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Human Terrain Team (HTT) AF-6 Research Update and Findings

Pashtun Sexuality

Background

The Human Terrain Team AF-6, assigned to the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Battalion and co-located with British forces in Lashkar Gah, has been requested by these forces to provide insight on Pashtun cultural traditions regarding male sexuality for reasons of enhanced baseline cultural understanding for improved interaction as well as any IO applicability.

Methodology

Because of the extremely sensitive nature of this investigation, traditional HTT techniques involving a directed research plan and series of interviews executed to generate, test, and confirm hypotheses are not feasible. Direct questioning of Pashtun male interviewees on the subject is further hindered by the female gender of the social scientist writing.

Instead, findings here will be based upon field observations and interviews responses by Pashtun men which were revealing regarding the topic, although discovered through the lines of questioning of other investigations. As sexuality is an essential building block of all human interaction and culture, these incidences of insight have been abundant, even couched in other research goals.

Secondary interviewees who have had extensive relevant interaction have been debriefed regarding their experiences. These include public health officers and medics who have treated a number of Pashtun men for sexual conditions, and other servicemembers involved, like HTT, in relationship-building and interpersonal interaction.

Extensive open-source journalistic and academic writings on the subject have been additionally consulted, some involving directly quoted answers from Pashtun interviewees. References are included for further examination.¹

Key Observations

- A culturally-contrived homosexuality (significantly not termed as such by its practitioners) appears to affect a far greater population base than some researchers would argue is attributable to natural inclination.

¹ Nevertheless, this work remains an informal paper written in a deployed field environment with the limited open-source resources available and without access to an academic library. The Human Terrain System's Research Reachback Center (RRC) may have additional resources on the topic.

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- Some of its root causes lie in the severe segregation of women, the prohibitive cost of marriage within Pashtun tribal codes, and the depressed economic situation into which young Pashtun men are placed.
- Other root causes include a long-standing cultural tradition in which boys are appreciated for physical beauty and apprenticed to older men for their sexual initiation.² The fallout of this pattern of behavior over generations has a profound impact on Pashtun society and culture.
- Homosexuality is strictly prohibited in Islam, but cultural interpretations of Islamic teaching prevalent in Pashtun areas of southern Afghanistan tacitly condone it in comparison to heterosexual relationships in several contexts.
- Pashtun men are freer with companionship, affection, emotional and artistic expression, and the trust bred of familiarity with other men. They often lack the experience of these aspects of life with women.
- This usurping of the female role may contribute to the alienation of women over generations, and their eventual relegation to extreme segregation and abuse.

Findings

Military cultural awareness training for Afghanistan often emphasizes that the effeminate characteristics of male Pashtun interaction are to be considered “normal” and no indicator of a prevalence of homosexuality. This training is intended to prevent servicemembers from reacting with typically western shock or aversion to such displays. However, slightly more in-depth research points to the presence of a culturally-dependent homosexuality appearing to affect a far greater population base than some researchers would argue is attributable to natural inclination. To dismiss the existence of this dynamic out of desire to avoid western discomfort is to risk failing to comprehend an essential social force underlying Pashtun culture—one with a variety of

2 While researchers may argue whether this can rightly be termed abusive when seen through a lens from within the culture, it is not arguable that it involves a great imbalance of power and/or authority to the disadvantage of the boy involved. (For information regarding the sexual exploitation of boys as part of Taliban and private militia indoctrination of pre-teen fighters, see the *New York Times* article by Craig Smith regarding “Warlords and Pedophilia” and the Reuters article “Afghan Boy Dancers Sexually Abused by Former Warlords”—both referenced in “Further Reading.”)

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potential implications upon the efficacy and applicability of ISAF efforts and on the long-term future of Afghan society.

HTT is often approached for advice by US and British servicemembers who report encounters with men displaying apparently homosexual tenancies. These servicemembers are frequently confused in the interpretation of this behavior. The British newspaper article below may be written with an attempt at humor, yet the Marines quoted typify the reaction often seen in servicemembers upon their initial encounters with Pashtun males. As HTT has observed with frequency while on patrols in Helmand and Kandahar provinces, these men are outwardly affectionate toward both one another and male ISAF members, are extremely gentle in their demeanor and touch, and have often taken great care in embellishing their personal appearance with fingernails dyed red, hair and beards hennaed in careful patterns, and eyes very occasionally subtly outlined.

