

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AFGHAN REFUGEE
A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF THE DISPLACEMENT EXPERIENCE ON
AFGHAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN LIVING IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC
OF IRAN AND PAKISTAN

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis

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Table of Abbreviations and Terms

Abbreviation	Complete term and definition
BAFIA	Iranian Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs
ICRI	International Consortium for Refugees in Iran
<i>madrasah</i>	Religious schools in Pakistan
<i>mehr</i>	Dowry
<i>mohageren</i>	Persian term for migrant
<i>muhajereen</i>	Persian term for traveler
<i>Hisb-e Islami</i>	Islamic Political Party
IMO	International Migration Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
<i>panahandagan</i> or <i>panohand</i>	Persian term for refugee
<i>Pushtunwali</i>	The Pushtun way
Refugee Convention	1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USCRI	U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
WFP	World Food Programme

Abstract:

With the goal of better understanding the impact of displacement on refugee communities and its affect on rebuilding efforts back home, this paper maps out the Afghan refugee displacement experience. I examine the impact that displacement has had on Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan by focusing on two groups: women and children and adolescents. I argue that the period in exile, although disorienting and traumatic, has also had a profound empowering impact on the lives of the Afghan women and, to a lesser extent, children. Both the migration to another state and the experience of living in a host country has altered their way of life. Interestingly, the refugees in Iran and Pakistan had divergent experiences reflecting the different government refugee policies, composition of refugee community, and cultural, religious, and social values of the host states. I analyze the empowering outcomes of displacement by examining a number of key issues, namely livelihood and economic coping strategies, education, and gender and familial relations of Afghan women and children living in Iran and Pakistan.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The kaleidoscope of traditional patterns has been shaken – leadership, women, and even children are affected. New voices are being heard, new values emerging. Afghan society will never be the same again.”

--Akbar Ahmed, Pakistani Anthropologist¹

Over the course of the last few decades, Afghanistan has been torn apart by war, geopolitical power struggles, foreign occupation, and a devastating drought. The Afghan people have struggled to cope with the ravages of manmade and natural disasters that have befallen their homeland. The internal and external conflicts has led to decades of civil unrest and the complete break down of the state structure as well as to the displacement of over twenty percent of the country’s population, the largest refugee population worldwide.² The majority of the displaced took refuge in the neighboring countries of Iran and Pakistan. The displacement resulted in not only the loss and destruction of land, sources of livelihood, and personal belongings, but the Afghans lives and their social fabric were left in complete disarray—families faced extreme poverty and hardship, often for the first time; new, frequently strange and unfamiliar, living conditions have affected the social roles and norms of men and women; and former familial, ethnic, and communal support structures have collapsed.

¹ Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont (1988), “The Afghan Refugee in Pakistan: An Ambiguous Identity,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 1(2): 1988, 141-142 citing Akbar Ahmad (1986) *Pakistan Society: Islam, Ethnicity and Leadership in South Asia*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 166.

² Sarah Petrin (2002), “Refugee Return and State Reconstruction: A Comparative Analysis,” UNHCR, New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper No. 66, 1 (accessed January 7, 2005); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ>.

Although millions continue to live in exile in Iran, Pakistan, and around the world, millions of refugees have slowly returned home, in particular since 2001.³ In order to understand the impact that returning refugees will have on the reconstruction of Afghanistan as well as the ongoing affect that they will have on the host countries, it is important to take a closer look at the influence that the displacement experience has had on Afghans living abroad, specifically in Iran and Pakistan. By examining the refugee experience of the Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, one gains a better understanding of the complexities of displacement and its impact on individuals, families, communities, and the host population.

Numerous scholars and practitioners have examined and written about the affect of displacement on individual's lives. Some researchers have argued that displacement can lead to trauma, dependency, and further displacement. In terms of women and children refugees, some academics perceive them as passive victims, too ill equipped to cope with the tumultuous and demanding situations. Other researchers argue that the displacement experience, in fact, can be an empowering experience—providing women with the skills, knowledge, and self-esteem to challenge their traditional roles and place in society.⁴

In this paper, I examine the impact of displacement on Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan by focusing on two groups: women and children and adolescents. I find

³ For example, in 2003 alone, UNHCR assisted approximately 142,000 Afghans to return home from Iran and about 125,000 returned on their own. And, over 343,100 Afghans repatriated from Pakistan under UNHCR's guidance in 2003. U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), *Iran: World Survey 2004 Country Report*, (accessed March 18, 2005); available at <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?area=investigate&subm=19&ssm=29&cid=118>; U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), *Pakistan: World Survey 2004 Country Report*, (accessed March 18, 2005); available at <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?area=investigate&subm=19&ssm=29&cid=149>.

⁴ Patricia Daley (1991), "Gender, Displacement and Social Reproduction: Setting Burundi Refugees in Western Tanzania," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 4(3): 248.

that the period in exile, although filled with great hardships and trauma, also had a profound empowering impact on the lives of the Afghan women and, to a lesser extent, children. Both the migration to another state and the impact of living in a host country altered their way of life. The refugee experience resulted in challenging traditional social norms, provided women and children with new skills, and led to independence and self-sufficiency for many. I analyze the impact of displacement, the traumatic and empowering outcomes, by examining a number of key issues: livelihood and economic coping strategies; education; and gender and familial relations of Afghan women and children living in Iran and Pakistan. Interestingly, the refugees in Iran and Pakistan had differing experiences reflecting the different government refugee policies, composition of refugee community, and the cultural, religious, and social values of the host states. This is reflected in how and if certain traditional social norms are approached and challenged and its impact on the women and children's lives of the two refugee communities within these four key issues.

I begin by briefly outlining the methodology of my research and theoretical framework. I then take a closer look at each country case study, Iran and Pakistan respectively. In each case, I first outline the historical and social context of Afghanistan, migration patterns, demographics, and the evolution of refugee policies in the host states. I then discuss the impact of the displacement experience on the four issues. Lastly, I draw conclusions and recommendations for what these findings and observations signify for Afghanistan's drive towards reconstruction and future development.

SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

In his research on poorer host countries, Robert Chambers observes that, "...host populations, and especially the poorer and more vulnerable hosts, have been neglected in analysis and action."⁵ Chambers' observation is exemplified by the cases of Pakistan and, in particular, Iran. A number of Pakistani and foreign researchers, think tanks, and international aid agencies have written reports analyzing the Afghan refugee situation in Pakistan. However, there continues to be many gaps in the research and there is need for further analysis on the Afghan refugee experiences in Pakistan, impact on host community, remittances, livelihood strategies, healthcare, and so forth. Iran, on the other hand, has been virtually ignored. During the last few decades, there has been little in-depth study of the refugee situation in Iran—impact of the refugees on the Iranian economy, society, and culture; living conditions of the refugees in Iran; and government policy and actions towards refugees. There are a number of factors that have made it particularly difficult for both foreign and Iranian researchers to examine the refugee problems in Iran. First, due to Iran's political, economic, and cultural isolation since the 1979 Islamic revolution, foreign scholars have had difficulty entering Iran and accessing relevant information. For example, in 2003 alone, half of all international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in Iran withdrew from working in Iran citing frustrations with government restrictions and difficulty accessing the refugee communities.⁶ Second, since the majority of refugees are dispersed throughout Iranian cities and villages rather than camps, it is difficult for both foreign as well as Iranian scholars to thoroughly scrutinize the refugee situation.

⁵ Robert Chambers (1986), "Hidden Losers?: The Impact of Rural Refugees and Refugee Programs on Poorer Hosts," *International Migration Review*, vol. 20(2): 246.

⁶ USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2004*.

Despite these limitations there are a number of excellent reports and studies written by Afghan, Iranian, Pakistani, and foreign scholars. In this paper, I have conducted a literature review of these sources as well as reports by international organizations. Other sources used are general forced migration literature, media and press releases, conference materials, and historical and economic materials on Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan.

Before beginning my analysis, it is important to first define what it means be a refugee for the international community as well as an Afghan. The legal and generally observed international definition of a refugee is set out in Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention).⁷ Iran has ratified both the Refugee Convention and the 1967 Optional Protocol and uses the term presented in the Convention while Pakistan has not. As for a refugee in a protracted situation, as is the case for Afghans who have been living in Pakistan and Iran for 10 to 20 plus years, Jeff Crisp defines “as living in exile for five years or more, with no immediate hope of finding a durable solution to their predicament by way of voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement.”⁸

⁷ “... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” United Nations Treaty Collection [as of 5 February 2002], 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees Participants, *adopted* July 28, 1951 (*entered into force* April 22, 1954) (accessed February 19, 2005); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/treaty2ref.htm> [hereinafter Refugee Convention].

⁸ Jeff Crisp (2002), “No solutions in sight: the problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa,” UNHCR, New Issues in Refugee Research Working Paper No. 75, 1 (accessed January 7, 2005); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ>.

An Afghan, on the other hand, defines him or herself not by these legal or generally accepted definitions of what it means to be a refugee. The Afghan definition of being a refugee defines their sense of self and future. In her study of Afghans living in Pakistan, Inger Boesen discusses the Afghan definition of being a refugee:

When the Afghan refugees speak about themselves, they do not use the Persian term for ‘refugees’—*panohand*—but ‘travelers,’ *muhajereen*. In doing so they express their desire to return, as well as their hopes that the circumstances that drove them into exile will end in the foreseeable future.⁹

This definition illustrates the tenacity of the Afghans during their years in exile.

⁹ Inger W. Boesen (1990), “Honour in exile: continuity and change among Afghan refugees,” in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds., Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 160.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Conceptions of Displacement

A number of theories have developed over the years to describe the impact of displacement among refugee communities. One of the prevailing theories in forced migration research is the ‘dependency syndrome’ (also referred to as ‘welfare mentality’ or ‘refugee mentality’). ‘Dependency,’ as Gaim Kibreab describes, is defined in two ways. First, it is the failure to attain economic self-sufficiency as a result of ongoing reliance on humanitarian and financial assistance. Secondly, it insinuates the inability to function independently and to be resourceful enough in order to attain short and long-term self-sufficiency even in the presence of economic and livelihood interventions.¹⁰ Accordingly, within this framework, women and children are viewed as principally susceptible to the ‘dependency syndrome.’ In countless forced migration literature, women and children are described and defined as the ‘vulnerable groups’ or victims.¹¹

In his prominent article on Somali refugee camps, Kibreab argued that in fact, the ‘dependency syndrome’ meaning “lack of initiative and motivation to work” did not prevail among camp refugees. Although the refugees had the support system of the camp infrastructure, the refugees were still engaged in pursuing economic activities within the camp, albeit on a marginal level.¹² The Somali refugees showed signs of “independence” and “self-sufficiency,” which Kibreab defines as:

Independence refers to the capability to adopt responses which rely on traditional support systems, coping mechanisms, organizational and technical skills. Independence is not only an indispensable instrument to achieve sustainable material well-being. It is also key to non-

¹⁰ Gaim Kibreab (1993), “The Myth of Dependency among Camp Refugees in Somalia 1979-1989,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 6(4): 330.

¹¹ Judy El-Bushra (2000), “Gender and Forced Migration: Editorial,” *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 9: 5; See also Srilakshmi Gururaja (2000) “Gender Dimensions of Displacement,” *Forced Migration Review* vol. 9: 13.

¹² Kibreab, 330-334.

material advancement. An independent community has the ability to be self-reliant and to retain and develop its cultural identity.¹³

Self-sufficiency refers to a community's capability to produce the material conditions necessary for its continuance, with or without enabling support in a sustainable manner. It refers to a situation in which refugee settlements can function effectively without requiring material assistance from outside.¹⁴

Harrell-Bond made a similar observation of the Rwandan refugees residing in the Ugandan refugee camps.¹⁵ Others have also found that as time passed refugees began to look to other ways to support their families and family structures by utilizing various survival strategies.¹⁶ As Susan Banki concluded, "refugees are not simply victims of persecution and recipients of aid but thinking individuals with survival strategies and coping abilities."¹⁷ Afghan refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan have also shown signs of "independence" and "self-sufficiency," particularly among the female population. This is illustrated by the diverse range of economic and livelihood coping strategies that have been utilized by both women and children to support their families, which I will explore in the subsequent chapters. Although in Pakistan, due to the high level of foreign assistance, there are some signs of dependency.

The Afghan women and children, although deeply traumatized by the migration and displacement experience, are not victims but survivors. By examining the impact of displacement of women refugee, I will explore the empowering elements of displacement presented by a wide-range of scholars. For example, Charlotte Lindsey, in her report studying the impact of armed conflict and women, has found that social upheaval (i.e.

¹³ *Ibid*, 330.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 331.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, citing B. Harrell-Bond (1982), "Ugandan Refugees in the Sudan Part I: The Long Journey," *UFSI Reports* No. 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 310-341 citing P.B. Caffrey (1983) Qoryoley Social Survey, SCF USA.

¹⁷ Susan Banki (2004), "Refugee Integration in the Intermediate Term: A Study of Nepal, Pakistan, and Kenya," UNHCR, New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper No. 108, 18 (accessed January 7, 2005); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ>.

conflict and forced migration) tends to change women's traditional roles. Armed conflict and displacement can instigate an increase of female-headed households, with men dying, displaced, or simply missing. The ensuing poverty and sense of loss greatly impacts women's lives. Traditional protection and support mechanisms may no longer function, which increases the insecurity of the women and children left behind. Nonetheless, this may result in women being forced to take on more responsibilities, traditionally assumed by the man, shifting gender roles and relations. These changes can result in the development of new skills and confidence as women become actively involved in rebuilding the lives of their own families as well as their communities in exile. Women refugees can become "independent" and "self-sufficient," reflecting the empowerment of women.¹⁸ Patricia Daley, in her examination of Burundese refugee women, found that the displacement experience has led to more multifarious roles within the household structure.¹⁹

Among the Afghan women refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan, as I will discuss in the next few chapters, this transformation that Lindsey, Daley, and others have outlined has taken place in some communities. By specifically taking a closer look at livelihood and economic survival strategies, education, and familial and gender relations, I examine how the displacement experience has shifted traditional roles for some women and children and increased their independence and resilience. By presenting and analyzing the Afghan traditional gender and family norms and beliefs prior to displacement and during the early years of displacement, I trace how (and if) women and children's roles have shifted and been empowered during their time in exile.

