WOMEN IN THE SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF AFGHANISTAN

Introduction

Afghan women may be considered as a homogeneous group only if the criteria are sex roles and typical life patterns. But they play these clearly defined roles within the framework of particular customs appropriate to their ethnic or religious groups and to the rural or urban environment in which their families live. Again they play these roles in their families, which are sometimes more, sometimes less influential, wealthy or subject to the influence of innovation.

In this way differences arise which can disguise the fundamental similarity of female sex roles in the various ethnic groups and strata of Afghanistan.

Women depend, even more than men, on their families, and this in a greater variety of ways; so much so that they do not and cannot exist as individuals without a family. The roles which they play need the family as stage, scenery, stage properties and fellow actors.

Even the division of the world into male and female spheres does not result in female solidarity, nor does it make women less dependent on their families. The reasons are that the women feel themselves to be unilaterally dependent on men, and that competition and status struggles between the women of one household are so common that they form part of the female stereotype both of self and others.

Because of the many forms of dependence that bind the women to their families, women cannot be viewed as a stratum of their own within Afghan society. Nevertheless they can be considered as bearers of a feminine subculture which retains constant qualities in all the various social groups and strata. One distinguishing quality of this inter-group and inter-class subculture is that it binds women to their groups more closely and more exclusively than men and that it demands absolute loyalty of them.

Even 'modern' women of the middle and upper classes of Kabul who are moving towards emancipation remain female adjuncts to their modern families and at the same time the latters' proof of modernity. Normally they confine their desire for emancipation to
themselves, to other women in their families, and at the most to unrelated women of their own socio-economic group. They aim at Western, middle-class standards as they know and understand them.

Education, however, is no longer limited to girls of open-minded circles of the middle and upper classes of Kabul. In the capital it reaches to those from less privileged families as well. Educated girls and women from the lower strata experience similar role conflicts in their turn and suffer similar fortunes as a result of these conflicts. The roles which they shall ultimately be able to play in reality remain determined largely by traditional forces. Expectations, desires and hopes, however, and also the consciousness of a conflict between desire and reality are something new. New too is the rising awareness that these are not individual conflicts and unique destinies and that the group of educated women has these problems in common, even though the struggles and arguments occur mainly in the separate families. Usually the women have to capitulate in these struggles, under the pressure of the existing situation, and are unable to get their way against the wills of their fathers, brothers, husbands or even the other women in the group. In the end most of them give up in despair and resign themselves to their fate. Consciousness of their despair and of their capitulation, and also the memory of their hopes, remain, however. So does the knowledge that they are not the only ones to face these problems. As far as these women are concerned one can speak, without much exaggeration, of the birth of solidarity out of despair. These women can view some of the male youth as a part of their own ‘lost generation’ and vice versa.

Female sex roles

The division of labour according to sex varies from one geographical area to another and from tribe to tribe, but it is always clearly defined within each entity. The factor which varies most is the participation

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1 In their autobiographical accounts (comp. bibliography) girls and women and young men too mention what one of them diagnoses in this way: “In all corners and counties of the country hundreds of young men and girls are nowadays suffering from this ‘family sickness’. “ (Account 107). Other writers want to have their own cases published in order to warn parents not to destroy their children’s happiness as it was done to the writers themselves. Very many attack traditional customs especially within the family and concerning the choice of marriage partners by the family as senseless and cruel. They express the opinion that the habits of the people have to be changed and they urge the authorities and public opinion to help the young and fight old customs and usages, and enlighten the people.
of women in economic production within the agricultural and pastoral economy and the manufacturing industries.

Domestic tasks on the other hand—housework, care of children, cooking, keeping stores—are subject only to slight variations. The wealthier the family is, the greater the opportunity for the women to delegate all or some of these tasks to servants.

In all parts of Afghanistan, religion, politics, consultations about community affairs and the representation of the group before others are matters to be attended to by men. Backstage, the women may sometimes influence the men of their families in these matters; but only if there were no competent male representative at all would a woman represent her group to the outside world.

