

## **On the Advancement of Human Rights: Exploring the Ethical Pitfalls of Female Engagement Operations**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on problems encountered when Western-led military forces attempt to improve the condition of women in conflict zones by conducting female engagement operations. Examples come from recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, where commanders were required to direct some capabilities toward female-based initiatives. Critics have charged that such initiatives were not adequately linked to doctrine-based training, and also that the methods used to build relationships with women were unsuccessful because they were not properly integrated into the broader mission. We go further, and argue that female-based initiatives essentially contributed to instability because they created multiple ethical pitfalls for military commanders, male leaders in conflict zones, and the women intended to be beneficiaries of those initiatives. However, the ethical concerns we identify can be addressed in ways that create stability, are more humane, and more successful.

### **Author Bios**

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*Pete Turner* is a former Counterintelligence Agent with the US Army. He has deployed as a service member, a DoD civilian, and as a government contractor in Bosnia, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan. Turner has worked in combat zones for over 70 months throughout his career with the bulk of his day-to-day activities conducted “outside the wire,” interacting with locals. Residing in the San Francisco Bay area, he is a recognized thought leader in Stability and Transition Operations, and the Founder of CULTRASEC, a company that evaluates cultural interactions and works to improve cultural systems for a variety of organizations.

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## **Introduction**

It is generally accepted that improving the condition of women in conflict zones is one way to advance human rights and increase stability. In Kilcullen's *Twenty-eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency*, he described what he considered to be an under-utilized and vital player in the success of modern combat, namely women.<sup>1</sup> In recent Western-led military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Kilcullen's principle of "engage the women, beware the children," was adopted by the United States' Department of Defense (DoD). By embracing this position, new requirements for US military commanders to direct operational capacity towards female-based initiatives were formed. These initiatives were, unfortunately, poorly linked to doctrine-based training. As Azerbaijani-Moghaddam aptly surmises, in *Seeking Out Their Afghan Sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan*,

"...the subtle interplay which weaves private and public worlds was too fine a pattern to be discerned through a quick fix, can-do opportunities for successful engagements and convincing metrics. The resilience of Afghan families to outside interference, as well as attempted meddling by successive Afghan governments, was lost on ISAF designers and planners."<sup>2</sup>

The US-led coalition did not sufficiently consider that Afghan gender relations are defined by cultural nuances unfamiliar to outsiders, leading to situations that undeniably fostered more instability rather than stability.

This paper addresses the disconnection between Kilcullen's theoretical proposition regarding women in modern conflict, and Azerbaijani-Moghaddam's observations of the failed practice of female engagement operations. We do so in the context of Cook's *Counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the War in Afghanistan*, where the argument is made that the approaches used to build relationships with women in Afghanistan were unsuccessful because

they were not properly integrated into the broader mission, thus putting the lives of everyone involved at risk.<sup>3</sup> The disconnection between theory and practice inevitably jeopardized broader DoD objectives, and contributed to instability, as multiple ethical pitfalls were created as a result of Western-led female-based initiatives.

First, commanders must focus training on preparing personnel for combat operations, yet the bulk of operations in theater focus on collecting “soft” wins in various non-lethal areas of modern combat. Second, male leaders in conflict zones have responsibilities to their families and communities, grounded in the cultural traditions, which clash with Western initiatives that circumvent the ethical demands placed on those leaders. Finally, the women we intend to reach out to have inherited cultural roles that do not neatly fit with Western assumptions and ideas about "empowering" women. In fact, the very word "empowerment" may have positive meaning for the women's movement in Western countries, but this is not an appropriate term in Afghan culture with regards to the same movement.<sup>4</sup> In Afghanistan, this word is taken to mean having power over another person. "It is not regarded as a win-win, only as win-lose," because, "One can only be empowered at the expense of another."<sup>5</sup> Instead, Coleridge encouraged using the word "enablement," but cautioned that term may even be misunderstood in societies that place a premium on the collective and kinship solidarity as a means of survival, rather than individuality or individual development.

The ethical problems we identify are bolstered by extant research on the subject as well as observations from the field made by two of the authors who conducted social science research for the DoD in various capacities. Clarification of these pitfalls exposes not only how they can be addressed in a manner that is vital to enhancing stability in modern military conflicts, but also in a way that is more humane, and increases the probability of mission success.

## **Ethical Pitfall #1 – The Commander’s Perspective**

### Commander's intent and the officer ethos

Female engagement operations conflict with the responsibilities of commanding a military unit because they can interfere with a commander's mission statement, which contains at least three basic elements, in order of precedence: 1) find and neutralize the enemy; 2) force protection, and; 3) if feasible, enable any attached augmenting assets to safely conduct their individual missions. There may be others, but these elements represent the essence of what a combat commander requires a unit to accomplish. Anything detracting from these fundamental objectives is generally relegated to an inferior position.

