

WOMEN'S COMMISSION FOR REFUGEE WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN: NEEDS AND RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPMENT AND RECONSTRUCTION

(Delegation to Pakistan May-June 1990)

DELEGATION:

Eve Burton, Attorney, Millbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy, former Fulbright Research Scholar at Thammasart University in Thailand, former relief workers for Save the Children in Thailand

Sima Wali, Executive Director, Refugee Women in Development

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Introduction

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children visited Afghan refugee camps in northwestern Pakistan from May 22 to June 3, 1990. Delegation members included Ms. Sima Wali, the Executive Director of Refugee Women in Development in Washington, D.C., Ms. Eve Burton, an attorney at Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy and Ms. Judy Mayotte an independent author and television producer. The delegation's mission was to study the special needs of refugee women and children to identify projects that might be helpful to them upon repatriation to Afghanistan. With these goals in mind, the delegation met over 100 Afghan women in five different camps.

The following report outlines the needs and resources of Afghan refugee women and makes concrete recommendations for overcoming the barriers to their inclusion in the development process. The delegates of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, traveling to Pakistan under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee, were highly impressed with the energy, competency, and dedication of rural and urban Afghan refugee women. With support from the international community, these women have unlimited potential to contribute to their own development in exile and to the reconstruction of Afghanistan when peace comes.

The report focuses on established and innovative programs that are most beneficial to the largest number of Afghan women. It pinpoints efforts needed to be made to develop their leadership potential and it suggests ways to solicit their input into programs. This report is not a comprehensive overview of all programs that either directly or indirectly effect Afghan women. Rather, it offers recommendations that are most likely to be successful and which can be accomplished by the re-distribution of existing resources. Our ideas come from the Afghans themselves - men, as well as women.

Human Right Abuses Against Afghan Women

Before discussing specific programs, it is necessary to mention certain dangers that exist in the war-zone along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border where the refugees are clustered. The war environment not only limits Afghan women from realizing their potential but in some cases actually costs them their lives. Afghan women refugees participating in programs tailored specifically for their development needs have become targets of violence and intimidation, as have members of some of the western organizations assisting them.

To the most conservative factions of the Afghan male population, programs for women are anti-Muslim. The response of the most radical leadership has been to bomb projects and kill women. A day before we arrived, an Afghan nurse, considered by some members of the Afghan population to be an "activist," was killed, mutilated, and delivered to her family in a box. To date, there has been no prosecution of the perpetrator. Despite these continuing abuses, Afghan women refugees, especially the educated, are extremely committed to the continuation of programs and services to women.

The present threats to Afghan refugee women are linked to politically motivated factions (presumably fundamentalist) who either wish to disparage the Communist regime's agenda for women inside Afghanistan or convince more of their countrymen that women are being dangerously westernized. The emergence of radical fundamentalists has directly and adversely affected Afghan refugee women and girls and must be taken into consideration in program planning during exile as well as after repatriation.

One durable way to address the anti-western sentiment is to lessen non-Afghan involvement in programs. In camp areas where the international community is not involved, there is less violence. To this end, leadership capabilities of Afghan refugee women must be strengthened. Women need to begin to handle their own affairs.

Many are educated, have the capacity to be leaders, and are only waiting for the opportunity. It is these women who will be indispensable to the re-development of Afghanistan. If it is feared that western influences will undermine Islamic values, the best way to defeat such an image is to be certain Afghan women are integral to the conception, planning, and implementation of any program.

The vicious attacks have raised concern among Afghan women that donors will see the situation as a green light to limit their involvement in refugee women's programs and to close permanently all projects. That, of course, is what the perpetrators of the attacks desire. It is vital that the rights of these women be protected and physical abuse should not be tolerated. Donor community funding of protection programs and relief agency presence in camp areas, are essential. Afghan women want programs to continue and they need international support in this effort. Threats by extremists should not deter donor countries from a commitment to development programs.

To ease reluctance among the donor community, it should be said that not all elements of male Afghan society oppose women's programs. In fact, increasingly men are asking for women's programs, including education, because they see the benefits, particularly in programs developed with cultural sensitivity. They realize, too, the difficulty their fellow men face in caring for the large numbers of widows left by the war. Including women in

programs is not meant to circumvent or show disrespect for Afghan customs and beliefs. Afghan women leaders we met do not wish to deny the essence of Islam. They are intent on encouraging programs that do not compromise their religious values.