The article titled "Startled Marines Find Afghan Men All Made Up to See Them," by Chris Stephen ran in the national newspaper *The Scotsman* on May 24, 2002. Not even in reference to the more heavily Pashtun southern areas of Afghanistan, it read:

In Baghram, British Marines returning from an operation deep in the Afghan mountains spoke last night of an alarming new threat—being propositioned by swarms of gay local farmers. An Arbroath Marine, James Fletcher, said: 'They were more terrifying than the al-Qaeda. One bloke who had painted toenails was offering to paint ours. They go about hand in hand, mincing around the village.' While the Marines failed to find any al-Qaeda during the seven-day Operation Condor, they were propositioned by dozens of men in villages the troops were ordered to search.

Another interviewee in the article, a Marine in his 20's, stated, "It was hell... Every village we went into we got a group of men wearing make-up coming up, stroking our hair and cheeks and making kissing noises." Beyond reacting to the unusual sight of made-up men, which one can

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readily accept as a style unique to a different culture, these Marines appear to have no doubt that they were being sexually propositioned.

One of the primary and obvious causes of this cultural tendency toward sexual expression between males is Pashtun society's extremely limited access to women. Heterosexual relationships are only allowable within the bounds of marriage, and Pashtun honor demands that a man be able to demonstrate his ability to support a wife and family, as well as produce abundant wedding-gifts for the bride and her parents, before he is allowed to marry. Therefore, given the economic situation of most young Pashtun men and the current state of employment and agriculture within the Pashtun regions of Afghanistan, marriage becomes a nearly unattainable possibility for many. A controversial *Los Angeles Times* article highlighted this issue and featured an interview with a young Afgan man whose situation was typical of this circumstance:

In his 29 years, Mohammed Daud has seen the faces of perhaps 200 women. A few dozen were family members. The rest were glimpses stolen when he should not have been looking and the women were caught without their face-shrouding burkas. "How can you fall in love with a girl if you can't see her face?" he asks.

Daud is unmarried and has sex only with men and boys. But he does not consider himself homosexual, at least not in the Western sense. "I like boys, but I like girls better," he says. "It's just that we can't see the women to see if they are beautiful. But we can see the boys, and so we can tell which of them is beautiful."³

Daud's insistence that his behavior should not label him as homosexual is the next important point in understanding the nature of this dynamic, and opens the doors to a complex interrelationship between Islam and its cultural interpretations. Even men who practice homosexuality exclusively are not labeled by themselves or their counterparts as homosexual.

3 Maura Reynolds, "Kandahar's Lightly Veiled Homosexual Habits" (*Los Angeles Times*, 3 April 2002).

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To identify as such is to admit an enormous sin in Islam—one punishable by death under the Taliban and one that would result in severe tribal and familial ostracization today.⁴ However, it appears to be the label, not the action or the preference, that poses the greatest problem.

In the context of rural southern Afghanistan, the relationship between Islam (here defined as the teachings of Prophet Mohammed as expressed in the Koran) and what is believed about Islam by the local faithful can contain vast differences. This is in great part due to a barrier in language and education. Not generally able to understand Arabic, the language of the Koran which is not to be translated, the Muslim faithful of southern Afghanistan rely on the teaching and interpretation of local Mullahs to inform them of what the Koran says. The more rural the area, the far less likely it becomes that even the Mullah himself understands Arabic⁵ and the more likely that what is taught is based upon local cultural tradition, independent of Islam itself. Homosexuality is strictly prohibited in Islam, but cultural interpretations of Islamic teaching prevalent in the area tacitly condone it in comparison to heterosexual relationships.

A typical expression, echoed by a number of authors and interviewees, is that homosexuality is indeed prohibited within Islam, warranting great shame and condemnation. However, homosexuality is then narrowly and specifically defined as the love of another man. Loving a man would therefore be unacceptable and a major sin within this cultural interpretation

4 A punishment of death for individuals publicly labeled as homosexuals remains a possibility even now, outside of Taliban rule, if enforced by extremist family or tribe members. Familiar recent news highlighted the situation of the young Afghan actor who portrayed a victim of male-upon-male rape in the film *The Kite Runner*. He had to be removed from the country due to death threats.