By nature, commanders are "problem solvers" in the broadest sense, trained to apply their craft with guidance from military doctrine. Junior officers are "brought up" to always support the commander’s intent, and are duty-bound to help impose their commander's will in any given area of operations (AO) or circumstance. Officers who are unsuccessful in this domain risk being taken off the command track. This situation is further complicated because success or failure in modern conflict is tied to the unit's ability to accomplish as many tasks as possible in relatively short-term deployments.<sup>6</sup> Commanders and their junior leaders personify doctrine, but a problem arises when promotions and success are measured by completing tasks that are not supported by professional-level training or capability.

### Training for cultural competency

Given the short duration of most combat deployments, any positive (and lasting) change resulting from non-lethal operations is fleeting, and at risk of vanishing shortly after a unit’s redeployment. One reason non-lethal successes are often short-lived is because new units have a tendency to repeat the same mistakes as their predecessors, as the authors have seen first-hand.<sup>7</sup>

These mistakes stem in large part from pre-deployment training, where a higher premium is placed on lethal combat skills rather than on various non-lethal skills which are more frequently used during deployment in modern conflicts. It is not that commanders cannot train their units in non-lethal capabilities, but rather that combat preparedness is required at a level that exceeds the actual demand on the modern battlefield. As a result, commanders of training facilities, as well as commanders in theater, have little incentive to divert scarce resources in favor of preparing individuals to properly conduct female engagement operations.

Training for actual combat requires putting effort into every aspect of countering and eliminating an enemy threat, based on doctrinal guidance. This type of threat-based thinking, and a keen awareness of doctrine, is critical for a unit's success in the field, especially when kinetic action is expected and required. For example, consider the level of detail that individual soldiers have available when training Basic Rifle Marksmanship (BRM), which is similar to the level of detail that is widespread throughout military doctrine. Training individuals to fire their assigned weapon is covered comprehensively, with known tasks and sub-tasks, which sets a common standard to be achieved by individual soldiers. Further improvement upon individual task training happens by way of supervisory unit-based familiarity, which helps maintain the standard for weapons qualification. Yet, when preparing for female engagement operations, DoD training tends to discount critical academic research that uncovers cultural norms specific to any given area of operations, and the manner in which those norms interact with the economic, political, and social structure. Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, Psychology, and Sociology offer invaluable guidance that could both enhance female engagement operations, and help officers grasp the essence of gender relations in an AO, and down to the village level.

Without implementing critical knowledge of gender relations in an AO into unit training, a commander's ability to train and accurately assess their unit's capabilities is diminished. Given that commanders have finite resources, female engagement operations are inappropriate because of a current lack of professional capability. While there has been some progress on this front, training for female engagement teams (FET) has nowhere near the level of detail available for female-led initiatives, as for BRM or other weapons training.<sup>8</sup> The amount of time available to develop a professional-level skill set is not feasible on most training calendars, and to make matters worse, available training is rudimentary. There is also a basic lack of resources needed to properly simulate how to conduct successful FET operations, which are often relegated to the level of "familiarization," meaning that little, if any, lasting effect is accomplished in the field.<sup>9</sup>

#### Unit capacity

When female engagement operations are conducted, they represent only a small part of what a unit does daily. Most of these meetings involve interacting with a small fraction of the populace, and it is common to visit a village once with a FET and never return. Conversations between an infantry platoon leader (PL) and the authors, working for an extended period of time together in southern Afghanistan, illustrates how the sporadic nature of female-based initiatives does little to foster stability, and is hindered by a lack of resources.

The PL noted his obligation to keep his unit focused on their original mission, which involved close-proximity presence patrols, as well as teaching, training, and advising Afghan partners. The all-male platoon occupied an outpost in a small district with very little support from higher echelons, to the point where most of their supplies had to be airdropped due to the remote nature of his AO. At one point, an external civilian asset arrived with concerns about the level of participation by women in an upcoming election. The PL stressed the limits of his

mission to the civilian asset, as he was far removed from dedicated support, and was not in a position to move freely in his battlespace. This restriction was magnified by extremely rugged terrain in the district, which required the unit to move on foot. Regardless, the expectation from the civilian asset was that the PL would monitor women's voting throughout the entire district.

