

## AFGHAN WOMEN IN IRAN

*Millions of women have gathered up their children and fled 'scorched earth', tactics of enemies who sweep through their villages, torching homes, killing villagers, poisoning the water, destroying crops, stealing cattle, strewing land mines, impressing their boy children into the military, and raping them and their daughters. As civilians, they are no longer by-products of war. They are targets, part of military strategy.*

Eighty percent of refugees are women and children. The refugee women who have been forced to leave their homes because of persecution and violence have to cope with the new environment, new language, new social and economic roles, new community structures, new familial relationships, and new problems. At the same time, they seek generally to reconstruct familiar lifestyles as much as possible. In a sense such women are both agents of change and sources of continuity and tradition.

Upon becoming refugees, refugee families have to deal with many new living arrangements. They often have to stay side by side with members of different tribes and clans. But for all refugee women, regardless of location, some issues appear to be common. They remain responsible for most domestic activities, whether in Third World camps or in industrialised countries. They also have to cope with changes in the family structure and roles. Women often find themselves as heads of households, with no husbands or older children to help support the families. They are also the principal maintainers of the traditional culture. And, when given the opportunity, refugee women form effective new social systems that provide support for their family members and the potential for helping others. By being resilient and inventive refugee women form new communities and support systems like the Afghan women's center at Peshawar and women's farming cooperatives in Somalia.

In addition to the common needs of the refugees like food, shelter, clothing and medical care, refugee women and girls require special protection and assistance ranging from physical security to cultural sensitivity. For instance, rape has been used as a weapon of ethnic cleansing, and under the laws of many countries, women do not have the same legal rights as men. Women are targets of sexual and physical abuse. They are often forced to give sexual favours to male refugees who have the authority to distribute rations in the refugee camps. Even without payment in sexual favour, food distribution is highly inequitable. As a result, women heads of households often receive fewer food

rations, and they and their children have higher rates of malnutrition than the families headed by males. Women are often in charge of caring for the most vulnerable refugees, the young, the sick, and the elderly, even though they may be vulnerable themselves.

Adequate attention to general and comprehensive reproductive health needs of refugee women is of key importance to the survival of refugee population. Women of childbearing age often face pregnancy-related complications. Lack of training of mid-wives, septic abortions, insanitary conditions during birth, poor lighting during deliveries, and frequency of pregnancies –all create difficulties.

Women also suffer from water-borne diseases like cholera, dysentery, typhoid and infectious hepatitis because they are generally responsible for collecting and storing water. Women also suffer from insect-borne diseases carried by insects that breed near water: for example, sleeping sickness, malaria, yellow fever and river blindness. They also risk infection from diseases transmitted through contact with water, worms and schistosomiasis. In addition to physical health problems, some refugee and displaced women suffer from mental health problems. Women often face emotional problems and difficulties in adjustment resulting from loss of family or community support.

Protection of women and their access to assistance are integrally woven. So too, is their involvement in the design, development and implementation of programmes. Judy Mayotte, who has worked in refugee camps all over the world, champions the cause of refugee women acting as peacemakers and decision-makers. She says – "These women, who have endured so much in exile, are women of uncommon resilience and well springs of human resources and talents.

Exhausted from the effects of war and desirous of peace and stability, millions of them are reaching out across war-torn countries to find ways to resolve differences by non-violent means, to transform their societies through reconciliation, and to heal the spiritual wounds of war. Women, who so often are sustainers of culture and nurturers of society, are often uniquely endowed to create a climate of peace and reconciliation. It would be a terrible loss to allow their efforts to remain small scale, piecemeal, and scattered. In such efforts we have no better ally or resource than women who have known the chaos of conflict and who are dedicated to finding non-violent means of resolving the conflict."

### Refugees in Iran

Afghans and Iraqi Kurds constitute the bulk of Iran's refugee population. For the last twenty years they have been allowed to live, work and move about freely within Iran to earn a living and become self-sufficient. About 1.4 million Afghans who stay in Iran can be found throughout the country, both in the urban centres as well as in the poor rural areas in eastern Iran bordering Afghanistan. In Iran there are very few refugees (about 5%) living in the camps.

