Afghanistan culture and customs: quick guide to help work with refugees

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Publication Date: 7 October 2021

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Introduction

Thousands of Afghans have fled Afghanistan, and many more will follow, after the Taliban took effective control of the country in August 2021.
According to a House of Commons Library report in 2021, the total Afghan population is about 39-40 million.

At the end of 2020, there were 2.9 million Afghans already displaced across the country. By mid-July 2021, this rose to 3.5 million. While the displacement is largely internal, globally there are about 2.5 million refugees from Afghanistan registered with the UN Refugee Agency, although this is likely to be an underestimation and doesn't include undocumented Afghans.

The majority – 2.2 million – are in Iran and Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Home Office has announced a resettlement scheme for Afghans in the UK and intends to settle about 5,000 Afghan nationals at risk in 2021 and up to 20,000 in the longer term.

This quick guide is extracted from *Afghan Culture* by Nina Evason (2019), published by the Cultural Atlas. It is intended to help social care professionals understand Afghan culture and customs when supporting refugees to settle in the UK.

Religion

Islam is the official religion of Afghanistan and the majority of the population is Muslim. There are some very small residual communities of other faiths, including Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Baha'i. However, the numbers of minority Muslim and non-Muslim groups have significantly declined over the past decades as people have fled sectarian tensions and conflict.

There are two main variations of Islam (Sunni and Shi'a) followed in Afghanistan. The Taliban is a Sunni Islamist nationalist movement that wants to re-establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with a strict version of sharia law (Islam's legal system).

The cultural and national identity of Afghanistan is deeply shaped by Islam. Faith in the religion is noticeable in dress, dietary codes, regular prayers and language. For example, reverence to Allah (God) is evident in the way many people speak; it is common to slip praise into casual conversation.

Ethnicity

Someone's ethnicity is an instant cultural identifier in Afghanistan and usually defines people's social organisation. The most common ethnic groups are the Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras. However, there are also significant populations of Uzbeks, Nuristani, Aimak, Turkmen and Baloch (among others).

Pashtuns

The Pashtun are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Most speak Pashto and are Sunni Muslims. Pashtun culture and social organisation have been traditionally influenced by tribal codes of honour and interpretations of Islamic law. This is recognised as Pashtunwali – a moral and legal code that determines the social expectations one should follow to honour Islamic and cultural values. Pashtun public interests commonly supersede those of other ethnicities that seek greater recognition. This has been exacerbated by the fact that insurgency groups, such as the Taliban, are predominantly made up of Pashtun men.

Tajiks

The Tajiks have Persian heritage and are Afghanistan's second largest ethnicity. Tajiks are majority Sunni Muslim and generally speak a dialect of Persian found in Eastern Iran. The Tajiks tend to be more urbanised than many other ethnicities and are relatively less rigid in their adherence to provincial attitudes.

Hazaras

The Hazara people are widely understood to be one of the most socially and politically marginalised ethnic groups in Afghanistan. They speak a dialect of Dari known as Hazaragi and make up the largest Shi'a Muslim population in the country.

The Hazaras have been persecuted by Pashtun leaders, civil warlords, the Taliban, ISIS and others due to their Shi'a Muslim beliefs. The persecution of Hazaras has been particularly fierce as they have hereditary features (from distant Mongol ancestry) that physically distinguish their ethnicity from other Afghans.

Some fled to neighbouring Pakistan where other Sunni extremists have also sought to target and kill them. Consequently, many have been left with no choice but to flee to more distant countries. As a result, a large portion of the Afghans in Western countries are Hazara refugees who have sought asylum from this situation.

Honour

Much social behaviour is influenced by Afghans' awareness of their personal honour. 'Honour' in this sense encompasses an individual's reputation, prestige and worth. It influences people to behave conservatively in accordance with social expectations to avoid drawing attention to themselves or risk doing something perceived to be dishonourable.

As members of a collectivist society, most Afghans consider a person's behaviour to be reflective of the family, tribe or ethnicity they belong to. When a person's behaviour is perceived to be dishonourable, their family shares the shame. When the dishonourable behaviour occurs outside of a person's community, other Afghans can often quickly implicate that person's ethnic group, tribe and/or religion as the cause of their behaviour.

As a result, Afghans can be wary of the fact that they need to give a public impression of dignity and integrity to protect the honour of those they are associated with. To prevent indignity, criticism is rarely given directly, and praise is expected to be generously offered.

