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## Half-Hearted: Trying to Win Afghanistan without Afghan Women

**Matt Pottinger, Hali Jilani, and Claire Russo**

By fits and starts, United States and allied military forces are realizing how difficult it will be to win the war in Afghanistan without half its population, the Afghan women.

One of the few military efforts aimed at earning the support of women began a year ago when a handful of female U.S. Marines and a civilian linguist formed the first “Female Engagement Team” (pronounced “FET”). The team visited rural Pashtun women in their homes and distributed humanitarian supplies, in the process earning the goodwill of women who, before they had spoken with the Marine team, had viewed international troops with fear.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, more FETs have stood up. The 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade now employs several teams on an intermittent basis in southern Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> U.S. soldiers and airmen in the country’s east run FETs that, in cooperation with district governments, teach health classes to local women. All international and Afghan security forces were ordered in November to establish FETs of their own.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these steps, four factors are limiting our ability to intensify and replicate successful female engagements:

- Die-hard presumptions by battlefield commanders that engaging local women will pay no dividends.
- Hackneyed hypotheses that female engagement will offend most Pashtun men.
- A failure to involve FETs in the planning stage of operations, leading to poorly conceived missions
- An unwillingness to establish full-time FETs made up of volunteers who are given the resources and time to train as professionals should.

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<sup>1</sup> This FET was led by 2ndLt Johannah Shaffer of Combat Logistics Battalion 3, part of the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force Afghanistan. An account of her mission is contained in the 16 May 2009 memo “Afghanistan Female Engagement Team After-Action and Way Forward.”

<sup>2</sup> The authors wish to thank MEB commander Brigadier General Larry Nicholson and his battalion commanders for their support of the FET program.

<sup>3</sup> See: JOINT OPORD OMID (HOPE), signed and issued by the ANA, ANP, NDS, and COM IJC Headquarters in November 2009.

All of these problems can be resolved by brigade commanders.

Consider the first factor. Some officers still imagine that engaging women is not worth the effort. “Pashtun women don’t have enough influence or knowledge to make valuable allies,” they argue. On the contrary, experience confirms that local women wield more influence in their homes—including over their husbands and their sons—than people uninitiated in Afghan family culture believe to be the case.

Rural Pashtun women are responsible for raising children, collecting water, cooking, and helping farm and care for animals, among other jobs. Though rarely seen by outsiders, they are keen observers and opinion-makers about the goings-on in their villages. “The women pass all the news in the villages,” says an Afghan National Army colonel who cautions against ignoring half the country’s population. “They know who is doing what, who should and should not be in the area. They talk around the well or while they are collecting firewood about the news they have heard from their husbands [and their kids].”

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. The longer-term benefits of earning the confidence and support of Afghan women are more difficult to quantify but, on balance, are likely to be even more profound.

A second conventional wisdom—that addressing female populations is culturally taboo—is also incorrect. “Sending our female soldiers on patrol or to tribal meetings will outrage Pashtun men,” the argument typically goes, but experience over the past year demonstrates that this assumption is not only usually wrong, but upside down. Many Pashtun men, far from shunning American women, show a preference for interacting with them over U.S. men. Pashtun men tend to view foreign women troops as a kind of “third gender.” As a result, female servicewomen are accorded the advantages, rather than the disadvantages, of both genders: they are extended the respect shown to men, but are granted the access to home and family normally reserved to women. In many circumstances, this attitude opens opportunities to allied forces. Afghan culture turns out to be more flexible than many male officers have conditioned themselves to believe.

The third problem is the failure to involve FETs in mission planning, with the result that too many operations are limited in scope, duration, and effectiveness. For example, some maneuver units use FETs to search women or try to comfort them during a clearing operation. But as soon as the mission is complete, despite the goodwill achieved, the FET is withdrawn and never sees these women again. While using FETs in this way is entirely legitimate, there are better uses of the FETs in other types of missions that score bigger gains. Instead of using them exclusively in the “clearing” phase of counterinsurgency operations, they should be used more in the “holding” phase. FETs that are devoted to a district and authorized to make recurring visits to households deliver lasting benefits. When 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.