Afghans can be very often found in construction sites or performing other forms of manual labour. To its benefit, Iran has consciously ignored some of its own regulations limiting foreigners' right to work. Afghans generally do the "dirty jobs" like digging ditches, curing skins for leather, cleaning wool, shelling pistachios, and working longer hours at lower pay than their Iranian counterparts. In a large number of cases, Afghan families have to solely depend on the women and children's work for a living. A comparison among men's, women's and children's earnings (Table 1) in the fields indicates that children receive the lowest wage.

**Table 1: Men's, women's, and children's earnings in their fields.**

Type of Work	Avg. Working Hrs.	Avg. Income/Day
Irrigation/shovelling (men)	10 hrs	13,000 Rials(Rls.) (\$2.7)
Picking/weeding (women)	9 hrs	6,000 Rls. (\$1.25)
Picking (children)	8 hrs	3,500 Rls. (70 cents)

**Source :** ICRI reports, 1997.

Although the type of work performed by children partly justifies their low wage, the fact that children are subject to exploitation cannot be denied.

Most of the illegal refugees live at a marginal level. In Mash'had, the average combined income of the refugee families ranged from 100,000 to 350,000 Rls. / month (about \$20 to \$70). The minimum legal wage for unskilled workers is about 260,000 Rls./month. Afghan refugees also enjoy the benefit of free primary health care services provided by the Ministry of Health (MOH) in health posts and health centres. Non-governmental organisations like the MSF and Merlin, along with the MOH have been efficiently helping refugees solve their

health problems.

Documented refugees have also been provided with free primary education. Afghans have benefited from the schooling system in Iran. Until 1995, Afghan children could register in Iranian public schools, and as a result many more children are literate (especially girls) than in their parent's generation. After a gap of two years (1995-97), during which only permanent card-holders were allowed to enroll in public schools, it was in 1997 that temporary card-holders were once again allowed to attend public schools. Apart from these, the documented refugees were also provided the benefit from state subsidies for fuel, water, bread and transportation.

Iran, which is regarded as one of the most secretive, isolated and difficult countries is also the most generous host in the world bearing the burden of millions of refugees coming from Afghanistan and Iraq. With very little aid from the international community, Iran's policy of allowing refugees to move about and seek employment has suggested not only a remarkable level of generosity and understanding of the refugee circumstances, but also proved that promoting self-reliance of the refugees is best for the refugees and also the most cost-effective approach for the host government and the society as well.

However this policy of Iran is to undergo a drastic change as Iran along with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is planning a massive repatriation programme for the refugees. The programme intends to encourage Afghans, thousands of whom are undocumented, to come forward to register and to be assisted and repatriated. According to the draft plan, those found to have continuing well-founded fears of persecution in Afghanistan will be relocated to designated areas within Iran. This attitude on the part of the Iranian government is understandable given the fact that Iran's economy is slowing down and it is becoming increasingly difficult to bear the burden of the refugee population.

### Afghan Women in Iran

It has been mentioned earlier in this article that women constitute the bulk of the refugee population, yet they remain the most vulnerable and neglected group. In Iran, the Afghan men are very often not able to work due to a number of reasons which includes physical disability (a consequence of the war situation in their own country) to the lack of proper documentation.

Since Afghans have for long been fighting a

civil war, many households lack male members. Men have been out for war or have lost their lives in the process. Thus very often women are the heads of the households or the principal breadwinners of their families. To contribute to their family income Afghan women usually work at home- a result of cultural restraints which does not welcome the work of women outside the home. As a result, it is the middle-aged women who can work outside the house, in the fields (for instance) picking and harvesting fruits and vegetables.

Another reason for women working at home, is the women's various responsibilities at home. Thus they need to look for a job which can be combined with the housework. Hence, shelling pistachios, cleaning wool, making brooms, cleaning saffron, making chains, and carpet weaving are examples of some of the work Afghan women do at home. Women often suffer from muscular skeletal diseases which are caused by long hours of poor posture, bending over and performing repetitive and mechanical work. Cleaning wool is an unhealthy job, as it causes obstructive bronchitis and other lung ailments.

Without the work of women and children, daily work at brick kilns cannot be completed. As the refugees often live with their families at brick kilns, it is possible for women to join men and help them by collecting and piling bricks.