¹⁸ Charlotte Lindsey (2001), *Women Facing War. ICRC Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women*. Geneva: ICRC.

¹⁹ Daley, 259-260.

In this paper, I focus on two case studies, Afghan women and children refugees residing in Iran and Pakistan. In Iran, the majority of the refugees are dispersed throughout the country and in the urban centers, rather than camps or refugee villages. Accordingly, the majority of the studies focus on refugees living in and around Mashad, a city in northeast Iran, and home to a large Afghan community. Other studies are in refugee areas throughout Iran and in all the major cities: Kerman, Shiraz, Sistan-Baluchistan, Mashad, and Tehran. A few of the reports attained data from a few of the refugee camps, along the Afghanistan border in the northeastern provinces. On the other hand, in Pakistan, the data is primarily from the refugee camps and refugee villages along the border in the North West Frontier Province. And, some reports evaluate the Afghan communities in Peshawar and other urban center.

The general literature available on Afghan refugees concludes that the majority of the Afghan who sought refuge in Iran and Pakistan are predominately from the lower-middle class (i.e. shopkeepers) and rural (i.e. small farmers, tenants).²⁰ On the whole, the most educated, wealthy, and/or urban Afghans left for Europe, United States, and other Western states. Sayd Bahaouddin Majrooh concluded from his examination of the Afghan intelligentsia that the Afghan urban elite faced serious problems staying in

²⁰ See e.g., Boesen, 160. Pierre Centlivres (1993) "A 'State of the Art' Review of Research on Internally Displaced, Refugees and Returnees from and in Afghanistan," prepared for the Planning Committee of the 4th International Research and Advisory Panel Conference on Forced Migration (IRAP), London, UK, January 1994, 4-6 (accessed February 9, 2005); available at Forced Migration Online. Ewan Anderson (1987) "Afghan Refugees, Geopolitical Context," paper for 4th International Conference – Refugees in Islamic World, Lake Como, Italy, Oct. 11-16, 1987, 15 (accessed February 9, 2005); available at Forced Migration Online.

Pakistan and integrating themselves in the refugee camps and villages.²¹ Therefore, even though the studies, for the most part, did not specify the demographics of the Afghan communities in Iran and Pakistan, I will be using the general assumption that the refugees are from rural, lower-socioeconomic classes, unless otherwise noted.

I have focused the discussion on Iran and Pakistan due to the high number of Afghans in both countries. Both states have hosted the largest number of Afghans, and incidentally refugees, worldwide. Furthermore, the history, cultural, and geopolitical history between these countries and Afghanistan makes it a particularly interesting comparison and discussion. All three have deeply embedded historical and cultural connections and have been even more politically intertwined during the last few decades with the migratory movements. The contrast between Pakistan and Iran—the different conceptions of hosting a refugee (camp vs. non-camp), religious values (*Shia* vs. *Sunni*), levels of economic development,²² and geopolitical ties to Afghanistan—also adds a unique dimension to the analysis as well. These contrasts have resulted in differences in the refugee experience for the women and children in the two states, which will be explored throughout the paper. And, lastly, I have focused my discussion on women and children both since a large number of the Afghan refugees, in Iran and Pakistan, are women and children, and that these two groups draw out both the empowering as well as detrimental effects of displacement and exile.

²¹ Sayd Bahaouddin Majrooh, “Afghan Intellectuals in Exile: Philosophical and Psychological Dimensions,” in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds., Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 71, 81; *See also* Boesen, 160.

²² According to the World Bank, in 2003, Iran’s GDP is USD 137.1 billion while Pakistan is USD 82.3 billion. World Bank Group, Data and Statistics – Data by Country (accessed April 27, 2005); available at <http://www.worldbank.org/data/countrydata/countrydata.html>.

Chapter 1: Afghan Women and Children Refugee Experience in the Islamic Republic of Iran

BACKGROUND: HISTORY, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND GOVERNMENT'S REFUGEE POLICIES

History and Demographics of Afghan Migration to Iran

Since the mid-1970s, the Islamic Republic of Iran has played host to millions of Afghan refugees. As the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) observed in 1999: “Geography, as well as the Iranian government’s propensity to seek to demonstrate the Iranian’s generosity toward fellow Muslims, has made Iran the country of choice for refugees from [...] Afghanistan since the mid-1970s.”²³ A number of historical, religious, and cultural ties link Iran and Afghanistan and have perpetuated the cycle of migration. Both share cultural and historical proximity—language (Persian speaking), ethnicity, and cultural traditions (i.e. *Norooz* celebrations). Afghanistan, with a population of 19 percent *Shia* Muslims,²⁴ has close ties with the *Shia* dominated Iran.

These links as well as Afghanistan’s turbulent twentieth century has led to a history of migration to Iran. Modern Afghanistan has had a history of westward migration dating back to the reign of Emir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901) when an exodus of tens if not hundreds of thousands of ethnic Hazaras, *Shia* Muslims, left for Iran. Stalinist collectivism in Afghanistan ignited the exile of hundreds of thousands of refugees to Iran.²⁵ Differences in economic development between the two states have driven economic and labor migration since the 1960s, which heightened during the great

²³ U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), *Iran: World Survey 2003 Country Report*, (accessed February 20, 2005); available at <http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/mideast/2003/iran.cfm>.

²⁴ CIA, *The World Factbook – Afghanistan* (accessed March 29, 2005); available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html>.

²⁵ Centlivres (1993), 4.

famine in 1970-71.²⁶ However, the largest and most recent influx of refugees is due to the wars that have occurred in Afghanistan. After the 1979 Soviet invasion, millions of Afghans sought refuge in Iran. They were primarily ethnic Hazaras, *Shia*, and from rural, lower socio-economic classes.²⁷ According to the preliminary 1986 national census figures, 2.6 million persons were listed as refugees of foreign nationality. The largest group, approximately 2.3 million, was Afghans; other groups included Iraqis, Azeris, and other groups from neighboring countries fleeing conflict.²⁸ The impact of the refugee population is illustrated by the fact that if the refugees were excluded from the 1976-1986 average annual population growth rates, it would drop from 3.8 to 3.4 percent.²⁹

The size of the refugee population rose dramatically throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, due to the continuing instability and conflict in Afghanistan, at one point reaching over 4 million. In 1988, the number of Afghan refugees was officially recorded as 2.35 million and by 1992 had reached 2.8 million.³⁰ This was a consequence of a large number of Afghan Hazaras fleeing to Iran in 1991 to avoid economic destitution following massive flood damage to their land. And, beginning in 1995, another wave of Afghans fled to Iran following the Taliban takeover of Herat.³¹ The migratory movements have subsided but continued to the present. Today, Iran hosts approximately 1.25 million refugees (approximately 1.1 million Afghani, 150,000 Iraqis, and 5,000

²⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

²⁷ Anderson (1987), 15.

²⁸ Library of Congress, *Country Studies, Iran: Refugees* (accessed April 5, 2004); available from [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+ir0043\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+ir0043)).

²⁹ Akbar Aghajanian (1991), "Population Change in Iran, 1966-1986: A Stalled Demographic Transition," *Population and Development Review*, vol. 17(4): 711.

³⁰ Peter Marsden (1996), "British Agencies Afghanistan Group Visit of Information Coordinator to Iran: Afghanistan and Pakistan from 17th June to 5th July 1996," presented at Reconstructing Livelihoods: Towards New Approaches to Resettlement Conference, Refugee Studies Programme, University of Oxford, Sept. 9-13, 1996, 3 (accessed February 10, 2004); available at Forced Migration Online.

³¹ *Ibid*.

other groups), making it host to one of the largest refugee populations in the world and the biggest non-Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.³²

The Islamic Republic of Iran's Refugee Policies: Evolution from Open to Closed Door, 1980 - 2005

Over the course of the last two and half decades, Iran's policy towards refugees has evolved from an open door to a more restrictive policy. Unlike Pakistan and other neighboring countries, Iran has upheld its international obligations. In 1976, Iran ratified both the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.³³ Prior to ratifying the Refugee Convention, in 1963, the government of Iran had adopted an ordinance relating to refugees that provided a legal and administrative framework to grant asylum to refugees, which remains in force.³⁴

Despite the large influx of refugees during the 1980s, Iran was a hospitable host and opened its doors to the millions. The refugees were for the most part welcomed and well-integrated into Iranian society.³⁵ During the first decade of migration, the government continued the pre-revolutionary practice of issuing Refugee Booklets (or white cards), albeit on an irregular basis. The white cards are the only government document, which use the word for refugees, *panahandegan*. The white card provides for rights and benefits, such as, "exemption from taxes, the right to work, and to obtain Convention travel documents, but it also requires its holder to renew their status every

³² USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2004*.

³³ Refugee Convention; United Nations Treaty Collection [as of 5 February 2002], Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted Jan. 31, 1967 (entered into force Oct. 4, 1967) (accessed February 19, 2004); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/treaty5.htm>.

³⁴ USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2003*.

³⁵ Marsden (1996), 8; See also Peter Marsden (1999), "Repatriation and Reconstruction: The Case of Afghanistan," in *The End of the Refugee Cycle*, eds., Black, Richard and Koser, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 79-83; International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) (June 2004), "Afghan Refugees in Iran: From Refugee Emergency to Migration Management."

three months and to report movement and residence to the authorities.”³⁶ Interestingly, since the revolution, the white cards have been primarily issued to highly educated and more professional individuals, and more often to an Iraqi refugee than Afghani.³⁷

For the most part, during the 1980, the government issued “blue cards” to Afghans as means of official registration and documentation. “The blue cards indicated that Iran recognized its holders not as ‘refugees’ per se... but rather as ‘involuntary migrants,’ *mohageren*.”³⁸ Refugees with blue cards are officially registered and documented with the government. The blue cards also permit the refugees to register for assisted transport provided by International Migration Organization (IMO) to various locations in Afghanistan. The most important component of the blue cards is that it entitles refugees to subsidized health care, primary and secondary education, and food subsidies, on par with Iranian citizens.³⁹

After the initial influx of refugees, the government agency, Iranian Bureau of Aliens and Foreign Immigrant Affairs (BAFIA), proceeded to set up camps in the eastern and western provinces, where the refugees were processed, provided basic assistance, and allowed the use of municipal services such as free access to public schools for registered refugee children.⁴⁰ Unlike its neighbor, Pakistan, Iran initially did not restrict the refugees to the camps and have given refugees freedom to move throughout Iran and to find their niche within Iranian society. Consequently, only about 3-5 percent of refugees,

³⁶ Marsden (1996), 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4. See also U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCRI) (1999), “Refugees in Iran: Who Should Go? Who Should Stay?” *Refugee Reports*, vol. 20(6): 7-8.

⁴⁰ Library of Congress, Country Report; U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), *Iran: World Survey 1997 Country Report*, (accessed April 5, 2004); available at <http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/mideast/1997/iran.htm>.

generally the most destitute, live in camps⁴¹ “a fact the Iranian government cites with pride, saying, “[t]he Islamic Republic of Iran, in line with its humanitarian policies has never forced refugees to remain in camps.”⁴² Refugees are dispersed throughout Iran, residing in both rural and urban areas, living amongst the local population. Afghan refugees live in most major cities but the biggest communities are found in Khorasan, Sistan-Baluchestan, Tehran, Kerman, Fars Markazi, and Semnan. The most vulnerable live in the poorer rural sections of two eastern provinces bordering Afghanistan, Sistan and Baluchestan and Khorasan.⁴³ According to BAFIA, 55 percent of refugees live in the three eastern provinces and in some cities the refugee/host ratio is one to one.⁴⁴ (For a map of Iran and location of these cities, refer to Appendix I)

Iran has shouldered most of the burden of hosting millions of refugees during the past two decades, both to the Islamic Republic’s isolationist attitudes as well as the general tendency of poorer host states bearing more of the financial burden. Due to Iran’s isolation, the refugees in Iran are practically a forgotten group. During the first decade, Iran received virtually no international assistance for the refugees. From 1980 to 1983, Iran received no international support and between 1983 and 1989 the average UNHCR assistance to Iran was 13.7 million, which was significantly less than Pakistan’s 69.8 million. This assistance deficiency was compounded by the fact that on average Pakistan received approximately nineteen times more in total bilateral Official

⁴¹ USCRI, “Who Should Go?” 1; *See also* USCRI, *Iran World Survey 2003*.

⁴² USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2003*.

⁴³ *Ibid*; *See also* International Consortium for Refugees in Iran (ICRI) official website (accessed February 9, 2005); available at <http://www.icri-ir.com>.

⁴⁴ Roy Williams (1992), “Trip Report: NGO Mission to Explore Situation of Afghan Refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Refugees Studies Centre (accessed February 10, 2005); available at Forced Migration Online.

