FAMILY FORMATION ATTITUDES AMONG HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS
IN KABUL, AFGHANISTAN:
A STUDY IN POPULATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Family Formation Attitudes Among High School Girls in Kabul, Afghanistan: A Study in Population and Social Change

Anne T. Sweetser

Introduction:

Participants in the seminar on "The Cultural Consequences of Population Change," which was held in conjunction with the World Population Conference in Bucharest during August, 1974, outlined the major socio-cultural factors related to population as follows: 1. cultural heterogeneity, 2. attitudes, values, norms, and knowledge about sexuality and reproduction, 3. marriage and family norms such as age, selection of spouses, child spacing, and polygyny, and 4. conception and role definitions of males and females. (1) They pointed to the key role of expectations and norms in determining reproductive behavior.

My survey of the family formation attitudes among high school girls in Kabul, Afghanistan during the summer of 1974 was directed at elucidation of many of these points. Approximately one-half of the juniors and seniors in the seven academic high schools for girls in Kabul, a total of 678 girls, completed multiple-choice questionnaires. Included were sections on a) the socio-economic characteristics of their natal families, b) their personal and family goals, and c) their knowledge and attitudes about family planning and aspects of health and nutrition related to child survival.

One school was visited each day during the survey period as arranged in conjunction with the Ministry of Education. With the exception of the two smallest schools where all students in the two highest grades were given questionnaires, classes were selected each morning by size and with an effort to maximize variation in rank ordering. In addition to explaining how to indicate the chosen response, the instructions, written in Persian and repeated orally, stressed the fact that the questionnaire was not a test and explained its purpose: to create a report. In each school an English teacher assisted in maintaining order and fielding questions raised by students.

Background:

The most influential social institution in Afghanistan is family. Political leadership at all levels is held and passed on within families, and relations between groups throughout the country are negotiated through ties of reciprocal rights and obligations. A spirit of egalitarianism, due to almost exclusive membership in the Islamic faith, exists despite hierarchical ordering in political relationships. Cooperative endeavors are not common, however, due to self-interest on the part of family units, which are organized into clans, subtribes, tribes, and ethnic groups. While efforts are being made to raise national consciousness, loyalty rarely extends above the tribal level. (2)

The family itself is characterized by patrilineality, patrilocality, extendedness,
and possible polygyny (though this is limited to the most wealthy of men). It is the basic economic unit; property is held in common, ideally at least, until the death of the eldest male. It is also the locus of socialization, most education, work, status definition, and protection for its members. Its structure is hierarchical; the eldest male controls most of the decisions made for the group and conducts affairs in the outside world for the collectivity. Close relations obtain between siblings and between mothers and their children. Sons work with their fathers who are usually friendly, but demand respect and obedience because of their authority. In exchange for the security and support given by the family, there is little room for individuation among its members, for they bear responsibility for its reputation and welfare.

Women are accorded very low status in this ultra-male-dominated society. From possibly being a source of shame to their fathers at birth, they may rise in power to the status of mother-in-law. Very early in life they become aware of the great role differentiations on the basis of sex, and learn to obey even their younger brothers. After about age ten, they may remain secluded, leaving the family compound only with permission and fully veiled. While they may exercise considerable private, informal influence on family decisions or control younger women in the household, their power extends outward only with respect to selections of spouses for their children. Their character is considered basically untrustworthy, necessitating control by explicit and oft-repeated rules. It is commonly held that they are weak, vain, frivolous, dependent, incapable of hard work, and in possession of smaller spirits, just as their bodies are smaller than men's. (4) It is believed that:

"The will of most women is under the influence of agitations and inclinations centered around their own personal emotions, while the will of men is subject to wisdom and thoughts. Men are in a higher position than women because of this domination of thinking over feeling and the greatness of their spirits, as well as the superior quality and strength of their bodies." (5)