Society is divided into an almost completely masculine sphere of action and influence outside the home and into a more or less feminine one, i.e., home and family. Women are restricted to this narrow circle but at the same time both sexes meet in the family, to which the influence of men also extends. Sex stereotypes, which are also common in the West, have been retained in Afghan society in extremely pure forms corresponding to the clearly defined sex roles, which overlap only in very rare cases. Only seldom are certain activities or types of behaviour equally acceptable and normal in both men and women. Leadership, activity, strength—including physical strength—and aggression are among the masculine stereotypes; weakness, powerlessness, passivity, patience, modesty, shyness, chastity, obedience are among the feminine ones. These attributes are considered to be biologically determined sex characteristics.

At the same time, however, some of these attributes imply moral principles which should determine the social behaviour of the sexes. A considerable departure from these guidelines is therefore an offence both against the genuine nature of the female sex itself and also against morality. These stereotypes—in contrast to the real state of affairs—are considered to be an essential part of Islam. This means that offences against them are offences against religion in addition.

Women are the most intimate, protected, sensitive, powerless and most assailable core of their families, the embodiment and touchstone of family honour. In their inviolability they represent the honourableness and the manly virtue of their men-folk. In contrast to this, women do not belong to their families to the same degree as men and are insecure in their familial identity. The young girl is kept in the family until she marries. Since her situation in her
father's family is therefore only a temporary one, she does not belong
to it completely. In her husband's home, however, she remains a
stranger, someone taken in, and is again not completely at home. In
spite of this she belongs here too to the innermost core of the family
and embodies its honour. Thus, in the family the woman is either
a temporary or an associate member. But if both groups reject her
she falls into a bottomless pit. As an individual and without the
support of a family she cannot live.

If a married woman is asked to which family she belongs, she
will name the one she came from, although as a rule she will live
apart from it since her wedding. The protection of the 'weak woman'
is transferred upon the marriage from her father and brothers to her
husband and his relatives. Conservatives arguing in support of the
esteem which traditional Islamic society grants women, claim that it
offers them special protection precisely because they are especially
valued. This protection includes material care and defence of their
honour. After marriage one protective power is relieved by the other
and usually the woman has no chance of calling on the old paternal
power to help her against the new one of her husband. A third, higher
protective institution above these two, a state-controlled body for
example, does not yet exist. The first steps towards its creation were
made under the last regime with the enactment of a law on marriage
and the family. Of course the enactment of laws does not change
society if they are not enforced.

If a woman is unable to enhance her importance in her husband's
family by special skills for economic production; if she has no children,
or no sons; if her husband, in a polygamous household, neglects her as
a sexual partner by giving preference to another wife; if he does not
divorce her, however, and does not let her return to her father's
family—or if that family refuses to take her back—then she is in a
situation from which, objectively, there is no escape. The combination
of all or some of these factors is by no means rare; Society has no
role for such women except that of the pitiable relative who performs
servants' tasks and who often supplies the family members with an
object for concealed or open scorn and serves to release their aggressive
impulses. The woman has no option other than the family.

Although the family lives closely and intimately together, com-
munication takes largely ritual forms. Considerable areas of experience
are excluded from it as taboos. Because of lack of practice, both precise
understanding of and expression in their own language are unde-
developed in the lower strata of society, especially with regard to the communication of feelings. Since women scarcely have the opportunity to introduce experiences from outside the house into their conversations, their subjects are very few. Gossip, intrigues, malice, envy and bigotry blossom in this desert. Apparently all these characteristics both confirm and encourage the dominant negative stereotypes of the qualities and behaviour of women.

Social control of women who do not conform to the predetermined sex norms is strong, strict and ubiquitous. The personality type who guides and controls himself and is independent of leadership and outward control is virtually unknown. Especially dangerous are the simplistic moral categories which are applied. They are ingroup-outgroup, friend-enemy, good-bad. Nuances and shades of meaning cannot normally be tolerated and attempts to assess behaviour objectively or even to judge before condemning are rare. This too, is especially true of utterances concerning the behaviour of women. Thus stepping over the bounds of the prescribed female roles results in moral condemnation. In Islamic areas, where a division of the religious and the secular must always be artificial, it is especially so in moral questions. A woman who does not observe the rules affecting her role spectrum commits a moral offence in the eyes of her society, and therefore also a religious one. She is an evil woman. And as if to make the danger to female innovations or nonconformists even greater, the bad behaviour of a woman may be rashly coupled with the suspicion of sexual offences. To have a woman in the family who is being talked about with reference to such offences means for the men that they themselves are treated as dishonourable, unmanly, vile. Out of fear for surrounding social controls the intrafamilial control mechanisms react vigilantly to the slightest non-conformity in a woman.