Working at such brick kilns is back-breaking, while the average pay for the family is about 12,000 Rls./day. Compared to the minimum pay announced by the Ministry of Labour in 1998 (i.e. 8,482 Rls./day) Afghan women's earnings are very low ranging from 12% to 60% of the minimum. Table 2 below shows some examples of women's average income, based on at least 8 to 10 hours work per day.

The interviews carried out by the International Consortium For Refugees In Iran (ICRI) in the Afghan settlements in Sistan –Baluchistan, Mash'had, and south of Tehran indicated that the number of working women in Zahedan was considerably lower than that in Mash'had. This must be due to the limited job opportunities in Sistan –Baluchistan, as well as the refugees' cultural background.

In the settlements located in the south of Tehran, it seems that there are not many employment opportunities available as in Mash'had. Thus, in these areas, being able to get work that can be done at home (embroidery, shelling pistachios etc.) largely depends on personal relationships.

**Table 2 : Example's Of Women's Work And Their Average Income**

Type of work	Avg. Pay	Avg. Income/Day
Shelling pistachios	300 Rls./kilo	1,800 Rls. (30 cents)
Cleaning wool	2,500 Rls./kilo	5,000 Rls. (about \$1)
Making brooms	50 Rls./broom	2,000 Rls. (40 cents)
Making chains	300 Rls./kilo	3,000 Rls. (60 cents)
Cleaning saffron	1,000 Rls./kilo	2,000 Rls.
Straightening used nails	250 Rls./kilo	1,000 Rls. (20 cents)
Embroidery	10,000 Rls./piece	1,200 Rls. (25 cents)

**Source:** ICRI Reports, 1997

Against the above background, it is necessary to investigate the perceptions of the needs and priorities of Afghan refugee women in Iran. The International Consortium For Refugees In Iran (ICRI) conducted a Needs Assessment Survey Among Afghan Women, both of the Hazara and the Pashtun ethnic group, to investigate the perceptions of their needs and priorities in August 1998. The study used a 'focus group discussion' technique and the objective of the study was to develop a better understanding of how two culturally different groups of Afghan refugee women see their needs and priorities. Specifically, the study aimed to :

- Rank refugees' own priorities for education, health and income generation programmes.
- Identify skills which women would like training in.
- Determine the problems of working women and the obstacles to work.
- Determine the degree of refugee women's access to health services.
- Identify obstacles to schooling for children.

The first aim of the study was to find out from the refugee women what they saw as their major needs. An important feature of the survey was that the facilitators of the survey did not give the women any suggestions- all the points were raised by the women themselves. Another important point worth noting was that both the groups, the Hazaras and Pashtun women had no difference of opinion. They put the highest priority on *education and literacy*. After this the other areas which they highlighted were: clinics run by Afghans for Afghans, creation of workshops run by Afghans where they can work, creation of job opportunities where Afghan women can work, legal security and documentation, ID cards for their children, freedom of movement and personal security, basic needs (housing,

household goods etc.), social insurance benefits.

When asked to prioritize their needs in the sectors of education, health and income, again there was a strong consensus among most of the women that their priority was for *education*. However, the Hazara women emphasized basic education and literacy while the Pashtun women emphasized vocational training. The second priority for all groups was *income earning opportunities*.

Both groups of women identified a wide range of *skills* and jobs which they aspired to. However the Pashtuns said that apart from teaching, they were not allowed to work outside of their homes. The skills which they identified for home-based work included:

1. sewing, crocheting, embroidery
2. weaving carpets, weaving sashes
3. making bags.

Many also wanted training for jobs based outside the home such as nursing, giving injections, hair-dressing, secretarial skills, dried flower arrangement, running a kindergarten and research into refugee needs.

With regard to the *characteristics of a good job* the women pointed out that a good job should have the following features: it should have a *decent pay* and provide for at least a living wage; there should be *flexibility* and preference would be given to informal and the private sector, part-time work, work which can be done at home and which does not require bulky or expensive tools; *personal safety* should be ensured; where *literacy is not required* and any training needed is given free; the work should be *motivating* and should benefit other women (nursing/teaching); there should be *job security*; a job which they do not have to go hunting for and is *introduced to them* by an agency or someone they know.

