Navigating norms and insecurity: Men, masculinities, conflict and peacebuilding in Afghanistan

European Union initiative

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Afghan society and, with it, gender norms, expectations and roles have been profoundly shaped by four decades of war, displacement and foreign intervention. These changes have not been unidirectional, uncontested or the same for the whole of Afghan society. New opportunities and spaces have arisen, sometimes temporarily, for more equitable and flexible understandings of gender, while simultaneously other spaces have closed and more rigid understandings of gender norms have prevailed. As anywhere, gendered expectations and gendered power dynamics are closely tied to other socio-cultural norms and identity markers. Class, age, location, education, dis-/ability, social status and ethnicity are among key factors that interact with masculinities to set different, though often similar, sets of expectations on Afghan men and boys – but also often radically different possibilities of meeting these expectations. While custom and religion, i.e. Islam, are often invoked in underscoring gender norms and expectations, how these are interpreted in practice differs between locations and individuals, even if the basic tenets remain the same.

The focus of this report is men and masculinities in Afghanistan, how these have been shaped by – and themselves shape – conflict and peacebuilding, and what this means for the implementation of the women, peace and security agenda. This focus comes out of an understanding of gender that is relational, i.e. that gender norms, roles and power dynamics are formed and play out in relation to each other, and that therefore promoting women's empowerment also requires working with men and boys in a transformative manner.[1]

This report is based on 70 individual interviews and 84 focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted in five provinces of Afghanistan – Herat, Kandahar, Laghman, Nangarhar and Takhar – as part of a broader project on localising Afghanistan's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). The interviews and FGDs were carried out by International Alert's Afghan partner organisation, the Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO) in Pashto and Dari between 2016 and 2018. The translated transcripts were then analysed both jointly in workshops in Kabul and separately by the two organisations. The interview and FGD questions focused on issues of gender norms and expectations, security, participation and decision-making, in particular at the local level. The interviews and FGDs in the target provinces were complemented by background interviews with researchers and non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff working on gender issues in Afghanistan, as well as by a round of individual and group interviews with male Afghan refugees in makeshift camps on the Serbian-Croatian border.

A single report can never capture the multitude of gender dynamics in a given society, and, due to the constraints of the project, in particular around security and access, only some aspects of masculinities are covered and the sample is by necessity a limited one.[2] Particularly sensitive subjects, such as direct experience of substance abuse or perpetration of domestic and intimate partner violence, were not probed directly, as researching these would require extensive trust-building and a different kind of research set-up. Where possible, gaps in the data are compensated for by references to other research. In spite of these inevitable shortcomings, we hope this report highlights the importance of taking into account men and masculinities in gender, peace and security work both in Afghanistan and more broadly, and encourages further-going research on this issue.

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[1] See also H. Myrttinen, J. El-Bushra and J. Naujoks, Re-thinking gender in peacebuilding, London: International Alert, 2014, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_RethinkingGenderPeacebuilding_EN_2014.pdf; and H. Myrttinen, Engaging with masculinities in fragile and conflict-affected settings, OECD/DAC Gendernet and INCAF Guidance Note, Paris: OECD/DAC, 2019.

[2] For a comparative view on the width and breadth of various femininities in Afghanistan, see for example J. Heath and A. Zahedi, Land of the unconquerable: The lives of contemporary Afghan women, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

GENDER, CONFLICT AND PEACEBUILDING

Gender is a central element in both conflict and peacebuilding. As stated in Alert's programming framework:

> *"Gender is one of the factors that influence, positively and negatively, the ability of societies to manage conflict without resorting to violence. Since gender analysis can help us understand complex relationships, power relations and roles in society, it is a powerful tool for analysing conflict and building peace."[3]*

Therefore, "building inclusive, sustainable, positive peace in societies affected by violent conflict requires analysing and addressing gendered power dynamics as well as gender roles and expectations".[4] Gender roles, expectations and identities both affect, and are themselves affected by, conflict and peacebuilding. It is important to see gender norms, expectations and gendered power dynamics as fluid and also as not being one-dimensional. At times, gendered expectations can also be contradictory.

The promotion of gender equality, women's rights and in particular increasing women's political participation have been high on the international community's and Afghan national governments' agenda since the fall of the Taliban government in 2001. These efforts have been supported by the activities of both local and international NGOs, but have also met resistance from local communities, religious and customary leaders, and armed actors such as the Taliban or Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP).

This resistance is not new – previous efforts at changing the position of women in Afghan society, whether during the ill-fated reforms of King Amanullah Khan in the 1920s, during the Republican rule of Mohammed Daoud Khan (1973–1979) or even more so during the Soviet-supported socialist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (1979–1992), have been at times fiercely resisted. In part due to the connection of the women's rights agenda with unpopular central governments and even more so with foreign forces, and in part in the way the agenda has been implemented, the issue has often been portrayed by Afghan opponents as being anti-Afghan and anti-Islamic.[5]

The central challenges of this project were thus firstly to work on women's empowerment and gender equality issues in a way that is seen as being acceptable to local social and cultural norms; and secondly to broaden out the discussion on gender issues to encompass not only women and girls, but also men and boys, without, however, side-lining women's needs and concerns in the process.

A key gap in gender work in Afghanistan to date has also often been an exclusive focus on women and girls, with little engagement of men and boys, let alone programming that would take critically into account men's needs and vulnerabilities, but also the expectations of masculinity placed on them.[6]

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[3] International Alert, Programming framework for International Alert: Design, monitoring and evaluation, London: International Alert, 2010, p.19, http://www.international-alert.org/resources/publications/programming-framework

[4] H. Myrttinen et al, 2014, Op. cit., p.10

[5] See for example L. Abirafeh, Gender and international aid in Afghanistan: The politics and effects of intervention, Jefferson: McFarland Publishers, 2009; and J. Billaud, *Kabul Carnival: Gender Politics in Post-War Afghanistan*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

[6] L. Abirafeh, 2009, Op. cit., and J. Billaud, 2015, Op. cit. Notable exceptions are A. Hakimi and T. Wimpelmann, Missing from the picture: Men imprisoned for 'moral crimes' in Afghanistan, CMI Insight 2, Bergen: CMI, 2018; A. Chiovenda, Crafting masculine selves: Culture, war and psychodynamics among Afghan Pashtuns, Ph.D. Thesis, Boston University, 2015; and C.R. Echavez, S.M. Mosawi and L.W. Pilongo, The other side of gender inequality: Men and masculinities in Afghanistan, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit and Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 2016.

