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2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, Afghanistan
MCIA Cultural Intelligence Team (MCIT)
(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO



(U) Executive Summary

(U)The purpose of this document is to outline the role of female engagement on the ground and best uses of female engagement initiatives. While existing academic literature on females in Afghanistan is limited mostly to the urban areas, it is evident that the lives of women in rural Helmand are complex and difficult than is generally understood from open source and academic literature. Female engagement encompasses methodical, long-term outreach efforts to the entire population, men, women, and children, which is essential in a counterinsurgency. Such engagement efforts provide opportunities to connect with both men and women, counter negative Taliban IO efforts, and improve civil affairs efforts.

(U) Note: Because little information is publicly available on Baluch women, more data is required to develop a thorough understanding of their role in society and develop best practices. As a result, this study will largely deal with female engagement in the Pashtun communities of Helmand and Farah.

(U) Key Takeaways:

- **Definition of engagement:** Efforts to establish ties of trust and respect between local nationals and the Coalition with the end-state being local national support, trust, and respect for the presence of Coalition forces in their area.
- **“Female engagement” includes engaging both men and women.** Female engagements will **only** occur through the men of the community.
- **Women are a critical, yet often overlooked, demographic in counterinsurgency strategy.** This is a key demographic in gaining popular support; however, engaging women is a delicate, refined process that requires a keen understanding of cultural sensitivities.
- **Female engagement teams are not collection assets.** Female engagement initiatives that promote the use of females as collection assets can seriously impede engagement processes, scare women away, and put local women in danger.
- **Men are not the only decision-makers in the community.** Women hold significantly more sway in the household and the village than is often

UNCLASSIFIED//FOUO

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

understood or immediately apparent. It is by understanding the means through which they exercise that influence that requires greater understanding by the Coalition.

- **Pashtun gender prohibitions are designed to protect Pashtun women, not Western women.** Afghan men interact differently with Western women. Often seen as a “third gender,” Afghan men will approach CF women with different issues than are discussed with men. For this reason, engagements are necessary with both men and women. As a result, many of those cultural prohibitions are not applicable with respect to Western women involved in female engagements.
- **Afghan and Iraq women are very different.** Therefore, female engagement in Afghanistan cannot be framed by Western and Iraqi biases, and cultural awareness is vital to successful female engagement processes. Afghanistan is also at an extremely different level of social development in 2010 than was Iraq in 2006-2009 when the majority of the USMC female engagement occurred.
- **Female engagement is not an Afghan Lionness program.** While security will inherently be part of the mission for any Marine, the primary goal is not to conduct female searches.
- **All politics in Afghanistan is local politics.** In light of this, broad-stroke programs that do not anticipate or account for the very local nature of Afghan culture and politics risk causing more problems than solving them.

(U) Key Atmospheric:

- “We know the men are here to fight, but we know the women are here to help.”
– LN in Khaneshin
- “You claim that you are afraid of the Taliban, but the female Marines are walking our streets and aren’t afraid, you should be embarrassed.” – Now Zad community de-mining initiative program manager
- After the FETs had been operating in Garmsir for three weeks under the auspices of the Civil Affairs Group (CAG), a key elder gave information that led to the detention of three IED makers who emplaced over 40 IEDs. When asked why the elder provided the information, he replied, “I see all the good you are doing for our people and our women.”
- District Governor of Nawa to the FET OIC regarding women’s programs, “You are my sister. You are right, I like this philosophy; we must stop talking about building programs and start doing them.”

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

- When LN men came into a clinic and saw the FET working, they started laughing. When asked why, “we were told that the Marines will rape our women if they come here, but we see women here so they aren’t going to get raped, we will go tell our women that they can come to the clinic.”

