

# Taliban's War on Women:

## Live Experiences of Afghan Women in Transit on Ethnicity and their Identity

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*Dedicated to the Women of Afghanistan*

“Women, who know the price of conflict so well, are also often better equipped than men to prevent or resolve it. For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls. They have been crucial in preserving social order when communities have collapsed...but women and girls are particularly affected by the consequences of armed conflict. Peace is inextricably linked to equality between women and men. Maintaining and promoting peace and security requires women’s equal participation in decision-making. Ensure that women and girls in conflict situations are protected; that perpetrators of violence against women in conflict are brought to justice; and that women are able to take their rightful and equal place at the decision making table in questions of peace and security”.

(Kofi A. Annan ; October 24, 2000)

## *ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

This research report could not have been written without the financial support of the Sir Ratan Tata Foundation. I wish to thank foremost, Professor Meghnad Desai, Dr. Christopher Hughes and Dr. Athar Hussain for the opportunity given to me to work on Afghan refugee women based in London. Thanks are due to Rita Field and C. Lee who were always in touch with me and provided valuable timely administrative and research support.

I am indebted to many people and Organization for help in carrying out this research and publishing its findings. I would like to thank, first of all and very warmly, the women who gave their time to be interviewed. All of my informants were generous and trusted on me to share their experience and feeling. It is important to stress, though, that ultimately the opinions expressed here are only those of the refugee Afghani women based in Delhi and London. Any remaining errors or misinterpretations must be laid at my door alone.

## Foreward

I remember you...

when you have no choice, no voice, no rights, no existence  
when you have no laughs, no joy, no freedom, no resistance  
your pain, your agony, your silence, your loneliness  
your anger, your frustration, your cries, your unhappiness

I remember you...

when you are abused, attacked, beaten and veiled  
when you are tortured, strangled, choked and almost killed  
you feel numbness, nothingness, lifelessness and tears  
your are a shadow, a ghost, a creature with many fears

I remember you...

when you in the darkness, stillness of a star-less night  
lift your arms to the sky, with sadness and fright  
and ask the universe with eyes full of tears and pain  
why all these crimes? for what reason? can anyone explain?

I remember you...

when you finally will rise and stand on you feet!  
and say " No! I will not stand for anymore defeat!"  
you will break the chains, burn the veil and destroy the walls!  
you will scream with all your might "Damn you all!"

I remember you...

when you take the solemn oath that you will struggle, resist and fight  
that you will gain your freedom with all your might  
that you will never give up, no matter how heavy the cost  
never again will you be confused, pitiful and lost

I remember you...

when you gain your rights, reach your goals and hope(s)  
but the path is hard, full of obstacles, you must learn how to cope  
while struggling for your ultimate goal  
a-reborn woman, free, independent and whole

TO MY SUFFERING AFGHAN SISTERS

By Zieba Shorish-Shamley

**I Will Never Go Back**

I'm the woman who has awoken

I've arisen and become a tempest through the ashes of my burnt children.

I've arisen from the rivulets of my brother's blood

My nation's wrath has empowered me

My ruined and burnt villages replete me with hatred against the enemy.

O' Compatriot, no longer regard me weak and incapable.

My voice has mingled with thousands of arisen women

My fists are clenched with fists of thousands of compatriots

To break together all these all sufferings, all these fetters of slavery.

I'm the woman who has awoken,

I've found my path and will never go back.

*By Mena Keshmar Kamal, founder of the Revolutionary*

*Association of the Women of Afghanistan, assassinated in 1987 by people opposed to justice for women*

Break the Silence

O' women and men why are you silent  
Why do you look for an imaginary world  
having illusions about your might  
Forget not that you are the makers of history.  
Be not occupied in day-dreaming  
Burn in your burning wrath  
The invisible chain  
Which cunning bucksters spun around you.  
You were the one who destroyed  
the foundation of slavery and feudalism  
smashed the foundation of Fascism,  
threw the reign of terror into the dustbin of history  
and built a new world on their ruins.  
Like the early Red morning Sun  
You have fertilized the earth with your blood  
And hoisted high the lofty banner of peace and freedom.  
Come and swim in the depth of the stormy seas  
Struggle against hardships  
Because the essence of life is continuous battle  
Sitting with folded-hand brings you no prosperity  
Struggle makes you a great human being  
It will record your name in the archives of history  
Because you are the makers of history.

Hafizullah Emadi

## CONTENTS

*Afghanistan: Review from background pointers.*

- 1.1. *An Escape to Violence.*
- 1.2. *Geography and Ethnic Composition*
- 1.3. *Historical Overview*
- 1.4. *The Mujahidin*
- 1.5. *The Taliban*
- 1.6. *Women In Afghanistan*

*Chapter: 2*

*State of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance.*

- 2.1. *A Gendered history of conflict in Afghanistan*
- 2.2. *Violence against women in Afghanistan*
- 2.3. *Women's defiance to Patriarchy*

*Chapter: 3*

*The Taliban: 1998 to Present*

- 3.1. *The Status of Women in Afghanistan during Taliban's regime.*
- 3.2. *Afghanistan's Women: The power of their endurance.*
- 3.3. *Widow's Voices.*
- 3.4. *Conversations with a few widows.*
- 3.5. *Experiences, Problems and challenges of women in Afghanistan.*
- 3.6. *Women of Afghanistan: Speak from behind the media veil.*

*Chapter : 4*

- 4.1. *The Afghan Women in the UK: Silent Voices*
- 4.2. *Resettling Afghan Refugees: Efforts of UK-Amnesty International Report*

*Chapter-5*

*Afghanistan: Current History; Women's Rights and Human Security.*

- 5.1. *Of Hopes and Commitments.*
- 5.2. *Towards a new Social Contract.*
- 5.3. *Afghanistan: The Challenges Ahead; Nation at the cross roads.*
- 5.4. *The Peace and Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan.*

*Conclusion*

*References*

*Annexure*





### Methodology

“Men are using religion as an excuse to dominate us. We should not submit quietly to such oppression in the name of religion.”

Royeka Sakhawat Hossain, an eighteenth century Bengal woman activist and writer.

“Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil, and to make no peace with oppression.”

Book of Common Prayer, the Koran.

Feminist research/consciousness rising give space to women for telling each other stories of their lives. It underlines the reality that the world is made up of many lives, and all of them matter.

I have conducted this study where I investigated a collection of oral testimonies. These were gathered by talking personally to women of Afghanistan based in Delhi and London. The goal of an oral testimony is to facilitate reflections about both self and the conflict in question. An oral testimony is therefore more than a mere reflection of experiences: it is also a constructed perception of reality.

The use of oral testimonies in social psychological research is not common, and it does have its pros and cons. The major advantage is that testimonies like those gathered by me have a particularly authentic character. The interviewees were able to tell their stories in their own language, talking with someone whom they trusted. The major aim of the study has been to investigate a psychological question concerning gender identity. The cultural component of this effort is important, but even more important is evaluating how the oral testimonies can shed new light on a social psychological problem.

*Preview*

In all ethnic conflicts different identities, voices and aspirations emerge. My problem was how do we juxtapose gender on it. In this research I indicated that women living in situations of conflict (especially with regards to Afghan women) through agency assume visibility. My concern was to analyze how women sustain their visibility in peacemaking. Before answering this question we need to analyze why women join peace activities. My answer is that they do it out of wider social concerns. Even when individual concerns or transgressions motivate them they assume success if they are able to translate those individual motivations into wider social actions thereby demonstrating their own society as well as their movement.

Why Women: A legitimate question at this juncture is why privilege women's experiences? The reality of the conflicts that is given to us in different periods is a male reality. In contention with other realities, as most of the commentaries are male centric constructed on the basis of male power compulsions. Most of the works analyzing intra-state conflicts do not deal with women's engagement in it. Women are also portrayed as passive actors, despite their significant roles, both in war and in peace. We would argue that because women are invisible actors in the structural processes does not mean they do not perform. Women's intervention in peace we believe have not only redefined gender stereotypes but also called itself "Women for Peace".

*Marginalized groups, living in economically unstable/ disadvantageous social settings have been particularly vulnerable to different kinds of violence. This study aims to record the oral testimonies of women encountered violence in Afghanistan.*

My knowledge of women's identity and security in India as well as in the international arena as a dimension of human right is very poor. It deserves more attention of social scientists than given so far. As a priority basis, I need a better understanding of those aspects of security, which are particularly relevant for designing effective policies and programmes. My intensive field investigation incases of Afghan Refugee women and children instigated me to take the case of this vulnerable woman. The vast gap in our knowledge about various categories of violence and torture against women is a serious handicap in designing and implementing effective intervention projects and development of a policy towards creation of their identity. *The issue itself is earmarked by lack of sufficient information, lack of awareness at community people level, lack of adequate legal protection, absence of shelter and rehabilitation programs, lack of political commitment, lack of proper law enforcement, secrecy and invisibility of the issue. There are many dimensions, which need to be added, and I sincerely want to tie the loose end after the situation analysis. Against this backdrop, I thought it would be*

*worthwhile to develop a plan of action to protect the women and girls from violence and bring them certain identity towards the realization of peace process. And hence this special study.*

Nowhere else has a war on women been witnessed so starkly as in Afghanistan. Flagrant abuses of Afghan women's most basic human rights in the sectors of education, health, and civil and political participation have been widely documented (U. S. Department of State, 1999; Amnesty International, 1999; 1995). The Taliban have been the perpetrators of these injustices, but violence against both men and women in Afghanistan has been ongoing for over two decades. The constant condition of war during the last twenty years has adversely affected Afghan women's lives forcing millions to leave their homes and seek refuge in countries across the globe. Approximately 11, 888 Afghan refugees registered with UNHCR India. (UNHCR, April 30, 2002). This research traces the experiences of these women, many of who wait silently in transit.

This research has investigated the trials and displacement of Afghan women who have found refuge in Delhi and London. My interest was to understand the relationship of these women to the nation even as they find themselves outside of the territorial boundaries of a country. *In this research I have tried to probe specific notions of nation, kinds of violence undergone during more than two decades of protracted war and their opinion about the recent changes in Afghanistan after the defeat of the radical Taliban in November 2001. Is Afghanistan a country without a state? While drawing of borders, what does a country, in this case Afghanistan, mean to women? How far they are agreed to return back to Afghanistan after the establishment of Ministry of Women Affairs in the present Karzai's regime.*

When initially interviewing Afghan women in New Delhi, (1999) I found that their stories were being passed down by word of mouth, and that listening to their experiences was crucial for understanding a more embodied version of politics in Afghanistan. Some of the most insightful narratives came from the older women with whom interaction was easier, as storytelling was part of their lives. They had so much to tell and so few people who wanted to listen to them. The accounts of raging mobs, check posts, corrupt border guards, sexual abuse, dead and mutilated bodies, lost or beheaded children, unhygienic and insecure camps were told and retold during the interviewing. There was also sometimes anger and silence. It is important that I understand the silences of the women as well as their narratives.

The severity of the Taliban's gender discrimination was noted by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur for Violence against Women, Radhika Coomarswamy, who visited Afghanistan in September 1999. The Special Rapporteur stated that the Taliban's Department of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (which issues edicts relating to women's status and carries out punishments for gender specific crimes) was "the most misogynist entity in the world." Coomaraswamy stated that its edicts about women were completely unacceptable and that the body should be disbanded.

As mentioned above, the Taliban's overt discrimination against women and girls has had a profound impact on health. In addition to institutionalized discrimination in the health sector, extreme punishments such as public flogging have been meted out for infringements of the Taliban's harsh gender segregation. Adultery offences by women are punishable by death via stoning, and women who violate the law by appearing in public without male chaperones face stoning or public beatings. But human rights violations by the Taliban are not limited to women. Both men and women suffer under a legal regimen based on a rare and extreme interpretation of Sharia's law. That situation is unchanged after four years of Taliban rule. Courts appointed by the Taliban that are wholly devoid of due process impose strict punishments (including beheading, stoning, and amputations) for common crimes. Men face brutal punishments for infractions of the Taliban's dress code (which requires beards of a certain length and prohibits certain items of apparel). The Taliban summons the public to witness these barbaric punishments on a regular basis, a practice that terrorizes the entire community.

In addition to the burden of arbitrary and cruel punishment, gender discrimination, and totalitarian repression of the rights to assembly, speech, and press that has characterized the Taliban's rule, the past two years have brought new misery and suffering to the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban and its sole remaining military opponent, the United Front (previously called the Northern Alliance) have engaged in fierce fighting throughout the period that has displaced hundreds of thousands of Afghans from their homes. Both sides have carried out indiscriminate military actions that victimize the civilian population. In August 1998 the Taliban attacked and captured the city of Mazar-I-Sharif and a large number of unarmed men, and children were massacred. The UN Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan has estimated that as many as 5000 civilians were killed when the Taliban took control of the city. Human Rights Watch also reported thousands of killings of unarmed people, as well as the abduction of young women by the Taliban, abuse of prisoners, and military attacks on contingents of unarmed people attempting to flee the city.

The mission of the newly created Ministry for Women Affairs is to restore and improve the right of Afghan women and to improve their legal, economic, political, and social status

throughout the country. The engagement of the Women's ministry is absolutely critical to the rebuilding of a peaceful, democratic Afghanistan in which women and girls have full rights. This research will revisit again Afghan women to have a dialogue on the changing scenario and way towards building peace in Afghanistan.

In this research I have compiled the oral testimonies of the most vulnerable Afghani refugee women based in Delhi and London about their long years of agony and return to Afghanistan and then analyzed their views with regards to the present Situation of Afghanistan.

## Research Methods and Design

### Relevance and linkages

This research study is relevant to understand the present and prevalent status of Afghan women affected by long-term violence and religious conflict.

Methods: 1. Field Research, 2. E-Mail/Web Page

### Research Objectives

This is a Socio-Psychological study based upon qualitative analysis.

- Mapping Afghani Women's experience of Violence during conflict.
- To assess the perceptions about Afghani women's own life and social security and identity during the long years of ethnic conflict.
- To find out the predominant factors making their life more vulnerable at present.
- To understand their present socio-economic and health status.
- To analyze the perception of different personnel from different sectors of the society such as the media, law enforcement agencies, administrators, local community leaders towards the issue of women's security and peace.
- To make an assertion, how far Ministry of Women affairs in Afghanistan is enforceable in favor of women's security issue.

### Methodology

Data was collected from Afghan women using a participatory learning and action approach. This will provide an opportunity to enter into a dialogue about the inner most feelings, thoughts of these distressed women and adolescent girls. Considering that different cultural aspects will be taken into account, this ethnographic method will assist for in-depth analysis of the issues.

### Source

*This* research was adopted both primary source as well as secondary source.

### Justification for fieldwork

Fieldwork is necessary to reach and explore women's innermost feelings in a conflicting situation.

### Analytical Technique

Qualitative Analysis of the Afghan Women's Personal narratives

### Strategies and activities

Information collected through in-depth interviews will provide an impetus to develop a concrete policy level process to bring peace and identity for women in conflict zones.

Study Area: London

Universe –Afghan women.

Sample population: 20 Afghan women based in London.

Duration: Eight Months

Products

- At the end of this *fellowship a written document of the research will be produced.*
- Dissemination Plans: The research findings will be disseminated through publication by the Asia Research Center, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Salient Features of this research

- To create a database of expert information on the distressed Afghan women's personal history to influence policy makers for the design and implication of an effective policy towards women's security and well being in international environment.
- Creating awareness regarding identity of women in ethnic conflict and thereby security process.
- It will interest students and scholars of gender studies, conflict and peace studies, political science and psychology as well as the lay leader.

### Introduction

Afghanistan: Review from Background pointers.

Afghanistan, a land of high mountains and rugged terrain has faced one of the worst human tragedies of modern times. In twenty-three years of turmoil, millions of people have been exiled and internally displaced. As many as one million and seven thousand people have been killed and an untold number wounded and maimed. The country's institutions, its schools and universities and its agriculture have been largely destroyed. Now this land is calling the sons of the soil to return and try to rebuild and reconstruct Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a land faced with the challenge of re-building itself from utter ruin, a country where every 30 minutes a mother dies of pregnancy-related complications and where 70 percent of all tuberculosis cases are those of women. Over the past two decades, the enormity of what has been destroyed by war and conflict has overwhelmed Afghan society. The physical infrastructure, the economy, institutions, political processes have all come undone.

Yet there is one new and positive reality today, amid the entire *clam* of voices expressing the needs of various segments of the population. A group talking about social structures, coping mechanisms and an end to social trauma-in short, social capital. I am referring to Afghan women.

#### 1.1. An Escape to Violence: World's single largest refugee group

Twenty years after the Soviet invasion provoked an avalanche of refugees. Afghans remain the single largest refugee group in the world, the UNHCR said in a statement making the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet pullout. By end of 1979, the year the Soviet army entered Afghanistan, there were already 400,000 refugees in Pakistan and 200,000 in Iran. By February 1989, the number had risen to a staggering 6.2 million, split almost equally between the neighboring countries. However, after the Soviet withdrawal, more than four million Afghans have returned home voluntarily since 1989. 2.6 million Afghans still live in exile, from the camps of Iran and Pakistan to the suburbs of Frankfurt, Paris and London. Hundreds of thousands of others are scattered across the former Russian states and the rest of the world.

According to the UNHCR, its work with the Afghan refugees is "one of the most cash strapped refugee programme in the world at present." In 1998, the organization said it needed \$21 million to improve the infrastructure in the areas where the refugees could return but had received only \$4.5 million from donor countries. The situation had worsened due to the negative signals generated by the Taliban with their strict interpretation of Islamic law. (Reuters, February 14,99 BBC World Service, July1, 1998.)

The United Nations World Food Programme feared that some 20,000 Afghan refugees living in Pakistan would face starvation if the WFP does not get funds.

WFP spokesperson in Islamabad Susan Manuel told reporters that the emergency aid would be terminated to Afghan refugees on April 30 unless it gets new funds. (NINI April 24, 1999)

#### *Geography and Ethnic Composition*

Afghanistan, formerly known as the Republic of Afghanistan, was renamed as the Islamic State of Afghanistan in April 1992. (Shahrani, N., "Afghanistan"; 1996) Situated at the crossroads of



Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan is a landlocked country mostly surrounded by rugged mountains and hills. The territory covers some 252,000 square miles (648, 800 square kilometers), nearly identical in size to the State of Texas. It shares borders with the independent Central Asian States of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, in the north; Xinjiang province of China, in the northeast; Iran in the west, and Pakistan in the east. The capital city, Kabul, is one of the largest cities in Afghanistan and had an estimated population of 1.5 million in 1996. Other major cities include Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-I-Sharif, Jalalabad, and Kunduz. Estimates of the total population of Afghanistan range between 15-20 million, including refugees in other countries.

More than 99.9% of Afghan people are Muslim, about 20% Shiite and 80% Sunni Muslims. Non-Muslims groups, including Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews make up less than 0.1% of the population. Although the vast majority of its people share a common religion, Afghanistan is very diverse in terms of language and ethnicity. Among several distinct ethnic groups living in Afghanistan are the Pashto-speaking Pashtuns (45-50%); Afghan-Persian or Dari-speaking Tajiks (25-30%); the Hazaragi (Persian dialect)-speaking Hazaras, (10-12%); and the Turkic-speaking Uzbeks, Turkomans, Kirghiz and Kazakhs (10%). The two official languages are Dari and Pashto. (Id, at p.1)

The climate in Afghanistan is dry with four seasons, including hot summers, cold winters and heavy snow year-round in the mountainous regions.

(Shahrani, N., "Afghanistan", in Simon, R., Matter, P. and Bullet, R. (editors) *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East*, Macmillan References USA, 1996. (Hereafter, "Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East")

#### Historical Overview

Afghanistan has had a turbulent history, and its people have suffered greatly at the hands of political factions vying for power. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 until its negotiated withdrawal under the Geneva Accords and Departure in 1989 was marked by massive human rights violations. Soviet forces engaged in indiscriminate bombardment, targeted executions, and the laying of millions of antipersonnel landmines. The war generated six million refugees and an estimated one million deaths.