Development Assistance Commitments from 1980 to 1989.⁴⁵ The paucity of international assistance was a consequence of the United States and its allies showing reluctance to fund programs, even for refugees, due to the revolution and the hostage crisis. Furthermore, the Iranian government also did not want the presence of Western agencies, even UNHCR (which opened its office in 1983).⁴⁶ During the 1990s, international assistance and action had increased considerably. Between 1992 and 1999, the average UNHCR assistance to Iran was 15.2 million, which was slightly less than Pakistan's 21.3 million. However, on average Pakistan received five times more in total bilateral Official Development Assistance Commitments during the same period.⁴⁷ Despite the increased international assistance, the Iranian government complained of the inadequacy of the contributions and the growing cost of hosting the millions that flooded their borders. Hence, the Iranian government estimates that every refugee costs Iran \$674 a year, and the international community only shares \$6 of this burden.⁴⁸

Over the years, the heavy financial burden, deteriorating economic conditions, geopolitical circumstances, and asylum fatigue (caused by growing numbers of refugees and negative host attitudes) has resulted in increasingly more restrictive government policies and laws towards the refugees. By the early 1990s, the Iranian reception of the refugees changed. Local authorities no longer saw local integration as a lasting solution,

⁴⁵ Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Program (OECD/OCDE) (1981), *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Aid Recipients 1977-1980: Disbursements, Commitments, Country Indicators* (Paris: OECD), 128, 182; OECD/OCDE (1991), *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Aid Recipients 1986-1989: Disbursements, Commitments, Country Indicators* (Paris: OECD), 152, 218.

⁴⁶ Hiram A. Ruiz (2002), "Afghanistan: conflict and displacement 1978 to 2001," *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 13: 9.

⁴⁷ OECD/OCDE (2004), *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Aid Recipients 1998-2002: Disbursements, Commitments, Country Indicators* (Paris: OECD), 155, 201; OECD/OCDE (1997), *Geographical Distribution of Financial Flows to Aid Recipients 1992-1996: Disbursements, Commitments, Country Indicators* (Paris: OECD), 117, 164.

⁴⁸ USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2003*.

instead turning to repatriation and restricting the number of refugees. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the collapse of the communist regime, large-scale repatriation began in 1992.⁴⁹ In conjunction with the repatriation program as well as trying to prevent the influx of refugees, the government implemented a series of restrictive measures, namely: changing documentation; restricting refugee's movements; imposing employment and education restrictions; closing borders; and a number of more extreme measures. After 1992, the government stopped issuing blue cards to refugees. Subsequently, the refugees who entered Iran hereafter are deemed illegal, undocumented, and have no right to seek asylum. Iranian authorities are unwilling to register new arrivals, violating their international obligations under the Refugee Convention. Furthermore, between 1992 and 1994, thousands of Afghan refugees lost their legal status due to a systematic campaign of confiscating blue cards of refugees living in the Khorasan province.⁵⁰ They cannot travel, work, and are unable to access public schools or health services.⁵¹

In 1993, the government implemented new documentation measures by issuing temporary registration for a period of three months. The temporary documentation did not provide refugees access to health care, education, food, limits their access to work, and, most importantly, gives no legal rights. The precarious nature of the documentation does not allow them to register refugee claims. The government also limited the freedom of movements of refugees and removed the provision of food, healthcare, and education for unregistered refugees. Since, the fall of the Taliban, the government has openly

⁴⁹ Marsden (1996), 8.

⁵⁰ Catherine Squire and Negar Gerami (1998), "Afghan refugees in Iran: the needs of women and children," *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 3: 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

called for the return of all Afghans, resorting to forced repatriation, harassment, and passing more and more restrictions on the refugees. Recently, the government announced that it is official Iranian policy for the remaining one million Afghans to return home within the next year.⁵² Meanwhile, refugees' inflows have continued with the ongoing violence, economic problems, and crippling drought in Afghanistan.

The background on the history of the migration and government policies are important to keep in mind as we examine the impact of displacement on Afghan women and children in the following sections of this chapter.

LIVELIHOOD AND ECONOMIC COPING STRATEGIES: REDEFINING TRADITIONAL ROLES OF AFGHAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN

As outlined above, the Iranian government's policy of not confining refugees to camps or certain areas allowed for freedom of movement. Consequently, the refugees were allowed to move throughout Iran to find work, enabling them not to be dependent on outside aid but to become self-reliant. This is compounded by the fact that the Iranian government has not given any financial assistance and support to the refugees and there are few international or domestic NGOs working in Iran, forcing the Afghans to be more self-sufficient, to endure greater hardships, and to predominately live on the economic margins.⁵³ As observed by researchers and NGOs, for the most part, Afghans have filled the "dirty, dangerous, demeaning jobs," working on construction sites, digging ditches,

⁵² France Harrison, "Iran's Afghan refugees feel pressure to leave," *BBC News*, Nov. 1, 2004 (accessed November 1, 2004); available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3971711.stm.

⁵³ Teresa Poppelwell (2002), *Afghanistan: Forced Migration Research Guide* (accessed February 5, 2005); available from Forced Migration Online; See also Homa Hoodfar (2004), "Families on the Move: The Changing Role of Afghan Refugee Women in Iran," *HAWWA: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, vol. 2(2): 149.

cleaning wool, shelling pistachios, and sweeping streets.⁵⁴ With the more restrictive immigration and employment measures implemented in the late 1990s to present,⁵⁵ refugees are facing even greater employment and financial insecurity. Due to the scarcity of work, refugees are forced to work underground and illegally, mainly on construction sites, and subsequently paid less than their Iranian counterparts. Often men are picked up by the police and if the family cannot pay the bribe the men are deported back to Afghanistan.⁵⁶

As a result of the economic hardships, precarious legal situation, and difficulty in finding work, Afghan men are no longer able to provide for their families by themselves, resulting in adjustments in livelihood coping strategies by the family unit as a whole, namely an increase in women and children working. Furthermore, as has been discussed earlier, during times of conflict and displacement, the number of female headed-households rises, which leads to women escalating their economic and financial roles within the household. Afghan refugees are no exception. Afghan women are left alone

⁵⁴ See e.g., USCRI, "Who Should Go?," Elca Stigter (2005), "Transnational Networks and Migration from Herat to Iran," The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), 25-26 (accessed February 5, 2005); available at <http://www.areu.org.af/publications/Transnational%20Networks%20-%20Herat.pdf>; Marsden (1996); Centlivres (1993); Peter Marsden (June 1996), *Exile and Return: Report on a Study on Coping Strategies among Afghan Refugees in Iran and Returnees to Afghanistan*, British Agencies Afghanistan Group, 6-7.

⁵⁵ With increased unemployment in Iran, the government has passed a number of restrictive measures. For example, in 2000, legislation was passed by the Parliament requiring the Ministry of Interior to deport all foreigners without work permits to their countries of origin. In June 2001, a new law was implemented that imposed a \$25 fine on employers for each Afghan they employed. The government has also placed restrictions on the type of work that Afghans can undertake (i.e. banning operating businesses or street vendors). According to a 2001 report, only 150 working permits are issued to refugees. See USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2003 Country Report*, 5; See also U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) (2001), "Afghans Face Precarious Future in Iran," *Refugee Reports*, vol. 22(7); Marsden (1996), 8.

⁵⁶ Hoodfar (2004), 149.

to fend for themselves as their husbands or sons travel to other cities in Iran to find work or are simply missing or dead.⁵⁷

Afghan Women as Active Economic Agents

The increase in both women and children working is counter to traditional practices, particularly for the rural, lower-socioeconomic households. Due to the emancipation reforms throughout the twentieth century, employment opportunities did open up to women, but were embraced by primarily the urban elite, not the rural or urban poor (which, as discussed earlier, are assumed to be the dominant group among the Afghan refugees in Iran).⁵⁸ According to traditional religious thought, men in Muslim societies are solely responsible for providing for their families regardless of their wives' economic position. Afghan family law and traditional practices are no exception. The role of the breadwinner of the family and taking care of their wife and families is a great source of pride for Afghan men and integral to their masculine identity and place in their household.⁵⁹ It has been shown that when women are completely economically dependent on their husbands and other male members of the household (as is the case in traditional Afghan homes), it is extremely difficult for them to resist or challenge these restrictive traditions.⁶⁰ Homa Hoodfar has concluded in her examination of Muslim households, when women are unable to interact within the public domain, away from

⁵⁷ Jo de Berry et al. (2003), *The Children of Kabul: Discussions with Afghan Families: Discussions with Afghan Families: War affected children: root psychosocial support in children's own coping strategies in Afghanistan*, Save the Children Fund, USA, 46,50 (accessed April 22, 2005); available at http://www.savethechildren.org/pdf_publications/ChildrenofKabul.pdf.

⁵⁸ Micheline Centlivres-Demont (1994), "Afghan Women in Peace, War, and Exile," in *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan*, eds. Myron Weiner and Ali Banuazizi, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 337-343.

⁵⁹ Hoodfar (2004), 161, 166; Nancy Hatch Dupree (1990) "A socio-cultural dimension: Afghan women refugees in Pakistan," in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds. Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 125-127.

⁶⁰ Nadia Hijab (1988), *Womenpower: The Arab debate on women at work*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

their close familial and tribal kin, they are unable to develop the skills, self-esteem, and resources to create alternate modes of social and economic existence.⁶¹

In two distinct studies, Hoodfar and the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran (ICRI) have found in their respective interviews with Afghan refugees living in Iran that women are increasingly contributing to family income since Afghan men are unable to support their families by themselves⁶² and, in the words, of Hoodfar, “faced with a situation where family survival depends on women’s initiatives and their participation in the social and economic life of the larger society, they [women] often do discover their potential.”⁶³ From 1999 to 2002, Hoodfar’s team of Iranian and Afghan researchers conducted interviews and focus group discussions with Afghan women refugees living in the informal settlement of Golshar (also called *Afghan-Abad*, meaning created by Afghans), outside of Mashad.⁶⁴ Only a six-hour bus ride from Herat, Afghanistan, Mashad is where the majority of Afghans refugees first arrived and consequently hosts one of the largest populations of Afghans. The bulk of the refugees live in Golshar, which has developed dramatically over the last 25 years since it provides affordable housing for both Afghan refugees and poor Iranian workers.⁶⁵ It has a population of 120,000, 60 percent Afghans and the rest Iranian nationals. Like most Afghan communities in Iran, the settlement is faced with the ‘missing men’ syndrome—52

⁶¹ Homa Hoodfar (1996), “The Impact of Egyptian Male Migration on Urban Families: Feminization of the Egyptian Families or Reaffirmation of Traditional Gender Roles?” in *Development, Change, and Gender in Cairo: A View from the Household*, eds. Diane Singerman and Homa Hoodfar. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

⁶² Hoodfar (2004), 161; Squire and Gerami, 20.

⁶³ Hoodfar (2004), 161.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 150-151. The sample of women ages ranged from 16 to 74, the majority between 26 and 40 years old. The majority had been in Iran since 1979 or fleeing the Taliban, while a group had lived in Iran and returned after the Russians left. *Ibid*, 150-151.

⁶⁵ Hoodfar (2004), 149-151. Piran also includes a description of Golshar in his article, Parviz Piran (2004), “Effects of Social Interaction between Afghan Refugees and Iranians on Reproductive Attitudes,” *Disasters*, vol. 28(3): 286.

percent of the Afghan community is female, since a number of men have left to work in other Iranian cities or simply missing. The average family in Golshar is eight and, in most cases, the extended family lives together in small houses.⁶⁶ Rather than concentrating on one area, from 1996 to 1998, ICRI conducted “low-profile” interviews and visited families in refugee areas throughout Iran, namely: Kerman, Shiraz, Sistan-Baluchistan, Mashad, Tehran, and Shahriyar (a province of Tehran).⁶⁷

Both studies found that during the course of their time in exile, a number of Afghan women in Iran have taken on financial responsibility for their families and, as Hoodfar noted, often interact with agencies outside of their household such as the host government and UNHCR. “These women readily acknowledged that despite the hardship, they enjoy their new roles and increased responsibilities, and would hesitate to give them up.”⁶⁸ Their economic activities, typically cash-earning, usually takes place in the home or in community-based, small-scale industries, a number of them run by Iranian women far from official reach; such as, shelling pistachios, cleaning wool, making brooms, carpet weaving, making chains, and cleaning saffron.⁶⁹ Since the women mostly work within their own or neighbors’ homes, unlike the men, the authorities and police rarely harass them.

The concentration of Afghan women as active economic agents within the informal sector as well as their dependency on communal networks is a reflection of a pattern seen in other refugee communities. In Mino Moallem’s study of Iranian immigrants living in Montreal, Canada, she concluded that: “[w]omen, in the absence of

⁶⁶ Piran, 286.

⁶⁷ Squire and Gerami, 19.

⁶⁸ Hoodfar (2004), 162.

⁶⁹ Squire and Gerami, 20; *See also ibid*, 162-163.

adequate financial and ethnic resources, must mobilize their own resources, such as family networks, the domestic domain, and above all, the offering of services to other women in the community.”⁷⁰ Consequently, Afghan women are not necessarily dependent victims as dependency theorists hypothesize, but are economic agents actively using all the resources available to them.

ICRI concluded that Afghan women are constrained by their illiteracy, having young children, lack of familiarity with Iran, and undocumented status causing them to take on the same jobs that other Afghans are employed in and/or working within their own homes. Mahin, a young widow from Kandahar, exemplifies the nature of their work:

My eldest child is 12 and my youngest is two years old. With their help, I make chains at home and earn about 3,000 Rls. (60 cents) per day. People sometimes give me clothes to bring home to wash. I cannot work outside the house, because my children are too young, and there is no one to take care of them. I cannot get pistachios for shelling, because one has to leave an ID card with the merchant as security or have a guarantor and I have neither.⁷¹

The more limited employment opportunities and women’s lack of skills has led to lower levels of economic sustainability for the families. In his study of coping strategies among Afghan refugees living in both Tehran and Mashad,⁷² Peter Marsden concluded that the majority of the Afghans surveyed were living at an extremely marginal economic level, female-headed households being the worst off.⁷³ This was partly due to the lower earning capacity of women as compared to men as well as the breakdown of the

⁷⁰ Mino Moallem (1991), “Ethnic Entrepreneurship and Gender Relations Among Iranians in Montreal, Quebec, Canada,” in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles Since Khomeini*, ed. Fathi, Asghar. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 196.

