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Seeking out their Afghan sisters Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan

Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam

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About the author

Sippi Azarbaijani- Moghaddam has spent the past 21 years working in conflict and post-conflict settings, primarily Afghanistan but also Rwanda, Tajikistan and other locations. She has worked with NGOs, multinational organisations, the Red Cross, donors and governments in a number of capacities. She spent 2010-2012 advising the UK military command in southern Afghanistan. A graduate of the universities of Oxford, Birmingham and Aberdeen, she has a background in sociology and anthropology. She has published widely on issues of gender, social differences and community development. She was born in Iran and lives in Scotland.

Abbreviations

Afghan Affairs Advisor A3	A3
Afghan National Army ANA	ANA
Afghan National Police	ANP
Afghan National Security Forces	ANSF
Area of Operations	AO
Area of Responsibility	AOR
Assessment Report	ASSESSREP
Battle Space Owners	BSOs
Brigade Combat Teams	BCTs
Civil Military Cooperation	CIMIC
Coalition Forces	CF
Combined Force	CF
Commander	Comd
Counterinsurgency	COIN
Counterinsurgency Advisory & Assistance Team	CAAT
Cultural Advisor	CULAD
Cultural Support Team	CST
Defence Cultural Specialist Unit	DCSU
Department of Women's Affairs	DoWA
District Stabilisation Team	DST
Female Engagement Team	FET
FFU	Find, Feel and Understand
Forward Operating Base	FOB
FRAGO	Fragmentary Ordinary
Government of Afghanistan	GoA
Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	GIRoA
Headquarters	HQ
Human Terrain	HT
Improvised Explosive Device	IED
International Security Assistance Force	ISAF
ISAF Joint Command	IJC
Joint Training Enhancement Committee	JTEC
Local National	LN
Manoeuvre Battalions	MBs
Military Stabilisation Support Group	MSSG
Ministry of Defence	MoD
Ministry of Women's Affairs	MoWA
National Directorate of Security	NDS

NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan	NTM-A
Non-Government Organisation	NGO
North Atlantic Treaty Organisation	NATO
Operational Environment	OE
Provincial Council	PC
Provincial Reconstruction Team	PRT
Regional Command-South	RC-S
Regional Command-Southwest	RC-SW
Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan	RAWA
Situation Report	SITREP
Stabilization Advisors	STABADs
Subject Matter Expert	SME
Tactics, Techniques and Procedures	TTPs
Task Force	TF
Task Force Helmand	TFH
U.S. Army Special Operations Command	USASOC
United Kingdom	UK
United Nations Security Council	UNSC
United States	US
United States Marine Corps	USMC

Executive summary

Almost a decade after the 2001 intervention by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan – rhetorically justified after the fact in part by the need to save Afghan women - women would once again take centre stage for some in the US military. By 2010, the leadership of the international forces (ISAF) had moved into a counter-insurgency (COIN) mode, hoping to reproduce what they regarded as successes in Iraq. The new COIN doctrine emphasised the importance of gaining the support of the civilian population, understood as rational actors who had to be convinced to choose the ‘right side’ in the war. It was against this background that Afghan women entered the calculus of the international military. Afghan women were now viewed as influential matriarchal figures and potential allies who could help turn the tide of ISAF’s struggle against the Taliban and other insurgents.

To engage women - the 50% of the Afghan population who had thus far been invisible to the military - the Female Engagement Team (FET) concept was initiated by the United States Marine Corps (USMC), which had tried a similar concept in Iraq. The FETs were groups of international military women meant to build rapport with, and support from, Afghan women and thereby their families and communities.

It was at this stage, after sixteen years of work in Afghanistan, that I was employed initially as Cultural Advisor to a succession of ISAF military commanders and their subordinates. Throughout 2010 I advised the Commander of Regional Command-South (RC-S). Later that year I was sent as Afghan Affairs Advisor (A3) to advise three consecutive Commanders of Task Force Helmand (TFH) over a twelve month period. In my position I had direct access to first-hand information and documentation on what FETs were actually achieving (or not), as well as ongoing discussion within the military about the concept and its implementation. The present report draws heavily on these sources of information.

The report describes the trajectory of FETs as they evolved from idea to practice, focusing on the work of the US Marine Corps and UK FETs in the period from 2010 to early 2012 in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. It critically examines the assumptions underpinning the concept of FETs and the reasons for the lack of substantive outcomes between 2010 and 2012 as FETs strove to engage women.

Introduction

History has taught us that most insurgent fighters are men. But, in traditional societies, women are extremely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. Co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermines the insurgents. To do this effectively requires your own female counterinsurgents. Win the women and you own the family unit. Own the family and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population on your side. (David Kilcullen 2006)¹

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established in Afghanistan as an outcome of the 2001 Bonn Conference to provide security in Kabul and its environs. NATO took over leadership of ISAF in 2003 with its mandate expanding to cover the whole of Afghanistan by October of that year. Seen as an interim measure until Afghan security forces re-established themselves, ISAF initially failed to engage much of Afghan society and remained blind to its gendered nature almost a decade into its presence in country. Even within its own ranks, the international military misinterpreted how foreign women, as the so-called ‘third gender’,² could operate at times more successfully than their male counterparts in Afghan society, smoothly navigating the social overlap between male and female gender identities.³ Instead the military worried that female personnel would offend Afghan males and did their best to mitigate imagined discomfort caused to Afghan interlocutors. Women’s groups and gender issues in general were given a polite nod from time to time, but addressing them seriously would have meant entering human rights territory, which ISAF did not wish to do.

However, in 2009 ISAF took a radically new approach when it started setting up Female Engagement Teams; small teams of women soldiers tasked with engaging the female part of the Afghan population. Talented and resourceful young female soldiers were put on the ground in Afghanistan to engage influential Afghan women who were supposed to turn the counter-insurgency tide by creating a groundswell of support for ISAF and the Afghan government. Yet retrospectively, Eikenberry⁴ (2013) describes them as “multimillion-dollar...teams without a clear purpose’.

Using primary sources this report critically examines the assumptions upon which the concept of FETs was based and the lack of substantive outcomes between 2010 and 2012 as FETs strove to engage women. It also touches on FETs’ struggle to be perceived as useful by male colleagues and their efforts to influence Afghans. It shows how promoters of the programme continued citing FET achievements, without any indicators to evaluate or measure progress or success. Moreover, the report shows that in pursuit of results following the new counter-insurgency orthodoxy, when conceiving and operationalizing the FETs the military largely ignored decades of accumulated knowledge and institutional memory on women and gender programming available in the aid community. Starting from a low baseline, the FETs were easily manipulated by Afghans with experience of three decades of relief and development interventions prior to the arrival of well-intentioned young military personnel in their area. In addition, there was very little understanding within the military regarding

¹ This article is number nineteen in Kilcullen’s twenty-eight proposed Articles on counter-insurgency. At the time, Kilcullen was an influential military advisor to the US Department of Defence and ISAF.

² Individuals recognized by their will or by social consensus as neither male nor female can be referred to as a ‘third gender’. The Commander’s Guide (2011) specifically mentions the ‘third gender’ status of women in the US military.

³ Like many contemporaries in Afghanistan, I used my ‘third gender’ status to work on women’s issues with the Mujahideen and Taliban high and mid-level leadership from 1995 to 2001.

⁴ Karl Eikenberry is a former U.S. military commander in Afghanistan later serving as the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan in 2009.

the role of women, potential and actual, both within the insurgency in Afghanistan and in support of it.

The report is divided into two parts. The first part explores the development, training and proposed functions of FETs, from their origins to how the concept was accepted by ISAF commanders. This section also looks at the challenges of realistically measuring FET impact. The second part examines the background materials developed to support the concept of female engagement and the rationale provided by David Kilcullen, one of the foremost strategists of the new counterinsurgency doctrine. Using FET reports as primary sources, it also examines the underlying assumptions that cast FET as a counterinsurgency (COIN) tool, comparing these notions to the realities faced once they were fielded. The key assumptions, all of which proved flawed, were that FETs could engage and influence Afghan women, that Afghan women are influential in areas useful to the military, and that they would provide information useful to ISAF. Given the shaky assumptions it should come as no surprise that the FETs had great difficulties in achieving the targets set for them.

In many ways, the young female soldiers plucked from their regular duties and assigned to FETs had the most difficult time and the biggest uphill battle in this story. Still struggling to be accepted and thought of as worthy in the military, they tried to make an experimental concept based on erroneous assumptions succeed in a difficult and complex environment, at times with no interpreters, knowing that they would return to base empty-handed to face colleagues who were either cynical or had unrealistic expectations of results. The FET experiment was the sociological equivalent of sending troops out with malfunctioning weaponry.

Methodology

After sixteen years of work in Afghanistan I was employed initially as Cultural Advisor to a succession of ISAF military commanders and their subordinates. Throughout 2010 I advised the Commander of Regional Command-South (RC-S)⁵. Later that year I was sent as Afghan Affairs Advisor (A3) to advise three consecutive Commanders of Task Force Helmand (TFH) over a twelve month period. I remained there until early 2012 and finished my work for ISAF with the Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications in ISAF HQ, covering engagement with different groups of Afghans. Throughout this period, I worked closely with various groups in the military hierarchy, from task force level to ISAF Joint Command (IJC) and HQ. I actively participated in meetings, discussions and exchange of communications related to FETs, both formal and informal, covering their activities, training and use. At different stages, I trained several groups of UK FETs on various issues and was used as trouble-shooter by some UK and US Marine Corps FET members. This gave me direct access to a wealth of first-hand information and documentation on what FETs were actually achieving (or not), as well as what individuals and groups within the military were thinking about the concept and its implementation.

In the preceding sixteen years, I had conducted in-depth qualitative and survey style quantitative data collection with what probably amounts to thousands of women and men across Afghanistan, in twenty-seven provinces out of thirty four. I spoke with Afghan women in their own language, in their homes, in relief distribution sites, in offices, in gatherings, in aid agencies and in ministries. It meant entering communities and seeking access to Afghan women through Afghan men under the most difficult conditions. General observations and explanations in this report on the behaviour of Afghan women as individuals, in families and in communities are based on this extensive experience.

⁵ ISAF split Afghanistan into four zones each covered by a regional command. This would become five in 2010 when RC-S was split to create RC-South West. Each RC was composed of Task Forces.

The report is based mostly on participant observation and analysis of a wide range of events, meetings, conversations, discussions and documents throughout the 2010 to 2012 period when I was working in RC-S and RC-SW with forays to Kabul. The sources - written correspondence, reports, presentations, manuals, meetings, interactions and conversations with military personnel - provided different forms of texts that were analysed for this report. The sources are listed in Annex 1. Where information is not directly attributed to an individual, location or specific time period, this is to maintain the anonymity of those involved.

Background to the Female Engagement Concept

In Afghanistan, women's inclusion in conflict prevention and resolution initiatives, the focus of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325, was largely left to a small group of gender advisors sent to ISAF headquarters (HQ) from NATO member countries. Their influence rarely spread beyond meeting rooms. Almost a decade after the 2001 intervention by the United States (US) and its allies – rhetorically justified after the fact in part by the need to save Afghan women - women would once again take centre stage for some in the US military. Afghan women were now viewed as matriarchal figures and potential allies in the counter-insurgency who could help to turning the tide of ISAF's struggle against the Taliban and other insurgents.

By 2010, ISAF leadership had moved into a counter-insurgency mode, hoping to reproduce what they regarded as successes in Iraq. Using a manual, later developed into a book, by David Kilcullen,⁶ an Australian military advisor to the Pentagon with anthropological training, to supplement the new US military doctrine on counter-insurgency (FM 3-24) published in 2006, ISAF personnel from Kabul HQ to remote patrol bases stepped up existing efforts to wage counter-insurgency against opponents who were more resilient and resourceful than anticipated. The new COIN doctrine emphasised the importance of gaining the support of the civilian population, understood as rational actors who had to be convinced to choose the 'right side' in the war. The military saw Afghan society as a series of discrete groups occupying bounded spaces with little or no overlap. Crudely put, 'good' Afghans supported the Government of Afghanistan, while 'bad' Afghans supported the insurgency. The fence sitters and 'bad' Afghans were targeted by counter-insurgency efforts. In this view, there was no room for people to transact by seeking out the best bargain as they had done in this conflict-ridden country for decades. It was not permissible to be disillusioned and cynical about available leadership options and to make fence-sitting a long-term alternative. ISAF's goal was to bring everyone firmly into the Afghan government camp. The war would be won by a willing majority and not a disruptive minority, so the focus was on numbers to build a critical mass of Afghans who would support the government side.

It was against this background that Afghan women entered the calculus of the international military. The advice in Kilcullen's manual to bring women into the picture was duly noted. Given the prominent position of this manual in the counter-insurgency strategy, engaging Afghan women was soon seen by some ISAF leaders as fundamental to accomplishing the mission in Afghanistan.

In Kilcullen's analysis, the private world of Afghan women is distinct from the public world of men. Yet this 'hidden' world of family dynamics was assumed to hold the key to public actions. It was this key which had to be discovered and wielded to bring 50% of the population, as well as the male children, attached into the legitimate fold of Afghan government. It was expected that the men would inevitably follow. The new orthodoxy in ISAF was that the 'critical mass'⁷ required to give momentum to the counter-insurgency would be impossible without women. In fact, the subtle gendered 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.⁸ The

⁶ Published as a book on counterinsurgency in 2010, this was originally published in 2006 as "The Twenty-Eight Articles" and republished in 2010 as "Counterinsurgency".

⁷ This phrase was used in relation to counter-insurgency by Kilcullen and frequently repeated in military communications and presentations. See for example Thorgeirsdotter 2011.

⁸ Broadly quantifiable indicators used to measure specific effects by the military.

resilience of Afghan families to outside interference, as well as attempted meddling by successive Afghan governments, was lost on ISAF designers and planners.⁹

To tackle the 50% of the Afghan population who had thus far been invisible to the military, the Female Engagement Team (FET) concept was initiated by the United States Marine Corps (USMC), which had tried a similar concept in Iraq. These were groups of military women meant to build rapport with, and support from, Afghan women and thereby their families and communities.

This report describes the trajectory of FETs as they evolved from idea to practice, focusing on the work of the US Marine Corps and UK FETs in the period from 2010 to early 2012 in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan.¹⁰

⁹ For a brief history of Afghan government interference with families see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2004.

¹⁰ Since the work of US FETs in Helmand was at the forefront of the move to engage women and held up as a shining success in much of the military documentation on the issue it can be assumed that this report reflects some aspects of the work of other NATO member country FETs in other parts of Afghanistan.

Part 1: Development, training and functions of Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan

FET Operations in Brief

FETs are a group of female soldiers operating within a security cordon provided by male soldiers and trained to build rapport with Afghan women:

'The...[FET] is a formally trained, dedicated resource that enables brigade combat teams (BCTs), as the operational environment (OE)¹¹ owners, maneuver battalions (MBs), as the battle space owners (BSOs), and provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) to influence and interact with the local population, primarily women, to achieve their...[counter-insurgency] objectives. When FETs are employed, units gain greater acceptance from the local population and collect information the unit can use to enhance their operations and provide improved security in their area of operations (AO).' (Commander's Guide 2011)¹²

Broadly, with variations across NATO members, FETs are meant to engage Afghan men and women, through carefully planned messaging, convince them of the goodwill of the US and/or ISAF troops and persuade them to choose the Afghan government over insurgent groups. They are also meant to collect information. The main goals for UK FETs, listed in internal documentation¹³ during the 2010-2012 period examined by this report, are to ensure that:

- -Women do not support or enable the insurgency
- -Women influence families/communities not to support the insurgency
- -Women influence others to demand basic services from the government, and,
- -Women influence family and community members to support the Afghan government

This section examines the functions of FETs, the reluctance in some quarters to adopt them, and the subsequent confusion over their roles as influence tool or intelligence collection-asset. This part also elaborates on how, when measuring impact, the need to succeed overwhelmed all other concerns. The result was less than ideal reporting that focused on the novelty elements of FET or their popularity with the small number of women they engaged. There was pressure to report almost any activity as an instant success.

The Afghan conflict did have a gendered dimension. As NATO came to realise, the insurgents had understood this and knew how to use Afghan honour sensitivities about women to their advantage: The 2011 Commander's Guide, a US army manual to help in the training and use of FETs, recognized the point explicitly: 'The Taliban know that male American Soldiers avoid the inner sanctum of

¹¹ Operational Environment. 'A composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect the employment of military forces and bear on the decisions of the unit commander.' (Anon., 2005)

¹²This report frequently cites the Commander's Guide (2011) prepared as a comprehensive document by the US Army to assist Commanders in utilising FETs. The full reference is *Handbook Commander's Guide to Female Engagement Teams Version 3 Observations, Insights and Lessons*, s.l.: Center for Army Lessons Learned.