Despite the intent of the civilian asset, the PL could not compromise his mission, or his men, in order to monitor elections in a way that he knew would provide an inaccurate assessment of the voting habits of women in the district. His infantry platoon had no training in monitoring elections, or in data collection methodologies appropriate for this type of work. Although they patrolled daily, they did so within their limits. The PL was not inclined to conduct missions designed to engage women, especially without a dedicated plan supported by the platoon's battle rhythm.<sup>10</sup> The request to acquire information about voter turnout among women was in contrast with the tactical demands and capabilities of an infantry unit serving in such a remote area. Additionally, the civilian asset concerned about the voting habits of Afghan women had no experience working in a remote area, and even had physical difficulties negotiating the terrain. The civilian asset ignored the ethical responsibilities of the PL, whose economy of force mission required working within limited means to kill or capture the enemy, but also to train Afghan forces. The civilian asset did not recognize the ethical demands of the LT to not expose the platoon to an unnecessary fight. The LT was certainly not afraid to engage in combat, but the requests to observe the voting habits of women, as per the expectations of civilian assets, were unreasonable given the unit's capabilities, and an economy of force mission.

In sum, a candid commander will acknowledge that a tactical mindset focused solely on conventional combat is not readily concerned with female engagement, especially in the absence of well-established doctrinal guidance. In Afghanistan and Iraq, FET has never had a command-



driven focus, but was done simply because it was required from higher authorities.<sup>11</sup> This lack of direction is not rooted in commander incompetence. Instead, it is rooted in training that does not effectively prepare soldiers to accomplish such tasks in an environment where short-lived success is fraught with danger for the soldiers (and external assets) involved. Additionally, it may be rather easy for a unit commander to just bring along soldiers who are women to interact with other women living in conflict zones, but success in those operations are much more complex than simply counting how many women “show up” to participate in an election.

### **Ethical Pitfall #2 – The Responsibilities of Male Leaders in Conflict Zones**

#### Male elders as "keepers" of the law

In many modern conflict zones, where instability defines day-to-day life, male leaders tend to take on many functions typically reserved for government. In essence, male tribal elders are the government, especially in rural areas that are far-removed from the physical presence of government, and it is the duty of male elders to both uphold cultural traditions, and act in ways that maintain the rule of law for the protection of their immediate family and local community. These actions involve avoiding innuendo, suspicion, and any rumors that they themselves may be involved with or condoning actions that take place outside the boundaries of well-established cultural norms. Furthermore, in areas where the more conservative forms of Islam are dominant, these actions are often directed and even validated by interpretations of religious texts, no matter how savage or inhumane by Western standards.

What follows is an anecdote, based on observations made by one of the authors during field research in Iraq, that illustrates the drastic means used by a male head of household in order to protect his family's honor from the harm of gossip and misinformation about family members. When asked to give his thoughts about the meaning of freedom, an Iraqi father said he personally

desired only to be "left alone," but also that he needed liberation from the harm that others could cause simply by spreading rumors about him, his family, or members of his tribe. Shortly after providing his definition of freedom, he explained that he was recently "forced" to beat his daughter because she was spending too much time on the roof of their home while hanging laundry. The speed of the chore was not the problem, but rather the "exposure" she had created for the family by being seen on the roof for too long. The father was concerned that others would get the impression that the daughter was a "whore," so he felt compelled to correct her behavior with violence. This is radically over-reactive and inhumane, but to the father his daughter's actions would bring shame upon the family if she was perceived by others to be drawing attention to herself, simply by staying outside too long. From his position, the actions he took protected the family and the daughter's interests, because she risked exposing them all to shame and even violence. What is more important is that her actions could cause great harm if others spread rumors that he was flexible about the "proper" role of women in a community where all residents were strict adherents to conservative religion. The father was required to discipline his daughter harshly, not only so she would be less inclined to draw "unnecessary" attention to herself in the future, but also so that others would know that he was holding his daughter to the same cultural standards set for other women in the broader community.

In situations like this, the basic means of survival exists within the purview of fathers, and other male leaders. Even if done inadvertently, when US forces enter into modern conflict zones, there is a tendency to disrupt any pre-existing social order. Social systems are commonly structured according to complex cultural norms, often guided by interpretations of religious texts, and not easily understood by those unfamiliar with that particular culture. The presence of outside military forces creates more instability when those who previously had the power to

maintain whatever stability existed prior to the conflict are denied that power. Culture, and the social order it creates, is a generational commitment to those born into that system, and in some AOs, cultural preservation is a life or death type of commitment unfamiliar to Westerners.