Last, the *ad hoc* nature of FETs, virtually all of whose members have full-time jobs in addition to their FET duties, limits their time for training and rehearsals and, as a result, hampers their effectiveness and safety. The teams should be comprised of full-time members, including female Pashtu linguists, and given the intensive training and resources they need. To do otherwise is a disservice to the mission and to FET members themselves, whose missions are dangerous. Poorly trained FETs are probably worse than having no FETs at all, just as poorly trained maneuver units tend to do—and suffer—more harm than well-prepared units. (Marines will soon deploy the first full-time FETs to Afghanistan.)

The authors of this paper, all of whom have trained and observed FETs in Afghanistan, offer the following vignettes and recommendations to help commanders understand the benefits of female engagement and the responsibilities inherent in making it work. We have also included some lessons on FET tactics in the spirit of contributing to the knowledge of current and future teams.

Nowhere do we seek to downplay the evident cultural sensitivities that pervade gender relations in Pashtun society. As a rule of thumb, for example, male troops should avoid laying eyes on or interacting with rural women. Doing otherwise risks violating Pashtun notions of family honor and invites serious conflict. In some villages—especially those with few foreign or Afghan security forces—men have been reluctant to allow U.S. females to enter the community. What follows are not unbendable rules. Women’s engagement in Afghanistan is challenging work and a single standard for operations does not exist.

Despite these complications, the *status quo* of “playing it safe” by remaining disconnected from Afghan women is costing international forces a vast pool of natural allies and is needlessly squandering an advantage we hold over the Taliban. The Taliban is, after all, a movement with few female members or admirers. Its disastrous economic policies of the 1990s, and its extreme notions about gender, including its disrespect for Afghan women’s education and mobility, present us a golden opportunity to earn women’s support.

### **The Right Conditions: Building Relationships in District “A”**

District “A” is a poor, socially conservative wheat-farming community in southern Afghanistan. A company of Marines moved into the district last year and began establishing a ring of security and influence around their base, driving away a significant number of insurgents in the process. When the authors of this article visited District “A” approximately two months after Marines had first arrived, the local bazaar was open and shopkeepers reported that business was improving. But the mood was still tense. Taliban were watching the community, and local residents had yet to make up their minds about whether to accept foreign troops. *Will the foreigners deliver a better situation? Will they stay for the long haul, or leave and subject us to Taliban retribution?* We heard more skeptical remarks than optimistic ones. As it turned out, this is precisely the environment where a FET is well-designed to deliver gains by cementing relationships with locals in ways that male Marines cannot.

A seven-woman FET arrived and accompanied male infantry on numerous foot patrols over the next several days. During the first patrol, Marines were surprised to discover that when they stopped to chat with local men outside a residential compound, the men agreed to allow the FET

inside their homes to visit the women. Once inside, the FET succeeded in breaking the ice and convincing the local women to open up and discuss their daily lives and concerns. Word soon spread that female Marines were in the area, and this led to an even warmer reception for the FET on subsequent patrols. We learned that some Afghan women had even been anticipating the opportunity to meet female Marines. In one home, the women said they had caught glimpses of the patrolling FET through a crack in the wall and that they had “prayed you would come to us.”

The Afghan women were from surprisingly diverse backgrounds. Though all were poor, some had been raised in relatively prosperous circumstances before the wars of the last three decades. Some were refugees from other parts of Afghanistan, including one group of young women who said they had fled Taliban captivity and were pleased with the Marine presence. The team spent roughly an hour with each family accepting tea and bread, and the FET’s female Navy corpsman provided over-the-counter medicines in return. Afghan women in a few homes said they worried that the female Marines would not return to see them again.

Local women were not the only receptive residents. Here, as elsewhere, the presence of female Marines softened and facilitated the interaction with local men and children. One gentleman with a gray beard who opened his home to the FET put it this way: “Your men come to fight, but we know the women are here to help.” (With a sheepish grin, he admitted that the female guests were also “good for my old eyes.”) Some men felt more comfortable airing their grievances to a female audience than to a male one. Several men, for example, described their indignation at a particular body-search technique used by male Marines—a technique relatively unobjectionable in Western settings but which, for that reason, left Marines unaware of its insulting nature to local men. This FET-created awareness of an indigenous point of view allowed Marines to devise a new, less objectionable way of searching local men and avoid needless conflict.

