

**A Tapestry of Resistance**

**Afghan Educated Refugee Women in Pakistan: 'Agency', Identity and Education in War and Displacement**

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## Abstract

This study addresses how educated Afghan refugee women in Pakistan have experienced, contributed to and challenged the gendered constructions of national, ethnic and religious identities in war and displacement. In addition, this study addresses the lived experiences of educated Afghan refugee women of formal education in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, and their 'agency' in utilizing education to further the cause of equity in their families and communities.

This is a qualitative study using twenty in-depth and semi-structured interviews, as well as extensive participatory observation in Afghanistan and Pakistan and library-research over the period of 1996 to 2003. It is the result of immersion, as an 'in-between' feminist researcher, in Afghanistan and Afghan refugee life in Pakistan since 1996, and an effort to link academic endeavor with activism and life as a development/humanitarian practitioner.

This study shows the symbolic and actual role of women in the gendered constructions of dynamic and shifting identities, and their mobilization by patriarchal, political and military processes in war and displacement. It highlights the specificity of Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, as the 'near abroad'. This includes national 'modernization', Sovietization and Islamization efforts and the influence of regional and global politics on Afghanistan and Afghans.

The study also shows that many Afghan women, in all their diversity, have challenged not only patriarchy but also other dogmatic and undemocratic process of exclusionary politics. Their lives and efforts challenge *Westocentric/orientalized stereotypes* of Afghan women (and men), as well as generally those of Moslem women, women of the South and refugee women, and their constructions purely as victims.

Formal education, as one of the first and most important public spaces available to girls and women, with its contradictory yet critical potential in enhancing the awareness, skills and resistance of girls and women, is further reviewed and analyzed.

While addressing the above issues, this study also highlights the need to undertake further in-depth research on Afghanistan, Afghan women, Afghan refugee women and female education in Afghanistan. Such research can be used to support Afghan women and Afghan refugee women with due consideration to their heterogeneity, 'agency' and struggles for wellbeing, choice and respect.

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## Glossary

<i>Ahmad Khan Abadali</i>	- Pashtun tribal leader who established an Afghan tribal confederacy in the 18 <sup>th</sup> century
<i>Ahmad Shah Masoud</i>	- Tajik Afghan commander known as 'the lion of Panjshir' assassinated by Al Qaeda linked Arabs in September 2001
<i>Aimaq</i>	- one of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan
<i>Al Qaeda</i>	- Islamic fundamentalist group led by Osama bin Laden
<i>Amanullah</i>	- Pashtun Afghan king (1919-29)
<i>Amir Abdul Rahman Khan</i>	- Pashtun Afghan king (1890-1901)
<i>Amir-al-Muminin</i>	- Leader of the believers
<i>Anahita Ratebzad</i>	- Communist Afghan female leader in the 1970s and 1980s
<i>Babrak Karmal</i>	- Communist Afghan leader in the 1970s and 1980s
<i>Bacheh Saqao</i>	- Tajik who took power from Amanullah in 1929
<i>Badakshan</i>	- province of Afghanistan (and East Tajikistan)
<i>Badal</i>	- practice of exchanging women in tribal conflicts
<i>Bahatism</i>	- a monotheistic religion founded in Iran in 1863, as a branch of Babism, emphasizing religious unity and world peace
<i>Baghlan</i>	- province in North Central Afghanistan
<i>Balkh</i>	- an ancient city and also name of a province in Northern Afghanistan
<i>Baluch</i>	- an ethnic group, based in Baluchestan
<i>Bamiyan</i>	- province in Central Highlands of Afghanistan, inhabited largely by Hazaras
<i>Basmachi</i>	- Turkic term meaning guerrilla/bandit first used by Soviets when referring to Islamic revolts in Central Asia after 1917
<i>Bazaar</i>	- market
<i>Bukharan</i>	- people from Bukhara in present day Uzbekistan, capital of Samanid dynasty
<i>Burhanaldin Rabbani</i>	- mujahidin leader & former President of Afghanistan in the early 1990s
<i>Burqa</i>	-the full length cover worn by many women in Afghanistan/Pakistan
<i>Buzkeshi</i>	- traditional Afghan game on horses, playing with goat carcass
<i>Chador</i>	- small head covering/veil
<i>Chadori</i>	- large head covering/veil
<i>Commander</i>	- mujahidin military leader
<i>Da'f</i>	-a tambourine like musical instrument also used in Sufi ceremonies
<i>Dai</i>	- midwife
<i>Dari</i>	- Farsi dialect, spoken in Afghanistan
<i>Daoud</i>	- the first President of an Afghan Republic
<i>Dervish</i>	- mystic

<i>Dr. Najibullah</i>	- the last Communist President of Afghanistan, murdered in 1996 by Taliban forces in UN premises, after capture of Kabul
<i>Dupatta</i>	- South Asian shawl worn with Shalwar Kameez
<i>Durrani</i>	- famous Pashtun-tribal family
<i>Efat</i>	- chastity
<i>Eid</i>	- Islamic celebration/holiday
<i>Farsi</i>	- language spoken with different dialects in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan
<i>Farsiwan</i>	- Farsi speakers
<i>Fateheh</i>	- Islamic prayers for the dead
<i>Fetwa</i>	- Islamic decree by a high-ranking clergyman
<i>Glasnost</i>	- Gorbachev's policy of opening up to opposition voices
<i>General Abdul Rashid Dostam</i>	- Afghan Uzbek leader based in Mazar Sharif
<i>General Malek</i>	- Afghan Uzbek leader who rose against Dostam and helped Taliban forces enter Mazar Sharif in 1997
<i>Ghabeleh</i>	- tribe
<i>Ghebleh gah</i>	- place of worship
<i>Ghezal</i>	- form of poetry
<i>Ghor</i>	- province in Afghanistan, West of Bamiyan, East of Herat
<i>Gilani (Pir Gilani, Fatima Gilani, Fatana Gilani)</i>	- influential Afghan family
<i>Gohar Shad</i>	- Afghan queen based in Herat
<i>Habibullah</i>	- Pashtun Afghan king (1901-1919)
<i>Hadith</i>	- attributed sayings and deeds of Prophet Mohammad
<i>Hafizullah Amin</i>	- Second Communist leader of Afghanistan in 1979
<i>Hamas</i>	- Palestinian Islamic Resistance Party
<i>Hamed Karzai</i>	- current President of Afghanistan
<i>Hanafi</i>	- one of the four Sunni branches of Islam
<i>Harem</i>	- women's quarters
<i>Haq</i>	- right
<i>Hazara/Hazaras</i>	- persecuted ethnic minority of Afghanistan
<i>Hazaragi</i>	- dialect of the Hazaras
<i>Hazarajat</i>	- region of Central Highlands of Afghanistan
<i>Hazrat -e-Ali</i>	- son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Mohammad
<i>Hekmatyar (Golbodin)</i>	- Afghan Mujahidin Pashtun leader of Hezb-e-Islami
<i>Hejab</i>	- Islamic coverage/veil
<i>Hejrat</i>	- migration for religious persecution, refers to Prophet Mohammad's leaving Mecca in the 7 <sup>th</sup> century A.D. for Medina
<i>Helmand</i>	- province in Southern Afghanistan where poppy cultivation is abundant
<i>Hezb-e-Islami</i>	- one of the Islamic Pashtun-based political parties led by Hekmatyar
<i>Hezb-e-Wahdat</i>	- union of the Shiite Islamic parties of Afghanistan (mostly Hazara)

<i>Hezbollah</i>	- Party of God, a Lebanese Islamic Party
<i>Hudood</i>	- Islamic punishment, according to Shari'a
<i>Inshallah</i>	- God willing
<i>Ismaeli</i>	- Seven Imamite Shiite Moslems, led by Agha Khan
<i>Ismael Khan</i>	- Afghan Tajik Mujahidin commander based in Herat before and after the Taliban
<i>Jalalabad</i>	- city in Eastern Afghanistan
<i>Jamiat-e-Islami</i>	- one of the Islamic parties of Afghanistan
<i>Jamiat Khaneh</i>	- the place of worship of the Ismaelis
<i>Jan</i>	- dear
<i>Jehad</i>	- holy war for the cause of Allah (God)
<i>Junbesh-e-Melli Islami</i>	- National Islamic Front of General Dostam
<i>Kandahar</i>	- city in Southern Afghanistan
<i>KHAD (Khadamat-e-Etelati Dawlati)</i>	- Afghan Communist state information agency
<i>Khaleh</i>	- maternal aunt
<i>Khalifeh</i>	- female religious teacher
<i>Khalqi</i>	- supporter of the masses/Communist (PDPA) political party
<i>Khastegari</i>	- asking for the hand of someone in marriage
<i>Kheir</i>	- for the best
<i>Khost</i>	- capital of Paktia province in Eastern Afghanistan
<i>Kirghiz</i>	- Afghan ethnic minority group
<i>Kalashnikov/culture</i>	- weapon, also used to imply militarization
<i>Kofr/Kafir</i>	- blasphemy/blasphemer
<i>Koochis</i>	- Pashtun nomads of Afghanistan
<i>Koran</i>	- the holy book of the Moslems
<i>Landay</i>	- form of poetry
<i>Lingua franca</i>	- official common language between people whose native languages are different
<i>Lycee</i>	- large high school
<i>Logar</i>	- province south of Kabul province in Afghanistan
<i>Madrassa(s)</i>	- religious schools where students study Koran and other Islamic subjects, some have been by fundamentalist groups
<i>Maghnayieh</i>	- form of Islamic headcover used in Iran after the Islamic Revolution
<i>Mahmoud Tarzi</i>	- reformer/Prime Minister during the rule of King Amanullah (1919-29)
<i>Mahr</i>	- brideprice
<i>Mahram</i>	- close male relative with whom women can have easier contact in Islam but can not marry
<i>Maiwand</i>	- historical place in Southern Afghanistan
<i>Majomal</i>	- female religious teacher
<i>Majrooh</i>	- Afghan intellectual assassinated in Pakistan
<i>Makta</i>	- form of poetry
<i>Malalai</i>	- Pashtun Afghan female leader of the Anglo-Afghan wars
<i>Mazari</i>	- Hazara Afghan leader killed by the Taliban in the mid 1990s

<i>Mazar Sharif</i>	- capital of Balkh province in Northern Afghanistan
<i>Mahr</i>	- brideprice
<i>Meliat</i>	- Nationality or ethnic group
<i>Microrayan</i>	- residential unit in Kabul
<i>Mileh</i>	- picnic
<i>Moghuls</i>	- originated from Mongolia and captured Central Asia and the Middle East
<i>Mohammadzai</i>	- influential Pashtun tribal family
<i>Mojadadi</i>	- the first post-Soviet President of Afghanistan in 1992
<i>Moki</i>	- Ismaeli leader
<i>Moslem</i>	- the followers of Islam
<i>Motasseb</i>	- dogmatic, prejudiced
<i>Moulavi Kholes</i>	- mujahidin leader of Harekat-e-Islami
<i>Muhajer, Muhajerin, Muhajerat</i>	- Moslems who leave their homeland for religious reasons
<i>Mujahidin</i>	- fighters who undertake jihad for Islam
<i>Mullah</i>	- Islamic clergy, prayer leader at a mosque
<i>Mullah Omar</i>	- leader of the Taliban
<i>Musharraf</i>	- President of Pakistan, a general, since October 1999 and through a coup d'etat
<i>Nader Shah</i>	- Pashtun Afghan king from 1929 to 1934
<i>Naheed</i>	- the first martyr, a young woman, of the Afghan anti-Soviet struggle
<i>Nasir Naderi</i>	- Afghan leader of the Ismaelis in Northern Afghanistan
<i>Northern Alliance</i>	-alliance of anti-Taliban forces based in Northern Afghanistan
<i>Noor Mohammad Taraki</i>	- First Communist leader in the 1970s
<i>Nowrouz</i>	- Afghan/Tajiki/Iranian New Year which starts on 21 <sup>st</sup> of March
<i>Nuristan</i>	- in East Afghanistan, part of Laghman and Konar provinces
<i>Omayat –al – Momenin</i>	- Afghan women's university in Peshawar
<i>Osama bin Laden</i>	- leader of the Al Qaeda
<i>OXFAM</i>	- British based INGO
<i>Paktia</i>	- province in East Afghanistan
<i>Pakhtunkhwa</i>	- country of the Pashtuns
<i>Panjshir</i>	- valley in Northern Parvan province of Afghanistan
<i>Parcham</i>	- flag, an Afghan Community party
<i>Pasban</i>	- guard
<i>Pashtun/Pakhtun/Pathan</i>	- ethnic group in Afghanistan/Pakistan
<i>Pashtu</i>	- language of the Pashtuns
<i>Pashtunwali</i>	- Pashtun tribal code of conduct
<i>Pol-e-Khomri</i>	- city in Baghlan province of Northern Afghanistan
<i>Prophet Mohammad</i>	- the Prophet of Moslems
<i>Qawm</i>	- Extended family/tribe/clan
<i>Qizilbash</i>	- nomadic ethnic group in Afghanistan
<i>Rabia Balkhi</i>	- famous Afghan female poet

<i>Rowshanfekr</i>	- intellectual, open-minded, liberal
<i>Safa</i>	- harmony
<i>Sam'a</i>	- dance of the Sufis
<i>Sargardan</i>	- without direction, confused
<i>Saur Coup d'etat</i>	- Communist coup in April 1978
<i>Savad</i>	- literacy
<i>Setam-e-Melli</i>	- National Injustice, a Maoist Afghan party
<i>Seven Imamite</i>	- Ismaelis
<i>Seyed</i>	- descendants of the Prophet Mohammad, females are known as Sadat
<i>Shah</i>	- King
<i>Shaheed</i>	- martyr
<i>Shalwar kameez</i>	- popular South Asian style of clothes for women
<i>Shari'a</i>	- Islamic jurisprudence
<i>Sheikhanzai</i>	- nomadic ethnic group of Afghanistan
<i>Shiite</i>	- twelve imamite Moslems
<i>Shohleh-e-Javid</i>	- Eternal Flame, Maoist Afghan group, Eternal Flame
<i>Shomali</i>	- fertile region north of Kabul largely destroyed by the Taliban
<i>Sigheh</i>	- temporary marriage in Shiite Islam
<i>Soraya</i>	- Afghan queen in the early 20 <sup>th</sup> century
<i>Sowzawans</i>	- form of poetry
<i>Sufi</i>	- Moslem mystics also known as dervish
<i>Sufism</i>	- Islamic mysticism
<i>Sunna</i>	- Prophet Mohammad's life and rule as an example for all Moslems and a basis for laws
<i>Sunni</i>	- one of the main two branches of Islam
<i>Tabied</i>	- exiled
<i>Tajikestan</i>	- country in Central Asia, neighboring Afghanistan
<i>Talib (s)</i>	- students, followers of the Taliban
<i>Taliban</i>	- Pashtun Afghan Islamic fundamentalist group
<i>Tajik</i>	- Afghan ethnic group/people of Tajikestan
<i>Tanzim(s)</i>	- political group
<i>Tarighat</i>	- Sufi order/group
<i>Turkmen</i>	- Afghan ethnic group/the people of Turkmenistan
<i>Twelve Imamite</i>	- Shiites
<i>Ummat/umma</i>	- Islamic world community
<i>Uzbek</i>	- Afghan ethnic group/people of Uzbekistan
<i>Uzbekistan</i>	- country in Central Asia, North of Afghanistan
<i>Wahabi</i>	- Saudi Arabian-based sub-group within Sunni Islam
<i>Watan</i>	- moderate Communist party of Dr. Najibullah, meaning homeland
<i>Zahir Shah</i>	- last King of Afghanistan deposed in 1973
<i>Zia ul Haq</i>	- General and former President of Pakistan in the 1980s
<i>Zoroastrians</i>	- a monotheistic religion predominant in Iran/Afghanistan prior to Islam

