

Headline

'Sesame Street' could provide healing touch for Afghanistan's children of war

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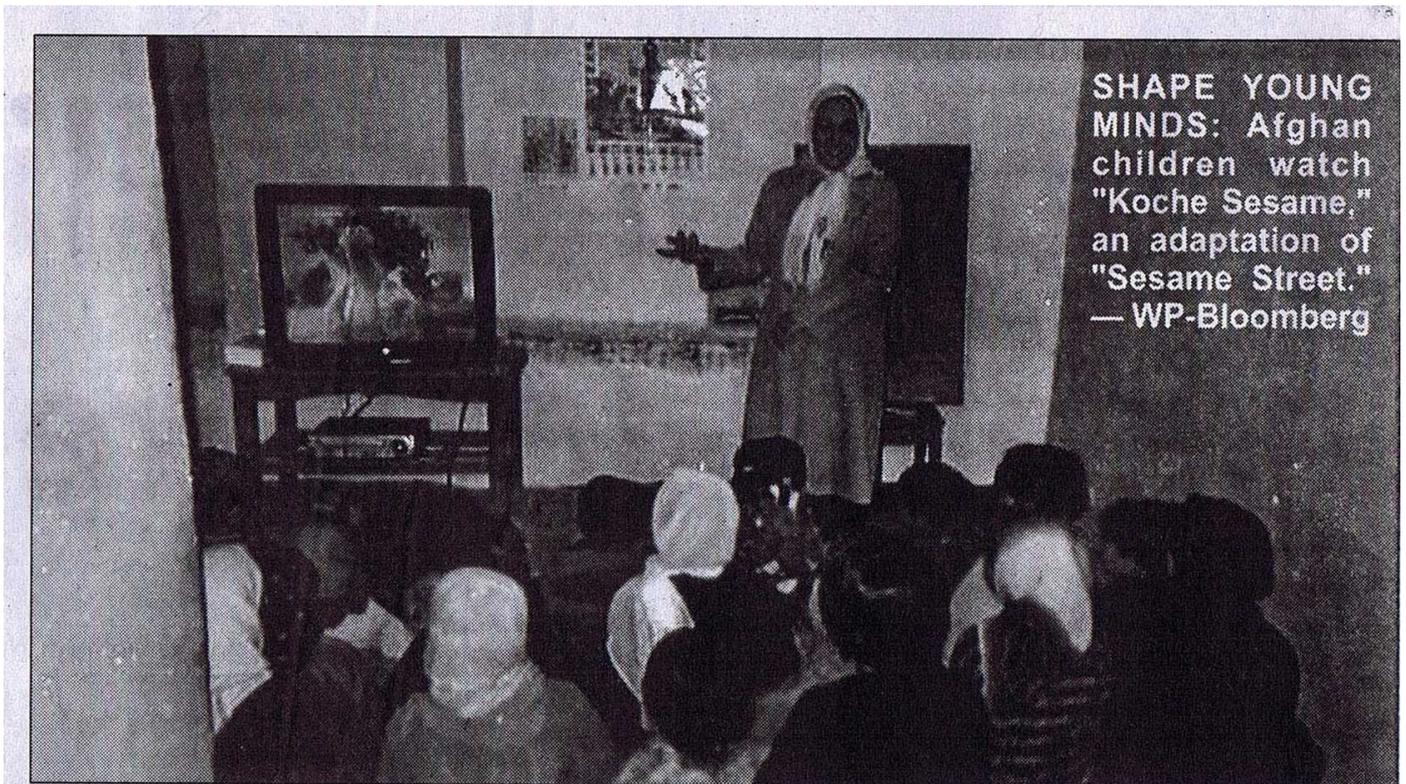
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SHAPE YOUNG MINDS: Afghan children watch "Koché Sesame," an adaptation of "Sesame Street." — WP-Bloomberg

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**HERAT, Afghanistan:** Today's letter is K. As in Kandahar. Or Kermit the Frog.

As US-led coalition forces attempt to drive out Taliban insurgents from Afghanistan, the intrepid frog and his friends — the 8-foot-tall goofy yellow condor, the two bickering bachelors and the trash-can-dwelling misanthrope — could pick up where the troops leave off.

Some educators and television producers here hope that Big Bird, Bert and Ernie, and Oscar the Grouch of "Sesame Street" could one day be on screens across Afghanistan with their letters, numbers and messages of fair play, ethnic tolerance and national unity to help heal and shape the country's young minds.

Even the luckiest

children in Afghanistan have childhoods defined by the spectre of danger. Many parents limit their children's outdoor playtime because of fears about roadside bombs, land mines, shootouts and thugs.

"Our children lack kindness because our society has seen only war and guns," said Latifa Akbari, a mother of six who works with an association for parents in Herat, Afghanistan's cultural capital. "Even our playgrounds have army soldiers and police officers with weapons. Maybe this 'Sesame Street' could help."

