school. His mother home-schooled him when he would return home with his father in the evenings.

I was studying in the evenings with my mother. I still remember when my father received his first salary, he went to the bookstore and bought second-hand schoolbooks for us. He gave the books to my mother and told her that I have to take my son with me to work, but my expectation from you is to teach them schoolwork. He also said that I don't want my sons to fall behind in their studies because he has to work with me. And he said that this situation will not continue, once we are stable, we can send them to school. I only accompanied my father in his work 5 days a week.³⁶

Nasir recalls an instance in his life where his father, who had just received his first paycheck as a migrant worker, decided to dedicate it towards Nasir's education. It was not until his father became an architect in a construction company that he was able to register his son in a state school. Once admitted to school, his father no longer wanted him to accompany him to his work. He recalls his family dynamics as such:

When he returned home in the evening, he used to check if we had completed our homework. He was very happy and proud when our teacher gave us good marks or a star in our homework. It was mostly my mother who played a great role in our upbringing, but our father always tried to financially support us and provide us with what we need, but on all other aspects of my life, such as education and good manners, it was my mother who played a great role.³⁷

When my mother disciplined us for not studying and imposed restrictions, I went to my father and complained about the way our mother treated us. He would then tell us about how it is important that a mother places restrictions on a child and about the role of women in general.³⁸

I remember that my father would always tell us that if a woman is educated, she can educate an entire society.³⁹

36 Interview on 13 April 2017.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

Nasir describes the importance of both his father and mother in his positive upbringing. He considers his mother's role to be formative, as she would help him in most aspects of his life and would place the most restrictions on him and his siblings. Meanwhile, his father taught him how important the role of women is in society, and he has always encouraged him to do all the household chores with his mother.

I personally believe that there has to be equality in everything, whether it is work or decision-making. There will be fewer problems if there is equality and teamwork.⁴⁰

Nasir has a young daughter and wants to raise her the way he was raised by his mother. He wants to teach her about equality between men and women in line with Islam and teach her that she is no less than a man.

I will allow my daughter to go to university. For me, it doesn't matter if my child is a boy or a girl, as my father supported me to pursue my education and graduate out of Afghanistan, even if I face thousands of problems, I will send my sons and daughters to study abroad.⁴¹

It becomes clear that Nasir's upbringing and his parents' positive co-parenting influenced how he intends to raise his children, especially when it comes to their education, irrespective of their gender.

Noor Ahmad

Noor Ahmad is a 68-year-old Tajik man who is a retired government employee. He was raised in Astana, Panjshir. His father was a farmer and cooked in Kabul during the summers, and his mother was a homemaker. Noor Ahmad spent his childhood in Panjshir during the 1950s, where he recalls that there was one school for boys which took seven miles to reach. This school was attended only by a few students in the region. Although his parents were not formally educated, his father wanted him to attend school.

The people living in Astana were like a family. I remember the old times there were a lot of friendship and honesty among people, unlike now [...] the people living in our village were like a family, and we always considered the other girls like our sisters. Boys and girls used to graze their livestock together [...] Honesty and faithfulness among people existed, unlike now where even small boys are full of lust and evil intentions. People were at the same economic level, and they were living like a family. When we were young, we used to go to school and aside from that, our only hobby was swimming in the river with boys our age and helping our parents in their work. Girls were usually playing with their peers and also helping their parents in the household chores and grazing animals.⁴²

Noor Ahmad recalls a time where there were positive gender relations practiced in society prior to the wars. During his upbringing, there was a division of labour between men who worked outside (farming, ploughing, masonry) and women, including his mother, who worked inside the home (cooking, washing clothes, cleaning). Women also helped their husbands in harvesting the land. Seeing women carry water from the river and feeding livestock was also a common sight. Noor Ahmad describes his parents as being very conservative, but when they moved to Kabul and he became a student at the Faculty of Agriculture in Kabul University, their views on gender relations and roles changed.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Interview on 28 May 2017.