## List of Abbreviations

ANCB	- Afghan NGO Coordinating Bureau
BRAC	- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
DOAW	- Democratic Organization of Afghan Women
ECHO	- European Community Humanitarian Office
ESL	- English as a second language
EU	- European Union
GAD	- Gender and Development
GAFM	- Gender and Forced Migration
ICRI	- International Consortium for Refugees in India
IDPs	- Internally Displaced Persons
INGO	- International Non-Government Organizations
IRC	- International Rescue Committee
ISAF	- International Security Assistance Forces
ISI	- Inter-Service Intelligence of Pakistan
LTTE	- Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MSF	- Medecins Sans Frontieres
MQM	- Mutahida Ghaumi Movement
NATO	- North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	- Non-Governmental Organization
PDPA	- People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
RAWA	- Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association
RFR	- References for Feminist Research
SAP	- Structural Adjustment Programme
SCA	- Swedish Committee for Afghanistan
SDPI	- Sustainable Development Policies Institute
STC	- Save the Children INGO
UN	- United Nations
UNAMA	- United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan
UNESCO	- United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	- United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNHCR	- United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	- United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	- United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNOCAL	- A US-based oil conglomerate
UNOCHA	- UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNRWA	- United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USAID	- United States Agency for International Development
WFP	- United Nations World Food Programme
WID	- Women in Development
WLUML	- Women Living Under Moslem Law
WWII	- World War Two

**A Tapestry of Resistance**

**Afghan Educated Refugee Women in Pakistan:  
'Agency', Identity and Education  
in War and Displacement**



**Chapter One - Introduction: Research Objectives and Political-Theoretical  
Imperatives of Researching Afghan Refugee Women**

**1. Research Objectives**

Women's status in society has been critically controversial in Afghanistan's contemporary history. This is linked, amongst many factors, to the problematic of patriarchal collective identities and has been exacerbated by conflict and displacement. Debates on female education have been amongst the most important manifestations of the contested role of Afghan women in society.

Based on in-depth interviews with twenty educated Afghan refugee women from several different ethnic communities in Pakistan, the research addresses the following questions:

- What were the interviewees' gendered experiences of war and displacement?
- What were their changing gendered experiences of being members of particular national, ethnic and religious collectivities in turbulent times, especially during conflict and displacement from 1978 to 2002?
- What were the changing familial and societal conditions which made their education possible and what were their dynamic lived experiences of formal education under various regimes, in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan, as girls/women as well as members of particular collectivities?
- What were some of their main struggles in life as women of particular collectivities and what were some of their success stories and moments of triumph?
- How are all the above issues interconnected and how do they throw further light on relevant sociological debates such as those pertaining to subaltern feminist studies, gendered constructions of collective identities, gendered experiences of conflict and

displacement, as well as the role of education in the dynamics of gendered social relations and women's struggles for equity?

This dissertation attempts to provide an explanation towards the understanding and contextualizing of the processes through which the above have occurred, with a view towards the future.

Through a study and analysis of the above questions, my objective has also been to locate as well as understand the 'agency' of the Afghan women interviewed. In addition, I have aspired to understand the role of formal education in providing additional impetus or opportunity to negotiate/redefine or transform some, if not all, of their life trajectories. I have also tried to understand how this is linked to their other experiences as girls/women in Afghanistan, in conflict and displacement, and how all these experiences have impacted their lives, as well as their views and perceptions about themselves, their families, communities, country and the world outside Afghanistan.

'Agency' is a critical area of concern in this dissertation. I use Victoria Ana Goddard's definition of agency referred to by Lister:

By agency I refer to the capacity of individuals or groups to embark on processes of autonomous self-realization. This agency is one that considers agency as 'located in a dialectic relationship with social structures' and 'embedded in social relations.' (Lister, 1997:37)

The efforts of the interviewees or their 'agency' were realized within an overall patriarchal context, in the numerous personal and geographic journeys of their remarkable lives. Their efforts are shaped by many factors, including the circumstances with which they are faced, as well as their values, principles, moral beliefs and imagination/vision of how individuals and groups of individuals can live together in smaller and larger collectivities. 'Agency' is also related to choice but a choice which, like other issues, is circumscribed by many factors including different cultural norms. The experiences and contributions of Afghan women through their individual and collective 'agency' to

processes of change – ideological, political, geographical and personal – are, therefore, of central interest to this study.

The boundaries the interviewees crossed provide hope for the future of Afghan women especially as quite a few of the interviewees are leaders and women's rights activists, defining current Afghan feminism(s). Similarly, it is important to understand the limits of these changes as a result of their intersectionality with other powerful aspects of their identities in a specific historical context.

Another objective of this dissertation is to avoid stereotyping Afghan women and to provide an alternative to the prevalent westo-centric depictions of Afghan women or a counter-narrative that de-centers westo-centrism as well as local, regional and international patriarchy and attempts to put Afghan women's experiences at the center. Or, in other words, one of the objectives is to de-objectify Afghan women and provide them with a subjective voice – to the extent possible in any such effort.

It is also a modest effort to document an inter-subjective interpretation of 'the female collective memory' (Sayigh, 1996:156). This particular collective memory is of a group of educated Afghan refugee women who no longer are as they were at the time of the interviews – due to various reasons, including movement out of Pakistan. Some returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. No doubt, this is but one collective memory of Afghan women, even Afghan educated refugee women. Nevertheless, it is still worthwhile to capture and share.

Identities are intermeshed in many complex ways and can not be reduced in isolation of one another. In the case of the interviewees, being a woman is related/linked to being Afghan, being Afghans is connected to being, for example, Pashtun and/or Moslem and/or a refugee. In addition, the interviewees various locations and systems of values/beliefs interplay with their individual and collective identity narratives. All these are connected to the specific context of Afghanistan and the various power relations involved. Identities continue to be used for self and other-identification and are, therefore, important to

understand and challenge in the aspiration to go beyond the inequalities entrenched in so many of them. We can only use the words we have to understand our 'real' life experiences which, however, does not mean we cannot aspire to see beyond these words and experiences, and transform our understanding in the hope of a better future.

I recognize that the twenty women interviewed do not constitute a representative sample, and that the range of experiences of Afghan women, even educated, and even just in Pakistan is much wider than that of the women interviewed. However, their experiences and life narratives can be used as illustrations of some of the major issues with which this dissertation is concerned. This dissertation also provides valid, if incomplete, information about the lives of these twenty women. This is further discussed in the methodological chapter.

There are thousands of other educated Afghan women who have suffered much more than my interviewees in these years of war and displacement. Also, there are millions of other Afghan women with no or very little formal education who have suffered from poverty, war and displacement. They are not forgotten. By trying to better understand educated Afghan women and their lived experiences of change, resilience, resistance, empowerment, activism and leadership, I also hope to modestly contribute to efforts which are supportive of *all* Afghan women.

## **2. Post-Colonial and Subaltern Studies: A Political and Academic Challenge to Westo-Centric Stereotypes**

I have been interested in post-colonial and subaltern studies for some time – though not uncritically. Post-colonial studies (Homi Bhabha, 1994, Aijaz Ahmad, 1992, Stuart Hall, 1990, Robert Young, 1990, Gayatri Spivak, 1988, Edward Said, 1978) aims at deconstructing Western images of the rest of the world, as they are related to colonial and post-colonial power relations. The importance of culture in these relations is also highlighted in these studies. Thus, it is not only economic and military power which

sustains colonial and post-colonial powers but also the wide arena of culture and cultural images (including through education and knowledge).

Their perspectives intervene in the ideological discourses of modernity that have attempted to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities and peoples (Bhabha, 1995: 47).

In the introduction brief to a conference on Postcolonialism at the University of Toronto in September 2002,<sup>1</sup> it states:

Post-colonialism loosely designates a set of theoretical approaches which focus on the direct effects and aftermaths of colonization...human exploitation, normalization, repression and dependency. ..post-colonial may refer to the status of a land that is no longer colonized and has regained its political independence...post-colonialism may designate, and denounce, the new forms of economic and cultural oppression that have succeeded modern colonialism...

Connected to post-colonial studies (sometimes mentioned as its sub-field) is subaltern studies which applies to academic work driven by the political commitment to challenge research reinforcing existing unequal power relations in society. It thus aspires to contribute to universal and local struggles against injustice, including gender and class inequality. ‘For the subaltern group, the main question was always how relations of power and inequality tend to get reproduced but can be changed through practice’ (Ortner, 1996:3). Subaltern studies owes much to the efforts of scholars from the sub-continent including Bhabha (1995), Partha Chatterjee (1995) and Spivak (1988). Spivak (1988) has meanwhile also challenged subaltern studies by asserting that the ‘real’ subaltern voice of the past can never be ‘truly’ found and presented. In addition, she has critiqued ‘romanticizing and homogenizing the subaltern subject’ (Loomba, 1998:235).

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<sup>1</sup> In the same document, it mentions that postcolonial studies began developing in the context of decolonization in the 1950s. It also refers to Marxist scholars who used the term colonialism as a form of resistance to underline exploitation, as well as the use of the word by colonialists themselves which was linked to the ‘burden of the white man to civilize’ and was strengthened through a Christian religious discourse.

Post-colonial and subaltern studies have been informed by each other as they address unequal power relations, including within academia. It is the work of feminists which has over the years engendered post-colonial and subaltern studies. I agree with Bannerji, Mojab and Whitehead (2001) that while appreciating the importance of culture in the above debate, the continued need to simultaneously and constantly highlight the socio-economic power relations involved and the material and 'real' impact on lives of people remains vital. That is why it is important to interlink postcolonial/subaltern studies with discussions on globalization.

I have always felt it would be challenging, important and a reflection of my political concerns to work within a framework other than that which is hegemonic and west-centric. I have, therefore, felt uncomfortable with referring only to Western or Western-based academic theories to understand non-Western societies and subjects. However, I have also often found it difficult to find viable alternatives either due to my own limited knowledge of these and/or access to them, sometimes for linguistic reasons. Earlier generations of Iranian intellectuals tended to be more immersed in non-Western and Iranian history, political studies and literature than mine.

Unfortunately, contemporary post-colonial and subaltern studies have not engaged with countries like Iran and Afghanistan as much as they have with African countries or the sub-continent. One important reason for this is that countries like Iran and Afghanistan have not been directly colonized. However, I believe that many of the same colonial processes have taken place – though in a different way – in these countries, and therefore, postcolonial and subaltern studies are also relevant to these contexts and this dissertation is a modest effort in that direction.

I realize that Western or Western-based theories are often directly or indirectly affected by non-Western history and individuals. Also, these theories are not homogenous and a growing number of activists are questioning Western hegemony and providing alternative understandings and voices. The contextualized interaction between different theories and

histories and the power relations they reflect is important to understand, rather than maintaining a binary perspective and having to choose one or the other.

The unequal positioning of non-European cultures and peoples in the Western ideological imagination is related to that of 'modernity' with the West being the 'modern' (or developed, progressive or any one of a range of such terms) entity and most of the rest of the world 'backward' (or undeveloped, underdeveloped or reactionary). The maintaining of this dichotomy has played a crucial role in the economic and political/military and cultural hegemony of the West. The 'East'<sup>2</sup> has had its share of self-serving and reactionary leaders which facilitates the continuation of this dichotomous perception. Also, for this discourse to succeed, it has had to be internalized by at least parts of the non-Western world. Fortunately, there is enough resistance, rejection, challenging going on in the West and other parts of the world to ensure its continuous ruptures.

Similarly, I would by no means identify with all non-Western voices, including those which are patriarchal and reactionary. Nevertheless, there is still a sense that what is being done to challenge westo-centric thinking is not enough and that the unequal power relations involved are so strong and their functioning so complex that it is almost impossible to completely escape their hegemony. In many ways, we have consciously and/or unconsciously internationalized some of these frameworks, making it more difficult to challenge.

Many of us are asking more questions and deconstructing existing stereotypes based on our experiences, ideologies and with reference to progressive literature in the West and East, while also attempting to provide alternative views and voices based on experiences outside of the West. Ours is also a construction and carries its own values, power structures and contradictions. Still, it is an attempt to bring us one modest step closer to a

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<sup>2</sup> In spite of the problematic of binary concepts and the colonial origin of many such concepts, I use the term West (or North) when referring to powerful European and North American countries and East (or South) when referring to much of the rest of the world including Asian, African and South American countries. Other problematic terms used to differentiate between countries has been developed, developing and underdeveloped. Presently, new terms are being used by progressive groups, including two-third and one third

more diversified understanding of social phenomena from the perspectives of non-hegemonic forces.

This has become, in some ways, even more urgent after September 11, 2001, and the increased stereotyping of Moslems, turning Moslem men and women into subjectless objects of the various prevalent 'terrorism' discourses. As an Iranian of Moslem heritage, this is an experience I have been through myself many times though probably still fewer times than many others identified as Moslem, Arab Moslem or male Arab Moslem. The whole process of disentanglement is very complex, as reflected below.

In the search for decolonialization, the anticolonial, colonized intellectual cannot ignore the borders of the colonial discourse; she bounces against them, attempts to devour them, falls back frequently, bruised and intoxicated. She encounters not only the problem of both "using the tools of the colonizer" and "claiming to represent the colonized" but also the problem of using the tools of the colonizer that represent the colonized (Savigliano, 1995:233).

The line which progressive thinkers from the predominantly Moslem world have to walk on without falling on this or the other side is thin. While not wanting to be defensive of Islam to the advantage of reactionary Moslem leaders and against their own principles, they also do not want to join the Islam-bashing, Islamophobia and racism which has become stronger in the West in the past years, allowing for an ever-growing hegemony.

While my interest in Afghanistan began with female education, identity, nation-state building and citizenship (Pourzand,1999,1996), it has now expanded to a more nuanced understanding of female education within a framework that attempts to locate the voices of educated Afghan refugee women and provide a contextual analysis of their experiences. I realize that these educated women, as refugee women, many as women who have worked for the international community<sup>3</sup> or have been in contact with the international

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worlds. The usage of these terms is made with full awareness of the many differences in each group of countries, as well as amongst them, including those related to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and class.