The period following the Soviet withdrawal until 1996 was characterized by factional fighting among the Afghan resistance forces (mujaheddin) that killed as many as 40,000 civilians and displaced upwards of half a million people. (US Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey*, 1997, US Committee for Refugees; 124-125) During this period, the capital city of Kabul was repeatedly rocketed and bombed, and the thousands laid landmines. The State Department estimates that 400, 000 Afghans have been killed or wounded by landmines. (State Department Country Reports, 1999, Afghanistan). Afghanistan to this day continues to sustain high casualties from antipersonnel landmines.

(Landmine Monitor Report 2000, which documents landmine use, stockpiles, transfer, production, and casualties on behalf of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines reported the following: "An estimated five to ten people were injured or killed by mines everyday in 1999, compared to an estimated ten to twelve people in 1998 and an estimated twenty to twenty-four people in 1993." Landmine Monitor attributes the improvements to extensive demining that has been carried out in Afghanistan.)

## The Mujahidin

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led to the rise of the Mujahidin, a coalition of Islamism tribal groups fighting to push the Soviets out of Afghanistan- supported largely by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States. The Mujahidin's rise to arms against the Soviet invaders thrust Afghanistan into civil war. Not surprisingly, the Mujahidin rejected the reforms instituted by the communist government and equated a return of women to their traditional roles as a return to the nation's Islamic identity and ultimately a restricted role for women became part of their Islamic ideology. After the Mujahidin had succeeded in bringing about a Soviet withdrawal, different factions began to vie for power and another stage of the civil war began, bringing with it numerous new horrors that resulted in the impoverishment and victimization of women.

Noting the traditional notions of honour and shame surrounding women's modesty and purity in Afghan culture, Amnesty International in its 1999 report entitled "Women in Afghanistan: Pawns in Men's Power Struggles" describes how "women were treated as the spoils of war" by the Mujahidin:

Particularly between 1992 and 1995, armed guards have used these (cultural) norms as weapons of war, engaging in rape and sexual assault against women as an ultimate means of dishonouring entire communities and reducing people's capacity to resist military advances.

Further, Mujahidin factions, including the Northern Alliance, often set out to demonstrate their commitment to Islam and the traditional Afghan identity by imposing restrictions on women's freedom of movement, education, and access to health care and employment.

However, because the Mujahidin had an unorganised structure, the enforcement of these restrictions were inconsistent and unsystematic and in Kabul women continued to work in government departments, education and health care at their own risk.

## The Taliban

The Taliban emerged in 1994, developing from a movement of Pashtun youths and students of religious schools in Afghanistan. The movement, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, was trained, armed and supported heavily by the Pakistani intelligence service (ISI) which had close links with various factions of Afghan mujaheddin that rose up in resistance to the Soviet occupation. Years before the Taliban emerged; the ISI strongly backed Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, one of the most brutal and conservative of the many mujaheddin factions. Gulbuddin's forces (and other factions) received millions of dollars in weapons provided by Pakistan, much of which was provided indirectly by the United States in a covert CIA operation. (The US provided approximately 2 billion to 3 billion in military and economic assistance to resistance forces, according to Human Rights Watch/Asia, citing US government sources.)

(A more detailed account of political and historical background information can be found in Physicians for Human Rights Publication, Taliban's War on Women: A Health and Human rights Crisis.)

## WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

At different points throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Afghan women have been the subjects of both policies designed to curtail their rights and status, and policies designed to promote their rights and status. In both scenarios, varying degrees of force have been employed to enforce these policies. In 1928, King Amanallah, abdicated his throne as a result of a tribal rebellion opposed to his reforms including those in the areas of schooling for girls, restriction on polygamy and prohibition of the bride-price.

Reforms relating to women's rights were again attempted in the 1960s and 1970s; however, their effect was largely limited to women in urban areas of Afghanistan. It is interesting to note that in 1965, the government of Afghanistan submitted a comment to the Commission on the Status of Women addressing the issue of a UN Declaration on Eliminating Discrimination Against Women. In this comment, it stated eliminating discrimination required the "combating of traditions, customs, and usages which thwart the advancement of women" and went on to advocate the use of affirmative action policies to aid women in overcoming the discrimination they faced.

In 1978, the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan obtained control of the country and attempted to institute radical reforms affecting the rights and status of women. These reforms included the prohibition of a number of cultural practices with regards to marriage and family law that were widely considered "Islamic" within Afghan society. In the summer of 1978, a wave of Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan reportedly in part in response to the government's use of force in the enforcement of its policy of compulsory education for women - a policy viewed by some as a source of dishonour to the family. (Moghadam;1999)

Chapter-2

States of Conflict: Gender, Violence and Resistance

Violence against women is a global phenomenon. In recent years there has been an alarming spread of fundamentalism as witnessed in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992 and the ensuing violence that erupted, as well as the fifteen years of conflict between Tamils and Sinhala Buddhists in Sri Lanka and at present the twenty two years of conflict in Afghanistan. It is now well established that fundamentalism uses women's bodies as a battlefield and its struggle to appropriate institutional power. (Jayawardena, Alwis; 1996) This research attempts to record all kinds of violence and torture undergone by the Afghan Women and children during long years of war and conflict and then their views about the recent assuming democratic set up in Afghanistan.

Sexual violence is a ritualized part of war. The war never stops in women's lives whether they are on the frontline or at home. Neither patriarchal violence nor genocidal colonialism is termed as war in mainstream accounts, as the power to name war is the prerogative of dominant nations and groups. Violence has many forms on women by men and women of the 'other community' and women in close familial relationship. Its own community perpetuates violence against women during wars members who were neighbors and known faces and for women nothing changes, except that the situation intensifies. Whether it is women in slavery, African American women, prostitutes have all faced rape through history. Even Peacekeeping forces the defenders turn rapists including against children.

2.1. A Gendered History of Conflict in Afghanistan

Nowhere else has a war on women been witnessed so starkly as in Afghanistan. Flagrant abuses of Afghan women's most basic human rights in the sectors of education, health, and civil and political participation have been widely documented (U.S. Department of State, 1999; Amnesty International, 1999; 1995). The Taliban have been the perpetrators of these injustices, but violence against both men and women in Afghanistan has been ongoing for over two decades. The constant condition of war during the last twenty years has adversely affected Afghan women's lives forcing millions to leave their homes and seek refuge in countries across the globe.

One of the earliest attempts at emancipation and social reform for women in the twentieth century took place in Afghanistan. Afghan leaders located women's emancipation as central to its nationalist ideology of modernization. In 1883, Amir Abd al- Rahman Khan (1880-1901), a ruler of Afghanistan, among other things, allowed widow remarriage, and registration of marriages was made compulsory. His son, Amir Habibullah (1901-19) introduced the concept of women as contributing members of society and not simply as mothers. However the emancipation process was not linear, and at the same time as progressive change was introduced, Habibullah proclaimed that men were entitled to full control of their women, as the honor of the people of Afghanistan prevailed in the honor of their women. (Hans; 2001) In the 1920's the next attempt to modernize Afghan society was initiated by King Amanullah (1919-29). New laws included the abolition of the veil (chadari) and purdah (seclusion). Women could go out in public unveiled, form associations, attend schools and work. These were the new undertakings of modernization, and were legally established in the 1923-24 code *Nizamnamah-ye arusi, nikah wa khatnasuri*. Islamic codes of appropriate behaviors for both men and women conflicted with more 'modern, and Western norms of women's conduct.

Women's lives up to this time had been influenced by Islamic law, and Sharia law in particular. Accordingly, women had inferior status to men in terms of marriage, inheritance and the law. Legally women had half the rights of a man. For example, women needed two witnesses while a man needed only one in a court of law. Within such frames of reference, people use the word 'woman' (meaning 'coward') to insult opponents. Women were the bearers of the family honour, and a man's reputation was measured through the behaviour of the females in his household. The state-building processes proposed by Amanullah included women's emancipation as central to his conception of a modern Afghanistan. He aimed to transform gender relations significantly. A rural Islamic opposition resisted Amanullah's reforms and he was forced to flee when his plea to the British for assistance was turned down. This was not the only time that great power strategic policies would have a devastating effect on women's lives in Afghanistan.

Consequent to Amanullah's removal under the regime of Nader Shah (1929-1933), schools for girls were closed, and veiling and segregation of women was reintroduced. Zahir Shah (1933-73), who succeeded as the next ruler, did not affect any significant change. It was under the Premiership of Daud (1953-1963) that crucial changes relating to gender relations were again introduced. Women were encouraged to remove the veil and despite protests by the conservative forces, Kabul University was opened to women. Both ideological and modern capitalists influenced Daud's policies. Liberal economic policies and an influx of consumer goods from the West supplemented increasing Soviet influence. This time, the mullahs (Islamic religious leaders) joined the tribal chiefs and other conservatives to challenge these changes. They failed initially as Daud used armed forces to quell the rebellion, but eventually they succeeded. In spite of the fall of Daud, during the rein of Zahir Shah the intellectual and middle class continued to support the liberal policies. The Constitution gave women equal socio - political and legal rights, and consequently in 1964, the first woman, Kubru Nurzai entered the National Assembly and was appointed as the Minister of Public Health. Women started to occupy new public spaces in the 1970s, in the top levels of the government, the judiciary and education. Despite these changes, the role of women as reproducers of the nation in their homes and households was never questioned. The dichotomy in women's lives continued.

In 1978 after the Saur Revolution, another round of social reforms for women was introduced. The Communist Afghan regime introduced laws to raise the minimum age at marriage for girls to sixteen years, put limits on the traditional 'bride price' system, and allegedly forced women to take part in literacy programmes. The Communist regime's modernisation reforms to improve the status of women, was once again, unacceptable to segments of the predominantly Muslim population. The regime's determination to forcibly apply the reforms contributed to the birth of the Afghan resistance movement. It was not only culture that was at stake, but the reforms had a deep economic element. For example, the limitation imposed on bride price affected not only the social basis of society, but also rural economies and women's own social security. Women not only symbolized the honour of the family but also of the nation and they found themselves placed at the centre of a conflict between Western concepts of modernization and Islamic codes of culture.

The Soviet invasion in 1979 opened up new spaces and roles for women, while also exacerbating suffering and insecurity in an already unstable situation. The communist regimes continued their reforms, which provided the Mujahideen grounds for organizing a coercive opposition. Many Afghan men who saw themselves as 'mujahid' took on jihad as a major life objective. In this war against the Soviets, many women supported the Mujahideen and became willing partners in the insurgency. The emergence of women in this public space has been

interpreted as women “being symbols of legitimisation for political groups led by men”. This is not altogether correct as, at times, their role turned combative. In 1980-81 for instance, schoolgirls and teachers led some of the most militant demonstrations in Kabul. Nahida, who led the revolt, came to be the new heroine of Afghanistan.

Tajwar Kakar was a well-known woman, associated with organizing war. She set up a school for training boys in armed warfare in Kunduz. In Herat and Kandahar, she established strong women’s resistance organizations that investigated enemy collaborations, pursued those suspected, and set up operational groups that abducted and executed Russians. Tajwar was a member of a small group of women who directly participated in the covert war against the Soviets. Though women’s roles in the freedom struggle were generally subordinate to those of men, they were accepted as important by the Mujahideen and women’s assistance was tolerated if not actively sought. It was not the first time women had participated in ‘jihad’. The role of Malalai who had fought against the British in the battle of Maiwand (1880) is part of Afghan women’s history. Women’s action during war against the outsider was accepted and acclaimed. Those women who stood up against the Soviets were made into heroines, exemplifying Afghan values, Islamic virtue, family honour and refusal to accept Communist dress code and ideas. The space allocated to women was still gendered, but it allowed for their participation in the battle against the Soviet occupation.

The Soviet invasion created a complete breakdown of the existing political and civil society. Centres of power emerged in rural Afghanistan that would eventually impose a new social order on the country’s urban centres. Different groups competed for leadership of the Jihad. Cold-war induced conflict and state controlled violence intensified the flow of refugees to Pakistan and Iran. A poorly and weakly governed country could not withstand the flood of modern weaponry, indiscriminately lavished on all groups by the super powers during the cold war. Washington alone supplied an estimated \$10 billion in arms and aid to the ‘freedom fighters’. During the Soviet occupation, the U.S. gave these weapons to the Mujahideen resistance/freedom fighters. Ironically, the U.S. also nurtured the Taliban with roots in the camps for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, in exile. Militarization thus intensified conflict and militant conservatism among members of both groups and this in turn affected woman’s lives. Women continued to be at the receiving end of a nation in conflict. Gang rapes, abductions and other crimes against women became common during the Mujahidin take-over.

The conflict entered yet another phase with the entrance of the Taliban onto the Afghanistan political scene in 1994/95. Their takeover of the capital, Kabul, in 1996 signaled their control of the balance of power within the country. Women’s emancipation and rights were lost with the emergent militant leadership of the Taliban. Highly restrictive notions of what constitutes appropriate femininity in an Islamic state became a critical issue. On 28 September 1996, Radio Kabul (Radio Shari’ah) announced, “as per an order issued by the Amir al-mu’minin (the commander of the faithful), Mullah Muhammad Omar, women are not allowed to venture outside of their homes”. Since their emergence as a powerful force in the mid-1990s, the Taliban have come to occupy 90% of Afghanistan. In this part of Afghanistan their decrees hold firm and especially those norms regarding women have become a matter of concern worldwide. The Taliban's "Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" squad is intensely harsh against the women.

The full restrictions imposed by the Taliban against the women of Afghanistan cannot be fully catalogued here. I have tried to gather information from the refugees in India and United Kingdom from RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) and other NGO sources working in the country. Punishment can include a beating, imprisonment, or

public stoning to death. Women must shroud every inch of their body with the 'chadari' (or 'burqa' as it is known in India and Pakistan). Schools are closed for females above the age of eight, health facilities are out of bounds for most women, as unescorted women are not allowed into hospitals. Since female doctors are forbidden to work and male doctors are either prohibited from providing treatment to women or must do so without touching them, few women are able to access health facilities. Work outside the home is not allowed. To venture outside a woman needs a male relative as an escort. It is her duty to see that no music is played in her house, and that children behave themselves, for example by not dancing, or flying kites (U.S. Department of State, 1999; Amnesty International, 1999; 1995; RAWA: 2000). The closure of land mine awareness classes for women has implications for their own and their children's physical security. School closures, especially boys' schools where women are no longer allowed to teach, has meant that larger number of boys on the streets are at risk of mine injuries. The banning of women from 'hamams' (public hot baths) has had implications for the health of both women and children, who used to accompany their mothers.

The turmoil of the past twenty years and the intensification of conflict at various phases of history have forced Afghans to leave their homes. The reasons for people leaving Afghanistan are mixed. In the narratives of the Afghan women I interviewed, it was quite obvious that violence against women increased with every phase of the conflict. The women who left during the governance of Najibullah left generally because of threats to their husbands. There is no doubt there was an increased threat of sexual assault during the reign of the Mujahideen. The takeover of Afghan territory by the Taliban not only generated an increased physical and sexual threat, but was also a threat to women's very existence. Women's behavior and honor became central to the Taliban's self-created image as protector of the nation.

The Taliban's policy of protecting women was rationalized by the ongoing political conflict in Afghanistan. Afghans have long been at the center of international conspiracies, and have had to maintain their nationhood despite incursions from the outside. In maintaining the Afghan nation-state, strategies of modernization and traditionalism have constituted a site of conflict where women became the symbols of the construction of the nation and its boundaries. In this case, women's bodies have become central to the conservative policies of the Taliban. Here, politics in the name of tradition constitutes resistance to the modernization process, which is seen as flowing from the West. This site of conflict is located within the cultural domain of the family and marked by a space dominated by women. Women's bodies belong not to them but to the nation, and are sites of its inscription. She notes that in the case of Indian nationalism, the women's question was removed to the inner domain, far from the arena of political contestation with the colonial state.

\*\*\* A gendered history of conflict was analyzed and documented only on the discussion with Faryal Ali gauhar and Prof Asha Hans.

\* Faryal Ali- Gauhar-Goodwill Ambassador of UNFPA Pakistan. She is an Afghan woman based in Pakistan since last fifteen years. She had undergone the trauma in Afghanistan till Mujahideen came into power.

\* Professor Asha Hans is a pioneer researcher on Conflict and Peace and awarded Kathleen Ptolemy fellowship (York University) for an in-depth research on refugees.

## 2.2. Violence against Women in Afghanistan

Women who have fled Afghanistan do not talk easily. To talk about the escape to exile opens wounds and to recount the sexual reasons for leaving, is shameful. Women find it difficult to discuss sexuality openly and particularly in refugee situations where men always remain present.

Thus my discussions with the women were marked by apprehension, reserve, control, reticence and above all, a silence. Those who did talk had individual fears and singular stories to narrate of their sexualities and the boundaries, which hindered their choices and life styles. Women left Afghanistan due to the various forms of violence they feared or experienced; sometimes this was a gendered violence, sometimes, not. The loss of limbs due to land mines affected the entire population, regardless of their gender. Afghanistan is one of the most mine-infested countries in the world and land mine explosions injure with no gender, ethnicity or age biases. However, men who are directly involved in military maneuvers, face more dangers from mines than women and children. Rockets entering a house and a related fear of loss of life forced families to flee to different countries.

Gendered forms of physical violence exist in all conflicts. In Afghanistan, it is women's sexuality that is targeted. For example, the woman being half buried and shot by her father or male relative punishes a kidnapping or elopement and a woman's hand shown outside her 'burqa' can be cut off. Families left Afghanistan, if a daughter was growing up into a beautiful young woman. Women's youth was, and will always remain, a cause for sexual attacks in Afghanistan. Under each of the Afghan regimes described in this chapter, women have left due to sexual attacks. Whether Communist or Islamic regimes, rape has been consistently found to accompany conflict in Afghanistan. Ethnic dissension is related to an increase in the incidence of rape. Among those persecuted under the Taliban regime were many Hindu women raped by local commanders, Taliban youth and border guards. Hindu and Sikh refugee women were quick to point out that rape of their community women by Taliban armed youth was supported by local commanders. Thus the Afghan state, which supposedly protects the populace, has been a significant agency in perpetuating this violence and thus also providing a method of forcing the ethnic group to leave. Those who leave are called 'kafirs' (non-believers, though the term is sometimes also used to mean 'slave').

A Sikh woman lamented that Jalalabad, where she was born and had grown up, was not the same. It has been emptied of its ethnic Hindu and Sikh population. Her family was forced to leave as her husband had been threatened that his beard would be cut. As a Sikh, his religion compelled him to wear a turban and grow his beard. He left Afghanistan, rather than violate the principles of his religion. She and women of other ethnicities such as the Hindus were forced to wear yellow 'burqas', or face physical punishment. A Muslim refugee woman told me that Kandahar is perhaps the only male city in the world. No woman is allowed outside on the streets. "Why did these things happen?" I asked them; "Why such attacks against them because of their gender and ethnicity?" She replied that women are regarded as sexually insatiable and succumbing easily to temptations of the flesh. They are believed to take men down with them into a perpetual hell. Another woman, who had been attacked outside a mosque, said that it has become a common occurrence to violate women's bodies, as the teachings in the mosque emphasize the danger that women's sexuality poses to men. Shalinsky has written that women are inferior because 'nafs' (desire) dominate more than 'aql' (reason) in women's lives. If the former is not controlled, it will result in 'fitna' (chaos). 'Fitna' according to the refugees is related to male honor in a cultural context where consequently, the veil assumes a crucial importance in the protection of women from the gaze of the outsider. Nazin, a young refugee woman who had been sitting quietly at one of our meetings asked:

"Is protecting honor only a male right? The breasts of women were cut if they opposed the Taliban."

