

Cultural reflections of Afghan youth living in Canada

Al-Rahim Moosa

Of central importance to Afghan culture is respect for one's elders – for parents, grandparents and the eldest siblings in the family unit. Such respect is expressed physically in various ways, from holding indirect or lowered eye contact with an elder when speaking to them to offering an elder a place to sit. Interviews with Afghan refugee youth who moved to Vancouver, Canada, in their adolescent years suggest that all those interviewed were pleased to have maintained strong inter-generational relations but that many have also welcomed the influence of Western societal norms. One 23-year-old young man said that being able to hold eye contact with his elders allows him to assess their reactions to his words, an important aspect of communication; he also felt that being considered on a more equal footing with his eldest sibling allows for friendlier social relations between them.

All interviewees expressed regret that they had become “disconnected” from their parents because their education and work reduced the time spent with them, though some also said that this was due to their parents' lack of familiarity with Western society and consequent inability to provide educational or career guidance.

More discretion is being given to young people to choose their spouses – whether because traditional Afghan perceptions of marriage are actually changing or because they are merely adapting pragmatically to different circumstances, that is, the reduced probability of finding a suitable spouse of their own ethnic group in a foreign country. Certain other cultural standards concerning relationships remain steadfast, however; all youth reported that the notion of casual dating has yet to be considered acceptable.

Many of those interviewed mentioned a fundamental change in attitudes towards gender differences, resulting in greater female participation in religious and family affairs within the Afghan community. As one young woman in her mid-20s stated, “the other thing that changed by resettlement in Canada is the encouragement, respect [and] appreciation of [the] female by the male.” However, some individual households still maintain gender-based role differentiation; the family of one woman in her mid-20s still holds fast to the tradition that only women perform household duties, which she has found troublesome to cope with given her full-time university schedule. Though she accepts that this is Afghan tradition, on a pragmatic level she hopes that this will change.

Many Afghan refugees were members of the Shi'a Imami Nizari Ismaili faith, generally referred to as Ismailis. Involvement in volunteer programmes run by local Ismaili institutions helps provide a sense of belonging and a means to facilitate interaction with local Ismaili youth from other backgrounds, while Ismaili social events provide Afghan youth with the opportunity to express their heritage in various ways, including song, dance and food. Most youth interviewed said

that although Afghanistan will always be considered 'home', they have found a second home in Vancouver.

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Displaced girls' participation in local youth life

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Daily life in the nine spontaneous IDP sites in and around the town of Dungu in Haut Uélé District in the Democratic Republic of Congo is characterised by peaceful co-existence and a mutual willingness to share the sometimes scarce resources. But although the IDPs and the host communities have related cultural practices and a shared language, the host community seems unwilling to allow the IDPs to integrate.

IDP girls explain that they naturally have contact with host-community contemporaries at school, in the market, at dances or football matches, when drawing water, and through manual labour performed for families in the host community. Nonetheless, a majority describe being dismissed because of their IDP status, which is aggravated by prejudices of the more urban host community against the mainly rural displaced population. Despite having lived in Dungu town for two to three years, none of the girls has friends in the host community. “I resent being a displaced girl because I am discriminated against by other girls, even though they are like me and of the same age as me.” (16-year-old girl)

IDP girls consider the classroom as a neutral space where they are judged against the same standard as the host community students. But the need for IDP girls to engage in manual labour to pay school fees stigmatises them even in the school environment and most of them have at some time had to suspend their schooling for long periods because of displacement and subsequent impoverishment. Some of the IDP girls wish to make friends in the host community; others are discouraged by their experiences and prefer to stay amongst their friends in the IDP community. In addition, the IDP girls' parents often prohibit them from seeing host community boys and girls, fearing that the girls will learn bad manners, and even prostitution, from the 'city' youth.

Greater dialogue is needed from the outset between displaced and host community leaders to avoid stigmatisation and prejudice; this could be backed up by joint activities such as mixed IDP-host community sports teams, theatrical productions and concerts.

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