The first modern education was introduced in Afghanistan early in this century by Habibullah Khan. His efforts were much extended during the 1920s by the progressive king Amanullah Khan whose attempts to improve the position of women in the society, which included the opening of a school for girls, ignited conservative opposition into open revolt and led to his assassination. From the early 1930s through the 1950s a program of slow expansion was promoted. Village schools directed by mullahs, many of whom resisted government intervention, and some secular elementary schools located primarily in towns remained the cornerstone of the educational system. By 1960 there were 500 such secular institutions, 90% of which were for boys; 75% of all students in the country were in Kabul; and only 1% of all students were enrolled in secondary schools or at the university. Also, the teacher training institute, founded in 1914, had graduated: only 2500 teachers. (6) An emergency was declared and the number of schools, teachers, and students doubled during the decade of the 60s, but educational standards fell. While expansion and decentralization remain important, efforts are now being made to
raise the standards, but rote learning is still prevalent and personal gain in social status motivates most students. (7) "Originality, creativity, empirical inquiry, and critical thinking are not qualities likely to be found in the classroom." (8)

Population:

Until the recently completed census by the Afghan Demographic Studies Team of the State University of New York at Buffalo, no accurate statistics on the population of Afghanistan were available. In 1970, estimates of the size of the population ranged between seven and seventeen million depending upon the party citing the figure and his purpose. (9) In 1972, the Ministry of Planning published the highest of these estimates and an annual growth rate of 2.3. (10), possibly reflecting an equation of numerical strength with prestige. Figures from the recent census indicate a settled population of slightly over 10.5 million, including 1.6 million in urban areas. The adjusted rates of birth, at 59.8/1000, among the highest in the world, and death, at 30.6/1000, including a high rate of infant mortality, yield an annual growth rate of 2.9%, which will mean doubling of the population by the end of the century. The proportion below fifteen years of age, already 46% (11), will then be much larger, causing increased pressure on the recently expanded educational facilities.

Kabul, the center of government, education, and commerce, with 597,000 people is almost four times more populous than the next largest city. Though urban birth and death rates are both lower than the national averages, natural increase alone generates a higher rate of growth in cities than in the country overall. (12) From the mid 1960s, when 290,000 in the city and 435,000 in the municipality (including the city) were enumerated in the Greater Kabul Census, permanent and seasonal in-migration have increased markedly due to completion of major roads linking large sections of the country with the capital and have boosted the rate of urban growth. At that time, 29% of all municipal residents were in-migrants, 78% of whom were from areas near Kabul. (13)

In the late 1960s, Jung found that 70% of migrants were from rural areas; 85% had come directly to Kabul from their former homes; 42% were between the ages of 15 and 34 at the time of migration; and twice as many males as females were among their numbers. 70% were illiterate, while only 5% had completed eight years of school. "Push" factors were paramount in their decisions to move: close to two-thirds gave insufficient land, income, or employment as the most important reason. (14)

The Sample Population:

Of the girls responding to the survey, 71.2% (N=666)*reported that their families were from Kabul Province, indicating virtually proportional representation of migrant and non-migrant families in the girls' high schools. Among the migrant

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*The number of girls responding to each question is given. Percentages always refer to the last sited "N" value unless specified.
families represented, though, a wider range in place of origin was observed than was generally true for migrants five years ago. 42.7% of migrants (N=171) were from Wardak (11.1%), Logar (9.9%) Nangarhar (9.4%), and Laghman (12.3%) Provinces to the west, south, and east of Kabul. The comparatively small numbers (10.6%) from Parwan and Kapisa Provinces to the north of Kabul accords with Allan's observation that the directional orientation for migration from these provinces is to the north. (15) A higher rate of urban to urban migration among the migrants in the sample is also suggested. The next most important places of origin were those provinces with the second, third, and fourth largest urban areas in the country: 29.2% were from Kandahar (14.6%), Herat (8.8%), and Balkh (5.8%) Provinces.

The girls listed work (12.3%, over half in pre-arranged jobs, N=676), education (11.9%, including school, college, and military), and helping the family (8.9%) as the reasons their fathers had come to the city. Compared with most migrants, then, the "pull" factors may be quite significant in the decisions to migrate of those families which educate their daughters. About equal numbers reported, in a distinct question, that their fathers had moved to the city during each of the three preceding decades (4% each, N=653). Considering that almost none indicated that their fathers had come to Kabul between thirty and forty years ago, perhaps the best interpretation of the responses that they had come over forty years ago, given by 5% of the girls, would be that they mean a (very) long time ago. This vagueness, plus the fact that 19% reported no knowledge about their father's time of arrival (including birth) in Kabul, confirms the anticipated low level of communication with (or about) their fathers' lives as suggested in the discussion of family structure.