Men have better opportunities of rising above their class of origin than women do, through personal achievements, qualities of leadership, knowledge or ability. Nevertheless even men who are socially mobile in this way are unusual. If a man is a self-made man and his family is unknown, this is a handicap for him in many respects, for example in finding a marriage partner. For this matter is normally dealt with by the family. Evaluating families' reputations plays an important part in it. It is however possible for such a person to ask his friends and acquaintances to advance his cause, to substitute themselves for his family to some extent and to stand surety for him.
Modern Women Originate from 'Modern' Families

Women who in general terms and relative to Afghan conditions can be called 'modern' belong almost exclusively to families which were also traditionally privileged. These families stand out within this group for their awareness of and their contact with the West, their relatively high level of education, their degree of enlightenment etc. They represent the modern elite of the capital. In other words these women are not socially mobile as individuals but as members of their particular families. For this group 'modernity' becomes a new justification of their elite status. Its members are in close contact with accidental cultures and with foreign people. Indeed their attitudes and opinions are often closer to these foreign cultures and the bearers thereof than to their own culture and their compatriots whose lives have been scarcely touched by modern developments.

Only this class, which has its privileges and legitimacy through tradition, can dare to permit its women a greater range of activities than are traditionally available, because this class alone is able to take the risks and face the consequences which the non-conformist role-behaviour of their women-folk brings. As members of the ruling classes they can protect their women as they take steps away from traditional roles into new and different ones.

Nevertheless the situation is precarious even for these women. They excite the moral sensibility of society by their existence, that is to say visibility, and by their apparent qualities, condemned as 'naked,' 'shameless,' 'immodest' etc. Such are the reactions of a part of Kabul's male population, that the walk of a smartly dressed and made-up modern Afghan woman through the streets of Kabul is at times like running the gauntlet between rows of men who are sexually and morally excited to the point of exploding. Members of the traditional low-income strata seldom react in this way.

Families of the upper and middle classes which have been influenced by the West adopt to some extent western patterns of behaviour of day-to-day contacts between unrelated men and women. Other groups, however, even among the educated, are scarcely familiar with these norms. So they have no standard code of behaviour for contacts between the sexes outside the family. As a result both men and women feel insecure. In such encounters they fall back on behaviour patterns which are customary within the family. This makes the situation more comfortable for them. They address each other as 'brother' and 'sister'—which is in fact one form of correct behaviour
for the few occasions when unrelated people of both sexes meet in traditional life. Others copy patterns they have seen in films and incorrectly judge to be normal in the West. Or they lose control of the situation in shyness and mawkishness. This problem of formlessness in behaviour between the sexes is especially marked, and especially disconcerting, amongst half-educated youths in the capital, who apparently imagine that any form of insulting behaviour to women in modern clothes is permissible and who waver between xenophobia and imitation of foreigners.

The Painful Transformation of the Traditional Family

For educated Afghans cultural conflicts are especially painful and of course personal in the family itself. They challenge the family's authoritarian style of leadership and its hierarchical organisation. But the family gives up the old order only under pressure and with struggles. It is equally reluctant to surrender parts of its traditional functions to other institutions and it finds it difficult to take over new functions.

Most educated young people criticise the traditional form of the family amongst themselves without making their criticisms heard within the family. Others state their opinions about certain problems openly and without waiting to be asked, and attack directly the decisions made by the authoritative power. But such objections rarely have an influence on the course of events. On the contrary, family authority often takes stern and violent measures to overcome this unexpected resistance. Topics of such controversy are almost regularly the choice of marriage partners, questions of schooling, the wish of a youth to have contact with other young people, but sometimes also philosophical and political opinions. Very slowly the doctrines of equality and democracy are finding their way into the family circle and lessening the importance of attributes like age and sex in determining the individual's place in the family hierarchy. They tend, at least, to move the vertical order of rank towards a horizontal one or perhaps to create a flexible order which changes according to the problem faced.