Why masculinities?

Masculinities are the various ways of being and acting, values and expectations associated with being and becoming a man in a given society, location and temporal space. While masculinities are mostly linked with biological men and boys, they are not biologically driven and not only performed by biological men. Although associated mainly with men and boys, masculinities can also be performed by women, girls and other gender identities.

Many of the institutions and activities associated with conflict and peacebuilding are often centrally associated with what is considered as male-ness and are heavily male dominated, be it military groups or formal and informal political decision-making bodies at various levels. While many of the perpetrators of violence are men and boys, they can also be victims of violence, and face particular gendered vulnerabilities, which in some cases may be the same as those faced by women and girls, and in others they might manifest differently, such as for example forced recruitment by armed actors.

Situations of conflict and fragility will empower some men, such as warlords and their patronage networks, but also undermine the possibilities of many men to live up to societal expectations to be economic providers, protectors or decision-makers. The new, often limited, societal and economic openings for women and girls that may arise in these situations may lead to fears of loss and a backlash from men and boys. Preventing violence both in the public and private spheres as well as building more inclusive societies requires engaging with men and boys as well as transforming expectations and practices of what it means to 'be a man'. This requires understanding and addressing men's and boys' needs and vulnerabilities, but also addressing the structural privileges they hold in comparison to women, girls and persons with other gender identities. While promoting gender equality is not a 'zero-sum game' in which men lose what women gain, there is a need for challenging men's privileges – and also highlighting the benefits of not adhering to harmful gender norms. The work of transforming masculinities can be central in this respect, but needs to be accountable to women and girls and not lead to a stabilisation or strengthening of patriarchal power.

This report therefore highlights the findings of the project in particular from a masculinities perspective, but also discusses the norms and expectations that guide women's lives in the target areas. This is in part due to the broader focus of the project, which is around the implementation of the WPS agenda. It is, however, also due to the fact that men's and women's lives in Afghanistan, as elsewhere, are inextricably intertwined, with many of the expectations placed on men and boys relating directly to the women in their lives – be it in terms of respecting the wishes of one's mother, providing for the family, being a respectable husband, physically protecting the family and community or notions of needing to protect women's honour.[7]

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[7] As Chiovenda notes for a Pashtun community in Nangarhar province: "'The women of my family are my *namus*', you often hear men say, which means that their honor, and that of their family members, rests on the appropriate behavior of their women. If the family's women must, through their public performance, ensure the maintenance of the family's honor and public respectability, it is upon the men to protect, and restore, such respectability when it becomes tainted by some delict or impropriety on the part of the women, or by a man outside the family towards its women. Usually such a taint entails some violent retaliation, either against the family's woman, or the outsider." (A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit. p.66)

Project background

The 'Strengthening women's role in peace' project administered jointly by PTRO and International Alert as primary implementers, with the Afghan Women Network (AWN) and Afghan Women's Educational Centre (AWEC) as partners, aims to implement two of the Pillars (Participation and Protection) of the Afghanistan National Action Plan on WPS (ANP) at the local level as well as address some of the challenges to gender equality work in Afghanistan more broadly by engaging not only with affected women and girls but also with men and boys in the target communities, and by engaging with male and female informal and religious leaders. Although the implementing partners did not define the parameters of participation and protection as referring specifically to the local level, it was striking that the research participants across all of the sites did so on their own, highlighting localised concerns that were quite different from the broader, national-level issues with which the ANP concerns itself. Local as these concerns may be, however, they are also heavily influenced by, and in turn have bearing upon, national-level dynamics.

The three-year project began in February 2016, focusing on the Herat, Kandahar, Laghman, Nangarhar and Takhar provinces, with initial activities in Herat and Nangarhar in the first year, and the other three provinces following in the second year of implementation. The project was implemented in an increasingly challenging environment, in particular in regard to the worsening security situation from 2016 onwards.[8] This has been due to both politically motivated violence, including increasing sectarian attacks against Shia often claimed by ISKP, three-way fighting between government forces, the Taliban and ISKP, and clashes between rival Taliban factions, as well as criminally motivated violence, in particular kidnappings. The civilian toll of the armed violence has increased sharply and steadily over the implementation period of the project, as have the humanitarian needs of the population.[9] Violence in the public sphere has been paralleled in the domestic sphere, although the extent to which the increase in reporting is due to increased levels of perpetration or higher awareness of the issue and better reporting mechanisms cannot be determined.[10]

Afghanistan as a whole but in particular urban centres, including Kabul, Herat and Jalalabad, have also come under increased pressure during the implementation period due to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returning refugees. In 2016, Amnesty International estimated that there were around 1.2 million IDPs in the country, often living in poor conditions and placing a burden on infrastructure that is already stretched thin.[11] This has been further exacerbated by an influx of returning refugees, many of whom are not returning voluntarily. These refugees are being returned mainly from Pakistan, but also from the European Union and to a lesser extent Iran.

While much of the international and national focus has been on the national-level conflict between the Government of Afghanistan and its western allies on the one side and insurgents on the other, the lives of Afghans are also determined by a range of local-level conflicts. This research highlights the prevalence of such conflicts, in particular around land and irrigation, which can often be linked directly

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8   An interesting outlier in this respect was Kandahar city, where the respondents tended to highlight an improvement of the security situation as compared to a decade ago – this may be a reflection on the heavy-handed rule of the then police chief General Abdul Raziq, who was subsequently assassinated by the Taliban on 18 October 2018.