In contrast, knowledge about their mothers was more complete and more consistent. 67% (N=652) reported that their mothers were born in the capital province. Among those who had migrated, the reasons were overwhelmingly either to accompany their husbands (75%, N=198) or to get married (18%); only fourteen had come independently, including nine who came for school. The largest number had come between twenty and thirty years ago (7.4%, N=662); decreasing numbers had come during the two more decades (6.3% and 5.4% respectively), and almost none had come over thirty years ago. Only 8% reported no knowledge of their mothers time of or reason for migration.

Generally, there were more children in migrant families. Equal proportions of migrant and non-migrant families had six to nine children each, but the majorities of smaller families were among the Kabulis and of larger families were among migrants. Thus, while a definite trend toward reduced family size in the urban setting is indicated, its effect is not seen in the first generation.

The families of these primarily seventeen to nineteen year old girls include an average of 7.5 children. While an average household size of seven was reported in the 1968 Kabul Household Expenditure Survey (16), the average for this sample was nine. Reduced infant mortality due to presumably better financial capability
of these families to utilize the health services in the city may be important in this differential. Small numbers of households include either a grandparent (15%, N=665), or the family of an aunt or uncle, usually a father's brother (10%). Most (85%, N=672) of the families own their own home; due to the low capital cost of building, this is not surprising. Most of the girls rated their families as being middle class standing; the mean response indicated slightly higher perceived social standing. Though large household membership correlated strongly with higher perceived social class, suggesting persistence of the extended family norm, the paucity of high correlations between social class and other variables, such as parents' educations and occupations, suggests that items not included in the questionnaire, such as family and wealth, are most important determinants. (17)

The privileged positions of these girls' families are reflected in the educations and occupations of their parents. Among the fathers, only 15% (N=661) were illiterate or learned to read and write at home; one quarter of them attended up to nine years of public school; another quarter attended college or training programs in teaching, the military, professions, or for special job skills. Almost 10% had been out of the country for some type of education. Of the remainder, some had attended village religious schools, and 23% had ten to twelve years of public schooling. Nearly one third work for the government, mostly in an official capacity; 16% (N=662) run shops or businesses; 12% hold high positions in the military; and 7.5% are professionals. Close to 30% were unemployed at the time of the survey; aside from the generally low level of opportunity, retirement, illness or incapacity, and possible absentee landlordism, instability following the coup d'etat one year prior to the survey may be a contributory factor.

Of the girls mothers, 40% (N=660) were illiterate; 26% had learned to read and write at home; 10% had attended only primary school; and, astonishingly, 17% had a secondary school background. Nonetheless, only 10% (N=653) were employed outside the home. The majority of these women were school teachers and most of the remainder worked in offices. Consistently, husbands had more education than their wives.

Among the fathers of the girls, educational attainment varied considerably between migrants and non-migrants. Whereas Kabulis have a wide range of backgrounds, large proportions of migrant fathers had advanced military training and had been abroad for some type of education; comparatively few had little or no education, or had attended secondary school without continuing their education thereafter. This suggests that the military is an important avenue for migration among the socially mobile from the countryside. On the other hand, daughters of more typical migrants have little chance to take advantage of educational opportunities in the city.
The Girls' Ambitions:

In view of all this, the great ambitions reported by the girls are surprising. Over half wish to attend college and another fifth wish to study abroad. (N=677) Close to 100 (14%) want to become teachers; but other socially useful occupations, such as health care, are extremely unpopular. More surprising is that 80% (N=647), especially those with the highest goals, stated that they expect to have the opportunity to fulfill their desires. Virtually none would leave school in order to get married, and very few would choose to stop work in order to get married. While 14% (N=649) said they would stop work if their husband wished and another 13% would stop "after making enough money" the majority (70%) reported that they would continue to work after having a baby. The mother's education was extremely significant in these aspirations; perceived social class, and to a lesser extent, the father's education also showed positive correlations.