⁷¹ Squire and Gerami, 20.

⁷² Marsden, with the assistance of ICRI, BAFIA, and UNHCR, conducted his study in both Tehran and Mashad. At the invitation of the government, Marsden and his team also interviewed residents at Torbat-e Jam camp, in northeast Iran, which has a population of 8,000. He interviewed a wide-range of families: households with only male breadwinner, female-headed households, single men, Afghans who had left during the Soviet occupation and those that had fled since 1989. Marsden (June 1996), 3, 9.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 1, 7.

traditional support network of the extended family system in exile, especially where poverty is high.⁷⁴ Accordingly, Moser and Clark, in their research on forced migration and gender, found strong evidence that women suffer severe forms of abuse during and often after conflict and displacement, with an increased prevalence of unequal access to goods and services and female-headed households facing increased discrimination.⁷⁵

Some government programs have assisted women gain economic independence and counter this discrimination. For example, the Iranian government, in conjunction with UNHCR and World Food Programme (WFP), has provided employment services and financial support for women, primarily for the few thousand living in camps, by implementing sewing, knitting, and carpet weaving services in refugee camps.⁷⁶

According to Ray Wilkinson, these economic as well as educational opportunities have allowed a number of Afghan women, who were normally secluded, to become more self-sufficient and independent.⁷⁷ However, since the majority of refugees live outside the camps, these programs are not far-reaching as ICRI and Hoodfar's studies confer. In fact, among the women interviewed by ICRI, there was a strong desire to be trained in sewing, crocheting, weaving, and so forth. The Hazara women also mentioned nursing, secretarial, and teaching training. All these jobs would provide higher incomes and less

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 11, 15.

⁷⁵ Carola Eyber (2002), *Forced Migration Online Research Guide: Psychosocial Issues*, (accessed March 5, 2005); available at <http://www.forcedmigration.org/guides/fmo004/> citing C. Moser and Clark, F. eds, *Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence*, New York: Zed Books, 2001.

⁷⁶ Fatemeh Hashemi (1994), "The Status of Refugee and Displaced Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran," presented at International Conference on Uprooted Muslim Women, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, Nov. 12-15, 1994, 4 (accessed February 14, 2004); available from Forced Migration Online; *See also* WFP website.

⁷⁷ Ray Wilkinson, "An Extremely Generous Host: An Iranian Surprise," *UNHCR Refugee Magazine* (June 1, 1997) (accessed February 15, 2004); available at www.unhcr.ch.

risk to their health.⁷⁸ Young women, in particular, expressed a strong desire to work and to be trained to take on more demanding and higher paying jobs.⁷⁹ Many of the younger women surveyed in Hoodfar's study insisted that women are capable of all economic activities, regardless of their gender and their husbands.⁸⁰

Child Labor as a Livelihood Coping Strategy

The refugee experience has empowered the younger generation to demand and strive for greater and more important employment opportunities and responsibilities but the refugee experience has also had a severe negative impact on the younger generation, namely an increased prevalence of child labor. In their interviews and discussions throughout Iran, ICRI found that children, just like women, are increasingly contributing to family income since Afghan men (and women) are unable to support their families by themselves. Unfortunately, as ICRI points out, child labor among the Afghan refugees in Iran has been neglected thus there is little in-depth information about the number of children working and the working conditions.⁸¹ According to ICRI, children are pulled out of school and sent into the labor force—working in workshops, begging on streets, and young boys are involved in smuggling goods across the border—in order to help support their families. Children, as young as five, start working and work between four and ten hours a day.⁸² For example, a 16-year old young refugee male, Khodadad, works at a perfumery workshop:

We came to Iran about 17 years ago. My father has been sick for more than five years now and cannot work very often. To help my family, I had to quit school for three years and work. Right now I work in a workshop on night shift from midnight to 6am. Of the

⁷⁸ Squire and Gerami, 21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*; Hoodfar (2004), 162.

⁸⁰ Hoodfar (2004), 162.

⁸¹ Squire and Gerami, 20-21.

⁸² *Ibid*.

people working on each shift, six are children under 14 years. The pay for the night shift is the same as that of the day shift that is about 5,000 Rls./day (less than a dollar).⁸³

One of the key coping strategies has been to send only one family member to Iran, often a son. Consequently, children and their families, in a study by Save the Children, said they are experiencing a great deal of worry and anxiety over the separation.⁸⁴

Although child labor, in general, has severe negative effect on young refugee children it also has some empowering outcomes. Elca Stigter in his study of transnational networks from Herat to Iran has observed that migration to Iran for young Hazara boys, as young as 14, has become “a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood.” Young boys with their fathers or alone, travel across to Iran to assist in earning incomes for their families, accumulate savings, help pay off family debt, and save up money for *mehr* (dowry) and to support a family. “Their time away from relatives, often with their friends, is a critical experience which allows them to explore a different lifestyle and prove that they can support themselves.”⁸⁵ However, these “empowering” outcomes do not overshadow the harmful aspects of child labor—poor working conditions, severe health hazards, and overall violations of children’s human rights.

The Role of Women in Transnational Networks and Remittances

Another livelihood strategy is the continued movement of migrants traveling via smuggling routes and transnational networks from Iran to Afghanistan. Despite the ongoing restrictions and government crackdowns, Afghans, majority of them men, travel back and forth to earn an income for their families both in Iran and Afghanistan. For men and women migration has become an integral livelihood strategy and remittances are of

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ de Berry et al., 46.

⁸⁵ Stigter, 16-17.

crucial importance for the survival of households back in Afghanistan.⁸⁶ Stigter, in his study, found that women are intimately involved in assisting families in being smuggled and tracking remittances. For example, a mother residing in Herat paid the smuggler fee for her son, who had been unable to find a job in Iran, by selling milk, eggs, and her teacher's salary. In another case, a group of migrants fled from the smuggler in order to avoid paying the smuggling fee. The smuggler caught one of the boys and forced him to work for two years for himself and his friends in order to pay off the debt. When his mother heard of the story, she went directly to the families of those friends and insisted on the return of that money, which she partially received:

I received the money back – 200 lakh Afghanis. I fought a lot with his friends after those two years and I received 20-30,000 back from each. After one year my son sent a letter from Kerman saying that there was no friend and no possibility to come back. Then I sent my son-in-law to Iran, he found him and brought him back.⁸⁷

Both of these cases demonstrate the fact that women are no longer bystanders but have assumed the responsibility of being the guardian of their family, illustrating that women are not just recipients of remittances but are active actors in negotiating the payments between the various members of the transnational network. And, it is another example of the empowering quality of the refugee experience, even for women left behind in Afghanistan.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 16-17, 28. For general discussion on remittances and transnational networks refer to Alessandro Monsutti (2004), "Cooperation, Remittances, and Kinship among the Hazaras," *Iranian Studies*, vol. 37(2): 219-240.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 22.

EDUCATION AND THE IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT: CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL NORMS

Historical Background: Girls Education in Afghanistan Past and Present

Education, particularly for girls, has long been a major concern in Afghanistan. According to UNICEF, as of today, only 30 percent of girls are in schools but in eastern and southern Afghanistan the numbers are considerably lower. Nationwide, the primary school enrollment rate is only 54 percent.⁸⁸ This is in stark contrast to Iran, which the nationwide school enrollment rate is above 97 percent and is almost equal among girls and boys.⁸⁹ Throughout the twentieth century, as early as 1920s, reformists and women's rights activities have believed education to be the key in changing the social, legal, and economic conditions for women in Afghanistan.⁹⁰ The illiteracy of the entire population has also been viewed as one of the major obstacles in Afghanistan's social and economic development. Conservative elements of Afghan society have been equally adamant in preventing girls from attaining an education in order to avert the upheaval of traditional norms. Despite successive attempts by Afghan governments throughout the 1920s until the 1970s, girls' education was only slowly reaching the more rural areas and remained limited to and accepted by the urban elite. As Micheline Centlivres-Demont pointed out in her article on Afghan women, "[r]ural society and a large part of the towns' inhabitants were far behind the reforms of Kabul and therefore rejected them."⁹¹ In fact, "[education] was still not the aspiration of the majority; emancipation was not a popular

⁸⁸ UNICEF, At a Glance: Afghanistan (accessed March 22, 2005), available at <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan.html>.

⁸⁹ UNICEF, At a Glance: Iran (accessed March 22, 2005), available at <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/iran.html>.

⁹⁰ Centlivres-Demont, 337-349.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 337.

movement, nor was it adhered to by tribes, rural populations, or urban lower middle class.”⁹²

However, when the Communist came to power in 1978, a new chapter of women’s emancipation and push for education began. During the 1978 Saur Revolution, one of the primary campaigns was universal and compulsory education for children and adults. The government forced parents to send their daughters to school. This led to a public outcry by conservative elements of Afghan society, calling the push for female education as un-Islamic and immoral, particularly since the majority of the teachers were male.⁹³ Subsequently, this resulted in the large-scale exodus of millions of Afghans to Iran and Pakistan. Studies of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan conducted by prominent Afghan researcher and expert, Nancy Dupree, during the 1980s found that one of the primary reasons for their migration during this period was the compulsory education law. The Afghan refugees were left no choice but to flee rather than face the public humiliation and dishonor of the state interfering into the male domain of family life.⁹⁴

Educating Afghan Refugees in Iran

As Hoodfar noted in her findings, it is interesting to examine how the Afghan women’s perception and role of education, especially for girls, has changed during their time living in Iran in light of this recent history.⁹⁵ According to the 1998 study by ICRI, the number one priority for Afghan women is educational opportunities for their

⁹² *Ibid*, 339.

⁹³ After the 1973 coup d’etat and the installation of a socialist government, the regime introduced a new family law (Decree No. 7) in October 1978, which aggressively pushed for girls’ education and marriage law reform. *See ibid*, 344-346; *See also* Hoodfar (2004), 141, 156-57,

⁹⁴ Nancy H. Dupree (1984), “Women and emancipation: before the Saur Revolution,” in *Revolution and Rebellious in Afghanistan*, eds. Nazif Shahrani and Robert Canfield, Berkeley: Institute for International Studies. *See also* Centlivres-Demont, 346; Hoodfar (2004), 157.

⁹⁵ Hoodfar (2004), 157.

children.⁹⁶ And, Peter Marsden study of coping strategies among Afghans living in Tehran and Mashad, concluded that one of the main reasons, cited by Afghans living in Iran, for not returning to Afghanistan was lack of good education back home, especially for girls.⁹⁷ This finding was echoed by a more recent UNHCR evaluation of Iran.⁹⁸

In her focus group discussions and interviews with women refugees, Hoodfar found that “[w]omen are adamant that education is necessary and that all Muslims have the responsibility to educate themselves.”⁹⁹ The women interviewed were attending literacy courses and *Qur’an* classes offered at local mosques. This was a major step for these women whom, before arriving in Iran, never visited their local mosque, market, or city center in their home villages. The women commented on how through these excursions they would expand their contacts, gain work opportunities, and learn of health and education services available in the area. These educational opportunities not only expanded their knowledge and skills but also their social and economic resources.¹⁰⁰

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s successful literacy campaign and discourse that literacy and education for all is an integral component of being a “good Muslim”¹⁰¹ as well as the high educational level of women in Iran has had a weighty bearing on challenging and reshaping the refugees’ views on education as well as being a Muslim.

Some of the women told us that living without extended family in a community of non-kin and interacting with Afghan refugees from various ethnic backgrounds as well as Iranians, has exposed them to the different ways that Muslims may understand and

⁹⁶ Squire and Gerami, 21.

⁹⁷ Marsden (June 1996), 8.

⁹⁸ UNHCR (May 2002), Real-time Evaluation of UNHCR’s Response to the Afghanistan Emergency. UNHCR Bulletin No. 3 (accessed February 25, 2005), available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/+xwwBmeBqgL.CwwwnwwwwwwmFqo20IOE2glhFqo20I0E2glhFqoGn5nwGqrAFqo20IOE2glcFqBwhtrwDaGnpwBGowBodDDzmxwwwwwwIFqmRbZ/opendo.c.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Hoodfar (2004), 158.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Golnar Mehran (1991) “The creation of a new Muslim Women: Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Convergence* 23(4): 42-52.

practice Islam. Their experience of living in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in a country where Islam is preached and practiced in all facets of daily life, has made it easier for them to examine more critically what it is to be a “Muslim woman.”¹⁰²

The initial generous policy of the Iranian government of allowing free access to Iranian education services to all arriving refugees during the 1980s also had a profound impact. These steps increased exposure to better, more-modern educational facilities to both boys and girls.¹⁰³ However, the more recent restrictive measures by the government, as discussed above, have impinged on the Afghans right to an education in Iran. According to UNHCR, by the end of 2002, only 200,000 Afghan and Iraqi children were registered at 17,000 Iranian primary and secondary schools.¹⁰⁴ Educational attainment has become a major problem and one of the most widespread grievances held by the Afghans.¹⁰⁵ Despite President Khatami’s 2001 declaration that all Afghan children, both documented and undocumented have the right to attend schools, local authorities have ignored the president’s decree.¹⁰⁶ And, just this past year, the Iranian government is making all Afghans pay for education for the first time. This is forcing families to choose only to send one child, no children, or to just return to Afghanistan since they cannot afford the fees.¹⁰⁷

Due to the difficulty in attending Iranian public schools, the Afghan community itself began to fund and run Afghan private schools that admitted both Afghan and Iranian school children. Since the first wave of refugees, Afghan and Iranian teachers have opened up schools just for Afghan school children, albeit without the support of

¹⁰² Hoodfar (2004), 159.