Schools have taken over educational and also to some extent socialization functions from the family. However unsatisfactory they are in many respects, they induce social behaviour which is not completely adjusted to the existing traditional form of society but may be more fit for one that is in the process of changing.
The family is losing some of its economic functions too. But still today the determining factor which decides whether an individual belongs to the upper classes or not is the accumulated inherited wealth of the family in the form of land and houses. It is virtually unheard of that an individual who comes from a considerably lower class works his way up to the highest ones only with the income from his work even together with additional sums in the form of bribes. Professional income is not of great importance in the middle and upper classes. Many women who are employed merely pay a few personal expenses, for clothing and cosmetics, and sometimes only for some of these, with the money they earn, while the family supports them. Here the traditional rule is significant, according to which it is the duty of husband or his family to keep the woman in a style appropriate to her rank. Nevertheless even these inadequate sums give such women some degree of economic independence. For those who have no possessions they are the only source of economic sustenance. The most successful earners in the family, mostly young men and women, acquire influence and standing in this way even if this takes time. More school-learning can give even little girls some standing in families where all adults are illiterate.

The right of the head of the family to marry off its younger members according to the interest of the family is being strongly challenged but in fact is slow to disappear. The younger people are beginning to claim a right to their own happiness. Romantic love and the goal of personal marriage are their guide-lines when they choose a partner. But these are the very demands which can as yet be met in exceptional cases only. Only a few heads of families yield to the wishes of their younger relatives. On the other hand almost no youths of marrying age are willing to risk economic insecurity and the family ban, which is almost the same as a social ban.

The fact that youth, male and female, questions the power of their 'betters,' even though they must yield to it eventually, seems to cause many fathers, even more today than in the past, to make especially pointless and authoritative decisions against the interests of their children. They are fighting a battle in retreat. Therefore those people are right who claim that this generation is being 'sacrificed' for the following ones because it is struggling in the front line to open up new ways of life for itself and others.

Because the traditional family structure is gradually becoming less firm and the family is slowly losing some of its functions, the
number of bonds between the individual and his family is decreasing. At the same time the quality of the bonds may be changing through new functions which the family may have in the future. Because of this process individuals are being judged more for their personal qualities than before, and they are getting more opportunity to associate freely in accordance with their interests instead of being automatically identified with their families. For women, a greater solidarity, independent of social class, could possibly be one outcome of this development.

**The Isolation of the Modern Segment of Society**

Conservatives observe the changes in the social status of Afghan women with suspicion, criticism and sometimes with moral disgust. Fear of losing their own positions of power no doubt plays an important part in forming these attitudes.

Had not the state become so powerful in recent times, the conservatives could have worked more effectively against women's emancipation, as they have done in the past when they aroused the lower classes for their own ends.

In the absence of an active force to influence the lower strata against modernism among men and especially among women, they seem neither disturbed nor alarmed by the new developments but only superficially attracted. So much are they accustomed to the proximity of many different groups and the coexistence of a host of minorities that they treat the modern type like a newly arrived ethnic group or a particular kind of foreigner. Therefore they see no reason to connect the roles and functions modern Afghan women have recently adopted with their own situation or that of their women-folk.

Without agents to force this association of ideas into the lower strata and to make them compare their way of life with that of the modern group, the changes do not influence their lives. Since the modern men and women—with few exceptions—remain group-centred themselves, they have not yet been of much use for spreading such ideas.

The social development which has begun in Afghanistan and particularly the changes in the status of some Afghan women, can be seen as an adaptation of one part of the elite to the outside world and to world opinion.

The optimistic belief of the moderns, that they could develop the Afghan economy, society and culture in a 'scientific' manner, is
hardly shared by other groups. (The concepts 'science' and 'scientific' are rather naively used as labels for particular statements to make them unassailable). The basic idea that people can change their economic and socio-cultural situation according to preconceived ideas, and above all that they have a right to do so, seems to most of the people to be both untrue and reckless. The changes which are obvious in Kabul do by no means all correspond to the planner's preconceptions.