Most were in no hurry to marry. 35% (N=651) stated that they do not expect to marry before age twenty-five. One quarter expect marriage at 23 or 24, and the same number at 21 or 22. Among daughters of migrants the average is slightly lower and the few (0.9%, N=644) already engaged were largely from this group. Traditionally, marriages were often arranged without the knowledge of the partners or without regard to their objections. The social prestige and wealth of the boy's family were important considerations and the paternal first cousin was the preferred spouse. (19) The primacy of group survival over individual choice, and a desire to keep the money exchanged for the girl "close at home" are demonstrated in these customs. But only one-sixth (N=628) of the girls responding consider parental control over selection of a husband best, while over 40% think the decision be left to the couple. Greater proportions of those from Kabul and those with less extravagant ambitions would prefer to live with their in-laws after marriage, but over one half of the sample would choose not to do so. Preference for a highly educated husband is strong: 95% (N=636) want to marry either a college graduate or a returnee from studies abroad.

Most want between two and four children; the mean desired number is 2.8 (N=675). Over half (N=646) want a space of four or more years, and another third, three to four years, between births. A slight preference for sons was indicated; the average number desired was 1.5 (N=674) compared with 1.3 (N=664) for daughters. Though over a third had no preference for the sex order of their children, more than half (N=649) want a son first and over 40% (N=639) want a daughter second. 15% (N=646) would have another child if they had enough children but not enough sons, compared with 10% (N=638) who would do the same in trying for another daughter.

Stated goals for their children are extremely high. If they could have their way, 72% (N=663) of their sons, and 50% (N=661) of their daughters would study abroad. Completion of college in Afghanistan is a poor second option for sons, followed by advanced military training, and is the only real alternative for daughters. Over half (N=643) would restrict the number of offspring they have in order to be able to provide the desired education for them, though most of the
remainder would have the desired number and do their best. 5% (N=635) stated that they would favor their sons' education if they encountered difficulties.

Family Planning and Nutrition:

Not unexpectedly, the girls are almost completely ignorant about pregnancy and means of preventing it. Only 6% (N=662) know when during her menstrual cycle a woman is most likely to get pregnant; 72.5% stated they "don't know." Slightly under half (49%) gave a definite response to a question on the possibility of pregnancy during lactation; the majority (28% of the total responding, N=665) stated that it is not possible. Most of the girls with whom I spoke informally indicated that they knew of the existence of some means for preventing pregnancy; but only 25% (N=665), including a high proportion from migrant families, stated that they knew one or more specific means. Despite a rumor to the contrary, only 7% thought it dangerous to use birth control prior to the first delivery. 90% (N=650) stated they would use birth control to increase the length of time between children, and 93% would employ a means for preventing pregnancy after having enough children. The Afghan Family Guidance Clinics are obviously well known; 77% (N=666) reported that these are the best source for birth control information and materials; and over one third (N=652) would seek help at one of these if unable to have a baby (61% would consult a private physician.) While two thirds (68%, N=642) would limit the number of children they have despite their parents-in-law's wishes, only 14% (N=640) would use birth control without permission from their husbands. The overwhelming majority want to know more about birth control (89%, N=660), and think it is a good idea to have lectures in school in the subject (90%, N=650).

Questions about nutrition were included because of its close relationship to population growth. In a large family where food is distributed more thinly (or less equally) mothers and young children are often less strong. For the mother this may mean decreased fecundity, increased pregnancy wastage, increased chance of death with a miscarriage or in delivery, and reduced milk supply. Low birth weight and undernourished children are more prone to succumb to the most common illnesses such as diarrheal or respiratory infections and more likely to die as a result. Further, high pregnancy wastage and infant mortality may lead to increased desire for more children. (20)

Reduced extent and duration of breast feeding in recent years in many countries has resulted in increased rates of infant and child morbidity and mortality due to dilution or unsanitary preparation of formulae. (21) Fortunately, 95% (N=669) of the girls believe mother's milk to be best for babies, but 15% (N=654) would prefer bottle feeding. In the Koh-e-Dahman Valley to the north of Kabul major reasons for the high death rate among children (diarrhea, measles, and pneumonia in over 60% of cases) are exacerbated by lack of knowledge about child raising practices, especially the late introduction of solid foods into their diets, and the introduction of foods with low nutritional value, with particular reference to protein content. (22) Both women in the valley and the girls in Kabul report the best age for weaning to be around two years. The girls, though, suggested a mean age

