

ON THE ROAD TO EUROPE

GENDER NORMS AMONG YOUNG MEN IN THE MIGRANT COMMUNITY IN SERBIA

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS



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Photo: Branko Birač

Summary of qualitative research

This participative qualitative study was conducted as a part of “Welcome Initiative for Migrant Youth” project that aims to provide adequate protection for young migrants – unaccompanied minors settled in the reception centers in the South of Serbia, through educational workshops and awareness raising in issues like healthy lifestyles, non-violent solution to conflicts, gender equality, positive masculinity, counter trafficking, and others. The project is implemented by CARE International Balkans in partnership with Nexus from Vranje, Center E8 from Belgrade and supported by ADH Germany.

Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) research was conducted as the analysis of the situation of young migrants in order to develop a tailored-made curriculum for this specific group. PLA is a research approach used to encourage participants to share knowledge and insight about their community and its needs and to determine ways to address those needs – this method is interactive as it includes target group’s participation in workshops, discussions and various activities.

The research was implemented in September 2017, in the reception center in Preševo, south Serbia. It was implemented with two groups of young men from Afghanistan, Pashtuns and Tajiks - 16 participants in total, with eight in each group. They were between 14 and 22 years old, and average age was 18. Young men in two separate ethnolinguistic groups had each passed a three-day program of workshops related to gender, masculinity, socialization of masculinity, power and influence, attitudes about violence, forms, root cause, consequences and experiences of violence, exploring transition from boyhood to manhood, and moving toward change. Recorded audio material from workshops, researcher’s notes, daily evaluations and visual and creative outputs, were all analyzed.

RESULTS

Gender roles and relations

Young migrants from the Middle East have a complexed perception of masculinity, which is, in some areas, different than perception of young men from the Balkans and Europe in general. Numerous risk behaviors, such as use of psychoactive substances or risky sexual relations, are not reflection of masculinity in their culture, but rather a weakness. They highly value moral behaviors and all other that are in accordance with religious norms. Main role of a man is to protect and to provide for his family. In that context, if a family is in danger a man should defend it, even by use of force. A man that is not up to it is qualified as weak and “wimp”. Thus, in some cases violence is a means to express and defend man’s honor. For most important characteristics of an ideal man they note: morality, kindness, success.

Regarding perception of women and women’s roles - beside biological and physical specificities, certain characteristics and social roles of women were mentioned: that they are gentler, more emphatic, have less

rights, they gossip etc. Participants report that men are usually associated with superior values. Young men are aware that majority of differences between men and women are relative while biological differences are those that are stable. Other differences are product of socialization and those characteristics can be mutual. But, it is clear that this mostly stays a possibility, and is very rare in practice. Most of men remain within their social roles for the most of their lives.

Young migrants often mentioned that women are less free and have fewer rights than men. Radius of women’s activities is very limited and directed to home and family. They are mostly at home, taking care of their children, family and house. They rarely work or get an education. There is a very clear and stereotypical division of male and female roles and duties which is conditioned by situation and norms in wider social context and therefore the gender-transformative work is challenging as these gender roles and stereotypes need to be addressed.



“Men are more free than women. They move around, look for job. Things men do outside cannot be done by women. Women do house work. In Afghanistan women do not feel free, they are under a lot of different pressures. Those kinds of laws are passed. They are raised in the spirit of Islam, and live under those rules. Men can go wherever

they want and do whatever they want. It is different with women. They are being controlled.”

“Rights of men and women are different. In Islam, the right of men and women are clear. Two women are worth as one man. A woman can be worth as two men only if both of them were physically incapable.”

Expressing emotions

Young men report that expressing emotions such as fear and sadness is not preferred and represents a weakness; they say it is not appropriate for a man to express emotions as social role of a man is to protect others and as such should not show those emotions, while among women it's more common. Their expressions of anger vary, but majority admits they are full of anger. It is a consequence of different events and frustrations they experienced in

life. They have a clear goal, but it is difficult and it takes time to fulfill it and that causes the anger. They very rarely communicate with family that stayed in Afghanistan. Anger is also a consequence of living in a closed area where they do not feel free. They believe men express anger more easily, but also that women from their groups show anger more easily when on European ground.



“We have seen so many bad things in Afghanistan. Our hearts are made of stone. How can we cry? We saw a lot of killed and butchered people. We spent all our tears in Afghanistan. We did not cry in some situations because we were in shock, we were burying people without their extremities. My father would call me every day to dig graves and earn money in that way. How can I cry?”

“Men have no room for fear. If you show to somebody that you are afraid of him, then he would harass you more. It is not good for a man to show his weak point that somebody else can

then use against you. Others would find you weak. People use your fear.”