I can say that it was the environment and the community that had the biggest impact on me. Because of my work, where I came from in my hometown and settled in Kabul, my vision broadened, and it was the environment and also my work experiences that really influenced me. I travelled to several European and Asian countries where I saw different cultures. When I worked as the director of MRRD, we received several workshops and seminars on gender, and I learned a lot from it. During my childhood, I can say that I was not very pro-gender and I was strict towards my sisters and female relatives. So, when my sister or female relatives didn't wear a hijab, I used to get mad at them and asked them to wear it. I was like this until I graduated from high school. But when I started attending university, I met many girls, and they studied in different faculties, which influenced and changed my views on gender norms.⁴³

Noor Ahmad contrasts his upbringing in a rural setting, which was “not very pro-gender”, with his current life in Kabul, where he attends university and has been exposed to different people. After he graduated from Kabul University, he worked as a teacher in a high school in Baghlan in the 1980s.

One day when I was busy distributing food for the students in the hostel, the governor himself came with one of his bodyguards and insulted me in front of everyone [...] I knew that after he left, he would issue a warrant for my arrest [...] I escaped and I returned to Kabul [...] After I had left Baghlan, the governor arrested a few of my colleagues and they searched for me, the students then demonstrated against the governor. I did not go back and stayed in Kabul for a few weeks and only by the interference and mediation of the Minister of Education, Mr. Akram Khan, that I was able to teach again.⁴⁴

Noor Ahmad recalls a formative time in his life that was influenced by war and political changes in the country. There were demonstrations which he engaged in with his students. These demonstrations caused him trouble with the governor of Baghlan at the time, who deemed him an opponent of the communist regime. Noor Ahmad compares this to his life now, where he has three daughters and four sons and narrates the changes in their lives today.

My children are living in a modern and educated family. The environment that we are living in now is different. Now we are in the era of technology, and a lot has changed. During that time, there were no schools for girls, and they would only work at home. However, it has changed now, my daughters are attending school. My elder daughter now lives in Germany and she is married. My other daughter is also married, she has graduated from Kabul University where she studied English literature, and my younger daughter who is engaged is now completing her bachelor's degree in economics. While in the past, the women of the family were uneducated, and only engaged in household chores, my wife is now working as the principal of a school every day from morning until evening.⁴⁵

Noor Ahmad describes how his life now differs from his upbringing, especially since his children are educated and live abroad. Noor Ahmad does not believe that he questioned traditional gender norms in Afghanistan. Rather, his views changed throughout his life. He believes that he is a traditional man, and he has not felt any external pressure for being supportive of his wife.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

If you see it from the perspective of people living in my village, I am somehow a non-traditional man because I am staying at home now and my wife is working outside, but I believe that it does not make someone a non-traditional person. As I told you before, the environment has a large effect on a person's views and way of thinking. Perhaps the people in my village may believe that I am a non-traditional man but for people in Kabul it is very common, and I am a normal person. I never faced any pressure from anyone because of my support for my wife. If I talk about my personal views, it actually made my life easier. Pressure and responsibility are not only on my shoulders because we share everything at home, we share every responsibility, and that makes our life easier.⁴⁶

Noor Ahmad contextualises societal norms and describes how they differ between his upbringing in a rural setting prior to the wars (his village in Panjshir), and an urban setting like Kabul. He asserts that positive gender relations are important in his life and that he does not feel any pressure to engage in them.

Mohammad Khan

Mohammad Khan is a 57-year-old Pashtun man who is a teacher and an activist. He grew up in Kabul with 13 brothers and one sister, as his father had two wives. His father worked in the Afghan military and used to help both of his wives with daily household chores (cleaning and cooking). He recalls having very positive gender dynamics during his upbringing. Their mother would cook food for them while they were in school. Most household chores were done by the boys and their father when he was not at work. His sister was too young, and his father would encourage her to study, which helped her to become very educated later in her life.

He recalls a time where there was little gender discrimination in his childhood in the 1960s and 1970s.

There was no difference between boys and girls. I still remember that from our neighbour in Kabul, I used to see four or five girls who were going to school by bicycle. During that time, it was not considered problematic. From that time onwards, I realised that we should not divide humans based on gender.⁴⁷

There was friendship between boys and girls. There were no bad thoughts. We had female friends, we studied together and had lunch. We were classmates and there were no negative thoughts in our mind. When we were in class, we assumed that we are a family. We used to visit the families of our female friends regularly. They also used to invite us to their family's home. During university, when a boy and girl fell in love with each other, they discussed it with their parents, and they would get married. But now, it is completely different. A person cannot visit his female friend's house, or a woman cannot go to the family home of her male friend. This is because of the last 30 or more years of war. Now in our society, there are many who consider themselves to be women's rights advocates. But once you visit their home, they have a separate place for men and women. Talking about women's rights is easy, but it is very difficult to prove it, and implement it. My wife is a doctor. She had a fellow doctor in her hospital. Once, my wife and I were talking to him and he started blaming other people for not giving rights to their wives. My wife said to him, you should not talk about women's rights because when your wife goes out of your home, she has to wear a burqa. So why are you talking about women's rights. Then my wife pointed to me and said, "if he talks about women's rights, it suits him because he has proved it."⁴⁸