The senior male of a family is considered to be responsible for protecting the honour of the family. They are often particularly concerned with the behaviour of the women in their family, as females have many social expectations to comply with. These relate to their moral code, dress, social interactions, education, economic activity and public involvement. A breach of social compliance by a woman can be perceived as a failure on the man's behalf (her father, husband or brother) to protect her from doing so.

Family

Family is the single most important aspect of life in Afghanistan and people generally put their family's interests before their own. This means that family responsibilities tend to hold a greater importance than personal needs.

Throughout all of Afghanistan, family matters are kept strictly private. People are often reluctant to share personal issues with non-family members as community knowledge of a family's struggles can bring shame on the household. Women may be slightly more likely to open up to other women about their personal life, but usually family matters are kept within the family.

Family roles vary between ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses and regions. Nevertheless, a traditional patriarchal age hierarchy prevails throughout all. Children are to show reverence and deference to their parents and elders. Disobedience of an elder's words is seen as extremely disrespectful and punishable behaviour.

Most Afghans observe a public separation of the genders that is legally enforced in some cases. Mixing of males and females only really occurs within families or closely knit village communities. In professional or educational contexts where both males and females may be employed or taught, people are cautious to maintain a physical distance from the other gender.

Divorce is rare and stigmatised in Afghanistan. Couples that seek to end their marriage usually face huge family and societal pressure to reunite.

Etiquette when meeting Afghans

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- Dress modestly.
- Punctuality is very important; arrive on time.
- A common verbal greeting is "Salam" or "Salam alaikum", meaning "Peace be upon you". People usually place their right hand over their heart when they speak, to show respect and sincerity in the greeting.
- Use a person's last name and title when greeting them unless they permit you to move on to a first name basis. The title comes after the last name in Afghanistan (ie Smith Mr). 'Sahib' is the common form of address for a

man, so, for example, it would be Hussaini Sahib. If someone is a doctor, you would say Dr Hussaini Sahib.

- Remove your shoes at the door when visiting a home.

- Wait to be led through the house and shown where to sit.

- You may be seated on the floor with rugs and cushions. Sit crossed-legged if you can or otherwise in a position that is comfortable for you. Avoid sitting with your legs outstretched or with the soles of your feet facing another person. It is considered insulting to show or expose the bottoms of your feet to other people.

- It is customary to be offered tea and sweets as refreshment. It is very important to accept any refreshment (typically coffee/tea) as a mark of friendship. Non-acceptance would be perceived as highly offensive and could create misunderstanding even if you are simply not thirsty. Your cup of tea will be constantly filled until you indicate you've had enough by covering it with your hand and thanking them.

- In Afghanistan, you should not touch people of the opposite gender unless they are very close family or friends.

- Leave the door open if talking one on one with an Afghan of the opposite gender.

- Expect the only fixed times on the meeting's agenda to be when practising Muslims have to pray. The midday prayer often interrupts meetings. Be patient and respectful if this happens. They will return when they have finished.

- Avoid correcting someone in a meeting in front of others. This can cause them shame and embarrassment.

- It is rude to walk away from someone while they are still talking to you.

- In Afghanistan, it is extremely inappropriate and disrespectful for men to enquire about an Afghan man's female family members, unless you know the family or person well.

- In Afghanistan, people generally extend an offer multiple times. It is expected that you politely decline the gesture initially before accepting on the third offer. This exchange is polite as the insistence to extend the invitation shows hospitality and the initial refusal to accept shows humbleness and that one is not greedy.

- Be sure to offer everything multiple times in return. If you only offer something once, an Afghan person may respond, “No, it’s okay”, out of modesty and politeness even though they meant to accept on the second offer.

- Be careful when you compliment an item in an Afghan’s house, as they may feel compelled to offer it to you as a gift. If they try to give it to you, insist that you appreciate their gesture but do not want to take it. An Afghan is likely to offer the object out of politeness, and if you accept, they may end up giving you something they wished to keep.

- There is a strong belief in the evil eye in Afghanistan whereby one’s misfortune is caused by another’s envy, sometimes taking the form of a curse. Do not compliment something more than once or continue to praise it once you have acknowledged it. This may cause an Afghan to be wary that the evil eye will be jealous of it.

- It is polite to avoid eating or drinking in front of an Afghan during Ramadan fasting hours.

Non-verbal communication

- **Hands:** there is a separation between the functions of the hands in Afghan culture. This custom is tied to Islamic principles that prescribe the left hand should be used for hygiene purposes. Therefore, it is considered more unclean and should not be used to gesture or touch things (eg food, people). Use your right hand or both hands together to gesture or offer anything.

