

The big difference

In a tribal society, it is important for each family to have as many sons as possible. Sons will be the fighters who can protect the family. If a woman cannot have children or has only given birth to girls, many men will marry a second or even a third wife.

The compulsion to have as many children as possible has significant consequences. Afghanistan's population is growing enormously fast. No national economy can offer a corresponding increase in the number of jobs – especially not the Afghan economy. The mass of the population has no economic prospects. The unbelievably poor school system can hardly improve its performance because it has to expand its capacities at great speed. There is nothing left for quality efforts. Even the training of a sufficient number of teachers is hardly possible.

In the western countries, the development from an agricultural country to an industrial state was associated with a reduction in population growth. In Germany, the introduction of pension insurance ensured a certain level of provision for old age, so that it was no longer necessary to have as many children as possible to guarantee support in old age. And families realized that they could no longer prepare as many children as they wanted for a life in which education was important. China, too, has combined its transformation into an industrialized state with a rigorous restriction on the number of children.

In Afghanistan, there is no hope that the population could leave behind the state of a tribal society. How could it? No state protects the people from raids and theft or organizes an old-age pension. Everyone has to look after his own interests on his own. In the chapter on "The Afghan Tribal Society," it was explained that tribal social structures and child wealth inevitably result from this. The Western countries, when they started their way into the industrial age, were constitutional states with police protecting their citizens and functioning courts – even if this was not exactly what we consider to be right nowadays. In Europe, armed sons were not needed to hold their own. As long as Afghanistan lacks the rule of law, child wealth will continue to create poverty.

An old friend had not visited me for a long time. He apologized when he came by again. He had had problems with his heart. That was now under control with medication. And besides, he had to stay longer in Holland. – Yes, why that? – One of his daughters had married an Afghan doctor who lived and practiced in Amsterdam. This needs some explanation: The Afghan doctor had already grown up and studied in Holland. My friend's daughter had grown up in Afghanistan. Times were unsettled and one did not know what was coming. My friend had preferred not to send his daughter to school. But how had this odd couple been able to find each other? Well, they both came from the same clan, originally living in the southeast on the Pakistani border. In Holland, a son was born to the young couple. But when he was four years old, the father died of cancer. And because of that, my friend had to move to Amsterdam. After all, the four-year-old grandson could not yet go shopping or even visit government offices – and neither could his mother.

A former colleague from the University of Kabul had fled to Bonn after the communist coup and had lived and worked there. One son had come to Germany as a small child. He went to school there, studied, became a doctor and practiced successfully in Munich. Now he was to marry a girl from his father's family. The young lady grew up in rural Afghanistan. She never went to school. But the German state requires that she prove a modest knowledge of the German language before she is allowed to enter the country. The young woman attends the Goethe Institute in Kabul and has failed the language test several times. My colleague is desperate. He thinks it is unfair, especially since he had been very committed to good relations between Germany and Afghanistan.

Pashtuns among our colleagues with whom we spoke about this confirm that they could not simply marry another Muslim woman, not even any other Pashtu woman. The woman one marries must come from one's own family circle. A clan is therefore a closed community in terms of the choice of partners.



It seems that these rules are binding for very many Afghans. Unfortunately, they contribute greatly to the spread of hereditary diseases.

So many boys have to be born. Are the girls just unfortunate collateral damage in the process? From the point of view of society as a whole, this is not true. Society needs girls so that they will have children later. As long as a girl is married off within the clan, she even contributes to the child blessing of her own clan. But for a family, its own offspring is clearly more important than that of the clan. The fact that a daughter can have children later does not benefit the family from which she comes. The girl must do the childbearing for the family to which she is married.

For a family, a newborn boy is far more valuable than a girl. Boys are the future of the family. They are to protect and rule one day. They are the princes. Boys are better fed than their sisters. They are breastfed more often. Girls have to be subordinate. They have to help their mother with the archaic housework. They have to take care of younger siblings and cousins. The amount of work they do for their family until they are married off is considerable. Of course, daughters are also involved in the emotional relationships of the family. They are attached to their parents and siblings and are loved by them. This is evident at weddings. The marriage of a girl is a sad celebration for her family. It is a time to say goodbye to a family member who has grown close to everyone's heart.