Gagan added:

"My colorful dresses became the reason for the shadow of death that hung over me. Did I look sexy in those dresses? I do not remember now. I was never beautiful; in fact in Afghanistan I was one of the 'dark' ones. The color of my



skin inherited from my ancestors was not pristine white as of my Pashtun friends. Unlike my friend Shaheen, no boy even glanced at me. Why then all of a sudden had I become a threat to the Afghan men? How could I, a married woman, steer them from the path of virtuosity? Why was my chastity attacked when men could not control their sexual urges?"

Nazin continued:

"Taliban's have their own rules and regulations, but these are not suitable for the contemporary people of Afghanistan. They have traveled back in time and want us all to do the same, but then I could never walk backwards, so I left."

Under each Afghan regime, refugee women faced a distinctive threat that forced them to leave the country. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious feuds accounted for most departures. Women at the receiving end of the Mujahideen and Taliban edicts, fled because the conservative religious policies threatened their very being as women. The women I interviewed showed an especially deep fear of the Taliban. Shaqeena spoke softly, the apprehension reflected in her eyes:

"Even a pregnant mother is not allowed to deliver at the hospital. Women are not allowed in public without a male guardian. The Mujahideen were animals but the Taliban are the devil. These people call themselves Muslim but they are not Muslims".

Fetching water for instance is a woman's job, and so this gendered work produces gendered crimes. Saheena, who went to fetch water as the pipeline was cut, was surrounded by five Taliban youth with guns. She was taken to a shelled building and raped. She laments:

"How could I not go out---we have to drink water don't we?"

There can be no response to such questions; we sit quietly, not being able to reply. Another woman who had been abducted and raped not by the Taliban, but by men of the Hizb-I-Islami (a party led by Gulbuddin Hikmatyar with the backing of Pakistan), felt that she had no option but to join the increasing number of prostitutes. She said that the prostitutes were in great demand by the Taliban. The commanders usually abduct women. Some of them even have ten wives, although Islam allows only four. They have enough food so it is no trouble for them to maintain such large households or harems. The men who are now middle-aged pick up very young and nubile girls. The soldiers on the other hand, are not rich and therefore pick them up as prostitutes. A middle-aged refugee woman from Kabul said:

"Prostitution is no longer paying, so I left". Even the economics of sex work has its limitations.

Among the members of this group of refugee women are widows who were targeted by the State and its armed forces in Afghanistan. As RAWA reports, about 15,400 widows in Afghanistan are below the age of 40, the sole breadwinner of their families and are presently being supported by the Red Cross and CARE. This figure does not include the sub-provinces surrounding Kabul. If included, the number of Kabul widows exceeds 50,000 (RAWA September 2000). The closing of bread shops and subsequent lack of access to basic food has brought these women on the streets with no options but to beg. Lack of access to food constitutes a distinct dimension of violence against women's bodies and this is obvious in Afghanistan which today stands as one of the poorest countries in the world (UNDP, 2000). The women interviewed did not speak on this issue, just as they will not speak of their bodies and sexuality. Honor is a gendered concept with many expressions, which has compelled many women to live in vacuums and not talk about their lives, their loss, their pain, and especially hunger. I noticed that one woman, Noor, a widow related only happy memories. She had edited her words and perhaps her mind of anything ugly or unpleasant. One day I sat with

her in silence, not talking. It was then that she began to relate what she called her past and her fate. Noor, like many widows, had to leave Afghanistan because of hunger, which exists but is not spoken about. She spoke hesitantly:

“When my husband was alive, we had a stationery shop and a car. We lived in Gazni district, but as the children grew up, to meet their needs of a good education, we came to Kabul. When the Taliban came we had to take our daughter out of school, then my son’s school closed, as women had been barred from teaching in the school. It was getting more difficult by the day to meet our needs. Food was going beyond our purchasing capacity. We decided we would go back to Gazni, maybe the situation was better there. That same night my husband did not come back home. After a month’s search my brother whom I relied upon after my husband’s disappearance was found dead on the street. I had no work, no one to support me, and we went hungry for days. I also realized that through my queries I was exposing myself to the Taliban’s anger. Everyone was afraid to help me. I realized I had not outlived my need in my own country, nor could it fulfill mine. I could no longer see the desperate hunger in the eyes of my children. My own people had become my enemies. Why, I never understood. It was as if I no longer belonged. Finally, where even the war and the rockets could not force me out of my country, my hunger compelled me to leave.”

Zahira, another widow added:

“Our families used to protect us. We were not open to sexual attack and though the system of marrying our dead husbands’ brothers existed, we had physical security. We were looked after and never went hungry. But with the Taliban, the situation has changed. The community can no longer support us against the wishes of the state. The young are dying or in the armed forces. Who will marry us? There is so much poverty so our only option is to become prostitutes or to beg.”

Physical attacks on women’s bodies, denial of basic food, and fears for one’s life have forced women, especially the unprotected to leave Afghanistan for India, United Kingdom or a third country. Neither is exile easy and it becomes even more difficult as family members are scattered across the globe.

Afghan men and women have multi-layered identities, defined by their gender, race or ethnicity, but also by their class and professions. The women’s search for new identities is part of their transformation to a new transient locational identity, which is dependent on access to international recognition and identity as bona fide refugees. There are many women who have challenged and moved beyond the boundaries of their previous identities. These are women who have been rejected by their own people, who have set up new ‘temporary’ homes and who are imbibing a new political consciousness of their rights. They have acquired skills and utilized them to meet the needs of their families. The younger women whom I met were usually well dressed, wore make-up, and resembled the young, Indian crowd around them. They loved music of any sort, especially Hindi film music. For these young women in exile, much of Afghan culture has been left behind and local customs adopted. Values have changed as women move without veils and walk with men. There is a world where cable television rubs out the edges of one’s nationalism, fusing remnants of a global culture beyond the history of conflict. Women, in these dislocated spaces search and find new identities more easily, even when their families and communities in exile are not supportive. Men find that national spaces even after crossing borders are still vibrant: the past is still very crucial to their present. On the

other hand, women's discourses center more on their own roles and new identities where nationalism intrudes much less into their lives.

Questions of relatedness to a territorial space while in exile become critical to a woman's identity, but are difficult to discuss, as these same spaces of nation and state are also the sites and the cause of their traumas. One of the first women I interviewed in New Delhi talked about the borders she had crossed to reach India:

Crossing a border was a trauma for me, I will always remember it. It was something in my heart, something I felt. If you ask me 'where did Afghanistan end and Pakistan begin, where did Pakistan end and India begin?' who knows and who cares? Did we draw these lines? These are all power plays meant for people who are rulers; for me when I looked out of the airplane I did not see any line I only saw my past fading and a fear of my future overtaking me. It was a line not on a map; it was drawn on my heart.

Many women understood the nation as related to the conflict in Afghanistan. Their understanding was that clan rivalry had not only been fundamental but also a critical barrier to Afghanistan's unity. They agreed that the differences between groups are drawn from shifting cultural constructions. But in spite of these differences, they felt a shared understanding of their cultural histories. Shakila stated that her love of the country would always exist, as would her memory of the beauty, the climate, and the smell of the mountain air:

"I remain an Afghan till I die."

The music, the dances, the mosques and the bazaars were all intertwined in her remembering of Afghanistan:

"Can anything change that? Can I be an Indian, just because I have been here for ten years? Yes I do love Hindi films and songs but these are different. They do not have anything to do with my land or culture. The beauty of Afghanistan has captured people's imagination and they want to capture her. It is like a woman - everyone wants her for her beauty. How can I forget it? I bought a small piece of stone [FROM AFGHANISTAN??] which cost me more than a months income."

The women I interviewed related nationalism and nation ness to lost homes and homelessness. There was hurt and nostalgia in their remembering:

"Nationalism has no meaning any longer, as going back to Afghanistan is to go back to hell".

When asked her opinion about nationalism, instead of answering my question, a young woman posed her own question: "Where is Afghanistan?"

Then she replied herself:

"In Afghanistan people are hanged for no fault. There are no rules of humanity. Only the name Afghanistan remains, it is no longer what it was. If the old does not remain then where does the question of nationalism arise?"

Women see themselves as the objects and survivors of a nationalism that protects the honor of the state through their bodies. Women made the following comments:

"God has made me so beautiful that he forgot to give me good fortune"... "My nation thought my body belonged to it"... "We women have become properties of the state. We are objects to be used and then discarded"... "A woman's body becomes the site of conflict, whereby she is forced to leave her country."

The gendered history of Afghanistan during the years of conflict has raised questions concerning the relationship between women and the state, processes of social inclusion and nationalist cultures. Afghan women's needs for self-definition and autonomy are ignored or utilized for political ends. At the same time, cultural practices have mutated and changed across space in exile. Women move without the veil, talk to men, and resume work outside the home. Despite ongoing dislocation, exile has, for many women, opened up a space to assert their identities and to diffuse their notions of nation.

### Women's Defiance of Patriarchy

Since the majority of women are illiterate and their access to legal institutions is extremely limited, they are at a disadvantage to fight injustices, discrimination, and physical abuse by men through legal means. One of the few options open to them to express their outrage and anger over societal and male oppression is through singing songs and behaving in a manner that subtly reflects their defiance of the social rules.

In the past women did not actively fight social injustices and male oppression, but occasionally individual women did defy patriarchal traditions and revolt against social oppression. Folklore and legend are replete with women's bravery and struggles for freedom. Rabia Balkhi (tenth century) was a well-known poet of a ruling family in Balkh who fell in love with Baktash, one of the slaves of her brother. She defied the values cherished by the ruling class, refused to marry the man chosen for her by her brother, and paid for her love for Baktash with her life. Her resistance led to her imprisonment until she died in prison. Prior to her death, Rabia wrote a poem in Persian on the prison wall with her own blood, in which she condemned society for not allowing her to marry the man for her choice. The poem reads as follows:

I am caught in love's web so deceitful

None of my endeavors turned fruitful,  
I knew not when I rode the high-blooded steed.  
The harder I pulled its reins the less it would heed.  
Love is an ocean with such a vast space  
No wise man can swim it in any place.  
A true lover should be faithful till the end  
And face life's reprobated trend.  
When you see things hideous, fancy them neat,  
Eat poison but taste sugar sweet.

Another courageous and popular woman who despised rigid social and cultural traditions that denied women the right and freedom to decide their lives on their own was Mahboob. She was born in Herat into a middle-class family and was supported by her brother in her endeavor for learning. She was a poet who expressed her dismay of the patriarchal tradition of arranged marriage. In one of her poems, she wrote:

Oh, friends, this lovesick one is nearly dying  
Who's to tell that merciless one about her condition  
Neither luck nor my beloved helps me,  
How difficult it is to lead such a life  
You, oh, enticer, remember the enticed;  
Free the enslaved.  
You wronged me much, now learn to be good.

Soothe my wounds, don't irritate the sore spots.  
When you pass by Mahboob's place,  
If you like,  
It would not hurt you to put a heart  
Back into her chest.

Women often despised men's control of their lives and sexuality but did not have the power to confront men and fight for their rights. Some women engaged in illicit sexual affairs as a way to fight men's domination of their lives and their khahar khandas often helped hide their acts. Women also have expressed their feelings of defiance in local folk songs, songs that reveal their romantic and sexual fantasies, as well as their frustration and anger at their lowly position in society. Such songs could be viewed as a challenge to the social system, and are sung by women only among fellow women. A folk song that portrays a woman's desire for freedom reads as follows:

God knows, there is no way,  
To climb the sky.  
And the earth, you have made it  
A blazing fire for me.  
The moon rises over my head  
In the center of the sky  
Is there no sleep without one's lover  
Or is it only I who cannot sleep.

There are songs that reflect a young girl's contempt for being forced to marry an old man of fifty or sixty. These songs express the woman's resentment and hatred toward her old husband, and her desire for a young man closer to her age. One of the reasons that young women are unhappy with an arranged marriage with elderly men is because their aged husbands are often impotent. The following song portrays a woman's complaint about her elderly husband:

Carrots do not grow on mountaintops,  
The young girl's heart  
Pine not for an old man.  
The old man is a father to me  
But the young man a light in my eyes.  
The old man has no fault  
Except weak sinews and no erection.

There are also other folk songs that express a woman's desire to meet a man she loves but cannot visit in his house nor receive him in her house. They content themselves with a visit far away from their homes. One such song reads:

My beloved  
Allowed not to visit me,  
My parents permit me not  
To leave the house.  
I can go out only  
When girls go to the spring nearby  
To fetch water.  
My beloved you must pass by  
So we can catch a glimpse of one another.

Women express their anger and frustration not only in private but sometimes also at public social gatherings such as weddings and cultural festivities by singing songs, performing dances, and playing music that satirize social and cultural traditions that oppress women. For instance, during a wedding in Heart a woman minstrel, Jamilah, sang the song “The knife-sharpener’s Wife.” The song reflects the anger of a woman who loves the knife sharpener but has been forced to marry a carpenter instead. The song portrays this woman as a defiant and spirited woman who is exhausted by frustration and anger, and who pines for freedom. As a sign of defiance, “She slams the tool of that profession [carpentry] down upon [her husband’s] head...the carpenter’s saw, the mullah’s book, the tea house proprietor’s teapot, even the hash-smoker’s pipe.” The women loved the song because it claimed the lowly knife-sharpener as an ideal husband and made fun of the serious world of men. Another song specifically sung by women was “The Widow”, a variant of an ordinary love song. In it the widow flirtatiously shows off various parts of her body—lips, eyes, an eyebrow, bottom—demonstrating that she is ready to marry again.

Minstrel women generally perform music that is secular and does not manifest any devotional feelings. They play music and sing songs that are mostly concerned with women and their desire for freedom. This scandalous action of publicly expressing women’s feelings of resentment and anger was tolerated only because it was performed only at special occasions and only in the women’s quarters, not amid the main party, and this occurred in the relatively liberal environment of the 1960s and 1970s. Islamic insurgency prior to and during the Soviet occupation period of 1979-1989, the establishment of an Islamic regime in 1992, and the rise and consolidation of the Taliban rule have effectively put an end to such cultural activities.

(For details, see Hafizullah Emadi; 2002; “Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan”; Praeger; Westport, Connecticut, London, P-50-55)

Chapter-3

The Taliban: 1998 to Present

The Taliban in Their Own words

“It’s like having a flower, or a rose. You water it and keep it at home for you, to look at it and smell it. It [a woman] is not supposed to be taken out of the house to be smelled.” *Syed Ghaisuddin, Taliban Minister of Education, when asked why women needed to be confined at home.*

“If we are to ask Afghan women, their problems have been solved”. Qudratullah Jamal, Taliban Minister of Culture.

“If a woman wants to work away from her home and with men, then that is not allowed but our religion and our culture. If we force them to do this they may want to commit suicide.”-*Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, Taliban Minister of Justice*

“We do not have any immediate plans to give jobs to (women) who have been laid off. Moulvi Wakli Ahmed Mutawakel, Taliban Minister of Foreign Affairs.

And in Their People’s Words

“Because of the Taliban, Afghanistan has become a jail for women. We haven’t got any human rights. We haven’t the right to go outside, to go to work, to look after our children.”—Faranos Nazir, 34-year-old woman in Kabul.

“Approximately 80% of women and men agreed that women should be able to move about freely and that the teachings of Islam do not restrict women’s human rights.”---Physicians for Human Rights, “Women’s Health and Human Rights in Afghanistan: A population-Based assessment”.

“Indignity is our destination”, says Seema, 30, who used to work at a health center and now roams the streets in Kabul begging to support her children.”---Time, November 29, 2000.

“When we are together, everyone here is talking about how the Taliban has destroyed our lives. They won’t let us go to school because they want us to be illiterate like them”. —Nasima, 35-year-old Kabul resident. (Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women: Released by the Bureau of democracy, Human rights and Labor, November 17, 2001.)

The Taliban’s War Against Women

In October 1997, the Taliban changed the name of the country to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with Mullah Omar, who had previously assumed the religious title of Amir of the Faithful, as the supreme head of state. Taliban officials rule but decrees and the central decision-making body is the Supreme Council in Kandahar and its head, Mullah Mohammed Omar. A six member ruling council in Kabul, headed by Mullah Mohammad Rabbani, has announced, “The new Taliban government would be neither parliamentary nor presidential, but Islamic.” Departments of a number of ministries exist in each province but the implementation

of policy is generally characterized by inconsistency since there is no efficient administrative structure.

Under the Taliban, there remains no constitution, rule of law, or independent judiciary in Afghanistan. In the absence of an independent judiciary, many municipal and provincial authorities use the Taliban's interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic Law) and traditional Tribal codes of justice. (UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, Report of the DHA Mission to Afghanistan, UNDHA, June 15, 1997.) The Taliban reportedly has economic courts in areas under their control to judge criminal cases and resolve disputes. These courts mete out punishments including execution and amputations. In cases involving murder and rape, convicted prisoners generally are sentenced to execution by relatives of the victim, who may instead choose to accept other forms of restitution. Decisions of the courts are reportedly final. In 1999 the Taliban claimed that it was drafting a new constitution based on Islamic law, but during the year there were no further announcements regarding such a document. (US State Department Country Report, February 2001, Afghanistan.)

The Taliban's destruction of its cultural heritage, particularly the giant Buddha's, shocked the conscience of the world. The action was a sobering indication of how extreme are the views of the most powerful elements of the Taliban, and how willing they are to suffer international condemnation and isolation for acting upon their extremist views. The implications are profoundly disturbing for not only the cultural rights of all Afghans, who have been violently deprived of their country's ancient and precious heritage, but of all internationally, recognized human rights.

### 3.1. The Status of Women in Afghanistan during Taliban's Regime

Prior to the Taliban, women in Afghanistan had to endure restrictions on rights to work and on dress. In 1994, the Jalalabad-based multi party local government under Haji Qadeer demanded that women work in gender-separated offices, wear black *hejab* and *chador*, and travel in segregated vehicles. Violence against men accompanying women made it difficult to retain female staff as men were unwilling to support them in fear of retaliation. Women had to be released on full pay until negotiations could be made, or separate offices for women and separate entrances had to be made if women were to continue employment with UN agencies. (UN Consultative Group on Human Rights, Islamabad Pakistan.) The Rabani government in 1995 sent letters to UN/NGO agencies demanding women be removed from employment. When Gulbuddin Hikmatyar was named as Prime Minister, his first official statement demanded that women adopt the black hejab "according to Islam" and stop wearing make-up "except for their husbands."(Id)

When the Taliban took control of Kabul in September 1996, the Supreme Council issued edicts forbidding women to work outside the home, attend school, or to leave their homes unless accompanied by a *mahram* (*husband, father, brother, or son*). In public, women must be covered from head to toe in a "chadari", with only a mesh opening through which to see and breathe. They are not permitted to wear white (the color of the Taliban flag) socks or shoes, or shoes that make noise as they walk. Houses and buildings in public view must have their windows painted over if females are present. Also the Taliban severely limited women's access to health care and closed public bathhouses for women, which served as female meeting places for social and celebratory purposes, in addition to essential hygiene facilities for households without water. Initially, these edicts were enforced in a haphazard manner, and varied from region to region, with more severe restrictions enforced in non-Pashtun areas.



Overall, since the takeover of the Taliban, there has been little improvement in the status of women or human rights of women. In Taliban-controlled areas, discrimination against women remains official policy and pervades nearly every aspect of women's lives and livelihood. Although there has been some relaxation of restrictions with regard to health care access, education and employment, for the most part, these are few and remain as exceptions rather than the norm. Much of the change has been due to local community pressure and/or international pressure. Official policies towards them have not changed, only the degree to which policies are enforced.