The women also enlisted several *obstacles and problems* faced by the working women. The major obstacle faced by the Afghan women is *illiteracy*. Moreover being *foreigners*, they are not very familiar with Iran, the Iranian people get the priority for jobs, many do not have a work permit and Afghan university degrees are not recognised in Iran. Sometime the *husbands are not very supportive* of his wife's work. *Lack of child care and housing conditions* (crowded homes where it is difficult to set up a loom or a sewing machine) are other obstacles faced by working women. *Cultural differences, language barrier, lack of familiarity with the working practices* are some other problems they face. The women have complained that they are

discriminated and are *not allowed to make decisions*. The Afghan women are also laughed at and *mistrusted* by the Iranians.

Both Pashtun and Hazara women stated that they believed that both boys and girls should be provided with education. The Pashtun women said that it was particularly important for girls so that they could help the women of their country in future. The reasons why boys and girls could not attend school were similar. Poverty, opposition from parents, legal constraints, schooling gaps were some of the reasons why they failed to go to school.

With regard to the health needs the Afghan women discussed their access to and use of various health services including general clinics, family planning, ante-natal care and vaccination. There was a mixture of views with regard to access to government facilities. However, there was clearly not universal access to free government primary health services for refugees. It was found out that some government clinics even refused to vaccinate Afghan refugee children. On the other hand, lack of family planning or ante-natal care was generally more to do with the husband or his family's opposition.

### General Observations and Recommendations

The survey clearly revealed that the Afghan refugee women had to share the responsibilities of their families along with men but faced a number of obstacles and problems with regard to job, health care, schooling of their children and basic adjustments into the Iranian society. The women complained bitterly of the limitations placed on them by their husbands and his family and blamed this on their "low" culture. They thought that it was time that these customs undergo some reformation.

The women, also did not attach too much importance to the fact that many of them were illegal refugees and lacked proper documentation. Although this came up in discussions it was never regarded as a top priority. They believed that many other things could be done to improve their lives even if they continued to remain as 'illegals'.

Refugee women should be provided with *education, literacy and skills training* as this remained their top priority. Provision of child care, small loans and a job-search service would enable many more women to earn a living. The refugees should be involved in decision making and solving refugee problems. Counselling should be done to the male counterparts and the other senior family members of the refugee

women who want to work, avail of health facilities in the clinics and get educated. This would help the refugee women to tread on a smoother path to self-sufficiency.

### Conclusion

The women who constitute the largest and one of the most vulnerable groups are beyond doubt also the most important component of the refugee population and their needs are to be given top priority for a refugee programme to be successful. With the needs and priorities of Afghan refugee women in Iran well-explored, the challenge for the future is to translate the improved understanding of their situation into concrete, effective programmes which will help them live in safety and dignity. Since the refugee women are the best judges of their needs and aspirations, they should be included in all aspects of programme design and implementation.

Since the Iranian government along with the UNHCR is organising an ambitious voluntary repatriation programme through which hundreds of thousands of Afghans are likely to be repatriated, the question of the difficulties faced by the women upon return to their war-ravaged country is basic to the safety and security of the refugees. Along with the problems of food and shelter, the total lack of social infrastructure, legal problems related to the ownership of land, demographic imbalances, lack of health, employment and educational opportunities will plague the lives of thousands returning to their homes. Tapping the resources that women bring to bear in development will be essential to the process of reconstruction of their country of origin. Including women at every stage of the planning process is essential to ensure that there will be no surprises along their way. This will, in the process, ensure a safe and successful repatriation programme.

*Arpita Basu Roy*

---

### Call for Papers

*The coming issue of **Refugee Watch** (No. 12) will carry a special article on the Pakistani-Indian diaspora. Papers on refugees and migrants from South Asia to different parts of the world are invited.*

**Refugee Watch** welcomes articles, notes and comments on relevant themes from interested scholars & activists.

*Please contact by letter, fax or e-mail*

**Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group**  
5B Mahanirban Road, Calcutta - 700 029, India.  
Fax: 91-33-464 0079  
or  
e-mail: mcrgr@cal.vsnl.net.in

## SAFHR paper series

### Those Accords A Bunch of Documents

by

**Ranabir Samaddar (September 1999)**

### Peace Process in Nagaland and Chittagong Hill Tracts An Audit Report

by

**Jehan Perera (December 1999)**

### Protection of Refugees in South Asia Need for Legal Framework

by

**Tapan K. Bose (January 2000)**

### Ten Week War in Kargil From the News Files

ed.

**Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury &  
Shahid Fiaz (February 2000)**