9   OCHA, 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/afg_2018_humanitarian_needs_overview_1.pdf; and UNAMA, Latest UN update records continuing record high levels of civilian casualties in 2018, 12 April 2018, https://unama.unmissions.org/latest-un-update-records-continuing-record-high-levels-civilian-casualties-2018

10   TOLO News, Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) records 4,000 cases of violence against women, 2018, https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/aihrc-records-4000-cases-violence-against-women

11   Amnesty International, 'My children will die this winter' – Afghanistan's broken promise to the displaced, London: Amnesty International, 2016

or indirectly to the broader, national-level conflict.[12] Resolution mechanisms for local-level conflicts have also been heavily affected by the decades of war, with former or current fighters and commanders (*kumandan*) joining the ranks of other informal arbiters of justice, such as *khans* and *maliks*, often leading to a sense of might triumphing over right as powerful men impose their will upon the less powerful.[13] The sting of such real and perceived injustices will be particularly acute for men whose personal and social sense of manhood and worth is tied to being able to defend their own and their family's rights. The decades of conflict have also had a detrimental impact on the economy, undermining the potential for many Afghan men to fulfil a key expectation linked to manhood, namely being a provider for the family. Thriving opium and marijuana production has not only fuelled the conflict but has also led to the increased use of drugs among the Afghan population, in particular among men and boys.[14]

Women, peace and security in Afghanistan

On 30 June 2015, the Government of Afghanistan launched its National Action Plan on implementing the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace, and Security.[15] The Afghan National Action Plan on WPS (ANP) will be in effect from 2015 to 2022 and covers the four pillars of the resolution, namely Participation, Protection and Prevention, as well as Relief and Recovery. In particular, it aims to promote the:

> *"- Participation of women in the decision making and executive levels of the Civil Service, Security and Peace and Reintegration;*
> *- Women's active participation in national and provincial elections;*
> *- Women's access to effective, active and accountable justice system;*
> *- Health and psychosocial support for survivors of sexual and domestic violence throughout Afghanistan;*
> *- Protection of women from all types of violence and discrimination;*
> *- Provision of financial resources for activities related to women in emergency;*
> *- Implementation of IDPs policy provisions related to UNSCR 1325;*
> *- Put an end to impunity for violence against women (VAW) and related crimes;*
> *- Engage boys and men in fighting Violence Against Women;*
> *- Support and provide capacity building for civil society (particularly women's organizations) on UNSCR 1325 and women, peace, and security;*
> *- Increase economic security for vulnerable women through increased employment opportunities;*
> *- Increase access to education and higher education for girls and women, particularly for the internally displaced persons and returnees."*[16]

As a plan of the central government, the ANP is mainly focused on national-level activities involving line ministries and national agencies, including the security forces and justice sector, the executive and legislative branches of government, civil society actors at the national level, as well as to a lesser extent provincial peace councils. The lead agency for the ANP has been the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

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[12] For an in-depth study of such dynamics in Helmand Province, see M. Martin, An intimate war – An oral history of the Helmand conflict, 1978–2012, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

[13] See for example A. Chiovenda, 'The war destroyed our society': Masculinity, violence and shifting cultural idioms among Afghan Pashtun, in M. Nazif Shahrani (ed.), Modern Afghanistan – The impact of 40 years of war, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018.

[14] On drugs production, see for example V. Felbab-Brown, Afghanistan's opium production is through the roof— why Washington shouldn't overreact, 21 November 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/21/afghanistans-opium-production-is-through-the-roof-why-washington-shouldnt-overreact/. As discussed further below, men's substance abuse and addiction is heavily frowned upon, but discussing women's substance abuse is largely taboo, leading to a lack of research or data on the issue.

[15] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Afghanistan's National Action Plan on UNSCR 1325 – Women, Peace, and Security, 2015, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/wps-afghanistan_national_action_plan_1325_0.pdf

[16] Ibid., pp.1–2

which has received extensive support for the Plan from international donors as well as UN agencies, in particular UN Women. Problematically, however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has little leverage over key ministries whose activities are directly related to the ANP, such as the Ministry of Defence or the Interior. Afghanistan is, and has been, a target or partner country of numerous WPS National Action Plans of other countries, such as the United Kingdom and several Nordic countries, but there has often been little coordination between these plans, either among themselves or with the ANP.

The overall implementation of the WPS agenda in Afghanistan has not only been resisted by local actors but has also been critiqued by national and international observers, although for very different reasons. Feminist critiques include its focus on numerical representation (e.g. in the security sector) rather than a transformation of gendered power dynamics, its close link with a militarised approach to security tied to the western military intervention, a perceived lack of consideration of local concerns and needs, and an underestimation of the backlash the WPS agenda has incurred, which is almost exclusively borne by Afghan women, in particular women human rights defenders.[17]

Background to the target provinces

The target provinces were chosen deliberately in a way so as to maximise their geographical and ethnic diversity, and with the specific goal of working outside of the capital Kabul. In all provinces, activities and research were conducted both in the provincial capital and more rural districts. The volatile security situation played a role in the selection of the target areas, and one of the initial target provinces, Baghlan, had to be changed for Takhar province due to ongoing, intense fighting between state security forces and insurgents.

The interviews and FGDs were carried out in the following locations:

- **Herat province**: Herat city, Guzara and Karukh districts;
- **Kandahar province**: Kandahar city, Arghandab and Boldak districts;
- **Laghman province**: Mihtarlam city and Qarghayi district;
- **Nangarhar province**: Jalalabad city, Behsood and Dara-i-Nur districts;
- **Takhar province**: Talqan city, Dasht-e-Qala and Khuaja Ghar districts.

Herat

Herat province is located in the western part of the country. Its main city and administrative capital is Herat, the third-largest city of Afghanistan, with a population of approximately 436,000. The eponymous province is divided into 17 districts and includes over 1,000 villages, and a total population of about 1,890,000. It is the second most populated province in Afghanistan after Kabul province. The population is multi-ethnic with an ethnic Tajik majority, and is largely Dari-speaking, followed by Pashto, Turkmen and Uzbek speakers. In addition to Tajiks, Pashtun, Turkmens and Uzbeks, the province also has a sizeable Hazara minority, as well as a nomadic Kochi population. The population is both Sunni and Shi'a.

The province is largely rural, and is culturally and economically marked by its proximity to both Iran and Turkmenistan, making both agriculture (in particular saffron and fruits) and trade important

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[17] See for example S. Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, On living with negative peace and a half-built state: Gender and human rights, International Peacekeeping 14(1), 2007, pp.127–142; C. Duncanson and V. Farr, Testing the WPS agenda: The case of Afghanistan, in S. Davies and J. True (eds.), The Oxford handbook of women, peace, and security, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp.553–568; D. Kandiyoti, Old dilemmas or new challenges? The politics of gender and reconstruction in Afghanistan, Development and Change 38, 2007, pp.169–199; S. Kouvo, A 'quick and dirty' approach to women's emancipation and human rights?, Feminist Legal Studies 16, 2008, pp.37–46; T. Wimpelmann, Leaving them to it? Women's rights in transitioning Afghanistan, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, 2014; and T. Wimpelmann, One step forward and many to the side: Combating gender violence in Afghanistan, 2001–2014, Women's Studies International Forum 51, 2015, pp.101–109.