A rural District Governor's priorities, which includes educating young girls

It is not as though male leaders in conflict zones feel no ethical or moral responsibility to the women in their community. Quite the opposite, as they only desire to see progress in terms of human rights occurring in accordance to the demands of their culture. If US military forces want to reduce instability in modern conflict zones, much consideration must be given to the notion that the path to stability is more likely created when an emphasis is placed on working within existing belief systems that, for better or worse, are deeply influenced by religious beliefs. Moreover, in many geographic regions male elders will look to religious leaders (also males) for guidance and approval, as they have always done, historically. In fact, politics and religion are largely inseparable in most Islamic countries, as illustrated in the following observations made by the authors while working closely with an appointed District Governor in a small rural district in southern Afghanistan.

After months of working with one of the authors tasked with liaising between Afghan leaders and elements of the US Army, the Governor laid out his long-term plan for the district, which consisted of a prioritized schedule of goals that he wanted to meet within the next year. Over the course of numerous meetings and rapport-building activities, it became evident that the Governor was intent on governing in a manner that benefited his constituents. While he was well-regarded as a political leader, a Mujahedeen fighter, and someone who had a great amount of secular education, it was the title of "*mullah*" that elders in the district used most often to refer to him. Despite his other earned titles, the religious position merited him the most respect, and

allowed him to maintain a position of authority while holding this appointed political position. He noted deep respect for Western women who also worked closely with the author and the unit to which he was attached, and even expressed admiration at the ability of US service members who are women to act in a strict professional manner during his interactions with them. As the father of several young daughters, he valued education for all children, and one of his top priorities was making sure young girls in his district had the same education opportunities as young boys. During meetings where he presented his course of action for the next year, which was in effect free from influence by the author, it became clear that educating young girls was not simple.<sup>12</sup> He knew that other male family and tribal elders also had responsibilities to meet before the district could benefit from education initiatives. His primary responsibility, like the other male elders in the community, was keeping family and tribe safe and "unmarked" by the types of suspicions that could result if others perceived their actions to be outside the accepted cultural norms dictating behavior in this small rural district.

He desired education for all children, but the Governor knew that young boys would be given preferential treatment by male leaders throughout the district. This prejudiced approach toward educating children sits poorly with Western notions of gender equality, but those notions downplay the reality in rural Afghanistan. One of a father's foremost responsibilities is to raise sons who can provide for his own family in the future. While the Governor desired education for all children, other elders adhered more strongly to a cultural and religious code mandating that males be educated first. The Governor expressed another concern apart from tradition, as no one could be educated if the district was not secure. As he explained, security is multi-faceted. First, the male head of household must be safe when travelling to and from his family compound. Second, there must be safety for all village clusters in the district, such that the Taliban could not

act without impunity. Only when these conditions were met could children receive a secular education, and in the "proper" manner. This set of conditions reveals a context where religion and security intersects with gender norms in a complex manner. If these conditions are not met, or not acknowledged by Western military forces working on education initiatives, then there is a greater likelihood of fostering instability rather than stability. If female engagement operations are to be successful, and if women are to be "enabled" in modern conflict zones, the work must be done within the cultural framework of gaining the approval of male elders and religious leaders in the community. This is resource intensive, but essential. If not done well, US-led forces will only create instability, and impair the broader mission of advancing human rights.

### **Ethical Pitfall #3 – Culture, Women’s Roles, and Western Assumptions of Empowerment**

Anthropologist Benedicte Grima’s ethnography of Pashtun women, *Secrets from the Field: An Ethnographer’s Notes from North Western Pakistan*, uncovers the cultural nuances defining gender relations that critics have charged were missed by ISAF leadership in the push to conduct female engagement operations.<sup>13</sup> Her research was conducted over twelve years of living among Pakistani Pashtuns and Afghan Pashtun refugees in northwestern Pakistan from the late 1970's into the 1980's. She provides a first-hand account of women's condition, detailing aspects of their lives as defined by Pashtun cultural values, which requires more than simply wearing a headscarf.

Pashtun people are generally known for hospitality, which Grima relied upon heavily to conduct her research. She learned however that "there was a sub layer of rules governing the blanket hospitality that Pashtuns are so renowned for. These rules are complex, organized, and defined by social hierarchy, prestige, and connections."<sup>14</sup> Essentially putting herself at the mercy of strangers in a strange land, she learned from experience about the cultural norms guiding a

woman's conduct. Moving from village to village, with the help of paid assistance but also from generous individuals she met along the way, Grima observed the segregated lives lived by Pashtun women. She built upon her own acquired language capabilities and improved upon her ability to identify the various dialects of Pashto, but she observed a multiplicity of norms that dictate a woman's behavior, ranging from the ways in which food is to be properly presented to guests by women, the differences in the manner of dress women are allowed to wear in public, a woman's personal hygiene and grooming habits, how a woman should conduct herself while bartering for goods in a bazaar, the "proper" way a married woman is to treat a husband's other wife or wives, how much or little kindness a woman needs to show members of an extended family, and the appropriate manner in which a woman is obliged to react when approached in public by a non-related male. By no means is this list exhaustive of the rules that structure a woman's behavior, in a society where, as she states, "Outside the bedroom, men were rarely a part of women's everyday existence."<sup>15</sup>