<sup>3</sup> The international community is by no means a homogenous body but I am using this prevalent short-hand to mean in general the UN agencies, INGOs, bilateral donor agencies, international human rights groups and



community, have also been influenced by non-indigenous concepts and, partially, see their lives with those lenses now. Nevertheless, they continue to maintain a sense of their 'roots' and are connected to these 'roots' in many ways.

Also, since I began this Ph.D. work, the issue of female education has unfolded in such a way in Afghanistan that it no longer only highlights issues of gender and nation-state building but also international discourses on gender, Islam and more recently, post-conflict reconstruction, peace-building and even 'terrorism'. In addition, my interviewees' lives have changed considerably since these interviews, especially the earlier ones, and now they are even more exposed to non-Afghan contexts than at that time.

Though neither my interviewees nor I can claim any representation of the subaltern voice, we still hope to contribute to non-hegemonic discussions on gender, identity and education in war and displacement. Also, I hope to have provided an opportunity for the voices of the interviewees to be heard, though these are circumscribed by many factors including my own voice.

### **3. Moslem Women in the Eyes of the World**

.... ironically, Islamic fundamentalists, by embracing the female body as the symbolic representation of communal dignity, and by drawing only on the Qu'ran and orthodox texts to explain...as divine, the historically developed subjugation of women in Islamic societies, recycle the totalizing colonial conception of Islam and women's rights as static, unchanging...(Moghissi, 1999:30)

This dissertation is relevant to the study of women in Moslem societies though I have not wanted to privilege the Islamic aspect of the interviewees' identities over other factors in their life.

Considerable valuable research (Saliba, Allen and Howard, 2002, Mojab, 2001, Kar, 2001, Shafiq, 2000, Al-Ali,2000, Moghissi, 1999, Ahmed, 1999, Paidar, 1997, Sayigh,

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other non-Afghan bodies which influence what happens in Afghanistan and/or have a presence in Afghanistan.

1996, Kandiyoti, 1991, Najmabadi, 1995, Badran, 1995, Joseph, 1993, Haeri, 1989) exists on Moslem women, women or gender in Moslem countries, often discussing the powerful symbolic and prescribed patriarchal role allocated to women in the overall effort of preserving conservative values and relationships by powerful men.<sup>4</sup> The invoking of culture to maintain patriarchy amongst women in countries with Islam as their dominant religion has also been studied. Issues pertaining to Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic clerical hierarchy and women's subordination have been elaborated upon as well<sup>5 6</sup>.

The above-mentioned academics/activists have also discussed women's role in the modernizing projects of the anti-colonial nation-state as well as the contributions of female reformers and activists in Moslem countries. The impact of the more recent political Islamic movements and governments such as that of Iran and their discriminatory gender policies have also been researched (Taraki, 1995, Abu Odeh, 1993, Towhidi, 1991). In addition, a growing number of books, articles and documentaries have been produced on violence against women including in Iran (Kar, 2001) and honour killing in Pakistan (Haeri, 1995).

At a presentation on Islam at the University of York on 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 2002 (on Diaspora, Islam and Gender), Islam was categorized as a religion, political ideology or field of study. I believe that as a researcher one is almost always dealing with all these and it is difficult to separate them as such. Though I, for example, might not be dealing directly with Islamic jurisprudence, I will still be informed by some of the relevant debates.

Though the attempts to diversify this area of study (the trajectory of representation of Moslem women) and to demonstrate the scope and range of women's lives in Moslem societies has existed and grown now for several years (Tokhtakodjaeva and Turgumbekova, 1993, Altorki, El Solh and Fawzi, 1988), a powerful stereotype of

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<sup>4</sup> There is some intellectual confusion (based on various political tendencies) regarding terminology. Some researchers refer to Moslem women, others to women in Moslem countries, some to Arab women (when actually meaning also non-Arab Moslems) and yet others Middle Eastern women.

<sup>5</sup> The publications of *Women Living Under Muslim Law* are another valuable contribution to related debates.

<sup>6</sup> These discussions are often based on the *Koran*, the *Sunna* and *Shari'a*.

Moslem women as victims of discrimination, ignorance and violence continues. This is often linked to wider issues of unequal global power relations.

The veil is often the focus of any debate on Moslem women, at the expense of all the other challenges in their lives (Yegenoglu, 1998).<sup>7</sup> The Western media further strengthens this fixation. For example, most CNN projections of Iran show only women in the black *chador*<sup>8</sup> (full-length material), often in front of a larger than life poster of Khomeini<sup>9</sup> and ignore the diversity in women's attire which continues to exist inspite of the regime's restrictions. In such discourses, there is no consideration for the diversity of the *hejab* amongst Moslem women and the role of their own 'agency' in the process. In fact, it is not only Moslem women who are coerced to pursue particular dress codes. Many Western women are also 'encouraged' to look a certain way by the dictates of the fashion industry, advertisement and peer pressure.

All the books I have seen written on Afghanistan in 2002 have a fully veiled woman on their cover. I can only assume that the veil sells and feeds the imagination and stereotypes of many Western readers and is therefore, also about commodification and the market. It seems to be also about the gendered colonial-gaze, about 'uncovering', 'discovering what is behind it all' and 'unveiling' – all very colonial processes, linked to sexualized and body-related power relations. It is also a continuing though different discourse on the orient being despotic (including towards its women) as compared to the 'civilized' West<sup>10</sup> and their 'civilizing' mission/missionary zeal. This 'civilizing' mission is linked to mainstream Western discourses about the West somehow having to 'save' Moslem women, for example, the Moslem women of Afghanistan. As Abu-Lughod mentions in an interview with Asia Source website in March 2000, this sense of 'saving' reflects great arrogance.

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<sup>7</sup> Yegenoglu (1998) elaborates the important role the veil has played in orientalist portrayals of Moslem societies and the link between these portrayals and the 'desire' of the colonizer to 'conquer' all and have nothing left out of sight, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the whole 'Orient' being symbolized as 'veiled, dark and mysterious'. She also critiques the work of Said for overlooking gender issues and his unidimensional approach towards colonial depictions.

<sup>8</sup> Please refer to the Glossary and List of Abbreviations in the beginning of this dissertation as required.

<sup>9</sup> The first clerical leader of the Islamic Revolution and regime in Iran.

Unfortunately, sometimes even academics from the Moslem world repeat and reinforce Western stereotypes in their zeal to challenge all that is Islamic. This is done consciously and/or unconsciously. Women from the Moslem world living in the West often find it very difficult to resist criticizing women's position in Moslem countries in a way which feeds the same powerful Western hegemonic discourses. This happens in academic circles as well.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to be critical without contributing to stereotypes but an urgent imperative for us all.

The solution is to refuse...to be dragged into the binary opposition between East and West in which so many such arguments are mired. However, the most powerful way to do this is to fearlessly examine the processes of entanglement (Abu-Lughod, 1998:16)

Even some Western feminists, activists and academics continue to uphold prevalent stereotypes about Islam and Moslem women. It was shocking for me to read, for example, that Oriana Fallaci, the Italian writer and journalist, who pursued quite progressive politics in the 1960s and 1970s and whom I admired has made racist comments against Moslems in late 2001 (June 2003, <http://www.ParaPundit.com>).

Colonial/orientalized depictions of Moslem women at times stereotypes them as 'sexual' and 'wild', doing 'things' which would be considered unconventional 'even' by Western standards as they are more 'backward' and 'primitive' (Mehdid, 1993). Some such stereotypes emanate from the *Harem* concubine to the exotic belly dancer images. Drawings and postcards by colonialists demonstrate some of these stereotypes, as does the content analysis of many travel books by Westerners of the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> Western suffragists sometimes also contributed to these processes.

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<sup>10</sup> This is also linked to celebrating Western clothes, which is related to the selling of such clothes in the global market.

<sup>11</sup> As mentioned by Dr. Mojab at a Toronto, March 2003 conference, there is no doubt that some academic centers of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies are supported by Western governments for political and intelligence reasons. They provide training to their staff and businessmen/women, as well as collect information and direct intellectual thought about and from the region.

<sup>12</sup> The colonial gendering process is complex and not limited to Moslem women alone. Men of the region have also often been either feminized or grossly masculinized in colonial depictions. It has usually been the colonialist male who is 'appropriately' manly, civilized and rationale with almost everyone else being the

...early British suffragist discourse and practice was powerfully informed by imperial representations of cloistered and oversexualized Oriental women (Indra,1999:9).

Consequently, in such texts, it is often either that Moslems are holier than the Pope or completely immoral – there is very little space for what falls in between, though the two are linked in various discursive ways.

These neo-colonial depictions of women in Moslem countries and ‘third world’ women have also influenced some of the work of development/aid agencies. These agencies often tend to depict ‘third world’ women as poor and illiterate. Much of the various development discourses is also based on concepts of ‘modernity’ thus also contributing to the ‘modern/ backward’ dichotomy. It is not the objective of this dissertation to further elaborate about the unequal power relations within development/aid agencies as well as their ‘target groups’. This includes, at times, the patronizing attitudes of many aid workers and policy makers of donor countries who know very little about the cultures/histories of the countries in which they serve and who do not try hard enough to learn more while serving in a particular duty station.<sup>13</sup> This also impacts mainstream attitudes towards refugees, especially refugees from Moslem countries.

The above concerns are linked to ensuring feminism(s) encompass the experiences and views of non-Western and non-White women as elaborated in the work of a number of prominent academics (Anthias, 1998, Yuval-Davis, 1997, Mohanty, 1997, Hill Collins, 1990, hooks, 1989, Jayawardena, 1984). In addition, such work has questioned concepts of international sisterhood or solidarity. We are now more aware of the differences and

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opposite. Colonial women have also been expected to adhere to particular social norms which have often been restrictive, though they themselves have helped sustain the colonial project. Obviously, there are always exceptions with some Western men and women being more progressive and in search of greater equality amongst all people. Also, stereotypes of Western men and women are quite powerful in the Middle East and elsewhere. However, their economic and political clout is less than that of the West.

<sup>13</sup> ‘The development enterprise for the most part has been predicted on the assumption that certain peoples and societies are less developed than others...Third World women emerge as “backward, premodern beings”, with no agenda of their own...’ (Marchand and Parpart, 1995:221).

unequal power relations amongst women. Women in developing countries have increasingly challenged Western women who speak on their behalf or claim solidarity while directly or indirectly supporting an exploitative global system and 'modernity' which sustains the poverty and injustice faced by a great majority of women in non-Western societies (and even in Western societies).

At certain points in time and in connection with phenomena such as globalization and militarization, women in a particular community might find greater solidarity with men in the same community (or some of the men) than, for example, women in the West. Consequently, it is very important to contextualize all such alliances at all times and to remain vigilant to other social differences besides that of gender.

Referring to the above points does not mean that patriarchal attitudes do not exist in many Moslem countries because they do and are indeed very powerful<sup>14</sup> especially in view of growing Islamization (of state as well as non-state spaces) in a number of Moslem countries (including Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, Algeria and Palestine). These developments also bear responsibility for the stereotyping of Moslem women in the mainstream Western imagination. They will continue to be challenged by feminists and other progressive forces in Moslem communities, as will essentialist, simplistic and stereotypical depictions of Islam, Moslems and Moslem women in the West<sup>15</sup>.

Patriarchy and unequal status of women in Moslem communities is not only a consequence of being followers of the Islamic faith or living in countries with Islam as their dominant religion but rather has more complex roots. Thus, any analysis of women's unequal status should take into consideration the context and not only privilege Islam in the argument.

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<sup>14</sup> These often include discrimination in terms of property, inheritance, marital and divorce rights, attire restrictions and forced *hejab*, limited mobility and rights of association and political participation and punishment for 'immoral' behavior.

<sup>15</sup> It is ironical that mainstream Western media which often demonizes Islam and its treatment of women allows so little room for reporting on the struggles of progressive women and men in Moslem countries.

It is often forgotten that there is much more to a 'Moslem' woman's life and identity than just being Moslem – even under Taliban (Pont, 2001) and this shrinks the space for understanding women's 'agency' and resistance. And in fact it raises another important question – what do we mean by 'Moslem' women? Is it women who are born into Moslem families, is it women who think of themselves as Moslem or is it women who practice their own interpretation of Islam? Does it refer to women who see Islam as their religion, their culture or both? This labeling often overlooks the differences within Islam as well as minority women living in Islamic countries or Moslem minority women living in non-Moslem countries and denies the multiple voices of Moslems.

The whole issue of Moslem women as an area of study is worth problematizing. Like 'Oriental Studies', it is linked to unequal power relations and the 'othering' which has been integral to colonial and post-colonial domination. Christian women do not seem to be generalized and studied in the same way by the academia and others. Their religious identity is not privileged in the same manner as is done in the case of Moslem women. Fortunately, as mentioned earlier, a growing number of feminist academics/activists are challenging hegemonic forces and derogatory stereotypes.

Islamic fundamentalism receives much greater attention in the West, as compared to fundamentalism in other religions, including Hinduism (Lesli and McGee, 2000), Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism. This is primarily linked to the sustenance of Western hegemony. Unfortunately, in the name of modernity and progress, mainstream Western powers need to demonize and mystify the 'other', especially the Islamic 'other' with Moslem women featuring prominently in this debate. This is also linked to the various social issues and challenges which Western states face domestically including a growing civil society that is against war and neo-liberal economic policies of globalization.

Similarly, as Kandiyoti (1991) has demonstrated the status of Moslem women is not only related to Islam but the various political phases and projects of the individual countries. The status of Moslem women, like all other women, is affected by their country and

family's socio-economic and political situation, levels of education and many other factors (Paidar, 1997), often not given the prominence they deserve in commentaries on Moslem women. It is also linked to the overall response/reaction to Western influence and Westernization (including global and local capitalism) as well as nationalism, with all the various disappointments and frustrations it has brought, and the search for other alternatives (Treacher and Shukrallah,2001).

The histories of the women's movement amongst Moslem women or women in countries with Islam as its dominant religion are often overlooked in the haste to stereotype Moslem women. The same applies to the efforts of Moslem women to undertake a more gender-sensitive interpretation of Islam. Women in Moslem countries have been active in many different ways as in all societies. Some have struggled within nationalist and anti-colonial struggles, others within Islamic reform movements, and yet others within the leftist framework. Chatty and Rabo (1997) have documented some of the experiences of women's groups in the Middle East which is also related and important. There is obviously a continuum between these various categories and the reality is much more complex. Women who have struggled within the Islamic framework are now sometimes referred to as Islamic feminists (Mojab, 2001, Moghissi, 1999).<sup>16</sup>

In addition, there is great diversity inter and intra- Moslem countries with regards to legal frameworks and interpretations of Islamic law as it pertains to women (Mir-Hosseini, 1999, Bodman and Tohidi, 1998) and homogenizing them is detrimental to the struggle for women's rights. For example, the life of Moslem women in Nigeria varies considerably from those in Iran or Azarbaijan (which has a secular state) or those in Canada (where they are a religious minority). A more complex contextualization is needed to fully understand the challenges faced by women in each of these situations.