#### Medical care

In January 1997, the Taliban announced a policy of segregating men and women and attempted to centralize medical care for Kabul's half million women. Services for women were provided by a single hospital still partially under construction, which at the time had neither water, oxygen, plasma, electricity, nor surgical equipment. Humanitarian organizations working in the city protested the edict and after months of negotiation led by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Taliban partially rescinded its directive and agreed to reopen some of its hospitals. At the time of this writing, due to international pressure on the Taliban and the ceaseless efforts of international health providers working inside Afghanistan, wards or beds for women and their children have been made available at virtually all of the hospitals in Kabul. While the Taliban's restrictions on movement, dress code requirements, and segregation of transportation facilities continue to impede women's access to health care, there is nonetheless at least some provision for women to receive hospital care at all of Kabul's 22 hospitals. (State department Country Reports on Human Rights, 1999, Afghanistan) Since June 1998, women have been permitted to seek treatment extremely difficult for most women, and especially for Kabul's widows, many of who have lost all such male family members.

At the time of DHR's last report, a male doctor treating a woman was prohibited from examining her unless she was fully clothed in a *chadari* and was not allowed to touch her, thus meaningful diagnosis and treatment was often impossible. By the end of 1999, all Kabul hospitals, except the military hospital, reportedly treated women. Rabia Balkhi Women's Hospital in Kabul now provides a full range of health services to women. Basic Health Units and Maternal Child Health Units staffed by local doctors, nurses, health workers and traditional birth Attendants, have been established in many areas of the country to help provide adequate care to women. Health care access has improved largely due to the influx of international aid and support in this arena as well as the Taliban's relaxation of work prohibition for female health sector workers. With segregation of health facilities for women and few female health care workers, health care remain absent even in the face of increasing numbers of women with mental disorders due to the realities of war, impoverishment, and confinement to homes.

Also the Taliban's ban on images of humans has hampered health care for both men and women. Destruction of public education posters and a ban on human images has made dissemination of health information in a society with high levels of illiteracy more difficult.

#### Women And Health

Gender ideology has greatly affected the status of women's health. There are a limited number of health centers in the capital of every province, and women are generally neglected by their husbands and excluded from healthcare. A vast majority of poor families cannot afford to visit a medical center or a hospital. Fathers and husbands continue to take their daughters and wives to shrines and known pirs (spiritual masters) for spiritual healing, or to local hakims, a

practitioner of holistic medicine, for treatment involving traditional local medicine. The available data indicate that in 1976-1977 there were 176 female government –licensed physicians and nurses throughout the entire country. It is estimated that 150 of these female professionals worked in health centers in the capital. Although there were 76 auxiliary nurse-midwives, 23 of them were in Kabul. The lack of female professionals in health-related areas discourages conservatives from allowing their wives and daughters to visit health centers. Even in cases of emergency, medical treatment is conducted in absentia when the medical doctor is a man and the patient is a woman. In these situations the husband or father will act as an intermediary between the doctor and the patient, relying the doctor's question and the patient's responses. The doctor must thus diagnose the patient's condition and recommend treatment, often without meeting the woman face to face.

Patriarchal tradition, combined with the necessity to have children to supplement the family's income in an agricultural or cash economy, imposes on women a duty to reproduce and maintain a high fertility rate.

Mary McMorrow, a nurse who worked for an international agency helping refugees in Pakistan, described the attitude of men toward women's health issues in these words:

The women are the most neglected, the women are the most anemic, the women have the highest level of tuberculosis; the women in general are in pretty bad shape.... Traditionally, the Afghan men get the best of the food, which is then passed down to the children, and the women eat last, what's left over, if anything. There are certain long-standing taboos: women in some of the tribes won't eat meat or vegetables, because they think they are bad for them. So what they basically live on is sweet bread and green tea.... You cannot get a husband to donate blood for his wife because if you take his blood you his life, but if she dies he can always get another wife.

The birth or death of a female was not considered noteworthy because it had no economic impact on the family. Reporting of male mortality, however, was relatively accurate because of the political incentive to report it. The military expected all adult males to serve, and a family that did not report the death of a son would sooner or later be expected to provide a male for service.

High mortality rates and health-related illnesses could also be attributed to the lack of educational institutions geared to promoting topics related to women's health. Although there were schools for women, the majority of low-income and poor families could not afford education for all their children. Those who could did not regard girls' education to be as important as boys' education. The overwhelming majority of women was illiterate and did not approve of their daughters' education after they reached poverty. They did not perceive any material rewards to be gained from their daughters' attendance at school. A dearth of employment opportunities for educated rural women also discouraged families from supporting education for girls. The lack of education and health awareness programs has largely contributed to poor health, high mortality, and life threatening diseases. Nonetheless, some girls managed to obtain educations at varying levels. (Hafizullah; 2002; 47-50)

## Education

The edicts limiting women to female health care providers have prompted many to question the rationale of forbidding education to women. In Afghan society, where the vast majority of teachers have historically been women, the termination of education for women and girls will likely have a disastrous effect for men and boys as well. While schools for boys have not

closed, they are severely lacking teachers. If restrictions on education persist, however, they will affect a woman's ability to make informed choices regarding health practices, accessing health care services, interacting with health personnel and participating in treatment regimens. Education is also an imperative for mental health and social well-being. Education enables individuals to make effective choices, participate in society, and protect and actualize one's interests. In addition, education that strengthens respect for human rights helps to develop an understanding of one's rights and those of others and an appreciation for diversity among people.

Lack of education will also limit women's capacity to effectively use maternal child health services, provide adequate nutrition for themselves and their families, obtain immunization for their children, understand the benefits of breast feeding, control the number and spacing of their children, improve hygiene and sanitation in their homes, limit the spread of infectious diseases, and use effective home remedies such as oral rehydration solutions.

Since 1998, increased numbers of female nurses, vaccinators, and traditional birth attendants have been trained by the humanitarian assistance community. In addition, in late 1999, 40 female medical students were at Kabul University. However, girls are still formally prohibited from attending school, apart from instruction provided in mosques, which is mainly religious in content. There are a growing number of girls educated by international NGO's informal schools, and home schools, which provide support to an estimated 7% of the total. 4.4 million children of primary school age in rural areas.

### Employment

During 1999, restrictions on women's employment eased. Women were allowed to work in the medical sector as doctors and nurses, treating only other women. Health NGO's reported that they were able to recruit both male and female health care staff without difficulty, however, recruitment of medical staff was severely limited by the lack of qualified female personnel. (State Department Country Reports on Human Rights, 2000, Afghanistan) Limited numbers of women were allowed to work for international agencies and NGO's, but they were not allowed to work in the offices of their employers. A Taliban edict issued in 1999 allowed widows with no other means of support to seek employment; but many widows were unaware of the change, and there was little work available. (UN Commission on Human Rights, Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan, E/CN.4/1999/40.)

On July 6, 2000, the Taliban issued an edict banning women's employment (except in the health care sector) by UN agencies and NGO's. Implementation was erratic, but the United Nations and the NGO's advised their female staff to stay home to avoid open confrontation with the Taliban. On August 16, the Taliban issued an order closing down the World Food Programme's (WFP) 25 widows' bakeries, which provided food to the many war widows and other female-headed households. (Id) On August 17, the Taliban reversed the decision to close the widow's bakeries, apparently accepting WFP's explanation that female staff of the bakeries were not direct hire WFP employees and therefore not subject to the July 6 edict. (Id.) As of 2001, the July 6 edict banning the employment of local women in UN agency programs remains in effect, despite negotiations with the United Nations.

### Camp Life

Women in the refugee camps face a stricter version of Purdah (seclusion from men) than they had experienced in the villages and the cities. Educated, urban women have found themselves

and their activities severely restricted by the conservative tribal leaders and mullahs who control the camp. Those who continue to try to practice the social and cultural freedoms to which they were accustomed have to put up with ridicule and often threatening behavior from Afghan men. For rural women, camp life has separated them from their extended families. Since they are living in close proximity to strangers, their men insist they remain almost constantly behind the walls of their home. Refugee women lead an artificial life, removed from much that is familiar. (Kathleen;1998)

Camp life has not meant more security for women. During the war, one or other of the Mujahideen groups controlled most camps, and any aid that came into the camp went through the governing camp committee, made up of men who did not necessarily have ethical scruples. Husbands would often deposit their wives and children in the camps then return to Afghanistan to fight in the jihad. These unaccompanied women were at risk of attack, or of having to have sex with one of the commanders in order to get rations for her children.

Many women in the camps suffer from post traumatic stress disorder, from a combination of shell shock, combat fatigue, the loss of their birthplace, being uprooted to another country against their will, and being dependent on hand-outs. The physically difficult life of the camps provides little relief and comfort to assist them in recovering from their trauma. In fact, camp life often adds to their trauma. (Mohammad; 1988: 65.)

Parents can easily become preoccupied with their own stress and sadness and pay inadequate attention to their children. These children can end up feeling very isolated and unloved. Parental violence against children increases with the length of stay in the camp. Hypersensitivity to noise, a common experience of people who have lived through a period of aerial bombardment, means that many parents insist their children be abnormally quiet. There is a high level of elective mutism among camp children. (Ibid. 67.)

Children can react to the stress of camp life by exhibiting psychological symptoms such as aggressive behavior, irritability, intolerance, loss of energy, loss of interest in things and people, feeling suicidal, unable to concentrate, fear, insomnia, nightmares, panic, anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal. (Ibid. 10.)

The conservative atmosphere of the camps forces girl children into *pardah* at an early age, sometimes as young as eight. They are forced to give up childhood play and remain in the house with their mothers.

Although there are some schools in the camps, there are not enough for all the children, and not all families can afford to send their children. Even if the school in the camp is free, the children in the family may be needed to contribute economically to the household, through begging or some other labor. Too many children live their whole lives knowing only their section of the camp, particularly girls, who are denied the freedom of movement their brothers enjoy. They do not know about other cities or other communities, they do not know about oceans or history or those human beings have walked on the moon. They are not being prepared to become the kind of aware, productive adults Afghanistan will need to rebuild itself.

Security in the camp is not good. Children have been stolen from them and from the streets of Peshawar. Some are held for ransom and then released. Others have disappeared forever. They are sexually assaulted, forced to smuggle narcotics, sold into prostitution, or trafficked to the camel-racing barons of Saudi Arabia. (CCA Newsletter 5, no.3. (June 1998).

Some children, after they have been stolen, are made into professional beggars, their limbs deliberately twisted so that the child is permanently disabled.

Afghan children are also being kidnapped for body parts.

Samiullah, a small boy living in the Tahkal section of Peshawar, disappeared for ten days. When he was finally returned to his parents, he was alive but in pain, and had a scar on his abdomen. His parents took him to the doctor, who said that one of his kidneys had been taken out.

Sheela, an eight-year-old girl also disappeared. She got back to her home a week later, minus a kidney, and was dead within three days. She was taken on her way to school and thrown into a private car, according to witnesses.

Between March 1998 and June 1998, over forty refugee children disappeared from the camps and from around Peshawar. This figure does not include those who have turned up with internal organs removed. If forty children disappeared from Chicago over a four-month period, it would make headlines around the world. These refugee children have not made the news. Their stories have not been told.

Zohra Rasekh, Physicians for Human Rights opined, Life in the refugee camps is a very unnatural kind of life for women. The basic needs of life are not being met. They live under these makeshift tents, or in these mud houses. There is no shower; there is no civilized way of living. There is no education for their children, there is no work for them or for their husbands, and there is no proper food or nutrition.

There are women who live in the cities in Pakistan. They may live in a home, but they share the house and sometimes the room with three or four other families, in order to afford the high rent. They have to cover themselves when they go out, because some Pakistani men consider all Afghan women to be prostitutes. They are in this waiting way of life, wondering when they're going to get out of Pakistan, when they're going to go back to Afghanistan. They're leading a temporary lifestyle, which has become permanent. They have no future, nothing to look forward to.

For some women, there is not much difference between their lives in the camps and their lives in Afghanistan. In the southern part of Afghanistan, where the weather is hot in the summer, many people live in mud houses, and there are similarities for those people.

For urban women, life in these refugee camps compared to their lifestyles in Kabul and major cities, it's like hell. Imagine, there are all these women, and they are just stuck, like prisoners, inside these mud houses. I'm sure there are all kinds of crime going on. There have been cases of rape reported, and homes broken into.

The social life is terrible, although some women, some families, still try to do their best, even in that environment, to have some kind of gatherings. Zora met a woman who was a beautician in one of the camps. She had these boxes of hair dye and things like that. I asked her what she said. She said, "We have some women who come here to have their hair dyed, or permed."

She asked, "You do this in a refugee camp?" I thought everyone should be depressed and upset.

She replied, “Well, you know, this is our life. We have to live it. Sometimes, for a change, women like to have their done.”

Some women did talk about their husbands being abusive, but they would defend their husbands’ actions by saying, “ I don’t blame him, because he has no job, he stays at home twenty-four hours a day, he sees all the poverty, he hears the children crying for food. He goes out of his mind, and he takes it out on me, but I can’t blame him.” Of course, there are also some abusive men who take advantage of the situation to be more abusive.

One of the camps she was in, Nasir Bagh, was better, comparatively, than Accora Hattack Camp. In Accora Camp, there is an area for new arrivals. They live in old tents. Many people don’t even have a tent, and they have constructed flimsy shelters out of rags. Some of them have lived that way for more than two years.

As she was standing there, a group of women surrounded her, and they were telling her about their problems. One or two women said, “We don’t have a place to go to the bathroom. So we wait the whole day, until it gets dark.” Then they have to go to the edge of the camp, to the bottom of a hill, to empty their bladder. Imagine having to hold onto your urine for the whole day, everyday! That can cause bladder infection and other problems, as well as being terribly uncomfortable. (Deborah; 2000; 76-77)

### *3.2. Afghanistan’s Women: The Power of Their Endurance by Sitara*

*The basic principle, nonetheless, should be that change couldn’t be imposed; it must be facilitated.*

The women of Afghanistan have walked a long and painful path through the years and have learned a great deal about the skills required to survive. The world has taken notice and is raising concern about the status of Afghan women; many who have been compelled to live in exile have spoken out from around the globe on important truths. In the past, the struggle for the human rights of all Afghans-but of women in particular-has suffered serious setbacks through the advocacy for these rights being misused by some for political gain. There have been times when advocacy efforts have been ill informed, and the voices of the silent majority of Afghan women about their issues and priorities have not been heard or fairly reflected. Often the most visible of the issues has been taken as the most important one. The wearing of the *burqua* is a classic example. More recently, there have been cases that have seen influential news media misleading audiences into believing that the end of Taliban control means that Afghan women will now enjoy all their rights.

Some of us also tend to believe that the provision of basic social services, such as access to health care and basic education will result in women’s empowerment. However, the fulfillment of such needs, while they may relieve the Afghan woman of the immense responsibility she has for her survival and that of her children, or itself brings very little change in her social status. Achieving empowerment and social inclusion begin only after such needs are fulfilled.

The issues facing the women of this country are, in fact, deeply rooted in social behaviors and practices. Their limited role in the public sphere, or exclusion from it, amount only to symptoms. What is needed is a change in social behavior through awareness raising, education, communication and dialogue with those who take decisions. Women’s empowerment should be integral to the country’s development agenda and presented as a means of achieving prosperity for the family unit.

There is a need to build trust among communities: that a just and balanced social role for women does not mean changed cultural values. In fact, it only requires a changed perception of these social and cultural values. However, the key factor for this social change to be realized is the political will those who govern the country. The strength and sincerity of this political resolve will be indicated by the degree of inclusiveness in the new legal system to be introduced in Afghanistan, the fairness with which it will be implemented and the protection it will give to women. It is vital that the equitable principles of Islam are put into practice, and that culture and traditions are not exploited to reinforce unfair practices.

Succeeding in empowering women and achieving their greater participation in society is a challenge. Above all, it requires persistence. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of lessons that have been learned. "Our hands are not empty and we are not starting from zero. We now have a chance to rebuild the country and its institutions, from the ground up. We have social values that we want to reassert. We have hope for the future. We have the will to give our children a fair and equal society. But above all, we must rise to the challenge before us".

(She is a Programme Officer and Gender issues specialist in UNDP. She lived for many years in exile in Pakistan. Sitara, like some Afghans, has only one name.)

### 3.3. Widows Voices

According to the information of the central board of statistics, before the assault of the fundamentalist bandits in Kabul, the numbers of registered widows were about 7,900. This included those who worked in hospitals or carried out duties as a clerk, teacher, and a servant in government offices.

During the years of war between fundamentalist factions, with the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban and their onwards advance towards the districts of Qara Bagh, Bagram, Saray Khoja, center of Parwan and Jabal Siraj this figure escalated.

At present, in all the sixteen districts of Kabul, there are around 17,700 widows with children, aged between 30 to 60. The Red Cross and Care assist some of them.

To assist widows that were surveyed three years ago, the Red Cross has prepared special charts. In which their full identification, age, number of children, permanent and temporary addresses, and the identity card of widowhood, which is the most important one, are included.

The Red Cross, with the cooperation of the directorates of all districts of Kabul and the help of local counselors, carried out a survey according to the following criteria: the widow's age should not exceed 40, they should have children below the age of sixteen, they should have been a resident of the area for more than a year and in the future must remain living in the same area.

The first priority was given to those women who were originally residents of that area. The immigrants and renters maintained in the third position. Care supports the widows of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth district.

In the survey, the Red Cross had the authority of decision while the counselor of an area just guided them. Besides the real and deserving widows, a substantial number of families belonging to the survey teams, were unjustly included in the chart.

Shajahudeen, who left his job two months ago, was responsible for the distribution and arrangements of the Red Cross aids. By using his power and giving a number of food cards to his friends' families he gained possession of a large sum of money. According to the information obtained, he had illegitimate sexual relationships with some of the widows, which was discovered by the Intelligence Bureau and was reported to the Red Cross. By giving bribes he succeeded in extricating himself from that situation but was dismissed from his duty.

Hashmi and Farooqi, who were close colleague of Shajahudeen, also ruined the right of widows and both had leased a few big general stores in Kabul.

At present there are about 15,400 widows, who are below the age of 40 and the sole breadwinner of their families who are supported by the Red Cross and CARE. This figure does not include the sub-provinces surrounding Kabul, if included in the figure then the number of Kabul widows will exceed 50,000.

Till 1997, once every two months, one sack of 24 kg flour, 21 kg rice, 21 kg beans, 6 soaps, one tin of 14 kg cooking oil are distributed for one deserving person and in winter some additional aids are also given, but in the last two years the amount of aid has decreased and the duration of distribution has change from two to three months. Instead of beans they are given 14 kg smashed peas, and instead of flour they are given wheat. The quality of the rice has also become worse. This action of the Red Cross has caused numerous difficulties for the women. Besides these problems, time and again surveys have taken place and under different pretexts a number of widows have been deprived from help and assistance.

Those widows, who are unable to attend on the day of distribution for some reason or another, cannot get their supplies on any other day. The card must be shown by the widow herself, otherwise it is removed and no apology is acceptable. Worse than this however, during 1996, 1997 and 1998 personnel of the Red Cross, mostly Afghans, got orders from their officer, Shajahudeen. They were ordered to camp in the distribution area and take some widows inside their tents and check their breasts, in order to discover whether they had married or not. They then, with unnecessary and nonsense questions, created trouble and gave some new forms which caused anxiety to the widows and in this way developed relationships with some of them.

3.4. Conversations with a few widows that are assisted by the Red Cross are presented as the tip of the iceberg.

It has been more than five years since my husband had married another woman and kicked me out of the house and also took my son. At present he lives in Panjshir and has not divorced me officially yet. Thus I can't marry again. Said Sabina with tear in her eyes.

My father is an old man. I had a brother who was killed last year in the war of Panjshir and for the time being my father is the main source of income for us. We endure the cold nights of winter without a fire.

My father collects plastics and papers from the roads and brings home the remaining food from the mosque's mullah. When I was with my husband our lives looked comparatively better. My husband was a laborer. But with the passing of time his attitude changed and without any logical reason another woman entered into our lives and as a result left our home. The difficult condition of my life forced me to take shelter in my father's house. In my father's house our



financial condition is so bad that we even go to bed at night hungry. Yet I was unable, for the purpose of getting work to go into others homes because I was afraid of becoming spoiled. My brother was working when he was alive, but after the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban, they imprisoned him for some months on the excuse of being Punjshiri and after his release the Punjshir fighters deceived him and he was killed.