5 Reading and understanding Koranic Arabic are two very different things. Muslims around the world, regardless of their linguistic background, are educated in religious schools to be able to read and recite the Arabic of the Koran. That is, they are taught to recognize, pronounce, and memorize the words in order. However, even this education does not teach students the meanings of the Arabic words they memorize. Students who do not natively speak Arabic, like those of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, etc., remain dependent on teachers to interpret what is written for them, and these interpretations vary greatly dependent on the culture and agenda of the teachers.

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of Islam, but using another man for sexual gratification would be regarded as a foible⁶—undesirable but far preferable to sex with an ineligible woman, which in the context of Pashtun honor, would likely result in issues of revenge and honor killings. These killings are a Pashtun, not Islamic requirement, although the two tend to become inexorably bound in the minds of rural villagers.⁷ Similarly, the social circumstance that has made women foreign and unavailable (excessive veiling, segregation, and exclusion from public life) is generally also attributed to Islam in Pashtun communities, but is in itself a cultural construct, passed and exaggerated through local tradition.

Another example of cultural misinterpretations of Islamic tenants, bent to support homosexuality over heterosexuality, comes from a U.S. Army medic completing a year-long tour in a rural area of Kandahar province.⁸ She and her male colleagues were approached by a local gentleman seeking advice on how his wife could become pregnant. When it was explained to him what was necessary, he reacted with disgust and asked “How could one feel desire to be with a woman, who God has made unclean, when one could be with a man, who is clean? Surely this must be wrong.”

The religious basis for his statement lies in the Islamic regulation that women are ritually unclean for participation in prayer while on their monthly cycle. In the Koran, his tenant does not extend to imply that women are unclean or unapproachable otherwise. However, local cultural interpretations have created the passionately if erroneously held belief that women are

6 Here a religion that prioritizes love and the fair treatment of others is turned on its head and made to condemn love as the greater sin but to tolerate the selfish use and potential abuse of another person as a peccadillo.

7 From HTT interview dated 28 June 2009, regarding the relationship between Pashtunwali and Islam.

8 From HTT interview dated 30 May 2009. Because of the nature of the details later revealed, the interviewee's name, specific location, and unit details are withheld to protect the anonymity of DoD employee patients. Further details are available from HTT upon request.

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physically undesirable. Interestingly, the Koran specifies a number of physical circumstances under which a man can be rendered ritually unclean, but none of these are extended to the belief that he is unclean or undesirable in general. Therefore, it seems possible that such interpretations of Islam are at some point picked and chosen to support already-held beliefs or tendencies.

Interestingly, the same medics treated an outbreak of gonorrhea among the local national interpreters on their camp. Approximately 12 of the nearly 20 young male interpreters present in the camp had contracted the disease, and most had done so anally. This is a merely anecdotal observation and far too small of a sample size to make any generalizations regarding the actual prevalence of homosexual activity region-wide.⁹ However, given the difficulty in procuring such data, it may serve as some indicator.¹⁰

Of greatest interest here, however, is the way the men reacted to the education offered them so as to avoid the disease in the future. They insisted that they could not have caught the disease sexually because they were not homosexuals—important evidence of the rejection of the label regardless of the actual activities in which a man engages. Instead, they concluded that it was the result of mixing green and black tea, which became a running joke throughout the camp. They also continued to return for treatment after re-contracting the condition, having not believed

⁹ Another medical professional's estimate of homosexual prevalence is featured in Reynolds' *Los Angeles Times* article (op. cit.). It reads:

It's not only religious authorities who describe homosexual sex as common among the Pashtuns. Dr. Mohammed Nasem Zafar, a professor at Kandahar Medical College, estimates that about 50% of the city's male residents have sex with men or boys at some point in their lives. He says the prime age at which boys are attractive to men is from 12 to 16--before their beards grow in. The adolescents sometimes develop medical problems, which he sees in his practice, such as sexually transmitted diseases and sphincter incontinence. So far, the doctor said, AIDS does not seem to be a problem in Afghanistan, probably because the country is so isolated.

¹⁰ These men were also openly observed to simultaneously share the same cots within their sleeping quarters, and did not appear to feel the need to hide or disguise this fact. Again, it appears to be only the label of homosexuality that causes them discomfort.

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or heeded the instruction they received.