¹³ For example, TFH Influence team assessment reports.

homes so as not to dishonour local women and will use this to their advantage by storing weapons and [Improvised Explosive Device] IED materials in rooms where women are present' (Commander's Guide 2011). Taliban were also known to have dressed as women to smuggle themselves and weapons through checkpoints. Women were at times used to transport weapons, money and drugs on their person. The primary benefit of ISAF having military women available for the search function during raids on compounds, referred to as 'cordon and knock' operations, or at checkpoints, was the 'deescalating effect' that this was expected to produce. This meant reducing tension and minimising the discomfort and insult felt by Afghan families when private areas and women were searched. It would minimise possibilities for accusations from insurgents that foreign men were used to search women, thus dishonouring the family and community. Allegations that foreign men had been inside the private quarters of a house and had body-searched females inflamed notions of *Afghanityat* and *Pushtuniat*.¹⁴ There was anecdotal evidence that videos captured on mobile phones of such searches were used by the insurgents for recruitment purposes.¹⁵

Similar considerations had led to the use of female personnel by the US Marine Corps (USMC) in Iraq under the so-called Lioness Programme.¹⁶ The programme evolved from a female search function to engagement with women in different sectors of Iraqi society. Mimicking what was seen as success in Iraq, the USMC launched FETs in Afghanistan in early 2009 when female marines were requested to support a cordon and knock operation in Farah province.¹⁷ The person who served as mentor, trainer and debriefer for the first team in Afghanistan, Matt Pottinger of the USMC, was subsequently instrumental in promoting the concept within ISAF until it was accepted at the highest levels. Importantly, there was no discussion with the Afghan government. By 2012 FETs were still at an experimental stage but by then were seen by some as one of the specialized teams providing a multi-disciplinary perspective required during complex operations.¹⁸ 'These specialized programs are tasked with engaging local populations to ascertain information on civil society needs and problems; address security concerns; and form links between the populace, the military, and the interagency' (Commander's Guide 2011).

Until recently most NATO members did not permit female soldiers to have direct combat roles, at least on paper. The 2011 Commander's Guide explicitly stated that FET members were not to have a combat role. For many of the women involved, however, FETs provided the next best thing, a rare opportunity to interact with Afghans 'outside the wire'.

¹⁴ *Afghanityat* and *Pushtuniat* categorise all the various qualities which make an individual an Afghan or a Pushtun. These describe the various aspects of a person's behaviour which safeguard their honour.

¹⁵ See for instance Azarbaijani-Moghaddam et al. (2008).

¹⁶ 'The Marine Corps started this program in Iraq in order to search female Iraqis for concealed weapons and contraband items as contact between men and women is culturally insensitive. Operations of this program began in the early spring of 2006 in multiple key cities of Al Anbar province. This team helped build the trust and confidence of women in the area, and opened up additional lines of communication'. <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLDD2276CED4C827F0>

¹⁷ See box below.

¹⁸ The definition of Complex Operations has changed over time—sometimes including combat, sometimes excluding it, sometimes encompassing disaster relief, sometimes not, and usually focusing only on missions overseas. For example, the Center for Complex Operations website states that 'stability operations, counterinsurgency and irregular warfare [are] collectively called 'Complex Operations.' <http://ccoportal.org>

Selling FETs to the ISAF Command

In an article in the *Small Wars Journal* in 2010 simple interactions between female marines and local populations in tense and underdeveloped parts of Helmand province were held up by the authors as ‘tangible gains’. Together with Claire Russo, the authors, Pottinger and Jelani, were co-creators of the FET concept. Like female aid workers in decades past, female soldiers in FETs were invited into homes to meet women as part of Afghan hospitality, because of the novelty value, and on the off-chance that they would offer assistance. In the article such common interactions are accorded much greater significance: ‘[T]he FET successfully encouraged the women to open up about their daily lives and concerns. Word spread...and the FET discovered that some Afghan women had been eagerly waiting for a chance to talk to them. One woman said they had ‘prayed you would come to us’ (Pottinger et al. 2010, p.4). This impression matches stereotypes circulating since the rise and fall of the Taliban, of Afghan women waiting to be liberated by international actors. Along these lines, the FET officer and cultural advisor claimed that the interaction between female soldiers and locals was softer than one with male soldiers because Afghans considered women being soft-hearted and unable to harm or kill others. By summer 2010, based on such reports of what some in the US Marine Corps considered success in using FETs in Helmand, ISAF HQ had issued a so-called FRAGO¹, an order advising all of its regional commands to follow the example and launch FETs.

From the very start, Pottinger sold the benefits of the FET concept as ‘the acquisition of valuable information and the opportunity to positively influence an otherwise untouchable half of the local populace’ (Pottinger & Shaffer, 2009). It was based on scant evidence. In a memo from 2009, shortly after fielding the first FET, he described the first interaction after a village elder had agreed that female marines could meet women in his community:

The village elder...moved all the village women and children (nearly 20 women and more than two dozen boys and girls) into one of the compounds, where our FET visited and talked with them. Our FET divvied their responsibilities as follows: three female Marines served as Guardian Angels,¹⁹ one led the searches of the local women, one served as photographer, one as a note-taker, and Lt Shaffer (with her interpreter) as the talker. Once she was satisfied the location was secure, Lt Shaffer engaged in a lengthy discussion with the local women, distributed school supplies, and held informal classes on how to use some hygiene products and cosmetics...The interaction with the local women, who had been clearly frightened when the Marines first arrived, ended up being extremely warm. (Pottinger & Shaffer, 2009, p. 1)

Anyone familiar with rural Afghanistan would understand that the elder took this FET to his compound and most likely gave his extended family access to the hand-outs, which they were delighted with. Other conclusions cannot be drawn from this interaction, but Pottinger went on to persuade the military leadership to fund an expensive concept based on these early engagements.

In Kandahar, where I was based, critical questions were raised when the idea was discussed in a general meeting of the HQ of the regional command group covering the southern provinces (RC-South). Scepticism was expressed as to how such groups could be fielded, how efficacious they would actually be and whether danger would be posed to the women involved. To the few familiar with women’s issues in Afghanistan, the idea appeared as another publicity stunt with Afghan women. It

¹⁹ In the USMC this concept implies people who watch over comrades with an ‘ambush mentality’.

was feared that it would involve badly trained and misguided but well-intentioned young, foreign military women who would be sent out to bother Afghan families, while their male superiors in the military would eventually be disappointed by the lack of substantive results. It was clear that the concept of FETs was focused on ISAF expectations of tactical gains rather than what would benefit Afghan women. It seemed like a lot of effort (training, setting up special patrols, taking up the time of ordinary Afghans, etc.) for very little gain. Since the order came from the Commander of ISAF, however, half-heartedness and failure were not acceptable options.

After discussions within the RC-South command group I was sent to discuss FETs with some of those spearheading the US Marine Corps FET initiative in Helmand. One of these was a Pushtun-American woman who had helped create the FET programme for the marines in Afghanistan. As with a number of advisors to the military she had developed a larger than life persona popular with many military commanders. This included embellished stories of high adventure in the region, a penchant for adopting military uniform, speech and mannerisms, but little in the way of substantive knowledge and understanding of the life and conditions of Afghan women based on structured interactions or research. The advisor spoke condescendingly of Afghanistan's lingua franca - Dari – ('I don't speak that Dari stuff'), and consistently identified herself as Pushtun rather than Afghan. This was hardly neutral behaviour for someone advising military commanders in a country struggling with on-going ethnic tension.

As launched in the south, the FET initiative operated in a contextual vacuum. The Marine FET teams initially lacked knowledge of Afghan government institutions and programmes for women and had no technical knowledge on gender issues. There was no understanding of the complexities of operating in a largely conservative, rural area such as Helmand. When reporting on their mission in discussion with me, hospitality, niceties, blessings and formal statements of gratitude from Afghans were presented as solid outcomes. As in written accounts of the success and effectiveness of this first iteration of FETs, there were never citations of tangible, substantive, measurable impact, merely discussions and expressions of goodwill.

As noted above, the FET concept nevertheless quickly caught on in the higher echelons of ISAF. The decision to expand it from the experimental stage to other regional commands was based on early assumptions about design, impact and success. These early FET narratives were largely promoted by a few individuals in the field, without any representation from the Afghan government, civil society or professionals with expertise on programming with women in Afghanistan. These concerns were discussed early on in RC-South, including my apprehension with labelling anything whatsoever which happened with women as a success. The discussions led to meetings with ISAF Joint Command (IJC) staff, tasked with implementing ISAF HQ directives and plans. While receptive to concerns expressed, they could not stop FETs because of the directives had been received from the Commander of ISAF forces and thus were irreversible. The initial directive had been issued from the office of General Stanley McChrystal, an ardent counter-insurgency supporter, and later another authority on counter-insurgency, General David Petraeus. Their sponsorship gave all subordinates in the military hierarchy strong incentives to ensure that the directives were carried out and reported as a success. The FET juggernaut could not be stopped and people wanted to be on board.

In the discussions with IJC, critics focused on damage control. If FETs were a necessity, the best impact of their engagement with Afghan women would be to strengthen their relations with the Afghan government. This would drive them away from the Taliban, whose rule was assumed to be 'particularly harmful to the lives and rights of women' (Thorgeirsdottir, 2011), and thus have a positive counter-insurgency effect. One possibility in this direction was to improve interaction between female government officials and women in their jurisdictions. The result was another FRAGO, this one issued by IJC directing FETs to mobilise Afghan women in subnational governance structures (both in the elected provincial councils and the state administration) to do outreach with women. FETs were informed that in the Afghan sub-national administrative structure there were

Departments of Women's Affairs in all provinces and that the education and health ministries had gender policies focusing on service delivery to women and girls in the provinces. The FRAGO stated that it was not the responsibility of FETs to undertake piecemeal service delivery; there was a national bureaucracy in place to serve Afghan women but it needed strengthening.

To ensure a wider FET presence, ISAF required in 2010 all deployed Brigade Combat Teams BCTs to send promising female military personnel to attend FET training in theatre. At that time, the US Marine Corps had the most well developed approach to FET, with four months of pre-deployment training specifically targeted to the required skills to support the range of missions and situations they would face once deployed. Skills included patrolling, medical skills, culture and basic language training and conducting engagements. The Marine Corps had between 30 and 40 women in their FETs in two-woman teams, with a linguist when available. U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) established a six-week training program in 2010 for cultural support teams (CSTs), their version of the FET. Most other groups had ad hoc training of one week and above depending on how their superiors wished to employ FETs. By 2012, only the USMC had full-time FET personnel. When I was in the field (2010-12), UK FETs had a short pre-deployment training, under the responsibility of the Military Stabilisation Support Group (MSSG). In theatre, they would receive a week long course²⁰ focused on Female Engagement and influence methods. At my suggestion, the training eventually also included interaction with the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, female Provincial Councillors and staff of the Department of Women's Affairs.²¹

US Marine Corps FET Tasks

For the USMC FET by 2011 their specific tasks were to:

- Engage Afghan men and women
- Support the battle space owner's intent
- Support Government of Afghanistan (GoA) to achieve its Constitutional and international convention related commitments to women's rights
- Convince Afghan women to use their influence to deter the insurgency
- Be an [information] collection asset giving comprehensive understanding of the operational environment
- Influence the Afghan population
- Build trust, win hearts and minds and show the 'human face of ISAF'
- Be an enabler for counter-insurgency
- Build support and confidence of the female population for GoA
- Convince Afghan women that GoA is the best option to provide them with services and security

FET Functions

In the 2011 version of the US Army Commander's Guide to FETs, their roles are described as follows:

²⁰ I helped organise and conduct trainings for three iterations of UK FETs.

²¹ As of early 2012 the institutional home for UK FETs was about to change. To overcome the difficulties related to lack of access to Afghan women, due in part to lack of female interpreters, the Defence Cultural Specialist Unit (DCSU) of the UK MoD took responsibility for staffing and training the UK FET Team Leader, who would be a female Cultural Advisor (CULAD). This individual would be a member of the British military with competencies in language, engagement with the population and analysis of Human Terrain (HT) data. The deploying Battle Group (BG) became responsible for finding remaining FET team members.

‘[U]nit enablers designed to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the OE[operational environment]²², and they are employed by the OE owners and PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams] to build enduring trust, confidence, and increased support of counter-insurgency and the [the Afghan government]. FETs are intended to:

- Build support and confidence of the female population for GIROA [Afghan Government] and more broadly build support and confidence of the Afghan population on issues of security, health care, education, justice, and economic opportunity to enable their families to live in a safe and secure environment.
- Provide an understanding of the different perspectives of women, which will provide a better situational awareness of the OE.’

Given such a broad range of objectives covering a wide remit, FETs would clearly face difficulties.

Afghan military and police forces valued the presence of female soldiers for searches at vehicles check points and in compounds, as well as during combat operations.²³ Afghan males generally accepted females being searched as long as it was done by other females. The deescalating effect of FETs was the most obvious and useful impact, as had been the case with the Lioness Team in Iraq. However, erroneous assumptions about the nature of women’s relations with the insurgency led ISAF military leaders to believe that FETs could do more than what the Lioness Teams had done in Iraq. An internal USMC memo on lessons learned made the claim boldly:

Despite their traditional status as second class citizens, even when compared to Arab women, Pashtun women still wield influence over their husbands and especially their children. Also, Pashtun females in Afghanistan pose virtually no threat to Marines. While Iraqi women were sometimes employed by the insurgency as couriers, scouts, or even suicide bombers, there is little or no evidence that Pashtun women are employed in this manner by Afghan insurgents. This crucial difference in Pashtun and Arab culture liberates us to place a greater focus on proactively engaging Pashtun women than some Lioness teams were able to do in Iraq. (Pottinger & Shaffer, 2009, p. 2)

Afghan families asked for female soldiers to be present when US marines overnighted in compounds, most probably to offset accusations of inappropriate behaviour between the military and compound residents. The Afghans effectively wanted to use female soldiers as *mahrms*.²⁴ Utilised strategically, in less conservative areas of Afghanistan, the search function could have been used to very gradually encourage Afghan forces to accept the utility and presence of Afghan female searchers from urban areas to peri-urban and rural areas, thus increasing the recruitment of women into the Afghan security forces, but the opportunity was lost. UK forces and the USMC did not capitalise on this potential, deciding instead that long, broader engagements would have a more strategic effect.²⁵

²² See note 11 for an explanation of the Operational Environment

²³ This is noted in several USMC reports, referred to as ‘USMC FET SITREP’ in this paper. The full reference is NATO C3 Force Effects Coordination Center Regional Command Southwest FET Situation Report.

²⁴ A *mahram* in Islam is a male whom a woman cannot marry (e.g. father, brother) and so able to accompany her. In this case the term is used loosely to indicate an individual who cannot damage the reputation of a woman through his/her presence. Foreign female soldiers being ‘the third gender’ fulfilled this role.

²⁵ Individuals such as USMC officer and FET creator, Matt Pottinger, eagerly pushed for planned engagements and felt that female soldiers could be used for more than just a deescalating effect.

Reluctance to adopt FETs

When Afghans see U.S. military females in the field, the civilian population becomes more accepting of the U.S. military in their area...Using female Soldiers to interact with local Afghan civilians may be the best-kept secret weapon available to the...[brigade combat team] to gain acceptance and information from the local civilian population' (Commander's Guide 2011)

Despite assurances that they were being provided with a 'secret weapon', commanders were often disinclined to utilise FETs,²⁶ reluctantly pulling female personnel performing multiple functions in other tasks to create them. FETs were frequently not tied to operational planning and were therefore not mainstreamed into the central thrust of military activities. Various measures were recommended to improve the situation, including training commanders to understand how to use FETs. Nevertheless, the FETs were frustrated by the fact that very few military actors in the areas where they were deployed saw them as useful and knew how to employ them.

US FET Core Tasks

- Facilitating female engagements and key leader engagements.
- Facilitating civil-military operations.
- Gathering and reporting information.
- Disseminating messages.
- Conducting female searches.
- Supporting combat patrols as required.

This was true even for the US marines, where women were exclusively trained and deployed to form FETs. Here, female engagement was reportedly integrated at every level of command from tactical battalion level to regional command level by involving FET leaders during planning of operations and using them as advisors to combat unit commanders.²⁷ Yet comments made in passing by individuals involved with FETs made it clear that US marine commanders also put a great deal of pressure on them to show real value added and potential to achieve, while simultaneously presenting them as 'shining successes' to the outside world.²⁸

The UK FETs, receiving less training and resources than their US counterparts, gravitated towards what was designated as 'influence work' and 'stabilisation work'.²⁹ Some UK commanders saw FETs as a tactical tool to create positive influence in support of localised operations, although achieving this was not be easy, as we shall see below.

²⁶ This is mentioned in a UK FET ASSESSREP and was a popular topic of discussion between myself and the Influence team as well as UK and USMC FETs. This is also emphasized by Pottinger et al. (2010).

²⁷ USMC FET SITREP

²⁸ Private conversations with USMC FET members

²⁹ In Task Force Helmand, the UK military had an Influence section as opposed to a Strategic Communications section, but they performed the same role. The UK military broadly followed NATO in defining Strategic Communication. NATO defines it as 'the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations, as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims' (SG(2009)0794). Stabilisation activity in comparison usually consists of development activities.