(U) Overview of Women in Helmand and Afghanistan

(U) Much of the literature that exists on women in Afghanistan is centered on the lives of urban women in the west, north, and east. Historically, women’s rights movements in Afghanistan came from the upper echelons of society or the civil servant class in the urban areas. Major social reforms were attempted at least at the beginning of the 20th century, when King Amanullah and Queen Soraya, inspired by Attaturk’s reforms in Turkey, tried to rapidly alter the status of women in society which ultimately led to the assassination of the king. King Zahir Shah, Prime Minister Daoud Khan, and leaders during the Soviet era also worked to incorporate more women into civil servant positions and other fields. These latter reforms were almost exclusively limited to major urban centers, whereas the countryside resisted such changes. The more progressive attitudes of urban-dwellers toward women over several decades were crushed by the vicious and aggressive execution of Taliban extremist interpretation of the Deobandi philosopher Maududi, which ultimately led to the death or mutilation of thousands of men and women in the cities.

(U) Very little is known about the lives of women in Helmand, who have largely been excluded from the recorded complexities of regional history in the last 30 years of warfare. Furthermore, even less is known about *rural* Afghan women. Misconceptions and ignorance of at least half the population in a rural insurgency may impede counterinsurgency efforts where the population is the center of gravity. A study conducted in rural Helmand and Kandahar in 1999 by anthropologist Anne Pont indicated that the lives of women in southern Afghanistan had not changed significantly over the previous 30 years in terms of their role in society.¹ Rural Helmandi men and women were always conservative, even by the standards of Lashkar Gah residents.

(U) While rural Helmandis have always been conservative, the treatment of women that in the eyes of a Western observer may appear backward and incredibly harsh is not as simple as men inherently wanting to treat women badly. Pashtun society dictates a certain niche for women, who are revered for their role as the mothers and caretakers of the family. Practices such as offering young brides to settle disputes and attain dowry money, honor killings, polygamy, or safeguarding women in compounds all need to be understood not only in a cultural context, but also through the lens of socio-economic strata and protracted warfare. Culturally, Pashtun tradition of promising daughters to men at a very young age, called *bad*, is a practice that solidifies two friends or individuals (and thereby, their family, clan, and tribe) as blood relatives in a manner that cannot be fully understood in a Western mindset. In a tribal society where who you

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

know can mean life or death, marriages are a means of securing access and allegiance of a certain network. At times, promising a daughter or son for marriage is symbolic of the importance of the friendship between individuals. Economically, arranged marriages also provide potentially badly needed income to an impoverished family; or vice versa, a marriage dowry can cripple a man's family with debt for the rest of their lives. Interestingly, Mullah Nasim Akhundzada who conquered Helmand under the Harakat-e-Inqilab-e-Islami mujahideen faction, forbid the practice of *bad* and permitted some degree of women's involvement in economic activities in parts of Helmand. This demonstrates that broad-stroke assumptions cannot be made without risk even in Helmand, as individual tribal leaders may deem certain tenets of Pashtunwali more important than others. Nonetheless, thirty years of intense warfare, where rape was regularly used as a war crime or to shame your enemy's family, intensified protective measures over women. The protectionist measures over women even prevent women from health care access unless the situation is very dire, which is exacerbated by poverty as well.

(U) Contrasts with Iraqi Women

(U//FOUO) As a comparatively modern state, it was not uncommon for Iraqi women to hold political office, openly wield tribal authority as sheikhas, and maintain a modern lifestyle in the major urban areas that is roughly comparable to that found in the West during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the rural areas the situation is extremely different, roughly comparable to that found within the late 1700s in the West, and the status of women's rights in the south has declined in particular under the influence of Iranian-backed militias such as Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). While Iraq by no means fully embraces women's rights in the Western sense of the term, there are definite avenues of influence and power that are available to women and the urban elite culture in particular has had a great deal of exposure to German, French, and Russian conceptions of women's rights. The comparatively free status of Iraqi women compared to the perceived repression and servitude of their counterparts in Iran is often considered a point of nationalist pride by even the most backward and chauvinist of Iraqi tribal leaders, and support for women's honor under *futuwa* (the Arabic code of honor) is framed in terms that the mistreatment of local women often results in social ostracism at best and direct retaliation by the nearest male relatives at worst.