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for introduction of solid foods of one-half to one year, a vast improvement compared with the rural women's practices. When asked to list good foods for pregnant and lactating women and for babies, the girls gave both generic categories (eg: vitamins) and specific food names. Whereas 8% of responses on women's diets were "protein" and another 28.5% were specific high protein foods, only 3% of responses were "protein" for babies; 24% of responses were high protein foods, including 13% milk. Though interdictions based on the theory of hot and cold foods may be significant in the low rate of mention of eggs and meats for babies, comparison of the percentages of "protein" responses for women and babies indicated failure to comprehend the great need for protein of the young child by the girls.

Lastly, the girls were asked whether they thought many or fewer children would be of greater benefit for their country. One half (49.8%, N=653) replied that fewer would be advantageous, close to one quarter (23%) favored a large population, and the remainder considered the issue irrelevant to the greatness of Afghanistan.

Discussion:

Overall, the attitudes expressed by these girls indicate rapid assimilation of modern ideas in their class and a low level of realism on the personal level. The opportunities they desire are available in such small quantity and the chance for them to exercise much influence over decisions effecting their lives so limited (such as in the selection of a husband), that dissonance on both levels would appear unavoidable. The marked trend toward greater "reasonableness" of personal and family goals with increasing age is very significant. For example, those nineteen or older expressed the desire to attend college or study overseas less frequently than those under eighteen years of age. While this might be a reflection of more mature evaluation of available options due solely to mental and emotional development, it is more plausible that concern within their families about their marriages is being assimilated in their expectations. It is highly unlikely that for the daughter of a middle class family a college education or employment would be very seriously considered as compared with the possibility of an economically favorable and prestigious marriage. Unless studying at the university, the possibility for a girl to meet any men outside of her family would be very restricted. And, unless married to a like-minded man, there would be very little chance that she would have only the number of children she desires, or hold a position outside the home. The potential for frustration over lack of opportunity, independence, and responsibility in decision making among these girls as they grow older appears to be of considerable magnitude.

In general, the population of Kabul can be expected to grow at a very rapid and increasing rate. Competition for educational opportunities will become greater as these girls can be expected to influence their childrens' ambitions very much, just as their mothers have influenced their own. Opportunities for migrants to educate their daughters and, hence, form marriage alliances with families already in good social positions in the city may become scarcer. Frustration among all
Kabulis, especially migrants, may thus increase due to lack of opportunity, simultaneous with rising expectations.

In attempting to change these patterns leading to personal and "class" dissatisfaction, inclusion of units on reproduction and relevant aspects of child raising in girls' schools, and promotion of independent thinking and problem solving in the education of both sexes might be sound first steps. Attempts could be made to raise the status of health work and other useful occupations, and alternative roles for urban women outside the home could be fostered as well. Efforts such as these might result in more balanced social and economic development while contributing to a decline in the rate of population growth and greater satisfaction among the growing urban classes.

In coping with increasing population and related problems as development proceeds, family planning and many of the available alternatives, such as incentive and involuntary programs (23) may be administratively infeasible or objectionable on religious grounds and lead to great conservative resistance. Health care and education are the most reasonable for introduction of population and similar programs, but in planning and operation, awareness of the correlates in social change must be maintained.
FOOTNOTES


2. Donald N. Wilbur, Afghanistan, New Haven, HRAF Press, pp. 76-97

3. Ibid.

4. Edith Knabe, "Afghan Women: Does their Role Change?" in Dupree and Albert, eds., Afghanistan in the 70s, pp. 144-166

5. Ibid., p. 153


9. Dupree, op. cit., p.3


11. Courtesy of Assistant Professor Graham B. Kerr, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Buffalo, and director, Afghan Demographic Studies Team.

12. Ibid.


15. Nigel J.R. Allan, "Techno-Environmental Change in the Cis-Hindu Kush," paper presented at the 26th annual meeting, Association for Asian Studies, April, 1974, pp. 4-5

16. Dupree, op. cit., p. 10

17. See Wilbur, op. cit., p. 79, 83

18. Dupree, op. cit., p. 5

19. Wilbur, op. cit., p. 91