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<sup>16</sup> In my work with UNICEF, Iran, from 1992-96 on gender issues, I had many contacts with such women, some within the establishment and others outside. There were simultaneously also women activists who worked outside of the Islamic framework and were secular in their approach. The diversity amongst them is also considerable based on class, education level, ideology and political affiliation. I also met clergymen who had progressive views on Islam and women's rights. One of them – Saedzadeh - was imprisoned for these views.



Whilst elaborating upon women in Moslem societies, two scholars of Islam mention the following:

The social picture, as we can see, is far from settled. Precisely because of this uncertainty, the family, and the role of women in it, is invested with diverse ideological meanings. The regime, established religious authorities, and counter regime Islamists all claim to be the defender of family integrity and of the roles and rights of women in an Islamic society. In so doing, each makes the ideas of family and women pivotal to contemporary Muslim politics (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996:99).

The authors correctly point out the importance of women as symbols in Moslem countries. Their statement also shows the range of such discourses by using 'meanings' in the plural.

I want to quote an unpublished article by an educated Afghan refugee woman, on Religion in Afghanistan, to demonstrate an indigenous conservative attitude towards Islam and women and at the same time challenge it. Her name is consciously not mentioned out of respect for her privacy.

In regard to the women they are very sensitive and the presence of women in the family is a big responsibility for the man. The man of the family not only feels that he is responsible to look after all the material needs of her but also he feels that he should fully care for her decency and honor. An example of caring about the women is that it is very shame(ful) for the Afghan men if someone takes (calls) his sister or wife's name in (the) presence of other men who are out of his family circle.

However, having known this woman now for a number of years, I believe she herself is an example of the existing complexity and contradictions, inspite of what she mentions in this conference paper. She is educated with a Masters degree, is very active in women's rights, travels nationally and internationally on her own and contributes financially to her family's wellbeing. For sure, many Afghan and non-Afghan male colleagues have known her name and called her by her name. Thus, this demonstrates that one should not even take the written word too dogmatically but rather see it next to the lived lives of Moslem women and their own changed beliefs and attitudes. I wonder if she were to re-write this

article, how different it would be from what she wrote several years ago. I have seen similar differences between discourse or rhetoric and the 'real' lives of women and men often in my life both in Iran as well as in Afghanistan. This can be for various reasons including (sometimes temporary) political affiliations/interests, community/group pressure and/or challenges to the 'outside' world.

#### **4. Dissertation Outline**

In the methodological chapter which follows, the connection between my own lived experiences, socio-political commitments as well as earlier work with this dissertation is mentioned. Feminist epistemological and feminist subaltern frameworks are also highlighted, in connection with the work at hand. Information is also provided on the women interviewed, before embarking upon research ethics which have been particularly important for me including my relationship with the interviewees, doing research as a UNICEF staff member and addressing risk. The complex task of data preparation and analysis across countries, continents and regimes is also reflected upon. The chapter ends with some comments pertaining to the impact of the research process on my life.

Two contextual chapters follow, on Afghanistan and on Afghan Refugees in Pakistan. Context is always very important, as it facilitates research which is thorough and not westo-centric. Also, when doing research on refugees, it is critical to know the context of where they come from as well as where they were placed at the time of the interviews. In each of these chapters, I have attempted to provide a summarized but yet comprehensive general framework, as well as one on relevant gender and education issues. These chapters are based on intense library research over many years and in many places, and information from the international community, as well as my own experiences and contacts.

The afore-mentioned chapters are followed by three separate but interlinked theoretical chapters raising issues pertinent to this work and the experiences of Afghan refugee women. One is on Collective Identities which addresses issues pertaining to nation, nationality, the nation-state, citizenship and the important gendering of these social

constructs. In this chapter, the growing field of gender and conflict studies is also referred to and expanded upon.

In the second theoretical chapter on Refugees/Displacement, issues pertaining to refugees, the scope and challenges of addressing refugee issues, as well as asylum-seekers, exiles, the diaspora and journeys is mentioned. This is followed by a section on gender, conflict and displacement, a more recent yet growing important area of study. In this section, issues pertaining to the international refugee regime and women, as well as the representational burden on refugee women are shared.

In the theoretical chapter on education, types of education/learning, as well as the politics and ideological underpinnings of education are mentioned, including colonial education. Education as resistance is also highlighted, as is the position of the international community on education plus female education, Moslem women's education, education in conflict and refugees' education.

The three empirical chapters follow from the above. In the first of these three chapters, an effort is made to introduce the interviewees and their trajectories by sharing specifically those of six. In the next chapter, their experiences are shared on war and displacement as well as, as Afghan women, and members of particular ethnic and religious groups under various Afghan regimes, during the conflict and in Pakistan as refugees. In the third empirical chapter, their views are shared on their experiences of formal education, in their families and communities, as children and as adults, in Afghanistan under various regimes, as well as in Pakistan as refugees. In these chapters, the diversity of their experiences, the strength they have shown in overcoming hardships and contributing to greater social tolerance and respect for human rights is highlighted.

This dissertation ends with a final discussion chapter outlining some of the debates to which it hopes to have contributed. These include the issue of the 'in-between' researcher, refugees in the 'near abroad', women and collective identities, 'agency' of Moslem women as well as the subversive potential in education. As emanating from this

dissertation, a number of areas for further study are mentioned. Similarly, considering my academic as well as professional engagement in Afghanistan/Pakistan, some practical recommendations are provided to the various parties involved.

All the above sections are informed by feminist, anti-racist and non-west-centric frameworks. While by no means claiming to provide a complete presentation of all the relevant debates or issues, an effort has been made to critically summarize the most pertinent in the context of this dissertation.

## **Chapter Two - Methodology & Methods: Feminist Research in War and Displacement**

### **1. An Introduction: Understanding Afghan Educated Women's Lives in Conflict and Displacement**

This research is based on extensive library-based research, field experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the twenty women interviewed, and exchanges with many Afghans and concerned non-Afghans, feminist research methodology and theories, subaltern studies and my own personal experiences.

In this chapter, I outline the methodology and the methods used. I begin by placing myself in context, who I am and where I am coming from. This is very important as it impacts my choice of subject as well as the actual research process. It is also linked to the next section on the epistemological framework of the work. Here I refer to feminist epistemology and its focus on the positionality of the researched and researcher and its impact on the outcome of the research.

It is in the actual field work that one can analyze the praxis of feminist research, as well as subaltern research, and this is what I have tried to outline in the field work section of this chapter. This is followed by a general introduction to the interviews and interviewees. A further section deals with the important issue of research ethics.

I have tried to move from theory to actual practice and then back into theory with the next section on data preparation and analysis – perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of any research. Issues such as coding and actual writing will be discussed here. This chapter will end with a reflection on the impact of the study on me, the researcher, as a result of an over six-year engagement.

## **2. A Personal Journey: As If She is Going to Travel to Kandahar**

This title is inspired by an old Iranian proverb about preparing extensively for a trip ‘as if she is going to travel to Kandahar’. Kandahar is a historic city in Southern Afghanistan. Many Iranians using this proverb would not even have known where Kandahar is. Some only learned about the city after September 11, 2002 through the international media, as it was the main Taliban stronghold. In the old times, by foot or camel, it must have taken a long time to reach Kandahar from, for example, Tehran, Iran. This proverb is also unconsciously an indication of how far Kandahar seemed, though in fact it was much closer to Iran than Europe or the USA. Unfortunately, this shows the scarcity of knowledge many Iranians have about Afghanistan inspite of our common historical heritage, cultural proximity and the presence of over 2 million Afghans for over 20 years in Iran (from 1978 onwards). Many Iranians know more about Europe or the US than Afghanistan.

Kandahar also became well known in Iran and elsewhere in the years 2001/2002 through Makhmalbaf’s movie ‘Journey to Kandahar’ which was based on the life of an Afghan-Canadian woman who wanted to return to Kandahar and find her friend who was considering suicide under the Taliban. Since the Afghan-Canadian woman (Niloufar Pazira) and I share a common first name, some of the Taliban authorities in Kandahar thought that we were the same person. I have been to Kandahar twice, in 2000 and 2001. Kandahar is also where the Afghan heroine – Malalai – is said to have fought against the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Indeed, directly and indirectly, consciously and unconsciously, much has had to happen for me to become so engaged with Afghanistan, Afghan women and Afghan refugees. The undertaking of this research is very much linked to and informed by my own personal and geographic journeys in life. It is a reflection of who I am with all its contradictions and ambiguities. It is about a mix of factors that have influenced me, some of which I have had more control over and others less. It is also about what I passionately believe in and aspire to do in life.

How do I introduce myself? I am an Iranian Farsi-speaking woman born into an upper middle class, educated, non-practicing Moslem- Shiite family. My mother was one of the first Iranian young girls to be sent to France and the UK for education in the 1940s. I am now in my early 40s.

I do not claim to be impartial in this research. I have been involved in political, professional and academic efforts to challenge various forms of hegemony, including some addressed in this dissertation, for over 28 years. With variances not uncommon amongst us all, I have opposed economic, cultural and social exploitation for many years. I began the search as a teenager, ‘discovering’ Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949/1990) to better understand women’s rights and Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967/1998) to get a glimpse of the impact of neo-imperialism and local dictatorships in the ‘Third World’. From my parents, I learned about Mosadeq’s<sup>1</sup> anti-colonial stand in Iran and the rich Sufi poetic tradition of Iran which encourages the search for higher meaning in life.

At high school in Tokyo, as the President of the Booster’s Club, I challenged our school’s Christian religious management (and some of the parents) by inviting a belly dancer, yogi and the Palestinian representative in 1977. I later studied history for my BA, with a focus on Persian history, at Shiraz University<sup>2</sup> in Iran. My studies coincided with the Iranian Revolution (1979). It helped me value the positive and critique the negative in our own country. I learned about the Constitutional Revolution of 1919 with its many great leaders, including women who mobilized against despotism in ‘*anjumans*’ (associations). I remember reading how a Polish freedom fighter had joined and died with the Iranian revolutionaries – inspiring me with ideas of cross-national alliances for freedom.

As a University student in Iran in 1979, at the time of the Iranian Revolution, I came to learn about political dissatisfaction, activism, change, various political ideologies, ranging from progressive to reactionary, commitment, idealism, zeal, danger, fright and loss. I

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Mosadeq was a nationalist Iranian leader, and Prime Minister, who championed the nationalization of Iran’s oil industry. He was overthrown in a coup supported by the USA in 1953.

<sup>2</sup> Before the Revolution of 1979, it was known as Pahlavi University, named after the ex-royal family.

heard about exploitation at various levels, about the quest for equality, justice and democracy. I also experienced the price one may have to pay when pursuing progressive ideals when some of my friends/classmates were killed in prison. In addition, I witnessed first-hand a regime claiming to be Islamic, institutionalized restrictions on women and eight years of war with Iraq. It made me see my own identity as an Iranian in a different light, and in fact, Iran was itself rapidly changing throughout this period.

As the daughter of an Iranian diplomat before the Revolution, I had traveled widely and lived an international life, attending international schools which largely pursued an American curriculum. That privileged experience allowed me to learn English, become familiar with Western-style education, meet and become friends with people from all over the world, including Afghanistan. Thus, I became increasingly interested and informed about international politics and the history and cultures of different countries. I was inspired by some of the more progressive teachers we had who encouraged our analytical and critical thinking and social debates.

During my father's tenure in Islamabad, Pakistan (in the late 60s), we traveled to Kabul to meet Afghan friends. This was when the country was in peace and during the times of Zahir Shah (the last King of Afghanistan). While we enjoyed this trip very much, I remember hearing about the low status of many Afghan women in society and how their fathers and brothers had strict control over them. These were also the hippy years with many young Westerners in Kabul on 'spiritual' journeys.

My marriage to an Iranian/Western educated progressive Iranian also changed my life, and as far as this research is concerned, especially when he joined UNHCR and I learned more about refugee issues, including Afghan refugees in my own country. His later assignments to former Yugoslavia during its peak period of conflict (1992), then to Bangladesh to work for the voluntary return of Burmese refugees and finally, to Mazar Sharif, Afghanistan (1995-2000) helped me feel and understand conflict and displacement. The latter increased my already growing interest in Afghanistan and resulted in a trip in the summer of 1996 for my MA fieldwork.



Having now worked for over twenty years with the United Nations in Iran and Afghanistan, I have been able to connect the international experiences of my childhood with the socio-political activism of my Iranian University days and direct it towards development and humanitarian work.<sup>3</sup> Through my work with the UN, I have been able to travel and interact with many inspiring children, women and men in deprived communities. I have also been able to meet activists and NGO workers dedicated to addressing social inequities. Human rights, women's rights and children's rights as well as education have been the focus of my work with the UN in Iran and Afghanistan. Though different in many ways, working on children and women's rights issues has been challenging in both countries.

My dream of pursuing graduate and post-graduate education was shattered as a result of the Iranian Revolution and its impact on my personal and family life. However, in 1995-6 I was finally able to take study leave with UNICEF's support and complete a MA in Gender and Ethnic Studies at the University of Greenwich. It was another journey of a lifetime which changed me forever. It allowed me to better understand my own life as well as the issues about which I felt passionate. It gave a sharper intellectual/ theoretical direction to my earlier experiences. It was for my MA dissertation that I decided to focus on Afghanistan, women and education for the first time<sup>4</sup>. The intellectual and personal satisfaction from that experience resulted in my decision to continue along the same lines with a Ph.D. which I began in November 1996 as a part-time, long-distance student at the University of Greenwich, London, UK – Gender and Ethnic Studies Pathway.

I have, therefore, also had an insider-outsider relationship with academia. I was working with UNICEF in Afghanistan while doing most of my research, rather than being based in

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<sup>3</sup> I joined the UN in Iran in 1982 initially with UNDP for two years, then I returned to University after the 'Cultural Revolution' to complete the one-year left towards my first degree. After graduation, I returned to UN, this time UNICEF, where I later worked as the first Gender and Education Officer. In UNICEF, Afghanistan, in 1997, I was first the Reports Officer and then was promoted and became the first Child Protection Officer (2000-2002).

<sup>4</sup> For my MA dissertation, I benefited from the supervisorship of Prof. Nira Yuval-Davis and Dr. Elaine Unterhalter. For my Ph.D., I benefited from the same guidance until 2002 when Dr. Elaine Unterhalter was no longer able to supervise me for institutional reasons and I continued with Prof. Nira Yuval-Davis.

a University. I was only able to make a couple of trips a year to the University or to participate in academic conferences. While I have not always been in an academic environment, I have been able to experience many of the theories and information obtained during my academic visits in the field, in the actual setting, and in turn, engage with the theories and information and enhance my own understanding and share with others in the course of my academic visits. A number of academic colleagues have over the years encouraged me for being able to combine academic and practical experiences at the field level in my presentations and discussions.