I was informed that the Red Cross supports the widows and having the identity card of widowhood is one of its important conditions. By selling some things and with great difficulty I was able to get the identity card and I waited for the survey. The Red Cross delegation came to our home; they saw at first hand the reality of our lives and gave us a card for assistance. I get some supplies, which I have to share with my father, mother and sister in law. We also do embroidery and spinning for the carpet weavers which is the hardest work of all.

The Taliban has made life unbearable for poor people and they especially bother the women and take work and other things from them. They have made us confined to home and have trampled our lives under foot. There is no authority to which we can complain in order to get our due rights.

I have studied till class nine and have the desire to work, like men, but the Taliban has covered women with burqa. We hope for a day to come, sooner or later, when people, including the women, will stand against the Taliban and release themselves from this oppression."

When I asked her about the quality of the supplies, she replied:

"The supplies consist of forty nine kilos of wheat, seventeen and half kilos of rice and less than fourteen kilos of smashed peas and three tins of cooking oil and three soaps. They control this and buy them from the markets of Kabul and give the worse items to the widows once every three months. The rice tastes bitter and the smashed peas are expired and decayed. They distribute Pakistani soap, which is not of good quality. If we complain about it, there is a danger that they will cut it too. We have to accept whatever they give us in the name of aid and not complain. Actually there is no one to listen to our voice and come to our rescue."

Sadiqa

"My name is Sadiqa. My father's name is Muhammad Ismail. We are from Herat province and belong to the tribe of Mujahidi. However, it must be said that I am not a relative of the Subgat Ullah Mujahidi and his family nor are they acceptable to me.

I am literate. My husband was a teacher but died last year due to sickness.

I have no child. I had two daughters who got married and now I am living with my brother who has lost his eyes. My brother himself has no house and lives in a rented house. I am a big burden on them. Sometimes my sons in law take me to their homes."

With tears in her eyes she added:

"My life has passed without any happiness. My husband was a teacher and through his salary and a part time job, he made enough for our life to be a little bit bearable. He wanted for a son but god didn't give us one. Then due to sickness he became paralyzed and died. After his death, my life got worse, his retirement salary is insignificant and not paid monthly and I have to try everything |I can for months to get it. With the help of one of my husband's friends I was

introduced to the committee of Red Cross and they gave me a form to fill in. When I filled in the form, they told me to wait for the survey. After one year they didn't accept me because I was more than 50 years old. Then with great difficulty and after giving 5 hundred thousands Afghani in bribe I succeeded in having the card for getting supplies but the quality and the quantity of these are not good, but I have to accept this."

When asked about the general conditions she said: "The conditions in Kabul are the worst. The Taliban have clamped down on knowledge and ignorance is ruling instead. Under the name of Sharia they practice different types of oppression 'lawfully' on innocent people: beating everyone of this or that name and searching peoples' houses in the name of arresting Punjshiris and Northern people, or finding weapons and in this way disrupt people's lives and show their enmity towards women and school girls openly. They have closed the schools down."

Shokria

"I am Shokria and my father's name is Abdul Jalilee. I am 35 years old. Originally I was a resident of Bagram sub-province. With the arrival of the Jihadis and their bloody war, Gulbuddin men destroyed our house. My husband Faqir Muhammad, who had duty in the Ministry of Finance, was martyred. In 1995 we set off from that place and since then have been living with one of our friends in Deh Afghanan. I have three sons, of which the eldest, is a student of mechanics and earns 50 thousands Afghanis in a month and my two other sons are younger and are still at home. I had a job as a worker in the weaving department of Bagrami Textile, which was near our house. My salary together with the salary and coupon of my husband kept us day to day to some extent. But time and again we were in economic difficulties, because we lived together with of my husband's father and mother and his three brothers and two small sisters.

Then, due to the fighting between Rabbani and Gulbuddin forces, whatever we had was buried under the debris as our houses were destroyed. We were able to escape ourselves, with a few household items. The only one who died in our family was my husband who was martyred. My husband's family with my father, who was a construction worker, decided to leave together for Pakistan and Iran. But then my father opposed this and said: " My daughter is too young and should not go so far away from the country. There is no one to rely upon and if wishes she should marry another of your sons." So in this they didn't agree, and annoyance and frustration built up between us. They went towards Iran and I, with my son, was separated from them, which I now regret. After some months my brother in law turned against me and there was always fighting and quarrels between us every day."

"We managed to live on the retirement salary of my husband and my own salary which was given to us in Kabul by the Ministry of Natural Resources till the Taliban arrived."

About the death of her husband and the razing of their house to the ground she said: "I was a worker in Bagrami Textiles and like me hundred of other women were working in the department of weaving, spinning, dyeing etc. We were called "workers". A number of us were listed in the organization of the party during Najib's era. Our organization secretary described the parties of Gulbuddin and Rabbani as rebels and slaves of Pakistan and Iran.

According to them, they were murderers, and were destroying the country and cutting off the supply of electricity. We didn't believe it; and were of the view that they were Mujahid and were fighting against the Russians. The Russians invaded our country and we were made

captives. We, could only look on as, the Russian advisors were abusing our rights and even assaulting on the chastity of some of our people; that's why we couldn't agree with what they were saying. But it was after the collapse of Najib's government and the coming of the Mujahideen to Kabul that I realized that a more disgusting disaster was awaiting us --the disaster of the Jihadis.

"Actually the Mujahideen were more acceptable to me and I hated the Russians, but sadly I was mistaken: because, whilst the Russians were invaders and a foreign force the Jihadis, I mean Gulbuddin, Rabbani and others, were truly the lackeys of foreigners and with their action they proved that they are assassigators and plunders. They razed the people's houses to the ground, like ours and left thousands of women widowed and thousands of children orphaned. Alas their sons become like other people, so they could feel the pain of our bereaved mothers.

They were not Mujahideen but looters of our factories, properties and heritages. For example, Gulbuddin destroyed the Bagrami Textile, which at one time had more than 3,000 workers and produced the clothes the country needed and its machines were sold in pieces to Pakistanis. So in this way, they committed the biggest national crime.

I never finished the tenth class because I got sick and couldn't continue my studies, so I learned to type, and worked in one of the government offices as a typist. But after my marriage I was employed in the factory, which was nearby our village. My husband gave me magazines, which I read. I also read some Iranian magazines. Alas! Everything was lost, when my husband was martyred and I have become a widow and a vagrant person. With the arrival of the Taliban, schools were closed and my children, like other children, remained illiterate and I can do nothing about it. My financial problems overwhelm me. When I heard that the Red Cross were distributing the food cards, straight away, I went to meet the area's counselor Abdul Satar and explained to him briefly the state of my life and begged him to include me in the list.

I was accepted by the survey delegation and they gave me the food card. I must say that it is three years since the Taliban stopped to paying my salary as a worker of the Bagrami Textile. Also, they don't give the pension from my husband.

The supplies they give us are not enough. So I get burqas from shops for pleating and embroideries, and at night I do that and I also take cloths from the stores for bead sewing. Trying to keep all of these jobs is very exhausting and is wearing me out. If the destiny of my children were known for sure, I would have got married and saved myself from this loneliness."

About the Taliban and the Jihadis she said:

"They are the chips off the same block and the obstinate enemy of women, the enemy of knowledge and school. In short, the Jihadis burnt Kabul and the Taliban burnt Shamali.

Bibi Gul

My name is Bibi Gul and my father's name is Pachamir. We are from Muhamod Aga, Logar province. My husband, Toryalay was working as a tailor and was killed by the Russians on the way from Logar to Kabul.

I am 38 years old and have three children, one daughter and two sons. My daughter is young and has married. The boys are working and some days ago they returned from Qandahar, where they were working in the poppy fields.

One of them has got backache and a nerve problem from handling the poppies and now he is sick. Daily they earn about one hundred thousands Afghani in the poppy fields, some of which they spend and the remainder they send to us. We live in sector three of Kartay Parwan in a rented house, and as well as paying the rent I have to sweep the house and wash the clothes of the owner of the house. The charges for electricity and the rent of the house are about ten hundreds thousands Afghani and we are not in a position to earn even half of it.

When my husband was alive, my sons were very young and by tailoring they earned money and also we had a small piece of land in our hands. But when the Mujahideen came to Muhamod Aga, they asked Toryalay, who at the time had a tailoring shop in Kartay Naw, to cooperate with them. But Toryalay didn't accept their request. We shifted to Kabul and the Mujahideen snatched our land. The day when my father in law asked him to come to Logar, he was killed on his way to Logar from Kabul. Widowhood is very terrible. A woman needs a man here and especially when she has no home, her landlord and neighbors look at her with doubt and suspicion.

No one can live in peace at the moment, as there is always the danger of eviction from your house. The news spread that the Red Cross was distributing cards for widows, so I went to the directorate of the district fourth and gave my name for the survey. But their personnel did not accept me and told me that I am too old and I have two young sons. I cried and wailed and told them that these boys are not mine and also promised that I will give one part of the supplies to them. So they accepted me on condition that I will give them cooking oil each time and deliver it at their home. Several times, I delivered the cooking oil to their home in Taimany, and several times I noticed that some widows like me were taking a share of flour or cooking oil to the houses of the Red Cross staff as a bribe. This lasted for more than a year but now they are not giving any thing to anyone.

Rabia

"I am Rabia, daughter of Abdullah from Chardahee, Kabul. It is four years since we were living in our house in the third district of Kabul city. I am 35 years old and have four children. One of them is a boy and the rest are girls. All of them are at home and jobless. My husband, who worked as a worker in the Jangalak Factory, was killed four years ago in the fighting between Gulbuddin and Rabbani forces. From that day till now, I haven't seen happiness in my life.

In Wasil abad we had a home, but due to the firing of bullets and shelling from the two warring sides and the looting of its windows and doors by the Hazb-i-Isami men, it was damaged and we became homeless. After the death of my husband we got into debt and my son got badly ill. We had no money for food and treatment. I asked my brother in-laws for help but they are also poor and needy and can do nothing. So I told them to sell my ruined house.

At first, they didn't agree but when they realized my problems they agreed. But up until now we haven't found anyone to buy it nor the permission order from the related authority for selling. My son Khal Muhammad is twelve years old and the apprentice of a cycle mechanic. My elder daughter is at home. We have no source of income and are in need of every morsel of our food. At night we eat food in darkness and in the winters we sleep under one blanket.

All of my children have had influenza. I was begging for money from the shops, stores and merchants. But when my brother saw me in that condition he again tried to sell the house but still no one bought it and the bribe to find a way of selling it was so high that we were unable to pay. I get wool from people for carpet weaving and wash it on the Kabul River, whether in winter or summer, and earn negligible money from this. I do not pay for the house in which we are living and just take care of it, and my small daughter goes out to beg in far away areas. My husband's family is very worried about this situation but they are unable to help us and we can have no expectation of help from them either. My father in law is a very kind person and always keeps in touch with us.

Despite all the difficulties I have faced, I managed to get my name included in the list of widows and after the survey got the card. I have a card for food but its not enough, except bread and Shola (A kind of Afghani food) and we have nothing else to eat. The consumption of bread is very high and fifty-eight kg of wheat is insufficient for three months. On the other hand, the terms of distribution are so strict that you even have to leave the dead and collect your supplies on the given date otherwise it is not available.

In the beginning, we didn't even know when the distribution time would be, because the Red Cross was planning to distribute the supplies weekly. If the Red Cross decision was implemented, caused problems for the widows of Kabul.

For this reason I was not able to be present on the specified day. When I explained the reason it was not accepted and the supplies were not given to me whom shocked me and I am still confused about what I should do. We then got in contact with the district directorate and Ministry Of Plan, but it was futile and all of them adhered to the ruling of the Red Cross committee."

Zarghona

"My name is Zarghona and my father's name is Abdul Wahab. I am about thirty years old. My life has been full of accidents and adventures. I was the daughter of a wealthy family, I belong to Kapisa and my father, besides land, had three vehicles, which worked in the line of Kabul and Kohistan. I have studied school till class eleven, became acquainted with a young and educated man by the name of Farooq who had finished at the faculty of literature. He was not a rich person like my father and gave duty as a teacher, I had great affection for him and in some respects we had a family relationship too. However, my father was not in favor of our engagement as Farooq was a poor teacher. At last as a result of the mediation of friends I became engaged to him and after that my father objected to my education.

Farooq and I urged him a lot to change his mind, but it was useless and this was the first blow that my father inflicted on my life when I left my family after the marriage, Farooq got separated from his elder brothers and we decided to live independently, but bad destiny changed my whole life. Najeeb's government collapsed and the Jehadis, the butchers and enemies of our people, came into power. Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin had the control of Kohistan area and collected "toll" from my father and he had no way but to pay it.

At the end of 1994 and the beginning of 1995, I requested Farooq to go to Kohistan and spend a night in the homes of our friends. Whatever were the circumstances, he agreed and we, still without any child, left for Kohistan.

At the main road that goes towards Gulbahar and Najrab, our vehicle was stopped by a number of armed men and they searched some of us. They asked my husband to introduce himself. My husband introduced himself. They buzzed something. The only thing, which I heard about my husband, was that perhaps he might be a spy of Hizb-e-Islami. They, by force, got us off the vehicle. At last, while pointing at me they said, "let that woman go." I immediately begged their pardon and wept and moaned but they struck Farooq with the butt of the rifle in front of my eyes and after some repeated blows he fell on the ground, blood gushed on his head and face. They dragged him off with themselves. The thugs belonged to the mullah Ieshan, governor of Kapisa.

Night ended, on the morning I headed for my village. I told the story to my father who was living with my mother in Kohistan, but he was not in any position to help me as he was considered the man of Hizb-e-Islami. At last he send some old men to mullah Ieshan who was living in Mahmood Raqee, and they brought back the dead body of my husband. Due to the blows of the butt, he was murdered on the first night. I was with my father for one year and except my son I have nothing as a souvenir from my husband. After one year I went back to Kabul. At home my brother was having a very terrible life. My brothers in law were always quarrelling with me. Two of my brothers have gone to Pakistan and now I am living with my elder brother and always doing their housework.

One day my brother told me: "Zargona you are young and must marry." He proposed the previous driver of my father as my match. In this we quarreled and in the end I went to my aunt's home in Qul Abchakan."

(Red Cross aids and interview with widows in Kabul. By RAWA reporter from Kabul, September 2000)

### 3.5. Experiences, Problems and Challenges of Women In Afghanistan

UNITED NATIONS, April 25 (Reuters) - Declaring that women could not live freely amid lawlessness, an Afghanistan minister appealed to the U.N.Security Council to expand a multinational peacekeeping force or the country might sink back into war.

Dr. Sima Samar, the interim Afghan authority's minister for women's affairs, said that gains made in the past four months when the United Nations helped set up the government, could "easily be lost" unless security became a priority.

Samar, a physician and one of two women ministers in the Kabul government, said the lack of security-endangered women's ability to register to vote and participate in political life.

"Women in Afghanistan are finally able to see a little light after a very long darkness," she said. "But the gains that have been made in the past four months can easily be lost unless security is greatly improved."

The U.N. Security Council intends to extend the mission of the International Security Assistance Force, known as ISAF, but not expand it because there are no volunteers.

Usually delegates from Islamic nations begin speeches with "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate." On Thursday Samar changed this to: "In the name of God, of Freedom and Equality."

She said women worried about the re-imposition of Taliban-like restrictions under threat of violence.

The Taliban, which barred women from work or studies and shrouded them in an all-enveloping veil, ruled Afghanistan from 1995 until U.S. troops helped dislodge them for harboring Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network, held responsible for the September 11 attacks against the United States.

Britain is currently heading an international force of nearly 5,000 troops in Kabul and its environs, with Turkey expected to assume command sometimes in June.

But unless the United States, conducting a war against remnant of the Taliban and al- Qaeda, joins or leads such a force, few countries are willing to field soldiers, saying they are stretched thin and could be involved in endless conflict.

Washington has limited its security aid to helping Afghanistan form a national army and is contributing around \$250 million to this end Germany is training a police force.

Samar also said the government had few funds at its disposal to follow through on its development plans.

U.N. Undersecretary-General Kieran Prendergast agreed with her, saying funds "have been extremely slow to arrive" despite \$4 billion pledged at a Tokyo donor conference in January.

Prendergast, in charge of political affairs, steered away from recommending the international force be expanded. But he listed about 10 serious incidents, from assassinations to fighting in provincial areas amid many "signs of hope."

Sixteen people alone were killed when the interim government moved to eradicate the poppy fields and tempt farmers into alternative crops. "This policy has provoked fierce opposition from farmers," Prendergast told the council.

About 4,900 acres (2,000 hectares) out of an estimated 160,000 acres (65,000 hectares) were destroyed. The eradicated crop is worth about \$300 million when the poppy is turned into opium and heroin on the European wholesale market, Prendergast said. (Information from Afghan Government. Date: Thu, 25 Apr 2002 17:17:11 Afghan minister says women need security force By Evelyn Leopold)

Bombs were still dropping then (on Serbia) as they do today on Afghanistan, and a quick look at Kosovo history is enough to sober one up about the prospects for the Northern Alliance becoming great respecters of gender justice and civil liberties. The Kosovo Liberation Army, once endorsed by the Pentagon as freedom fighters, turned into ethnic supremacists against local Serbs and then Macedonians, as soon as the ink on the so-called "settlement" was dry.

Feminists, however, are cheered by the news that among the 26 participants representing four Afghan groups, three women have been invited to participate in the Petersberg negotiations. Whether they have been invited simply to window-dress the warlords' talks is what we are about to find out.

The struggle for women's rights has always been about more than numbers. In Afghanistan, as in the U.S.A, achieving equal treatment for people regardless of gender has something to do with including women in policymaking, but way more critical is which women are involved.

The Petersberg picture includes two women dispatched by the ousted former king, Mohammad Zahir Shah; the third is an exile living in Iran who will be one of 11 delegates sent by the Northern Alliance. Amina Safi Afzali, the Alliance representative, is the widow of a mujahedeen commander, and for two decades led the Afghanistan Women's Islamic Movement.

Of the Shah delegates, one is Rona Mansuri, daughter of a former prime minister and an activist with Afghan refugees, and the other is Sima Wali, head of the Washington, D.C.-based agency Refugee Women in Development and a longtime activist for women's rights.

"With the exception of the king, the previous leaders' records on human rights and gender issues are all cause for concern," Sima Wali told the Los Angeles Times (who to their credit covered the story in some depth). Wali left Afghanistan after the arrival of the Soviets 22 years ago and was a founder of the Sisterhood Is Global Institute based in Montreal.

Top of her list of concerns is the return of Afghanistan's former leader, Burhanuddin Rabbani, who now heads the Northern Alliance. The last time Rabbani was in power in Kabul, he imposed Islamic police squads to enforce ancient laws banning women from appearing in public without a male relative. Today, he is Kabul's de facto leader, the only Afghan head of state recognized by the United Nations.

"With Professor Rabbani talking about a willingness to defend the rights of women 'within the context of Islam,' we are going to have to watch closely to make sure that all these statements about commitment to gender issues move beyond the rhetorical level," said Wali.

At the rhetorical level, Laura Bush says she hopes the U.S. assault on Afghanistan will ensure dignity and opportunity for women in Afghanistan. But U.S. military ventures have been dressed up in "for the sake of the women" clothing before.

As president, George Bush the elder launched the invasion on Panama on the pretext that General Noriega's men had assaulted a U.S. woman there. The Gulf War brought us pictures of "liberated" women in U.S. military uniforms, rushing to the aid of veiled Kuwaitis - but a decade later, Kuwaiti women have yet to get the vote, and in Saudi Arabia the Pentagon requires U.S. servicewomen to abide by that state's gender-apartheid rules.

So will the inclusion of women at the Petersberg talks be more than a gesture? In Central Asia and Europe, women are part of the negotiating process. Until now we've not seen any women involved in the processes that were ongoing," Farida Shaheed of Women Living Under Muslim Laws told Working Assets Radio. Shaheed is coordinator of the Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Center in Lahore, Pakistan.