46 Ibid.

47 Interview on 17 October 2017.

48 Ibid.

Similar to Noor Ahmad, Mohammad Khan recalls a time where there were positive gender dynamics between men and women during his upbringing prior to the wars. Mohammad Khan has five children now and attributes their success in higher education to his wife. He recalls how his wife (whom he knew prior to his marriage because she is also a relative and they attended school together) was so intelligent that she received awards for her academic excellence. She now lives in Peshawar, Pakistan, as a medical doctor, while he lives with two of his children (a son and a daughter) in Kabul. He does all the household chores in their home, while his two children go to work every day. He believes that men who do not help in the home are in fact *zancho* (engaging in a behaviour to be suitable for women) because they are fearful of societal pressures.

My wife prepares food for me, if I help her prepare food for us, what is wrong with it? My wife takes care of our children. If I take care of my own children, what is wrong with it? Similarly, if my wife wants to clean our house, and if I clean my house, what is wrong with it? [...] I have learned everything from my father and from the society I grew up in. When your parents train you in such a way, then you don't give importance to societal pressures. I do not live for the community; I have my personal life which I am very happy with. Why should I ruin my personal life for others? I have seen a person who was rich and marry a girl, but after their marriage, the girl faced many restrictions, like wearing a burqa, and she was not able to go out of their family without her husband's permission. This girl was living a miserable life. We have many examples like this. Such people do not consider their wives as a human being. They consider them their personal property [...] In the past or before the Russian invasion, we were going to our friends' house, if he was not at home, his mother or sister welcomed us. There were no such restrictions, that a woman cannot welcome a male guest to their house [...] a woman could go shopping, receive her husband's guest, work in an office, and she had a good reputation in society. When we see the current situation, it is the outcome of 35 years of war and ignorance of people about women's rights.⁴⁹

Mohammad Khan attributes his positive relations with his wife to his upbringing prior to the wars. He also understands the existing societal pressures on being a man, with which he does not agree with and even denounces. Instead, he illustrates the ways in which he does not let societal pressures influence him.



49 Ibid.

Discussion

This paper illustrates the lives of five different men who engage in gender-egalitarian practices in Afghanistan. These five men highlight how upbringing, conflict, migration, religion, socio-economic status, gender norms and expectations, and other factors intersect with and inform their masculinities. These cases also demonstrate how gender is relational, since dynamics between men and women affect one another, creating and transforming conceptions of masculinity. Since they are learnt behaviours, gender roles and responsibilities can not only be challenged, but they can be deconstructed and replaced with gender-egalitarian practices.

By using a life-history approach, this paper gives insight into how particular aspects of men's lives have been formative to their conception and practice of gender roles and responsibilities. It also demonstrates how masculinities change over time, especially in the face of socio-economic and political transformations, and in relation to other forms of identity such as ethnicity, region, class, and socio-economic status. Each man is different from the other and locates himself within his own context and history, which helps to understand what they find to be significant in their lives and in their conceptions of gender and gender relations.

The expectations placed in different communities across time and space vary. There are regional differences between rural communities in Nangarhar, Panjshir, or Ghazni in contrast to urban ones such as Kabul. Different expectations also exist for those migrating outside the country, whether it is due to forced migration (Iran or Pakistan), or for work and educational opportunities (India). Diverse ethno-religious communities in different regions place different expectations on men and women. For example, different regions of Afghanistan are affected in different ways and degrees by conflict and violence. In Nangarhar, Abdul Karim and his family were faced with death threats because his mother worked in a ministry. This expectation would have looked different in another region in Afghanistan that does not have an insurgency and the presence of Afghan and US military personnel.