(U//FOUO) As already discussed, thirty years of warfare and rural tribal society sets Afghan women at some length culturally from Iraqi women, and views will often be determined by local dynamics. In some areas even of rural Helmand, women may inherit property of a deceased husband, a practice seemingly uncommon throughout Afghanistan. The Taliban's control over women, especially in the urban centers, was crippling in that women were shut out from public life, denied access to schools, could not sing, had to wear the burqa in public, and had to be accompanied by male family members when traveling outside the home compound. All these problems were especially problematic given the tens of thousands of widowed women as a result of the

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

Soviet and civil wars, causing thousands of these women to resort to begging, prostitution, and starvation. In order to rectify these injustices and provide some basic services to men, women, and children alike, hundreds of underground women's networks reached thousands of people to provide schooling, health services, and a forum for therapeutic discussion.^{2 3 4} If women were caught, they would be executed. These underground networks are believed to largely have existed in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Herat, and some of the surrounding rural areas. However, it is unknown if these networks existed in the countryside where these services were badly needed, but given the logistical constraints and dangerous of traveling in rural areas it is unlikely that they did.

(U//FOUO) After the fall of the Taliban, efforts were made to improve the lives of women in Afghanistan and include women in governance and other capacities. The Afghan constitution extends equality to women, approximately one-third of the Wolesi Jirga are reserved for female representatives, and two women ran for president and seven for vice president during the August 2009 elections. Thousands of girls and women are attending school, where several generations lost such an opportunity during the 1980s and 1990s. However, all of these improvements in the lives of women have occurred in the urban areas, whereas rural areas remain poor and more at risk to attacks given the rural nature of the Afghan insurgency. Approximately one percent of girls in rural communities attend school and the mother and infant mortality rate in rural areas is significantly worse (in some cases 1 out of 16 women die during childbirth).⁵

(U//FOUO) Understanding the stark differences between the lives of women in Iraq and Afghanistan is critical for engagements so as not to allow previous deployments in the former shape female engagements in the latter. Where most Iraqi women remember a better time and needed to be reminded of and encouraged to pursue what they once had, rural Afghan women do not have the same experiences of school, running shops, selling produce, and other opportunities. As such, they often do not know about other options that could fit within their cultural boundaries to participate in with regards to development and improving their own lives. In the cultural context it is essential that any changes to women's lives are first brought through the men, while simultaneously teaching the community about possible improvements in daily living, healthcare, and job opportunities.

(U) The Role of Female Engagement Teams: Breaking the Misconceptions

(U//FOUO) The female engagement teams (FET) first and foremost are outreach teams of Marines in pursuit of broader and deeper long-term engagement by accessing the entire population. By virtue of the role FETs perform, they serve as yet another platform to show local nationals that Coalition forces and GIROA work in the interest of the *entire* community. FET presence in the community affects men and women, and provides levels of influence that many cultural trainers or battle space owners do not foresee.

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

Female Marines can acquire more information from local men than male counterparts at times; or, having seen female Marines and sincere efforts to improve the lives of women in the community, men will come forward with information. Furthermore, positive female engagement allows Afghan women the opportunity to create another link between CF and local community, and exert informal social pressure against local insurgents.

(U//FOUO) It is crucial to understand that projects, engagements, and any events having to do with women must first be conducted through the men. Western females working in Afghanistan is an anomaly especially in the countryside, and could be seen as threatening and suspicious when unaccompanied by male counterparts. In many cases, local nationals will never have seen Western or Marine women before, and because cultural sensitivities of women traveling on their own, may certainly be perceived as something to fear. As the fate of King Amanullah and Queen Soraya demonstrates, reforms for women in rural Afghanistan must not be rushed. While it is certainly not the aim of female engagement to instill any Western cultural standards upon Afghan men and women, it cannot be perceived as such through a local lens. For this reason, FETs must engage with men on any projects regarding work, schooling, healthcare, or otherwise. By bypassing the men in accessing or providing services to women, there is a much greater risk of backlash and will lack critical local buy-in necessary for sustainable progress. When schools were reopened in Now Zad shortly after Operation COBRA KAREH in December 2009, the Civil Affairs team which included a female Marine worked through the men and sons in the villages to send daughters and sisters to school. Today, Now Zad (a district that had never had a girls school) has over 25 girls in class everyday out of about 200 students in the DC.