But sustainable long-term changes in Afghanistan will only come about through reconstruction, said Shaheed. "We need to look at the reconstruction processes - shelter, medicine, education - this is where it's critical that women are involved." And that reconstruction will require international aid. After decades of talk about "reconstruction" here and there, the United States at present allots the sum total of only 0.1% of gross national product to overseas aid.



"The inclusion of women may be self-serving for the regional chieftains, who want more U.S. and other foreign backing, but it also presents an opportunity to get women's rights moving in the right direction," Sima Wali said. (Laura Flanders, Working For Change, 04/25/02 16:00)

### 3.6 Afghan Women Speak from Behind the Media Veil

"Now that the U.S. and the Taliban are on two opposite sides in a war, you've probably heard a lot about how the Taliban treat women," said Tamina. Tamina is a member of RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, and her mother was a founding member of the group back in 1977.

"You probably know a lot about the restrictions on women in Afghanistan, but maybe you've heard less about what Afghan women want instead."

There's no maybe about it. Late Tuesday night Tamina spoke to a group called New Yorkers Say No To War. About 75 people crowded into a room in Greenwich Village's Gay and Lesbian Community Center to hear her, because Americans have begun to see a lot in the media lately about the oppression of women under the Taliban. We've begun, finally, to hear about the women whom the Taliban ban from working, keep from school, flog for wearing makeup, even execute. Now that U.S. leaders are selling the nation on war against the Taliban, there are a lot of pictures of silent, shrouded Afghan women on the news. But the U.S. media veil Afghan women, too. You sure don't get to hear what any of them have to say.

Like any group of politicized people, organized Afghan women's groups differ in their views. Some have more confidence than others in the so-called Northern Alliance, the triad of ethnically distinct guerilla outfits who have been fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan's north. Some believe that good could come of an armed U.S. intervention if it ousted the Taliban. Others see nothing coming of it but more political extremism and more war.

Wednesday's New York Times published an article by David Rohde about life for women under the Northern Alliance, datelined Gulbahar. "Life for women here in rebel-held northern Afghanistan is not without its constraints," Rhode reports. Women wear the head-to-toe burqa, but they may shop in the market and talk to male shopkeepers "if absolutely necessary." Girls may attend special schools.

Asked Tuesday if people in Afghanistan support U.S. collaboration with the Northern Alliance to oust the Taliban, Tamina said RAWA opposes pouring more weapons into an already starving and desperate land. "The first step must be to stop financial and military support going to the Taliban and all the militias," she said.

Recalling the period 1992-1996, when the groups that now comprise the Northern Alliance vied for power after the fall of the Soviet-installed Najibullah regime, Tamina noted, "Afghans know the Northern Alliance."

They remember, she said, a time when women were raped en masse, and young girls were forced into marriages with military commanders. Thousands were killed and tortured. "We don't want that period back," she said.

RAWA supports a UN peacekeeping mission to disarm all warring factions, all fundamentalists, all terrorists, said Tamina. "The people of Afghanistan want peace, security and the opportunity

to rebuild under a government established by legitimate elections where the people can read, and understand their options, and vote without a gun to their heads," she said.

"That sounds wonderful, of course," said Osmam, a younger woman in jeans who was sitting in the second row. Osmam said she and her family left Afghanistan when she was six years old. "But it's unrealistic. No UN peacekeeping mission has ever built a democratic society," said Osmam. The Northern Alliance may not be great, but they're not as bad as the Taliban, and getting rid of the Taliban must be the first step, she argued. "RAWA's vision is lovely but it's unrealistic."

"But the UN has been able to implement a transition to peaceful democracy," piped up Donna Sullivan, a professor of international law at NYU. Sullivan was sitting way in the back, flanked by several long-time women's and human rights activists. "In Namibia, in East Timor ... My fear is those processes will be foreclosed by the U.S. erection of the Northern Alliance as the only possible mechanism for progress."

We're facing a situation, said Sullivan, where "you don't even have the UN failing to bring women into the peace process, you have the U.S. keeping women and the UN out."

It's the kind of discussion that would make great television, if the U.S. media were interested in great television. The ratings might even be good, I imagine if the liveliness of the debate in Greenwich Village last night was any indication. (Laura Flanders, Working For Change, October 3, 2001. Journalist Laura Flanders is the host of Working Assets Radio and author of "Real Majority, Media Minority: The Cost of Sidelining Women in Reporting." (RAWA reporter from Kabul. September 2000.)

*Chapter 4*

**THE AFGHAN WOMEN IN THE UK: SILENT VOICES**

According to the society of Afghan Residents (UK), there are now 52,000 Afghans living in the UK. This figure is a conservative estimate and numbers could be considerably larger since asylum applications have continued to increase. According to UNHCR figures, there were 6,025 applications from Afghan Nationals in Britain between January and September 2002. (UNHCR: 2002b: 12). The community is extremely diverse in relation to ethnicity and includes Sunni, Shia Muslims, ethnic Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and members of the north Afghanistan Hazara tribes. The communities are also divided on political lines, with waves of migration following changes of government, and in relation to motives for migration and their current connection with Afghanistan.

There are also major differences in legal status, with long-established residents often taking out British citizenship. This group tends to have a fairly even gender balance, with the majority married and with dependent children. As well as representing a process of settlement and establishing a sense of belonging in Britain, an idea discussed in the latest White paper on Immigration and Asylum (Home Office, 2002b: 10), taking out citizenship has a more practical value for refugees. People with refugee status are forbidden from entering their country of origin; so taking out British citizenship enables them to return without jeopardizing their status in Britain. Others have Refugee Status or some form of long term status such as Indefinite Leave to Remain, while the most recent arrivals tend to be asylum seekers with insecure status within Britain or have Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR). Immigration status determines access to a range of rights, including to employment, training and education and other welfare benefits (Morris, 1997). Recent immigration and asylum legislation has increased the differentials between groups with different statuses, while removing many of the rights previously enjoyed by asylum seekers, such as the right to cash benefits and to mainstream housing (Sales, 2002b). The Nationality, Immigration and asylum Act, 2002 removed the right of asylum seekers to apply for permission to work after six months.

Most Afghans in Britain are settled in north-west London, between Acton and Harrow. However, compulsory dispersal under the Immigration and Asylum Act, 1999 (Sales, 2002b) has led to the creation of small but rapidly growing communities in cities such as Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, Glasgow and Leeds. Figures from the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) shows that 3, 695 Afghan people were being supported outside London under the dispersal scheme, the overwhelming majority of them male. The largest concentration was in the Midlands, with Birmingham the major center.

Number of Asylum Seekers (including dependents) supported by NASS by region, End of September 2002.

	Female	Male	Total
East Midlands	10	250	260
North East	15	485	500
North West	55	670	725
Scotland (Glasgow)	50	235	290
South Central	0	50	50
South West	5	60	70
Wales	15	55	70

West Midlands	35	975	1,010
Yorkshire and Humberside	55	595	655
Other	10	90	95
Total	255	3,465	3,720

The most well established community organizations are concentrated in London, particularly West London. These have extensive mailing lists, offer a range of services to their members (such as advice, interpretation) and have developed links with local service providers, particularly within the Health Service. New groups are developing within other cities but their range of activities is more restricted. Afghan-run businesses also tend to be concentrated in West London, where the community presence is not visible through the development of shops (mainly food) and restaurants.

In this survey (Rosemary Sales, Middlesex University; 2003) women were asked a series of questions aimed at assessing their feelings about integration into British society. Majority of population agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that they felt fully integrated into British life, with very little percentage disagreeing strongly. The answers varied little by gender. Perhaps surprisingly, status did not seem to be very important. The respondents who felt least integrated into British society all had ELR. They had received no qualifications in this country, were unemployed and spoke English at a basic level. Sixteen of those with secure status disagreed. This suggests the complexity of feelings of integration, which also affect feelings about return. One woman, describing her feelings about Britain said:

*It's great because it's safe. It's true for everybody, because we are safe from the war; we live here safe, otherwise we are hurting for the rest of our lives. We are hurting...I am a citizen of Britain, but I feel always there, my feeling is there, I can't forget that.*

Her daughter, brought up in this country said *Even if I have a British passport, I am not British.* She went on to talk about her feelings for Afghanistan:

*Yes, my passion isn't because I have been directly influenced by anything, it is because my parents have such a passion and such a pain, that I feel that I have to live it through them, and I have to, and regardless of whether I have felt the war or not, I will defend my country.*

The majority reported that most of their friends in this country are Afghan, with only very small percentage disagreeing with this proposition. This suggests that community networks are crucial and that these do not hinder feelings of integration. The majority of respondents lived in areas where there are large communities. One young woman said

*Yes, I socialize not just with the youth, but with the older generation as well. We Afghans ... like socializing and that's the reason why I know that when I go to Afghanistan I will be able to live there.*

The respondents had made efforts to settle in Britain, taking part in education and employment as well as voluntary and community work.

### **Views about return and levels of integration into British society**

The notion of return is particularly sensitive and held strong views on the subject. No one was planning to settle in Afghanistan in the immediate future. In some cases return meant simply

going to Afghanistan for a visit; for others, it was an experimental visit to see the situation for themselves; for others it meant full resettlement, or repatriation, although this was seen as a distant wish rather than an immediate possibility. For some born here, 'return' to Afghanistan meant going there physically for the first time: for them Afghanistan was seen as 'home' even if they had never lived there.

The desire for return was strongly linked to feelings of settlement and security within Britain. Most obvious was immigration status, with those with secure status showing most interest. Settled status gives confidence about return and the ability to make choices. Those awaiting decisions had made asylum applications based on claims that Afghanistan is unsafe. They were unlikely to want to return, and for them the difficulties in the situation in Afghanistan were most fresh in their minds.

### ***Reasons for Wanting to Return***

Many Afghans exhibited two sets of, often related, emotional feelings towards return. Many showed a nostalgic attachment to Afghanistan expressed in terms of open-ended statements about a longing for return. This was often combined with a desire to help in rebuilding the country and *giving something back*. One wrote *I would like to go back to Afghanistan because I would like my children to experience what I had in my childhood*. A former army officer summed his attachment to his country and its virtues without clarifying how or when he would ever return. His statement demonstrates the sense of loss and war that has ravaged his country.

*Afghanistan is a poor dusty country but for me it is heaven. It has a lot of sun, we have good food, good people, kind people. Every one loves their country and I like my own dusty country...my mountains. My dream is to return there. My country is gold...it was gold.*

Similar feelings were expressed by many afghan participants. These were shared even by young people born in Britain or who had come here when very young. One young woman talked of her commitment to Afghanistan:

*I haven't even seen my country, but I can speak my own language and I know most facts about my language and my country. I have learned how to read and write, I go to Afghan school. We find this necessary to go to Afghan school because we are willing to go back. We know that we are going to be going back one day, everyone knows. For me this is not back.*

Another woman, who had come to Britain as a young adult said:

*The worst thing is I can't forget Afghanistan.... I have everything, good children, good education, husband is OK, and I have my own home, everything is fine, but, you know Afghanistan is (home).*

This statement brought this response from a young man:

*The sense of nostalgia is something that people hold on to as opposed to – I don't know if any of these people have been back. I went there during the Taliban. And there is no electricity, it's only for three hours, no water, nothing, you can't move, the roads are broken. The things that we take for granted here, it's not there. We can sit here and long for it, but as soon as you hit the ground, and have the realization that you will never be back in England to enjoy the electricity and the cleanliness and everything else – so when people say a lot about going back, it's a sense of nostalgia, and something that*

*they hold on to from their past that they find it hard to let go. In actual fact it would be hard to make a decision to go back because they would not last for six months to be honest.*

For many, the desire to return was linked to an expressed aim of using training and education gained in the West for the benefit of their country. Several stated that they had or were planning to acquire transferable skills to feed back into their home country. In their words, the investment in skills and training would not only assist their own re-entry but also to help the process of post-conflict stabilization and economic development. One woman put it simply: *we want to go back with something* another said she would not want to go to live but to *establish things there*.

A doctor said that he would like to work with charities to deliver medicine and books to people. He affirmed that there is *a lot of scope for specialists in Afghanistan*. He claimed that many would like to go to Afghanistan eventually, to check out the situation or to work with NGOs. Suggestions that the elites should go back and rebuild the country first were shared by some well-educated respondents. One respondent in Bristol said

*I think that the highly educated people can and should go back to rebuild the country, but the middle and lower classes should stay here.*

For some, the aim of acquiring skills to take back was part of a larger life plan. One leader in the Pashtun community spoke of how he would like to return to Afghanistan and 'give back' but was concerned to ensure that his children were brought up as he wanted. To this end, he spoke of dividing their education between Pakistan and the United Kingdom, where he hoped his children would attend university. A young woman put it this way:

*For me it's like utilizing everything that this country [offers]... I am Afghan I am not British. British in the sense that I am taking everything for my advantage, I am making use of the education system, I am making use of money, I am taking use of the language that will benefit me when I travel and I go everywhere, I am taking use of how modern this country is, and hopefully I will go back to my country, and the things that I've learnt here and made use of here, I will go back to my country and say you know, this is how you are supposed to do things, and teach other people what I have been taught. And so I am not British in that sense, I'm Afghan, making use of Britain for my benefit.*

### Reasons for Uncertainty about return

Those who were undecided about return cited doubts about the situation in Afghanistan. One interpreter had been back to Afghanistan before the collapse of the Taliban and had been hopeful about the situation. He spoke of the failure of the US agenda in Central Asia and the failure by the international forces to maintain security. He felt he could not therefore comment on his prospects of return at this point. For others their life choices, children's education, and the fact that they had already put down roots in the UK, made the question difficult to answer. One British national spoke of his torment of not being able to go back to Afghanistan because of the way his life turned out.

*I would love to return, but return is not easy after 19 years in a country ... one of my ambitions is to go and teach in Afghanistan ... but for the time being, it is difficult because I married a British girl [together for 11 years, now separated] and had two children. Then I remarried and have a three-month-old baby. I have been offered jobs to go to Afghanistan, good jobs, but at the moment it feels ... I don't feel I can subject my two children to another upheaval again.*

### Reasons for not wanting to return

A minority of respondents expressed outright opposition to return, but some felt very strongly against, writing in comments such as:

*Killing, rapes, robbery and so on. No one likes to leave his mother, sister and relatives for other reason except all of the above.*

*I have lost my sister and my auntie and grandmother were burned alive with our house. I have no desire to return, I hate my own city and its people who did this to us.*

A number mentioned 'tribal enemies'. One said:

*I do not want to back to Afghanistan because still everywhere there is fighting and no central government. Also my private enemy is still strong that is the reason I came to this country.*

He added that the government should not deport Afghans.

One from Bristol commented,

*I would never want to return. I don't like the people or the regime. If the Communists came back ... then maybe, but if I never want to go back.*

Two recent arrivals from Manchester said:

*This is my home. I don't even want to think about Afghanistan any more. This is my new life!*

*My future is here. To me it is like my life starts now. All I had before was fighting and war.*

One said simply *if I go, I'm dead*. Another noted the psychological effects of relocation:

*If people have settled somewhere, moving around is also a waste of life ...I mean they can lose their life. Integrating into Britain, trying to adapt to the way of life, then moving away again, and another change happens ...from a psychological point of view, it is very harmful, very difficult.*

One respondent appeared to see return as a form of punishment. He claimed that many Pashtos are from Pakistan, and said that *they must send them back; they must be the first to go*. This comment was, however, an individual one and not representative of the respondents as a whole.

### Timing of return

The majority of respondents were unable to give a definite answer to the question of when they would like to return. Only very small percentage indicated a desire to return in less than 6 months. Clearly for the majority return was not a realistic possibility within the foreseeable future. Several respondents spoke of their feeling of "pressure" and fear that the British government might soon start deporting Afghans. One woman in Bristol said:

*I would never go there for good because I have a life here as well. I have really good friendships here ...I would see myself as a two-home person, a two-country person. And also the memories I have are*

*nostalgic memories of Afghanistan. Unless I experience going there I can't answer that question...I have never been back since I left. What I know or what I can guess is that of course it is not the same Afghanistan. People have changed, socially and economically. The landscape has changed, the values they have changed ...I can't make that decision or answer that question now.*

## FACTORS INFLUENCING DECISIONS ABOUT RETURN

The structural factors were given great importance, while individual factors such as illness and marriage and kinship obligations were considered much less important. The overwhelming importance of security concerns much.

This was reiterated frequently at interview. A middle-aged man in Manchester summed up the feelings of many Afghans:

*The main problem is security. If it is not even safe for the President, how can anyone think that it is safe for the people?*

A 23 year-old man living in Bristol added:

*I still don't feel that it is safe. I don't think it is safe and I am sure it is not. I am from that country. I know it is very temporary ...we need stability. There is not stability at all.*

Another commented:

*There is no peace, security or stability in Afghanistan. The same warlords are in power and the old Mujahidin are in power. They control Afghanistan.*

The issue of the international presence was raised by several participants who differed in their assessment of the security situation in Afghanistan. As noted above, some respondents discounted the effectiveness of the international forces, while others believed that the provision of security was simply temporary and that in this context return could not be contemplated.

*I think at the moment it is not safe. It is not a good option to send anyone back home. As far as I know, many Afghan families and people are planning to go but they cannot just go immediately. Now there is no real choice, it is too soon and too quick. Not only are there no guarantees there but also we have seen it so many times from our experiences. We have seen it from the early, mid and late 90s. Three times already, we the Afghan people, the civilians, we were left alone and as soon as the [foreign] power is gone, everything just goes back to square one. Warlords are still in power...the government can't control them. They need more time; it is too soon to return any Afghans back.*

Many were concerned about the people in charge, and there was frequent mention of warlords.

*The Northern Alliance rules there and these people have killed. All the Embassy staff is NA.*

Another expressed doubt that things had really changed:

*Where are the Taliban gone? Where are the weapons? The people only change their turban and they shave their beard, and now they say that they are Mujahidin, but they are Taliban.*

One respondent spoke of the need for trust as a precondition for return:



*It is more a question of trust at the moment. There has to be trusted ... they are living in England which is quite safe and going to somewhere at the other end of the world. It is a question of time. The people who are going now are pioneers if you like. They want to achieve something, they want to do something. But the core of the people living here, they would not go until they see some kind of persistent safety and opportunity and social life.*

Another comment:

*We have lost everything, including our national ID, our pride. How can we trust again? It needs time and proof... We have lost everything. Hope the next generation gets a basic human life at least.*

Others mentioned the issue of the need to guarantee human rights,

*The government ministers, almost all, except for Mr. Karzai, were involved in human rights abuses and crimes; they should not be allowed to continue on those posts. There should be inquiries about the past.*

A doctor interviewed at Dover said he came here because of the violation of human rights, and the violation of women's rights. He said had just wanted to find a safe place, not to come to England in particular. A woman who had lost her job under the Taliban said:

*Women have no human rights in Afghanistan, especially in the provinces... I would never want to return. I don't like the people or the regime. Another said Women's rights are lacking in Afghanistan. They use women as slaves. I would rather my daughters were brought up here, where women are treated better.*

Several respondents spoke of the continuing ethnic conflict. One spoke of the need for an organized, guaranteed government which was multi ethnic. For one interviewee, the problem was that his wife was a Christian and she had not been accepted in Afghanistan. One spoke of the 'human disaster' if refugees were forcibly returned.

Many respondents saw Job security, salaries and status as important. Several mentioned that 'illiterate' people are running the government:

*They support the NA; they will be placed above me just because they are NA. I would be proud to work for an educated experienced people, but not for an illiterate person.*

There was a great deal of discussion in the focus groups about the lack of infrastructure:

*I think another problem now that the Afghans are facing with making decisions whether to go back or stay here is that all of us have been living here quite a number of years, we have been accustomed to the comforts of this way of life here so I think that if I go back, would there be doctors, hospitals all the facilities that we have here, so we have to overcome those kinds of decisions and problems in the decision whether to go back or not.*

Next in importance came children's education and the destruction of educational opportunities in Afghanistan. Many were reluctant to move their children, who they felt were doing well in Britain. Several spoke in terms of children's human rights to education.