The Social Isolation of Women and their Integration in the Female Subculture

Given the numerous forms of interdependence which in Islamic society even more than in others blend all aspects of life with each other and with religion in the narrow sense, any change in one sphere—puri pro toto—endangers the whole system of the traditional way of life. External and obvious, often merely superficial departures from this way of life and the emphasis on fashionable modernism have contributed substantially to the isolation of the modern group. The modern women are especially isolated. They are placed apart from the rest of society by their family membership, the socio-economic status of their families, the female subculture and because they are part of the modern group. Men who follow traditional patterns keep their distance from them as they do from all members of the female subculture. There is no such institutionalized barrier between modern and traditional women. In spite of this the former cannot exert much influence on the latter—even if they should want to—because of the social gap between them.

Women living in traditional way do not yet compare themselves to modern ones and cannot in general imagine any changes in their own situation.

On the other hand, the modern women of the middle and upper classes do not take the idea of equality, which motivates them to claim rights similar to those of the men in their group, so consistently and seriously that they would demand the same rights for both sexes in every class of their society and equal rights for all groups.

In spite of the social gap between modern women and those living in the traditional way, which is kept open by both, modern middle and upper class women can discuss many aspects of life with lower class women without difficulty. This is obviously a result of the female subculture which is independent of groups and classes and to which both belong.
For all Afghan women it remains true that according to divine law they have exactly half the ‘value’ of a man in certain social situations—indeed of their individual personalities, simply because they are female. This applies to the division of inheritances or when they appear as witnesses in court. An institution as modern as the Afghan Insurance Company in the year 1974 valued the life of a female human being at half that of a male. All women are considered to be unreliable, changeable and easily seduced, and therefore in need of special protection, guidance and precautions; this again has no reference to individual character.

Almost all of them feel themselves to be the potential prey of men outside the family, who are considered to be hostile and sexually aggressive. For each of them it is true that she is raised as an object for a particular man, who—with few exceptions—is chosen for her by others. Each of them must obey the male, whether he is her father, uncle, brother, husband or in some cases her son. Each of them learns to feel shame and disgust for her menstruation. Each of them is told how important it is to keep her virginity intact until her wedding. And almost all suffer a clumsy and violent defloration from their unknown and sexually inexperienced husbands.

All of them know that the children they bear do not belong to them but to their husbands. Every woman can suffer the experience that her husband takes another wife beside herself. Many feel insecure in their husband’s family and have only the affection of their children as a reliable emotional bond. And all women know that this has been decreed for them because they are female. The laws applying to their sex have been legislated by the highest authority, God, and are therefore good. They cannot change their sex.

These few examples give some impression of the contents of the female subculture in Afghanistan, which is not however limited to this one Islamic country. It is clear that criticism of these conditions and every actual change in the status of women touches a sensitive nerve in society. Conservatives who want to justify the traditional situation work to find rationalizations for them.

New Female Sex Roles?

Since even modern women so clearly belong to the female subculture one may ask whether they are really going beyond their old sex roles or whether they are simply giving them more publicity; or further for which aspects of their lives one or the other is true.
Many of the female roles within the family, including the interpretation that modern women give them, remain strictly within the limits of Islam, although they contradict traditional Afghan customs. Modern women in these cases simply make greater use of the latitude which tradition has narrowed and of the possibilities which it has concealed. This applies for example to a girl expressing her opinion about the choice of her future husband. When modern Afghan women become the advisers, intimates and partners of their husbands, this too is no attack on the fundamental principles of Islam, nor is school education for girls.

It is quite a different matter with the passionate discussion about women's roles, which is theoretical and extends beyond actual practice and which has placed the Islamic family at the centre of public interest. Under the previous regime, this discussion even led a government to occupy itself with the family within the framework of 'secular' law. By doing so the Government intruded into a region which, in Islam, is definitely beyond its competence.

Taking over public office and working for money or even for a living are things which were previously restricted to men. Since the state is Afghanistan's greatest employer, it can legitimate and protect the women who work for it. Under this state protection, a few Afghan women have attained high public office. In these positions men are under their control to varying degrees. The women manage this power with care and diplomacy. At present such outstanding women still come from the group of traditionally privileged people. The increasing education of girls from the lower classes should theoretically lead to the possibility that individual women from these strata could move up to important positions in the future, and this purely because of their abilities. Only then would it be possible to speak of social mobility amongst Afghan women.

