

Making Muted Voices Heard



Image by by Sgt. Gene Arnold via the [U.S. Army](#).

INTRODUCING THE ISSUE

The insurgency in Afghanistan, composed of pro-Taliban and other anti-Western factions, has long taken refuge in (and held dominion over) the rural areas of the country. The unforgiving terrain outside the urban centers and the few roads that traverse the remote land make access to rural areas very difficult. As a result, the presence of both the Afghan government and humanitarian organizations in these regions remains limited and in great danger.

In the mid-2000s, U.S. forces began to realize that, to quell the insurgency, they would have to focus on these hard-to-reach tribal areas that provided the insurgents sanctuary and allowed them to flourish. This new strategy birthed the concept of Village Stability Operations (VSO) in which small numbers of U.S. special operations soldiers would imbed in rural villages that were weary of Taliban exploitation and

work toward village security, self-sustainability, and connection to the Afghan government for support and recognition. The concept of VSO was revolutionary and successful. However, in the process, male U.S. soldiers discovered that communication with local Afghan women was virtually impossible.

Conservative Afghan culture dictates, with regard to men other than their male relatives, that women stay out of sight and out of mind. Interaction with male U.S. soldiers represents, therefore, a grievous breach of decorum for women, one that could also endanger their lives. In addition, many Afghan village leaders—all men, of course—neglected to mention women's or children's health issues during cooperative meetings (shuras) with VSO forces, and often avoided the topic when confronted by U.S. soldiers. In fact, many local men were very uncomfortable and even offended when asked about the condition of women in Afghan society.

It became apparent that we needed to hear the voices of the women themselves in order to address their concerns. To make this happen, the U.S. Armed Forces created all-female U.S. Army and Marine units who traveled to and imbedded in the remote and dangerous regions of Afghanistan alongside their male-soldier counterparts. These all-female units interact with, communicate the needs of, and protect the women and children of the village, all the while respecting local gender norms. These groups are known as Cultural Support Teams (CSTs).

EXPLAINING THE PROBLEMS

The toppling of the Taliban by U.S.-led NATO forces in 2001 and the subsequent implementation of a new constitution by Karzai's government led some Afghan women to once again hope for an improved place in society and access to their legal

rights. While there has been some improvement for Afghan women in terms of legal representation and in the realms of education and work, these small steps forward have been largely concentrated in urban centers under NATO security umbrellas. Except when pressured, the government of Afghanistan has generally neglected to address women's issues; therefore, much of the funding for women's institutions comes through foreign and domestic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reliant upon foreign and local women to perform their functions.

The major obstacle to gender equality, however, is not the central government's reticence; it is the population distribution. The majority of Afghans live in tribal regions outside urban centers that are almost completely out of touch with the central Afghan government. Additionally, due to their remote location and inherent security threats, the rural areas are highly inaccessible to humanitarian organizations. Consequently, these areas of the country have not experienced nearly the same progress toward gender equality and humanitarian support as the cities. The few humanitarian personnel brave enough to travel to the rural, tribal regions have often encountered threats, capture, and even death by Taliban insurgents.

Through VSO, U.S. forces began to imbed within rural Pashtun (the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan) villages to work with locals in establishing a common defense against the strong Taliban presence that thrives in the rural regions. During this process, U.S. soldiers found that the local village leaders were eager to discuss issues involving security and food, but not very open about discussing the health or conditions of women and children in the village. The Pashtun culture is deeply entrenched in a conservative interpretation of Islam mixed with its own "eye-for-an-eye" tribal code, known as *Pashtunwali*. Thus, despite their desire for a U.S. presence and an end to Taliban exploitation, the

villagers were not wholly ready to exhibit what they perceived as untraditional behavior by discussing women's conditions in the villages.

This phenomenon became a critical problem in the civil-military aspect of VSO since lack of knowledge about the welfare of women and children ultimately prevented the proper distribution and application of humanitarian aid to the villages. Providing humanitarian aid and security are key components of the VSO mission since they are essential in maintaining a healthy alliance between the rural anti-Taliban villages and the U.S. forces imbedded within them. During the weekly shuras between U.S. forces and village elders, whenever questions on the status of women in the villages arose, tension mounted among the local men. This was perhaps due to a tribal and religiously orthodox chauvinism that seemed to assert that, in a business-like meeting between two male parties, women's issues are not of importance. One of the most unendurable aspects of this cultural barrier for U.S. soldiers was the knowledge that children were suffering from curable diseases and malnutrition inside homes they were not allowed to enter because women were present there. Furthermore, women were not receiving basic healthcare or childbirth support—issues that the funding allotted for VSO would cover if only the U.S. soldiers could actually assess the situation by hearing from the women within the community.

CULTURAL SUPPORT TEAMS: INTRODUCING A SOLUTION

Early in the Iraq War, U.S. forces quickly realized the cultural taboo of searching Muslim women or entering homes in door-to-door searches where women may be present and uncovered. Failure to respect this societal custom further alienated U.S. forces from the locals and escalated tensions. The need to search women and enter homes was apparent. However, one month after the initial invasion of Iraq in March

2003, a female suicide bomber killed three U.S. soldiers at a checkpoint when they decided not to search her out of respect for local modesty rules. Sadly, terrorist groups often exploit women and children in the War on Terror.



Image by by Sgt. Gene Arnold via the [U.S. Army](#).