¹⁰³ UNHCR New Stories, “Afghan New York Signals New Returns, New Challenges,” March 21, 2005 (accessed March 26, 2004); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news..>

¹⁰⁴ USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2003*.

¹⁰⁵ UNHCR Evaluation 2002; *See also* Hoodfar (2004), 160.

¹⁰⁶ USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2002*.

¹⁰⁷ Harrison.

Ministry of Education, UNHCR, or NGOs. In 1986-1987, a few primary and secondary schools were opened for both Afghan boys and girls in Mashad and its environs, with the assistance of the Ministry of Education.¹⁰⁸ There are also other schools in which UNICEF, international NGOs, as well as the Iranian Ministry of Education have supported and recognized.¹⁰⁹ It is important to note that women have played an integral role in opening and running all these schools¹¹⁰ as well as operating informal home-based schools for neighborhood children.¹¹¹ According to UNCHR estimates, approximately 23,000 Afghan children were attending over 100 Afghan-led schools in Tehran, Mashad, and Zahedan.¹¹² Despite these measures, there are still a large number of refugee children who do not have access to education.

According to Hoodfar's study, women view the attainment of education as one step in challenging the traditional cultural norms of male-domination that have defined the Afghan female experience and in redefining what it means to be a Muslim women.¹¹³ They have a newly discovered self-confidence, independence, and assurance in themselves, religion, and place in society. Afghan women refugees have been and continue to be actively engaged in pushing for their children's right to an education, both by participating in training themselves, by encouraging their children to attend school, as well as spearheading local community-based schools. As Hoodfar concluded in her assessment of the impact of displacement on Afghan women — "It is this newly-emerged confidence and the reassessment of their abilities in the context of new understandings

¹⁰⁸ Mobin Shorish (1988) "Educating Afghan refugees in Iran," *Afghanistan Forum*, vol. 16(3): 27-28.

¹⁰⁹ Squire and Gerami, 20-21.

¹¹⁰ Hoodfar (2004), 160; Squire and Gerami, 21.

¹¹¹ Hoodfar (2004), 160.

¹¹² USCRI, *Iran: World Survey 2003*.

¹¹³ Hoodfar (2004), 161.

about what it means to be a Muslim that point to a profound change in how Afghan women see their roles in society and in their families. Education has clearly been a key factor in this change.”¹¹⁴

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE: RESHAPING TRADITIONAL COMMUNAL AND GENDER RELATIONS

The Afghan refugee experience in Iran has had a profound impact on not only community and familial relations but also gender roles within the family. This is a consequence of the hardships endured by families and communities as well as the increased access to education, health services, economic opportunities, and new living standards and environment. The experience has had empowering but also traumatic consequences for the familial structure, as are exemplified by the female and child refugee experiences. By looking more closely at the affects that the new living environment, exposure to different Islamic society, formation of new networks and friendships, and the overall refugee experience, one can examine how these relations have evolved over the course of displacement, both weakening and strengthening the role of children and women. As Homa Hoodfar, in her study of Afghan refugee women in Iran from 1999 and 2002, concluded:

... ironically, living in exile has brought about the very changes resistance to which had forced them into the refugee situation. Forced to cope with a crisis situation, they developed economic and social survival strategies that altered women’s role. Moreover, that exposure to an Islamic very different from their own brought structural and ideological changes in the family and in gender roles which legal reforms in Afghanistan had failed to induce.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 141.

Background: The Traditional Afghan Family

As I have discussed in the previous sections, traditional Afghan society is rooted in a patriarchal system. Although Afghanistan is composed of various ethnic and religious groups, with explicit customs and beliefs, most fundamental marriage, familial, and kinship traditions traverse all the major ethnic groups.¹¹⁶ Afghan families, both *Shia* and *Sunni*, are traditionally male-dominated and deeply rooted in Islamic traditions. According to traditional marriage customs, young people, in particular women, have little or no say in their choice of partners. Early and arranged marriages are common practices. Divorce is extremely rare in rural Afghanistan. And, it is viewed dishonorable for a widow to return to her own family or remain alone; thus, she often marries the dead husband's younger brother. Afghan households are traditionally large, with the majority of the extended families under one roof, and larger than their Iranian counterparts. The extended family is central to the identity of an Afghan and these familial, communal, and tribal relations have solidified the women's roles and responsibilities.¹¹⁷ As Hoodfar has observed, "[t]he control of women by male relatives within the tribal system has constituted an essential aspect of social reproduction in Afghanistan, where one of women's central roles has been to cement and continue male alliances over generations, through marriage and childbearing."¹¹⁸ Hence, women's role in society is centered on women's reproductive functions, physical and social.

Successive Afghan governments throughout the twentieth century attempted to reform the marriage laws and ferment more equal gender relations but came up against

¹¹⁶ Mohammad Hashim Kamali (1985), *Law in Afghanistan: A Study of the Constitutions, Matrimonial Law and the Judiciary*, Leiden: EJ Brill.

¹¹⁷ Centlivres-Demont, 334-335. Hoodfar (2004), 144-145

¹¹⁸ Hoodfar (2004), 144-145.

continued resistance by the majority. Though among the urban elite there were signs of change.¹¹⁹ The tribal leaders, in particular, were adamantly opposed to these reforms and resisted these attempts. “Until 1978 and beyond, the role of women within marriage and family was never really questioned, although there were a few cases of marriage without the parents’ consent.”¹²⁰ Interestingly, the refugee experience has shifted relations in a way that these reforms were unable to alter, as discussed in the next section.

The New Living Environment: Reshaping Relations

One reason for the shift in relations is due to the spatial and living conditions of refugees during their time in Iran. As discussed in the background section, the Iranian government did not restrict refugees to reside in the refugee camps and did not provide housing. This has resulted in the refugees living throughout the country among the host population as well as in informal, spontaneous settlements around Mashad, Zahedan, Tehran, among other cities. One example is Golshar (which was discussed in-depth in an earlier section) with a mixture of Afghans and Iranians. As a result, the new living arrangements and settlements, such as Golshar, have allowed for Afghan refugees to interact with different ethnic groups, living without the extended family and with non-family and non-kin members of a community as well as Iranians. This has shifted their perception of how different Muslims view and practice Islam, familial interactions, and gender relations.

The new living conditions have also shifted the refugees’ conception of family and social networks, with the diminishing role of the extended family. A UNCHR

¹¹⁹ For example, under the communist regime, Decree Number 7 (Oct. 17, 1978) called for equal rights for women and the abolition of arranged marriage and bride-price, *mehr*. Centlivres-Demont, 344. *See also* Hoodfar (2004), 143.

¹²⁰ Centlivres-Demont, 343.

Evaluation team found that some groups of refugees wanted to repatriate only if they could return and settle together, despite the fact that they came from different places of origin and kinship groups. A diverse group of refugees in Torbat-e Jan refugee camp in the northeastern province told the evaluation team that they had become a large family in exile.¹²¹ Peter Marsden in his study of coping strategies among refugees in Iran concluded that unlike the widely held assumption that the extended family system is an important element in ensuring survival, families are facing far greater difficulties surviving than had been assumed. The study found that members of the extended families were often too poor to help each other and that little money was being sent to relatives in Afghanistan. A number of the refugees mentioned that they had not heard from sons and fathers back in Afghanistan. Rather than relying on the extended family, as is the case in Afghanistan, the nuclear family are likely to stand alone as economic units and are increasingly becoming more important in the Afghan's survival. Interestingly, many turned to their neighbors for financial assistance, food, and support.¹²²

The New Afghan Family: Family Planning, Marriage, and Shifting Gender Roles

Traditionally, Afghan brides move into their husband's families' home and live as a member of that extended family under the control of the mother-in-law. According to Hoodfar's interviews, given the new living arrangements in Iran and difficulty and expense of living in large quarters, families have shifted to living with just the nuclear family. Iranian landlords are also reluctant to rent to large families, especially families with a large number of children, which has resulted in some families sending their

¹²¹ UNHCR Evaluation 2002.

¹²² Marsden (June 1996), 1, 6-7,11.

children to live with other relatives.¹²³ Thus, the new living environment has resulted in Afghan families, who traditionally have large households, to rethink and question the value of having a large number of children for both themselves and society as a whole.

In Afghanistan, both during the war and under the communist regime, women were encouraged to have large families and were, for the most part, unable to practice birth control, in particular rural women.¹²⁴ The majority of the Afghans, like most Muslims, believe that contraceptives are against Islam and detrimental to familial structure. Hence, the more traditional interpretation of Islamic doctrine provides women with little freedom to make decisions regarding their reproductive health.¹²⁵ In Iran, however, a government-sponsored program has reformed traditional views towards family planning. Since 1989, the Islamic government has initiated a state-sponsored family planning program, which endorses the use of all modern contraceptives (i.e. tubal ligation, condoms, vasectomy, and birth control pills) and provides them free of charge. Consequently, Iran's fertility rates have dropped from 5.6 births per women in 1985 to 2.0 in 2000.¹²⁶ This sustained drop in fertility is primarily a result of increased contraceptive usage: 74 percent of married women practiced family planning in 2000 while only 37 percent in 1976.¹²⁷ In contrast, a reproductive health survey that was recently conducted in Kabul found the contraceptive prevalence rate of 23 percent (16%

¹²³ Hoodar (2004), 151-52.

¹²⁴ In 1968, the Afghan Family Guidance Association (AFGA), a private voluntary organization committed to family planning, was established. AFGA tried to encourage the use of birth control among the urban and rural populace. However, these clinics tended to reach the urban more than rural women. Centlivres-Demont, 342

¹²⁵ Carla Makhoul Obermeyer (Jan/Feb. 1994), "Reproductive Choice in Islam: Gender and State in Iran and Tunisia," *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 25(1): 43.

¹²⁶ Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi (June 2002), "Iran's Family Planning Program Responding to a Nation's Needs," *Population Reference Bureau*; See also Homa Hoodfar and Samad Assadpour (March 2000), "The Politics of Population Policy in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 31(1): 19-34.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

modern, 7% natural methods) and 93 percent of women needed authorization from their husband or male relative before seeking professional healthcare.¹²⁸ And, according to UNFPA's 2004 report, the estimated total fertility rate of Afghanistan from 2000 to 2005 is 6.8 percent, while in Iran it is only 2.33 percent.¹²⁹

The new Iranian model of the Muslim family—small, healthy families—has altered the Afghan refugees' perceptions. This model has encouraged the practice of birth control for many refugees. This, in turn, has shifted women's attitudes towards reproductive health and is an illustration of the radical impact of the refugee experience on gender relations. Iranian researcher, Parviz Piran, recently conducted a study examining the impact of social interactions between Afghan refugees and Iranians on reproductive health attitudes. Piran and his team carried out focus group discussions among men in two refugee communities: Golshar, with a majority *Shia* population, and Shirabad, with a *Sunni* majority.¹³⁰ As discussed in an earlier section Golshar, is outside of Mashad. Shirabad, on the other hand, is an informal settlement near Zahedan, the capital of Sistan and Baluchestan province. In the last few years, Shirabad has grown from being a poor village outside of Zahedan to a large neighborhood in northeastern Zahedan, with a population of 55,000 to 60,000. Piran estimates that Afghans compose 30 percent of the total population.¹³¹

Piran and his team concluded that exposure to Iranian society and the more liberal attitude towards reproductive health care has, indeed, had a profound effect on the

¹²⁸ Kathia van Egmond et al. (2004), "Reproductive Health in Afghanistan: Results of a Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Survey among Afghan Women in Kabul," *Disasters* vol. 28(3): 269-70.

¹²⁹ UNFPA (2004), *The State of the World Population 2004: The Cairo Consensus at Ten: Population, Reproductive Health and the Global Effort to End Poverty*, New York: UNFPA, 107.

¹³⁰ Piran, 283-286.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 286-287.

Afghan refugees' views on family planning.¹³² In his interviews with health workers in Golshar, Piran found that over the years there has been a slow but consistent interest among Afghan refugees, both men and women, in contraception, family planning, and reproductive health. Health workers were surprised by the shift in behavior since initially Afghans were adamantly opposed to not only the use but also the general discussion of using contraceptives. Afghan men and women are now freely discussing the issue of family planning, which is a major change.¹³³ In Piran's focus group discussions with men, he observed that men were accepting contraceptive usage in particular due to the high-ranking Islamic clerics passing edicts allowing its use. The men, in contrast to traditional Afghan belief, also stressed the importance of having smaller and healthier families. And, all the men believed that reproductive health was a female issue and they should take responsibility.¹³⁴ Many of the men noted that their wives and other female family members had learned about reproductive health from talking with their Iranian neighbors.

The impact of these transformations in the Afghan's attitudes is not only significant to the health of women and children but also to social structure of Afghan society. As Piran observed:

... a change of attitude among Afghan refugees, even among a minority, is a first step towards the creation of 'pioneers of change,' a group whose gradual advances will influence others especially the young, more educated and those open to change... may not be limited to family planning and reproductive health, but gradually multiply and move into other domains of life.¹³⁵

Piran, who has worked with the Afghan refugee population for a number of years, concluded that, "a silent revolution is taking place in refugee life, a revolution of rising

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 285.

expectations and increasing awareness. Through the progressive edicts issued by clerics under the pressure of change and the all-encompassing social movement in Iran, the influence of religion on family planning and reproductive health is changing....”¹³⁶ It is important to note, however, that the Afghans who have changed their views about family planning remain a minority.