aspects of its economy. Poppy cultivation has decreased in the province over recent years. Other industrial activities include marble mining and light industry.[18]

Politically, the province was long dominated by the former mujahedin commander Ismail Khan, but the city of Herat also has a vibrant and politically independent civil society.[19] At the time of writing, the province was mostly under government control, although some districts are contested or controlled by the Taliban. While Herat has long been one of the more stable and safe provinces of the country, there are increasing concerns around politically motivated assassinations and criminally motivated kidnappings as well as thefts in Herat city, in addition to increasing Taliban control not only in more remote districts, but also in Guzara district, which houses Herat airport and is also one of the target districts of the project.[20] Instability has led to violent clashes between Taliban factions, for example in southernmost Shindand district.[21] The political dynamics in the province are marked by rivalry between Herat mayor Farhad Niayesh, governor Muhammed Asef Rahimi, the head of the provincial council Haji Kamran Alizai and Ismail Khan.[22]

Kandahar

The southern province of Kandahar, bordering Pakistan, is named after the second-largest city in the country. The province as a whole has a population of approximately 1.2 million people, of which around 560,000 live in Kandahar city. While the provincial capital is an important transport and trading hub, especially to Pakistan and to a lesser extent Iran, the rest of the province relies mainly on agriculture.

The population of the province is predominantly Pashtun, with Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek and Baloch minorities, especially in the city of Kandahar. The province was the site of extensive fighting during the Soviet-Afghan War and was a mujahedeen stronghold. After the ouster of the Taliban, the province came under the controversial control of President Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who was assassinated in 2011. The province has continued to be plagued by fighting between government forces and insurgents, as well as targeted killings. In 2017, the United Arab Emirates ambassador and four other diplomats were assassinated in Kandahar, and, the following year, the head of the provincial police, General Abdul Raziq, who was known for pursuing a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in the province, was also killed. Kandahar city has also been the scene of targeted killings of outspoken or socially active women, be it by insurgents or family members.[23]

Laghman

Laghman province is located in the eastern part of Afghanistan, between Kabul and Nangarhar provinces, and has a multi-ethnic, mostly rural population of about 440,000. Its capital city is Mihtarlam, with a population of around 126,000. The ethnic breakdown of the population in 2010 was 51% Pashtun, 21% Tajik, and 27% Pashai and Nuristani, with Sunni Islam being the dominant religion.[24] The economy of the province is mainly reliant on agriculture, in particular growing rice, wheat, fruit and vegetables, and to a lesser degree on mining gems and minerals.

The province saw heavy fighting during the Soviet-Afghan War and during the subsequent conflicts between rival warlords. Taliban insurgents have frequently attacked Afghan national police and armed

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[18] J. Leslie, Political and economic dynamics of Herat, Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2015, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW107-Political-and-Economic-Dynamics-of-Herat.pdf

[19] For a historical background and analysis of Ismail Khan's rule, see for example A. Giustozzi, Empires of mud – War and warlords of Afghanistan, London: Hurst & Company, 2009, as well as J. Leslie, 2015, Op. cit.

[20] S. Reza Kazemi, The battle between law and force: Scattered political power and deteriorating security test Herat's dynamism, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 11 January 2017, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-battle-between-law-and-force-scattered-political-power-and-deteriorating-security-test-herats-dynamism/

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] M. Jeong, Femicide in Kandahar, London Review of Books, 31 August 2017

[24] Laghman Provincial Overview, Naval Postgraduate School, https://my.nps.edu/web/ccs/laghman

forces, and there have been reports of forced recruitment of children by insurgent groups active in the province.[25] While the province remains under government control, many of the districts are contested between the government and insurgent forces.

Nangarhar

Nangarhar province is located in the eastern part of the country on the Pakistani border, and has a population of about 1,436,000, with Jalalabad (population of approximately 356,000) as its administrative capital.

As it is on the main transit route for goods to and from Kabul and Peshawar in Pakistan, much of the formal and informal economy is tied to trade, especially in Jalalabad. Agriculture is one of the main income sources for the majority of the population. The population is over 90% Pashtun, with small Pashai, Arab and Tajik communities. Poppy cultivation was previously a major source of income, but, following an at times heavy-handed eradication programme, legal crops tend to predominate at the time of writing.

Politically and militarily the province is far more volatile than Herat, with heavy fighting between government and coalition forces, the Taliban and the local branch of Islamic State, the ISKP, especially in the mountainous areas in the southern parts of the province, with shifting alliances and several changes in terms of the control of the territory, which have been accompanied by violence against civilians and suspected combatants alike.[26] As in other parts of the country, kidnappings for ransom have increased greatly in the province, in particular in Jalalabad, including of foreign NGO staff but also Afghan professionals, including doctors, administrators, teachers and even clerics.

Jalalabad is the main economic hub of the province and is the seventh-largest city of the country, and is a major transit and trade hub with Pakistan. Within the city, it is not unusual for women to work outside of the house, but this is far less the case in the districts outside of the urban areas. Behsood district is adjacent to Jalalabad city, and includes urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Dara-i-Nur is rural and mountainous, with the villages concentrated in the three valleys of the district.

Takhar

Takhar province is located in the northeast of the country, bordering Tajikistan to the north, Badakhshan province to the east, Panjshir province to the south, and Baghlan and Kunduz provinces to the west. It has a population of around 930,000 and the city of Taloqan (population of around 196,000) is its capital. The population is majority Tajik (approximately 60%) with a large Uzbek minority (around 35%) and smaller Pashtun, Turkmen and Hazara communities.

During the Taliban rule, the province was mostly in the hands of the Northern Alliance, and Taloqan was the last to fall to the Taliban in January 2001. The province has seen fighting between insurgents and the Afghan state security forces as well as ISAF forces since 2008, and in 2012, at least 140 Afghan schoolgirls and teachers were poisoned, though not lethally, when the school water supply was allegedly contaminated by insurgents. In spite of the historical allegiance of the province with the

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[25] Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, Anfragebeantwortung zu Afghanistan: Provinz Laghman, Distrikt Alingar: Sicherheitslage, Aktivitäten der Taliban, Zwangsrekrutierungen, Document #1090437, 2016, https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1090437.html

[26] The ISKP presence in Nangarhar has evolved in part out of Pakistani members of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) present in the province, and the three-way fight between government forces (supported by US drone and airstrikes), Taliban and ISKP has seen otherwise adversarial groups temporarily joining forces or at least tolerating the other's presence to fight and weaken the respective third party. See for example B. Osman, The Islamic State in 'Khorasan': How it began and where it stands now in Nangarhar, Afghan Analysts Network, 27 July 2016, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-islamic-state-in-khorasan-how-it-began-and-where-it-stands-now-in-nangarhar/?format=pdf; and B. Osman, Descent into chaos: Why did Nangarhar turn into an IS hub?, Afghan Analysts Network, 27 September 2016, http://afghanistan-analysts.us7.list-manage1.com/track/click?u=9fb799988fb06cc27c225f046&id=23cbdd9e1e&e=260e637aa8.