To prevent further casualties of U.S. troops, by the end of the first year of the U.S. occupation in Iraq, the Army formed all-female engagement teams (FETs) composed of U.S. Army or Marine soldiers. FETs began to accompany their male counterparts to perform searches of Iraqi women when necessary, and to assist with controlling or calming the females of a household when those homes were searched for insurgents or weapons stockpiles. By having women perform these duties, tensions were lessened.

By the mid-2000s, the FETs became an integral and effective part of any U.S. military unit on the ground that dealt with the locals on a regular basis. The casual term, "Team Lioness," became widely used in the Army and Marines in

reference to the teams. Eventually, the idea made its way to Afghanistan, where it was a well-known tactic of Taliban insurgents to dress in a woman's burqa in order to travel covertly and to elude capture. FETs quickly played a critical role in Afghanistan and were constantly praised by U.S. commanders who understood the need for "Team Lionesses" in a country entrenched in conservative Islam.

The solution to the challenges faced by special operations soldiers conducting VSO (to assess the needs of the isolated female community), therefore, pointed to FETs. In the case of Afghanistan, though, the mission in the villages went beyond the need for female soldiers to perform searches or to gather intelligence from Afghan women. FETs in Afghanistan must also understand the local customs and religion, attempt to blend into the rural village communities, and be people the local women trust to listen to and to share their security concerns as well as health issues. In response, the Army established a course at the U.S. Army's Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to train highly select female soldiers (many chosen from among the ranks of the original FETs) to deploy in support of the VSO mission. To denote the special training these women receive and in relation to the role they play, these units have become known as Cultural Support Teams (CSTs). The description given on their recruitment website details their mission:

"Cultural Support Teams comprised of female Soldiers whose...primary task is to engage the female populations in an objective area when such contact may be deemed culturally inappropriate if performed by a male service member. CSTs directly support activities ranging from medical civic-action programs, searches, and seizures, humanitarian assistance and civil-military operations. Cultural support training will primarily focus on basic human behavior, Islamic and Afghan cultures, women and their role in Afghanistan, and tribalism." (["Cultural Support Team," Special Operations Recruiting](#)

[Battalion, 2010, http://www.sorbre recruiting.com/SORB_CST.html.](http://www.sorbre recruiting.com/SORB_CST.html))

One cannot stress enough the importance of the CSTs to the village stability mission. The female CSTs, armed but donned with hijabs, were welcomed into many Afghan homes. In gaining access to the women of village households, they witnessed firsthand the levels of children's malnutrition and the signs of physical abuse of some women. Their presence also aided in assessing whether homes lacked proper comfort for the winter months and whether the women and children had enough warm clothing for the cold nights. CST officers directly related these needs to VSO commanders, which facilitated funding into the villages to provide women and children with blankets, warm clothes, and basic medical supplies. They also instructed local women in female hygiene and proper sanitation awareness. CSTs have also worked hard to bring contractors from the urban centers to teach midwifery, literacy, and sewing to those village women allowed to participate in mini-classes. With the implementation of CSTs into rural villages, by 2011 the voice of the local women began to be heard. Despite the village elders' neglect in bringing up these issues, they were pleased with the progress and did not interfere when CSTs brought these provisions and services into their homes.

The tribal areas where CSTs are stationed remain unsafe for unarmed humanitarian workers, so the CSTs and the rest of the U.S. special operations community in the villages bear the brunt of humanitarian work. These villages are often under attack by Taliban insurgents who frequently seek to exploit the resources of the villages and punish those who have collaborated with NATO. In some cases where the villages have been attacked when the CSTs were present, the CSTs have performed excellently in protecting the local women and children: They quickly shelter them in homes or in a central area from which they fend off attack, while the other elements of the VSO team carry the fight to the enemy. The age-old customs of chauvinism in Pashtun tribal society will not

disappear overnight, nor will the small steps of gender equality found in Kabul reach the Taliban-influenced tribal regions quickly or easily; but, if the CSTs are able to make the lives of these rural village women a little better, they have done far more for them than anyone else before.

THE WAY AHEAD

As NATO forces prepare to leave Afghanistan by the end of 2014, it seems certain the Taliban will return. One can only hope that the urban centers, the Afghan military, and the few villages that have the strength to defend themselves through VSO will continue to stand their ground against the Taliban. The U.S. will continue to support the Afghan government in these efforts, and humanitarian organizations will continue to be present in the cities. For some Afghan women who have experienced education and opportunity since the Taliban's ouster, they will likely continue to fight for their status in the days ahead, and support for them will continue through the various aid groups—foreign and domestic—that have appeared on the scene in recent years. As for the CSTs, along with their special operations counterpart assigned to continue training Afghan security forces, they will not be included in the retreat of NATO forces at the end of 2014.

Moreover, the militaries of the United Kingdom and France have begun creating units similar to the CSTs. Currently, CSTs work alongside other U.S. forces in the Horn of Africa, working with local Muslim women as part of an overall U.S. mission to create stability in tribal areas and to undermine the terror organization, al-Shabaab. CSTs are also present in the trans-Saharan region working alongside other U.S. forces to counter al-Qaeda affiliated terror organizations in northern Mali. In the war zones of Muslim countries where women's voices are muted, where the U.S. military is present, and where it may be too dangerous for humanitarian organizations to go, one can

count on the CSTs to establish connections with local women, work within the culture, and provide humanitarian assistance for years to come.