(U) IO Opportunities Through Female Engagement

(U//FOUO) Female engagement conducted appropriately can have massive IO implications. In a counterinsurgency, the population is the center of gravity, as such it is essential to reach as wide of an audience as possible. Providing services in a culturally sensitive way to women sharply contrasts with the experience of rural and urban women during the 1980s and 1990s, when rape was regularly used as a means of violence and exerting control, or when reforms were either far too progressive or extremely oppressive by Afghan standards especially in the urban centers. This recent history strongly resonates with Afghans, and when female engagement is conducted in a manner shaped by local traditions, men and women recognize that. It is not surprising that atmospherics improve when it is clear that Afghan women are well taken care of by Marines, and a significant indication of respect for Afghan culture. Engaging females discredits Taliban IO that CF rape local women or disrespect women's role in Islam.

(U//FOUO) After relationships have been established with local women and trust has been formed, women can be yet another means of spreading a GIROA and ISAF-friendly messaging, or spreading critical information. For example, women in the outlying

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(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

villages of the Now Zad DC were not aware that a female midwife was present in the DC and was seeing patients. Men in the villages most likely knew, but did not share with their wives because of the danger of mines between villages and the district center, as well as the military presence. Farzona, a midwife sponsored by the Ministry of Public Health, travels to a new village week after week (sometimes accompanied by the FET) spreading the word that she is willing and able to see female patients, and has a stocked pharmacy, meanwhile making the argument that if it is safe enough for their children and husbands to go to the district center, it will also be safe for women. Women will see that GIROA is working on their behalf by providing female healthcare for the first time at least four years. Similar stories can be seen in other districts where FETs are employed as well: In Nawa, FETs are engaging mullah's women (thereby reaching the religious community and demonstrating that CF respects Islam), the number of men inviting female Marines into their homes steadily increases, and FETs are providing in-home hygiene classes. The FET and local women are also working with a USAID representative to discuss alternatives to growing poppy. In Now Zad, Nowruz was celebrated by women for the first time in years, and also served as a forum to discuss local grievances with the female Marines. Additionally, local women and female Marines held Now Zad's first economic and education council meeting with 15 women in attendance. These are just a few anecdotes that demonstrate how female engagement can help with reconstruction, healthcare, civil society-building, education, alternative crop development, and more all as a means of winning over the population and demonstrating that there is a significantly better alternative to supporting the insurgency. As Central Asia Institute founder Greg Mortenson so famously argues, women play a critical role in getting men to lay down their arms, but doing requires tactical patience and thoughtful engagement strategies.

(U) Not Lionness, Not Collectors

(U//FOUO) The primary mission of FET is not Lionness-oriented; nor is the FET a collection asset. FETs primarily work in a civil affairs capacity, assisting with community development projects that can include women, engaging with key leaders and shopkeepers alike, helping with reconstruction efforts, and supporting civil society development. It is precisely because Marines provide tangible services in a civil affairs capacity that locals come to trust and appreciate their efforts. For this reason, the primary goals of female engagement should not be motivated by collection or security requirements. FETs serve in such a capacity only insofar as civil affairs teams do.

(U//FOUO) The primary goal of female engagement should not be collection. By virtue of the placement and access to information that FET can achieve under the framework of "every Marine a collector," and information shared by women that could assist CF better understand the operating environment or provide actionable intelligence does occur. However, the information is not always transferred through women, and when it is, it is after long-term engagements and trust-building has already occurred with men and women in the community. Women oftentimes will know who in their villages are

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(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

planting IEDs and who is causing trouble; however, extracting that information must be done in a thoughtful and methodical manner that does not significantly put the lives of women at risk. CF realistically have no way of protecting women as sources especially given the cultural environment, and the safety of local women is usually not considered in planning processes of employing female Marines. When FETs are utilized as active collectors, female Marines become higher value targets and local women are put in significant danger. CF should be particularly cognizant of what other women and children are present while information is passed. Because women are almost always surrounded by children, they may inadvertently put women in danger by telling men what was discussed in meetings. For this reason, especially when relationships have not been established with the men in the household, conversations should largely be limited to civil affairs topics (such as governance, development, education, health, atmospheric, etc) unless the women voluntarily offer information. Such topics have major COIN implications and preserving that access is critical. Particularly as CF outreach to local women is in its infancy, CF must understand that it would take only a handful of murder and intimidation incidents to completely and permanently cripple the rapport with local women in key areas. As a result, in order to preserve regular access to information it is absolutely vital that FET not be viewed as a collection asset or employed towards tactical objectives.

