



# Female Engagement Teams

## The Need to Standardize Training and Employment

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**T**HE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan includes three lines of effort—security, governance, and development. Securing the population and quelling the insurgency in rural Afghanistan remain two of the biggest challenges facing coalition forces, along with assisting the nongovernmental organizations in providing sustainable jobs and agricultural opportunities to Afghans. These economic opportunities provide income and lessen the attraction of joining the insurgency. Coalition forces are finding that one of the best ways to achieve strategic goals is to use female marines and soldiers to influence the family unit. Over the past decade, coalition forces have formed informal female engagement teams (FETs), mainly from tactical and provincial reconstruction teams, civil affairs forces, and agribusiness development teams. However, U.S. Army efforts remain ad hoc and disorganized, and training and employment are not standardized. The Army needs to better staff, employ, and train female engagement teams to ensure we are meeting strategic goals and objectives and institutionalizing these practices for future contingencies.

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, recognizes that groups like families and tribes play critical roles in influencing the outcome of a counterinsurgency effort, but it erroneously claims these groups are beyond the control of military forces or civilian governing institutions.<sup>1</sup> They are not. Female soldiers can and are building relationships with Afghan women and men, empowering them through economic development programs, education, and training, but they are doing so at several separate levels, to include battalions and brigades, provincial reconstruction teams, agribusiness development teams, and special operations cultural support teams. These teams are operating in a semi-coordinated battle space. Their efforts can be redundant and repetitive when not properly coordinated across the battle space and when coupled with the current nonstandardized training. The resulting effort is not nearly as effective as it could be in reaching Afghan women.

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PHOTO: U.S. Marine Corps CPL Mary Walls and a linguist speak with Afghan women during a patrol with marines from 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment in Musa Qa'leh, Afghanistan, 2 August 2010. (DOD, CPL Lindsay L. Sayres, U.S. Marine Corps)

## Beginnings

Female engagement teams were formed because cultural restrictions on females, especially those in the rural, mostly Pashtun villages, prohibited their contact with men outside of their families. These teams not only provide a variety of services to the women and children of the villages, but also build personal relationships with these people. According to author Cherry Lindholm, mothers and grandmothers in the compounds, which house extended families, influence the fighting-age male, because the “adult sons not only bring home wives as subservient helpers for their mothers, but also tend to ally themselves with their mothers in their competitive struggles with their fathers.”<sup>2</sup> Sons stay with the family while daughters leave to join their husband’s family. Therefore, having female soldiers establish positive relationships within Afghan families can ultimately network to several families as the children marry and pass on their positive experiences to new families and a new generation.

Westerners often think that Afghan women are powerless, not only because of cultural constraints but also because Afghan men do not support rights or opportunities for women. This generally isn’t the case. In fact, women’s rights activist Sima Wali states, “the stereotype of Afghan men as women haters and oppressors is incorrect. Most Afghan men are committed to the cause of better conditions and freedom for Afghan women.”<sup>3</sup> The coalition force use of females to break through cultural and religious barriers and misperceptions to reach Afghan women exhibits a show of trust and respect to Afghan traditions and Islamic values.<sup>4</sup> Understanding and respect can breed cooperation, and when this cooperation spreads across families, a powerful tool emerges for fighting the insurgency.

Coalition force females have the advantage of engaging both Afghan women and men. According to Deborah Rodriguez, author of *Kabul Beauty School*, “foreign women are not held to the same rigorous standards as Afghan women. [They] are like another gender entirely, able to wander back and forth between the two otherwise separate worlds of men and women.”<sup>5</sup> While this is difficult to explain, according to an article in *Small Wars Journal*, empirical evidence shows that “many Pashtun men, far from shunning American women, show a preference for interacting with them over

U.S. men.”<sup>6</sup> This may be because, in some cases, the coalition force male soldiers are clearly there as such—soldiers—and perceived as destructive and dangerous. Although the Afghan men recognize the coalition force women as soldiers, they are also distinctly female.