Hoodfar’s interview with Afghan women refugees also echoed Piran’s findings. Many of the Afghan women in her study particularly ones with three or more children, while living in Iran, were inclined to practice birth control, with the consent of their husbands. Although some women said they practiced birth control without the husbands’ knowledge or approval. The majority of the women said that the new living arrangements were the primary reason for limiting family size. But, they also acknowledged that information and resources were more readily available to them in Iran than in Afghanistan.¹³⁷ As Bauer concluded in her observation of Iranian refugees, cross-cultural experiences have provided the refugees with new experiences and ways to understand the different ways of thinking and behaving while in exile.¹³⁸ This is evident among the Afghan refugees, particularly in terms of family planning and reproductive health.

Another impact that displacement has had on family and gender relations are changing marriage practices among the refugees. Both due to the new living arrangements as well as exposure to different Iranian marriage customs, women refugees have altered traditional marriage and spouse selection customs. The informants in

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 291.

¹³⁷ Hoodfar (2004), 152-53.

¹³⁸ Janet Bauer (1991) “A Long Way Home: Islam in the Adaptation of Iranian Women Refugees in Turkey and West Germany,” in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles Since Khomeini*, ed. Asghar Fathi. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 94-95.

Hoodfar's study stated that "because life has changed drastically as a result of war and living in Iran, young adults, particularly young women, should marry later, when they are better prepared to cope with life's challenges."¹³⁹ The women also believed that fathers and other male members of the household should not arrange marriages for very young children and should wait until the girl has reached both physical and mental maturity. Although they did not believe that girls should be free to choose their own partners but families should not force girls into unwanted marriages.¹⁴⁰ Since these issues are being discussed and critiqued it is an illustration of the social change, which has developed among the Afghan communities living in Iran. After living in another Islamic country, with rigid and traditional gender roles, but still permits more freedom for girls and women, Afghan women have been introduced to new models of being a "Muslim woman." This, according to Hoodfar, has allowed Afghan women to "more easily and legitimately be critical of certain traditional Afghan practices without being accused of violating their faith, losing their religion or becoming Westernized."¹⁴¹ A middle-aged Afghan woman eloquently reflects this shift:

Before I came to Iran I thought that marriage, work, property, and all that, were concerns of men, and we have just have to take care of our children and families on a day to day basis. Now I've lived here [Iran] for almost ten years and watched how Iranian women understand their roles and religion and it has changed my views. I am still very much an Afghan, something I did not think about before, but I also think some of our traditions go against Islamic principles.¹⁴²

As discussed in early sections, increasingly Afghan women are working and earning incomes during their time in Iran. This undoubtedly has impacted the husband-

¹³⁹ Hoodfar (2004), 153-154.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

wife relations, fueled tensions, and readjusted household roles and responsibilities.¹⁴³ Afghan men, despite their skills and education levels, are forced to work in low-skilled, poorly paid jobs, and are constantly harassed. Afghan men no longer hold the same status of provider and head-of-household as before, which has resulted in more tensions between family members. However, a number of Hoodfar's informants felt that these shifts in gender relations has also made men more sensitive to the plight as men are forced to rely on women more both financially and emotionally. Hoodfar's study found that some of the women were now sharing financial management of household affairs and shopping with their husbands. In Afghanistan, finances, shopping and so forth were purely in the husband or male household head's domain.¹⁴⁴ Younger women in particular have become very conscious of these changes within their families and have benefited from the new marital relations and mutual dependence of the man and woman in the relationship.¹⁴⁵

As a result of their refugee experience in Iran, Afghans have not only been exposed to different views on reproductive healthcare and marriage but have been privy to higher standards of general health, sanitation, and living conditions. This has impacted their relations with one another as well as their overall expectations. One study found that refugees in Iran tended to live in urban environments and were more accustomed to better water and sanitation conditions, running water, and toilets. Upon return to Afghanistan, women showed a high level of interest in latrine projects and health

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* See also Bauer, 85. In her article, Bauer examined how Iranian women refugees reconstructed their lives and identities in exile after leaving Iran in the late 1970s and 1980s. Bauer observed that, during exile, male and female roles changed, partly due to the different living conditions. Unmarried men and women may live in the same living quarters, which can change roles but also increase tensions.

¹⁴⁴ Hoodfar (2004), 162-165.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164, 167.

education campaigns and increased knowledge of healthcare behavior.¹⁴⁶ As Stigter observed in his study of Hazara refugees who have returned home to Herat:

The exposure to a more developed country during the many years of displacement, a better educational and physical infrastructure and other cultural practices has changed aspirations of those families and individuals who have returned to Herat. The readjustment to a new and less developed environment takes time.¹⁴⁷

Similarly, in his observation of residents of the district of Enjil, “the breadbasket of Herat,” Stigter found that they had been exposed to a relatively more liberal, freer urban environment, experienced a different culture, and had better infrastructure and basic services during their time in Iran. These experiences drastically altered hopes and expectations for the future, which pervaded all aspects of life.¹⁴⁸

This observation is reflected in the younger generation refugee experience. For many young Afghan adolescents, the refugee experience has introduced a new lifestyle, raising expectation of future aspirations that cannot be necessarily matched in Afghanistan. Most rural families who sought asylum in Iran settled in urban areas with the younger generation becoming accustomed to relative sophistication of the urban environment.¹⁴⁹

In conclusion, the Afghan refugee experiences has challenged and reshaped traditional gender and familial roles and beliefs. As Piran observed, a ‘silent revolution’ has taken place in the Afghan community in Iran, which has radically impacted women

¹⁴⁶ Global Movement for Children Afghanistan Working Group (2001), *Lost Chances: The Changing Situation of Children in Afghanistan 1990-2000*, (accessed January 20, 2005); available at <http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2001/gmc-afg-30jun.pdf>.

¹⁴⁷ Stigter, 10-11.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ Global Movement for Children Afghanistan Working Group (2001), *Lost Chances*.

and children.¹⁵⁰ The circumstances of exile, government refugee policies, and the cross-cultural experience of living in a different society and being exposed to the new Iranian model of the Muslim family and woman have altered the Afghan refugees' perceptions of themselves and their families. Many Afghan women refugees are now active economic agents, negotiating remittances, pushing for their children's education, practicing family planning, and holding their families together. The women are showing signs of empowerment and independence that was absent before.

¹⁵⁰ Piran, 291.

Chapter 4: Afghan Women and Children Refugee Experience in Pakistan

BACKGROUND: HISTORY, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND THE GOVERNMENT'S REFUGEE POLICIES

History and Demographics of Afghan Migration to Pakistan

Like Iran, Pakistan has been host to millions of Afghan refugees over the last few decades and, similarly, there has been a long history of eastward migration from Afghanistan. Under the reign of Emir Abdur Rahman, hundreds if not thousands of Pashtuns migrated to the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). But, like Iran, the largest migratory movement occurred after the 1979 Soviet invasion.¹⁵¹ The exodus escalated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the peak being 1990 when the number of refugees reached over 3.272 million.¹⁵² The majority of the refugee population is women and children. Fifty-nine percent of the more than 1.5 million refugees assisted by UNHCR in Pakistan in 2001 are children and adolescents under the age of 18, half of them girls. Women between the ages of 18 and 59 are 58 percent of the population.¹⁵³ Other studies found that more than 75% are women and children.¹⁵⁴

The ethnic composition of refugees differs in Pakistan than from Iran. The refugees in Pakistan are predominately Pushtun and from the south and east provinces adjoining the borders of Pakistan. There are also Hazaras, Tajiks, and other ethnic

¹⁵¹ Centlivres (1993), 4-5.

¹⁵² UNHCR Pakistan, Afghan Refugee Statistics (accessed March 14, 2005); available at <http://www.un.org.pk/unhcr/Afstats-stat.htm>.

¹⁵³ Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2002), *Fending for Themselves: Afghan Refugee Children and Adolescents Working in Urban Pakistan*, 1 (accessed February 15, 2005); available at http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/af_chil.pdf [hereinafter Women's Commission 2002].

¹⁵⁴ Said Azhar (1990), "Afghan refugees in Pakistan: the Pakistani view," in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds. Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 109; See also Dupree (1990), 121.

groups in smaller numbers, which increased in size after the mid-1980s to the present.¹⁵⁵ The Pushtuns are ethnically the same as the people living in the border regions of NWFP and they share close historical, cultural, and blood ties.¹⁵⁶ The Pushtun Afghan refugees and the local Pakistan population share fundamental cultural links: language (Pushtu), religion (*Sunni*), and the Pushtun cultural system, which they call the *Pushtunwali* (The Pushtun way). The basic values of *Pushtunwali* are twofold: *merana* (magnanimity) and *melmapalana* (hospitality).¹⁵⁷ Thus, there is a sense of Muslim and Pushtun brotherhood between the populations on both sides of the border.

All of these factors led to the initial warm welcome by both the Pakistani government and host community. Furthermore, by opening their doors to the Afghans, Pakistan was receiving financial aid from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States as well as the United States and Western Europe.¹⁵⁸ As I mentioned in the Iran chapter, the Pakistan government was receiving a great deal of foreign assistance, far exceeding the Iranian government.¹⁵⁹ Consequently, refugees in Pakistan have lived a very different existence than their countrymen seeking refuge in Iran, primarily due to the large amount of international aid, both in the form of financial as well programmatic assistance by foreign governments, UN, and international NGOs.

¹⁵⁵ The ethnic minorities, in particular Hazaras, have endured greater hardship, marginalization, and prejudice by the local population and Pushtun refugees. A. Janata (1990) "Afghanistan: the ethnic dimension," in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds. Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 69. For more discussion on the ethnic tensions refer to Punjani's article: Shahid Punjani (2002), "How Ethnic-Religious Identity Influences the Living Conditions of Hazara and Pashtun Refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan." UNHCR, New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper No. 14 (accessed January 7, 2005); available at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ>.

¹⁵⁶ Centlivres (1993), 13-16.

¹⁵⁷ Boesen, 161; See also Janata, 67; Ewan Anderson and Nancy H. Dupree eds. (1990), *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*. Oxford, University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, xvi.

¹⁵⁸ Boesen, 161.

¹⁵⁹ Refer to Chapter 3, pages 19-20.

Pakistan's Refugee Policies: Evolution from Open to Closed Door, 1980 - 2005

Since the 1970s, the Pakistan government has engaged in periodic attempts to register refugees and to offer some legal protection. In contrast to Iran, the Pakistan government has not ratified the Refugee Convention and there is no mention of refugees in any of its official domestic laws and ordinances.¹⁶⁰ In the early 1980s, refugee families were given *shanakhti*, passbooks or identity passes, which registered them with the government. These passbooks entitled refugees to assistance (food aid and basic supplies) and were used as identity documents. After a few years, these passbooks were utilized just for giving financial assistance and were not deemed valid identity documents and all incoming refugees were not registered and given no legal protection.¹⁶¹ A large number of the refugees are unregistered and the children of Afghans born in Pakistan are not registered and appear in no documentation.¹⁶²

In contrast to refugees in Iran, refugees in Pakistan were not 'integrated' within Pakistani society. Refugees in Pakistan were accommodated in over 300 government-administered camps, which developed into refugee tented villages, along the border with Afghanistan mainly in the front-line provinces of NWFP and Baluchistan. (Refer to Appendix II for map of Pakistan) The Afghan refugees represented 20 percent of the local population in these two provinces.¹⁶³ In some high-density refugee areas, however, the Afghan refugees equal or outnumber the local population. The refugees were provided with tents and household equipment and given access to food, health centers, and schools in the camps. The refugees were permitted to seek employment, subject to

¹⁶⁰ Azhar, 106-107; *See also* Centlivres (1993), 13-14.

¹⁶¹ Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2002), "Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan Closed Door Policy: Afghan Refugees in Pakistan and Iran," 14, no. 2G: 19. *See also* Centlivres (1993), 14.

¹⁶² Centlivres (1993), 14.

¹⁶³ Aznar, 108.

restriction, within Pakistan.¹⁶⁴ Within an astonishingly short period, the refugee tented villages developed into stable settlements with walled enclosures around the mud abodes housing extended families. The settlements were supplied with water and sanitation, health care, schools, mosques, and bazaars. The settlements even established the *loya jirga*,¹⁶⁵ or grand council, as a system of governance, similar to one's in their home villages. As time progressed the camps and villages have developed into semi-autonomous entities and are independent of the host society. For example, Surkhab camp has a population of 160,000 and functions as a small city.¹⁶⁶

Over the years, similar to the Iranian government, the heavy financial burden of hosting millions of refugees, cutbacks in international assistance, deteriorating national economic conditions, geopolitical circumstances, and asylum fatigue (caused by growing numbers of refugees and increased animosity by host community), has resulted in the Pakistani government passing increasingly more restrictive refugee laws and policies. In 1999, the government refused to consider all newly arriving Afghans as *prima facie* refugees. From this period onwards, the Pakistani government has implemented a number of restrictive measures, such as: border closures; camp closures; detaining and deporting refugees; voluntary and forced repatriation; among other actions.¹⁶⁷ The refugees also faced greater restrictions on movement, employment, and access to public services within the camps and refugee villages. In 2001, Pakistan's borders were officially closed to new arrivals. Those permitted to enter Pakistan were allowed to

¹⁶⁴ Janata, 67-69; *See also* Marsden (1999), 79-83; Aznar; Anderson and Dupree, xv.

¹⁶⁵ *Loya jirga* is a forum distinctive to Afghanistan in which, customarily, ethnic tribal elders assemble together to resolve conflicts and affairs of the community or nation.