Confusion over FET roles

Like most interventions involving women in such a complex and bewildering context, there is no doubt that the FET concept was an add-on to an on-going process facing numerous obstacles. In spite of everything on paper there was no real institutional home or support structure for FETs within ISAF. ISAF HQ wanted FETs, but what they could actually achieve was a matter for speculation and cynicism at the field level. Some in ISAF had accommodated counter-insurgency with a certain amount of head scratching or hostile reluctance. For almost a decade, ISAF, a male-dominated institution, had not seen women as a priority. From the start there had been considerable confusion over FET roles or utility and where their work slotted in to ISAF daily business on the ground. Efforts to create and use FETs ranged from trained units with engagement plans to female soldiers playing with children and teaching them the alphabet. Attempts were made to standardize female engagements,³⁰ but the diverse cultures of NATO members and the spectrum of permissiveness in communities across Afghanistan made this difficult.

Several functions of FET can be distilled from relevant ISAF documents. The main ones are:

An influence tool?

The moment the FET walks into a village wearing headscarves and politely approaching local families, the FET is already sending a powerful and positive message. There are ways the FET can conduct its conversations to reinforce the message that the United States is on the side of the people and that it is in the people's interest to deal with the United States. (Commander's Guide 2011)³¹

An important role conceived for FET was influencing women to view the United States as a benevolent force, based on their mere presence in the village. In military terms it was described as reinforcing the 'narrative and master messages'.³²

FET ACTIVITIES REPORTED

- FET assists local contractor's son with speech classes
- FET connects LN woman to ANP [Afghan National Police] looking for son
- FET discovers a possible tax for GIROA run health services
- FET discusses claims issues with LN woman
- FET discusses recent IED strikes with locals
- FET discusses upcoming wedding with LN girl
- FET efforts turn initial negative atmospherics into positive ones
- FET engages local shop keeper at bazaar
- FET engages with local ANP commander
- FET follows up with family whose daughter received critical medical attention by Marines
- FET identified a new female doctor
- FET identifies loyal Radio Tamadoun fans
- FET imparts leadership lessons to local females

(Source USMC SITREPS)

³⁰ For example the HQ ISAF FRAGO of May 2010

³¹ The reader is reminded that the Commander's Guide is written for US military use.

³² TFH Influence Team Report on FETs

An intelligence-collection asset?

From the start there were misunderstandings as to whether FETs were intelligence collection assets or not. Afghan women were viewed as having access to hidden, in-depth information from the private sphere and from their communities. This was assumed to be easily accessible to female soldiers after building rapport. UK Joint Doctrine Note 1/09 states: 'Analysis of different actors' involvement, relationships, beliefs, motives, perceptions, interests and desired outcomes is integral to understanding the operating environment (or framing the problem), and throughout campaign planning.' Thus some commanders hoped that somewhere in the material provided by women was the elusive information, the 'actionable intelligence' (Commander's Guide 2011) which would help ensure success for the counter-insurgency effort.

The Commander's Guide, however, stresses that FETs are not intelligence collectors since this would deter Afghan women from engaging and endanger them. UK Joint Doctrine Note 1/09 (2009) makes a distinction between the collection of cultural information and intelligence, stating that accessing the former will reduce tension and maintain access to and trust of local populations and academia. Whether those fielding FETs, those interviewed by FETs, and indeed FET members themselves, made this neat distinction is unclear.

A multi-purpose Tool?

Caveat. Female Engagement does not attempt to deliver social change, deal with women's issues/emancipation or impose western social values on Afghan society. Under no circumstances must women's position be endangered through their association with ISAF. (Task Force Helmand Influence Report on FETs, 2011)

While counter-insurgency doctrine acolytes in Afghanistan saw women as the mass oppressed by the Taliban who could be encouraged to rise up, FETs were instructed not to get involved with social engineering and the women's rights discourse. The contradiction of this situation was evidently lost on military planners and, not surprisingly, confusion arose.

One publication from the UK Defence Science and Technology Laboratory presented the military 'as one of the key intervention tools alongside other agencies', especially in more conservative and insecure environments 'where such activity is key to delivering security through achieving civil stability' (Menzies and Cooper, 2011, p i). In the field, some FETs and their managers expressed frustration that they could not move into women's rights territory. Such proclivities set off alarm bells for their male colleagues, who wanted FET activities to contribute solely to improved governance and security before the planned exit of NATO and Coalition combat forces in 2014.³³ Some military personnel recognized that addressing such high-risk issues in the Afghan context required experienced personnel and more than sporadic visits over a six month period. 'We must set realistic aspiration: we are unlikely to change any fundamental aspects of Afghanistan's character and mores in the next 35 years', a UK military report concluded.³⁴

Unclear as to their real functions and in a desperate bid to appear useful and 'engage', yet unable to liberate Afghan women, FETs blundered into all sorts of territory (see FET Activities Reported boxes). They provided hand-outs, tried to solve individual problems, provided loans for small businesses and so on. For example, US FETs report adult literacy classes at their women's centres but this turns out to be not Pushtu or Dari but teaching the letters of the English alphabet, with one or two

³³ TFH Influence Team Report on FETs

³⁴ TFH Influence Team Report on FETs

letters taught at each session.³⁵ A reported lesson on ‘leadership’ includes showing pictures of Khatol Ahmadzai, an Afghan female paratrooper from the Communist era, later turned general, to Helmandi girls as a positive role model to be emulated. Reports list numerous futile efforts to engage and appear useful. Altogether it was a far cry from leading the oppressed to rise up and shed the shackles of Islamist patriarchy at its worst, as the most ardent supporters of FET might have hoped.

Measuring the impact of FETs

The military needs to consider female engagement within a broader civil affairs capability and to incorporate measures to understand the impact and suitability of such a mission. (Menzies and Cooper, 2011)

FETs had unclear performance measurements and accountability. With so little clarity over FET roles, it was inevitable that impact evaluation would pose challenges. Much of the confusion over FET roles probably arose from the inability to have demonstrable, empirical outcomes and impact in the first place. There is no evidence, and I saw no objective external evaluations, to support claims that FETs achieved any of the outcomes their creators and supporters were claiming on their behalf.

Documentation examined and discussions in which I participated showed that most individuals dealing with the concept were unqualified, unwilling or unaware of useful measures of effectiveness for the impact of FETs.

One UK report suggested that ‘[l]ocal atmospherics before, during and after FET employment are likely to be the surest indicator of effectiveness’.³⁶ Atmospherics is a technical term for gossip and hearsay, an unreliable measure of impact. Some within the UK military in Task Force Helmand questioned success reporting: ‘The specific role and purpose of FETs, and what is defined as ‘successful’ engagement, require clarification. These must be informed by broader debates surrounding military interventions within stabilisation environments’.³⁷

FET engagements could have been used for understanding whether the Afghan government was delivering the services they claimed to be providing and the scale of neglect, but it is impossible to build even a partial picture of this from FET reporting. Some useful measures of FET effect would have been whether Afghan government females stepped up the quantity and quality of interactions with local females as a result of FET interventions, what concrete result interactions would eventually achieve, and how much autonomy such women began to show in doing this. This was not the direction taken.

³⁵ USMC FET SITREP

³⁶ TFH Influence Team Report on FETs

³⁷ TFH Influence Team Report on FETs

The desperation to show FET as a success permeates UK and USMC reporting. If aid agency and government staff, especially female local language speakers, operating in an area were to record all requests for assistance, blessings, niceties, gossip, chit chat, and random encounters as well as every minor achievement and every meeting attended, after a week the report would be very long indeed. This is exactly what FETs did, in effect demonstrating the meagre outcomes of their interactions. Every engagement is described in excruciating detail, presumably to demonstrate that something useful happened. Also recorded is the apparent level of enthusiasm for FETs among Afghans and the value added that the teams were bringing. Every single trivial activity and incident, even planning for these, is listed as if it is a critical event, and items listed as impacting on a group are usually about one individual (See boxes on activity). The banality and absurdity of some items reported with lengthy passages that read like popular literature lead to some FET reporting being cited as ‘inconsistent and unhelpful’,³⁸ by military colleagues. As a result, UK FETs adopted standard reporting formats. USMC FETs already had standardised reporting formats, but this did not stop them from listing discussion of wedding plans with a young girl as an activity.

The need to succeed

U.S. military leaders should not necessarily be criticized for devising plans to fill the gaping policy hole they stumbled on years into the Afghan war. But the public marketing of these plans by some of these generals in an effort to enlist support from members of Congress, sympathetic think tanks, and the media should serve as a warning against granting too much deference to military leadership. (Eikenberry, 2013).³⁹

Impact measurement was influenced by two distinct sets of criteria. FETs were being assessed according to their utility in a theatre of war. This reporting in turn was dominated and driven by perceived success, and a felt need to show success, fed by ambitions for promotion within the short timeframes of military deployment cycles. Every commander is required to achieve results in the one year or six months during which he is deployed. As a result his subordinates feel the same pressure to

MORE FET ACTIVITIES REPORTED

- FET looks for LN [Local National] woman requesting to speak to team
- FET observes increase in women's freedom of movement in Southern [District]
- FET provides class on proper hygiene and grooming
- FET speaks with teacher who is also a local AUP [Afghan Uniformed Police]
- FET supports graduation ceremony at local school
- LN women discuss concerns about her believed kidnapped son
- Local midwife returns to Kandahar to care for husband
- Locals surprised to see female Marines
- Positive interactions with Marines change one local national's perceptions of CFs
- Women beckon FET to visit from behind compound walls

(Source USMC SITREPS)

³⁸ TFH Influence Team Report on FETs

³⁹ US Army general Karl W. Eikenberry served as US ambassador to Afghanistan in 2009-2011.

succeed, and failure is never an option. There is no time to consider a long-term process of careful consideration of pros and cons, planning for change or piloting activities.

Given a task based on erroneous assumptions, (as will be further discussed below), and often composed of young, inexperienced personnel with minimal training to do a difficult job,⁴⁰ FETs typically fell back on easy options such as handing out free medicine to show results. This culture of manufactured results seems to have permeated the Afghanistan mission in its later years, from the highest levels down, and particularly so in the later and more difficult years when the FETs were launched (2010-12). What was referred to as ‘success reporting’ became pervasive.

In addition, the gender relations aspect within the military itself meant that women had to work hard to prove themselves. Presented with a badly designed programme, which had to be shown as a success because it was specifically by women and for women, female personnel were determined to make it work, or at least to show that it worked. FETs were under great pressure from the start to appear successful.

Initial FET encounters were based on the distribution of humanitarian supplies (Pottinger et al. 2010), which catered well to the hand-out mentality developed in many Afghan communities over decades. Also, since women’s time is not their own in Afghan households, when they leave the home for meetings they are relieved to have something tangible to show hostile husbands and in-laws upon their return. Otherwise they are accused of leaving household tasks undone and face the risk of verbal or physical abuse. As a result a meeting with hand-outs is particularly popular, an instant success. FETs ignoring this motivation to attend meetings and events were either demonstrating artlessness or engaging in misrepresentation so that interactions could be reported as successful.

OVERNIGHT RESULTS

“[The local midwife] told FET that since the women have been going to the shuras they have been more outspoken they get out more and they are learning a lot from FET and becoming smarter.’ (USMC FET)

“The LN girl...burst into tears once the FET placed their helmets back on.’ (UK FET)

After a session on breast feeding: “The women told the FET that they feel related to them, that they are American sisters...’ (USMC FET)

“They seemed pleased with our responses.’ (UK FET)

“[A]ttitudes towards the FET changed over the night because they felt that FET actually cared about them and their family. The women stated that they felt secure as they talked with Americans, but the Taliban act like animals and they do not listen to their concerns.’ (USMC FET)

FET changes Local Nationals’ (LNs) attitude one engagement at a time (USMC FET)

⁴⁰ See Jones (2010) for a journalist’s account of some of the difficulties and challenges faced.

FETs did ‘meet and greet’ and used photo opportunities, even reporting on shampooing and combing children’s hair during a hygiene class in an effort to ‘engage’.⁴¹ Day to day mundane chit chat had to be depicted as somehow significant. The smart response to the impasse on achieving anything remotely near the counter-insurgency targets hoped for was to put a successful and positive slant on everything. The following case is illustrative. A *maulavi* (religious leader) heading a community refuses a FET access to the village, citing security to get rid of the visitors. The report for a start states that *maulavi* is the man’s first name, showing lack of basic knowledge. He does not allow FET to contact local women in his village and asks the marines to leave, stating that he is responsible for village security and does not want them patrolling. The report is optimistically entitled ‘Event: Elders

take responsibility for security in the area’ and turns the incident with one man into a counter-insurgency success for the community.⁴²

Success reporting by FETs led to:

- Mistaking business for philanthropy
- Lack of realistic assessments
- Failure to recognize standard evasive measures by Afghans or misrepresenting them
- Mistaking grandstanding and performance as sincere statement of intent
- Lack of knowledge of basic cultural and social practices in relation to women
- Inaccurate reporting without consulting Afghans or subject matter experts
- Expectation raising, creating a hand-out mentality and developing an artificial sense of entitlement

In desperation, FETs at times even jumped on board activities that others were undertaking with women (e.g. civil-military cooperation teams, PRT staff, local businesses, NGOs, etc.), trying to convey this as an activity and success for FETs. The PRTs, for example, were already supporting female provincial council members, the local Department of Women’s Affairs and others to do outreach in districts, but this was reported as a task which FETs were performing, based on a handful of successful interactions which they were invited to attend as observers.

FET reports manifest an apparent naive belief in the absolute sincerity of everything Afghans said. They indicate that anything discussed at a *shura* will be instituted, that if elders approve of something it will be implemented, that if they say they support someone then it is a valid assertion of instant alliance, thanks simply to the

presence of a FET. Grandstanding and performance by local leaders are at times mistaken for sincere statements of intent. The presence of leaders at openings of projects is portrayed as support. Although such sentiment may be present, this is standard behaviour from local leaders to demonstrate one’s ability to provide largesse and an opportunity to grandstand in front of the community. People turn up at such events to exchange gossip and to watch dynamics which inform them about the latest alliances and transactions within local leaderships. Detailed accounts of such events provided in USMC FET reports imply that this is unusual and represents a sign of progress facilitated by FETs.

On one occasion, for example, FETs were present when a detachment of the Afghan National Army met with village elders in Marjeh district in Helmand. The FET claimed that their presence and facilitation created a ‘foundation of trust and understanding’. The report also claimed that the *shura* resulted in an agreement for the village to support the Afghan security forces. It is very rare for decisive decisions on such sensitive issues to be made and announced publicly at the end of one *shura* and must be understood as an artificial gesture to compliment and impress foreigners present.

⁴¹ USMC FET SITREP

⁴² USMC FET Sitrep

Rather than adding to the body of knowledge to facilitate counter-insurgency planning, FET reports indicate a very simplistic understanding of political and social dynamics and the implementation of development initiatives, often leading to a rudimentary description of people's lives, perceptions, interactions and decision-making processes that blurred ground realities. Reading the reports it becomes clear that the roles are in fact reversed. The FETs are manipulated by the local people over and over again, and yet doggedly continue to report success because there was no acceptance in the organization that the initiative could fail. The following case of success reporting from Helmand province is illustrative:

HIGHLIGHT: During a meeting between the LKG,[Lashkargah] FET and DOWA [Department of Women's Affairs], 61 women showed up to receive Veterinary training from the FET; this was astounding considering that the previous training was presented to the male members of the community, which means that the women must have specifically requested the training and then travelled to the DoWA.⁴³

In fact, there was fierce rivalry between the DoWA leadership in Helmand and female provincial councillors for control of assistance to women, stemming from the possibility to skim a percentage of money from project funds and to raise their own profiles.⁴⁴ The provincial DoWA office needed to show its usefulness to Helmandis and to the provincial governor, who was being lobbied by rivals to replace the local department head. At the national level, the Ministry of Women's Affairs' mandate is to provide advocacy support and oversight, but Afghans prefer hand-outs and projects, leaving the provincial-level DoWAs in a difficult situation to justify their existence.

A closer examination of the case indicates that the DoWA opportunistically used the presence of veterinary specialists that day to draw women to their centre in order to show their own usefulness and popularity. DoWA was using the vets accompanying FETs as a resource to boost their own popularity in the political battle for survival. It must also be understood that women can turn up in the hundreds for any event in Lashkargah – the provincial capital of Helmand - such as the celebration of International Women's Day. In the city there are less security concerns and travel restrictions than in other parts of Helmand. In short, the report misrepresented the reality of the event and the actual impact of FET, while missing the political dynamics involved.

FET reports at times contain extraordinarily naive sweeping statements about sudden changes in gender dynamics or claim to have produced incredible overnight effects, with little awareness that they are responding to hackneyed ideas and phrases that have been in circulation in Afghan communities for decades. A charitable interpretation is that these young military women did not simply respond to the pressures of success reporting; they conveyed optimism and a sense that with Afghan women they were pioneers in uncharted territory offering a bonanza of possibilities.