Though never a refugee myself, I have been on the move since childhood. I realize that these were much more privileged moves than that of refugees. Later in life, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, my family and I often debated over the issue of staying or leaving Iran. Most of our relatives and friends had, in fact, left for the West, either as refugees or as immigrants. My first long trip outside Iran after the Revolution took place when I went to London, UK, for my MA degree for one year (1995/96). Later, I moved to Pakistan in order to join the UNICEF, Afghanistan office. We have now also become immigrants – to Canada – in the aspiration of having more choices for our two daughters and ourselves.

Being a non-Western student has also had other repercussions on my work, for example, I have found it more difficult to apply for funds and my work has been self-funded (and I had to work for most of this period). In addition, I have constantly had to struggle for visas either for myself or for my family. Consequently, in different ways, and at different times, I too have been seen as the ‘outsider’, the unwanted and potentially dangerous ‘outsider.’

As a result of having been a long-distance observer of the dramatic events of Afghanistan since 1979, having had Afghan friends for much of my life, and the geographical and socio-cultural proximity of Afghanistan to Iran, a husband who was working in Afghanistan for UNHCR, commitment to base my dissertation on field-work in the ‘developing’ world, I chose to do my MA on Female Education, Ethnicity and National

Identity in Afghanistan. For that purpose, I traveled to Afghanistan in the summer of 1996 and realized more than ever that this was a country and situation which I wanted to understand and contribute to in a meaningful way. Thus, upon completing my MA and returning to work, I tried – successfully - to get posted to UNICEF, Afghanistan. While working, I began my Ph.D. in Gender and Ethnic Studies at the University of Greenwich with a focus on Gender, Identity and Education amongst Afghan Refugee Women in Pakistan. My years of work in Afghanistan have increased my commitment to understand and support Afghan women and progressive men in their search for dignity, survival, wellbeing, peace and equality.

Consequently, various aspects of my life and identity have brought me close to Afghanistan and Afghan women. Earlier journeys led to this one. I share with Afghans living through a dramatic change in my own country's regime, ideological orientation and war<sup>5</sup> (though their experiences were more intense, devastating and longer). I also share with at least some of them in terms of certain identity issues (such as, for example, being Farsi-speaking, Moslem, educated, female head of household and having an extended family set-up)<sup>6</sup>. Of course, in other ways, my lived experience and positionality is different from that of all of my interviewees. My own background, identities and ideological/moral frameworks make me who I am at the point of doing this research and no doubt, impact my work from beginning to end and the claim to knowledge that comes out of it.

I am, therefore, not impartial in this study, as I support the plight of Afghan women, and women elsewhere, to seek their rights but on their own terms and not those set by others, in particular the powerful West. I am also in favour of meaningful peace which will bring stability, security, wellbeing and dignity into the lives of ALL Afghan women, children and men – regardless of their ethnicity or religious faith. I hope that Afghanistan will once

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<sup>5</sup>After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, in 1981, Iran went through eight years of war with Iraq. During part of this period, the city in which I lived – Tehran – was also witness to missile attacks.

<sup>6</sup> I have been a virtual female head of a household for over 10 years with my husband and I being based in different locations for most of the time. Also, since my mother and I have been living together after my father passed away 8 years ago, mine has been somewhat of an extended family arrangement.

again be able to find its rightful place in the world – not because it can be beneficial to the interests of other states and/or multinationals – but because it is the right of its people who have suffered and struggled for so long. Very few people have shown as much resilience, commitment and dignity in the face of adversity as have Afghan women.

### **3. Epistemological Issues: Who is Speaking? Who is Listening? What ‘Knowledge’ Comes Out of It?**

This dissertation is informed by the epistemological framework which realizes that all knowledge is influenced by the standpoint/positionality/situated self of the researchers – their subjectivity - as much as the researched and no such knowledge is complete or the absolute truth (Haraway, 1990, Hill-Collins, 1990, Harding, 1986). Similarly, I have benefited from the existing feminist critique (Mohanty, 1992, Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1989, hooks, 1981) of some of the work of white feminist academics in which they have overlooked the links between the above issues with that of racialized, ethnicized and colonial constructions of non-white and non-Western women. Such critique has brought us closer to understanding the dynamic complexity of multiple social categories and their intersectionality.

I believe that in spite of the limitations we encounter as researchers due to our own positionality as well as that of the researched, research committed to improving our understanding of unequal power relations and social injustice is important and relevant. I realize that the Afghan women interviewed and I are together creating the knowledge that this dissertation aims to share, through a complex web of social relations which are specific to a particular time and place and culturally embedded. As mentioned by Ramazanoglu and Holland:

If feminist researchers want to produce knowledge of what gender relations actually are (as a basis of emancipatory action) that is in some way ‘truer’ than pre-existing, partial, patriarchal or male-centered knowledge, they still confront the problem (faced by all social researchers) of finding general criteria for making their knowledge believable (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2000: 46).

It is through commitment to being thorough and well informed in one's research and its political intonations that I believe one can find the criteria mentioned above. It is about being self-reflective and self-critical. It is also about knowing the context very well (since individual experiences alone can not always sufficiently explain a situation) and not imposing one's own ideas on the research (while they will no doubt influence the research). Maintaining 'an open mind' inspite of one's own positionality is similarly very important. All this contributes to the integrity of one's work. This is not achieved by proving that one is 'neutral' and 'objective', as pursued in the male-centered enlightenment/ rational discourse which has contributed to the sustaining of unequal power relations.

To paraphrase Korac's quotation from Edwards (1989), feminist research is about believing in the importance of women's experience, wanting to understand women's lives with the objective of enhancing it and also realizing the role of the researcher herself in this process (inter-subjectivity). But I would go further to say that it is also about transversal politics (Yuval-Davis, 1997) or the effort to forge alliances with other women (and men) inspite of different lived experiences. To quote Yuval-Davis:

...this approach is based on the epistemological recognition that each positioning produces specific situated knowledge which cannot be but an unfinished knowledge. Therefore dialogue among those differentially positioned should take place in order to reach a common perspective as a basis for a common action or policy. Transversal dialogue should be based on the principles of rooting and shifting - i.e. being centred in one's own experience while being empathetic to the differential positionings of the partners in the dialogue, thus enabling the participants to arrive at a different perspective from that of hegemonic tunnel vision.... (Yuval-Davis, 1997:17)

It is still a socio-political reality that women (and men), inspite of their many differences, are defined by various dominant and other discourses within particular, intricate and changing unequal power relations and consequently, experience and challenge life accordingly. Consequently, inspite of post-modernism's valid concern for essentialism and homogenization of social categories, it is still possible and in fact, important, to

understand the gendered lives of women in different contexts. It is only through such an understanding that these unequal power relations can be challenged. This is in particular the case with Afghan women whose dramatically gendered lives and experiences, inspite of their many differences, provide a basis for some common analysis. However, no doubt, we need to be conscious of the context and the differences amongst women at all times. There are no simple or generalized answers that would not be stereotypical or relativist.

...debate no longer concentrates solely on the question as to which research technique should be employed and they should be implemented...Feminists are now involved in exploring a whole range of wider issues concerned with practical, political and ethnical matters in undertaking research. There is also a burgeoning literature on epistemology, which is concerned with the nature of feminist knowledge (Maynard and Purvis, 1995:1).

Feminist research is also about the ethics of research which will be further elaborated below (Wolf, 1983). I want to add here that I have and will share the outcome of my research with at least some of my interviewees as well as colleagues and friends. I have shared my earlier work with interested colleagues and friends and received feedback.<sup>7</sup>

For me, it has been very important to undertake research which includes listening to Afghan educated women with all their diversity and multiple layers of experience and understanding the complex scenario which determines their changing social status. This is important to me not only as a feminist researcher and in response to patriarchy but also as a researcher concerned about the very powerful hegemonic westo-centric stereotypes of women in the 'third world' and especially Moslem women. Part of this concern also results in questioning the credibility of many Western researchers and journalists who become 'experts' of the 'developing' or Moslem world after one or a few short visits to the region or country and often not even that. This gives them, at times, a *carte blanche*, to depict the 'other' to the Western public and even back to the non-Western public. The

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<sup>7</sup> Saeed Mokhtarzada, a former Kabul University Professor and colleague kindly read carefully through my MA dissertation and provided written and comprehensive comments in 1998. I have also shared my work with other UNICEF colleagues and consultants as well as Afghan/Pakistani and other friends.

question for me was 'How could I do it differently?' The following sections are an attempt in putting together a response.

I fully agree with Bhavani paraphrased in Maynard and Purvis (1995) that 'the crucial question for all (feminist) researchers is to ask, does the analysis reinscribe the researched into powerlessness, pathologized, without agency?' (Maynard and Purvis, 1995:87).

I accept responsibility for the limitations of the knowledge which my dissertation intends to share based on who I am (and who I am not), who I chose to interview (and who I did not interview), the questions I asked (and those missed), the answers given (and the silences), the time frame (ranging from under Taliban to post-Taliban), the theoretical framework and analysis as well as language and writing but I know that I tried my best and cared.

#### **4. An Effort to Do Feminist and Subaltern Research and Fieldwork amongst Refugees: Sampling, Interviewing and More**

This research is primarily qualitative, based on in-depth and semi-structured interviews which are very close to life-stories, since one of its main objectives is to bring out the voice of educated Afghan refugee women to the extent possible. This is undertaken in full cognizance of the problematic of representation. I have chosen qualitative research because it is the most appropriate in highlighting and understanding the various voices and lived experiences of Afghan women. Quantitative information is needed to set some of the context, such as how many refugees lived in Pakistan but it is not sufficient in understanding the complex, nuanced, personal and yet socio-politically very significant experiences of Afghan women.

Representation has been a serious topic of debate amongst researchers and activists in the past years. The Afghan women I have interviewed by no means represent all Afghan women and no one Afghan woman or group of Afghan women could possibly do that

when taking into account the great diversity that is Afghanistan. The educated refugee women I have interviewed do not even represent ALL educated Afghan refugee women. There is great heterogeneity amongst them. Nevertheless, they represent part of what Afghan women and Afghan educated refugee women have experienced and is valuable and significant to document. While there are differences amongst every one of the interviewees, there are also some overall general and similar contours which link them together. It is the best that we as social researchers can strive for.

Qualitative research based on interviews has been used by many feminist researchers as it facilitates a woman-centered research approach (Wolf, 1996, Abu-Lughod, 1993, Edwards, 1993, Francis, 1992). I have also benefited from participant observation and action-research in the course of these years. Therefore, I have used a mix of methods with the interviews at the center. This was to familiarize myself as much as possible with the context and lives of Afghan women (and men). This study is also informed by library-based research for over six years. I have visited libraries in the UK, in Iran, in Pakistan and in Canada to find relevant material. I have now a substantial personal library on Afghanistan including books in English and in Farsi, newspaper cuttings, magazines and journals and UN/NGO reports. In addition, I have maintained field logs while doing the fieldwork.

Regarding the value of the life-history approach, I would like to quote from Rosemary Sayigh:

...the introduction given by Passerini to her use of life-stories for her study of Italian workers' memories of Fascism meets many of these objections. Passerini evokes the 'self' not as a psychodynamic entity but as 'revealing cultural attitudes, visions of the world and interpretations of history.' For her, subjectivity is an arena in which ideological and political struggles are played out, and in which historically transmitted elements of popular culture are displayed. Though care is needed in eliciting and interpreting life stories not to over-individualize them, these notions are as relevant for ethnographers working the 'Third World' milieus as for European historians (Sayigh, 1996:156).



The field of refugee research has been growing in the past years, however, existing references on academic research methodologies/methods amongst refugees are still somewhat limited (Korac, 1998, Omidian, 1996, Camino and Krulfeld, 1994). It is important to realize that as refugees, individuals face additional experiences and concerns which require sensitivity and awareness. To summarize what Krulfeld (1994:147-150) mentions, consideration needs to be given to the turmoil in their lives, the uprooting, the need to become adaptable and developing new coping mechanisms and being connected to more than one location. In this context, Omidian (1994:151-177) finds the life-history approach appropriate to note changes and adaptation mechanisms.

In March 2003, at a conference on refugee women at McMaster University, Hamilton, Mojab referred to her research on Kurdish refugee women in Sweden and the importance of the life-history approach as well as links between these life-stories and the wider social-political context of unequal power relations. Interviews are a beginning in research, rather than an end (Bannerji, 1995, Smith, 1987). Mojab also made the point that feminist researchers need to tap into the survival, political resistance and struggles of refugee women in their interviews. In addition, they are responsible to come out with not only methodological, theoretical and empirical information, but some practical recommendations for policy-makers and others. I fully concur with these points, with which I believe my work is in line.

In my case, interviewing educated women who had in one way or another survived and even made it, meant that I was not repeating the common westo-centric stereotype of *all* Afghan women being very poor, uneducated and powerless. This is not to deny, however, that most are poor and illiterate. Interviewing the kind of women I have interviewed has, therefore, also meant showing that there is a small group of Afghan educated women who have defied the stereotypes in their private and public lives and been able in various ways to provide leadership in their families and communities. Consequently, it is an effort to do feminist research within a non westo-centric framework as mentioned earlier. The interviewees are educated Afghan refugee women who did not leave for the West, at least not until 1998, for various reasons including commitment to Afghanistan and Afghans.

I have interviewed educated Afghan women with whom I had become friends earlier and knew myself or came to know through other good friends. This encouraged trust and led to mutually open relationships. Consequently, first I interviewed Afghan women who were friends and then through them, I was able to access other Afghan women that they knew and recommended. It did not go through more than two tiers. There was some snowballing but not a lot. I would explain to friends that I wanted to interview Afghan educated refugee women who had interesting lives and experiences, as well as women from different ethnic/religious groups.

In most cases, my relationship with the interviewees already had a past before the interviews and has also had a future after the interviews. I know that some of my Afghan friends agreed to the interview and/or agreed to introduce others at least partly as a friendly gesture to me – as a sign of support and solidarity. Omidian's experience shows that 'Afghans do not trust strangers or outsiders, making the anthropologist's task all the more difficult' (1996:31). Though this could be true about many other people as well, it is particularly valid about Afghans who have been through incredibly dramatic events and witnessed or heard about undercover and clandestine activities and information gathering. Consequently, being a friend or a friend of a friend made a big difference in my research and its interviewing process.