Rohullah's upbringing in a rural village offers one example of what the roles and responsibilities of men and women were in the 1980s. He narrates how they changed when his father became a mujahid and fought in the Soviet-Afghan war, and when they migrated to Iran, and finally returned to Afghanistan. His status as a migrant in Iran and as an ethnic Hazara, his father's active involvement in the war, and his family's socio-economic status are just some of the factors that interact with, and influence, his perception of gender roles and responsibilities. Abdul Karim's example demonstrates how moving from an urban setting (Karte-Naw in Kabul) to a rural setting (their village in Nangarhar) came with a change in gender ideals. Him and his family faced societal pressures that were not only impacted by migrating to a rural setting, but also by war. They were faced with new anxieties as his mother was threatened and forced to resign from her position at the ministry, and his father was overprotective of his children due to the ethical problems within society as a consequence of war. This is in addition to his father's position within the new political order in the country because of his affiliation with the communist regime. The death threats received by the armed groups are a consequence a militarised and conflict-ridden context where new forms of femininity and masculinity are constructed. It becomes unacceptable to see a working woman in public, regardless of her important work as a community member.

Similar to Rohullah, Nasir and his family were forced to migrate to Iran, which changed the gender roles and responsibilities in his household. However, unlike Rohullah, he did not face discrimination based on his ethnicity. Rather, it was his socio-economic status that became formative in his family's life, as he worked with his father in a poorly paid labour job in Iran. When him and his family returned to Afghanistan, he received different opportunities that emerged in post-Bonn Afghanistan, such as becoming a teacher in a military academy.

Both Noor Ahmad and Mohammad Khan lived in Afghanistan prior to the Soviet-Afghan war, something which is significant in their understanding of their pasts and their place within it. Noor Ahmad nostalgically recalls a time in his village where, in his own words, people lived a traditional lifestyle and gender relations were very positive among men and women. Yet, Noor Ahmad mentions that he was strict with his sisters and female relatives until he moved to Kabul, where his views on gender relations gradually changed. This is rather different from Mohammad Khan, who grew up in Kabul in a household with many brothers, and who witnessed positive gender relations between the members of his family. He attributes the negative perception of women and gender relations to the consequences of the decades of war in the country, as gender relations, according to him, were different prior to the wars.



Mia Khan, an Afghan father who drives 12 Km by his motorbike to drop his three daughters to school and waits more than 4 hours till their classes end and take them back home.

Conclusion

What is salient from these five interviewees is how they understand what it means to be a “traditional man” and what masculine ideals are. For the participants, their upbringing helped to shape gender relations across time and space. For some, it hardened their position against gender-egalitarian practices until they gained some independence as young adults, whereas for others, their childhood and family experiences prepared them to advance gender-egalitarian practices. The interviewees’ varying childhood and family experiences demonstrates that although men may stand at very different points when it comes to gender relations, it can be changed based on multiple factors. Similarly, participants’ views on gender relations in the workplace demonstrate that the space for women to work is expanding, but attitudinal changes require far more work for them to be accepted by the public at large who are at times quick to question their “honour”. Violence is not far behind, particularly for those women whose decision to pursue a career has led to their character being questioned by their community or by individuals whose beliefs are antithetical to gender-egalitarian principles. More than four decades of armed conflict provides the conditions for men to violently target women for having a professional career or for speaking their mind.

Men, women, and children have been adversely impacted by over four decades of armed conflict. The prolonged nature of conflict makes it difficult to escape the tragic reality that has created and normalised violence. All interviewees have lived, witnessed, and felt the effects of violence in their lives, including the fear of losing their loved ones or seeing their sisters and mothers denied an education or a career under the Taliban rule. However, gender-egalitarian practices have manifested for them despite these conditions and this is a positive indication that work in this area can, and should, take place even in the midst of ongoing violence and insecurity.

Another distinguishing factor among these men who advance and practice gender-egalitarian principles is their relative self-awareness regarding their differences from other men in relation to traditional masculinity. They indicate how other men are not only conservative in their approach, but also hold back the advancement of gender-egalitarian principles, whether in relation to their family members or others. For the interviewees, assisting their wives and daughters and encouraging gender-egalitarian practices are an important aspect of their masculinity. They challenge aspects of traditional or hegemonic masculinity which seeks to control women’s bodies and sexuality. They also reject violence, abuse, and neglectful parenting. Instead, they reinterpret and redefine what masculine ideals should be. These ideals, according to these five different men, are in line with Afghan culture and their religious beliefs. As such, they all demonstrate an understanding of hegemonic masculinities yet stand firm in their willingness to pave their own way against societal pressures, whether from their family or society at large. It thus becomes imperative to highlight the importance of promoting positive forms of masculinity not just at the individual level but also at the familial and community levels. Afghan men and women occupy distinct familial roles within their households, and this contributes to the construction of larger social identities.