- 'Afghan man [says the] presence of ISAF females has changed dynamics causing men to open up and speak about a different range of topics - Men WANT to speak with women'⁴⁵ – apparently assuming that men and women were previously not speaking.
- 'Women's *shuras* and events continue to have a large influence on the community and the potential for women's involvement in addressing community issues. This is evidenced by women asking for basic literacy class, discussing economic opportunities, and over 80 women

⁴³ UK FET Patrol Report

⁴⁴ This was amply demonstrated in a fierce exchange of screamed insults and barbs between the two parties during a meeting organized by myself where ladies from the DoWA and the PC were invited to interact with FETs.

⁴⁵ UK FET Patrol Report

attending women `s *shuras*⁴⁶ – showing lack of awareness that women have a history of at least two decades of asking for project-based assistance.

- ‘There is potential for...informal “sewing circles’ which would allow females to meet (with a legitimate and acceptable - to the males - purpose) and share thoughts and ideas’⁴⁷ – decades of such events have failed to produce anything substantive for Afghan women but they are still popular for those new to the Afghan context.⁴⁸

In fact, many initiatives were designed as if nothing had occurred in the past and the FETs had arrived to a blank slate. This ignored all the accumulated knowledge and experience of the past, including information on the futility of certain approaches. None of the FET reports even attempted a ‘before and after’ scenario, for example, how women’s access to services, mobility or quality of life had been twenty, ten or five or even two years previously compared to the present. It was all about how UK or US troops had affected lives in recent months. Access to earlier experiences would have taught FETs that working with Afghan women in anything beyond a superficial way requires time and patience together with a good understanding of the social and political dynamics involved. In that sense the FETs were at a tremendous disadvantage, but felt compelled for the most part to produce reports which, in fact, demonstrated a state of ignorance.

Popularity pageant

Popularity also masqueraded as a measure of impact, using the ‘people were very happy’ form of measurement in favour of more concrete measures for assessing change. One reason was the assumption that popularity would mean unfettered access to women and the ancillary results expected as a result. Evaluation of multiple aid programmes in Afghanistan has shown that Afghans will almost always say the programme implemented achieved its aims and was a success. This is mainly due to politeness and hospitality as well as a wish for interventions of any kind and quality to continue just in case there is a positive outcome.⁴⁹ It takes persistent skilful questioning and observation to ascertain real impacts. Outbursts of emotion, blessings and prayers are very unreliable indicators of impact, and yet they consistently appear in FET reporting.

The numbers game

In any assessment, size of the sample interviewed and method utilised are critically important to determine validity. In FET reporting, such rules were set aside by the eagerness to reach and influence a critical mass of women. US FETs, for example, mention that 90% of their meetings are small gatherings of women (1-20) in their homes, with a lot of children in attendance. Only 10% of interactions are in organised women’s *shuras*,⁵⁰ but the reports do not state the number of engagements. Most observations, impacts and outcomes are written as if they represent large groups or entire communities, when they are in fact based on a handful of incidents or brief interviews with one individual or small group in one location. Examples of extrapolating results from small numbers of interactions include the following:

⁴⁶ USMC FET SITREP

⁴⁷ UK FET Patrol Report

⁴⁸ For an explanation of why Afghan women’s gatherings do not automatically lead to ‘results’ see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2010).

⁴⁹ This is based on over a decade’s work which involved evaluating numerous projects across Afghanistan as well as reading countless evaluation reports prepared by others.

⁵⁰ On the definition of *shura* or ‘council’ see below.

- ‘Women in Northern Helmand Province have begun communicating to district GIRoA [government] officials and participating more in community events.’
- ‘Throughout [district X], women have recently reported that they are beginning to trust CFs [combined forces]⁵¹ and ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] since they have seen some of the possibilities that are available without the Taliban. Women...will routinely speak with the...DG [district governor] regarding the location of detained family members. Local women coming to speak to the DG about developmental projects display increased confidence in GIRoA leaders and their ability as problem solvers.’
- ‘The women want to continue finding ways to better their lives and they are tired of their lifestyles and are ready for a change.’
- ‘The women were asked how secure they felt in the area at this time and they all agreed that the security in the area is ‘one-hundred per cent’ and that they are very appreciative towards the Marines and their police.’

To the general reader, these reports might be seen as revealing a vista of satisfied Afghan women, engaging local government and ready to take on any challenge set before them. More probably, these are opinions expressed by a small number of women, likely from elite families, speaking for the benefit of FETs.

Talking to a small number of individuals under duress, as time was limited by security concerns, using leading questions is, of course, not going to provide unbiased and widely applicable findings. Piecemeal interactions meant that FETs could not collect good baseline information on women even to assist their own understanding of why women were not coming to engagements or sharing the messages transmitted. Such information would have included levels of mobility for local women, overcoming reluctance to discuss certain issues in public, information sources and so on. The need for baseline information was discussed during trainings with UK FETs, but efforts on the ground never materialised because there were few FETs and the task would have been overwhelming.

Risky business

More alarming than reporting non-existent successes was the lack of reporting on the potential negative impact of some FET activities. The Commander’s Guide (2011) hints at potential controversy and outlines a number of cultural *faux pas* committed by FETs in the past. By and large, however, there was no in-depth inquiry into why women were not returning to meetings, or whether women were facing violence at home or threats from insurgents after attending FET events. Some FET activities were controversial in the conservative communities such as those of rural Helmand. For instance, a slideshow showing photos of Afghan women training for the National Army, being pilots and playing soccer produced negative reactions. ‘The women at the *shura* were in disbelief when they saw the pictures and said that women were not allowed to do the things that were displayed in the pictures.’⁵² Films were also shown e.g. demonstrating the impact of drug addiction or natural family planning. It is highly likely that some Afghan men on discovering that women had been exposed to material not sanctioned by them, would at best ban them from attending meetings again and at worst beat the women. Yet this aspect was neglected, unreported or ignored.

⁵¹ This is the US equivalent of a battle group.

⁵² USMC FET SITREP

(Mis)-understanding gender relations

It is useful to examine briefly the gender analytical underpinnings for the FET concept. These were shaky, to say the least. FETs were instructed to avoid gender issues, but since they hoped to influence male-female relations and had to interact with men to pursue their mission they inadvertently stumbled into gender territory. This paper does not deal with gender issues in ISAF in their totality, but evidently some of the problems rested here. Some of the FETs' misguided approaches can be traced back to the overall ISAF approach to gender which, while implicit and not formalized, was plagued by persistent misunderstanding, mechanistic and simplistic assumptions. Gender was often equated with women's rights or perceived as providing assistance to women, often concretized as goodwill gestures and micro-development projects for Afghan women, more often hand-outs.

Another problematic question was the understanding in ISAF of what their female personnel could do. ISAF had been told by experts (known as Subject Matter Experts, or SMEs) and Afghan advisors that many Afghan men preferred strict segregation of the sexes. Yet this was only partially true. Based on this erroneous advice, some military leaders were misled into side-lining their own female personnel. Very few in ISAF noted the ease with which foreign women could navigate between the worlds of Afghan men and women as a so-called 'third gender'. This has been the experience of female journalists and aid workers, including myself, who struck up friendships with Mujahideen and Taliban commanders in previous decades, and who have worked in Afghanistan after 2001. Nevertheless, several reports written by and for the UK and US militaries a full decade after the 2001 intervention registered surprise that men might be more forthcoming with female personnel.

In my experience, gender was generally viewed in ISAF as a simple, easily applicable formula which could be left to women with little or no support or training. For some time ISAF had military personnel, usually women acting as gender advisors in HQ, the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A), IJC, and the RCs. There was a certain amount of arrogance or ignorance in some military circles in terms of the level of technical skill required to understand the context and implement appropriate gendered programmes within it.⁵³ General Eikenberry (2013) recognizes the point, citing the 'risk of senior U.S. commanders' becoming intellectually arrogant and cognitively rigid'. It was regularly assumed that any woman could understand, analyse and deal with gender issues simply because of her sex. There appeared to be complete ignorance of the time, personnel, technical skills, qualifications, analytical skills and experience required to undertake meaningful gender interventions. There was a facile assumption that FET readily could undertake more complex tasks without appropriate time and training. As Pottinger and associates put it, '[w]hen repeat visits are possible, FETs should go beyond identifying women's grievances to helping address them in partnership with local leaders, non-governmental organizations, and Afghan policewomen. (Pottinger et al. 2010, p.2).

ISAF's gender personnel usually had little or no first-hand experience of gender in the Afghan context. They were trying to come up with solutions to complex gender issues with few resources, at a distance from actual events and protagonists. They liaised with ministries and external organizations working on gender issues, but even such interactions gave them little exposure to ground realities. Very few of these gender advisors had the skills to apply gender analysis to the institutions within which they worked, let alone the gendered implications of multiple groups of protagonists engaging in a process to recruit women for counter-insurgency.

⁵³ The USMC colonel in charge of the RC-SW gender advisor told me before the latter arrived in theatre that she was from a logistics background but that she would understand what to do on gender issues from reading a few documents. This was not the only occasion on which military interlocutors claimed that development and related sociological concepts were not 'rocket science'.

Part 2: Underpinnings, assumptions and analysis for Female Engagement Teams

The underlying assumption for the creation of FETs was that Afghan women were simultaneously isolated in a separate space from men, unaware of the tides of war and unaffected by partisan feelings such as anger or sadness at the death of relatives as a result of ISAF activities. And yet women were also supposed to be knowledgeable about the martial affairs of men in the community and willing to influence these on behalf of ISAF, their supporter and friend. This and related assumptions need to be critically examined. The influential work of military analyst David Kilcullen is a good starting point.

Kilcullen's approach to women

History has taught us that most insurgent fighters are men. But, in traditional societies, women are extremely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. Co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermines the insurgents. To do this effectively requires your own female counterinsurgents. Win the women and you own the family unit. Own the family and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population on your side. (Kilcullen 2006)

A few years into the war in Iraq, a new military doctrine gained increasing influence in US military circles. Called population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN), it modelled itself on colonial warfare and posed the soldier as a benevolent figure sensitive to local culture and winning the population over through good governance. At the centre of these developments was General Petraeus, whose application of COIN in Iraq came to be seen as a turn-around event in the war. COIN enthusiasts regarded 'winning the population' – as distinct from crushing the enemy - as the key to military victory. Through cultural knowledge, the provision of services and the avoidance of civilian casualties to the extent possible, it was believed that the military could gain popularity and support among the local population, who would then deny insurgents space to operate. General Petraeus co-authored Field Manual No. 3-24 (FM 3-24) Counterinsurgency, the US military's doctrine⁵⁴ on the subject, and policy followed. When the Obama administration conducted a comprehensive review of the Afghanistan strategy and General Stanley McChrystal assumed command of ISAF forces in 2009 COIN was adopted as the way ahead and the solution to the flagging campaign in Afghanistan. The operational plan was revised and COIN doctrine was incorporated.

David Kilcullen, an Australian army officer, was Petraeus' senior COIN advisor in Iraq. He wrote several articles and papers on COIN, the most popular being his 2006 "Twenty-Eight Articles". This was a practical guide for junior officers and non-commissioned officers espousing the COIN approach in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was eventually added as an appendix to FM 3-24 and consolidated with his other writings in a book on the subject in 2010. His work encouraged the reader to gain an in-depth cultural understanding of the conflict environment, what he refers to as 'conflict ethnography'. By 2010, Kilcullen's guidance was widely referred to in the discussion of counter-insurgency approaches in Afghanistan, and Kilcullen's advice on women was suddenly seen as the magic bullet. 50% of the population - a 'vast pool of natural allies' (Pottinger et al., 2010) - was waiting in the wings to rise up against the Taliban and avenge themselves. Kilcullen's guidance on women is given prominence in the Commander's Guide (2011) and it is clear that the creators of FETs used his logic to argue for the expansion of the FET approach to contribute to the counter-insurgency effort. FET architect Pottinger

⁵⁴ "Military doctrine provides guidelines that inform how armed forces contribute to campaigns, operations, and battles. Contingent on context, military doctrine is meant to be suggestive, not prescriptive." (Eikenberry, 2013)

stated that ignoring women is ‘needlessly squandering an advantage we hold over the Taliban’ (Pottinger 2010, p.3).

Although appearing simple, every concept in Kilcullen’s construct - for example ‘traditional society’, requires unpacking and clarification. This the military planners failed to do. Thus FET architect Pottinger presented issues such as reduced mobility for women as Taliban abuses rather than understanding them as the socio-cultural impositions of Kilcullen’s ‘traditional society’, which he was trying to influence (Pottinger 2010). The following sections clarify how Kilcullen as well as those, like Pottinger, who tried to apply his doctrines, were misinterpreting realities on the ground.

Setting the tone for FETs

The COIN paradigm was applied with such unquestioning zeal that critical thought was often suspended. (Eikenberry, 2013)

It was understood that ‘engaging women is a delicate, refined process that requires a keen understanding of cultural sensitivities...’ (Commander’s Guide 2011). Where the deep and sophisticated knowledge of Afghan culture would come from remained unclear. Much of the information underlying the erroneous assumptions underpinning the concept of FETs used stereotypes and provided inadequate material to create a sound understanding required for the complicated task ahead.

The development of FET followed a familiar route. The top-echelons in the military hierarchy had adopted an idea after being convinced of its usefulness by subordinates driving the concept, the idea was then developed further and promoted among the ranks. Staff from various information collection institutions in home nations were tasked with researching the topic required to justify activities, thus putting the ‘good idea’ in motion. These staff often searched open source information and cherry-picked from a variety of reports and sources to support the concept. Some sources were out of date, including pre-Soviet invasion material, and did not take into account the impact of decades of conflict and displacement, and the resultant tectonic shifts and tensions in Afghan society. Reports and accounts written on different ethnic groups and regions were cobbled into an unwieldy whole, at times romanticising Afghan customs and culture pertaining to family life, to provide a feasible argument for FET activities.

An additional problem with the topic of Afghan women was that it had generated a vast amount of reporting of varying qualities, at times written without visiting the country. In some cases, well-intentioned authors selected excerpts from sources separated by centuries or decades of drastic socio-cultural change to show that Afghan women need to be included and engaged, yet with little or no understanding of the dynamics necessary to set in motion, or measures to support and assist such a process. For instance, one US study produced for use by ISAF stated:

Solidarity among women plays an important role and can mark a counterpoint to the patriarchal culture that outwardly characterizes Afghan society...Men in Pashtun culture hold significantly to a warrior-oriented value system, endorsing individual-oriented bravery and, in principle, a largely egalitarian social structure (Moore et al., 2011, p.4).

This particular study, full of erroneous assumptions on Afghan society, was based on a small number of reports on Afghanistan ranging from 1973 to 2011 and anthropological studies to reports commissioned by the US military.

The embarrassing fact that ISAF had pretty much ignored women for almost a decade was not explained in any of the reports. Nevertheless, much of this information had the imprimatur of being

produced by what was officially called Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) - individuals in designated positions in the military hierarchy or external consultants or institutions. The SME label of course served to validate the content.

This kind of literature provided background materials and set the tone for would-be FET members and the commanders who utilised them. It supplied a supposed baseline of information. For some training courses, apart from a couple of thoughtful books on Afghan women, the booklist consisted of pop culture and travel books on Afghanistan. There were no reports or books written by academics, development practitioners, or research institutions. This perpetuated the catalogue of stereotypes and hackneyed notions about Afghan women, but failed to provide a solid foundation on which FETs could build. It also presented a misleading picture of the context within which FETs would operate. UK FETs, for instance, later reported they were ‘disappointed at the lack of female welcome in the area, which is inconsistent with the briefings received in the UK’.⁵⁵ They also complained that cultural norms were much more variable than they had been led to believe. This problem is also highlighted by a journalist’s report on an internal Pentagon document that summarized a decade of lessons learnt in Afghanistan and Iraq:

[U]nits were not taught in advance what local populations were really like; instead, they depended on what the military calls ‘discovery learning’ -- otherwise known as flying by the seat of one’s pants -- with lessons not systematically passed along to units rotated in as replacements... (Smith 2012).

The US Army’s Commander’s Guide (2011) showed a startlingly shallow analysis of the situation and history of Afghan women. Cherry-picking from various sources, it sought to demonstrate that Afghan women are powerful agents in their own right. The Guide also relied on hearsay and titillating titbits to make deeply distorted claims regarding the life for Afghan women:

- ‘Providing services in a culturally sensitive way to women sharply contrasts with the experience of rural and urban women during the 1980s and 1990s, when rape was regularly used as a means of violence and exerting control or when reforms were either far too progressive or extremely oppressive by Afghan standards, especially in the urban centers.’
- ‘Because rural Afghanistan is still a medieval society, development will have to come in stages and cannot be prematurely forced without risking the kind of backlash that overthrew former King Amanullah and Queen Soraya...It would benefit all FETs to recognize that attempts to import Western-style women’s rights, rhetoric, and ideas without any cultural preparation will not take root and may be regarded as hostile.’
- ‘In order to...provide some basic services to men, women, and children alike, hundreds of underground women’s networks have been established and reach thousands of people to provide schooling, health services, and a forum for therapeutic discussion. If women are caught, they will be executed. These underground networks are believed to largely exist in Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, and some of the surrounding rural areas. However, it is unknown if these networks exist in the countryside.’(Commander’s Guide 2011)

A pioneering mission

Reflecting the notion that women were an untapped secret weapon in the battle for hearts and minds, much of the military-produced literature surrounding female engagement is focused on their occult existence. A section in a 2010 UK Defence Intelligence Report read as follows: ‘Hidden Afghans.