Female engagement teams are not a new concept. They first came on the scene in 2004 as U.S. Army and Marine Corps “cordon and search teams” in Iraq, but have now evolved into a more sophisticated tool.<sup>7</sup> U.S. Army Special Forces have female soldiers on their cultural support teams to interact with Afghan females. The Marine Corps continues to train and deploy FETs in their areas of operations. The provincial reconstruction teams, although not sourced to provide dedicated female engagement teams, do use females to perform similar duties when they are available and their normal duties permit.<sup>8</sup> Agribusiness development teams have women’s initiative training teams to teach small-business opportunities to Afghan women such as food drying, beekeeping, and poultry production.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. Army is finally catching up, and recent Forces Command guidance directs that all units that deploy after 31 August 2011 must have trained FETs exclusively dedicated to engaging the female population of Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

## Training Programs

Both the Marine Corps and U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) cultural support teams have in-resident training programs for their FETs. The Army does not. Instead, units are left to select and train their soldiers as the commander sees fit. A 22 April 2011 decision briefing to the vice chief of staff of the Army, which provided recommendations on predeployment training and institutionalization of FETs in the general purpose force, explored four courses of action for training FETs: train the trainer, mobile training teams, training at a central site, and training at a central training site with a mobile training team capability.<sup>11</sup> The recommendation and ultimate decision from this briefing was to put together a handbook for commanders and a training support package that deploying units could use to train their own team. The decision brief also required FET employment training at the COIN Academy. The guide is available to anyone with a common access card



(U.S. Marine Corps, CPL Orlando Perez)

**U.S. Marines assigned to the female engagement team with the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force patrol around a mock Afghanistan hospital in the nominal city of Warda-Mir located on the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, Twenty Nine Palms, CA, during a clear-hold-build exercise, 8 September 2010.**

at the Army Lessons Learned Information System and is also on the Army Training Network. The Center for Army Lessons Learned published the third version of the handbook in September 2011.

In addition, the training support package, which consists of slides and notes to support FET training, is available on the Army Training Network. The “Commander’s Guide to Female Engagement Teams” gives a fairly comprehensive history of the teams and admits that “the Army as a whole has been slow and late in accepting the FET concept.”<sup>12</sup> The commander’s guide and the subsequent training support package pull from the U.S. Army Special Operations Command cultural support team program of instruction and the Marine Corps FET program of instruction, and also include a great deal of information that comes from an informal “FET Academy” in Regional Command-East. LisaRe Brooks, a Ph.D. human terrain social scientist; Lieutenant Colonel Teresa Wolfgang, commander of the 404th Civil Affairs Battalion; and Shakila Reshtoon, the CJ-9 women’s affairs

advisor, developed and implemented a 40-hour, five-day training program in 2010 that focused on the engagement of Afghan females in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner through FETs.<sup>13</sup> This program was the precursor to the current FET training support package.

The Regional Command-East team used female soldiers from Task Force Wolverine, a brigade command team from the New Hampshire National Guard under the operational control of the 101st Airborne Division, as their pilot program.<sup>14</sup> Task Force Wolverine females had recently formed an organic FET in response to the growing need to engage the female population. The initial volunteers came from within the task force staff sections. The first 30 hours of training included instruction on culture, daily language practice, information collection, a simulated shura, engagement techniques, interpreter management, religion awareness, Commander’s Emergency Relief Program, administration, and participation in actual female engagements at the nearby Egyptian



Hospital.<sup>15</sup> The task force trained team members on tactical movement, patrolling, and basic defensive skills with organic resources. The trainers revamped course content based on feedback from the first class, adding storyboards, working with the media, Afghan traditional medicine, and some required reading.<sup>16</sup> There were more than ten instructors and two to three translators, as well as assistance from Afghan business women and government officials.

Because it was the only formalized FET training in the Army, the course rapidly became so popular that Dr. Brooks and Lieutenant Colonel Wolfgang found themselves training soldiers from Regional Command-North and South, as well as Department of State officials and airmen and sailors from the provincial reconstruction teams.<sup>17</sup> Eventually, a great deal of this training found its way into the Army's training support package. The most important part of this early training is that the trainers were subject matter experts in their fields of human-terrain analysis and civil affairs, which is not the case with the current "train the trainer" version of the Army training support package.