Among the lessons from District “A”: FETs are valuable when employed as part of a classic “oil spot” counterinsurgency approach, working from an established outpost in a semi-permissive environment where they have access to families in their homes. This approach also offers the chance to conduct repeat visits to households over the course of a deployment, deepening relationships and expanding troops’ situational awareness and areas of influence.

### **Little to Gain: A Reconnaissance Operation in District “B”**

A Female Engagement Team supported a reconnaissance operation in District “B”. The mission integrated a variety of special teams (the FET, a three-person Civil Affairs team, a five-person Human Terrain Team, and some Information Operations Marines and interpreters) for two days of patrols led by a company of infantry Marines and Afghan National Army soldiers. The purpose was to gain information about the infrastructure and local population in several villages that lacked any Afghan government presence. The operation demonstrated that a variety of “enablers,” as these special teams are sometimes called, were able to work together productively despite their sometimes competing agendas. The FET, for example, was joined by two female researchers with the Human Terrain Team. The all-female composition of the two groups allowed the FET to provide tactical security and linguistic support to the HTT during its meetings with local women.

That said, missions that call for troops to venture into areas that they have no intention of holding are often of limited value. By passing through villages just once, the Marines tended to generate more friction than rapport. When the patrol stopped in an abandoned compound to bed down, local elders, claiming that our presence would invite attacks by insurgents, begged the patrol to move away from the village. The FET and other special teams were able to gather rudimentary information, but did virtually nothing to influence the villages or the Taliban's evident dominance of them. FETs—and international forces generally—should direct their finite resources toward areas they intend to hold. FETs should be used in areas where they can build trust with locals over time.

### **Medical Care: The Benefits of Good Planning**

The FET in District “A” hosted a temporary medical clinic for women inside the combat outpost. For approximately two days before the clinic opened, Marines “socialized” the idea with locals by coordinating their presence with the district governor and by explaining the initiative to local men during foot patrols. The night before the clinic opened, an invitation to the local population was advertised in brief messages over the outpost's tactical radio station. The radio message and the foot patrols made clear that female Marines and caregivers would be running the clinic. Despite these outreach efforts, expectations were low that any women whatsoever would show up. In fact, nine women (four of child-bearing age, five elderly) arrived the next morning seeking care. Two had personally heard the radio advertisement. Each woman was accompanied by at least one male adult relative. Some brought children. FET Marines searched the visitors at the outpost entrance and escorted them to a shady spot near the medical tent. Female patients were brought inside the tent one at a time; each was permitted to bring along one male companion for comfort and security.

Inside the tent, a female linguist and female caregivers heard patients' complaints and provided basic advice and care. The FET found that it had to shoo away curious Afghan men who sauntered over from the waiting area to try to peek inside the tent. The caregivers were able to do more for pediatric cases—cleaning and dressing a bad burn or dispensing amoxicillin for an ear infection—than for the more serious illnesses typically afflicting the adult women. Still, all the patients expressed deep appreciation for the diagnoses and advice given by the caregivers and gladly accepted pain relievers for arthritis and other aches and pains.

It would be good practice to have a female Pashto linguist sit with the people waiting outside the medical tent, in addition to having a linguist inside. While waiting, local residents are a “captive audience,” providing an excellent opportunity for a FET Marine and linguist to engage in casual conversation and soothe the women's nerves. Female U.S. Army and Navy doctors in Afghanistan should be authorized to leave large Forward Operating Bases from time to time in order to treat Afghan women at smaller combat outposts.

### **Another Medical Mission: The Dangers of “Winging It”**

At the request of a unit in eastern Afghanistan, a FET visited a clinic to teach local women classes about pregnancy and child care. Despite the obvious good intent of the visit, the Afghan

doctors working at the clinic were annoyed when the FET arrived. Why? Because the doctors were not expecting the Americans on that particular day. In addition, local men and women were distrustful of the FET after its previous visit to the clinic. The Afghan doctors explained that on the previous visit, the FET had frisked several female Afghan patients at the clinic's front gate. The offense apparently lay not in the frisking itself, but in its place and manner. It would have been acceptable, according to local opinion, if it had been conducted in a screened off area, but having been done in full view of Afghan men and male American soldiers, it constituted an offense.