## HELP WANTED IN THE UK

The top priority was information about Afghanistan, followed by reassurance over their status in this country. Much less important was support aimed at integrating into Afghanistan, such as training and financial support. This was particularly the case for women respondents.

At interview people reiterated their distrust of media reports that the situation was safe.

The main thing is security. We are not sure about the security in Afghanistan. Seeing it on the news is different ... seeing is believing. If someone goes there and stays for 2 or 3 months and comes back to tell us the facts. We could believe that. Otherwise, seeing images of crowds in Afghanistan, of people in crowds buying and selling which is supposed to mean that Afghanistan is now safe... I don't believe that. We have our own people. We have our friends and relatives, different channels of news and they say that there is nothing in Afghanistan. I don't know why they are saying that there is peace. Yes, there may not be as much fighting as when the Taliban was there but that does not mean that there is no fighting or that there is peace. If there is peace, then what is the purpose of the international forces being there?

Another said :

*We want to hear about progress, and any good news you have from Afghanistan. That people who have gone to Afghanistan are happy, we know their names, where they are living, what they are doing, and we want to know something about those people.*

The possibility of return to Britain was felt to be crucial. In a focus group, one young man said, to murmurs of agreement, *that's 99 per cent of it*. This view indicated that people wanted short visits to assess the situation and that plans for long term resettlement were premature.

These priorities contrast strongly with those of the respondents in the research report on Somali refugees (Bloch and At field, 2002: 47). This found that information was given a low priority, while work, training and education were the highest priorities. This reflects the overwhelming importance of the security issues in relation to Afghanistan, and the fact that for many return is not yet a realistic prospect.

Several commented on the lack of relevance of resettlement packages.

*The money being offered by the government to persuade people to go back is too little. They can earn more here to support their families.*

The respondents in Dover felt that the government's assistance package was an 'insult'. Having faced all the difficulties of getting to England, and then to be offered £600 was, they felt, offensive

*It is as if our lives are being bought for £600. If the situation improves, they will not need £600 to go back.*

## HELP WANTED IN AFGANISTAN

The most important factor, and particularly in relation to those deemed 'essential' were improvements to the infrastructure. This, unlike the others listed, is general rather than individual help and reflects the concerns noted above about the economic situation of Afghanistan.

### The contribution of the Afghan community

This study identified a highly educated and qualified Afghan community living within Britain. While the survey cannot claim to be representative of the Afghan population as a whole, it nevertheless indicates that the community possesses important skills and experience, which could be used both in Britain and in Afghanistan. The downward mobility faced by many respondents, and in particular the large number of medical professionals who were not able to work here, is indicative of a severe under-utilization of skills. Specific needs emerged in relation to English language training and the updating of professional skills and the recognition of diplomas, skills and training received in Afghanistan. This is particularly problematic in medicine, where conversion courses are costly and inflexible. The ban on asylum seekers taking up employment in the first six months in Britain – now extended to a total ban - also leads to de-skilling.

In spite of these problems, many within the community were making a significant social and economic contribution to British society. The development of community networks provides a useful resource for the community, and could be tapped into further for developing services in this country and for supporting return where appropriate. Many who were unable to practice their profession had retrained in other areas. The majority felt well integrated into British society and felt that their children were doing well. There was a strong desire to retain an Afghan identity and to contribute both to British and Afghan society.

*(For details see Sales Rosemary, Blitz Brad K, and Marzano Lisa "Afghan Nationals in the UK: Professional Capacity And Views on Return" Report for Refugee Action and International Organization for Migration. Migration and Refugee Research Unit; School of Health and Social Science; Middlesex University. Much of the information was taken from this research report.)*

### **Resettling Afghan Refugees**

Until recently, the UK has not set regular, large-scale resettlement quotas. Small numbers of recognized refugees are resettled in the UK through what is known as the 'ten or more programme', which allows a minimum of ten refugees with serious medical needs to enter the UK for resettlement. Others may be reunited with family members already recognized as refugees in the UK.

Under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, the Government pledged to pilot a resettlement programme in co-operation with the UNHCR. The UK has agreed to accept just 500 referrals in the first year with the possibility of expanding the programme if it proves successful. Planning for the first group of arrivals is currently underway and the home office is in discussion with a number of parties involved in operating the programme, including NGO.

Amnesty International strongly condemned the UK government's decision to forcibly return a group of asylum-seekers to Afghanistan whose claims have been rejected by the UK authorities.

"Given the complexities and challenges in ensuring the sustainability of return, the timing of returns should be informed by human rights standards," the organization stated.

An Amnesty International mission to Afghanistan in April pointed in particular to serious problems of sustainability of returns, highlighting continuing denial of economic, social and cultural rights as well as a grave lack of security.

“Lack of security in the country, including in Kabul and in spite of the presence of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), is still a serious problem. This is particularly so in western Kabul where many refugees are settling, and where ISAF has a more limited effect and presence on the ground,” Amnesty International emphasized, “Afghanistan is not in a post-conflict situation, and there is no rule of law”.

“Returns for ‘symbolic’ purposes are dangerous because they are motivated by public perception rather than a cool-headed and objective assessment of the reality on the ground,” the organization said.

“Instead of pushing for ‘symbolic’ returns, the UK government should be concentrating on helping to create the conditions for a genuinely safe Afghanistan, including one where the rule of law is actually upheld.”

Amnesty International seeks comprehensive assurances from the UK government that international human rights standards will be upheld during the course of the asylum –seekers’ return, and that adequate provision will be made for effective and ongoing monitoring of their human rights post-return. (AI News: ASA 11/012/2003(Public) News Service No: 104, 28 April 2003.)

### Return to Afghanistan

In 2002, almost 1.8 million Afghans returned to their homeland from Pakistan and the Central Asian republics. The Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, and the government of the neighboring countries assisted them. At the same time, 2 30, 000 internally Afghans were helped to go home. (Afghanistan Humanitarian Update No. 68; **UNHCR**/11/12/2003)

Following the signing of the Bonn Agreement and the establishment of the Afghan Interim administration on 22 December 2001, large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons began to return to their areas of origin.

Moreover, within the first six months of 2002, almost 200,000 IDPs went home with assistance from the international community, with a further 200,000 going home of their own accord. More are expected to return, but many may be unable to—at least for the time being. These include groups fearing discrimination, retaliation and persecution, as well as nomadic Kuchis and other drought-affected people who have lost their livelihoods, particularly those who have been displaced in the south of the country. (UNHCR, July 2002.)

*Chapter-5*

Afghanistan: Current History

Women's Rights and Human Security

The most striking single social, political and economic transformation of the past century has been the emergence of women as leaders in nearly every country and walk of life. But obviously there is still a long way to go. Whether we are talking about women's presence in legislatures, business and education or simply the right to be protected from violence and discrimination, much more needs to be done, in both developed and developing countries, to achieve gender equality.

Nowhere is this more important than in communities trying to recover from civil strife and armed conflict. Although there is growing recognition that women and children bear the heaviest consequences, and there is worldwide evidence of increased gender-based violence in these situations, women's participation in peace processes still remains limited.

In recent years, and especially in the last six months, we have seen new and strengthened partnerships of women uniting for peace. The UNDP programme is supporting these groups, not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because they have a unique potential to help resolve some of the world's most intractable conflicts.

In Sierra Leone, for example, women staged a sit-down strike paralyzing the city of Freetown, holding the government accountable for the implementation of the Lome Peace Accord, and forcing officials to provide daily public briefings. In the Philippines, Rwanda, Somalia and Sudan, women are setting aside ethnic allegiances in new partnerships to help ease local tensions. In the Cordillera area of the Philippines, where indigenous people have struggled for decades to defend their traditions and cultures, women are advocating new rules and mechanisms to align national laws and local custom. In Albania, women have been actively involved in UNDP's 'weapons for development' project that has taken thousands of arms and tons of ammunition out of circulation. They have played a critical role in convincing their communities to surrender weapons.

Through the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), led by Noeleen Heyzer, we are developing innovative ways to challenge the use of tradition as a rationale for continued violence. Projects supported by UNIFEM are demonstrating how women's groups can work with religious leaders and communities to change attitudes and practices towards female genital mutilation and so-called honor killings. Family by family, community by community, these projects are building respect for women and girls and an understanding that gender-based violations are not integral to any tradition or culture.

Some of UNDP's most successful initiatives are based on an understanding of the necessary link between sustainable peace building and women's participation in decision-making. In Botswana, Kenya, Rwanda, Switzerland, Tanzania and Uganda, UNDP is supporting efforts by coalitions of non-governmental organizations and Parliamentarians to remove legal constraints on women's involvement in political processes. In Pakistan, we are supporting a nationwide information and awareness campaign, including orientation meetings at the grassroots level, to help the government achieve its goal of having women fill at least one-third of seats in local assemblies. In India, which has a similar goal of one-third representation by women in local

government, we are giving newly elected officials training in modern techniques of public administration.

Now, in Afghanistan, it has an historic opportunity to support human rights and the empowerment of women. There, as anywhere else, no arguments of cultural relativism or tactical caution should deflect from the need to help women rapidly better their status. We must ensure not just ambitious efforts to guarantee equal access, but also that women be directly integrated into all aspects of planning for the overall recovery effort. There needs to be an especially strong focus on the overall recovery effort. Their needs to be an especially strong focus on the critical issue of girls' education, which has been neglected for so long. And we are working with Afghan women's groups to help them participate fully in the future governance of the country.

*What has happened to women in Afghanistan demonstrates that if a country or community fails to treat women well and protect and promote their human rights, this is one of the best early warning indicators of lack of respect for international norms and standards. We all, in developed and developing countries alike, have a stake in providing choices and opportunities for those who have never had them: education for girls who have been denied it; protection from abuse at home and in the workplace for wives and mothers who have long had to endure it silently; and access to real political and economic power for all women in every country.*

Over the past two decades, Afghanistan has been ruled, in whole or in part, at times badly and at times atrociously, but it has not been governed.

In Afghanistan as elsewhere, women can usually obtain high positions only by being qualified, whereas men have other options for advancement.

#### *4.1. Of Hopes and Commitments*

Once the breadbasket of Afghanistan and inhabited mostly by farming families, the Shamali is better known today as a death trap for the unwary because it is riddled with land-mines. We were told that at least 30 civilians a week are killed by stepping on them, as displaced Afghan farmers try to reclaim their villages and wheat-fields. Across the country, there are some 10 million landmines-the legacy of 23 years of war. From our view of things, nearly all the buildings near the airport were either roofless, bullet-riddled or both. The 45-kilometre road into Kabul was a trail of abandoned villages, overturned tanks, unexploded bombs and blown-up bridges.

He was accompanying Mr. Malloch Brown on his first official visit to Afghanistan since his appointment as UN coordinator for the international recovery and reconstruction effort in the country. Their first stop on a busy round of meetings with officials, local UN workers and community leaders was Kabul's Babourshour Community Centre, in a rubble-strewn district of the city. There they came across a most striking change from the Taliban period. In a session with local leaders, at a traditional public assembly-or Shura-women sat upfront, with the men filling in behind them, three rows deep. After years of hiding their faces in public, they now wore scarves over their heads instead, having shed their head-to-toe, veiled dresses, or burqas, which were obligatory until recently.

Saifurah Kurstani, a teacher in pre-Taliban days before outside employment for women was outlawed in 1996, welcomed them. She reminded that " Afghan women have suffered very much; they have lost their husband, their friends, their relatives, their jobs and their education."

Amid the anguish, she said, they have tried not just to survive but also to “live” in this society. “Now we want promises put into action, and we want the rights of women to be restored in Afghanistan in all aspects of social life”, said Mrs. Kurstani.

They heard that same message later in the day when they met Hamida Mohammad Ali, a chicken farmer whose small business was all but wiped out during fighting between Taliban and United States-led coalition forces. Debris from a bomb had demolished her chicken coop, killing most of her 1,000 birds and taking away the income she needs to care for her ailing husband and large family. Rather than dwell on her misfortune, she wanted inform that she was back in business and had built a new chicken coop with rubble from her neighborhood, after obtaining a small loan.

That sort of determination—the will to prevail in the face of near-total destruction of one’s livelihood and community—is being seen across Afghanistan. It is an invitation to the world to do all it can to support the country’s rehabilitation. The US \$ 4.5 billion in long-term development assistance pledged in January at the Tokyo Conference on the Reconstruction of Afghanistan is a promising start. While such meetings may seem far removed from the lives of people like Saifurah Kurstani and Hamida Mohammad Ali, their right to reach or earn a living as a farmer has a crystal-clear connection to the goals set in Tokyo.

(Observation and revelation by Administrator Mark Malloch Brown with his secretary, United Nations Development Programme, during his visit to Afghanistan very recently.)

#### *4.2 Toward A New Social Contract-Afghanistan*

It is essential that there be a tangible peace dividend, to give Afghans the confidence to unite around the political process.

**“... unless there is a sense of ownership and the feeling of having a say at the community level, the people may continue to suffer...”**(Of course, international assistance was recognized as essential to reconstruction, but it was equally clear assistance had to be managed carefully to ensure that it was truly a process of reconstruction rather than simply humanitarian aid.

To assist Afghans in recovering their country, the international community has begun what is likely to prove the largest post-conflict aid programme anywhere since the Marshall Plan for Europe after the Second World War.

The International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan that was held in Tokyo in January-co-chaired by the European Union, the Governments of Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United States-has anchored the process of reconstruction in firm commitments of more than US\$4.5 billion over the next five years. But this historic demonstration of international solidarity with the Afghan people was about much more than financing for the development of a workable nation-state. It was also about bringing peace and stability to a turbulent region. It is notable that in the wake of the Tokyo conference, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan went to Afghanistan, the first such visit since that of Dag Hammarskjöld 42 years earlier.

Now there is a moment of hope and the 25 million people of Afghanistan (including the refugee diasporas) have an unprecedented opportunity to build an effective state. Ordinary Afghans from every part of the country have indicated their desire to seize this moment. But

they need both immediate and long-term international support. Such assistance needs to be rooted in the understanding that reconstruction and political recovery must go hand –in hand. Experience in other post-conflict countries, such as El Salvador and Mozambique, demonstrates that reconstruction cannot be separated from the revival of legitimate national political institutions.

### *The UN as catalyst*

In recent months, the UN has served as a catalyst, helping Afghans to agree on a framework for a broad-based government capable of earning public trust. We have helped to bring about the inauguration of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA), which for the moment represents Afghanistan in all of its external relations, and occupies the country's seat at the UN and in its specialized agencies. Later this year there will be an emergency Loya Jirga, a traditional council of representatives from the country's various tribes and factions. Their challenge will be to establish a Transitional Authority to succeed the AIA in planning for the country's future development, pending the advent of a fully representative national government.

Afghanistan presents the UN with one of its most daunting challenges ever, as it does the entire international community. But the world cannot afford to fail. A stable Afghanistan—living in peace, protecting its people's rights, carrying out its international obligations, denying terrorists safe haven, posing no threat to any of its neighbors, and enjoying their respect and support—is an achievable objective.

(By Salma Zulfikar—is a writer with the Integrated Regional Information Network, of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. She is based in Islamabad-UNDP.)

### Kabul

For Salim Qayum, a national staff member with the United Nations Development Programme in Kabul, being at the forefront of the reconstruction effort in his country is like a dream come true. “ I will contribute as much as possible and I hope and pray for a good future for Afghanistan,” he says. “This is a good chance for us and what people keep saying is: Don't miss out on it'.”

Born and raised in District Nine, close to downtown Kabul, Mr. Qayum explains that after more than two decades of war, one of the most pressing needs is to restore the economic viability of local communities. One of his main responsibilities—he has been with UNDP for two years—is to liaise with the country's Interim Administration, its technical advisers and non-governmental organizations, as part of the effort to develop an overall plan. As one of its first recovery projects, UNDP is assisting with the reconstruction of some 30 ministerial buildings in the capital. “ We are providing them with the technical know-how,” Mr. Qayum says, adding that one of the first priorities has been to winterize the buildings. “The windows are shattered, the doors are broken, the buildings are cold; people cannot work like this,” he says.

Noting the enormity of the challenges that lie ahead, Mr. Qayum stresses the necessity of Afghans and their benefactors realizing that there can be no quick fixes. “The country has been destroyed over 20 years, and it will not take two years to rebuild; we are looking at 20 years, maybe,” he predicts, adding: “Once we rebuild Afghanistan, we have to make sure that it moves with the times, and is not stuck in medieval times. There is a greater need for new technology to be introduced; this is the way forward for our country.”



### A need to help Afghans regain trust

Nafisa Nezam, a Programme Officer for the UN Office for Project Services, works alongside her Afghan UNDP colleagues. Involved in Community development work in Afghanistan since 1985, but forbidden to work after the Taliban seized power in 1996, Ms. Nezam recently returned home to the capital. Asked how she feels about her new role, she beams and says: "I was so excited when I came back to Kabul. Who else is going to do this, if we don't? Our country needs us now more than ever."

Emphasizing the importance of having a strong complement of Afghan staff, Wuria Karadaghy, Senior Programme Coordinator for the UNDP/PEACE Programme in Afghanistan, says "the social infrastructure needs to be upgraded and this can only be done by Afghans themselves with our support. Afghans built the country brick by brick. We must remember that Afghanistan is not Kosovo and the UN is not taking the lead role here." He adds that over the past two decades" experience shows that Afghans have lost their trust in the outside world. We need to help them regain trust; we must ensure that."

To that end, one of the earliest initiatives developed through UNDP is the US\$3 million. Recovery Employment of Afghanistan Programme, funded by the Government of Japan and implemented directly by the Afghan Interim Authority. Launched earlier this year, it will employ some 12,000 workers to clear and recycle rubble in Kabul, fashioning it into construction materials. Getting cash income circulating at a grassroots level through the local economy is another key objective, with the AIA identifying workers, including internally displaced people, women, the disabled and demobilized soldiers.

### The Reconstruction Agenda

International assistance to support Afghanistan's economic and social recovery and reconstruction is being guided by a comprehensive effort to catalogue both the country's most urgent short-term priorities as well as options for longer –term development initiatives.

The initial assessment foresees a need for \$15 billion over the next decade, exclusive of humanitarian aid, which is not covered by the report. The authors caution, however, that given past turmoil, much of the currently available data on Afghanistan is out of date and that because of time and security constraints in the lead-up to Tokyo, there was no opportunity to field test available information.

The Afghan Interim Authority has since identified its key priority areas for the channeling of reconstruction assistance. They include:

- Enhancement of administrative capacity, with emphasis on the payment of salaries and establishment of the government administration.
- Education, especially for girls.
- Health and Sanitation
- Infrastructure, in particular, roads, the electric power system and telecommunications.
- Reconstruction of the economic system, with urgent attention given to the severe shortage of currency.
- Agriculture and rural development, including food security, water management and revitalizing the irrigation system.

(Observation of Lakhdar Brahimi who has been the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Afghanistan since 1997.)

#### 4.3. Afghanistan: The Challenges Ahead; Nation at the Crossroads

In Tokyo in January, the international community responded to the AIA's (Afghanistan Interim Administration) plea for support by committing some US\$4.5 billion for the next five years, and as much as \$ 1,8 billion for 2002 alone, in addition to humanitarian commitments of around \$400 million this year. But as AIA Chairman Hamid Karzai told the historic conference, speed is everything; it is essential that promises be translated rapidly into action. At Tokyo, the task of helping to lead the recovery effort was squarely thrown to UNDP, both in terms of its role in mobilizing support for the AIA's spending plans, and in getting reconstruction aid projects moving quickly. For the risk is great that delay will result in Afghanistan continuing to function again as a collection of regions controlled by those with arms. If so, it will leave open the question of whether well-meaning modernists who lack the means to deliver on promises are any better than the stern fundamentalists forces who brought peace at the expense of freedom and progress.