Afghan television is filled with US imports featuring characters searching for ever more elaborate ways to pummel one another, such as the "Tom and Jerry" cartoons

and World Wrestling Entertainment matches.

Inside a middle-class home tucked away amid the lively markets and ancient mosques in this western city, the Rahmani family's 10 children said they were captivated by the violent fare.

"I liked it when the mouse used some wires to electrocute the cat. That was funny," said Nawshir Rahmani, 10, as six of his brothers chuckled along with him.

Some child psychologists say the aggression in these programmes is cathartic in a place where tanks, armed guards and roadblocks are posted in front of schools and near soccer fields. With television coverage spreading to more than half of the country's homes, children end up glued to the screen.

Some parents and educators say "Sesame Street," or similar shows, could kick-start the process of healing by targeting children before their brains are hard-

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wired with all the baggage left by three decades of war. Some children have been victims of sexual abuse. Others simply spend their days selling trinkets and candy at intersections or transporting brick pyramids on old wheelbarrows.

Throughout a trip I took across Afghanistan, "Sesame Street" kept coming up. Parents and educators said they thought the TV series was a genuine tool that could teach the children of war that revenge wasn't the answer, that every ethnic group had dignity, and that female Muppets such as Maria or Miss Piggy could be forces of nature.

The programme could "do everything from empowering women to teaching parents and kids not to throw trash on the ground," said Saad Mohseni, director of Tolo TV, a private station. "Sesame Street" had its origins in social engineering: The show premiered in 1969, during the social upheaval of the civil rights movement and the desegregation of American classrooms.

### Acute problem

I grew up watching "Sesame Street" and its diverse crew of human actors and guest stars such as Maya Angelou and Dizzy Gillespie teach "caring is sharing" and joke around with Grover, Cookie Monster and Mr. Hooper. They all fit right in with my diverse neighbourhood in Queens, New York, where the "Sesame Street" set is located.

But the Muppets are likely to need a crash course in *sharia*, or Islamic law, and possibly a makeover before they go on air in Afghanistan, a deeply religious country with many overlays of ethnicities, languages and traditions, in addition to regional differences. Many here view the provinces as mini countries.

Still, if anyone can do it, "Sesame Street" can. The

childhood classic has been adapted in about 140 countries, from India to Israel. Deciding what's appropriate for Afghans has led to interesting questions.

"We want to be mindful of any cultural taboos or sectarian groups. But in Afghanistan, anything you do is difficult. Certain groups have protested far more ridiculous issues than 'Sesame Street,'" Mohseni said. "You have to weigh the benefits against the criticism. Right now, 60 per cent of the population is under the age of 20. We have to take educating our children very seriously."

In a country where women rarely go out in public without burqas, which cover them from head to toe, would most people accept strong female characters such as the feisty Maria, who bossés around her husband at their fix-it shop? Would they accept the movie-star

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**Muppet Miss Piggy making guest appearances without a burqa? Should Bert and Ernie wear beards, as required of males in some interpretations of Islamic law?**

Some Muppets that are controversial back home may go unnoticed here. Two adult, unmarried male characters — Bert and Ernie — living and sleeping in the same room together might register on people's gaydar in some Western cultures but would probably not raise an eyebrow in Afghanistan, where men and women often lead segregated lives and where it's common for male friends to hold hands in public.

It's unclear what Afghans would make of Oscar the Grouch, a grumpy Muppet who lives in a garbage can. Most likely his name will be localised, as it was in Pakistan, where he became Akhtar.

**Tickle Me Elmo? Not until he puts on some clothes.** The Sesame Workshop, the non-profit educational organisation behind "Sesame Street," produced a 2004 Afghan "Sesame Street" test video series shown in schools and women's centres. Grover wore a sparkly *kurta* (a long shirt), pyjamas (baggy cotton pants) and an Islamic prayer cap. It also had a playful hot-pink female Muppet who couldn't decide whether to be a pilot or a doctor. That was a controversial message in a country where girls had been forbidden to go to school under Taliban rule.

"The workshop was an important first step," said Charlotte Cole, a Sesame Workshop vice president, adding that they were talking to Afghan stations about a permanent version of the show.

Similar adaptations for Northern Ireland and

Kosovo taught children not only to spell and count, but also to embrace ethnic and religious diversity.

In South Africa, an orange Muppet named Kami is HIV-positive. Her appearance sparked controversy in that country, where AIDS is rampant but too socially taboo for its leaders to discuss publicly.

In Bangladesh, where parents routinely send their sons to school while keeping their daughters at home, the pigtailed Muppet Tuktuki told girls how much fun class can be.

"The great thing is the Sesame model does not club you over the head. It's subtle and often humorous," said Michael Davis, a former preschool teacher and the author of "Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street." He added, "Jim Henson had a theory of sublime silliness as a way of getting a lot of serious business done." — WP-Bloomberg