Although the cultural code applies to men as well, "doing Pashtu" is a way of acting that takes on a different meaning for women. As our brief description of her work shows, and as Grima summarizes in an earlier article, Pashtu "designates not only the language, but a particular code of behaviour and values."<sup>16</sup> So, one does not only speak the language, but must be able to perform specific actions in precise ways in a variety of situations. This is especially important for women, who must present themselves according to unspoken and unwritten rules, not only in behavior but also in dress, in both public and private settings. They must do so if they intend to remain accepted by members of the extended family and broader community. Consider also the wearing of a *hijab*, which is often viewed by a "Western" analysis as a symbol of women's oppression, when actually the veil is a critical part of many Muslim women's identity, whether

she resides in her home country or in less conservative countries in the West. Even so, women who act independently, disregarding or failing to comply with complex social norms, are treated with suspicion and subjected to ridicule and abuse not only by men, but other women in the community as well.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the ethical pitfalls they created for US commanders, male leaders in conflict zones, and the women intended to be beneficiaries, female-based initiatives conducted in the past essentially contributed to instability. This does not have to be the case in future conflicts. If care is taken to adjust training capacities toward improving a unit's cultural acumen and conducting non-lethal operations, female engagement operations can be done more effectively and safely. This is because they will be done in the framework of existing culture values, which change from region to region, where male leaders and the women whose lives we intend to positively affect are guided by norms of behavior not easily understood by outsiders. By avoiding the ethical pitfalls we described, US military forces can more appropriately work to advance human rights.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> David Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May-June 2006): 106, accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, "Seeking out their Afghan sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan," *Chr. Michelsen Institute, Working Paper 2014:1* (March 2014): 4-5, accessed March 21, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Gabrielle Cook, "Counterinsurgency and Female Engagement Teams in the War in Afghanistan", last modified August 2015, accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/08/16/counterinsurgency-and-female-engagement-teams-in-the-war-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>4</sup> Peter Coleridge, "Development, Cultural Values and Disability: The example of Afghanistan," in *Disability and Development: Learning from action and research on disability in the majority world*, ed. E. Stone (Leeds: The Disability Press, 1999), Chapter 10.

<sup>5</sup> Coleridge, "Development, Cultural Values and Disability: The example of Afghanistan," Chapter 10.

<sup>6</sup> There is also a tendency to measure success and failure by internal metrics, rather than by external assessments.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of how to minimize these mistakes, see Richard Ledet, Jeff Stewart, and Pete Turner, "Transition Operations: A Discussion with 29 Articles," *Small Wars Journal*, (September 17, 2012), accessed March 21, 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/transition-operations-a-discussion-with-29-articles>.

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, the DoD does design training for FETs, which can be found at <http://www.army.mil/article/61315/>, but there is still not the level of specificity found in the BRM example.

<sup>9</sup> Further weakening the capability to empower women is the general lack of unit-level dedicated training for engagement teams. To this point, the authors witnessed one unit's discussion of female engagement operations, where it was noted that the metric for success in such missions was simply "to find females."

<sup>10</sup> The PL also never had a directive from higher military authorities to monitor elections or perform female engagement operations.

<sup>11</sup> The work of Azerbaijani-Moghaddam (2014) and Cook (2015), referenced in the introduction, supports this claim.

<sup>12</sup> Great attention was given to ensure that the Governor's long term planning procedures were not overly influenced by US partner's preferences. For example, prior to subsequent meetings, the author who worked with the Governor would intentionally distort the planning documents, in order to "test" his ability to recognize and verify his own planning procedures. The Governor repeatedly corrected the author when presented with incorrect planning documents, thereby verifying that these intentions were more than just a product of ISAF influence. The authors can provide further information about the process used to "extract" the Governor's long-term plans.

<sup>13</sup> Benedicte Grima, *Secrets from the Field: An ethnographer's notes from North Western Pakistan* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Grima, *Secrets from the Field: An ethnographer's notes from North Western Pakistan*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Grima, *Secrets from the Field: An ethnographer's notes from North Western Pakistan*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Benedicte Grima, "The Pukhtun Tapos: From Biography to Autobiography", *Asian Folklore Studies*, v 44 (1985), 241.