”Here, we are like in a prison. If we were free, we would be much happier even if sleeping outside.”

“We are depressed because of uncertain future and expectations. We do not know where we stand. We only think about that, day and night. We are hopeless, we do not know what the future will look like. Everybody here has some talent and goals they want to accomplish in Europe. Now that goal and talent slowly fades away.”

Violence against women

Young men agree that they witnessed violence against women. They say it happens in the family, but in the community as well. Some young men say they would be ashamed if they would commit violence against women. In their communities if a woman commits adultery, that almost always ends with violence against that woman. Also, young men say that there

is an unwritten rule in Afghanistan that a woman can be hit if she does not respect two or three warnings. Some of them say they would be ashamed if they would not act in this way. It appears it is almost standard procedure: two warnings, then violence occurs. Additionally, cause of violence can also be if a woman does not take care of children.



“I would warn her once or twice, and if she would not listen to me I would hit her. That is in our tradition. I would hit her if she does not do what I say, if I saw her talking to an unknown man, or if she does things behind my back.”

“If my wife does not listen to me, I would give her two warnings and then I would hit her, but after five minutes

I would hug her because I love her.”

“I go to work. I tell my wife to take our child to school. I came back earlier; the child is hungry and dirty. It is normal that a man would be angry in such situation. A man would provide anything a woman asks for, but it is expected of her to fulfill her obligations.”

Opposite of these attitudes and opinions, there was a different attitude of a young man who was completely against violence.

“I would never hit her. Not even if she would be unfaithful. I would divorce her. Hitting will not change a thing. When you do not respect your wife, that is also violence.”

Violence – perception and experience

For young men who participated in the research, first associations about violence are mostly linked with war events and their status as refugees. Also, they had no problems identifying different forms of psychological violence: humiliation, mockery, threats etc.

They have different opinions when it comes to peer relations and violence. Some say that they usually respond to violence by violence, or else they would be harassed in the future as well. Others do not react in the same way; they believe that violence does not contribute to someone's masculinity.

“I am quite skilled when it comes to psychological violence. That is in my nature. I even abuse myself in the mirror. When someone offends me in front of the school for being an Afghan, I fight back and insult him. I was in a situation to respond to physical violence, with violence. If I

did not react in that way, they would harass me every day.”

“You do not show your strength if you commit violence. Violence is not a reflection of masculinity. A person that has a heart does not have to react with violence. Silence can also be a reaction”

Experiences with violence during their life in Afghanistan are mostly related to events from war. Throughout the workshop, the young men shared their experiences with different forms of violence. Majority of them witnessed explosions, bombs and murders. Some of the Afghani young men lived temporarily in Iran while fleeing from violence.

“I also experienced several situations of violence at school. There were five of us Afghanistan boys at school and Iranians were mocking us all the time. Nobody was defending us. Not even the teachers. They are heavy racists. They were mocking us even for belonging to a certain region.”



During refugee and migration process young men witnessed different cases of violence. Those who were in Bulgaria saw Bulgarian police hit migrants, often without any reason. They reported this happening in Macedonia as well. Some also had negative experience with smugglers who were supposed to get them to another state.

“I was detained and harassed by smugglers for 15 days.. They asked for money. We were in a village in Macedonia. We gave him money in Greece and he was supposed to give it to another smuggler, but he didn't. Then other smuggler tortured us for 15 days, asking us to give the money back to him. He made us call our family and ask them to send us the money.”

There is not so much fighting between migrants because they are afraid of being deported out of the camp. Sometimes there are disputes and fights, mostly between members of different ethnic groups. They also had one negative experience with local people in the camp.

“When we first came to the camp, a group of local boys came carrying knives. They took our phones and money.”

“We have been beaten in Bulgaria and in Macedonia, by other migrants. Here in the camp that does not happen as much because they are afraid of deportation from the camp. There are a lot of problems with violence here involving Iranians. Adult Iranians once prevented us from cooking in the kitchen, because we would make it dirty.”

Sexual violence

All participants were against sexual violence and said that difference between a normal sexual intercourse and sexual violence is that sexual violence happens without consent of the other party. They also said that violence would be if somebody were to blackmail another person with nude photographs. If somebody would have

sex with a person who is drunk or drugged, or not old enough, that would also be sexual violence.

Majority of participants expressed that women are sometimes guilty for being raped because they dress provocatively. They added that it also depends of geographical context.

“It is a woman’s fault because by dressing provocatively she irritates and provokes man. She is exposing herself to other people, and men have that instinct. If she wears revealing clothes, everybody is looking at her. If she is covered, nobody is looking.