Northern Alliance and continued strong ties to anti-Taliban groups, non-Pashtun Taliban groups, in particular ethnic Uzbeks, have been able to establish themselves in the province.[27]

The provincial economy is mainly dependent on agriculture and mining, in particular of coal, gold and salt, as well as sand and gemstones.

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[27] O. Ali, The Non-Pashtun Taleban of the North (3): The Takhar case study, Afghanistan Analysts Network, 29 July 2017, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-non-pashtun-taleban-of-the-north-the-takhar-case-study/

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Gender norms

A key part of the research interviews and FGDs was determining local views on appropriate and inappropriate gender behaviour for men and women; on women's and men's possibilities of social, economic and political behaviour; as well as gendered perceptions of security. The respondents' answers regarding what was seen as acceptable and what was seen as unacceptable behaviour for men and women were strikingly similar across the five provinces, and largely in line with other studies on Afghan gender norms and expectations. They were marked both by a highlighting of Islamic values and of local cultural norms – which may or may not be wholly mutually compatible, an issue that is also a subject of debate in Afghanistan.[28]

The interpretations of what these broader normative frameworks mean in practice vary between rural and urban settings, between individual communities and families, as well as individuals themselves – and may differ from one setting or situation to another.[29] For example, while respondents in all research sites stated that it was acceptable for women to participate in activities outside of the household to a certain degree, what this entails is likely to differ greatly between a conservative rural district in Kandahar or Nangarhar province and the more liberal environment of, for example, Herat city.

Maintaining gendered respectability was seen as a central expectation for both men and women, anchored in piety and chastity/monogamy, with men expected to play a more public and women a private role. These expectations were very similar across all research sites, regardless of the urban/rural divide, age or educational differences between respondents or their ethnic background.

Men were expected to be pious, truthful, a breadwinner who takes care of his family, and someone who plays an active, generous and constructive role in society. Women were expected to be pious and 'honourable', display modesty and shyness in public (including importantly in her manner of dressing), respect her husband and family, and be a caretaker in the household. The proper raising of children was highlighted both for women and for men. As one respondent from Herat province put it:

> *"[What a] good man is is already introduced by our religion. As it is said [in Islam]*
> *what a good man is: that nobody is harmed by his deeds and words. And a good*
> *woman is one whose neighbours are not harmed by her, and that she respects her*
> *family."*

On the other hand, traits and actions considered shameful for men included adultery, being disrespectful, dishonesty, being hedonistic, being lazy or disrespecting women. Unemployment and in particular drug abuse and addiction were raised several times as being dishonourable for men. For women, similarly adultery was often mentioned as being particularly shameful, as was to a lesser degree immodesty, being loud, dishonesty or gossiping. Behaviour less often mentioned but also notable for men included perpetrating domestic and intimate partner violence, violent behaviour more broadly, but also 'vanity' (e.g. fashionable hair or beard style, dressing unconventionally) or, in some cases, doing household chores.[30] For women, some respondents regarded working outside of the home (in particular without a *mahram*, i.e. a male relative) as being shameful, although this was often framed as a broader, community-wide rather than as a personally held norm.[31] Divorce was seen

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[28]   Cf. A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit.

[29]   Ibid.

[30]   The negative backlash against men helping out with household chores and being ridiculed as being '*zancho*' (Dari) or '*narkhazai*' or '*narshazai*' (Pashto) by community members and peers was more evident in the research carried out by Echavez et al, 2016, Op. cit., pp.27–28.

[31]   With regards to women's mobility, numerous respondents raised and debated the Pashtun proverb "a woman's place is in the home or in the grave" (i.e. she should only leave the house upon death or, to read it another way, be killed if she leaves the house) and to what extent it still applies as a social norm.

as shameful for both parties, in stark contrast for example to neighbouring Tajikistan where the stigma tends to fall upon the wife but not the husband.[32]

In some of the interviews and FGDs, quite detailed lists were compiled of what was considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, such as by one men's FGD in Kandahar city:

- Women are meant to stay at home and look after household chores
- Men are made for outdoor activities
- Good women must get education
- Good men must have good behaviour and morals
- Ideal women maintain a successful family life
- Ideal women get education and respect husbands
- Men who lack good behaviour and are involved in illegal activities are considered shameful
- Men who are addicted to drugs are considered not good
- Men who don't maintain good behaviour within the community are considered shameful
- Men who sexually abuse young boys[33] are considered shameful
- Men who train dogs to fight and engage in dog-fighting are considered shameful
- Women who don't respect their husbands and maintain rough behaviour at home are considered shameful
- Women involved in adultery are considered shameful
- Women speaking with strange men on the phone are considered shameful and the woman's character is questioned
- Women speaking to the media for fun is considered bad and is a shameful act for women
- Women who sing are considered shameful
- Women who spend recklessly are considered shameful
- Women who backbite and cause a conflict are considered as not being good women
- Women who put on make-up and often go to the marketplace are considered not to be good.

On the whole, gender expectations were closely tied to local concepts of Islamic piety, respectability, honour and shame, and also with a degree of bias towards education, be it formal or Quranic, both for women and men. Respect of customs, of elders and parental authority were also highlighted. In general, there is an expectation of putting communal values over individual wishes, although, as others have pointed out, the decades of conflict have in part altered this, and previously frowned-upon behaviour, such as ostentatious displays of personal power, wealth and self-aggrandisement by warlords, have become more common – and attractive to some.[34]

It is important to note, however, that these are idealised expectations and norms, and that people will not always live up to them. In part, the reasons for not living up to expectations are comparatively mundane, such as household disputes arising between spouses and/or in-laws, but in part it is the continued decades-long state of exception caused by ongoing armed conflict, grinding economic

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[32] See for example S. Mastonshoeva, U. Ibragimov and H. Myrttinen, Zindagii Shoista: Living with dignity – Research Findings of the Formative Research, Dushanbe: International Alert and Cesvi/Pretoria: MRC, 2016, http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Tajikistan_LivingWithDignity_EN_2016.pdf.