⁵⁵ Correspondence between TFH Influence Team and UK FETs.

Women in Afghanistan make up approximately half of the population, yet they remain mysterious to Westerners, not least as they are infrequently seen in public.’ (UK Defence Intelligence Report, 2010, p...4.

Women were perceived as gatekeepers to a *terra incognita* in spite of the fact that the humanitarian and development communities had been interacting with them for decades. Afghan women’s tendency to accept their fate stoically for centuries, or to reinforce cultural norms by oppressing other women in return for male approval, should also have given military analysts pause when assuming Afghan women were poised to avenge themselves on those who had abused their rights.

As newcomers who were mostly ignorant of earlier decades of interaction and intervention by Western aid agencies, FETs describe their encounters in revelatory terms. One UK FET patrol, for instance, reported observing the ‘rarely seen forum of Afghan females raising issues and concerns for discussion’.⁵⁶ In fact, since pre-Taliban days NGOs have been having meetings with groups of women across Afghanistan, a practice that sharply increased after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2002.

The frequent use of the word ‘discover’ in relation to women in UK and US FET reports highlights the self-perception of FETs as pioneers encountering Afghan women as they occupy a separate space waiting to be found. The word ‘secret’ also occurs frequently in the literature supporting the female engagement concept as in FET reporting. Home schooling has been assisted in Afghanistan since the Mujahedin era when NGOs like CARE started programmed support. In the dramatic reporting surrounding FETs, however, home schools are referred to as ‘secret’ schools and FETs want to support these without acknowledging the Ministry of Education’s policies and procedures. A notion of secret help, automatically implying something taboo, adds a frisson of excitement as something new is ‘discovered’ by FETs.

Considering the assumptions

Waging war is serious business, and military commanders must ensure that their critical planning assumptions are based on empirical evidence and probabilities, not simply on hope. This was not done when the Afghan surge was designed in 2009. (Eikenberry, 2013)

This section focuses more sharply on the assumptions underlying the concept of FET, namely that the teams could engage and influence Afghan women who are influential and can provide information that is useful to ISAF. At no stage was the actual concept of engaging women to achieve a particular effect critically scrutinized. Many of the effects which FETs were expected to achieve flow from these assumptions, in particular the belief that interactions with small groups of foreign military women would impel Afghan women to act in new and desired ways. The erroneous, problematic and misleading nature of these assumptions was frequently raised by me in discussions with some FET leaders, UK military Cultural Advisors and Influence Team members assigned to Task Force Helmand, as well as individuals in ISAF Joint Command in Kabul.

Assumption one: FETs can engage Afghan women

A great deal was expected of ‘engagement’. The Commander’s Guide (2011) describes it as ‘efforts to establish ties of trust and respect between local nationals and the coalition, with the end state being local national support, trust, and respect for the presence of coalition forces and the...[Afghan

⁵⁶ UK FET Patrol Report

government] in their area'. The inkblot metaphor⁵⁷ invoked in counter-insurgency literature provided the rationale to reach women, the heart of the family and community, and through effective communication to initiate what in reality would have been a deep and transformative effect. The focus on how to reach Afghan women, the 'critical yet often overlooked demographic in counter-insurgency strategy...[the] key demographic in gaining popular support' (Commander's Guide 2011) quickly overshadowed considerations of whether their hearts and minds could be won in the first place.

Making friends

[M]eetings should be about making friends, talking about family, and engaging in small talk. Subsequent engagements can branch out into targeted conversations about village dynamics, needs, and support requirements. Once meaningful relationships have been established through persistent and consistent engagements, village men and women will provide increased information about the population and enemy forces. (Commander's Guide 2011)

In some cases it was widely known that members of Afghan forces or militias that partnered with the international Coalition Forces had been involved in extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual assault, paedophilia, human trafficking or other activities, and to which their foreign protectors turned a blind eye, or in the worst cases even protected them with superior fire power. The excuses used for such happenings were that (a) the individuals concerned were effective at killing the Taliban and were therefore useful allies, (b) no Afghan leader had a clean record and (c) the military were not 'tree huggers' and had to accept some brutal realities.⁵⁸ US Special Forces and ISAF were also accused of being directly responsible for torture and wrongful killings.⁵⁹ Since life does not exist in neat discrete spaces, and Afghan communities were aware of these transgressions, it can safely be assumed that they tarnished the identity of all international armed personnel, FETs included. Not all Afghans understood the military's goal of engagements, the dynamics of interaction were complex, and conspiracy theories flourished. Developing trust in these conditions was indeed difficult. As one independent analyst recently noted:

[I]t reveals a deeply embedded assumption about the quest of counterinsurgency war: that use of over-whelming military might featuring extensive use of automated weapons systems and the presence of over a 100,000 international troops, does not, in fact, work against the pursuit of a 'deep comprehension of others', the establishment of 'comprehension' or 'trust' (Holmqvist, 2013 (forthcoming))

It eventually became obvious that compound searches and vehicle checkpoint searches were not the best places to strike up friendships with women who were stressed, frightened and sometimes hostile. There was some recognition of this in ISAF, but also considerable inconsistency. The Commander's Guide (2011) recognises that such conditions are not optimal. In FET trainings I was quizzed about possibilities by female soldiers who had been instructed by their superiors to conduct searches and build rapport with local women in the process. These instructions evidently assumed that women were insulated from the impact of the war on their doorstep: while women were becoming widows and losing sons as a result of ISAF activities, FETs could search women in compounds and checkpoints AND engage successfully with them, communicating while using force.

⁵⁷ In COIN discourse, this refers to creating a small patch of stability which is expected to seep into surrounding areas like the spread of an inkblot.

⁵⁸ Based on discussions with a broad spectrum of personnel in ISAF HQ, IJC, RC-SW and RC-S. A 'tree hugger' is a derogatory or affectionate term used by military personnel when referring to those whom they consider as hippies or do-gooders.

⁵⁹ The events in Wardak province in early 2013 with locals demanding the withdrawal of US Special Forces because of wrongful killings of locals are just one recent example.

Chercher La Femme

[I]n the fields, the patrol noticed one woman with two children herding a flock of goats in the fields. When the patrol halted and the FET attempted to approach the woman, she began walking away further and further. The FET decided not to chase her down, as it appeared she did not want to talk.⁶⁰

FETs and those in charge of them agonized more about reaching Afghan women than analysing and questioning the utility of the contact. The intricacy of family decision-making on something as convoluted and risk-laden as support for an insurgency was reduced to a binary choice made by women, and the more women decided in favour of the government and its international allies, the greater the chance of forming the critical mass to ‘mobilize the population’, as Kilcullen had written.

The frustration over finding women to engage became so intense that some reports mention a ‘specific drive to search for females’.⁶¹ Ideas forwarded included sending FET to men’s *shuras*, identifying what were considered ‘forward thinking’ families. In some cases reaching women became the ultimate goal, especially when it was clear that nobody was sure what exactly they were meant to do with women once they accessed them. Practical considerations also began to impede progress. It became increasingly clear to the military that the biggest limiting factor for FET engagement was the lack of female Afghan interpreters willing to deploy and/or female military linguists. Male interpreters and linguists would not have been allowed to engage with women in communities except under exceptional circumstances e.g. a female needing urgent medical attention.

Some FET documents clearly state that engagement is the mission, losing sight of the original objective, which was to facilitate the counter-insurgency mission by recruiting women to form a critical mass. There is no mention of how many women were accessed over a specific time period or geographic area. Only one report explains that FETs have found that it takes a great deal of time and significant investment to develop the trust necessary to be able to engage. Engagement was now for the sake of engagement. This development was regularly discussed as an emerging problem by those involved in handling FETs in Task Force in Helmand.

Afghans easily deciphered what FETs wanted and promised engagement with women to achieve other goals. They quickly took advantage of the desperation of FETs. One report,⁶² for instance, describes how a veterinary engagement was set up since the community had indicated that women would attend in numbers to receive training on animal care. Instead a group of men appeared with no interest in the preceding training and demanded free medical care for their livestock. At other times women would be presented with male chaperones.

Communities understood that FETs relied on hand-outs to gain access to women. These could range from gifts and free items to the promise of small development projects catering to women’s practical gender needs. UK FETs faced more difficulties and frustration in engaging females than US FETs, probably because the latter were better resourced for providing hand-outs and assistance. In areas under UK control in Helmand, the District Stabilisation Teams (DSTs), answering to the civilian-led Provincial Reconstruction Team rather than the military-led Task Force, refused to support badly formulated FET project proposals and consistently reminded their superiors that ISAF-inspired projects were often not sustainable. This made FETs’ work near impossible as families saw no point in engagement.

⁶⁰ USMC FET SITREP

⁶¹ UK FET Patrol Report

⁶² UK FET Patrol Report

FETs consistently had to fall back on ‘consent winning activities’,⁶³ the easiest of which is usually hand-outs. Medical events were well attended because Afghan doctors generally try to divert patients to their private clinics and then to their pharmacies where they are instructed to buy a variety of medicines. A free medical examination followed by free provision of medicines is a most welcome change. Women’s centres were also popular because the cost of hospitality is removed from an individual family, and there are no men to influence events held there. Women can socialise at will. The difficulty is that a limited number of women will be allowed to travel to a women’s centre, and men can always use the security excuse to curtail women’s mobility.

Bypassing the guardians

Almost two decades of personal experience and discussions with Afghans have convinced me that Afghans are keen to secure different avenues to extract information and resources from powerful patrons and institutions. Female representatives will be seen as a ‘soft touch’ and an easy avenue through which to influence the transaction (e.g. with ISAF), therefore FETs were welcomed, but their presence did not necessarily change overall views on ISAF,⁶⁴ as shown by refusal to give FETs carte blanche to engage Afghan women. Additionally, if Afghan history is a guide, whenever women’s issues are thrust into the political sphere, family males will respond cautiously and eventually aggressively if a powerful group is suspected of trying to interfere in the inner workings and power balance of the private sphere, whether that group is the Communist government, the Taliban or others.

Interaction with women is almost always negotiated via men. Even when men are not present at some stage, the woman engaged will mention that she has to refer back to her family on an issue. In fact many men believe that they must control women's mobility, visibility, speech, congregation and activities. Women's involvement must be facilitated by men who will create a space for them - and take it away if things get out of hand (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2006). It was therefore a naive expectation that women in areas where FETs were newly arrived could hold *shuras* at short notice.

Since FET’s utility mainly relied on accessing women in communities, an inordinate amount of time and effort was spent trying to get buy-in from men in communities for the FET mission. It was mentioned in almost every report. By 2011, UK military elements were stating that FET should be part of a comprehensive engagement strategy and that they cannot expect to engage Afghan women just because they are female (Menziés and Cooper 2011). This meant that women should accompany male colleagues on their missions and see whom they could meet on the margins.

A growing sense of irritation becomes apparent in reporting as time and again FETs have to go through the male public face of the village before even tackling individual families and as meetings are chaperoned by males. Men will sense a great deal of risk in this kind of interaction, and have a standard range of excuses to limit women’s participation in events and projects (e.g. the event is not in their village, the women are uneducated, the women do not have time, security is not good and so

⁶³ According to the UK Ministry of Defence, consent winning activities are ‘simple projects that gain consent of the local populace . . . to create a permissive environment. . . . They are intended to gain the goodwill of the community in order to initiate the engagement required to identify, plan and implement longer term programmes.’ United Kingdom, Ministry of Defence, *British Army Field Manual: Countering Insurgency*, Vol. 1, Part 10 (January 2010).

⁶⁴ The lack of success of the Soviet military in engaging different sectors of Afghan society should have provided ample lessons on the futility of such endeavours. See Deborah Ellis (2000) *Women of the Afghan War*. Information on such interactions was also provided by many of my own interviewees over the years in different regions of Afghanistan.

on). All over Afghanistan, men will generally sit in on discussions to censor communication in both directions, as a damage control measure. In most cases, the man will leave once he is convinced that the conversation is not going in a harmful direction. The controlling behaviour reflects in most cases men's lack of trust in female ability to think rationally and in the inability of their usually illiterate wives to give coherent responses, hardly an indicator that women are influential. It also reflects fears amongst some Afghan men that educated urban women, Afghan or international, will talk to women about their rights and encourage them to divorce their husbands. This last point was discussed in a FET training where participants who had been in Afghanistan before recounted instances of men worrying about this eventuality. Generally, however, the FETs were unaware of these concerns and nuances.

Evidently some Afghans were genuinely wary of Taliban spies and informers and were reluctant in some cases to allow women to engage with FETs. It was reasonable for Afghans in an area like Helmand, which had seen intense fighting since mid-decade, to be risk averse; dangers from Taliban retribution for fraternising with ISAF or the Afghan government were real. In a chaperoned engagement, the male can show hospitality while diverting conversation into neutral territory when necessary and exploring possibilities for projects, hand-outs and assistance. As a FET leader bitterly noted: "They were sceptical about FET and apart from the one compound were only really interested in what they could get from us."⁶⁵

Development practitioners working in Afghanistan very quickly learn that security is often used as an excuse by Afghan colleagues to deter them from engaging with women, starting new activities and initiating anything that may create perceived disruption or destabilize the status quo. In Helmand, FETs often reported men and women mentioning fear of the Taliban as a reason for things not happening. Being singularly focused on Taliban activity, the international military often took this at face value rather than analysing to ascertain what constitutes a genuine threat versus reluctance from local people who use the Taliban as a pretext to avoid change. The Taliban have in fact become a useful foil in preventing women from engaging in all sorts of activities, but the FETs seemed unaware that even were the Taliban to disappear, numerous Afghan men would find other excuses to stop women undertaking many activities.

In pursuit of consent from communities, the FETs doggedly tried to find solutions in the game of escalating excuse syndrome utilised by Afghan communities to avoid disappointing and directly refusing tenacious groups and individuals with a specific agenda. This usually started with a problem statement e.g. no education for girls, even though many in the community probably did not want their daughters educated in the first place. The solution usually presented by outsiders was a school solely for girls. Once this was built, the next excuse was lack of a female teacher. If she was found, the next excuse was security. Even if security improved, parents would find other pretexts to prevent girls going to school after menarche. This mostly has to do with cultural attitudes about girls' marriageability or their propensity to be lead astray by young men encountered on their way to school. At any rate, Afghans generally do not like to discuss such issues straightaway in a public setting. Similarly, a man may appear very keen about setting up a women's *shura* but immediately says he cannot allow his wife to go to the village where the *shura* is being held because it is too far for a woman to travel. He wants the *shura* in his village. It is almost completely guaranteed that should the FET hold the *shura* in his village he will find another excuse to cover the fact that his wife would never be allowed to attend.

⁶⁵ UK FET Patrol Report

Encounters with women

When outside females, especially foreigners with armour and weapons, come into a community a group of curious and enthusiastic women will almost always turn up. The usual format for prominent males is to produce the family and extended family of the village head or elder, whose house is normally being used because it is probably larger or cleaner than anyone else's. Neighbours and allies will also turn up to support the family in entertaining the guests. To display largesse, elders will present charity cases (widows and other cases with tragic stories) who may be helped by the external benefactors. Women are sometimes rounded up by elders to lobby on an issue on which they are briefed before being herded into such engagements. On several occasions, I have sat in the room as an honorary male when district governors discussed with their entourage exactly who would attend an event set up for women by outsiders and what they would say when they got there.

Lack of cultural sensitivity

Once inside a family home, some FETs wasted no time in getting down to business. In one account a FET is invited into a wedding in full swing, fitting with the Afghan custom of extending hospitality. The FET reports the invitation as a very positive sign since they were told, presumably by an interpreter, that such events are 'closed'. The FET then try to interview the bride and bride's mother on security and development in the middle of the ceremony with the Afghans politely trying to hint that this was not the time or place: 'I sat next to the veiled bride and spoke to her mother who indicated that healthcare and security within the village were good, but was more interested in seeing whether western females could play the *Tabla* (drum) and dance. Their time was short but we let the family (including nervous groom) know that ISAF has a human face as well not merely that of a protector or searcher.'⁶⁶ It was a demonstration of social ineptness which would be glaringly clear by any cultural standards.