(U) Best Practices as a Western Female in Helmand

- There have been instances where very conservative LN men did not want to work with the FET, but those occasions are rare. In those instances, it is best not to force the issue.
- Men will most likely not be bothered by women attending shuras with tribal and government leaders; however, shuras with religious leadership is best left to the men to conduct unless invited in.
- Initially engage women through the men, and continue to engage men. Bypassing men creates skepticism as to why CF are working with the community and questions of what influence and ideas are being imparted upon local women.
- Do not take photographs of women or have cameras out around women; first ask if it is okay to take a photo of the children. Polaroid cameras are extremely useful, as a photograph of children may be a very welcomed gift. In a compound with only women, they may allow photographs, but will likely cover faces. As a general rule, avoid photographs of women, as if a camera is stolen (and children are great at pick-pocketing) and photos of women are found, it could potentially cause serious problems. There will be instances where women will permit photographs to be taken even around men (such as key elders and GIROA figures), however it is very rare.

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

- Rural Afghans especially see Western women as a “third gender.” While they are extremely protective of their own women, they are not necessarily protective of American women. However, men will judge CF based on how they treat Western women, will be very suspicious of large groups of Western women, or women working independently. This is particularly true of women in uniform. Suspicions and curiosities can be best kept at bay when working in a civil affairs capacity.
- Hair should always be kept up and tight; walking around with hair down can be quite insulting to locals.
- Headscarves are not a necessity for good relations with locals. While it will be perceived as a sign of respect, Afghans largely understand CF are not Muslims, and therefore are not required to wear headscarves. Afghan women may give headscarves as gifts, and in such cases it should be worn as a sign of respect. In the presence of multiple religious clerics, a headscarf should be worn.
- African American, darker skinned, or very short-haired females may want to wear a headscarf at least initially to ensure they are not confused for men. A vast majority of rural Afghans have never seen persons of African descent, and may unintentionally assume that they are men (especially if in uniform and carrying weapons). Once relationships have been established with the community, any potential misconceptions will likely be alleviated.
- Be aware that oftentimes local women may be very afraid of female Marines during searches given this is a completely foreign practice. Furthermore, not everyone female CF meet should be searched, nor should anyone be searched when invited into homes. Searching babies and children when there are a lot of women and children should be addressed by the men and women alike. The likelihood of the Taliban targeting large groups of women and children in order to kill or target one female Marine will lose the support of the entire community. Attacks upon women and girls has occurred more in RC-East than in other parts of Afghanistan, and largely against girls attending schools.
- Women and children will act differently depending on who is present nearby. Generally, women and children are very friendly and inquisitive when there are no nefarious actors in the area; however, men, women and children may act disengaged, afraid, or less receptive to interaction with CF if someone they fear is watching. For example, in a contested village in Now Zad, very few women and children attended the female village medical outreach despite the desperate need for medicine and health service. In a nearby village with no Taliban, over 40 women and children were treated. In another case, a village where a previous female village medical outreach wielded over 40 women being treated, another

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

medical outreach several weeks later only two came (despite the second outreach employing the Afghan female midwife whereas the first one did not) due to harassment and intimidation by Taliban elements. Being able to read locals, especially women and children in a hostile environment is critical.