However, beyond the issues of poverty, segregation, and tacit cultural approval which apparently contribute to the prevalence of consensual sex among adult men, there seem to be darker underlying dynamics additionally at play. To begin illustrating these, HTT turns to a field experience in which a principle interviewee was a boy in his very early teens. His circumstance, combined with the nonverbal reaction of his adult male companions to the women interviewers present, was revealing regarding the social and cultural factors underlying the exchange. The following is quoted directly from HTT field notes of the incident:

Upon arrival at Camp Leatherneck in Helmand province, HTT was initially limited in its ability to conduct research with foot patrols and therefore sought to engage Afghan truck drivers who came on to the base for general atmospheric information. For the most part, such drivers are staunch allies who take enormous risks, as it is publicly evident that they assist American and Coalition Forces, and they frequently face reprisals from insurgent fighters. Also to be noted is the fact that truck drivers are highly cosmopolitan in comparison to most rural Afghan populations, as they have seen and traveled within many regions, to include western-influenced metropolitan areas. It should be anticipated that they would be therefore less likely to display local Pashtun resistance to the open and public presence of women.

On day one, HTT met only a group of four or five truck drivers, all of whom were from Helmand, living approximately 50 miles away from the camp. The most striking interviewee was a boy, about 12-14 years old, traveling with a group of older men. He spoke English beautifully, Dari beautifully, Pashto with apparent fluency, and when asked about other languages he knew, said he also spoke Urdu.¹¹ This was an absolutely brilliant child.

Asked why he was traveling with the other men, they identified him as their 'little mechanic' and said he could repair any problems they had on the road. This added greatly to the already very strong impression of the intelligence of this child.

The boy told HTT that he was traveling with his brother, an older truck driver, and that their truck had been hit by an insurgent rocket on their way in. (He

¹¹ These linguistic abilities were confirmed by a fluent Dari speaker who was an HTT member at the time.

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was proud to point out the location of impact.) The referenced brother was not present. The boy also explained that while their time on the road could be shortened, they take a circuitous route to the FOB, lasting about 10 days, in an attempt to throw off or avoid Taliban attacks.

I was deeply impressed with the boy, yet experienced a sense of wariness from the men who combined looks of distaste among themselves with slightly-too-slow requisite politeness toward the two female HTT members present. They had no such apparent problem with the male Human Terrain Analyst or Team Leader. The latter of the two approached in a U.S. Military uniform.¹² Therefore, the reaction of the interviewees appeared to be an issue regarding females, rather than an issue regarding Americans or the American Military. Nevertheless, I left the interview uplifted thinking that the future of Afghanistan was in the hands of brilliant, brave children like this.¹³

This incident was later re-examined in conversation with a group of American interviewees who together and individually spoke with many, many years experience working directly with the culture in country.¹⁴ They reminded me that one of the country's favorite sayings is "women are for children, boys are for pleasure." One the interviewees shared stories of how groups of men, ie. shepherding parties, would always travel with one boy "for fun." Sadly, the talented young mechanic came immediately to mind. HTT produced a picture of him with the group of drivers, and the interviewees were quite confident that their worst suspicions were correct. One interviewee then told the story of a time he found a 14-year-old boy quite literally in the hands of a group of Afghan security guards under his command. He physically fought the guards to free the boy and drove him back to Kabul, hours away, returning him home to his family, from whom he had apparently been forcibly taken in order to travel with the guards.

12 Further regarding appearances for future reference, both female HTT members were well-covered in their attire, including long sleeves and pant legs. My own hair was covered with a scarf, while my female colleague's hair was worn long and down. This may or may not have affected matters, as the men present regarded us both with equal apparent distaste.

13 From HTT personal field notes dated 5 May 2009.

14 HTT interview dated 11 May 2009 conducted at Kandahar Airfield, with former USPI employees. Their previous experience included providing security for the building of the Ring Road over the many years of its construction, and working and living with locally-hired Afghan security details for highly extended periods.