It is not that all women led a life without power and influence. Rather, the division of labor within the family creates a large area that is organized and dominated by women. Women have to make the food for everyone and keep the laundry clean. They have to take care of the children. All this happens under archaic conditions. Many women have only heard about achievements such as washing machines in television advertisements. Men could know more. But why should they be interested?

As a rule, the wife of the head of the family is the boss among the women. Daughters and unmarried sisters must obey her. Young women who are married into the family usually have to endure unpleasant times. Often, they are fitted into the new community with rough methods. We were told about a family that had a "darkroom". This was a windowless dungeon where daughters-in-law were locked up if they did not function exactly as the mother-in-law wished. The daughter-in-law had to endure days without light, water or bread. Only when she was close to collapse, was she released on parole. It does not always have to be quite so terrible. But there are numerous stories about the suffering of newly married daughters-in-law. The female boss enjoys the status of an archetype in Afghanistan, instilling fear and terror not only in women.

There is little overlap between the spheres of women's and men's lives. Some things can only be done together and must be discussed between the female and male heads. For example, shopping for the household is necessary, which is done by the men, or repairs in the house. Guest meals and the accommodation of guests must be regulated. The order of meals at banquets is the responsibility of the women. Joint visits to weddings or funerals must also be planned. Women interfere when the men do not perform their duties as the women see fit. For example, if a man is unemployed, he is scolded and ridiculed by the women. Often such a "failure" sneaks away to the mosque or to a tea house. There seems to be limited space and time for marital intimate contact.

Westerners think that Afghan women must desire to be freed from this restricted life. But Afghan women do not know the world from the perspective of a Dutch or Canadian woman. Women have hardly any contacts outside their families. Men are responsible for external relations.

In the countryside, men do the field work alone, if climate and soil conditions permit. If the men's labor is insufficient, women also work in the fields and orchards. But great care is taken to ensure that no outsider observes the women. If a stranger is traveling across the country and a woman is working in a nearby field, the woman squats down, turns her face in the opposite direction and hides it behind a cloth.

The Pashtuns in particular like to settle in the countryside in clay castles called qalas. These are larger rectangular plots surrounded by a high mud wall. From the outside the property is accessible through a gate. Often above the gate there is a room for the guests. Through the windows of this room, guests can only view the landscape outside the qala. Inside the qala the women and girls move freely. There are dwellings, sometimes vegetable patches. Domestic animals are also kept here. The people living in a qala are closely related to each other.

Sometimes it is said that a woman enters a qala when she is married there and does not leave it until she is buried. This is exaggerated, but not by much. A woman has the right to visit her parents' family. And she is invited to weddings and other big events within the large family or even the clan. There, the women celebrate separately from the men in their own rooms. For them, these are the only opportunities to show beautiful dresses "publicly" – i.e. in the circle of the wider female kin. On such occasions, women like to dance, while the men sit in other rooms and resent the women's activities.

Women live in small family groups isolated from each other, with no continuous communication between them. It is an illusion that Afghan women could form larger groups, for example, to make joint political demands. Indeed, they have no incentive to think of such a possibility. In the city, families live closer together than in the countryside in the qalas. But even here, the family maintains the isolation of women and girls from strangers as best it can. The vast majority of women do not go shopping. Only in the fabric bazaar do you find groups of women, often accompanied by male relatives.

In pretty much every household, a television is on continuously. There, one sometimes even sees films about women in foreign countries who, together with other people, are changing the lives of the general public. For Afghan viewers, these are fairy tales from a foreign world that does not affect them. Women do not send revolutionary messages via the widespread mobile phone, but rather exchange family internals.

Women are much more the bearers of tradition than men. They do not know life any differently and have learned from their mothers and mothers-in-law that it has always been this way and must always be this way. Men live much more outside their families, both in the city and in the country. They have many contacts with others and hear much more about other ways to act and live than women do. But they hardly ever have the opportunity or the desire to talk about it with their wives or even with their daughters.