- No matter what your marital status is, it is best to tell locals you are married and have children. It is also helpful to tell locals that one of the male Marines is a brother or cousin. Women traveling unaccompanied by male family members is very unusual (especially in large groups), and may inadvertently cause locals to have negative perceptions toward females trying to engage. More importantly, talking about married life and children is a great way to bridge a cultural gap and open conversation.
- Engaging females specifically to attain even basic atmospheric is a very delicate task that requires an individual attuned to local nuances and capable of working in a culturally sensitive manner. It is very easy to make women feel like they are being interrogated, especially given that many women may never have seen a Western woman before. TCAPF questions (*especially* where there has been no previous engagement process) such as the following may scare women or provide misleading answers:
 - Have there been changes in the village population in the last year?
 - What are the most important problems facing the village?
 - Who do you believe can solve your problems?
 - What should be done first to help the village?
- Children will eagerly invite Western women to their homes for chai and meals. Make an effort to do so, but do not make promises that cannot be kept.
- Drink many cups of chai with the locals and the rewards will be great. However, cups of chai must be coupled with tangible benefits to the community and efforts to improve the lot of locals in terms of security and civil affairs projects.
- As security, education, and the economy improves FETs will observe tangible improvements in the lives of local women. Because rural Helmand is still a medieval society development will have to come in stages and cannot be prematurely forced without risking the kind of backlash that overthrew King Amanullah and Queen Soraya. There will be real improvements to women's rights in Afghanistan; however, it would behoove of female Marines to recognize that attempts to import Western-style women's rights rhetoric and ideas without any cultural preparation will not take root and may be regarded as hostile.

(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

- Afghan conception of time is different than that of a Westerner. CF references to “Afghan time” when referring to the late start to meetings and shuras is largely accurate. Interestingly, when it comes to projects and getting things done, Pashtuns tend to want to see that CF are keeping their promises. Oftentimes in shuras with either men or women, locals will express dissatisfaction with security and GIROA. After being reminded of the progress made and benefits brought forth from Coalition or GIROA presence, perceptions change.
- During female-to-female engagements, utilizing female interpreters will vastly improve relationships with locals and access to women. The most ideal situation would be for female Marines to speak Pashto themselves at least for basic conversations, medical outreaches, and “kitchen talk.” Locals are extremely surprised by Westerners, let alone Western women, being able to speak their language. The effort goes a long way in convincing locals that CF are trying to understand their culture. While male interpreters may be able to translate from behind a sheet during female-to-female engagements, it is not ideal and may diminish how open and honest females are with CF.
- So as not to disrupt the daily duties of women, ask women and children to teach how to do what they do. *Once a relationship has been established*, ask how to make chai, cook meals, take care of the children, etc. This will strengthen outreach efforts and relationships with local women, as well as assist with their tasks. The Pashtun tenet of *melmastia* (hospitality) requires Pashtuns to take care of their guests, and should not be offended. However, Pashtun women will likely be happy to watch Western women attempt to learn their own tasks.
- Gifts provided to women should be humble and practical. Women almost always ask for soap, lotion, or sunscreen, seeing as the weather is harsh on their skin. Toothbrushes, toothpastes, hairbrushes, blankets, socks, and small gifts for their children are strongly appreciated. CF should be exceedingly careful not to inhibit on someone’s business by providing gifts; for example, large donations of clothing or shoes to the community may inhibit someone’s clothing or cobbling business. Gifts such as shoes and clothing should be done in small numbers when there is the possibility of disrupting business activities. Men and women alike often ask for radios, while children largely want candy, pens, and pencils.

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(U) Female Engagement in the MEB-A AO

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¹ (U) *Blind Chickens and Social Animals*, Anne Pont, 1999 (UNCLASSIFIED)

² (U) *Veiled Courage: Inside the Afghan Women's Resistance*. Cheryl Benard, 2002 (UNCLASSIFIED)

³ (U) *Meena, Heroine of Afghanistan: the Martyr Who Founded RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*, Melody Ermachild Chavis, 2004 (UNCLASSIFIED)

⁴ (U) *The Sewing Circles of Heart: A Personal Voyage Through Afghanistan*, Christina Lamb, 2004 (UNCLASSIFIED)

⁵ (U) 2009 Afghanistan Country Report, Women for Afghan Women, March 2010 (UNCLASSIFIED)