[33] Although there are no definitive figures available, the sexual exploitation and abuse of young men and boys, in particular the so-called *bacha bazi*, has been widely documented in Afghanistan; see for example AIHRC, Causes and consequences of Bacha Bazi in Afghanistan, 2014, https://www.baag.org.uk/sites/www.baag.org.uk/files/resources/attachments/AIHRC%20Causes%20and%20Conseque nces%20of%20Bacha%20Bazi%20in%20Afghanistan.pdf; and UN OHCHR, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan and on the achievements of technical assistance in the field of human rights in 2014, 8 January 2015.

[34] A. Chiovenda, 2018, Op. cit.

duress, forced displacement and widespread substance abuse that militate against living up to gendered ideals.[35] However, these two issues can interact and lead to situations in which social norms, such as around non-violence, are broken – but other gendered norms and expectations are mobilised. FGD participants in Kandahar and Laghman provinces, for example, raised cases in which small, everyday incidents, such as children squabbling at a water-collection point, could escalate into broader conflicts between families or clans, with men being expected to protect family honour by violent means.

Participation and security

In the target provinces of the project, and in Afghanistan more broadly, participating in meetings out of the house is traditionally considered mostly or exclusively a male activity. Women and girls, especially in more rural districts covered, are often prevented from working outside of the household compounds or participating fully in social activities. If women are to leave the household compound, they must ask for permission and be accompanied by a *mahram*, a practice that is common throughout the country and more broadly in the region. Women are supposed to mainly stay at home, cook for the family and take care of children, elderly and the household more generally. Some respondents, however, were quite pragmatic about the need for women to work outside of the home to supplement household incomes, in particular in urban areas and if the work was seen as 'honourable'.[36] Views on this, however, varied, and in more conservative rural districts acceptable women's economic participation was limited to producing handicrafts at home to be sold in the market by their husbands.[37] What was noticeable especially in more rural districts was the central economic role of NGOs in providing livelihood opportunities for women.[38]

This does not mean, however, that women do not meet outside of the house or living compounds at all, even in more conservative rural districts. For instance, as a part of daily routine tasks assigned to women, they are expected to fetch drinking water for their families. Often, the natural springs used as a water source in rural districts are located at a distance from residential compounds. The women coordinate their trips to the water sources once or twice a day, using the trips to converse, socialise and share information among themselves, enjoying the hour or two for being in a women-only space. In the more conservative areas, women are allowed to participate in funerals, wedding receptions and inter-family receptions, and occasionally more informal spaces. Men, on the other hand, socialise in various male-only spaces, both formal and informal, including meetings of the immediate and extended family and clan, and community meetings.

In addition to concerns about propriety, pervasive security fears due to a worsening situation were cited as a reason for women and girls to remain at home, and, in the latter case, not attending school. Interestingly, it was not so much fear of the wider conflict that was mentioned in this respect, but rather fears of kidnappings (in particular in Herat, Nangarhar and Takhar provinces). However, and across all provinces, it is above all threatening male behaviour such as verbal and physical sexual harassment of women and girls that emerged as a key insecurity factor leading to the curtailing of women's and girls' mobility.

Somewhat unexpectedly, perhaps, in parts of the conservative rural Dara-i-Nur district in Nangarhar, it is women who are mainly in charge of looking after tasks both within and outside of the house, in spite of this being one of the most socially conservative areas of the project. Women look after livestock, and in some cases they carry out agricultural labour on the fields and are in charge of feeding their family and earning a living, while the men remain at home, looking after children and sometimes

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[35] That is not to say that it would be possible for anyone to always live according to 'ideal gendered behaviour', but the obstacles faced by Afghan men and women are arguably greater than in most societies, given the structural barriers on the one hand and the rigidity of and high expectations linked to gendered ideals.

[36] The main occupation mentioned was teaching.

[37] Interviews and FGDs, Kandahar and Laghman provinces

[38] However, NGOs, in particular INGOs and those with international connections, are also often viewed with extreme suspicion (interviews, Mihtarlam, and also J. Billaud, 2015, Op. cit., and A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit.).

cooking. In these locations women do not have to be accompanied by male relatives when going out of the house. The reason for this is that many men fear becoming targets of inter-clan blood feuds if they venture out of their household compounds, and thus it is left to women to provide economically for the family.

While women's participation in social and political decision-making is accepted to a degree in some areas, including quite broadly in Herat city, in more socially conservative areas it is more restricted, in particular in spaces where women and men would be together. Even in places where there is a possibility for men and women to participate in the same space together, it may not be considered proper for women to share their own views or comment on, let alone challenge, a man's opinion. Nonetheless, there was broad support for women's participation in general, as long as women's participation was arranged in a way that took local social mores into consideration (e.g. separate meeting spaces for men and women). There is also a need to differentiate between older and younger women, especially in rural areas, as younger women are often expected not to attend meetings, while women over 45 years old are freer to do so. Based on the findings from the qualitative research, women's participation in rural areas was quite restricted in community-related decision-making, even on issues that directly or mainly affected women, which would often be decided upon by men. Several respondents mentioned that male family members decided on behalf of women who to vote for in elections.

Generally speaking, women tend to be allowed to participate in government and NGO-run capacity-building programmes, especially in more socially liberal and areas with less security concerns, but this does not automatically translate into women collectively and actively participating in debating social and political issues and decision-making. Often, it may be poorer women in particular who participate in exchange for the per diems paid to them by the NGOs.

Men as providers, decision-makers and protectors

Men across the country are expected to be the breadwinner for their family and participate in discussions over community-related issues, often creating great social and emotional pressures for men who are not able to adequately provide for their family.[39] A man's economic dependency on his wife was seen as highly dishonourable across all provinces and regardless of ethnicity. This expectation on men to be the economic provider was also used by some respondents as a justification for why women would not need to leave the house/family compound – assuming the men were able to live up to their roles and maintain their masculine honour.