General Observations

Although women and children comprise approximately 80% of the refugee population, they are disproportionately underserved by aid programs. Durable solutions to problems affecting Afghan women depend on a political settlement to the continuing Afghan conflict. In the meantime, however, one important way the international community can support women is through the re-distribution of existing resources. For example, there are many more primary schools for boys than for girls. During 1989, in one school system alone 33,000 males attended school while only 535 females enjoyed the same opportunity. Higher education and skills-training also reach primarily men.

Members of the donor community state that they fund programs for the community at large. Therefore, they do not see the need to target the special needs of women. Although donors envision equitable distribution of program benefits, religious and traditional constraints, which have intensified during the years of war and exile, inhibit women and girls from receiving or participating in services and programs. In order to reach the

female sector of the Afghan community, funding sources and implementors must create and support carefully structured programs.

As preparations continue for repatriation, it is imperative that those organizations linked to the process of return (particularly UNOCA, USAID, UNHCR, UNDP and NGO's) consider the UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women. This policy states that programs which are not planned and implemented with assistance from women, representing more than half of the target population, cannot be effective and may well have a negative impact on the population as a whole. In every sector and at every phase of reconstruction, women policy planners, both Afghan and expatriate, are needed to ensure that comprehensive, constructively designed women's components are included.

The delegates recommend that donor countries earmark funds specifically for women's programs. At the implementing level, however, the international organizations and NGO's must be sensitive to the appropriate form of delivery to specific projects at specific sites.

Observations of Existing Programs

Under the structure of the existing western aid operation, funds are designated primarily for refugee relief and maintenance programs (UNHCR, donor country and NGO funded and administered) and

cross-border operations (USAID and other donor countries). This arrangement lacks a well-defined development component that links relief aid to the skills training needed to rebuild Afghanistan. Most aid programs would be enhanced by a refugee women and development component. Programs most beneficial and accessible to women, such as income-generating and credit projects, are actually types of economic development programs. By changing its focus toward development, the international community would find that more Afghan women could be incorporated into practical and productive small scale mainstream programs.

Credit Programs

The most successful programs we observed with the greatest long-term development benefit, particularly for rural women, were credit projects. Programs that utilize free market principles such as the IRC poultry projects for widows, Catholic Relief Service quilting and tailoring programs, and the World Bank tree production and reforestation program, are effective, inexpensive, lead to self-sufficiency, provide skills training and have met minimal community resistance in most camp areas..

The poultry production program and the tailoring project follow similar guidelines. In the case of the poultry project, widows are given chickens worth one hundred dollars and on a loan

basis are required to repay fifty percent of the costs. Women are trained in animal husbandry by a Pakistani who offers basic information on market needs and the feeding of chickens with locally available and affordable food. Male family members are expected to sell the eggs (minus family consumption) in the market. Each month the widows repay a portion of the loan, so that at the end of three years they will have enough profit to purchase a new brood of chickens.

Women in the tailoring project purchase their sewing machines in much the same way as others buy their chickens. Not only will these women return to Afghanistan with a valuable skill, they will also own the necessary equipment to continue sewing.

Cottage industries like poultry production and tailoring will rekindle the economy of Afghanistan in the early years following repatriation. Furthermore, credit programs provide immediate income. If a majority of the loans are repaid, the anticipated costs should even be less. Donor countries and international NGO's should give the highest priority to these types of programs.

Income Generating

Income-generating programs most benefit Afghan women living in rural camps who arrive in Pakistan with an existing skill. Handicrafts and carpet weaving projects in most cases are the

primary source of income for women and their families. Income-generating projects must therefore be seen as a means of providing a family's basic diet, not as supplemental income. The Afghan war has produced so many widows that the extended family is unable to provide traditional support. Since ration distributions to the vulnerable populations, especially widows, is frequently faulty and meager, money made for handicrafts is often the widow's only means of providing for herself and her children.

Women who participate in these activities, even with all their other family duties, appear to enjoy better mental health. Most women in rural areas are homebound for cultural and religious reasons and suffer from loneliness and isolation. Each woman we visited waited eagerly for the weekly contact with the Afghan woman organizing the income generating program. For most, it was the only connection with the broader community.

A number of successful income-generating programs can be used as models for replication. The most successful approach used in rural camps has been a "door to door" distribution and payment system. Afghan or Pakistani women working for NGO's administering these programs distribute materials and pay wages for completed tasks. Women need not leave their home compounds to be able to earn money for the family. The male leadership usually sees the economic benefit of these programs and has accepted them as long as they are administered in a sensitive way. In many camps this may mean a low-

keyed western presence.