Switching lanes

It took UK forces almost a year to realise that engagement would have to go through men, and that the most acceptable approach was to address women within their family roles, not as individuals. There was no notion at the initial stages that engaging Afghan men would get any results. In the quest to reach women, gatekeeping Afghan men are described as 'more obstructive than expected',⁶⁷ almost depicting them as an enemy. The attitude was ironic, if not counterproductive, given that the FETs were trying to access women to influence family males in order to produce a counter-insurgency effect.

Tiring of the lack of success with engaging and influencing women, some US Marines FETs started conducting 'youth *shuras*'. The age groups involved are not clear from the reports, which sometimes show pictures of female soldiers addressing children loitering on hills. The Commander's Guide (2011) later encouraged female soldiers to engage young boys because "[a]dolescent males have a natural desire to impress females...Using this desire to interact with and impress females can be advantageous to U.S. military forces when done respectfully to both the female Soldier and the adolescent Afghan males.' This alarming instruction clearly indicates the desperation being felt in some quarters in how best FETs could engage Afghans, influence them and extract useful information.

⁶⁶ UK FET Patrol Report

⁶⁷ Correspondence between TFH Influence team and UK FETs

Assumption two: FETs could influence Afghan women

The...FETs have found that it takes a great deal of time to develop permissiveness. It is important that CF comds [combined force commanders] and FET members have the patience to develop FFU [Find, Feel and Understand]⁶⁸ of an area, even though the prize is INFLUENCE and it is desired immediately. This implies a significant level of investment and hope; if influence does not subsequently develop, no doubt a degree of despondency can then set in - but it must be accepted that we will not always succeed. (UK FET ASSESSREP)

The language above reflects the level of instrumentalization and attempted standardization of the very complex and sensitive process of negotiating access to a foreign culture or community. This perspective was further reinforced by what passed for social scientific studies, such as a report commissioned in 2011 to ascertain the impact of FETs, given that only anecdotal evidence of success was available. The study, conducted by academics working for the Sandia Corporation,⁶⁹ concluded in favour of the FETs based on general modelling:

Experimental results support the hypothesis that FETs, by extending contact to the female community in a population, can bring about a greater shift in opinion than engagement teams who interact with the male community alone...Our modeling indicates that FETs acting on female and male social networks with topologies consistent with the literature can generate positive opinion shifts, which agrees with anecdotal accounts from units in the field. (Moore, et al., 2011, p. 9).

The study employed “an opinion dynamics model on idealized social networks characterized by strong gender assortativity to analyze how gendered networks contribute to opinion formation, and how FETs and other groups might act to influence opinions and behaviors in those networks’.⁷⁰ The study further argued that the insurgent lacked this advantage because it only interacted with men.

Kilcullen on influencing women

“Win the women and you own the family unit’ - The linear logic of this statement expresses the notion that a foreign military can not only ‘win women’ but ‘own families’, using women as the lever. ‘Owning the family unit’ is an ambiguous phrase and a highly improbable notion in a deeply patriarchal society such as Afghanistan where there are rare instances of the type of women’s empowerment and leadership sought by ISAF. Men can marry multiple wives, while women are often forced to marry male relatives when a husband dies. There are many practices in Afghan society which prove that the locus of family ‘ownership’ is based on complex socio-economic considerations. If there is in fact a force within ‘women’s space’ which can be mobilised to fight insurgency, then it nests deep within the dense, complex, gendered ganglion of family relations. The family can only be effectively engaged and possibly mobilized by gendered teams fully conversant with gender as a description of the relations between men and women. In this sense an analysis that sees FET integrated as part of a comprehensive engagement policy makes sense. Instead, as we have seen, in the ISAF framework women and men were being treated as segregated categories.

⁶⁸ Find, Feel and Understand – the process of assessing the situation in an area.

⁶⁹ The small print in the paper states that Sandia National Laboratories “is a multi-program laboratory managed and operated by Sandia Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of Lockheed Martin Corporation, for the U.S. Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration under contract DE-AC04-94AL85000’.

⁷⁰ The study mentions that “[G]ender assortativity, the tendency for like-gendered individuals to form relationships, has been observed in many types of networks, including childhood and elementary schools...and secondary schools...in the United States, in workplaces and entrepreneurial...and in immigrant populations...’ (Moore, et al., 2011). Results were being extrapolated to diverse post-war communities in rural Afghanistan.

Woman to woman

It was assumed that female soldiers could appeal to women due to a shared sex, and that they would bond easily with their Afghan sisters to solicit information and change their allegiance. The point was reinforced by studies such as the one cited above from the Sandia Corporation, which claimed that people form relationships “with people who resemble themselves according to some sets of socio-demographic characteristics, including ethnicity, age, class, and gender” (Moore, et al., 2011, p. 3).

As noted above, the assumption regarding the ease with which Afghan women could be engaged was patently incorrect. FET planners also assumed that Afghan women would be easy to influence once engaged. This was evidently based on the perception that women in Muslim society are somehow ‘innocent’ and ‘naive’ because they have been sequestered by men in the confines of the home. This notion first became apparent to me when the RC-S command asked me to engage women in prominent Afghan families in Kandahar province as potentially more representative and uncorrupted than the men, who were proving duplicitous. In the RC-S command, at any rate, it was believed that if the men can be bypassed, the women’s side of the family is untainted by the impacts of conflict and betrayal ravaging a nation. The command was disappointed when I explained that women can be just as obstructive and corrupt as men in any society.

The first foreigners ever seen

There was a view that the novelty of FETs for Afghan women in itself would give them influence stemming from the novelty and the extraordinary qualities that went with it. This is reported frequently in a variety of ways, such as:

- ‘FET engaged a woman who was shocked and amazed to see a female Marine especially in this area since the Taliban are very active and have a lot of influence.’
- ‘Many of the females had never spoken to a foreigner before.’⁷¹

The delight shown by Afghan women when foreign women arrive in a village or their home is based on a combination of factors. It reflects curiosity and a relief from the tedium of their life or an expectation that like times before there is the possibility to break out of normal patterns for a while. A novelty gives women something to gossip about and an opportunity to socialise with other women. Interactions with outsiders allow women to understand something about the outside world and to please their menfolk and perform their roles in entertaining guests. For some, the important element is receiving some form of hand-out or raising the status of the family by forming links to an important foreign body. This would allow the family to influence the former’s activities and, most crucially, their ability to display largesse in the future. This is based on traditional norms of hospitality and a slightly newer culture, which has developed since aid organisations started interacting with families in Afghanistan and in refugee camps. Any development organisation, for example, would be foolish to believe that the warmth with which hospitality is offered equates with the provision of unbiased and accurate information and willingness to follow courses of action suggested at a later date.

The hand-out game

Only one UK FET report is candid about an area where people were only interested in what they could get from ISAF. After decades of assistance in Afghanistan, there is a standard and well established protocol when assistance is offered, especially through women. One approach is to deny

⁷¹ USMC FET SITREP

previous assistance. In one case a FET visited a ‘comfortable’ compound with 54 family members who unbelievably claimed that they did not own a radio. Another approach is to claim that everyone present in a venue is poor and deserving of charity e.g. widow or orphan.

In some cases, women, considered as more gullible, malleable and easily influenced than men, are briefed by men before they interact with outsiders. If the meeting is anticipated well in advance a script of some description may have been devised and rehearsed. In conflict environments when families feel under duress from armed actors this kind of preparation or risk mitigation helps ensure survival. In some instances, prominent families will position themselves to act as gatekeepers for any assistance entering the village to ensure that only they and/or relatives and clients benefit from largesse. Individuals will discredit each other and claim that they are the true representatives of a group. Such behaviour is clearly in evidence from examining some reports on interactions between FETs and women.

Masters of the game

Afghan men and women use the sophistication honed over hundreds of years of living in risky environments to avoid doing much of what the FETs want to do and know. FET engagements were, for the most part, skilfully diverted by Afghans into the quagmire of superficial chitchat on day to day life or small-scale projects and never reached the ambitions of COIN proponents. Afghans manipulated the FETs with gracious ease – the influencing roles were reversed. Sometimes their efforts were too blatant, for example, locals bargaining with the US Marines for money, claiming that the insurgents offered greater benefits. In one case a woman took a FET with her to the District Governor (DG) and asked him to build a well next to her home, to which the DG agreed. The FET recorded this as a success. In fact, the woman used the FETs as a lever to ensure that the DG could not deny her request for fear of loss of face, but this was lost on the young FET soldier.

In another case the teacher from a local school meets the patrol at the edge of the village and talks to the FET. He praises the Marines, thanks them for their efforts and gently and graciously diverts them from their mission to talk to the women.⁷² Without understanding the underlying reasons behind the diversion, the FETs report this as locals fearing the Taliban rather than what in reality it probably was, namely a sophisticated move to avoid engagement for a host of reasons. In another report, women at a community centre report that their husbands have told them of an increase in night letters naming their family members and of the risk of a suicide attack from a female bomber.⁷³ Most likely, this is their men’s ‘psychological operations’ to use the Taliban bogey man to deter their wives from going to the community centre. It could also have been a ploy to indicate to FETs that women were taking considerable risks to be there. Consequently, the FETs should feel obligated to repay them for their troubles. Either way, the Afghans proved themselves adept in their attempts at influencing the young women in the FETs.

Consent winning activities gone awry

After reaching women, the next hurdle was winning their hearts and minds so they could be influenced. Based on Kilcullen’s advice that ‘co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermines the insurgents’, FETs wanted to help women with projects. Once again FETs were out of their depth, ignoring decades of experience of NGOs working on micro-projects to assist women and proceeded to reinvent the wheel. For example, as part of the established ritual process of asking all

⁷² USMC FET SITREP

⁷³ USMC FET SITREP

newcomers for sewing machines for tailoring to generate income, there is a conviction, encouraged by Afghans, that a sewing machine will be life-changing for women. There are many reports which explain why small scale income generation projects e.g. sewing and embroidery, do not automatically empower women and enable them to economically support themselves. Reasons for this range from lack of control of income and viable markets to the inability to even ask for payment for services.

The machines arrive, and are typically distributed within the extended family or among close friends rather than used to benefit the community, as described in the project proposal. Some machines are often left unused or sold. A group of women will be gathered and told to sew and praise the project at times when donor delegations visit. In many cases, FETs were unaware of such misappropriation and accepted reports that tailoring was a community success. 'The woman who received the micro-grant...told FET the workshop is a success and over 40 of the women who live in the surrounding compounds have taken advantage of the sewing machines. She reported that the sewing machines had been used every day except for Fridays.'⁷⁴

Assumption three: Afghan women are influential

In the time of Xerxes, it is documented that the Persian King took advice from his Queen, which significantly impacted a political issue and prevented mass genocide. We are still in Persia. Conversations still go on between men and women behind closed doors. To understand those conversations and more importantly how we may be able to influence these conversations, we must be able to access the females. FETs are a proven concept. The Marine Corps does this well. (Commander's Guide 2011)

It seems odd that the ISAF command resorted to an apocryphal example from pre-Islamic Iran to make a point about women's presumed influence two millennia later in today's conservative, Islamic context of Afghan society. In fact, there is very little proof that Afghan women wielded anything resembling that influence within the household and the community as leaders. If ISAF had looked, they would have found no contemporary texts to back up such a claim. Using the King of ancient Persia as a reference points for evidence of women's political influence in the contemporary rural Afghanistan is akin to using Pocahontas to explain why US women are active in politics today.

Kilcullen on the influence of women

'Women are...influential in forming social networks that insurgents use for support'. Kilcullen's claim (2006) does not reflect the roles of the majority of women's in post-war Afghan society. Women are rarely given social sanction to form social networks beyond extended family and in many cases lead an isolated existence. Community males would never dream of exposing their womenfolk to out-of-area fighters for network formation. Placing women at the centre of such a process calls for some serious unpacking. Closer examination points to numerous factors that all work against women forming networks beyond the confines of the family compound.

Women are responsible for maintaining networks of reciprocity (e.g. exchanging food, gifts and help in dealing with life cycle events such as births) with other women in the community, particularly the extended family, but these roles have been fragmented and undermined by war, displacement and other factors. Decreased mobility in areas with fighting further limited these functions. There is anecdotal evidence⁷⁵ that insurgents, the Haqqani group in particular, understand well the potential

⁷⁴ USMC FET SITREP

⁷⁵ Personal notes on informal discussions with current and former Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) personnel, 2010-2012

use of mobile women in urban and peri-urban areas, and influence such women through the socially sanctioned medium of the madrasa, but their numbers are likely to be modest.

The 'women are influential' mantra

The assertion of women's influence within the family was repeated in all ISAF and NATO member policy documents related to FET. The related notion was that women had agency as individuals to influence the political and military agenda of the men of their household in the public sphere:

Despite restrictions on public roles, women wield considerable influence within their homes, which can indirectly affect events outside the home... As a result respected female 'elders' may serve as negotiators as they can move between households...and act as spokesperson for their family within the female sphere...to request the cessation of feuds between families...In addition to the responsibility for the upbringing of children, Afghan women also played a significant role in motivating men, husbands, sons and brothers, to continue their participation in wars and in providing future fighters. (UK Defence Intelligence Report 2010)

This last assertion is most probably based on the actions of one single woman, the iconic and legendary figure of Malalai, said to have lived during the second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80), who famously picked up the Afghan flag and encouraged fighters to surge forward when motivation was flagging during the Battle of Maiwand in 1880. In all the years that I have spent in Afghanistan I have found a minute percentage of women who have had the circumstances to become military or political leaders within their communities. These are mostly from the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek ethnic groups across the north and west, but very rarely in Pushtun communities of the South and East (where the Taliban have relatively more support).

Information showing that women's influence in the Afghan context is not a straightforward given was consistently missed by FETs, possibly because no technical wizardry or training short-cuts could have adequately equipped them to understand the social context before attempting to alter it. FET reports give the impression that they were more about proving the assertion that women were influential in the communities visited rather than discovering the reality of the situation. Most trip reports have points that amount to claims of women's influence, but the details of what exactly women have access to and can control are lacking. A very few reports have information that expands our knowledge of women's modes of survival in an unstable area such as Helmand, but such information was not sought out and often missed as the authors were not social scientists or development practitioners, but military personnel with a mission to actualize the doctrine given them and blinded by the need to succeed.

Observing the FET, it seemed to me that the teams launched themselves on rural Helmandi society determined and desperate to demonstrate exactly how influential Afghan women were. They were told at the outset that women were influential and were sent on a mission to seek the 'right' women to help them achieve their COIN objectives. Thus they imagined they saw evidence of influence in many interactions. In one instance, the ability to sit and have a chat with a FET is seen as a sign of 'firm control within the home'. In another case, while a medic sees a child outside a compound, a FET enters and engages the women. The report says 'FET went inside the compound and talked with the females, who were happy to talk to FET. The absence of [the family elder] made no difference and showed that the women had sufficient power and influence within the family to talk equally in his presence or out of it.'⁷⁶ How a simple chat indicates 'power and influence' is not explained.

⁷⁶ USMC FET SITREP

Muddying the water

The FET Leader spoke to the shop keeper and requested his opinion on LN [local national] female desire to engage with the FET and/or Afghan females.⁷⁷

At times it was difficult for FETs to grasp the essentials of a situation because groups and individuals provided an incomplete picture based on various motivations. For instance, some Afghan men feel it is essential to appear ‘enlightened’ in front of foreign guests, especially to impress young women in groups such as FETs. They might say that their wives can go out, engage with other families and make decisions within the household etc., but if put to the test there is often a fast retraction. In one case a husband declared that his wife was mobile but further probing revealed that his wife was not even allowed to listen to the radio. Afghan men may claim that their wife or mother influence them and ‘run the house’, but if questioned about what areas she influences, how she influences and what the limitations are to that power a different picture will emerge. Once the FET or any group of foreigners leave, those men are under pressure to safeguard their masculinity and impress their peers with their honour and ability to control of their women. Such nuanced understanding of the motivations of Afghan women and men was never revealed in the FET reports.

Once the FET notion became popular, it quickly gained further supporters and clients in the international community closely affiliated to the military presence in Afghanistan. The FETs became what the military terms ‘a self-licking lollipop’. For instance, when a female Afghan advocate and Congressional liaison at a Washington DC-based consulting group is quoted in the Commander’s Guide as saying that Pashtu women have a powerful role in their families and in Afghan society,⁷⁸ the message is what ISAF wants to hear and strengthens the ties between the consulting firm and the military. In an Afghan context, however, the claim that an Afghan woman has a wide network of male contacts, and can be the difference between their sons becoming peacemakers or insurgents, has a different meaning. It equates with accusing her of being a woman of ill repute and her husband of ‘facilitating business’.