Some of the interviewees first asked about my research and wanted to know more about it, before agreeing to an appointment or to prepare for the appointment and obviously, this explanation was provided. Sometimes it was in person and at other times, through the phone. I always explained the reasons for the interview, its confidentiality, asked permission to use the tape recorder and asked my interviewees at the end of our interview whether they too had any questions they would like to ask me. I would always explain that I am doing this because I am interested in the experiences and views of educated Afghan women and want to learn from them.

Only once did an interviewee want a copy of her interview on tape, which I provided and then she seemed satisfied.

The fact that they are all educated women though with different socio-economic status meant that the unequal power relations between us were somewhat reduced (compared to if I had, for example, interviewed Afghan women living in refugee camps who were illiterate). The power relations varied from one interviewee to another. With some it was less, with others more – depending on their economic status, education level and employment situation. It also depended upon the personal character of the interviewee. I think some have felt almost if not completely equal and others less so. At least, all knew they were educated and were proud of this point and its impact on their lives. They were satisfied or proud about other aspects of their lives as well. That is, however, not to deny that some unequal power relations were involved, mostly linked to my status as an international UN professional staff member.<sup>8</sup>

Overall they were happy that I was talking to them as educated Afghan women. For some of them it was important to feel their experiences were being documented, to be shared, albeit indirectly, with more people who would learn about the Afghanistan they have experienced as educated women. They also had the power of withholding or giving an interview and providing or not providing information which I needed to complete my Ph.D.

To quote from Gunew:

Power, according to Foucault, is not conceived in any monolithic or centralized way and is not, in other words, simply a matter of ‘us and them’, or, of the state versus ‘us’, or even men versus women. Power is reproduced in discursive networks at every point where someone who ‘knows’ is instructing someone who doesn’t know (Gunew,1990:22).

Quite a few interviewees wanted to tell others, including family and colleagues, that I was there as a researcher to interview them. It carried with it some prestige since it meant they had things to say which others found important. Many said they felt good about sharing their experiences, that they wondered whether it was valuable for me and some said that I

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<sup>8</sup> In the UN/aid community, there is a hierarchy between local/national staff and international staff and similarly between general staff and professional staff. Afghans have become quite familiar with these hierarchies as a result of years of direct or indirect engagement.

was the first or amongst the very few people in their lives with whom they had shared some of the various aspects of their lives and thoughts. Like Korac (1998), Stanley and Wise (1983) and other feminist researchers, I believe that the female researcher should have a relationship with the interviewees which is open and honest. Considering the difficult circumstances they were facing and all the responsibilities most of them had, as well as the focus on the community rather than the individual in Afghanistan, talking about themselves was somewhat of a rarity.

Since they were educated women, many with desires to have had even higher education, they appreciated my efforts to get a Ph.D. and would say things like 'you are lucky to be able to do this', 'this is a good thing you are doing' or 'we also want to pursue our education'. I did not hear any of the women interviewed express doubts regarding my 'real' intentions but that may be somewhat due to my naivety. I know that Omidian (1996) initially faced problems in her study of Afghan refugees in the USA as an American when her intentions were questioned. No one ever refused to be interviewed by me though some planned interviews did not work out because of time constraints or other reasons. However, when I had recently arrived in Pakistan in 1997 and fewer people knew me, following a debriefing on Violence against Women at the Afghan Women's Network in Peshawar, I was informed by Afghan friends that some of the other women resented me for being Iranian. In my years of travel to Afghanistan, especially under Taliban, there were times when colleagues would ask me to speak English (rather than Farsi) and not reveal that I was Iranian in view of the political tensions involved.

I began the interviews with a general question 'please tell me about when and where you were born and your family' which usually resulted in a very good and long response and provided a lot of information about their lives. In fact, the interviews were thus also biographical. This was then followed by relevant questions. I was very careful not to ask controversial questions if I felt the interviewee was not comfortable enough. This sense of discomfort occurred at times. Sometimes it happened when they were talking about family problems and domestic violence and did not want to go further, or religious issues, and at other times, ethnic differences as well as political issues. I felt it was important not to

push when they did not seem to want to discuss something further. A few times, they did discuss it with me but once the tape-recorder was off which was fine. This is also an indication of the dual role of the tape-recorder. On the one hand, it facilitates the process by helping in its recording. On the other hand, it can also inhibit the interviewee.

A few times when talking about painful experiences, some of the women began to cry and we stopped and I would ask them whether they wanted to stop for a longer period of time or go on. They always agreed to go on after a few minutes. I also was witness to good laughs, beautiful smiles and sparkling eyes when good memories came to their minds. At moments, I did feel that what they were saying could be dangerous for them and also for me but in one way or another, it has worked out. I had to be extra careful as a UNICEF staff member, Iranian, Shiite and a guest/foreigner in Pakistan. I felt the risks most acutely when the Taliban was in power and had considerable influence in Peshawar as well.

I did not always agree with what the interviewees had to say but did not push the matter further than saying 'do you really think so' or 'perhaps it meant something else'. Overall, I had much in common in terms of basic principles with many of the interviewees and no serious disagreements arose or moments when I felt I was listening to very unethical comments.

The interview locations were chosen by the interviewees, though I made suggestions while remaining flexible. Some wanted to be interviewed at their homes, some in their offices and others at our home. I agreed in all cases and never faced any serious problems in this connection. I have interviewed the women in their homes in Rawalpindi (this particular home was also a school), Islamabad, Peshawar, in their NGO offices in Peshawar, and in our home in Peshawar and later in Islamabad. If it was at our home, they would always meet my family and we would have a snack or a meal together during or after the interview. Similarly, in their houses, Afghan hospitality was always fully acknowledged. I never had problems with troublesome third parties. Considering the security situation, I would decide whether to go with our own family car to these locations

or with a taxi and how to dress appropriately. I was usually dressed in the Pakistani style *shalwar kameez* but without a scarf, just a shawl around my neck.

The issue of language, being Farsi speaking, has made a big difference in my research since I did not need a translator and was able to directly and simultaneously translate/transcribe the interviews thus in fact listening to the interview more than once. It also meant that the women felt more comfortable and did not have to be restricted by their vocabulary. Since almost all educated Afghan women speak Farsi, it did not restrict my access to Afghan educated refugee women of non-Farsi speaking ethnic groups. This is indicative of unequal linguistic power relations in Afghanistan and the region.

It is perhaps not surprising that the only interview conducted in English was of my youngest interviewee who has lived most of her life in Pakistan. Her family includes an American woman who calls them 'my Afghan family'. The presence of this person has meant the interviewee's English has improved tremendously over the years. There is some difference between Farsi in Iran and Dari in Afghanistan, but by working in Afghanistan now for many years, I have learned many Dari terms. When there is a term I don't know, I ask. Some of the terms which could not be easily translated into English I wrote and kept in Farsi with a parenthesis.

For most Afghan Farsi-speakers, and also some of the other minorities such as the Uzbeks, Farsi has historical, poetic and emotional significance. As one Uzbek interviewee mentioned, 'Uzbek is our mother, Farsi is like our aunt, and we love our aunts very much.' I also enjoyed listening to their Farsi especially as some of them spoke very eloquently and used classical words no longer being used in Iran. Obviously, it would have been great if I was able to also speak Pashtu and Uzbeki and reciprocate their knowledge of my mother tongue but that was not the case.

Going back to the issue of translation and transcribing, there is no denying that each translation brings with it new meanings since languages are also placed within specific frameworks. Having to translate into English for academic purposes is itself also a sign of

the hegemony of the English language. Someone like me has chosen to study in a particular university and language but it does signify something bigger than a personal decision and is linked to the hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon world. As mentioned by Roman and Eyre:

Nonetheless, we are acutely aware that this volume commits to print its own symbolic imperialism through the absence of research by feminist post-colonial scholars exclusively living and working in non-Western countries "Third World" countries, where English is *not* the predominant language spoken (Roman and Eyre, 1997:7).

The closeness I felt with the women interviewed is not only due to language, but also the cultural, religious and geographical affinity between Iran and Afghanistan (inspite of the political tensions between the two countries). Some of the interviewees would say 'you understand, you are of the same language and same religion as us' or 'it is the same in Iran I believe'. My interviewees felt that since I had experienced revolution, war and a conservative religious regime in Iran, it meant that I was in a better position to understand what they had been through. This familiarity facilitated being at ease in their homes or deciphering their body language and reading between the lines, when they spoke. This is also an outcome of years of interest in Afghanistan and other life experiences. Though largely Western-educated (which itself provided some prestige in the eyes of the interviewees), I have still been able to engage with my interviewees as someone from their part of the world. Besides other factors, being a feminist researcher from 'our' part of the world is also a political statement for me. By 'our' part of the world, I can mean different things, the Middle East and Central Asia, predominantly Moslem countries, Asia...it depends upon the circumstances.

Being a woman has also made it easier for me to connect with these women and interview them, especially in a patriarchal society. Feminist researchers have pointed out the importance of woman-to-woman interviews as it facilitates the interview process while also pointing out its challenges (Korac,1998, Sayigh, 1997, Fonow and Cook, 1991, Oakley, 1981). While agreeing with this, I would say that it does not apply to all women and it is not only about being a woman. There are other additional issues involved

including knowledge about the context and cultural sensitivity. I have been somewhat of an insider-outsider (Altorki, 1988) with Afghan women and occasionally, I even forgot that I was not Afghan. Issues such as age and family status also make a difference in the interview rapport. I think it was easier to trust and communicate with me as someone in her late 30s/early 40s than if I were in my 20s. Similarly, in a conservative environment, being married, a mother and daughter placed me in an advantageous position.

The interviews, in some cases, have been snapshots of the women I have known before and after the interview. I have known quite a few of the interviewees for almost six years. They are part of my overall research on Afghanistan through my MA dissertation, library research, UNICEF work experiences, journeys to Afghanistan (over 25 under various regimes), many official and personal discussions with Afghan women and men of various backgrounds and with many expatriate men and women about Afghanistan. Over the years, I have participated in many meetings with Afghan NGOs and attended special events in different Afghan cultural and education centers. This has provided me a further perspective on relevant issues. Some of these were held in Pakistan, others in Afghanistan and some in Iran. I have attended several Afghan weddings, birthdays and mourning ceremonies in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran – before, during and after Taliban. I have also attended Afghan-related events in Iran, the UK and Canada.<sup>9</sup> In addition, I have been to many hospitable Afghan homes and had long and rich discussions with families. I have also had access to some of the articles written by a few of the interviewees as well as articles written about them by others.

## **5. The Interviewees: Twenty Educated Afghan Refugee Women**

I interviewed 20 women, 13 when the Taliban was in power and 7 afterwards. So, 13 were interviewed in the years 1998/99 and 7 in 2002. Those whom I interviewed in 1998/99 were witness to some of the worst hours of Afghan history and were speaking to me in such an atmosphere. The women definitely felt more hopeful in 2002, after the fall of the

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am not referring to any of the UN related Afghanistan events which I attended in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and abroad including UNIFEM's Meeting on Afghan Women's Leadership in December 2001 in Brussels.



Taliban. There were various reasons behind this two phase approach to the interviews. I could never have imagined the significance of this time-gap, in view of Taliban's overthrow in late 2002.

Conscious methodological reasons for this gap included wanting to have a more diverse and varied understanding of the situation by interviewing women with some time difference. I also hoped it would give me more time to identify other women for the interviews. However, these conscious decisions were also influenced by certain material realities such as the intensity of my work with UNICEF in Afghanistan which for some time did not allow me to concentrate as required on my Ph.D.

In retrospect, while I realize that it means that the interviewees are speaking in two different contexts, I believe overall this has greatly enriched the range of experiences and emotions covered, as well as my own understanding of these situations. In order to update myself with regards to those I had interviewed earlier, I sent emails to approximately 8 of them with 3 follow-up questions in April 2002. I also tried to reach more through those 8 by asking for their new emails. I received responses from five and these responses are used in this dissertation. In addition, I have been able to pursue most of the interviewees up to the present and know more or less what each of them is doing which provides me a unique perspective on their lives.

I have interviewed women from the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek ethnic groups and some from mixed-ethnic background. I have interviewed women who were Sunni, Twelve Imamite Shiite and Ismaeli Shiite as well as Seyed (descendents of the Prophet Mohammad). I have interviewed single as well as married women. Women in their 50s and 40s, as well as in their 30s and 20s, and one under 20, have been interviewed. I have interviewed three mothers and daughters who were Tajik, Pashtun and Uzbek. They are all formally educated women. All have at least high-school education but many have also attended University. Not surprisingly, their socio-economic situations are not and have not been the same. Some led prosperous lives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Others led modest lives in both countries. Some led much better lives in Afghanistan and faced a lot of

poverty in Pakistan, especially in the first few years. Another group faced poverty in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan in spite of their education. Some worked for the UN, others for NGOs, some as teachers/educators, as domestic workers, on a small-handicraft project and others were not working outside of their homes at the time of the interview. A few of the interviewed women have been and continue to be human rights/women's rights activists and community leaders. In Chapter Eight, more information is provided on the interviewees in general and specifically about six of the interviewees. Brief summaries on the twenty interviewees are provided in Annex III.

While I had hoped that all the women interviewed would have spent some time in Kabul, I was not sure that it would work out but it did. Indeed, all the women have spent all or part of their life in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. Some came to Kabul from close by rural areas and others from distant rural areas. Others came for education or their parent's work. Some were forced into exile from other parts of Afghanistan to the 'center' so that they could be under the watchful eyes of the government and others moved to Kabul because of the war. Nevertheless, Kabul is a part of Afghanistan they have all experienced and most of them relate well to the situation in Kabul.

Kabul has played and continues to play an important role in Afghanistan as the capital and as the center of 'modernism' especially before the war began. It is especially symbolic for women who in Kabul were allowed a greater degree of freedom than in most other places. The destruction Kabul faced in the early 90s in the inter-group fighting of the *Mujahedin* has become a symbol of the war and the negative impact of the *Mujahedin's* internal conflicts. In the past few years, the Taliban believed that the women of Kabul were particularly immoral and dangerous and that they had been able to corrupt even the *Mujahedin*, so they had to be extra careful and strict with them.

Another common factor the interviewees have besides being Afghan, educated and having all spent some substantial part of their lives in Kabul, is that they were all refugees in Pakistan when interviewed. Some lived in Peshawar and others in Islamabad. Some came during the Communist rule of Afghanistan in the 80s, others when the *Mujahedin* were in

power in the early 90s and another group when Taliban came to power around 1997. Many have now moved on – to the West and more recently, back to Afghanistan. Our journeys in life crossed at some point – through our friendships, the interviews, my research and work in Afghanistan.

While the research, interviews and friendships remain, my work in Afghanistan has ended and therefore, I am no longer part of their journeys back to Afghanistan or those who went to the West. In fact, since life has changed for almost all the interviewees, either they have gone to the West or will return to Afghanistan – with very few exceptions – what has been captured here in the interviews is now somewhat historic as that time has passed – hopefully, never to repeat itself for Afghans. This is indeed often the case with research on refugees – their rapidly changing situations, sometimes for the worse and sometimes, for the better (Krulfeld, 1994:147).