The use of a "woman's center" as a distribution point for materials and wages has raised problems with some Afghan male leaders since women must leave their compounds to journey to the center. In addition, they are likely to meet other men or women when they arrive. In such places as Baluchistan, agency personnel have observed that poorer Afghan males are receptive to allowing their women to attend center programs.

When training is not a component of the project and women are utilizing skills they already have, there may be no practical need for a central meeting place. Since some camp workers believe that the "door to door" approach has been well received in a number of the rural camps, this model could be used at least until a project is well established in the camp area. When training is necessary, small groupings of women gathering in adjacent compounds have proven to be satisfactory, even in some of the more conservative camps.

In urban areas such as Peshawar, where most of the women participating in programs are from urban areas of Afghanistan, the needs are different. Training in accounting, nursing, small business administration and other such skills have a higher priority than income generating projects, since food is often less of a concern.

One major benefit of income-generating projects is the link they forge between urban and rural Afghan women. Save the Children USA, which administers one of the largest income generating projects, hires rural Afghan women to make handicrafts and urban Afghan women to pack and market the products. This model could be beneficial upon repatriation.

Health

Health-related programs and services for Afghan women are accepted among most segments of the Afghan community. Yet the current estimated mortality rate of 400 live births per 1000 women of childbearing age is the highest in the world. Less than 10% of Afghan women receive professional birth assistance. More effort should be directed toward public health, training midwives, birth attendants, and other preventative concerns.

Immunization, sanitation education, and nutritional programs are some of the most beneficial preventative efforts. Newly learned skills are useful in the immediate future and upon repatriation. Health education classes, such as training traditional birth attendants to utilize better sanitary and hygienic methods are cost effective and culturally acceptable. These types of programs, which greatly increase the number of women who will get support, can be implemented in the home. As a result, trained personnel can reach

large numbers of rural women at minimal cost.

Because health programs are trusted, they can be used as a tool to create training and skill-building programs in other areas. For example, literacy training could be incorporated into already existing programs.

Education

Education of women and girls has been the most controversial program area. Few programs have been successful, especially in rural areas where illiteracy is the highest. Urban women particularly have expressed a strong desire for educational opportunities. All initiatives have been more expensive and often risky from a security perspective because special transportation and guard services must be provided if education is to reach women and girls. Rural camps are most in need of primary schools. Urban women and girls are most in need of secondary and higher education.

There is nothing in the Koran or in Islam that prohibits women from being educated. In Iran, for example, 95% of all women have some level of education. Many Afghan women and many families, particularly those aligned with the moderate political parties, have expressed an interest in women's education programs. The Afghan Women's Center in Peshawar, which provides educational

programs for urban Afghan females, is a highly successful venture and documents the enthusiasm expressed by many Afghan women.

Cross-Border

Approximately 100 million dollars was allocated in 1989, to cross border operations, particularly by USAID. The massive infusion of aid is by many accounts ineffective, since the war in Afghanistan continues and monitoring devices are minimal. With the exception of one small program, little of this aid directly benefits women. USAID programs as presently structured exclude women. This is partly a result of actions by the conservative Afghan leadership, but fault also lies with misdirected USAID regulations and policies.

One USAID education program administered through an international NGO, for example, is an engineering school for Afghan men, forced to leave university during the war. This program is funded by "cross border" money since the men study in Peshawar and do summer "engineering internships" in Afghanistan upon graduation. In reality, since the men left to escape the present political situation, they are not likely to return permanently until there is peace.

This educational program excludes women, unable because of cultural and religious constraints to "agree" in advance that they

will return to Afghanistan for summer internships and at the end of the program. USAID argues that a culturally and religiously acceptable women's program cannot be funded as long as women will not commit to re-enter Afghanistan. The solution, however, is to treat the definition of cross border more broadly. A university level program created for women in Peshawar can offer them skills for use upon repatriation. Alternatively, USAID could pay for Afghan women to attend Pakistani universities. The practical reality is that the women will probably go home at the same time as the Afghan men currently being trained with USAID cross border funds.