Modern women, in reaching out for new roles, have pursued until now only verbally goals of general social significance and have not even verbally pursued radical goals. They have not created utopian plans for themselves. The ideal which most are striving for is rather a nice Western middle-class life, economically secure, adjusted to the environment, without serious problems. They believe that happiness can be found in the isolated nuclear family, in whose affairs no one meddles. Most of them have no understanding of the darker aspects of individualism, nor of the problems of the isolation of the nuclear family. They do not recognize the various conflicts arising from com-
peting roles, nor the excessive emotionality and possible over-organization of a small, intimate family unit, nor do they realize that this family type, too, can be a breeding-place for neuroses. Others pursue goals which have been given up in the West or are seen here to be fairly complex. A growing time-lag of a special kind can be observed in developing countries in that even the social aims they set at present are often outmoded in their places of origin by now.

Consistent social and psychological, let alone sexual emancipation are not among the goals named. Neither do women challenge men's right to take the ultimate decisions or to lead society. Finally, the possibility of opposing the whole social system and freeing themselves of religion are not mentioned in public. In the present social conditions in Afghanistan, mentioning such aims would in any case endanger everything that has been attained and is being attained for a few women.

The Modernism of Women: Forms and Contents

In earlier days a woman was her husband's concealed possession. Today many women of the middle and upper classes put themselves on display and many men use their wives as status symbols, as is often the case in the West. It is true that they play with fire when they flirt, but the actual flame ignites so seldom—i.e., the game so rarely becomes serious—that for the women it often becomes a game of hypocrisy. What seems to be a liberal pattern of behaviour is no more than a fashionable accessory, without seriousness, without risks, without true adventure. Everything stops at the promise. And the promise is an empty one.

Because of the public display of the modern women in Kabul, the qualities which decide the status of a women within the female group begin to include beauty, smartness, elegance, tidiness, fashion and cosmetic skill.

The fashionable appearance of a women, in the growing anonymity of the large city of Kabul, can even lead in a brief encounter to a wrong idea about her social status so that she seems to belong to a higher class than she really does. The same is true, of course, for fashionable young men.

Qualities which can be assessed only after a longer acquaintance,

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such as liveliness, charm, knowledge, wit, self-confidence, are becoming more important in the choice of a partner. A modern man looking for a wife also considers whether he can appear in public with her. Many modern women base their behaviour and appearance almost exclusively on a pattern which they hope will please men. They are not conscious that in doing so they are fully accepting the role of an object for men.

Western fashions, which modern women in Kabul wear with complete elegance, express their hopes and aims rather than their present-day social situation. In fashions modern women in Kabul show the sense of adventure which they are rather lacking in the consistency and extent of their demands for emancipation. This apparent daring serves the conservatives again and again as evidence what women who depart from traditional roles betray all the traditions of Afghanistan and the religion of Islam. This conclusion seems all the more logical to them because there is no form of eroticism in the existing Afghan culture which does not find a direct outlet in sexual consummation—except between near relatives of both sexes where such relationships are forbidden by incest taboos.

In addition the conservatives view human sexuality as a pure product of nature which functions according to inevitable and unchanging laws.

In this context the common practice, already mentioned, of conversing with strangers in a familial tone, addressing them as brother and sister, points to the fact that the incest taboos are being extended into public life and now include people who are not related. So the display of the women which was formerly confined to the family now takes place within a larger group. To the male members of this group the women remain taboo.

Conclusion

Afghan women are the bearers and sharers of a female subculture which extends beyond class and beyond ethnic group. At the same time, of course, they belong to any ethnic groups and social classes, forming in each a female subdivision. This applies also to the family.

Formally, one can view modern women of the middle and upper classes, too, as female appendages to the modern group. But to the extent that modern men and women are at least for their own part trading to put an end to the traditional division of the world into
male and female spheres, women are full members of this group and not of a female subdivision of it.

Belonging to the group of the despairing, the resigned, the occasionally rebellious, of those who feel that they are being sacrificed and whose desires and expectations are not being realized, is not a question of sex. It is rather decided by a certain minimum of knowledge and education and by a special psychological reaction to repeated frustrations in personal and social life; this group does not repress or forget them but gathers them together in its consciousness. This group alone includes female as well as male members, from a broad range of social groups and strata. Sections of this group are partially conscious of what they have in common and show the first signs of building up solidarity.

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