¹⁶⁶ Anderson and Dupree, xv.

¹⁶⁷ HRW, 20-22; *See also* U.S. Committee for Refugee and Immigrants (2001), "Pakistan: Afghan Refugees Shunned and Scorned," available at http://www.refugees.org/world/articles/pakistan_introduction_2001.htm; Centlivres, 13-17.

relocate into designated areas (“relocation camps”) that are different and separate from the previous established camps. Officially, these refugees are undocumented with no legal rights.¹⁶⁸ Meanwhile, despite these harsh restrictions, refugees’ inflows have persisted with the ongoing instability in Afghanistan.

The background on the history of the migration and government policies and the differences with the Iranian experience are important to keep in mind as we examine the impact of displacement on Afghan women and children in the following sections of this chapter.

LIVELIHOOD AND ECONOMIC COPING STRATEGIES: SOLIDIFYING AND REDEFINING THE TRADITIONAL ROLES OF AFGHAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN

A number of researchers have found that the majority of the Afghan refugees are living on the economic margins. Both Sabahuddin Kushkaki’s examination of refugees living in Pakistan and Peter Marsden’s study of refugees residing in various camps and throughout the NWFP, concluded that whatever the refugees have been receiving in the form of material assistance, shelter, or medical care, though impressive, falls short of the actual minimum needs.¹⁶⁹ And, the increasingly more restrictive government measures and cut backs on foreign aid, has perpetuated the marginality and poverty of the Afghan refugee existence in Pakistan. The worst-off families in the refugee communities are families’ head by women.¹⁷⁰ As a result, similar to Iran, some women and children have been pushed into the workforce. However, reflecting the contrasting government

¹⁶⁸ HRW, 20-22.

¹⁶⁹ Sabahuddin Kushkaki (1990) “Afghan refugees: the Afghan View,” in *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*, eds. Anderson, Ewan and Dupree, Nancy Hatch, Oxford: University of Oxford, Refugee Studies Programme, 118; Peter Marsden (December 1996), *Living in Exile: Report on a Study of Economic Coping Strategies among Afghan Refugees in Pakistan*. British Agencies Afghanistan Group, 9.

¹⁷⁰ Women’s Commission (2002), 3; Marsden (December 1996), 9.

policies, Pakistani society, and refugee ethnic and religious composition, the impact on livelihood strategies for women and children are different and not as widespread as the Iranian experience.

Restrictions of Purdah on Afghan Women and Employment Opportunities

In Pakistan, there has been greater resistance to women working than observed in Iran. A number of reports discuss the limitations placed on women and continued reservations, which have kept women from income-generating projects. Nancy Dupree, in her study of refugees living in camps and villages, observed that, “[i]n fact, many men regard all spaces beyond the immediate vicinities of their homes as hostile world where women without male relatives become intolerably vulnerable. As a result, many women are more tightly confined than they ever were in Afghanistan.”¹⁷¹ The belief in *purdah* (or seclusion) has been strengthened.¹⁷² In her discussion of *purdah* among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Boesen concluded that:

It could thus be argued that the stricter practice of *purdah* among the refugees has two functions: first, protection and defense of the family in an environment which is regarded as more alien and dangerous than at home; second, the symbolic demonstration and affirmation of the agnate family’s social and ethnic identity in a situation where the male Pushtun are deprived of their ‘normal’ means of demonstrating identity and social status: economic and social autonomy.¹⁷³

For a number of women and young girls, particularly ones coming from more urban areas, this signifies that their potentials of physical freedom of movement and social networks are even more limited than back in Afghanistan.

¹⁷¹ Dupree (1990), 126.

¹⁷² *Purdah* is the practice that calls for the seclusion of women from the public domain by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. *Purdah* is practiced by Muslims and by various Hindus, especially in India. *Ibid.* See also Centlivres (1993), 24; Boesen 168-172.

¹⁷³ Boesen, 172.

In Pakistan, as Dupree also noted, the strengthening of *purdah* and the prominent presence of foreign aid and rations has created a sense of dependency among some men and women. Many are unable to undertake their past income-generating duties that they were engaged in back home. In the refugee settlements in Pakistan, there are no longer any crops to harvest for the women to process and sheep to shear for wool for the women to weave and spin. Few can afford to buy materials for handicrafts. In the words of Dupree, “A women’s pride and self-esteem engendered by shared contributions to family welfare can be utterly shattered by the realization that her role is diminished.”¹⁷⁴

Nevertheless, despite the generally more restrictive views towards *purdah* and employment limitations, many refugee women have had to assume duties and responsibilities that would normally have been taken over by their husbands and kinship network. The years of war, conflict, and migration experience have changed women’s roles. As discussed earlier, war, unfortunately, breeds countless widows and single women. In the Pakistan case, a large number of the women living in the camps or villages were widowed or their husbands were living in Afghanistan or other parts of Pakistan. These women had no choice but to work to provide for their families.¹⁷⁵ Like Iran, majority of the women take part in cash-earning activities within their homes or near the camps, where *purdah* and transportation can be ensured.¹⁷⁶ For example, Marsden’s study of 27 poor Afghan refugee households residing in three refugee camps along the NWFP discovered that many of the informants worked both within and outside the home, even though there was strong cultural prohibition in their rural communities

¹⁷⁴ Dupree (1990), 127.

¹⁷⁵ Boesen, 170.

¹⁷⁶ Centlivres-Demont, 356.

back in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁷ In fact, Marsden found it particularly noteworthy that women from two of the families interviewed were working in factories outside the camp and the majority of the families were partially or entirely dependent on women's income for their survival. For the most part, women were engaged in various handicrafts at home, such as, carpet weaving, tailoring, soap making, or embroidery. Two women had professional occupations: one was a teacher in the school camp and the other women worked as a "social animator" with a local NGO (surveyed disabled individuals and widows and referred them to the NGO's training programs).¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, the refugee women, in particular widows and single women, have also received the attention of the plethora of international aid agencies programs on income-generation, such as International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, UNFPA, and other aid agencies.¹⁷⁹

Micheline Centlivres-Demont came across an interesting livelihood trend among the Afghan women refugees. According to Centlivres-Demont, certain sects of the Afghan community have better access to cash-earning activities because of their tradition of handicrafts, such as carpet weaving by the Turkoman women and embroidery by Qandahari women. For example, in the camps where the northern Afghan refugees (or Turkoman) reside, the carpet weaving craft has been passed down to the Pushtun, Uzbek, Hazara, and Tajik women. At times, these women bring a Turkoman widow, for example, who is well-trained in the craft to teach them within their homes, resulting in many of them becoming active carpet producers in the Pakistan market.¹⁸⁰ These activities not only provide money for these women but are "positive experiences because of the

¹⁷⁷ The camps included, Azakhel, Nasirbagh, and Kachagari camps.

¹⁷⁸ Marsden (December 1996), 9, 21, 42.

¹⁷⁹ See e.g., International Rescue Committee, The IRC in Pakistan (accessed April 24, 2005); available at <http://www.theirc.org/Pakistan/index.cfmwww.irc>.

¹⁸⁰ Centlivres-Demont, 356-357.

contacts established between the Afghan women of rural origins and those from urban areas (usually from Kabul) who, because of their former education, are indispensable intermediaries between the producers and those in charge of the international aid organizations.”¹⁸¹ This helps bridge the divide between the different groups within Afghanistan and allows them to learn from each other.

Child Labor as a Livelihood Coping Strategy

As I discussed in the Iran section, conflict and displacement has pushed the responsibility of supporting families on the shoulders of children. In Pakistan, this is even more pronounced. The restrictive measures by the Pakistani government, as discussed above, as well as the cut backs or elimination of humanitarian assistance has led to increased reliance on child labor. As Human Rights Watch observed, refugee families often send their children, especially males, to work as opposed to school in order to supplement the family income.¹⁸² Marsden also found that one of the prevalent coping strategies for Afghan families in the refugee camps was reliance on child labor.¹⁸³ Extensive reports and articles have been published depicting the high prevalence of child labor among both the local Pakistani population as well as Afghan refugees. Hence, the large number of Afghan refugee children in the labor market is a reflection of the overall trends in Pakistan society. In Pakistan, today, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that 3.6 million children work in Pakistan, including tens of thousands of Afghan children.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 357.

¹⁸² HRW, 33.

¹⁸³ Marsden (December 1996), 9.

¹⁸⁴ Women’s Commission (2002), 1.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children conducted a fact-finding mission in January 2001 to investigate the condition of refugee "street children" and other young people living and working in urban settings in Pakistan. The Women's Commission found that with few resources and opportunities to support their families, many of the poorest families from pre-existing and now new refugee flows, are compelled to push their children to work in industries that place them at risk.¹⁸⁵ Many of these children are sent alone while their families remain in Afghanistan. Thousands of young Afghans are fending for themselves and their families as principal breadwinners, with few educational opportunities, leisure activities, and parental guidance. Their earnings are often the backbone of the families' survival.¹⁸⁶ Thousands are carpet weavers, "street children" engaged in "garbage picking," beggars, brick makers, house servants and, in some cases, drug sellers and smugglers. For example, 20,000 children as young as five are believed to be weaving rugs in Peshawar working 12-16 hours per day.¹⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch reported that, in Peshawar, refugee children are working as garbage pickers earning only a few rupees per day and live in dire conditions.¹⁸⁸ This inactivity, poor living conditions, and lack of education can lead to violence and/or extremism.¹⁸⁹ Young Afghan girls face different difficulties. Girls movements are more restricted than boys, thus, they have fewer earning opportunities. As a result, girls' work is conducted closer to home, primarily as domestic servants.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5; See also de Berry et al, 46; "Fleeing Afghan children create glut of workers," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 31, 2001.

¹⁸⁷ Global Movement for Children Afghanistan Working Group (2001), *Lost Chances*.

¹⁸⁸ HRW, 33.

¹⁸⁹ de Berry et al, 46.

¹⁹⁰ Women's Commission (2002), 3.

The work has also become more difficult for many in the wake of September 11, 2001, as new refugee children have entered the competition for resources in Pakistan while employment opportunities have diminished. In the aftermath of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, the carpet industry market decreased and a number of refugee families reported that their children lost jobs during that period.¹⁹¹ Women's Commission concluded that: "[w]ithout targeted humanitarian assistance, the pressure on these young people to produce income is enormous, and most say if they refuse to attempt to work, their parents beat them, and they will also go hungry."¹⁹² In general, these activities expose them to physical and psychological abuse and disease.

EDUCATION AND THE IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT: CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL NORMS

Similar to Iran, many Afghans seem to have changed their view of education during their time living in Pakistan. Initially, as Boesen observed in the 1980s, there was resistance towards education, particularly for girls. This was, in part, due to the emphasis on *pardah*. Furthermore, there was an increased skepticism towards education by the rural families, in particular. As I discussed in the Iran chapter, before the 1978 communist takeover, an understanding of the importance of education for boys and girls was growing in the urban centers as well as, more slowly, in the rural areas. After the 1978 coup, in reaction to secular education and the physical force used by the communist leaders, suspicion and negative attitudes developed in the provinces towards education, which carried over once they migrated.¹⁹³ Centlivres-Demont concluded that: "The negative effects of the campaign were felt for a long time within the refugee population;

¹⁹¹ HRW, 33.

¹⁹² Women's Commission (2002), 2.

¹⁹³ Boesen, 168-169.

among the traditional elements it bred doubt and rejection of all teaching imposed by the government and it caused considerable damage to the project of literacy for girls.”¹⁹⁴

However, more recent reports, have noted shifts among the Afghans, as young Afghans and women are demanding the right to an education. Like Iran, the most important task, from an Afghan point of view, is to provide them with educational services, for both economic as well as spiritual survival.¹⁹⁵ In his study of economic coping strategies of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, Peter Marsden was surprised by the refugees’ determination in providing some form of education for their children, however, inadequate their income. In one case, a young woman was working to support her brother through medical school.¹⁹⁶ Aid agencies have also reported increased awareness of the importance education by the repatriated refugees.

Despite this determination, a large number of Afghan children are unable to receive an education, due to the families’ financial constraints as well as their inability to access schools. From the beginning of the Afghan migration movement into Pakistan, the government did not give refugees access to free educational services, unlike Iran. Since the refugees were concentrated in camps and refugee villages, the Pakistani government worked with UNHCR, UNICEF, and other international NGOs to establish schools. The schools typically have fees, which many are unable to pay. Both due to the small number of schools as well as the high costs, these schools are limited in their reach. Hence, in 1986, UNHCR estimated that there were between 500,000 and 600,000 school-

¹⁹⁴ Centlivres-Demont, 346.

¹⁹⁵ Women’s Commission (2002), HRW, Marsden (December 1996), Kushkaki, 118

¹⁹⁶ Marsden (December 1996), 10.

aged refugee children. Out of that number, UNHCR only educated about 100,000 children.¹⁹⁷

Young girls face another set of difficulties. The increase emphasis on *pardah* has restricted the movement of young girls and their ability to attend school. This is exacerbated with the small number of schools, specifically for girls. Furthermore, there are also countless reports that young girls are pulled out of schools and forced into early marriage to ease financial burdens.¹⁹⁸ The difficulty in attending schools has been problematic for the group of refugees coming from the urban areas who had been exposed to education back in Afghanistan.¹⁹⁹

However, in reaction to the limited educational opportunities for both girls and boys, a number of alternatives have developed. In Pakistan, similar to Iran, the Afghan community, in particular women, have mobilized to educate their children. The Afghan political parties, *Mujahideen*, and *Hisb-e Islami* (Islamic Political Party) with the assistance from the Saudi government, founded political party or religious schools, *madrasah*, for all educational levels and for free. The *madrasah* provide instruction not only in religion but also geography, mathematics, Pashtu and Dari language, and paramilitary training. According to Pierre Centlivres study, in 1990, the number of students enrolled in these schools was at least equal to that of the UNHCR schools.²⁰⁰ In Peter Marsden's interviews with Afghan refugees, a number of the informants noted that their children attended the local *madrasah*. For example, in Azakhel camp all the schools were run by *Hisb-e Islami*. However, a few of the informants were not happy with the

¹⁹⁷ Centlivres (1993), 22.