Admittedly, not all FETs consistently saw women as influential and informed. In my numerous discussions with military personnel from a broad spectrum of ranks and roles there was at times also the perception of Afghan women as victims and innocents needing sympathy and help. Some FET members articulated the need to save Afghan women and let this view influence their assessment of particular cases. In some cases, for instance, USMC FETs found women hiding large sums of money on their person or hiding IED components or opium tar in their part of the compound. Yet in the reports of such events, the women are depicted as not having agency or influence. In line with this view of Afghan woman, FET recommendations include preventing ‘the enemy from utilizing women to smuggle or hide items’. Women are here placed in a passive role; they are no longer agents of influence in the family and the community but helpless victims. In another case, women who have attended meetings organised by FET are seen in the company of people suspected of collaborating with insurgents. There is a note of surprise in the report, which does not recognize that it makes perfect sense for female Taliban informers to be checking what FETs are up to. Overall, such presentations contrast starkly with positive reporting of FET activities where women are seen as influential.

⁷⁷ USMC FET SITREP

⁷⁸ Commander’s Guide 2011

Influence, roles and decision-making

Influence should not be confused with role. Women perform many roles in Afghan families and in society but this is not the same as having control over and access to power and assets. The following are some formidable obstacles to women openly exerting influence in the family:

- A man allowing his wife to be seen as decisive or controlling of his behaviour will be ridiculed and face social pressure from his peers. His masculinity will be brought into question.
- Women are almost completely at the mercy of men for their basic survival. They can in the worst and most extreme cases be killed by men and, in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, Afghan government officials may not intervene if it is considered a private honour issue. The public rarely hears of such cases.
- A woman cannot challenge male relatives directly in most cases because of prevailing social attitudes about the position which women should adopt vis-a-vis males in society. This remains unchanged even in cases where women are better educated or have an income.
- Women are subjected to high levels of domestic violence across Afghanistan - this forces them to self-censor and ensure that they toe the line.

Any decision-making process within a close knit family unit occurs at the nexus of a complex set of relationships, obligations and sociocultural prescriptions. It is not a simple, linear process involving, for example, mother and son. Apart from decision-making on the running of a household, managing family workloads and deciding on the sale or barter of small household assets, most women's influence rarely extends to deciding for family members, except daughters before marriage, sons up to puberty and daughter-in-laws who enter the household. This all depends on family circumstances and architecture. Some examples of decision-making processes affecting family members which women may be involved in include:

- Who her children marry, but not whether her children marry⁷⁹
- Whether her children receive an education or not
- Whether she marries one of her male relatives in the case of her husband dying

Once a dominant male in the family makes a decision it is generally impossible for a woman to reverse it. Women will generally not participate in decision-making about what is grown on a farm, sale of land and property, for example.⁸⁰ Saccharine notions expressed by FET supporters that if 'mum is not happy' the family is not happy,⁸¹ are foreign social constructs that do not have the same resonance in Afghan society. In areas such as rural Helmand, men rarely look to females for approval and support once they are in a family and power relations are firmly established. As a result recommendations such as "FET can support ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] development and recruitment by encouraging wives and mothers to support their husbands and children's

⁷⁹ See for example Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2010)

⁸⁰ In 1997, in an evaluation of a CARE Afghanistan project, I surprised the assistance community with research results that demonstrated that women in Eastern Afghanistan had minor decision-making roles in the household and that some controlled the sales of small livestock. Previous to this it was assumed that women had very little decision-making power in the home.

⁸¹ MSgt Julia Watson discussing FETs in a TEDx talk uploaded to the internet on 24 Jan, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozPsmNiu12U>.

participation in the ANSF⁸² are divorced from social reality. If Afghan men act to make spouses happy it is more a matter of personal preference and circumstances. There are no cultural or religious injunctions to guarantee women's influence in the home.⁸³

The realities of women's influence

Women, like other family members impact that unit through various actions and presence, but their influence differs from the stereotypes used in ISAF to promote FETs. The vast majority of Afghan women may rarely have voice in the family context. Faced with men, many women lack assertiveness in some areas because their socialization from birth has involved accepting male supremacy and allowing male relatives to be their voice, taking over the right to think and speak on their behalf (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2006). Some examples of the type of influence women have in the private family sphere may be articulated or expressed as follows:

- Emotional blackmail e.g. pretending to be sick to mobilize feelings of guilt or to deter certain courses of action. This only works if the males in the family hold the female in great esteem or have affection for her.
- Violence towards family members who are lower in the family hierarchy e.g. beating and more severe disciplinary actions towards children and daughters-in-law
- Control of food supplies in the home
- Control of money allocated for 'appropriate' spending e.g. food for family and guests⁸⁴

Such behaviour is generally in pursuit of personal goals, to consolidate authority when threatened by intra-family rivalries, to maintain face, to avoid punishment and violence, and/or to maintain an accepted social order determined by 'culture', usually male-sanctioned socially acceptable behaviour which maintains the patriarchal order. Additionally, a matriarch may be listened to out of respect for age but not necessarily heeded. A very small number of women in Afghanistan may have the type of influence or agency within their families which ISAF sought, but even this is limited. British military sources assumed, for example, that mothers could use their position in Afghan society and Islam to influence the behaviour of sons and other relations:

Influence over children. Open source research indicates that while men are responsible for the support of their family, it is a mother who decides whether sons should be allowed to go to fight in a war. In Ou'ranic[sic]⁸⁵ teaching, the mother is the gateway to heaven, thus sons need the forgiveness of their mother before they can enter heaven.... *Influence among men.* Depending on the number of sons who remain living in the compound with their wives and children, a matriarch can wield a considerable amount of power, particularly over her daughters-in-law but also in respect of her sons...Older women can therefore be a key interlocutor for activities aimed at young men... (Defence Intelligence Report 2010)

⁸² USMC FET SITREP

⁸³ Recent struggles in parliament over the law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women have highlighted the persistence of negative cultural attitudes to women based on Afghan interpretations of religion and endorsed by high level politicians and religious scholars.

⁸⁴ This information has been gleaned over the course of interactions with Afghan families during numerous evaluations of programmes and from observation and discussion of interactions in numerous families known to me in previous years.

⁸⁵ Misplaced apostrophe in the original.

Some mothers may in fact wield tremendous influence over sons but are also acutely aware of the societal constructs which shackle their expectations and limit them to the narrow behavioural confines of what it is to be a good Afghan, Muslim mother. This is a complicated construct and to mobilize it for purposes beyond personal or family interests, women would have to understand and be committed to a sense of greater societal or political good. A woman may be upset about a son joining the insurgency or police force, for example, but may only show her disapproval or anxiety by getting sick from grief. It is difficult to ask women to mobilise such behaviour on behalf of ISAF or the Afghan government. To attempt anything of the sort, women would have to be politicized and committed to contribute to an abstract notion. They would have to understand how the broader political issues beyond their narrow personal or parochial interests affect their family lives and feel empowered to change them. Developing this understanding and commitment is a long-term process requiring a drastic broadening of women's horizons and an exceedingly subtle and fine-tuned facilitation.

Afghan women's groups influencing society

Kilcullen's advice to use a 'network of enlightened self-interest' to undermine an armed and violent insurgency in Afghan rural hinterlands drew military planners to focus on women's groups. Considering the obstacles to influencing family, the possibilities to form influential women's groups within communities are even more limited. The following conditions would have to be met:

- Women are allowed to appear in public when appropriately covered
- Women are mobile
- Women can gather in a group
- Women have identified common interests to act as a group
- Women are free to express opinions in a communal setting
- Women are allowed to discuss violence perpetrated within their homes or community
- Women are free and informed to discuss political and military issues in a substantive way beyond sharing gossip

These conditions are rarely met in conservative Pushtun areas, and even in permissive environments may require long-term (one year or more) facilitation from trained individuals and/or generational change. There is a broad consensus among Afghan men, reluctantly shared with foreigners, that women do not have the intelligence to say something useful in any gathering.⁸⁶ They are also confused that foreigners would want to talk to women when they believe that male leaders can give them all the information they seek.

FET reports rarely reveal this reality, but more commonly their own fantasies about women's roles and influence at the community level. Similar to misunderstandings about *shuras* were assumptions about women becoming leaders. US FET reports have many items such as 'Women identify future community leaders at *shura*' or 'Local woman willing to be representative for women's issues'. Given the many obstacles involved for individuals, especially women, often with limited connections and resources to achieve leadership positions in Afghan society, these statements demonstrate remarkable naiveté. In one section entitled 'FET discusses familial roles and culture with LN [Local National] women', all we are told is that a woman receiving sewing machines invites the FET to the wedding of her husband to his second wife, who is fourteen. The FET calls this civil analysis. In fact FET reports

⁸⁶ See for example Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2010) where Afghan men complain that their women cannot even walk in straight lines.

show very little understanding of what women in communities traditionally do. There are no discussions of communal activities during important lifecycle events or to help afflicted families. Such traditions reveal a great deal about community relations and the role of women.

A gathering of women does not a Shura make

In FET reporting, any gathering of two women or more was referred to as a *shura*, apparently to give a living room chat some form of legitimacy and to depict the gathering as purposive and influential. The idea that any gathering of women, usually related to each other, in someone's living room was a *shura*⁸⁷ was frequently mentioned by the Military Support to Stabilisation Group (MSSG) in Helmand. UK CIMIC teams, which can be seen in some ways as the precursors for FETs and form the thrust of relations between civilians and military on the ground totally misunderstood the significance of *shuras*. Information being provided to the UK military from home reflected the misunderstanding on the ground:

Female Shuras. In Helmand female shuras or meetings are known to take place, usually bringing together 5 to 50 people, although they can be as large as 500. Women may attend several shuras. Some women do not tell their husbands that they attend, while others are encouraged to do so by their husbands. In some cases these seem simply to be a forum for women to meet and talk, but most are focused on some kind of teaching, vocational training or production (Defence Intelligence Report 2010)

This ignores associations, purpose and significance accorded to the term *shura* by Afghans: the fact that this is a male tradition, that gatherings of men are fundamentally different from those of women, and that a male *shura* is a network of influential people, usually elected in some manner, who get together to preside over specific processes and wield community decision-making power. It also ignores the lack of cohesiveness often shown by women in such contexts and their inability to act in a group without strong facilitation. It ignores completely the dynamics of women's get-togethers and how these are often remotely controlled by men. In fact, Afghan men can show great sensitivity and reluctance to the idea of women holding meetings and setting up *shuras*.⁸⁸ Gathering women in a room with spousal consent is a significant logistical event in conservative areas but does not necessarily go further than that. After some time, those handling UK FETs began to understand this, while the USMC FETs continued to draw women with projects and assistance.

Women's *shuras* are, for the most part, a relatively new idea in Afghanistan,⁸⁹ and a gathering of women generally does not have authority to effect substantive change in a community without a great deal of interference from men. Women do not have the same history of having *shuras* for a variety of reasons, including pressures on their time due to workload, lack of space, lack of peace of mind, and limited mobility. Women have no history of community level decision-making, therefore no experience, no precedent and no decision-making authority. Women's gatherings represent a number of things that does not tally with the expectations of groups such as FETs and other inexperienced observers.

⁸⁷ Wardak and Braithwaite (2013) describe *shuras* as conflict resolution bodies. They quote sources claiming that women's *shuras* existed prior to the Taliban to uphold human rights issues. Since I was present in Afghanistan before the advent of the Taliban I can attest that this is closer to wishful thinking than a fact.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of these dynamics and other insights on women's groups see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam (2006) and (2010)

⁸⁹ NGOs started having more formal gatherings of women in relation to specific projects under the Mujahideen and Taliban, but these would be referred to simply as women's groups to avoid offending sensibilities.

Assumption four: Women will provide useful information

This section examines the usefulness of the information FETs did collect and their inability to provide valuable analysis of what they encountered.

As mentioned, FETs were never meant to be an intelligence collection asset. This would have created all sorts of legal and ethical problems, as highlighted in the Commander's Guide (2011) and in some FRAGOs. It was considered that FETs *might* come across good intelligence going about their engagement work, but this was not the main focus. Yet it was assumed that Afghan women were privy to useful information and part of the 'triangle of knowledge';⁹⁰ since they saw and heard what went on behind the compound walls, they were targeted for the collection of other types of information. Once again, FET creator Pottinger pushed the idea of women as useful sources of information. 'The tactical benefits of speaking with women have already been well established. Pashtun women have on numerous occasions given FETs important information about local personalities, economics, and grievances, as well as about the enemy' (Pottinger et al., 2010, p.2).

One USMC FET report is entitled 'LN Women desire to pass information to CFs but prevented by husbands'. A number of similar reasons were forwarded as to why the type of information required was not materializing. In spite of reported obstacles, however, the information collection aspect was reported by others as a success. Just as 'women are influential' became a mantra which many probably hoped would become reality with frequent repetition, so did 'women provide good information'.

People as texts

With the notion that every soldier is a potential 'sensor within...the *human and social terrain*' (Joint Doctrine Note 2009) and that fifty per cent of the population in theory would become accessible through the use of FETs, there was an expectation that a wealth of information was within the military's reach once women started to talk:

Rural Pashtun women...[t]hough rarely seen by outsiders...are keen observers and opinion-makers about the goings-on in their villages. Women pass all the news in the villages. They know who is doing what and who should and should not be in the area. They talk among themselves around the well⁹¹ and while collecting firewood about the news they have heard from or around their husbands and children. (Commander's Guide 2011)

The situation described above, of women lolling around a well while collecting water, is part of a rural idyll often described by urban Afghans and idealized in poetry and song. The reality is that hostilities in an area can greatly impede activities performed by women, their level of mobility and their ability to socialize. This can vary from community to community and family to family, but FETs were starting on their quest to collect useful material armed with unreliable baseline information.

FET teams were instructed to collect information on 'patterns of life' or day to day habitual activities,⁹² customs, motivations and beliefs, unravelling strands in the knot which forms 'culture' so that it could potentially be influenced, unravelled and woven anew. Information which could assist in

⁹⁰ This is the military's term for the different types of knowledge available to men, women and children based on their activities and mobility.

⁹¹ In Pottinger et al. (2010) this assertion comes from an Afghan army colonel.

⁹² Author's discussions with Battle Group Commanders in areas under Task Force Helmand

turning the tide against the insurgents could be lying within the private, female sphere. Simultaneously culture and the people who bear it became instrumentalized for military purposes as ‘influencers’ and conduits for messages. In tandem with efforts to engage them as people, Afghans, particularly women and children, were depicted as dehumanized ‘texts’, with the ability to ‘read’ them potentially critical to survive in a hostile environment (Commander’s Guide 2011). At times, the manipulative intent behind the FETs was explicit, as in this report:

The direction to keep FETs out of direct combat has occasionally resulted in over-cautious deployment and loss of valuable engagement opportunity...If FET is desired during a cordon and search, this should be supported and deployment should be early enough to capitalise on ‘shock of capture’ very soon after compounds are entered and searching is going on. During such ops, it may be preferable for a FET from another CF [Coalition Force] to be employed in order that follow-op FET ops in the AOR [Area of Responsibility] are not unduly compromised (on the ‘good cop, bad cop’ principle: where the in-place FET is the good cop); however FET linguists may be able to provide reassurance and therefore a positive perception of the FET on these occasions which may allow further future engagement. (TFH Influence Team Report on FETs)

The quote demonstrates that the military were willing to go to great lengths to achieve their goals, even trying to benefit from the trauma of forced entry into private homes to take advantage of women’s unbalanced states to elicit information.

Gathering information

As in any culture, gatherings and interactions in Afghan society have to take place within an accepted social protocol. Even after several years, ISAF knew relatively little about this protocol, partly because it could not be understood through the fleeting interactions experienced in most engagements. A myriad gestures, expressions and messages are interchanged when an exchange takes place, but these can only be ‘read’ by those who understand the cultural cues and references. The situation becomes more complex when it is cross-cultural. To counter this, a host of advisors on culture and similar issues were hired to guide military commanders. The latter, however, seemed unaware of the glaring differences in the quality of advice provided. Lower military echelons had to make do with so-called rapid cultural awareness courses provided by a range of consultants of varying calibre. With inadequate or low quality preparation in many cases, stressful conditions, basic or no language skills when there was no interpreter, the FET engagements were never going to produce much information of value.

To the seasoned observer, some exchanges can be predictable. For instance, Afghan women and men are happy to speak on a variety of topics, quite often using set phrases and texts which are heard across the country or in one region. Depending on context and individuals present there will be limitations and omissions which are important and should be noted. Women will discuss standard topics: health, education, drinking water, employment, vocational training, income generation, and adult literacy and ask for clinics, girls schools, projects or women’s centres. They have been doing this for over two decades with no concern whatsoever of whether their requests are sensible or not. If asked to contribute to a process or project through presence, actions, or a contribution in kind or cash, however, interest rapidly dissipates. FET reports took requests for assistance as signs of knowledge or influence, and vague promises of cooperation as evidence of women’s agency and as reliable pledges to make changes in the community.