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While in many areas of southern Afghanistan such treatment of boys appears to be shrouded in some sense of secrecy, in Kandahar it constitutes an openly celebrated cultural tradition. Kandahar's long artistic and poetic tradition idolizes the pre-pubescent “beardless boy” as the icon of physical beauty. 19th-century British authors report their observations of Pashtun fighters singing poetic “odes of their longing for young boys.”¹⁵ The *Los Angeles Times* author cited earlier notes this tradition as alive and well in very recent literature:

A popular poem by Syed Abdul Khaliq Agha, who died last year, notes Kandahar's special reputation. 'Kandahar has beautiful halekon,' the poem goes. They have black eyes and white cheeks.¹⁶

Further, even the newly re-emerging musical nightlife of southern Afghan cities idolizes pre-pubescent boy performers, whose star status lasts only as long as their voices remain immature. While these performers themselves may be quite innocent, the reputation of their availability to patrons of the establishments at which they perform is difficult to dispel.¹⁷

Known frequently as *halekon*, *ashna*, or *bacha bereesh*,¹⁸ “beautiful” beardless boys are coveted, almost as possessions, by men of status and position for sexual relationships. Further, the more attractive or talented the boy is deemed, the more his presence elevates the status of his patron. In the article “Afghan Boy Dancers Sexually Abused by Former Warlords,” various interviewees state the following:¹⁹

‘Everyone tries to have the best, most handsome and good-looking boy,’ said a

15 Smith, Craig. Op cit.

16 Reynolds, Maura. Op cit.

17 Nick Meo, “The Boy Singers of Kabul” (*Moby Capital Updates*, 12 April 2005).

18 The titles translate roughly as “gorgeous youths,” “boy loves,” and “boys without beards.”

19 Anonymous, “Afghan Boy Dancers Sexually Abused by Former Warlords” (Reuters News Service, 18 Nov 2007). Interestingly, this article features the phenomenon as it takes place in several other areas of Afghanistan.

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former mujahideen commander, who declined to be named.

‘Sometimes we gather and make our boys dance and whoever wins, his boy will be the best boy.’ Former mujahideen commanders hold such parties in and around Pul-e Khumri about once a week.

‘Having a boy has become a custom for us. Whoever wants to show off, should have a boy,’ said Enayatullah, a 42-year-old landowner in Baghlan province.

A key feature of this relationship, slightly different from the homosexuality practiced by men with other grown men who have limited access to women addressed earlier, is its more coercive nature rooted in an imbalance of power (economic, rank-associated, status/age-associated, etc.) between the parties involved. According to one observer:

An apparent distinction seems evident in this particular Kandahar variation... The dating and courtship appears more coercive, more opportunistic and seems to take advantage of younger guys who almost have no other choice than to accept the money or gifts from bigger and more powerful 'commanders' whose bit of authority is bestowed by their gang-member status, their guns and the shattered legal/police system.²⁰

Even where the halekon tradition is not “celebrated” per se, it appears to underlie a number of Pashtun social structures, most notably the recruitment of very young "soldiers" by commanders of paramilitary groups. (This is so much true even today, that current law prohibits “beardless boys” living in Afghan military and police stations.²¹) This in turn fits under the traditional warrior ethos which defines the role of men within Pashtun culture. This dynamic played a major role in the functioning of the warlord culture that preceded the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

20 Dr. Richard Ammon, a clinical psychologist who maintains an internet database on worldwide homosexual culture at globalgayz.com, posted an interview containing this quotation. The article is titled “Interview with Michael Luongo on his return from ‘gay Afghanistan’” and was posted in July of 2004. Micheal Luongo is in turn a recognized researcher of gay culture in non-western societies and author of the book *Gay Travels in the Muslim World*. Both the interview and the book are referenced in "Further Reading."

21 Smith, Craig, op. cit. Also noted in the Wikipedia article at www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gay_rights_in_Afghanistan and the Sodomy Laws Database, edited by Bob Summersgill, at www.sodomylaws.org/world/afghanistan/afnews009.htm.

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By some accounts, the first incident that brought Mullah Omar and the Taliban to prominence in the eyes of the Pashtun people actually involved a dispute between two warlords over a particularly attractive halekon. This dispute took the pedophilia of the warlords to such an extreme that the locals themselves were repulsed and happy to embrace a force of reform. Tim Reid, in *The Times of London* writes:

In the summer of 1994, a few months before the Taliban took control of the city, two commanders confronted each other over a young boy whom they both wanted to sodomize. In the ensuing fight civilians were killed. Omar's group freed the boy and appeals began flooding in for Omar to help in other disputes. By November, Omar and his Taliban were Kandahar's new rulers. Despite the Taliban's disdain for women, and the bizarre penchant of many for eyeliner, Omar immediately suppressed homosexuality.²²

Perhaps “repressed” homosexuality would be a more apt statement, as the cultural tendency has not disappeared. However, open displays of homosexuality, in which the label of homosexuality could not be denied, became publicly punishable by crude executions under the Taliban. Now, in the absence of this possibility, the underlying cultural traditions appear to be returning to visible life with greater freedom.