¹⁹⁸ Women's Commission (2002), 3, 13.

¹⁹⁹ Centlivres-Demont, 357.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 22-23.

curriculum of the schools, which they believed were too geared towards religion and *jihad*. As one woman stated "It is not education in the normal sense. It is military and political indoctrination. I don't want my children to go through this kind of education."²⁰¹

Self-help schools, mostly in refugee camps, have also been set up with assistance from UNHCR and other international and national NGOS. Afghan women have been running these education programs in the refugee camps in Pakistan for a number of years now. For example, in 1995, Sakena Yacoobi, an Afghan woman, founded the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), an Afghan women-led NGO, in Peshawar, Pakistan. The organization was created to provide teacher training to Afghan women, education for boys and girls, and health education to women and children.²⁰² Another organization, Islamic Organization of Afghan Women, has established schools and income-generating training centers for refugees in the areas of Peshawar. And, the resistance organization, RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan), also has started schools and health clinics for women and children refugees.²⁰³ A wide network of Afghan private schools—"Afghan schools"—were also established in urban areas, but again the poorest refugees in those areas could not attend. The poor urban refugees, not residing in the camps or refugee villages, are the worst off since they are deemed invisible and ignored by the Pakistani government and aid agencies.

Interestingly, Dupree observed that the most active Afghan women, who started the schools and health clinics, are generally from small towns, with little or no long-term

²⁰¹ Marsden (December 1996), 36, 39.

²⁰² Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) website (accessed April 24, 2005); available at <http://www.creatinghope.org/About%20AIL.htm>.

²⁰³ Centlivres-Demont, 361.

exposure to Western lifestyles or the world outside their family and kin. The women have provided the direction of their schools and sought out funding from others.²⁰⁴ This illustrates the empowering impact of the displacement experience on small town women.

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE: RESHAPING TRADITIONAL COMMUNAL AND GENDER RELATIONS

Similar to the Iranian experience, Afghan refugees in Pakistan also experienced shifts in familial and gender relations, which was both traumatic and empowering. But, in the Pakistan case, the changes were different as they reflected the divergent living environment, host government's reception, and the host society values and beliefs. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Iranian model of "a good Muslim woman" altered and reformed how Afghan women and men viewed education, family planning, marriage, and familial relations. And, due to the Iranian government's initial policy of 'integration,' Afghan women had the freedom to go to the local mosque, market, and live throughout Iran. Accordingly, the Afghans observed and learned from the Iranian host society. In Pakistan, on the other hand, the refugees were confined to the refugee camps, villages, and settlement primarily along the border area. This resulted in less interaction with the host community and increased seclusion of many Afghan women refugees. However, the impact of international NGOs and their programming have also had an impact on women and their families with increase use of family planning, education, and so forth.²⁰⁵ By looking more closely at the impact of the new living environment, exposure to international NGO's activities, and formation of new networks and

²⁰⁴ Dupree (1990), 129-30.

²⁰⁵ Women's Commission for Women Refugee and Children (2001), *Rights, Reconstruction, and Enduring Peace: Afghan Women and Children After the Taliban*, New York: Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 3,12. Accessed February 25, 2005. Available at <http://www.womenscommission.org/reports/reconstruction.shtml>. Centlivres-Demont, 355-356

friendship, I examine how these relations have evolved over the course of displacement, both weakening and strengthening the role of women and children.

The New Living Environment: Challenging Family Relations

Many of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, like Iran, were confronted with an entirely new living environment, which transformed the familial and kinship roles. In the Afghan refugee villages, the majority of the houses are mud-brick, typically with only an interior courtyard, without a garden, and smaller than their village houses back in Afghanistan. In contrast, in Afghanistan, the houses have a number of rooms and may have up to two courtyards, barring strangers from the larger compound. During the daytime, men or strangers do not enter this area. Thus, the dense and overcrowded living quarters in the Afghan refugee villages, is an enormous change for women. Men, who were previously active in society as farmers or skilled workers, are now idle and have resorted to assisting with household chores and spending more time in the woman's domain. The close quarters and men's presence has restricted the movements of many women.²⁰⁶ The studies of the refugee villages by both Dupree and Centlivres-Demont concluded that the unaccustomed physical closeness of the new living arrangements as well as the men's inactivity has led to strained relationships within the household and the extended household. As Micheline Centlivres-Demont observed in her study of Afghan women refugees living in Pakistan "[women] strongly feel and resent this masculine presence and authority, which renders even more slender the margin of liberty left to women in the domestic spheres."²⁰⁷ And, according to Dupree's observation of refugee villages and camps, the close living quarters has resulted in the breakdown of close

²⁰⁶ Centlivres-Demont, 354; *See also* Dupree (1990), 125-127; Boeden, 170.

²⁰⁷ Centlivres-Demont, 354.

interrelationships between a number of husbands and wives, mother-in-laws and daughter, and so forth.²⁰⁸

On the other hand, a number of families face a different dilemma, the absence of men. Due to war and migration, Centlivres-Demont observed that the family group is continuously disintegrating within the refugee villages with the loss and scattering of men to Pakistani cities. In an environment in which families are detached a married woman or a widow often lives within the safe haven of her own family again and not always with her in-laws (as tradition would have it had in Afghanistan, as discussed in Iran chapter). Many widows, now, have the right not to remarry.²⁰⁹ Thus, there is a different allocation of family members living in the new environment, as marriage and family customs have shifted.

Accordingly, in her study, Dupree made the observation that refugee households in Pakistan contain more complex mixtures of kin-related women because so many men have perished during the wars or have migrated to other parts of Pakistan looking for employment. The absence of men in many of these new living arrangements has left many women feeling more marginalized and isolated. But, at the same time, a number of women, particularly respected female elders, have taken on the leadership role within the family and have fought to keep their families intact even in the absence of men. Women have upheld societal and familial obligations by assiduously preserving family unity and moral integrity.²¹⁰ Interestingly, in Bauer's study of Iranian women refugees, she also made a similar observation. Iranian women refugees have taken on an extremely

²⁰⁸ Dupree (1990), 127.

²⁰⁹ Centlivres-Demont, 354, 358; Centlivres (1993), 24.

²¹⁰ Dupree (1990), 128-129.

engaged role in preserving the cohesiveness and integrity of the Iranian family and community in exile.²¹¹

The roles of many Afghan women have changed and their expectations heightened despite, as I briefly alluded to in earlier sections, the stricter attitudes of *pardah*, closer confinement, and changed living situation. As a result of increased responsibility, they have learned confidence and greater independence in decision-making. They have had access to basic services, medical care, water systems, and so forth which they were not even able to dream of back home. Through the educational and programmatic efforts of various international aid agencies, they have learned to combat infant and maternal mortality, understood the importance of family planning, and the benefits of educating all their children. Centlivres-Demont noted that for most women the only place that they are given permission to go to by their husbands and family are the health units and NGOs in the camps and villages: “[w]hen physically ill or in need of psychological treatment, women have found a haven of counseling and attention there....”²¹² During these visits, Afghan women, learned how to use family planning services and basic hygiene techniques. And, a number of women have even participated in midwifery and community health worker trainings.²¹³ According to Centlivres-Demont’s interviews with health workers, with the ongoing medical supervision by the health workers in the refugee villages, sanitary conditions for women have greatly improved, in particular maternal and prenatal care. Infant mortality has not only decreased in comparison to that in Afghanistan, there first year in exile, but also to

²¹¹ Bauer, 94.

²¹² Centlivres-Demont, 354.

²¹³ Centlivres (1993), 22.

that of the rural Pakistani population.²¹⁴ All of these exposures have empowered these women and also broadened their expectations for their life back in Afghanistan.²¹⁵ However, it is important to note, that a number of these international NGOs and local Afghan women's organizations have come across resistance and difficulty in implementing health, education, and livelihood programs. Some Afghans and conservative religious leaders view the "Western" values as an assault against Afghan and Islamic traditions and family values.²¹⁶ For example, in 1988, the widow's refugee camp (Nasir Bagh camp) was closed due to religious leaders outcry; illustrating the limitations on Afghan women's roles.²¹⁷

As a result of the new living arrangements and migration, Marsden found that Afghans in the refugee camps in Pakistan, similar to Iran, relied much more heavily on the informal networks of friends and neighbors than in the past. In Marsden's study, a number of the informants noted that they turn to their neighbors for financial and material assistance rather than families. This is contrary to traditional Afghan practices in which families are the primary support system.²¹⁸

In conclusion, in many respects, the lives of Afghan refugee women and children in exile in Pakistan have regressed—increased *purdah*, control of religious parties and conservative elites on the lives of the refugees, initial difficulty in accessing education, high prevalence of child labor, and so forth. These hardships and constraints are a

²¹⁴ Centlivres-Demont, 355-356; Centlivres (1993), 25.

²¹⁵ Dupree (1990), 128.

²¹⁶ For example, Women's Commission noted the resistance to their projects as well as local Afghan women's organizations difficulties. Women's Commission (2001), 4. *See also* Centlivres (1993), 25 Boesen, 168-169.

²¹⁷ Centlivres (1993), 25.

²¹⁸ Marsden (December 1996), 9-10; Dupree (1990), 127.

reflection of the culture bred within the refugee camp and villages living environment. However, out of necessity and sheer determination, many women have overcome these limitations and hardships. They have become engaged economic actors, pushed for education by sending their children to school and created schools, learned the benefits of better healthcare for themselves and their families, and have taken the responsibility in preserving their families during the difficult years of exile.

Chapter 5: Looking to the Future – Conclusions and Recommendations

After comparing the traditional Afghan gender and family norms and beliefs to the displacement years of the refugees in Iran and Pakistan, one sees that, the refugee experience has challenged and engendered major transformations in the roles of Afghan women and children. The time in exile has also led to negative consequences, such as: high prevalence of child labor, solidification of some restrictive traditions, and increased trauma and anxiety for the women and children. But, exile years have also empowered the Afghan women, like no other incident. The experience of being a refugee in the neighboring countries' of Iran and Pakistan has brought a broader outlook and knowledge of the world outside of their valley, city, or village. In Iran, refugees reexamined their notions of Islam and being a Muslim. In Pakistan, women challenged the notions of *pardah*. Refugees have learned new skills, livelihoods, and even languages. Awareness and understanding of health, in particular the importance of reproductive healthcare and family planning, and interest in education have increased among the refugees. And, women and their families have experienced and enjoyed new standards of living that they never dreamed of back home.

It is important to take these findings and look to the future as Afghanistan struggles to reconstruct and develop its society. As the UNHCR evaluation team concluded in their evaluation of the refugee situation in Iran in 2002, Afghan refugees can play an imperative role in their home country, “as agents for development.”²¹⁹ The returning refugees are just as important in the reconstruction efforts as the returning diasporas from the West. It is true, that a number of these refugees are returning home

²¹⁹ UNHCR Evaluation 2002.

completely traumatized, improvised, and in need of both financial and psychological support. But, as this paper has shown, a large number of the refugees, in particular Afghan women, can make a significant impact on reshaping Afghanistan in the ensuing years. Women have the potential to be tools for change as they return home armed with new skills and livelihoods, education, and greater confidence. As Nancy Dupree eloquently stated “Afghan women personify the essence of Afghan culture, esteemed as preservers of the values of the society and as symbols of honour. Prevailing wisdom to the contrary, no solution to the Afghan problem can succeed without attention to a women’s component.”²²⁰ These new voices and values need to be incorporated in the “new” Afghanistan.

Thus, in light of these conclusions, I propose the following key recommendations for the donor governments, international aid agencies as well as the government of Afghanistan that are working together in the reconstruction and development efforts:

- *Livelihoods*: A number of Afghan women refugees, who were unskilled and isolated prior to migrating, have learned new skills (i.e. carpet weaving) and became active entrepreneurs during their years in exile. These women need to be incorporated within the new Afghan economy and encouraged to continue their handicrafts and professions. Furthermore, among the young Afghan women, the refugee experience spurred the desire for higher education, professional lives, and active roles in society. The new Afghan government and international NGOs should be well aware of these young women and encourage and assist them in their aspirations.
- *Education*: As I have discussed in the preceding chapters, Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan have been actively involved in running education programs in towns, refugee camps, and settlements. In particular, women from more rural backgrounds have played a key role in these campaigns. As Afghanistan reconstructs its social services in the urban and rural areas, it is vital that the Afghan government, donor governments, and international NGOs, encourage the involvement of these women in advising and assisting in the establishment of the new educational system, and how best to ensure girls’ access to education.

²²⁰ Dupree (1990), 121.

- *Health and Family Planning:* Afghan women and men, particularly ones living in Iran, have altered their views of family planning and gained more knowledge in regards to better health and sanitation. Rural women have played a key role in health campaigns and running health programs in refugee settlements and camps. Many women underwent training and are certified midwives and health workers. All of these men and women should be incorporated in any health and sanitation educational campaigns by the government or NGOs. The men and women can potentially serve as health volunteers, where they can share their knowledge and experiences during exile. These refugees can serve as a resource for future development and their voices must be heard.

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Appendix I:
Map of Islamic Republic of Iran

Appendix II:
Map of Pakistan