“There is a different law in Afghanistan.

Women should be covered, and in Europe they don’t have to be. That should not be a cause for violence. A woman can dress like that, but then somebody call her names.”

“The attacker is the guilty one, not the woman for dressing like that. Every form of abuse is wrong.”

Young men have different attitudes on whether sexual violence in marriage exists. Some feel that sexual violence in a marriage is impossible because both partners committed to that relationship, while others feel that consent of both persons is necessary in a marriage too.

“They got married, they wanted it, nobody forced them to get married. As soon as they got married, then they should be ready to have sex.”

“It is impossible that a husband could rape and abuse his wife. They are married and agreed to it. But still, it is not alright for a man to sleep with a woman if she does not want to.”

During the workshops, additional examples of sexual violence were mentioned by the young men as a common knowledge that they happen, both in their country of origin and on the migration route.

“In Afghanistan rich people do that. They find somebody from lower class and rape him. That is called ‘bacha bazi’¹ relationship. Nobody can do anything to them because they have power and position.”

“We have seen something similar in Iran. Young men from school would go to some older man.

It happens a lot in Greece. Older men want to have sex with young men and they give them money for that. We saw this happen in Victoria and Alexander Park. In Greece, an older man approached me, put me aside of my friends, and asked for sex. I know young men from Iran who did that and got paid good money.”

1 Bacha bāzī is a slang term in Afghanistan for a wide variety of activities involving sexual relations between older men and younger adolescent men, or boys which may include to some extent sexual slavery and child prostitution. Bacha bazi has existed throughout history and is currently reported in various parts of Afghanistan. Force and coercion are common, and security officials state they are unable to end such practices because many of the men involved in bacha bazi-related activities are powerful and well-armed warlords.

Attitudes towards LGBT

All young men confirmed that they are aware of existence of homosexual people who feel love and affection for same sex. Their unified position towards these kinds of relationships is negative and aligns with traditional religious and cultural norms of Afghanistan. They all stress that such people are sick, should be heavily punished and that they need treatment. They say they find basis for this kind of attitude in religious teaching.

“Men like that should be punished. It’s a sin. We know that people like that get married in the West, but that is wrong.”

“That is not normal. God created woman for a man, and man for a woman.”

“That exists in Afghanistan too. When they catch that kind of a person, they punish him/her. Punishments are rigorous. They go to prison for a year or two. It also happens that if somebody is caught in that relationship, he/she would be killed.”

How young migrants see their future

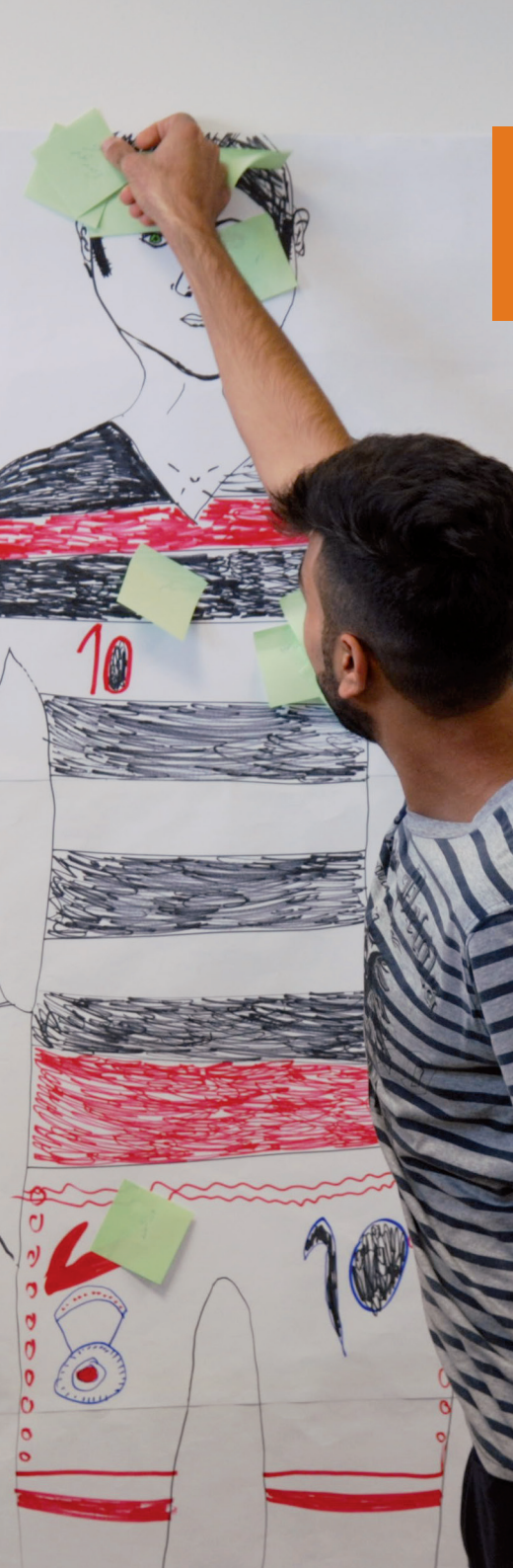
At the end of the program, young men talked about their own future and in general about future of men and women in the camp. How living in the camp could be improved and how they see themselves in five years. They felt they should use free time in the camp in the best possible way and that they should prepare in order to adapt for future life in some West European country. They also said they should