Ideals of masculine honour are discussed at length in particular in ethnographic literature on the Pashtuns, and are described by Andrea Chiovenda[40] with relation to reacting to real and perceived slights, but also more broadly, in his excellent in-depth study of men in rural Nangarhar as follows:[41]

> *"[...] A male family member who has ghairat[42] [the masculine virtue of defending one's family's respectability] (who is ghairati, or, alternatively, who is a ghairat man; see below for details) must take action in these cases, lest he be publicly disgraced and considered beghairata, i.e., unworthy of being a Pashtun, of being a nar (a 'manly', virile man; see below). The equivalent of namus in the male realm is izzat. A man's izzat is injured when the man sees his rights disrespected (for instance, by being cheated in an economic transaction), or is publicly insulted, or is not accorded the esteem, as a nar, that every Pashtun man, regardless of its social*

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[39] The centrality of men being providers was also strongly in evidence in the research conducted by C.R. Echavez et al, 2016, Op. cit.

[40] A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit., pp.66–67

[41] See also S. Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Manly honor and the gendered male in Afghanistan, in Viewpoints Special Edition. Afghanistan 1979–2009: In the grip of conflict, Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 2009.

[42] Chiovenda's respondents made clear distinctions between 'good' (expected and justifiable) and 'bad' (unjustified) acts of *ghairat*.

status, wishes to claim. As in the case of namus, so also in the case of injury to izzat, the way to restore its integrity often entails violent retaliation, which every man who calls himself ghairati is required to enact. Failure to do so carries with it the stigma of being beghairata, and the loss of personal respect within the community at large […]

Nartob, in a nutshell, refers to the moral and ethical qualities that a nar must possess. A nar is not just an 'ordinary' man (saray, in Pashto), but rather a 'manly man' (the suffix –tob in Pashto has the same meaning as the suffix –ness in English. Thus, nartob is the exact equivalent of English 'manliness', or even more closely from a semantic standpoint, 'virility') […] a nar has 'to be good at being a man'[…]

Strictly related to nartob is ghairat, which is the willingness and capacity to demonstrate publicly that one is a nar. So, a nar is a virile man, a man in all his masculine prerogatives, which correspond with certain characteristics that are often associated with virility in many other ethnographic contexts – courage, strength, fearlessness, assertiveness. Yet nartob has also another side to it, which is not directly linked to aggressiveness and violence. Protecting the rights of the weak, supporting the poor, defending women and children, awareness and cognizance of one's qawmi lar (the ways/customs of one's tribal group of ascription), diplomatic skilfulness in managing instances of social friction and conflict, are all expected in a nar."

Although these may be the dominant, traditional ideals among rural Pashtun men, as Chiovenda[43] points out, not all men in the community are able or willing to live up to them, let alone men from other ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds. Men and boys may seek out various coping or escape strategies (e.g. relocating to urban areas), depending on the opportunities available to them, to avoid having to abide by dominant expectations. Although the research covered a broader range of Afghans geographically and ethnically than only rural Pashtuns, some echoes of these idealised notions of masculine honour did resonate in the interviews and FGD findings as well. There was, however, a noticeable degree of ambiguity around the use of violence and its justification. In a majority of the interviews and FGDs, violence was quite categorically cast as negative, and in a minority of cases it was regarded as being vindicated only for protective purposes or meting out 'justified' punishment.

While the decades of war, displacement and economic hardship have made it difficult for many men to live up to expectations of being a respected provider, protector and decision-maker, other men have thrived in these circumstances, be it as political power brokers or warlords, or members of their retinue. The views of those respondents who commented on these men were markedly ambiguous, with a strong undercurrent of disapproval mixed with the reality that de facto one needed to engage with them for everyday security and justice provision.[44] Arguably, the structural conditions to an extent have also created spaces for some men to engage in the verbal and physical harassment of women and girls in public spaces that is seen as such a major contributor to feelings of insecurity, though, given the global spread of the phenomenon, war and economic deprivation alone are not root causes of this behaviour, but rather men's sense of sexual entitlement. However, this research also highlighted how responding to conflict also brought to the fore more constructive masculine behaviour, especially in terms of using masculine-coded and male-dominated positions of

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[43] A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit.

[44] However, differentiations were made between those former fighters who were seen as legitimate, e.g. former resistance fighters fighting the Soviet invasion, and those *kumandan* and warlords seen as less legitimate. Cf. A. Chiovenda, 2018, Op. cit.

respectability and social capital, such as being an informal leader or being a *jirga* (traditional council) member, to defuse and resolve conflicts peacefully.[45]

An aspect of men's lives not directly covered by this research is that of their emotions, be it the psychological costs and benefits of abiding by rigid gender norms, or the emotional impacts of ongoing conflict and of economic struggles. Both the work of Aziz Hakimi and Torunn Wimpelmann[46] on men's 'moral crimes', including attempted eloping with partners as well as accusations of adultery, as well as Andrea Chiovenda's[47] work shed partial light on these issues, but more research would be most welcome. Closely linked to emotional wellbeing, and in particular lack thereof, is substance abuse, especially of drugs. This emerged repeatedly in the interviews and FGDs as a major issue of concern, especially relating to men and boys, and was viewed across the board as dishonourable. Far more work would be needed, however, in analysing and addressing underlying reasons for substance abuse beyond merely focusing on the obvious fact of their widespread availability.

A further aspect that was not directly addressed by the research in the FGDs and interviews in the target areas was that of migration and displacement as a coping mechanism. This was, however, examined both in background interviews as well as research with Afghan refugees in Serbia. Internal and external migration in particular by Afghan men is in part a historically established and culturally legitimised way of dealing with social crises and economic hardship, but also for gaining social capital and better providing for one's clan and family back home, or even as a rite of passage, often relying on well-established networks.[48] A further factor affecting migration to urban areas or abroad can be the wish to escape rigid social gender norms. The decades of war have dramatically increased internal and external displacement. The patterns and sizes of the flows have shifted over the course of the conflict. During the Soviet invasion, it was mainly whole families that fled especially to Pakistan and Iran, while in recent years it has increasingly been single men who have attempted to make their way to western countries. The journeys undertaken by these men – and occasionally women and smaller families – are extremely perilous and costly, and often the funds for the voyage are mobilised through extended family or community networks. The hope or expectation is then for the investment to be paid back through remittances.[49]

The young Afghan men interviewed for this study, whose numerous attempts to set up a life in the EU had repeatedly been thwarted and who had been caught up for months if not years on the Serbian-Croatian border, were not able to live up to these expectations. Instead of becoming providers, they were now subsisting off handouts from charities as well as remittances sent to them from their families rather than the other way around. This included some who had been living, working or studying for years in the EU, and had been supporting their families in Afghanistan, but had since been deported.[50]

Within Afghanistan, migration from the countryside to the cities has also changed the demographics and thereby, to an extent, socio-cultural and gender norms in the urban centres, making these more akin to the rural districts.[51]

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[45] For a discussion of similar dynamics of civilian men as conflict resolvers in Aceh (Indonesia), see R. Kunz, H. Myrttinen and W. Udasmoro, Preachers, pirates and peace-building: Examining non-violent hegemonic masculinities in Aceh, Asian Journal of Women's Studies, 24(3), 2018, pp.299–320.