Now that Taliban rule is over in Mullah Omar's former southern stronghold, it is not only televisions, kites and razors which have begun to emerge. Visible again, too, are men with their 'ashna', or beloveds: young boys they have groomed for sex. Kandahar's Pashtuns have been notorious for their homosexuality for centuries, particularly their fondness for naive young boys. Before the Taliban arrived in 1994, the streets were filled with teenagers and their sugar daddies, flaunting their relationship. It is called the homosexual capital of south Asia. Such is the Pashtun obsession with sodomy - locals tell you that birds fly over the city using only one wing, the other covering their posterior - that the rape of young boys by warlords was one of the key factors in Mullah Omar mobilizing the Taliban.²³

However, the Taliban should not be viewed as free of the culture and tradition of

22 Tim Reid, “Kandahar Comes out of the Closet” (*The Times of London*, 12 January 2002).

23 Ibid.

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homosexuality of the Pashtun world of which it is a part. Writers have argued that even within the Taliban, the tradition of *halekon* and the isolation of boys from the influence of family while they are assumed into the identity of a fighting group in which they are also sexually objectified and abused, is precisely what occurred with prevalence behind the walls of the madrasas. The now-iconic *Los Angeles Times* article on the issue states:

...many accuse the Taliban of hypocrisy on the issue of homosexuality. "The Taliban had *halekon*, but they kept it secret," says one anti-Taliban commander, who is rumored to keep two *halekon*. "They hid their *halekon* in their madrasas, or religious schools."²⁴

Whatever the source, there is frequently the risk that Pashtun boys will face a set of experiences that mold their beliefs regarding sexuality as adults in ways that are ultimately damaging, both to themselves and to Afghan society. It appears that this set of experiences becomes cyclical, affecting generations, and that this cycle has existed long enough to affect the underpinnings of Afghan culture itself.

From these findings, a model of this cycle might be ventured. It seems the cycle begins in isolation from the experience of women's companionship and the replacement of such companionship with men. Significantly, in the case of Taliban madrasas, many boys spend their formative years without even the influence of motherhood in their lives.²⁵ Women are foreign, and categorized by religious teachers as, at best, unclean or undesirable.²⁶ It is then probable that the male companionship that a boy has known takes a sinister turn, in the form of the expression of pedophilia from the men that surround him. Such abuse would most likely result in a sense of outrage or anger, but anger that can not possibly be directed at the only source of companionship

24 Reynolds, Maura, op. cit.

25 This is often due to orphanhood or family separation because of refugee circumstances.

26 At worst, women are categorized by such leaders as associated with evil—not unlike many Christian teachings over the years, emphasizing Eve's role in man's downfall.

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and emotional support a boy knows, and on which he remains dependent. This anger may very well be then directed at the foreign object—women—resulting in the misogyny typical of Pashtun Islamism. Men and boys therefore remain the object of affection and security for these boys as they grow into men themselves, and the cycle is repeated.

The fallout from this cycle affects both genders, and could possibly be a part of what leads to violence against women and women's suppression in Pashtun culture. If women are no longer the source of companionship or sexual desire, they become increasingly and threateningly foreign. Two initial findings add to the cycle of male isolation from women. One, put forward by the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Farah Province,²⁷ who conducted regular round-table discussions with local women, is that boys, even when raised in the home, are separated from their mothers' care around the age of 7 and are considered the charge of their fathers.

Another, more complex phenomena, highlighted in the *Los Angeles Times* article as well as the Reuters article²⁸ and others, is that men who take on a halekon often attempt to integrate the boy into their families by marrying him to a daughter when the boy is no longer young enough to play the “beardless” role. This maintains the love relationship between the father and son-in-law which inevitably makes difficult the establishment of a normal relationship with the wife. The once-halekon becomes a father with his new wife, and then begins to seek a teenage

27 Taken from the non-published notes of the “Women's Engagement Binder” available at the PRT, and followed up upon by interview with former discussion leaders. USAID has taken leadership on the women's development front in Farah province, and can provide further information on request. The specific notes, titled “Women's Development Ideas,” state:

Though Islamic law stipulates rights to women, in the countryside it ranks behind customary/tribal law which is extremely harsh to women (think village honor code). Add Afghan superstitions and women take the brunt of it. A final influence is the community—for example once a boy reaches the age of 7, he is taken away from his mother and raised by his father. Mothers in law do not help in this process and are generally quite harsh to the younger ladies in a house.