## **6. Research Ethics: Principled Common Sense**

In terms of the ethics of research (Wilson, 1992), interviewing and the concerns about ‘using’ the women we interview for our own research purposes without giving much in return, I have tried to minimize this valid concern as much as possible through the personal/ professional/political relationships developed with most of the interviewees. For example, as a result of the terms of reference of my work with the UN, I was their partner in joint projects, and I was able to facilitate their meetings with some of our interested senior colleagues or provide their names to those seeking out activist Afghan women. This provided required support to both sides. Also, as a feminist, in my personal capacity, I was able to support their work as women’s rights activists, by editing some of their material, making suggestions, contributing and helping out in various modest ways. Since 1996, I have also been speaking at many gatherings on Afghan women’s rights. I have also tried to lobby as much as possible on their behalf within the UN and aid community.<sup>10</sup> Supporting their activism for human, women, children, minority, religious and refugee

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<sup>10</sup> Amongst various responsibilities in UNICEF, I also represented the organization at the UN Afghanistan Human Rights Consultative Group for two years (2000-2002) and was its Gender Focal Point.

rights has been integrally linked to my own activism on these issues. They provided me the opportunity to contribute for which I am grateful.

Two of the women I interviewed lived with us for almost four years. Some others spent a night or several nights at our home and vica versa for various purposes, including transiting as well as medical reasons. I have also been able to support some of the interviewees in realizing their plans to move out of Pakistan. As friends, we have provided each other mutual support at many points in time over the past years. They have all had my telephone number and most have also had my email and home address in Islamabad, Pakistan and later in Toronto, Canada. They knew that they could always contact me. I have socialized with many of them and we have come to know each other's families as well.

Many of them would always ask how my mother was – *khaleh jan* (dear aunt) – and my children and husband. In fact, my mother (with whom I have lived these years) has been part of these relationships and supportive of some of these Afghan friends, including in helping the divorce process of one of them. My daughters have also had relationships with some of the interviewees' children. My husband has met and become familiar with some of the interviewees and a number of their spouses. He too has provided support in his own capacity to a few of them in Afghanistan, in Pakistan and in Iran. In fact, some of the interviewees knew my husband before we met (my husband worked for UNHCR Afghanistan from 1995-2000).

I have always tried to be very careful and conscious of the security concerns of the interviewees and not to put them at any risk. I have done this by making sure all my interviews and material are in a safe place and by changing the names of my interviewees when discussing what they have to do. In addition, I have been able to provide some of them security advice and support when they were at risk for other reasons.

I was very serious about never using UNICEF time to undertake my research in any way either in Pakistan nor in Afghanistan, and in fact that is the main reason why my Ph.D. has

taken a long time to complete and why I decided to take a sabbatical – leave without pay – to complete it. Of course, I can not separate mentally my observations and experiences of Afghanistan in an artificial way and no doubt my years of work with UNICEF in Afghanistan has influenced and enriched my knowledge of the country and its people, but I never allocated UNICEF time and space for my own academic work.

Nevertheless, it was because of UNICEF that I was based in Pakistan, enabling me to meet many of my interviewees and other inspiring individuals from whom I have learned so much. In all fairness, I have to acknowledge this privilege. Though this was not the driving force behind my efforts, working with UNICEF allowed me to develop a good reputation amongst Afghan colleagues, which in turn facilitated access to other Afghans and their honest sharing of experiences. It is because of UNICEF that I was able to travel to Afghanistan extensively over the past years, mostly under the Taliban regime and to many different parts of Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Like all aid workers during that period, my trips involved risks that were managed to the extent possible by the UN security regime and myself. In my case, as a Moslem, Shiite and Iranian woman working on rights issues, I faced particular risks. Fortunately, these never resulted in any harm to me or others.

## **7. Data Preparation and Analysis: Focusing in Complexity**

I have found managing the data collected all these years plus what is in my head and analyzing the interviews within the given theoretical framework and codes very challenging. After being involved with Afghanistan for over six years, I have a lot of experiences, ideas and information. However, I realize and my supervisor has reminded me that the issue is really about focusing and providing a meaningful reading within a given framework and time-frame. Like many Ph.D. students (especially older students), I have faced many personal challenges in trying to continue working and completing my

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<sup>11</sup> I worked for UNICEF Afghanistan for 4.5 years during which I traveled to Kabul, Faizabad (Badakshan), Panjshir Valley, Mazar Sharif, Pol-e-Khomri (in the North), Herat (in the West), Jalalabad (in the East) and Kandahar, Helmand (in the South). I also traveled to many other locations around the above main cities during this period. Moreover, I contributed to and participated in numerous UNICEF programmes, projects, workshops and trainings and wrote or supervised the preparation of many UNICEF documents/reports/articles during this period.

degree. I have also faced intellectual challenges in undertaking the work at hand effectively. It has not always been easy.

In terms of timing, I began towards end of 1996 when I was still living in Iran by working on some of the draft outlines and theoretical issues and wrote a number of papers which were shared with my supervisors.<sup>12</sup> When I moved to Pakistan in 1997, I initially continued with the theoretical issues and then began the interviews while gaining considerable practical experience about Afghanistan. This continued till the end of 1999. I visited the UK for supervision visits several times during this period.

As a result of UNICEF Afghanistan's very heavy workload -especially in 2000/2001 – and many family responsibilities, my interviews and research was prolonged. However, I continued collecting material, taking notes, observing and participated in a few academic gatherings including as an instructor at the Hanover International Women's University of 2000.

I planned for, requested and received approval from UNICEF to take a sabbatical for a year from February 2002 to end of March 2003 with the purpose of completing my Ph.D. Of this period, I decided to spend a few months in Pakistan in order to complete my interviews and collect further material on Afghanistan while beginning to analyze and write my dissertation. In these months, I began working on several chapter drafts and shared these with my supervisor.

From mid-June 2002 till August 2003, I was based in Toronto, Canada and at the Center for Refugee Studies at the University of York working on my dissertation as a pre-doctoral visiting scholar. During this period, I have made several trips to London to meet with my supervisor at the University of Greenwich and collected other information to support my analysis. These trips were very important as they provided me with the

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<sup>12</sup> I wrote papers on epistemology, research on refugee women, Afghan refugees in Pakistan and various other issues. These were sent to my supervisors from whom I received comprehensive feedback. I was initially registered as a Mphil to Ph.D. student. The transfer to Ph.D. student occurred after three years or in 1999 when the University reviewed and accepted my progress report.

additional opportunity to interact with other academics and benefit from their views and suggestions.

In Toronto and at the Center, I was able to exchange experiences and views with many other scholars and researchers. In addition, I had the opportunity to make over ten presentations based on my work and research at various venues, and was guest lecturer in a couple of University courses. I have also prepared a few articles for publication. I continued to maintain contact with the Afghan and Iranian diaspora communities in Toronto and was able to seek further information from them on particular issues, as well as through email from Afghan and other friends elsewhere. It is thus from a base in Toronto that I have been able to complete my Ph.D. dissertation.

Regarding interview analysis, I began by coding them under a number of relevant headings in the computer inspired from the theoretical framework of my work so as to be able to categorize the subject by interview and have a better sense of what each has said within each heading. I began by doing it manually by highlighting the relevant sections in each interview and making a computer directory accordingly. I first tried it with three interviews and then with one code but for all interviews and based on both I wrote short papers. Realizing that this was going to be time consuming and also practically difficult, when faced with the opportunity to have it coded through the software *Ethnograph*<sup>13</sup>, I went for it. It enabled me to search for a greater number of codes (20) and be more comprehensive.

There were 10 codes under the heading of 'life journeys of educated Afghan refugee women in Pakistan' and 10 under 'becoming an educated woman'. The first covers discussions on various aspects of their identity (national, ethnic, religious and gender) as well as lived experiences of change of regimes, family issues, work/activism, violence and the future. The second covers views and experiences on/of education in their family and

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<sup>13</sup> This was done with the support of a young Pakistani female researcher at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Islamabad, Pakistan in April/May 2002. The researcher had coded interviews with Afghan refugee women for SDPI earlier. *Ethnograph* was developed by Qualis Researchers, in Denver, USA in 1985.

community, actual school experiences, experiences of non-formal education, impact of education on their working/family life as well as activism and the link between education and their other identities. Issues pertaining to education and aid agencies, as well as the future of education were also coded. I provided a list of the codes plus a description of each to the concerned friend at SDPI. I changed all names of the interviewees for reasons of confidentiality. Since the friend concerned had other work to do, the process took over a month. During this period, we were in regular contact to make sure we had the same understanding of the codes. At the end, I had booklets with each category and the relevant quotes. However, eventually, I used these booklets but also my own reading/re-reading of the individual interviews over and over again.

The process of actual writing and putting together the various shorter pieces I had written earlier was a challenge. I have tried not to make it too dry and write it in a context that is also reflective of the cultural undertones of this research and which will resonate with my own experiences as well as that of my interviewees.

I have been able to share my ideas and work and sometimes validate my intentions/observations/analysis with many people in various locations of the world over the years, especially Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, the United Kingdom and Canada. This has tremendously enriched my understanding of the situation. Consequently, I have been able to share my thoughts with Western and non-Western audiences and academics/activists in the West as well as Western and non-Western audiences in the region of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Each has been able to contribute in her/his own way. It is through all these exchanges that this work has developed and for which I am very grateful.



## 8. Conclusion: Impact of Research Process on Researcher: The Mystical Swirl of a Dervish in Sam'a<sup>14</sup>

I ask myself what has been the impact of this research on me, the researcher, besides resulting in a Ph.D. degree? I somehow get the image of the *dervish* dancing, swirling, moving his/her body, head and attire in the search for something more than himself/herself, for some kind of connection, for something special – and though it is momentary and fleeting – it permanently touches and changes his/her life. It is a journey unlike any other - beyond familiar boundaries.

Yes, that is how I feel about the impact of the research on myself. By listening to and studying Afghan women and their lives, I was able to grow as an individual, academic and professional and know myself better. I was able, even if for short periods of time, to feel part of their world, privy to their lives and stories and touched by the humanity they demonstrated and the human spirit which struggled against all adversity. Their lives were not isolated from the wider environment, the community, national, regional and international environment.

What has happened to Afghan women and their country is integrally linked to other developments in the world – including patriarchy, militarization (or what became known in Afghanistan as the *Kalashnikov* culture), the war economy of drugs and weapons, oil multinationals (mostly run by Westerners) and their state supporters, tightening up of Western and other borders and increasing restrictions and discrimination towards refugees, immigrants and Moslems, the war against 'terrorism' and many other unequal

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<sup>14</sup> *Sam'a* is when the *Sufis*/Moslem mystics go into a trance after the repetition of an Islamic mantra and often while being accompanied by the playing of the *da'f* – a traditional round instrument. Islamic mysticism can be found throughout the Islamic world. Sufism has been especially influential in Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Kurdistan, Central Asia, India, Pakistan and North Africa. The Farsi mystical poetry of Jalal al 'din Rumi – known as Mowlana – is claimed by Afghans, Iranians and the Turks and his popularity has traveled from the Middle East/Central Asia to the Western world. Mysticism provided more scope for early Moslem women to express themselves and attain spiritual leadership including Rabia of Basra. *Sufism* has also been one of the main inspirations for music in the Moslem world and women have also sung *Sufi* songs in religious gatherings as well as for the wider public.

power relations at various levels including that of nationality, ethnicity, religion, class and gender.

The research process not only added a rich dimension to my life as a UN staff member, activist, mother, wife, daughter and friend, and provided additional meaning and direction, but it also allowed me to utilize various aspects of my identities and skills to engage with Afghan women and their communities, try to understand the complexities of their lives and appreciate the power in so many of them to deal with all this hardship with such dignity and resilience.

As a result of the research, I looked at the world around me with new spectacles, trying to search for more meaning and understanding as connected to the plight of Afghanistan and its people. I have been intellectually and politically challenged to be more analytical and efficient in my research.

Yes, in the course of these years of work in Afghanistan, I have often become sad, devastated, angry, frustrated and abhorred the injustice and suffering of war, displacement, discrimination and blatant violation of basic human rights but I have learned from life's experiences, including my years of political activism as a student in Iran, and my Afghan friends, that one needs to be strong to deal with these issues and make a difference. I have also often been encouraged, excited, surprised, touched and enthralled by what I saw in Afghanistan and with Afghan women (and progressive men). I have learned about solidarity, empathy and humility.

I have always felt privileged to listen to these women and learn from their rich lives and incredible characters and strengths. It has indeed been one of the biggest privileges of my life and one which I will never forget. I have felt very close to them at moments (the moment of the *Dervish's* dance) and shared in their grief, disappointments, fears, joys and hopes. They became my heroines.

While they have generously shared with me some of their personal and family journeys in life, it has also been a very enriching personal journey for me. They will forever be with me and I will keep in touch with as many of them as possible. I will never forget the dance!

## Chapter Three – Afghanistan: Land of Beauty, History and War

### 1. Introduction

The historical context of Afghanistan and Afghan refugees in Pakistan is outlined in this and the next chapter. Information is provided, in most cases, up to mid-2002 or the convening of the *Loya Jirga* (grand council).

Presentation and interpretation of history is never a neutral act. We all put the bits and pieces together, consciously and unconsciously, which emanate from our own background, experiences, political ideology and commitment. While all historical narratives aim at capturing and sharing a relevant social and historical reality, there is in fact usually no coherent historical trajectory 'out there' ready to be captured and documented.

For example, my focus on the heterogeneity of Afghanistan's population, or its contested socio-political terrain, as well as its women and education, are all a reflection of my own political interests and commitments. In addition, what we know and don't know (i.e. the silences, the gaps) are a reflection of various power relations and representational issues. Nevertheless, as scholars with ethics, we attempt to present as accurate an account as possible.

This chapter will continue with a section on some of the main social divisions amongst Afghans. This is followed by a section on the political history of Afghanistan, as it is this history which has to a large degree shaped the status of Afghan women, as well as their educational opportunities. This chapter will then continue with a section on Afghan women and education, which are issues at the core of this dissertation.

## 2. Who are the Afghans?

### 2.1 Introduction

The estimated population of Afghanistan is over 20 million, in the absence of a census since the 1970s. The country has great diversity in terms of ethnicity, religion, language and tribal composition. This diversity and its related power struggles have been crucial to its socio-political history, as well as the status of Afghan women and their education. This situation has emanated from the actual heterogeneity of the country as well economic and political efforts to exacerbate differences. It is not 'natural' or inevitable that such diversity result in conflict and violence. None of these identities are essential or frozen in their constructions. They are always changing, inter-connected and fluid. These are impacted upon and (re)constructed by many factors, including colonial and neocolonial interventions, global and regional political rivalries as well as the socio-economic, religio-cultural and political contestations within Afghan society. These and other factors are all interconnected and cannot be seen in isolation or out of context.