What is positive about being a man for the interviewees stems from different social relations during their upbringing. For Rohullah, it was his mother and sister's positive influence and his religious education. For Abdul Karim, it was his mother. For Nasir, it was both his parents. For Noor Ahmad, it was a culmination of experiences, including moving to Kabul from rural Panjshir. For Mohammad Khan, it has been his wife. This demonstrates that these men's lives do not just share certain aspects of a gender-egalitarian outlook, but new ways of being men are created, especially in the face of precarity demonstrating the ways in which masculinities are constructed, deconstructed, and change over time and space in different ways for different men.

Only by engaging both men and women in gender initiatives can we work towards creating long-lasting and positive gender relations. Yet, it is noteworthy that any effort towards creating and sustaining a more gender-equitable Afghan society must be done with the consideration that Afghan men and women continue to live in conditions of prolonged wars, conflict, and insecurity, which affects all facets of their lives. Positive changes in gender dynamics within Afghanistan need to be structural and permanent. This would mean that changes need to be made simultaneously and on multiple levels (political, economic, social, religious, etc.); this requires looking at wide-ranging intersecting inequalities. These changes must be socially and politically attuned to local needs, social and cultural requirements, and must involve all stakeholders. Change should address men's needs and vulnerabilities, their privileges vis-à-vis women, girls and persons with other gender identities, and promote positive masculinity that supports gender equity. The following recommendations in this paper are grounded in this consideration.



Recommendations for Further Study

The recommended areas for further research below stem from the study of men and masculinities in Afghanistan. Additional research in the area of men and masculinities has the potential to describe the ways in which men respond to shifting political, economic, social, religious, and community landscapes within a context of war, insecurity, and economic uncertainty. It can also allow us to see the different ways men engage in domestic tasks, practice caregiving, and showcase kindness and love within their families and communities. This becomes particularly important as the dominant stereotypes of Afghan and Muslim men continue to portray them as being one-dimensionally violent and brutal. Additional research also allows for effective ways of delivering educational programmes and, indeed, to start conversations about gender relations, including men's attitudes and practices regarding caregiving for their children. While some men, as highlighted above, have taken on this responsibility openly, it would be worthwhile to explore how their personal experiences can be used to design programmes aimed at promoting gender-egalitarian practices. Such examples have the potential to be fed into formal educational programmes at schools and universities, adapted to community-based discussions, developed for broader consumption through the media, and incorporated into work practices in government, private industry, and civil society, among other areas.

1. Positive co-parenting in a child's upbringing can have lasting effects on the way a boy and girl is socialised. There must be increased support for a fathers' positive engagement with their child and shared burden of care by schools and practitioners. Civil society, the media, and religious groups can also promote responsible fatherhood by stressing that not only children and women, but men are also beneficiaries of fatherhood.
2. Developing educational programmes on gender equity in schools and universities can explain the relevance of these topics for boys and men. These programmes must create a safe space to develop empathy, to talk about gender relations, intimacy, armed conflict and violence. They should also promote equality between genders, promote non-violent respectful relationships, and the difficulties that boys and men experience in the face of the current gender order in Afghanistan, especially in their assigned role of provider, protector, and decision-maker. Although this is complex, as some men have thrived in these circumstances, these complexities need to be examined, analysed, and discussed.
3. The media plays a fundamental role in the ways masculinities and femininities are shaped. A comprehensive and culturally attuned communications plan must address the implications of hegemonic masculinity in the everyday lives of men in society. This way, both men and women can better re-evaluate and reflect on gender hierarchies and understand equity between genders as mutually beneficial. The media can also make visible the positive contributions of men within the domestic sphere, work-life balance for both genders, and identify, work with, and promote men who can become positive role models for boys.
4. Local-level women's activism, both globally and in Afghanistan, has made major advances through alliances with men. Women's rights activists and women's rights organisations should work alongside men in Afghanistan to establish more equal and less violent relationships between genders.
5. Profiling positive men, or men who are supportive of women in their families, working environment and broader community and society, can inspire younger generations of men to follow them as role models and agents of change at the community and national level.

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