Experience indicated that the Afghan doctors had not exaggerated the negative consequences of the FET's earlier carelessness. A pair of women who showed up at the clinic a short time later, having walked several miles to get there, turned and left upon seeing the American soldiers. The doctors begged the FET to leave, which they eventually did. An underlying cause of this minor debacle: female soldiers in the earlier offending group had been "volun-told" to be in the FET. It was evident to Afghan and American bystanders alike that some FET members had neither the training nor the desire to be there. Misfires of this kind are easy to avoid with a minimum of thought and planning.

### **Partnering with Female Police and Civic Leaders**

We recommend partnering FETs with Afghan National Policewomen and civic leaders. The dedication and courage of Afghanistan's small corps of female policewomen is nothing less than inspiring. A FET visited one station where the budget was so small the policewomen had to hand-sew their own uniforms. The policewomen said their jobs have so far been limited mostly to searching female civilians at police checkpoints. When the FET described its mission of substantively engaging Pashtun women in their homes, several female Afghan police expressed their desire to do similar work.

Working side-by-side with FETs, Afghan policewomen would gain valuable experience in support of the Allied effort. By learning to substantively engage the public, policewomen have the potential to improve the image of the Afghan National Police in the same way that FETs help ease civilian attitudes toward U.S. troops. Any steps female police can take to improve the public's confidence in Afghan security forces would be welcome and helpful to our counterinsurgency objectives. Too often, civilians' first reaction to Afghan police is fear. Female police help change that. One female policewoman explained how she gently talks to female civilians to stop them from trembling as she pats them down. This small gesture, repeated many times and honored by word of mouth among Afghan women, can be undertaken only by females, and best by Afghan women police.

Other female Afghan professionals with whom FETs should seek to partner include doctors, midwives, businesswomen, and development workers.

### **FETS: An Optimal Conduit for Distributing Humanitarian Aid**

The remaining sections of this paper offer some tactical lessons learned by FETs in the field to help their sister FETs avoid repeating mistakes.

When time permits, it is better to deliver sacks of grain or other humanitarian assistance directly to each household rather than toss it off the back of a truck into a crowd of clamoring residents. Although the latter approach is common with relief efforts all over the world, as news reports reveal, its unruliness and inequity robs us of an opportunity to connect with the very individuals and groups we are trying to influence. We recommend using the FETs to distribute humanitarian supplies directly to the women of each household. This approach ensures equal distribution, openly and conspicuously empowers local women in their communities, and constitutes an effective way to start valuable conversations. Gifts welcomed by women include rice, grain, beans, sugar, tea, cooking oil, and over-the-counter painkillers. These opportunities to bolster our mission have no downside cost and should not be missed.

### **Don the Headscarves, Shed the “Battle-Rattle”**

FET members should patrol with visible headscarves under their helmets. By doing so, when they enter a house or search a woman, they are less likely to be mistaken for male soldiers by local residents watching from the sidelines. Once inside the compound’s walls, FET members who are not posting security should take off their body armor, eye-protection, and helmets. Wearing “battle rattle” in these circumstances is a prime example of putting force protection ahead of mission accomplishment. Incidentally, the body armor, once removed, becomes a good conversation starter during an engagement. A local woman who tried picking up a flak vest asked a FET member if she was “made of iron.” Realizing the weight of the load, the woman said she was impressed with the sacrifices U.S. women endured to help Afghanistan. Anecdotal as this is, it and similar stories form a pattern difficult to ignore.

### **Don’t Turn First Engagements into Interviews**

On more than one occasion, the authors watched a fragile, fifteen minute rapport developed between a female Marine and a local resident suddenly dashed when a nearby FET member whipped out a pen and notebook to take notes. This happened to promising engagements with both local men and women. During one engagement, a Pashtun woman told her relatives to stop talking to an American woman who herself had begun taking notes. If Americans are typically unnerved by seeing someone write down every spoken word, we should not be surprised to see Pashtun’s suspicions similarly aroused. The same problem arises when reading aloud a list of canned questions. Questions should be woven into the conversation naturally, and better still, should be asked in a subsequent meeting after some degree of trust has been established.