study, gain useful knowledge and skills, and behave morally and treat other people nicely. When it comes to projection of future in five years, young men see themselves in some developed European country that has no Taliban violence, with their basic needs secured, having a home, income, healthcare, education etc. Majority expects to have their own house, to study or work, to have 'moral' girlfriend.

"I see myself at the university where I will study, have a nice girlfriend, a nice house and communicate with my family every day. I will have a lot of friends in Europe, and when I finish university I will have a job. I will live in Belgium."

Positive circumstance is that young migrants are willing to learn and adapt to a lifestyle on European grounds. This positive energy should be properly channeled towards humane integration of migrants into European society. Let's close with the quote of a young migrant man, when asked to evaluate this PLA research/workshops:

"This was fun and educative. I've been in the camp for 10 months now and I have never participated in something this good. I learned a lot from you, but I also learned a lot about my peers, about their experiences and attitudes regarding these topics, through discussions held during workshops. I did not know that they know so much about these topics. You are not like some other organizations that come and talk to us forcedly, just to spend time. I hope that you will not be like other organizations and end at this. I hope you will do more of this, so others could hear about us."



Summary

Traditional gender norms are very strongly rooted in the participants and strong influence of religion was evident throughout their statements during this research. From their perspective, perceptions of men and women are quite different. They usually associated men with superior values and stressed the importance of providing for the family and protecting it, having financial security and family stability. They noted morality, kindness and success as most important characteristics of an ideal man. They also stated that in some cases violent behaviors were means to express and defend a man's honor. Expressing emotions such as fear and sadness is not a preferred behavior and normally is considered a weakness. Use of psychoactive substances and number of sexual partners are both not considered a way for men to prove themselves in their culture, but rather considered weaknesses. Main characteristics of women that was often mentioned during the research is that they have fewer rights and that they are less free than men. Participants expressed that in their families' division of duties is very clear and traditional and that generally a range of women's activities is very limited and focused on home and family. Cognizance and awareness of young men about difficult position of women is encouraging, and that can be one of the bases for future educational work on building gender-equitable relations.

Regarding gender based violence, participants expressed that it was justified in some situations, for example if a woman committed an adultery, if she did not fulfill her duties or obey after men gave her two warnings. They say this behavior was considered as legitimate, as an unwritten rule in Afghanistan, and some of them say they would be ashamed if they did not act according to this. Also, majority of participants expressed attitudes that women were sometimes guilty for sexual violence that they experienced, if they were dressed not according to standard norms. Also, some of them stated that sexual violence in marriage was impossible because both partners committed to that relationship. Another issue is very negative attitude they expressed about LGBT and justifications for violence towards that population. On the positive side, they are aware that different norms about clothes, marriage and human rights exist in Europe, so their attitudes are already slightly more flexible. Generally, gender norms proved to be a very sensitive topic. On one side, there is a very clear division of male and female roles. On the other side, men are aware that numerous standpoints and norms are product of time and context they live in. As they said, in some countries, in certain periods of time, hijab was

obligatory and now it is not. Thus, young men understand there is a certain flexibility and a space for change. It is still very important to be balanced and careful in approach during educational programs, and avoid generating sense of pressure towards participants. Positive circumstance is that young migrants expressed willingness to learn and adapt to a lifestyle on European grounds.

Clearly, from findings of this research we can conclude there is a strong need for educational programs related to promotion of gender equality and healthy masculinity with these groups of participants. In relation to that, there is also a need for promotion of European values and human rights, which is important for their successful integration to Serbia and other European countries. Based on this PLA research, CARE and its partners developed a pilot program for working with young migrants, currently implemented in reception centers in Serbia. Next steps will include further development of the program, based on experiences from the pilot, and development of final manual with educational gender-transformative program for working with population of young migrants.



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