Recommendations

The following recommendations highlight major program adjustments that require immediate attention from the donor community:

1. USAID, which offers a significant amount of money for Afghan cross border programs, should modify their regulations to promote programs involving women. Recent directives by the United States Congress in the 1990 House Appropriations Bill based on testimony by members of the Women's Commission, should provide the necessary legislative incentive to re-examine present USAID regulations. The development of training programs for women, who comprise more than 50% of the population, is essential for the future rebuilding of

Afghanistan.

2. Credit programs seem to offer the international donor community the greatest opportunity, at the least cost, to train and assist the Afghan community, particularly women, with skills that will be useful in Afghanistan. Since most of the refugee population are likely to return to the rural areas of Afghanistan, the types of skills obtained are essential to longer term development. The use of revolving loans is also a desirable aspect of this type of program. Credit projects should be funded by USAID once regulations are expanded to promote the inclusion of women.

3. Relief and development organizations working with Afghan refugees should be encouraged to employ and train Afghans for upper level management positions with a special emphasis on hiring more Afghan women. These organizations would benefit too from tapping the expertise of Afghan women who have settled overseas. The creation of more Afghan non-governmental organizations is essential to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. This process should be attempted in collaboration with the international NGO's.

An immediate initiative might include a "joint venture" arrangement between an Afghan NGO (with representation from all the political groups) and an international NGO. The purpose would be to develop and empower Afghan NGO's to participate actively in the building of their country. Staff from an agency experienced in the

affairs of Afghanistan, such as the IRC, could be responsible for fiscal management to meet donor requirements while an Afghan staff person familiar with local needs would oversee program development. Staff from each agency would work together as equal partners of the newly created entity.

A joint venture would help to ensure that international funds were being used for the designated purpose. This type of innovative approach is conceptually similar to the mutual assistance associations organized in the United States with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Joint ventures begin to put in place local indigenous structures for the delivery of aid once a political settlement is reached on the Afghan situation. In the end, if history is any indication, the only successful economic development of Afghanistan will be done by the Afghans themselves. But failure to include women will slow the process and will be more difficult to achieve.

Conclusion

There is no immediate solution to the Afghan refugee problem. Nonetheless, opportunities exist to introduce programs which will provide long-term social and economic benefits. There is a growing awareness among a significant number of development specialists,

as well as Afghans abroad (especially those in the United States) of the importance of the including women and girls as partners in the development and repatriation process. The international community would do well to concentrate more on the innovative and courageous spirit of more than half of the refugee population and embrace all they have to contribute toward rebuilding their homeland.

Recent policy of the UNHCR focuses on the integration of refugee women in the development process and encourages members of its staff to become more conscious of the special needs and resources of female refugees. Similarly, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women convened in Vienna an international meeting of governmental and non-governmental representatives to develop resolutions aimed at addressing their protection and development needs. The Women's commission applauds these actions and continues to press for inclusion of women and girls in all facets and stages of development assistance programs.

The delegation also notes that U.N. agencies, U.S. government and NGO's have still to include and promote women in general, and women of color particularly, to positions of authority. In the end, a change in this regard may be the best hope for advancing the special needs of refugee women and girls.

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The Women's Commission delegation to Pakistan met with directors or senior members of the following institutions:

Government of Pakistan-Commission for Afghan Refugees (Peshawar)

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees - UNHCR (Islamabad, Geneva)

United Nations Coordinator for Humanitarian and Economic Assistance Programs for Afghanistan - UNOCA (Islamabad)

Islamic Afghan Interim Government (Islamabad, Peshawar)

United States Embassy (Islamabad)

US Mission to the United Nations (Geneva)

US Agency for International Development (Peshawar, Washington)

US Department of State (Washington)

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Washington)

House Committee for Foreign Operations (Washington)

Canadian Embassy (Islamabad)

Dutch Embassy (Islamabad)

Catholic Relief Services (Islamabad)

Save the Children Federation USA (Islamabad)

International Rescue Committee (Islamabad, Peshawar, New York)

Save the Children UK (Peshawar)

Norwegian Refugee Committee (Peshawar)

Danish Agency for Afghan Refugees (Peshawar)

Asia Foundation (Peshawar)

Nancy Hatch Dupree (Peshawar)

Afghan Relief Foundation (Peshawar)

Afghan Obstetric and Gynecology Hospital Association (Peshawar)

Afghan Women's Resource Center (Peshawar)

Afghan Lycee Malalai School for Girls (Peshawar)

Over 100 Afghan women with no official affiliation in five different camp areas in Pakistan