- **Eye contact:** Afghans lower their gaze and avoid sustained eye contact with members of the opposite gender. Younger people may also lower their gaze from elders. This is considered respectful and observant of differences in status. However, when talking to people of the same age, gender or status, direct eye contact is expected.

- **Physical contact:** after an initial handshake (if there is one), there should be no contact between genders.

- **Personal space:** Afghans usually give people of the opposite gender a respectful amount of personal space – usually around an arm’s length. However, people often sit/stand very close to those who are of the same gender. Some Afghans may stand at proximities that you consider uncomfortable or within your personal space. It is likely they have not been made aware of the discomfort some Westerners feel with it and do not realise the awkwardness.

- **Gestures:** hooking the index fingers together signifies agreement. The thumbs-up gesture is considered rude and has the same connotation as raising your middle finger for traditional Afghans. The “OK” sign with the hand can symbolise the evil eye or something more lewd. Stroking your beard or pounding a fist into your hand may signify revenge.

- **Winking:** winking at a member of the opposite gender is considered extremely inappropriate. A man would likely be highly offended and angry if he saw his female relative being winked at.

- **Nodding:** consider that nodding may not necessarily indicate that an individual understands or agrees with what you are saying. An Afghan may nod out of politeness. Follow up crucial information with questions so they can show they know and understand what you said.

Other considerations

- “Afghani” refers to the currency of money in Afghanistan and should not be used to describe the Afghan people.

- The burqa existed in Afghanistan before the Taliban’s rise to power but was not worn as frequently. The Taliban regime enforced a policy that required women to wear a burqa whenever moving outside of their home. This custom has now become the cultural norm, with the burqa worn commonly throughout all urban areas in Afghanistan. Some liberal women may prefer not to wear the burqa but still dress very conservatively and wear a head covering of some sort to avoid unwanted attention. This is especially common among Afghan women living in Western countries. Many wear a loose scarf or type of hijab that covers their hair. Consider that many Muslim Afghan women choose not to wear any head covering. Attitudes and choices vary depending on the individual.

- Friday is a holy day for Muslims. In Afghanistan, most businesses close on this day and Thursday in respect of that. This means their weekend falls on Thursday and Friday instead of Saturday and Sunday.

- Consider that some individuals may be illiterate and require an interpreter to assist them in reading material. Literacy levels vary depending on which region in Afghanistan the person is from, as well as their migration journey.

- Most Afghan women are not taught how to drive in Afghanistan and many living in other countries do not have a valid driver’s licence. They may be reliant on male family members for transport.

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Do:

- Be sensitive to the experiences that Afghan refugees have endured. There is a high occurrence of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among those that have witnessed the loss of their family and friends. Many Afghans that have fled to Western countries have had their entire home/village destroyed by the Taliban or other forces, and do not possess any memorabilia.

- Offer sympathy regarding the current situation in their home country if the opportunity arises. Afghans are likely to deeply appreciate the gesture and respond with warmth. However, be sensitive not to push for details of their personal experiences in Afghanistan.

- Recognise that experiences of persecution differ between ethnicities and be aware that members of minority ethnicities may prefer to identify by their ethnic affiliation overseas (eg Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, etc). Pashtuns are much more likely to identify solely as Afghan as it is historically synonymous with Pashtun.

- Be aware that individuals who have been the target of religious persecution may prefer not to discuss faith.

Don't:

- Call Afghans "Arabs" or "Middle Eastern". Afghanistan is not located in the Middle East. It is a South Central Asian country composed of many different ethnicities, none of which are Arab.

- Mention the topics of ethnic tension, politics, the Taliban, warfare or women's rights unless your counterpart initiates the conversation or you have a close relationship with them. These are sensitive subjects in Afghanistan and such discussions can lead a person to recall negative experiences.

- Assume that all Afghan Muslims follow a conservative interpretation of Islam. The official position of many Afghan religious leaders does not

reflect the interpretations of all Afghan people. For example, not all Afghan Muslim women living in other countries wear the hijab.

- Ask questions that assume Afghan people are uneducated or uncivilised, such as “Do you have phones in Afghanistan?”. Many Afghan migrants living in English-speaking countries are skilled, educated, urbanised and familiar with the technologies of the developed world.

- Push an Afghan to tell you about their family. Some people have been separated from relatives or had family members killed. Others may be hesitant to talk about the family they have left in Afghanistan out of fear that it could endanger them.