### **Peeping Toms in the Afghan Army**

Male American troops are usually disciplined to avert their eyes from Pashtun women and avoid provoking Pashtun men. Afghan National Security Forces are another story. On two recent missions, the passions of local residents were inflamed when an Afghan soldier or policeman blundered into a bedroom or climbed a courtyard wall to oggle “the local ladies.” In both cases, the offender was an ethnic Tajik. International soldiers, male and female, must be informed that they will need to guard against Peeping Toms and will need to summon the moral courage to

grab them by the scruff of the neck when they step out of line, and educate them on good manners in Pashtun society.

### **Screen Female Pashto Linguists for Attitude and Fitness**

A lack of physically fit, female Pashto linguists has been an additional limiting factor on the effectiveness of FETs. FET linguists must be highly fluent in Pashto and fit enough to walk a few kilometers wearing protective gear. The other challenge is ensuring that linguists have the right attitude and training to be truly effective. It is a lack of “people skills,” as often as a failure of language abilities, that impinges on the success of FET missions. In many cases, local men would have balked at opening their homes to the FET had they not been charmed by the cheerfulness or sheer boldness of a FET member or of the linguist she was commanding.

This quality of easy personal engagement helped achieve mission objectives inside the compounds, too. FETs have often been frustrated when an Afghan male inserted himself into a conversation between female troops and Afghan women. But when a young man tried to take control of a FET engagement in District “A”, one of the co-authors of this paper, Ms. Jilani, saved it by abruptly scolding him for entering a room where women were relaxing. The man apologized profusely and left. It takes a certain amount of savvy to wield the culture as a weapon in that fashion. To be effective, FET training should incorporate frequent rehearsals in which soldiers or Marines and their linguists, working with role players, practice “breaking the ice” and engaging local men and women under a variety of circumstances. To some officers—though fortunately not all—this form of training may be seen as new age “touchy-feely.” But these simple exercises are essential, easy to execute, and eventually pay off handsomely even for initially unsympathetic commanders.

### **Conclusion**

Perversely, our reluctance to employ all but a few allied servicewomen in tactical counterinsurgency operations mirror-images the Taliban. Last year, so few U.S. servicewomen had meaningful contact with Afghan women that, statistically speaking, they literally had a higher chance of getting pregnant than of meeting an Afghan woman outside the wire. The excuses for not altering this reality are disappearing fast. *“But engaging women will offend the locals...”* Not true. Experience shows that many local men actually prefer talking to U.S. women than to U.S. men. *“But Pashtun women will be punished by their husbands for speaking with Americans...”* If that were so, why would FETs usually receive warmer receptions upon returning to the same households later? *“But U.S. law doesn’t permit female soldiers to conduct these sorts of missions...”* Incorrect. An explanation of why this is wrong can be found in the 14 September 2009 “Memorandum of Law Concerning Women in Combat Support Operations” by the U.S. Central Command’s Office of the Staff Judge Advocate.

Conducting female engagement is no longer a fanciful suggestion, but an official directive. In November 2009, the commanding general of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command signed an order calling on units to “create female teams to build relations with Afghan women.” This order was not issued to be honored in the breach, but reflects the considered



judgment of command that FETs are an important part of our evolving counterinsurgency strategy.

This is not to suggest that having poorly trained or badly employed FETs are better than no FETs. They are not. FETs must be enduring teams with soldiers dedicated solely to their mission and officers empowered to promote, shape, approve, and deny mission requests.

The work that FETs do is difficult and dangerous, underscoring the imperative of superb training and of involving FETs in mission planning before they leave the wire. The inherent dangers have not, however, deterred female soldiers and Marines from volunteering for FETs or from accomplishing their missions.<sup>4</sup> In fact, several FET members told us they were willing to extend their deployments or quickly return to Afghanistan if given the chance to be on a FET fulltime. This begs another question: Who is shielding their women from Afghan society more: Pashtun men or U.S. commanders?

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