The challenge now is for the AIA to take the baton of leadership and ownership of the recovery and reconstruction process. The coming months will be a test of multilateralism, something that has been in general decline for a decade. But if there is any place where circumstances demand a UN-led sharing of responsibility, programming and action, it is in the complex political environment of Afghanistan. Pooling of efforts and resources is the best way to enable a reliable, predictable, long term relationship of support for Afghan civil authorities as they embark on nation-wide programmes, aimed at binding the country together.

To that end, the ambitious international effort that has now begun amounts to both an act of faith and demonstration of trust in the capacity of Afghanistan's people to overcome the burden of their recent history.

(By David Lockwood-UNDP Deputy Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, with special responsibility for Afghanistan.)

#### 4.4. The Peace and Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan

The prime international interest now lies in the emergence of a peaceful and politically stable Afghanistan, which co-operates with the world community in the 'war on terrorism', instead of being a 'haven for terrorists'. It is in this context that the Bonn agreement, was accepted by various Afghan factions in December 2001, and is now being successfully implemented. A broad-based government has now set up in Kabul, which is an important step in the peace process. In addition, the international community has made generous commitments for financial and technical assistance for reconstruction and rehabilitation work. While these are significant developments, Afghanistan still has a long way to go to achieve the goals of peace, reconciliation, political order and the establishment of stable governing institutions. The govt. in Kabul faces huge challenges including establishing law and order, disarming of warlords, setting up a national army and reconstruction. Most challenging is the task of constructing representative institutions, which enable all the constituent ethnic and regional groups in Afghanistan to participate fully in political decision-making.

Opinion of Dr. Farouq Azam-Director Afghanistan Studies Forum –London, United Kingdom.

He visited Afghanistan in February 2004.

Security is a major problem in Afghanistan for men, set aside the security situation for women. There is little even discussion about social security in Afghanistan. The Taliban were slashing a lady if was not covered. But the warlords, currently in power, rape them as they see the faces of the women. They can choose and follow a pretty lady without fear. Not only there is no effective judiciary system but also not an effective government to protect women.

There is a new life in socio-economic sectors nowadays in Afghanistan compared to the Taliban era as there is no longer economic embargo on Afghanistan as was imposed on the Taliban. People are building their houses and most of them, especially in big cities, are so expensive even beyond the imagination of an ordinary Afghan. There is much money in Afghanistan nowadays and thus there are investments in trade and transport. There are two sources of incoming money: external money in the form of foreign donations/loan spending mainly through NGOs; and money generated internally through illegal trade of narcotics, mines excavating and the smuggling of antiquities and timber. The first source has a limited effect so far on the people's life while the second has far reaching effect. Health facilities are better than the time of the Taliban especially in big cities. However, the widely spread of cultivation of poppies and their trade has affected Afghans health wise more than ever.

Opinion of Sita Nazari –Women's Group Officer-Afghan Association of Harrow –London, United Kingdom.

Women of Afghanistan want independence for them having a secured life. According to their opinion though they are secured here in London but they will be happier if return back to Afghanistan and stay there with full security. Afghanistan is not at all safe for women. Women have been debarred from education, health facilities and work outside. Before Taliban Afghanistan was a mini America. "We want independence like the Western Women. We want to study and work but these days it is not possible. Taliban said, pregnant women were not allowed for check-up with male doctors. But if girls are debarred from education then there will be no female doctor. This is simply a dying situation for women of Afghanistan. According to Taliban it is written in Koran that women are not allowed to work outside, but it is a myth. Koran gives full freedom to women and also treats men and women equally. It is their own [Taliban] rule.

Now also the same people are in rule who were very much oppressive in Taliban regime. So there is no security for us. Though we miss our own country and our own people but Afghanistan is not safe for us. Hence we don't want to get back. We are safe here in London. But the government of United Kingdom very recently told that no asylum seekers would be stayed here after a certain period. Hence all the afghan refugees should be return back to Afghanistan. But we are in great problem as the country is not safe for us. How could we return back?

## **CONCLUSION**

All of us have an obligation to speak out. We may come from different backgrounds and faiths-but parents the world over love our children. We respect our mothers, our sisters and daughters. Fighting brutality against women and children is not the expression of a specific

culture; it is the acceptance of our common humanity—a commitment shared by people of good will on every continent. Because of the recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. Yet the terrorists who helped to rule that country now plot and plan in many countries. And they must be stopped. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.

The severe repression and brutality against women in Afghanistan is not a matter of legitimate religious practice. Muslims around the world have condemned the brutal degradation of women and children by the Taliban regime. The poverty, poor health, and illiteracy that the terrorists and the Taliban have imposed on women in Afghanistan do not conform to the treatment of women in most of the Islamic world, where women make important contributions in their societies. Only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women. Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish. The plight of women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty, carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control.

Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror ---not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan, we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us. (Laura Bush, First Lady; Radio Address to the Nation; Crawford, Texas; November 17, 2001.)

As an old Afghan saying goes, "Society is like a bird. If one wing is broken, then society cannot function." Afghanistan is a place now, which is considered as the hot cake for USA and other powerful countries. In this situation, safety and security of human being is a big question mark. Hence the new initiative towards realization of human rights and women's security is truly worth noted but the full-fledged achievement scenario is quite dismal and bleak at the moment. (W. Palmer lee, Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues at Western Illinois University March 28, 2002.)

Prior to the events of September 11, 2001, U.S. officials opposed the Taliban's subjugation of women through meeting with them to urge moderation, and working with other countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to curb Taliban excesses. Most recently, the Administration, led by President and Mrs. Bush and Secretary of State Powell, has spoken forcefully for the need to restore women's proper role in Afghanistan society. (Fact Sheet; Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues; Washington, DC; May 9, 2002.)

In its report "Afghanistan: Out of sight, out of mind: The fate of the Afghan returnees" Amnesty International highlights its concerns that, under current conditions, the inability of many refugees and Internal Displaced Persons (IDP) to sustain their return to their places of origin or preferred destination is leading to destitution and renewed cycles of displacement.

The organization stresses that sufficient and effective reconstruction assistance must be made available to Afghanistan, that an effective degree of security is provided in the whole of the country and that national institutions of justice, policing and social reform are able to operate in a rights-respecting manner throughout the country. (Afghanistan: Still not safe enough; ASA 11/015/2003 (Public); News Service No: 148, 23 June 2003.)

Two years after the ending of the Taliban regime, the international community and the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), led by President Hamid Karzai, have proved unable to protect women. Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the extent of violence faced by

women and girls in Afghanistan. The risk of rape and sexual violence by members of armed factions and former combatants is still high. Forced marriage, particularly of girl children, and violence against women in the family are widespread in many areas of the country. These crimes of violence continue with the active support or passive complicity of state agents, armed groups, families and communities. This continuing violence against women in Afghanistan causes untold suffering and denies women their fundamental human rights.

The criminal justice system is too weak to offer effective protection of women's right to life and physical security, and itself subjects them to discrimination and abuse. Prosecution for violence against women, and protection for women at acute risk of violence is virtually absent. Those women who overcome powerful barriers and seek redress are unlikely to have their complaints considered, or their rights defended.

In certain regions of Afghanistan, women accused of adultery are routinely detained, as are those who attempt to assert their right under Afghan law and international standards to marry a spouse of their choice.

The criminal justice system will have to play a central role if women are to realize their rights in Afghanistan. The role of an effective, functioning criminal justice system is to provide remedy to victims of human rights abuses and to bring accused people to justice in accordance with international standards for fair trial. In Afghanistan, these two roles are not clear and may lead to the criminalization of victims themselves. Impunity and the failure to provide justice and protection from abuse perpetuate violence against women, as the perpetrators do not consider themselves as criminals. (Afghanistan: No-one listens to us and no-one treats us as human-beings. Justice denied to women: AI Index: *ASA 11/023/2003*, 6 October 2003)

The recent history of Afghanistan shows that insecurity has higher cost than security. As the timetable set by the Bonn Agreement on the Constitutional Loya Jirga and national elections come close, the Transitional Administration and the international community must stand by their promise to the Afghan people.

“Human rights must not be allowed to fall to the bottom of the political agenda,” There is no shortcut to justice. Nor is justice the privilege of the few, concluded Irene Khan the Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Re-establishing the rule of law, including ending impunity, is an essential pre-requisite for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Recognizing this, the international community has pledged to assist Afghanistan in rebuilding and reforming its shattered justice system. The challenge of reconstructing a judicial system in the wake of 23 years of armed conflict is a formidable one. The lack of effective governmental control outside of Kabul, the existence of ongoing conflict and a *de facto rule* by commanders and armed groups in certain areas of Afghanistan are factors that are undermining the rule of law. Currently, the Afghan courts lack legitimacy and there is a perception among the people that the judicial system is unable to properly serve the interests of justice. The lack of public confidence in the court system is compounded by a history of reliance on informal judicial mechanism in Afghanistan. (*Afghanistan : Re- establishing the rule of law*; AI Index: *ASA 11/021/2003*, 14 August 2003.)

Under-representation of women in the judiciary

Gender inequality in Afghanistan permeates into the judiciary where women are greatly under-represented. A Supreme Court representative informed Amnesty International delegates that out of a total of 2,006 sitting judges, only approximately 27 are female.

With the exception of the heads of the juvenile and family courts in Kabul, women are excluded from key positions within the judiciary. In addition, where women do serve as judges they do not perform the same functions as their male counterparts. Female judges tend to act in the capacity of judicial clerks and are rarely involved in the adjudication of cases. There were no women judges present at any of the 17 proceedings observed by Amnesty International.

In interviews with Amnesty International, a number of senior judges expressed a lack of concern for, and even resistance to, the greater inclusion of women in the judiciary. The lack of concern with the under representation of women is evident in the fact that neither the Supreme Court, Ministry of Justice nor the Attorney General's office hold any statistical data on the number of women judges and prosecutors. Furthermore, in interviews with Amnesty International delegates, many senior judges expressed outright opposition to increasing the number of women judges. Other judges informed the organization that if there were to be more women in the judiciary then it would only be appropriate for them to serve in the family and juvenile courts. When Amnesty International delegates asked the Chief Justice whether he had a strategy for increasing the number of women judges, he informed the organization that "there are many unemployed men and our priority is to provide jobs for them. Once the problem of male unemployment has been resolved then we will turn our attention to women".

In March 2003, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW places an obligation on the government of Afghanistan to ensure the right of women to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government. In addition, both CEDAW and the ICCPR ratified by Afghanistan in 1983 set out that, where necessary, government should undertake affirmative action to ensure that men and women enjoy equal rights. Amnesty International's research demonstrated that while approximately 25 percent of law students at the University of Balkh and Kabul are women, only approximately 1.3% of judges are women. Amnesty International believes that affirmative action must be taken to ensure greater participation of women in the Afghan judiciary. (Afghanistan: No-one listens to us and no-one treats us as human-beings. Justice denied to women: AI Index: ASA 11/023/2003, 6 October 2003)

#### Human rights Violation in Afghanistan: Present Scenario

"Recent allegations of abuse of an Afghan police officer in August 2003 by US soldiers in Gardez highlight the imperative need for a transparent and accountable investigation into reports of human rights violations," according to Amnesty International. Amnesty International calls on the US and Afghan government to investigate all deaths in custody, including the deaths of two Afghans in US custody in December 2002, and for the results to be made public. Both governments must ensure that all officers involved in allegations of torture and misconduct are suspended pending the outcome of investigations. This should include those individuals responsible for the ill-treatment of prisoners and lengthy incommunicado detentions at detention facilities run by regional commanders, such as Shiberghan jail run by General Dostum in the north of Afghanistan.

Amnesty International also expressed concern that a recent request by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) to be allowed access to US managed detention facilities in Afghanistan has been refused. The US military has repeatedly denied access to independent

human rights bodies, including Amnesty International. We urge the US military in Afghanistan to ensure access is now granted. Amnesty urged the Afghan government to give full support to the AIHRC in their request to gain access to detention facilities. (ASA 11/008/2004 (Public); 13 May 2004)

First execution since fall of Taliban

On 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2004 Amnesty International reported shock at news of the first judicial execution known to have been carried out in Kabul since the fall of the Taliban. Abdullah Shah, a military commander from Paghman, was executed on approximately 19 April. Amnesty International urges President Karzai to declare a formal moratorium on executions in line with assurances given to Amnesty International in 2003.

Over the past year, Amnesty International has extensively documented the many failings of the criminal justice system in Afghanistan. The system is currently incapable of fulfilling even the most basic standards for fair trials as stressed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extra judicial, summary or arbitrary executions, following her observance of Abdullah Shah's trial proceedings.

Amnesty International fears that Abdullah Shah's execution may have been an attempt by powerful political players to eliminate a key witness to human rights abuses. During his detention, Abdullah Shah reportedly revealed first hand evidence against several regional commanders currently in positions of power against whom no charges have been brought. They are among the scores of other Afghans implicated in serious crimes, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. The lack of a fair and independent mechanism to deal with such crimes means that most of the accused have not been brought to justice and remain in positions of power from which they continue to threaten the Afghan population. This is of particular concern in the context of upcoming elections due to be held in September 2004 when it is believed that several of these individuals will be standing for political office. (First execution since fall of Taliban: AI Index: ASA 11/007/2004)

At this critical juncture progress has been made to: protection of women; reform of the criminal justice system and establishment of effective accountability mechanisms for the investigation and prosecution of all human rights violations both past and present.

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Annexure-1

*Afghanistan: Basic Facts*

*Geographical Location:* Afghanistan is located in the heart of South-Central Asia. It has China to the east, Iran to the west and Pakistan to the south. To the north lies, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

*Official Name:* It is officially known as the Islamic State of Afghanistan with its capital at Kabul. Afghanistan had three principal names, each of which lasted for centuries. Aryana in antiquity, Khurasan in the medieval era, and Afghanistan in the modern times.

*Official Languages:* The official languages are Pashto and Dari.

*Economy:* The economy is chiefly agricultural. The unit of currency is the Afghani.

*Major groups in Afghanistan*

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Settlements</b>
Pushtun	Pashto dialect	Hanafi Sunni, except Turri (Shia)	About 6.5 m in Afghanistan
Tajik	Dari, Taziki dialects	Hanafi Sunni, some Isma'iliya Shi'a	3.5 m in northern Afghanistan
Farsiwan (Parsiwan or Parsiban)	Dari	Imami Shi'a	About 600,000 mainly agriculturists, living near the Iranian border, southern and western Afghanistan
Qizilbash	Dari	Imami Shi'a	Scattered throughout Afghanistan
Hazara	Hazaragi	Some Imami Shi'a, Some Isma'iliya Shi'a, a few Sunni	About 800,000
Aimaq	Dari dialects with Turkic vocabulary	Hanafi Sunni	About 800,000 in Afghanistan
Moghul	Dari with Mongolian loan words. Some speak Pashto.	Hanafi Sunni	Several thousands live central and north Afghanistan
Uzbek	Uzbeki or Jagatai	Hanafi Sunni	1 m in Afghanistan
Turkoman	Turkic dialects	Hanafi Sunni	Several thousands in the Afghan Pamir mountains.
Pamiri (Ghalcha or Mountain Tajik)	Various Pamiri or East Iranian dialects	Some Isma'iliya Shi'a, some Hanafi Sunni.	Live mainly in Badakhshan, Wakhan
Baluch	Baluchi	Hanafi Sunni	About 100,000 in Afghanistan
Brahui	Brahui, also Pashto or Baluchi	Hanafi Sunni	About 2,00,000 in Afghanistan
Nuristani	Kafiri dialects	Hanafi Sunni	100,000 in Afghanistan.

Kohistani	Dardic	Hanafi Sunni	Southern fringes of Afghanistan.
Gujar	Dialect related to Hindustani	Hanafi Sunni	Eastern fringes of Nuristan

Annexure-2

Matters of Fact-Women in Afghanistan

- There is no country where women earn more than men.
- Two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women.
- By 2001, 168 countries-more than two-thirds of United Nations members-were party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Discrimination Against Women, the world's most comprehensive legal instrument outlining women's rights.
- In 1998, 8% of the world's cabinet ministers were women; Sweden was the only country with a majority of women ministers.
- A comprehensive study of 71 countries' news media found that only 17% of people interviewed, quoted or described in detail were women.
- In developing countries as a whole, 74% of girls and 76% of boys enrolled at Grade 1 reach Grade 5.
- 52% of girls and 59% of boys complete Grade 4 in the World's least developed nations. Women are 51% of the world's agricultural work force.
- In Southeast Asia women provide 90% of the labor force for rice production. Women and children comprise 80% of the world's refugees and displaced people.

*Sources: UNDP Human Development Report 2001, UNFPA The State of World Population 2001, The World's Women-Trends and Statistics 2000.*

Annexure-3

*Afghanistan Facts:*

- At least 1.5 million Afghans have been killed since the 1979-1989 war against the Soviets and in civil warfare since then. About 1.2 million people are displaced internally. Six million people have fled to Iran and Pakistan in the last 23 years; five million remain there- the world's largest refugee population.
- Before the Taliban took Kabul in 1996 and banned women from working, 50 percent of government employees, 70 percent of schoolteachers and 40 percent of doctors were women.
- Thirty-nine percent of boys and three percent of girls attend primary school. More than 90 percent of school age girls cannot read.
- The infant mortality rate is 165 per 1,000 live births; 257 of every 1,000 children born die before age five. Life expectancy at birth is 41 years of age.
- There is one physician for every 50,000 people in Afghanistan. Seventeen out of 1,000 pregnant women per year die in childbirth. Only 11 of the country's 31 provinces have essential obstetric care services.
- Twenty-three per cent of people have access to safe water (five percent rural, 40 percent urban)
- Twelve percent of the populations have adequate sanitation.
- Landmines and other ordnance that kill about 10 people a day contaminate more than 700 square kilometers of land. There are an estimated 10 million mines.
- In 1999 Afghanistan produced 75 percent of the world's illicit opium. In some provinces up to 95 percent of households earned income from selling opium.
- There is one telephone line per 1,000 inhabitants.

*Sources: United Nations and affiliated agencies.*



Annexure-4

Women and Asylum determination in UK.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), around half of uprooted people in any refugee population are women and girls. Stripped of the protection of their homes, their government and often their family structure, women in refugee situations tend to find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation. They face the rigors of long journeys into exile, harassment or indifference from officials who are supposed to protect them and frequent sexual abuse not just in their home countries but in refugee camps and other places they think will be safe. Women must cope with these threats while at the same time being the nurse, teacher, breadwinner and physical protector of their families. On arrival in a safe country like the UK, women then have to re-live their stories through a maze of bureaucratic and legal processes.

Drawing on existing gender guidelines in other countries like Norway, the UK's Refugee Women's Legal Group (RWLG) published its *Gender Guidelines for the Determination of Asylum Claims in the UK* in 1998. Heaven Crawley, currently Director of the Migration and Equalities Programme at the Institute for Public Policy, explains why the guidelines were drafted: "In practice, things were going wrong for women in the determination of their claim. The guidelines aim to highlight to legal representatives, community groups and others that women do have difficulty accessing the asylum system, suggest ways of ensuring women's specific experiences are presented and also challenge the existing paradigm that a refugee is male fleeing political persecution."

Unlike the Norwegian guidelines, the RWLG guidelines go so far as listing all the different elements set out in the refugee definition to explain how gender can affect each criterion individually. They also emphasize procedural and evidential issues. According to the Refugee Convention, in order to be recognized as a refugee, an asylum applicant must fear a form of harm that can be characterized as persecution. There are, in fact, many forms of harm that are specific to women. These include, but are not limited to sexual violence and abuse, rape, female genital mutilation, marriage-related harm, violence within the family or community, domestic slavery, forced abortion, forced sterilization, forced marriage, honor killings or bride burning.

Source: *INEXILE* (Gender guidelines in the UK.)