28 Reynolds, Maura. op cit. Anonymous author for Reuters, op. cit.

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boy with whom he can play the “bearded” role. The children born to this father inevitably register the nature of their mother's marginalized role. When to this is added the further isolation that occurs when boys are groomed for the halekon role by fighting groups or madrasas, it becomes almost unimaginable that boys would learn to form a normal and familiar attachment to a woman.²⁹

Talibs and halekon of fighters and other powerful men, when kept from the one universally nurturing experience of women—their mothers—are left with no way to relate to females whatsoever, and therefore no way to counter the negative labels assigned to women. While these men are excessively mild toward each other, the opposite side to the coin is a tendency to aggression toward women. HTT can again cite anecdotal but personal field experience which typified the way in which the behavior patterns of men, gentle toward one another, can turn quite opposite toward women, and the way these behaviors are imitated and transmitted to the next generation of men. The following took place on patrol in the Maywand district of Kandahar province:

29 This state of affairs perhaps made most evident in the words of the halekon themselves, featured in the article “Afghan Boy Dancers Sexually Abused by Former Warlords” cited in “Further Reading.”

‘I was only 14-years-old when a former Uzbek commander forced me to have sex with him,’ said Shir Mohammad in Sar-e Pol province. ‘Later, I quit my family and became his secretary. I have been with him for 10 years, I am now grown up, but he still loves me and I sleep with him.’

Ahmad Jawad, aged 17, has been with a wealthy landowner for the past two years.

‘I am used to it. I love my lord. I love to dance and act like a woman and play with my owner,’ he said.

Asked what he would do when he got older, he said: ‘Once I grow up, I will be an owner and I will have my own boys.’

But Shir Mohammad, at 24, was already getting too old to be a dancing boy. ‘I am grown up now and do not have the beauty of former years. So, I proposed to marry my lord's daughter and he has agreed to it.’

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Upon exiting the Mullah's compound, I was confronted with an irate neighbor—a man in middle-age, clean and apparently relatively wealthy in appearance... He expressed his horror that I, a woman, was present with the patrol. He would not make eye contact with me or shake my hand, but instead only referred to me with angry gestures. I maintained a respectful distance while he sat nearby to engage the men of the patrol.

When formally addressing the men, his demeanor changed. He shook hands with each, with every display of gentleness and respect. The traditional first handshake between Pashtun men grips only the first joints of the fingers, and he used this with each, along with much bowing. It was explained to him that I was present in order that men would not enter a compound where women might be seen, and he was significantly appeased...

After this conversation, as the group said their goodbyes and began to move away, the neighbor approached me and extended his hand. I took this to be an invitation to a handshake, offered now that he understood that I was there out of respect for the traditions of his culture rather than in an attempt to disrupt them. When I offered my hand, he took it in a crushing grip and with unexpected strength bent my wrist back into a painful joint lock.

I ultimately wrenched myself from his grip, and as I sought to rejoin my patrol, I was mobbed by the village boys, who I had previously showered with gifts of candy and school necessities, led by the neighbor's oldest son. This boy appeared to be approximately 11 years old. Grabbing my arm, he attempted to practice the same maneuver his father had demonstrated, to the delight and cheers of the younger boys.

The noise of the children caught the attention of our American interpreter, who returned and scolded them for their behavior. He attempted to shame them by asking “is this the way you would behave at home?” The oldest boy proudly answered that it was, indicating that his mother and sisters were treated with the same violence and disdain. While the encounter with the father hurt my wrist, the encounter with his sons broke my heart.³⁰

In conclusion, due to both cultural restrictions and generational cycles of certain experiences, Pashtun men are freer with companionship, affection, emotional expression, and the trust bred of familiarity with other men. They often lack the experience of these aspects of life with women. This usurping of the female role may contribute to the alienation of women over

30 From HTT Personal Field Notes dated 15 May 2009.

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generations, and their eventual relegation to extreme segregation and abuse. If ever the cycle of abuse is to be broken and the Pashtun culture heal itself from its wounds, which continue to fester in patterns of violence and conflict, the role of women as mothers and companions may be key.

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