[46] A. Hakimi and T. Wimpelmann, 2018, Op. cit.

[47] A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit.

[48] Ibid., p.334; A. Monsutti, War and migration: Social networks and economic strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan, New York: Routledge, 2005; and A. Monsutti, Migration as a rite of passage: Young Afghans building masculinity and adulthood in Iran, Iranian Studies, 40(2), 2007

[49] Interviews and FGDs with Afghan migrants, Šid, Serbia, June 2017

[50] Ibid.

[51] A. Chiovenda, 2015, Op. cit., p.55

Male champions

One of the key aspects of the project was the recruitment of 'male champions' for gender equality in the target districts to support and promote the work of the Inclusive Women's Groups (IWGs), which had been established through the project for increasing women's participation on WPS-related issues. Although the use of male gender equality champions has been critiqued for putting male agency at the centre, this approach was chosen precisely because of the radically different degrees to which men and women have agency vis-à-vis and access to male power-holders.

The experiences of the male champions differed greatly. While some felt that great progress had been made in terms of men and women being able to work together in ways that were not possible previously,[52] others were more cautious:

> *"At first I didn't mention being a male champion for gender equality because of cultural issues. I'm a university teacher and I didn't mention it to my hundreds of students. If I had mentioned it by accident, I feel like most people would react negatively and not welcome the work."*[53]

A male champion from Herat reported that issues of gender equality and entrenched expectations were markedly different in rural areas as compared to urban centres. He reported that in the more rural areas of Herat it would be impossible for him to arrange a meeting with a woman or for an IWG member to meet with any male officials. This facilitating or intermediary role of the male champions was echoed by a woman IWG member from Takhar province:

> *"We have a friendly, supportive and cooperative relationship. In rural areas they [male champions] support us because alone women cannot talk to influential people in an area where most people are prejudiced and don't like to talk to women. These men always support us and we know that, if we are threatened, they will defend us."*

In spite of their supportive role and the possibilities of using male agency and privileged access to further their cause, however, social norms placed restrictions on the extent of their activities, as one related: "[As a man] I could never go to a home of a woman to promote girls' education or support for the government because of cultural concerns."[54]

The experiences of the IWGs and the male champions underscore the need to work with both women and men on promoting gender equality, and strategically using the different avenues of access that men and women have – for example in terms of men being able to access male power-holders and women being able to access other women and girls.

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[52] Male champion from Nangarhar province
[53] Male champion, Kandahar province
[54] Male champion, Laghman Province

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings echo in part those of other studies that underscore highly normative gender expectations placed on Afghan men and women, in particular in rural areas. Echavez et al,[55] for example, who conducted research in Nangarhar, Takhar, Bamyan and rural/urban Kabul provinces,[56] found strong expectations on men to be "breadwinners but also a *nafaqah* provider; that is, a man as the husband and father is obliged to provide for all needs of the wife and the children, such as financial subsistence, family's abode, education, and health and responsible for family security" – and in return he should have respect and authority in the family, as well as have the last word on family decisions.

In spite of strong dominant expectations linked to masculinities, it would be wrong to see Afghan men as homogenous or as exclusively guided by dominant expectations that are cast as being customary. Especially in urban areas of Kabul and Herat, some men have been able to forge spaces for different kinds of masculinities, which break with traditional expectations, though not always with patriarchal privilege.[57] Others may not be as fortunate, and find themselves feeling pressured to attempt to live up to and accept expectations to which they may not fully subscribe; and yet others may subscribe to the expectations but find themselves unable to fulfil them in a context of continuous war and economic hardship. Some seek solace and momentary reprieve in drugs, in spite of the societal disapproval and harm to self and others this entails. As noted, however, there are also those who have embraced militarised notions of strongman masculinity and thrived – and those who use their positions of male power and privilege to resolve conflicts. As in the case of femininities and the different needs of different women, gender work in Afghanistan needs to take into account the variety of men and masculinities, and develop nuanced approaches based on local concerns and lived realities, rather than stereotypes and assumptions. Above all, gender work in Afghanistan should involve both women and men, boys and girls; it must involve and engage with men and boys, while not side-lining women and girls.

In terms of what the findings mean for furthering the WPS agenda at the local level in Afghanistan, there is space for cautious optimism. Violent behaviour is by and large not condoned, even if there is some ambiguity here. Nonetheless, this is a foundation that can be further built upon, as is the qualified openness, even in the most conservative areas, to women's social, economic and political participation. Some of the main objections to increased women's mobility come not necessarily from patriarchal mores but from legitimate security concerns – be it kidnappings or women's and girls' verbal and physical harassment in public spaces. A key challenge for the localisation of the ANP would be how to take these local-level concerns into account in a meaningful way, rather than focusing on outcomes that are perhaps of more relevance to donors than local communities. Furthermore, the backers and implementers of the ANP, be it national or international security actors, also need to be cognisant of the ways in which their own actions.

As in all work on gender equality in Afghanistan, all actors also need to be aware of the risk of association with such efforts to intended beneficiaries and the very real risk of violent backlash, be it from insurgents or family members, which also underscores the need for working with and convincing these potential spoilers-to-be of the benefits of more equal gender relations – and that these are neither un-Afghan nor un-Islamic. These risks tend to be far greater for women than for men, but, even in the case of men, some of the less serious risks of ridicule and social sanction (as compared to physical attacks or death) can often be enough to deter people otherwise sympathetic to the cause of gender equality from continuing their work.

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55 C.R. Echavez et al., 2016, Op. cit., pp.19–20, 39
56 Although there is overlap with this study in the case of two provinces (Nangarhar and Takhar), the districts covered by C.R. Echavez et al., 2016, Op. cit., differed in both cases.
57 Cf. H. Myrttinen, Depictions and reflections: Photographing visualizations of masculinities in Afghanistan and Democratic Republic of the Congo, International Feminist Journal of Politics, 19(4), 2017, pp.530–536.

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