While certainly well-intentioned, the training support package has an obvious flaw. It includes long lectures on Afghan history and culture but does not provide subject matter experts to teach the classes. It includes references to Defense Language Institute Dari and Pashto language training but provides no native or trained speaker to assist. The deploying brigades and battalions are expected to resource the instructors organically, and it is doubtful many of these units have anyone assigned who is an expert in Afghan culture or language. Because of this, most units are choosing to use the Army training support package as a resource and putting together their own training packages. The 4th Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, when preparing for its Afghanistan deployment, chose to do this, and the commander appointed a female captain as the FET lead to develop a brigade training package. The unit set up its own training, to include bringing in Afghan-American language trainers and asking them to teach cultural aspects as well.<sup>18</sup> The New York National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 108th Infantry, FET leader was completely unaware of the Army's training support package and chose to put together her own training based on a syllabus developed by the 10th

Mountain Division.<sup>19</sup> The 37th Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the Ohio National Guard also put together their own training package.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it would seem that the Army's efforts to standardize training for the general purpose force still have a long way to go to achieve equality with either USMC training or that of SOCOM cultural support teams. In his article, "Transforming the Conflict in Afghanistan," Joseph A. L'Etoile writes, "A robust training regimen must be created if the FETs are to realize their full potential. Courses in tactical questioning, human terrain analysis, cultural understanding, and advanced situational awareness are essential."<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of the FET initiatives because they can't necessarily be numerically qualified.<sup>22</sup>

Anecdotal evidence, storyboards, and after action reports indicate the teams are making a difference with business projects, but empirical evidence and personal interviews show that when the relief in place/transfer of authority occurs, the successful projects are sometimes lost in transition and may take several months to start again.<sup>23</sup> There needs to be a clear delineation between what the engagement teams do at the tactical level, such as searching and tactical questioning—which can mean very physically demanding missions—and what the FETs do at the operational level, such as the fairly new concept of using U.S. female military police to assist female Afghan Uniform Police with recruiting more female police officers.<sup>24</sup> Other FET initiatives include conducting hygiene and midwife classes in Dand and Eastern Panjwai to overcome years of forced home isolation, and even more sophisticated efforts such as the small business ventures mentioned earlier.<sup>25</sup> Shakila Reshtoon, the women's affairs advisor for Combined Joint Task Force 101 in 2010, found that as both women and men saw other women be successful with these

***...when the relief in place/transfer of authority occurs, the successful projects are sometimes lost in transition and may take several months to start again.***

small businesses, they became more accepting of seeing women in commerce and began to want to take part in the programs themselves.<sup>26</sup>

## A Way Forward

For the FET program to succeed and move into the future, the Army must institutionalize the role of the FET at battalion and brigade level and build mobile training teams of subject matter experts that deploy to training centers to standardize the training for all deploying units. While adding “FET lanes” at the training centers is a step in the right direction, the Army needs to standardize these lanes and the training conducted to ensure each unit receives quality instruction. The Army could go even further and establish female engagement training teams at Fort Dix, Camp Shelby, and all three combat maneuver training centers.<sup>27</sup> The FETs at the tactical level need training in tactical

questioning, pulling security, and additional weapons training.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the Army must delineate between these teams and those at the operational level in the provincial reconstruction team, agribusiness development teams, civil affairs units, and military support information operations, which all require additional training to assist nongovernmental organizations with economic development opportunities and to interface at the strategic level with International Security Forces Afghanistan, Department of State, and the government of Afghanistan. The current process of ad hoc training and organization is unacceptable, and not only unfair to those individuals involved, but also a grave disservice to the mission.<sup>29</sup> The Army should institutionalize this training for future contingency missions where female soldiers may again be needed to engage with the female portion of the population. **MR**

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## NOTES

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14. *Ibid.*

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