FETs were also hampered in other ways. Like Human Terrain Teams,⁹³ FETs were sent out to do the job of sociologists and anthropologists, to understand how people ‘ticked’. A draft report prepared by the US Department of Defence, entitled *Decade of War*, made the point clearly, According to journalist Jeffrey Smith (2012) who saw the report,⁹⁴ military planning was based on ‘U.S. expectations instead of those consistent with the host nation and mission’. This was evident not only at command levels but all the way to interactions on the ground. Some ideas espoused and implemented as a part of the FET concept revealed ethnocentric views, with preconceptions and projections of American culture onto Afghan culture. In a presentation on FETs in the US,⁹⁵ a female Marine master sergeant involved with FETs explains that the important thing is to keep ‘mum’ happy. The concept of ‘mum’ is loaded with associations which do not translate smoothly into rural Pushtun society. Conversely, there is much about the role of the mother in Islamic and Afghan culture and the privations she must suffer to be ‘good’ that does not appear in American culture (Grima, 2005).⁹⁶

At face value

[I]t was sheer hubris to think that American military personnel without the appropriate language skills and with only a superficial understanding of Afghan culture could, on six- or 12-month tours, somehow deliver to Afghan villages everything asked of them by the COIN manual. The typical 21-year-old marine is hard-pressed to win the heart and mind of his mother-in-law; can he really be expected to do the same with an ethnocentric Pashtun tribal elder? (Eikenberry, 2013)

The FET soldiers were often too poorly informed to avoid being misled by rural Afghans. In one instance the FET notices that irrigation canals are dry and starts engaging men on the lack of irrigation water, believing there is a drought or similar problem. However, when irrigation water is distributed in a community, the water is diverted to different parts of the system leaving some sections dry. This is a sign of functioning social systems for allocating a scarce resource, not drought.

FETs frequently took information at face value. One USMC FET report is entitled ‘Pakistan made book instructs children in mathematics through weapon systems and grenades’. This is seen as Taliban propaganda when these books are in fact the old Mujahideen era text books, published by the University of Nebraska. They can still be found in some places. In another report FETs write that people send children to school in Pakistan. ‘It is believed that many of these children are influenced by Taliban and return to Afghanistan as suicide bombers.’ They do not consider that a family may be investing in their child’s education rather than supporting them to engage in suicidal acts of terrorism. In another case FETs come across a local doctor hiring a female teacher to teach girls privately. The assumption is that the doctor is providing a free service to the community. This rarely happens in Afghanistan without pupils paying a fee, but FETs do not realise this and try to find additional assistance for the school which is most probably a private enterprise.

⁹³ ‘The Human Terrain System develops, trains, and integrates a social science based research and analysis capability to support operationally relevant decision-making, to develop a knowledge base, and to enable sociocultural understanding across the operational environment.’ <http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/>

⁹⁴ Smith (2012) explains that ‘this new retrospective may be more significant because it was prepared by the Pentagon directorate responsible for developing military educational curricula, war-fighting doctrine, and training regimes for all the services’.

⁹⁵ See MSgt Julia Watson discuss FETs in a TEDx talk uploaded to the internet on 24 Jan, 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozPsmNiu12U>. In this talk she uses the concept of ‘mum’ replete with Western cultural associations that would be largely alien to an Afghan audience living in southwest Afghanistan.

⁹⁶ See Grima 2005

In another example, a FET writes: ‘A section at a local restaurant for women to come shows the desire for increased women’s opportunity in the area.’⁹⁷ Eating establishments in most parts of Afghanistan have a family section where women can relax and take off their hijab when travelling with families. This practice has existed for many decades and shows improved security giving men confidence to travel with families. It does not show any support for ‘opportunities for women’. Another FET reports that [i]n some compounds the female names were not given; this is often because no name was forthcoming and they referred to themselves as the wives of compound owners or other males.’ In rural Afghanistan, however, the prevailing norm is that a woman’s status comes through males; she will introduce herself accordingly through the main male figure together with her relation to him. It is considered shameful by some Afghans for outsiders to know the names of their women.

Basic information that is available in open source reports on Afghanistan from NGOs and experts residing in the aid community was treated as ground-breaking information. The military audience of FET reporting had no idea what was already out there and was content to allow groups like FETs reinvent the wheel. FET reports rarely if ever provided information of more use than that available in the local bazaar.

Any information from women, and especially ‘women leaders’, is taken at face value. One woman features regularly in the reports of one FET. She is heavily supported by FET to sell locally produced jewellery at a Forward Operating Base (FOB). Elsewhere she is reported to go with FET to pursue allegations against a judge, which may indicate that she was using her status as a FET protégé to solve personal conflicts in her own favour. She provides a great deal of inaccurate information which the FETs accept without question. She claims she is a police officer and conducts searches at check points, and further, that there are female Afghan army soldiers in the provincial capital, Lashkargah. Both claims are highly dubious. A similar case is an item entitled ‘FET discovers local woman ready to join the ANA [Afghan National Army]’⁹⁸. An older woman in a compound had said ‘I would like to fight against the enemy, give me a weapon’. This is very much the sense of humour often shown by feisty, older women in rural settings but this was lost on the FET. The lady later declined, saying that her role as a mother made it difficult for her, a gracious segue out of a ridiculous misunderstanding.

Some reports assumed that people would tell FETs directly if they did not support ISAF. In fact, people would certainly complain about issues which experience had shown that ISAF addressed e.g. payment for damaged property, but would be foolish, as in any similar context elsewhere, to discuss their genuine support or distrust of foreign military force in a public setting. It is clear from the FET reports that the teams rarely came across any information of military value. Information about the Taliban’s TTPs (Tactics, Techniques and Procedures, in ISAF language) that was volunteered by women, for example, was very basic common sense material e.g. they come at night, they do not carry weapons in certain areas, they do not always come at the same time. Even had the FETs had stumbled across valuable interactions and data, they lacked for the most part the analytical skills to make sense of what was going on and how the information could be utilized to their advantage.

⁹⁷ USMC FET SITREP

⁹⁸ USMC FET SITREP

Concluding remarks

The FETs struggled to demonstrate usefulness and some in Western military establishments remained staunch supporters of the concept. There were diverse reasons for this, including the need to utilize female personnel in a visible manner, the necessity to show the military was addressing gender issues, the fit with COIN doctrines, and the requirement to unquestioningly and relentlessly demonstrate success once the leadership had endorsed the concept. The list goes on with none of the reasons having to do with any demonstrable form of effectiveness.

As a result, FETs should not be presented as ISAF's answer to 'doing gender', for implementing UNSC Resolution 1325 in Afghanistan, or as a woman-only contingent handling 'women's stuff'. There is a requirement for a realistic understanding of women's involvement in peace processes, currently dominated by men pushing their requirements forward. The requisite is for practical options to support women within realistic timeframes, not rapid military ones based on deployment cycles, demonstrating quick fix success to fast-track promotion.

Any counter-insurgency aspirations and agendas related to FETs were quietly discarded after some time when the problems discussed above became evident. Missing clear goals, ill-prepared for the task, lacking even preliminary knowledge of context to be effective, not having the correct procedures to attain any specific goal, and even being sent out without linguists, FETs frequently spent time and money on wild goose chases. The amount of time and effort involved in simply 'reaching women' mostly exceeded benefits that were in any case often inflated. FET-related literature schizophrenically handled women as victims one minute, and empowered agents for change the next. Throughout the two-year period studied here, FETs were struggling to demonstrate success to cynical male colleagues while grappling with an experimental approach with ambiguous objectives. Claims about the positive impact of FET activities would not have stood up in a rigorous, unbiased evaluation, had one been undertaken.

The FET concept was not helped by the 'dog-and-pony show' treatment which has been reserved for any project dealing with Afghan women, frequently muddying the waters and claiming success where none exists. The Afghans encountered were far more efficient at influencing the FETs than vice versa. In any case, the type of changes which FETs were expected to achieve requires sophisticated information collection and analysis, well beyond the scope of a group of well-meaning but generally inexperienced young women working in unstable, conflict areas, quite often with no linguists. It would have been simpler and more beneficial for the entire assistance community and for ISAF to instruct troops in conflict areas to understand the basics of how women were affected by the war. ISAF should have encouraged these female soldiers to talk to women to achieve crude measurements of the impact of ISAF efforts on local security as perceived by women. Anything more complex was beyond the capability of FETs as they were trained and fielded.

It is likely that FETs could have had a positive impact if their superiors had realised and utilised their real advantages. A realistic approach would have restricted FETs to search functions in public relations/engagement scenarios. In a context such as Afghanistan, where public treatment of women is at the centre of the complex honour knot, female personnel do have distinct advantages i.e. better quality interactions with men and women, de-escalation of tensions during searches of family compounds and vehicles bearing passengers. Instead the ISAF command meandered into complicated and ambitious plans with nebulous goals based on their imagined advantages, namely mobilising a dormant fifty per cent of the Afghan population who would automatically support the international military presence.

The type of facilitation required to address gender and rights issues in any context requires the presence, expertise and facilitation of experienced and *qualified* individuals, both male and female. A

feasible approach to gender mainstreaming in armed conflict requires commitment as well as *competent* gender advisors with sound technical and field experience. They should have access to financial and other resources and be able to implement approaches which are not just add-ons involving women. Application of such approaches requires military institutions to move away from putting gender in woman-only ghettos and accepting that changes in attitude and practice across the board are essential for a commitment to gender and meaningful engagement with women, not just when it is convenient for particular operations.

The way ISAF sporadically decided to interact with Afghan women when suitable and relegated them to their 'box' when their usefulness was over, or when other concerns required women's rights to be discarded, invited criticism for of unprincipled and unscrupulous behaviour. Afghan women did not automatically understand ISAF's goals in engaging them, nor did they prove to be an untapped and pliant critical mass of allies ready to rise up against the oppression of the Taliban. Afghan women probably assumed that ISAF, like other members of the international community, had finally decided to help them, whether through vaccinating babies, providing hand-outs and sewing machines, saving lucky individuals from violent marriages, funding their projects or, for some, fighting male oppression. ISAF, however, demonstrated lack of consistency, assuming on the one hand that women would rise up at the call from FETs because they wanted to remove the shackles of oppression, but simultaneously avoiding the discourse of rights. Moreover, the goal was never to give women a meaningful role in stabilization, peace-building and the counter-insurgency.

Much needs to be understood and added to the existing body of knowledge on women's contributions to post-conflict reconstruction, peace building and stabilisation efforts at multiple levels. The process of understanding and engaging should go beyond statements built on wishful thinking, perpetuating feel-good projects with no long-term impact, and bad reporting from enthusiastic but ill-informed supporters. There is a need for substantive recommendations on how women can really be empowered and assisted to contribute to and benefit from stabilization, COIN, peace-building and related efforts. Hopefully, Western militaries will do more to act on this knowledge in future.

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Annex I: ISAF Sources from the period March 2010 to February 2012

NATO, ISAF AND OTHER DOCUMENTS		
Headquarters ISAF Joint Command		
WNGO 030-2010	FEMALE ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT TO GOVERNMENT OF ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN	03 Jul 10
FRAGO/507-2010	FEMALE ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT TO GOVERNMENT OF ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN	12 Sep 10
Headquarters International Security Assistance Force		
FRAGO 1 23-2010	ENCLOSURE I ENGAGEMENT WITH AFGHAN FEMALES DIRECTIVE	31 May 10
FRAGO	COMISAF Directive on Female Engagement Teams	04 JUN 10
FRAGO 003-2012	GENDER PERSPECTIVE INTEGRATION INTO ISAF PLANS AND OPERATIONS,	30 Jan 2012
COMISAF OPLAN 38302	Rev 5, Annex X - Gender	
Headquarters Regional Command (SouthWest) I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) Camp Leatherneck, Afghanistan JOINT HQ RC(SW)		
FRAGO 475-10 -	FEMALE ENGAGEMENT SUPPORT TO GOVERNMENT OF ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF AFGHANISTAN,	Nov 10
JTEC 1600/22,	FET Issues and Recommendations for Development,	22 Apr 2011
NATO		
	Action Plan to Mainstream UNSCR 1325 into NATO-led Operations and Missions,	endorsed on 20 November 2010
Bi-SC Directive 40-1	Integrating UNSCR 1325 and Gender Perspectives in the NATO Command Structure Including Measures for Protection During Armed Conflict	

REPORTING		
Debrief Reports	UK FET	Mar 2011-Dec 2011
FET Situation Reports (Sitreps)	NATO C3 Force Effects Coordination Center Regional Command Southwest	Apr 2011-Dec 2011
Patrol Reports	UK FET	Mar 2011-Dec 2011
Reporting on FETs	CULAD	Feb 2011-Dec 2011
	TFH Influence Team	Mar 2011-Dec 2011
Weekly Assessrep	UK FET	Mar 2011-Dec 2011

OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE – DIRECT OR COPIED IN ON	
Apr 2010 –Sep 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A3 and ISAF Joint Command Senior Governance and Development Advisor and her team on FETs, gender and Afghan women
Apr 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CULADs Chief of Counterinsurgency (COIN) Advisory & Assistance Team (CAAT) on FETs
Apr 2010-Nov 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commander and various members of the Command Team in Regional Command South on FETs, gender and Afghan women
Jul 2011-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A3 and United States Marine Corps (USMC) Gender Advisor and Education Officer
Mar 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A3 and UK FET elements
Mar 2010-Nov 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RC-S and TFs
Nov 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TFH and CFs TFH and HQ RC-SW UK FETs and Influence with USMC FETs and Consecutive Gender Advisors UK FETs and Influence, STABADs, CULADs A3 and various Cultural Advisors (CULADs) on FETs, gender and Afghan women Stabilization Advisors (STABADs) on FETs, gender and Afghan women A3 and Influence Team on FETs, gender and Afghan women A3 and three consecutive Commanders of Task Force Helmand on FETs, gender and Afghan women A3 and USMC FET elements

INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS

Nov 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and various Cultural Advisors (CULADs) on FETs, gender and Afghan women • Stabilization Advisors (STABADs) on FETs, gender and Afghan women • A3 and Influence Team on FETs, gender and Afghan women • A3 and USMC FET elements
Mar 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and UK FET elements
April 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3, USMC Cultural Advisor, Hali Jelani, and a USMC MSt Julia Watson in Camp Leatherneck
Apr 2010-Feb 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consecutive IJC and ISAF HQ Gender Advisors
2010-2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current and former Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) personnel
Nov 2011-Jan 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3, USMC personnel, UK military personnel on FETs in various camps and Forward Operating Bases (FOBs)

PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Apr 2010 –Sep 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and ISAF Joint Command Senior Governance and Development Advisor and her team on FETs, gender and Afghan women
Apr 2010-Nov 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commander and various members of the Command Team in Regional Command South on FETs, gender and Afghan women
Nov 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and three consecutive Commanders of Task Force Helmand on FETs, gender and Afghan women

PRIVATE NOTES ON FORMAL MEETINGS

Apr 2010 –Sep 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and ISAF Joint Command Senior Governance and Development Advisor and her team on FETs, gender and Afghan women
Apr 2010-Nov 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commander and various members of the Command Team in Regional Command South on FETs, gender and Afghan women
Mar 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and UK FET elements
Nov 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A3 and Influence Team on FETs, gender and Afghan women • A3 and three consecutive Commanders of Task Force Helmand on FETs, gender and Afghan women • A3 and USMC FET elements

PRIVATE NOTES ON INVOLVEMENT WITH AND ATTENDANCE OF FET TRAININGS

Mar 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A3 and UK FET elements
Nov 2010-Dec 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A3 and USMC FET elements

Annex II: FET Timeline

2006

USMC Lioness programme in Iraq begins by searching Iraqi women at checkpoints

2009

February - USMC Captain Matt Pottinger sets up preliminary FETs in Farah Province, Afghanistan

2010

March - The first platoon of female Marines trained as full-time FETs deployed to Afghanistan

May - ISAF FET directive provided guidance and intent for standardizing female engagements with Afghan females by ISAF units.

July - ISAF Joint Command FET directive providing guidance and intent for FETs to support Government of Afghanistan through their activities.

July – Military units deployed in Afghanistan conducted some level of in-theatre FET training and performed FET operations.

September - ISAF Joint Command FRAGO disseminates FET guidance to RCs on

2011

January - Three-day FET working group convened in Kabul to discuss and develop unified, official FET doctrine; FET team composition; FET training requirements; and a FET mission statement.

March - ISAF directed that all brigade combat teams deploying to Afghanistan after August 2011 to have trained FETs assigned to the unit prior to deployment.

June - The US army develops a formal FET training programme.

August - The Commander, International Security Assistance Force (COMISAF) requires a minimum number of trained FETs.

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Afghanistan

Female Engagement Teams

Almost a decade after the 2001 intervention by the United States and its allies in Afghanistan, women were once again taking centre stage in NATO planning. With a new counter-insurgency (COIN) strategy in play, gaining civilian support became crucial. In this context, Afghan women came to be seen as influential matriarchal figures and potential allies who could help turn the tide against the Taliban and other insurgents.

Under the overall command of ISAF (the International Security Assistance Force) the US and the UK set up Female Engagement Teams (FET), consisting of international military women tasked to build rapport, offer support and gain the allegiance of Afghan women and their families. This report follows the course of FETs in southern Afghanistan during the period of 2010 to early 2012. It critically examines the assumptions underpinning the teams and why they produce so few results.