Afghanistan's ethnic diversity is also linked to its geographic location between Iran, Central Asia, South Asia and China. 'For millennia, the area now called Afghanistan has been a crossroad of cultures, empires and peoples which has given rise to a turbulent history' (Olesen, 1995:21). Afghanistan has an ancient and rich history<sup>1</sup>, though unfortunately most of its historical sites have been damaged or destroyed during the war.

In the following section, information will be provided on Afghanistan's main ethnic groups. The reality is that there is almost no region in Afghanistan where only one ethnic group lives. While one ethnic group might predominate in one region, there is considerable ethnic diversity in almost all the regions of the country. In most cases, Afghans of different ethnic groups have lived peacefully together. This section will be followed by information on religious, linguistic, tribal and other social categories.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of Afghanistan have historically also been called Aryana and Khorasan.

## 2.2 The Pashtuns of Afghanistan

Afghanistan literally means land of the Afghans which is another name for Pashtun. This is why some Afghan intellectuals from the Hazara ethnic group prefer to be called Afghanistani rather than Afghani (Mousavi, 1998). Afghan Pashtun leaders have almost always been in a state of low or high-intensity conflict with other social groups in the country. According to Shahrani:

...discrimination and injustice by the government against the local Turkic, Tajik and Hazara populations in education, social services, and political participation became rampant. These groups lost much of their rich land and water they had owned...there was flagrant economic oppression by some government-sponsored Pashtun khans (Shahrani, 1984:8)

Nation building therefore came to be seen as a process of Pashtunisation, with non-Pashtuns unable to compete on equal terms' (Johnson, 1998:7). There is debate over the percentage of the population which are Pashtun or members of other ethnic groups. It is, however, estimated that Pashtuns constitute 40% to 60% of the population (Jawad, 1992:2). Such data often reflects different ethno-political projects and is, therefore, frequently contested.

Afghan Pashtuns are linked through language (Pashtu), their tribal structures (though varied and ever-changing), the *Pashtunwali* (tribal code of conduct), territory (Southern and South Eastern Afghanistan), adherence to Islam (especially Sunni Islam), a sense of 'common origin' (Smith, 1986) and 'common destiny' (Yuval-Davis, 1993, referring to Otto Bauer). The *Pashtunwali* outlines the following:

...to avenge blood; to fight to death for a person who has taken refuge with me no matter what his lineage; to defend to the last any property entrusted to me; to be hospitable and provide for the safety of the person and property of guests; to pardon an offence...on the intercession of a woman of the offender's lineage...; to punish all adulterers with death (Hiro, 1988:229).

The *Pashtunwali*, unlike Islamic jurisprudence, does not allow for female ownership<sup>2</sup> or divorce. It has in fact been interlinked with many other socio-cultural and religious experiences and practices for most Pashtuns, and to say it is the cornerstone of the life of all Pashtuns would be an exaggeration. The *loya jirga* or Pashtun tribal grand council has been used to conciliate power through a limited process of consensus-building in the past (Olesen, 1995).

Establishing a separate Pashtun nation-state or *Pashtunistan* has been pursued unsuccessfully by various Pashtun leaders in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Ever changing processes of inclusion and exclusion and alliance-building has existed within different groups of Pashtuns, as well as with other social groups. Pashtun leaders and intellectuals have maintained different ideological positions, some conservative and others progressive.

Not all Pashtuns are Sunni Moslem or even Pashtu speaking. There is a Shiite Pashtun community in Parchinar on the Pakistan border and there are also small Farsi-speaking Pashtun communities (Naby, 1988:792).

### **2.3 Tajiks**

Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (30% according to Halliday, 1978). While like most other ethnic groups Tajiks are spread in most regions of Afghanistan, many live in the North East (close to Tajikestan) and West of the country (close to Iran). They are not organized along tribal affiliations. Many educated and urban Afghans, as well as traders, are Tajiks. Though most are Sunni, like the Pashtuns, there is a Shiite minority amongst them (Jawad, 1992:11). Some are Twelve Imamite Shiites and others, Seven Imamite Shiites or Ismaelis (1990).

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<sup>2</sup> In Islam, girls/women do not have equal inheritance rights with boys/men but are permitted to own property and have some inheritance rights.

Parochialism is important in Afghanistan and therefore, there are some differences between Tajiks of Panjshir, Badakshan and Kabul, while they have often been united in their opposition to various Pashtun leaders, especially the Taliban. Jawad (1992) even refers to Panjshiris as a separate ethnic group. It was in the Shomali Plains north of Kabul and close to Panjshir, where Tajiks predominate that the Taliban committed some of their worst human rights violations in 1999.

Tajiks mostly speak Farsi which is spoken in Iran and Tajikestan and are therefore, also known as *Farsiwan* (those who speak Farsi). Their dialect is known as Dari. While national leadership has mostly been in Pashtun hands, many Tajiks have been well-known as intellectuals, politicians and members of the elite or upper classes of society. Tajiks ruled Afghanistan briefly in 1929. Karmal who was in power in the 1980s during the Communist regime was half-Tajik and half-Pashtun. President Rabbani who came to power in the 1990s is also Tajik. Many Tajiks were famous anti-Soviet and anti-Taliban commanders including Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Masoud and Ismael Khan (Governor of Herat). Currently, there are senior Tajik officials (a few from Panjshir), in the Government of Afghanistan working with a Pashtun President.

#### **2.4 Uzbeks and Turkmen**

Uzbeks and Turkmen speak Turkic languages and are ethnically closer to Turks. Most are Sunni Moslems. They make up about 19% of Afghanistan's population (Jawad, 1992:12). Some of the best arable land in Northern Afghanistan has belonged to these groups. 'In addition, the production of carpets by the women has brought them considerable supplementary income. Cotton production and Karakul enabled them to become involved in Afghanistan's first industrial...activities...the Uzbeks and Turkmen have not been dependent on the central government' (Jawad, 1992:12).

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, various Pashtun leaders confiscated land belonging to Uzbeks and Turkmen. They also exiled their leaders and crushed dissent. Pashtun forces at various times in Afghan history raped Uzbek and Turkmen women. In the recent



decades, much of what remained of their communities has been devastated by the combined impact of many years of war, drought and discrimination.

General Dostam is the most famous Uzbek leader of these past years of war. He was a Communist General and later allied himself with the *Mujahidin*, in spite of his own secular tendencies. His political party has been called the *Junbesh-e-Melli-Islami* (National Islamic Movement). His base has been Northern Afghanistan, especially Sheberghan and Mazar Sharif. He has been supported by Uzbekistan and other countries. He ruled over the North until the Taliban captured Mazar Sharif in 1998. Dostam and his forces – like many other Afghan commanders - have committed massive human rights violations against women, other ethnic groups in the North as well as Uzbek opposition to his leadership. After the fall of the Taliban, Dostam returned to Mazar Sharif and is currently Deputy Defense Minister.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.5 Hazaras

Hazaras are the most oppressed and deprived ethnic group in Afghanistan (Jawad, 1992, Halliday, 1978) and constitute about 10% of the total population. Many live in the Central Highlands or Hazarajat. Most Hazaras are Shiites. Thus, they are also a religious minority and have been especially discriminated by dominant ethnic and religious groups (Mousavi, 1998).

Several Pashtun rulers have committed genocidal human rights atrocities against the Hazaras, including Abdul Rahman Khan and the Taliban (Human Rights Watch, 2001). For much of their rule, the Taliban also blocked aid – including food – to Hazarajat, resulting in the hunger and death of many Hazaras. Often being identifiable by their features, Hazaras were reluctant to be seen in public in the days of the Taliban. Hazara

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<sup>3</sup> On May 21 2003, he was also appointed as Special Advisor to the President on Security and Military Affairs. This has been seen as a move aimed at removing Dostam from Mazar to Kabul.

political groups, especially *Hezb-e-Wahdat*<sup>4</sup> remained amongst the most resistant to Taliban rule.

During the Pashtun monarchical period, Hazara land was forcibly taken and given to Pashtun *koochis* (or nomads). Hazara uprisings were violently put down and Hazara women raped (Mousavi, 1998). Many Hazara men, even before the war, migrated in search of work, mostly as unskilled labor (Jawad, 1992). Some were involved in the transport industry. Most Hazaras speak Farsi and their own dialect, Hazaragi

Years of political struggle have raised the political awareness of Hazaras and other ethnic minorities and they have been able to assume a more prominent position in the Afghan political scene. One of the main Afghan human rights organizations in the past years was established by Hazara intellectuals, namely the Cooperative Center for Afghanistan. It had Afghan staff from other ethnic groups as well. Also, the current Human Rights Commission is headed by a Hazara woman, Dr. Sima Samar, the former Minister of Women's Affairs. *Hezb-e-Wahdat* leaders are currently members of the ruling regime and have also re-established themselves in their own region of Central Afghanistan.

## 2.6 Other Ethnic Groups

Other Afghan ethnic groups include the Baluch who live in the South-West and number 300,000 (Jawad, 1992) and are involved largely in agriculture, animal husbandry as well as legal and illegal trade. Baluch, like the Pashtuns, have at times pursued a political project of a separate state as they are spread between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. This has so far failed and been repressed by the concerned regimes.

Nuristanis who live east of Kabul are amongst the last to have converted to Islam in Afghanistan. Nuristanis are believed to be descendants of Alexander of Macedonia<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> This Party has more than one faction now. Originally, it was formed from the unification of nine Afghan Shiite groups in 1990 with the support of Iran.

to have resisted conversion to Islam for a long time. They practiced a local version of Hinduism (from the website of Richard F. Strand). They number around 100,000 (Jawad, 1992). They too are involved in animal husbandry. Some Nuristani intellectuals have been involved in different social and political projects in Afghanistan.

Other ethnic groups include the Aimaq who are a mixture of Persians and Turks (Jawad, 1992) and are well known for their carpets. The Sheikhanzai, who are also tribal, have been studied by Tavakolian (1987) and are known as fiercely independent. The Qizilbash are another ethnic and tribal-based group in Afghanistan who are predominantly Shiite.

## 2.7 Religion

Islam has been both a binding as well as divisive force in Afghanistan. On the one hand, it has helped forge a collective national identity in a very heterogeneous situation. On the other, it has been interpreted and used in many different, often reactionary, gendered and ethnicized ways and resulted in differences and tensions. As already mentioned, there are Sunni and Shiite Moslems in Afghanistan, each with their own sub-categories (Nasr, 2002). The initial point of departure between Sunnis and Shiites is over the succession to the Prophet Mohammad.

Most Afghan Sunnis are *Hanafis* (one of four major Sunni schools of thought). Saudi Arabian ultra-conservative *Wahabi* Sunni influence increased in Afghanistan during the anti-Soviet wars and the growing presence of Arab *mujahidin* in the country. Osama bin Laden, the leader of *Al Qaeda*, is one such example.

Halliday (1978) estimates that 20% of Afghans are Shiite. Shiites have often been threatened and/or discriminated by the ruling Sunnis. Most Afghan Shiites are twelve immites and a minority seven immites/Ismaelis. Imam is the title given by Shiites to their religious-political leaders who are descendants of Ali and Fatema (the Prophet's

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<sup>5</sup> Like the Kalash of Northern Pakistan.

son-in-law and daughter). Ali was the fourth Caliph of Moslems, according to Sunnis, and the first Imam of Shiites. Ismaelis believe in only seven such Imams and currently follow Prince Karim Aga Khan IV, who is based in Geneva. Ismaelis (like all Shiites) have been discriminated in various parts of the country. However, in Baghlan and upper North-Eastern regions of Afghanistan, their leaders have exerted considerable local influence.

*Sufi* (mystical) orders have also been important in Afghanistan. As Sufi leaders, Mojadadi and Gilani assumed relatively moderate anti-Soviet positions after 1978 and continue to be involved in politics. Gilani's daughter and daughter-in-law have also been active including on women's rights issues.<sup>6</sup> Another group, the *Seyeds*, claim direct descent from the Prophet Mohammad and have enjoyed respect amongst Moslems. It is possible, for example, to be Moslem, Shiite, Sufi and Seyed at the same time.

In addition, there are Afghan Hindus and Sikhs who migrated many generations ago from the sub-continent and were largely traders. Many returned to India in the course of the recent wars. Under the Taliban, they too were discriminated against and at some point, were ordered to wear a star for identification. This was a reminder of Nazi anti-Semitic crimes in World War II. Afghanistan had a small Jewish population who originated from Bokhara, in present day Uzbekistan. A neglected synagogue with only one caretaker continued to exist under Taliban in Kabul.

An unknown number of Afghans have converted from Islam to Bahatism as well as Christianity. The latter has happened in the past years and largely through the efforts of Christian missionaries who came with NGOs.

## 2.8 Language

Though the Afghan rulers have often been Pashtu, Farsi or Dari has been the *lingua franca* of Afghanistan for most of its contemporary history. Both have been the official languages of the country under various regimes, with the exception of the Taliban. Taliban were not the first Pashtuns to follow a Pashtu-linguistic policy in Afghanistan but probably the harshest of them all. Dari has usually been the language of the state and education (though Pashtu was also taught at all schools).

This particular status of Farsi/Dari is due to 'the cultural heritage' of Persian in the region which has been strong and influential (Naby, 1988:795). Therefore, most Pashtuns (and Uzbeks), especially educated Pashtuns (and Uzbeks), learned Farsi, though this was not always reversed. Tapper (1983) has referred to how Durrani Pashtun women learned Farsi in order to mix with other ethnic groups. Besides Pashtu and Farsi, Afghans speak Turkish, Uzbek, Turkmen, Kirghiz, Baluchi and Pashaie. Language is considered to be amongst the most contentious dividing factors in Afghanistan's contemporary history and a hindering factor in the central state reaching out to all its citizens. It has also impacted upon education, as will be further highlighted in the empirical chapters of this dissertation.

## 2.9 Tribes, Urban/Rural Divide and Parochialism

Tribal *khans* (leaders) and feudal landlords have been influential in Afghan history (Emadi, 1993). Their powerful position allowed them to maintain patron-client relationships which is another aspect of certain Afghan communities. The *khans* were often supported by the *mullahs* (clergymen). The affiliation of some *khans* to various internal and sometimes external centers of power - including the British and now the USA - has played an important role in Afghan history. There have been some progressive *khans* who have supported social reforms.

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<sup>6</sup> Fatima Gilani, the daughter of Pir Gilani, the *Sufi* leader, was a representative of the *Mujahidin* in London during part of the anti-Communist struggle. She has now returned to Afghanistan. Fatana Gilani, his

Tribal affiliations have been cited as one of the reasons behind the failure of a centralized and coherent, strong state in Afghanistan (Emadi, 1993). According to Tapper (1980) and Shalinsky (1986), while no doubt largely subservient to men (or certain men), nevertheless, many tribal women do in fact possess some level of power and are seen as central to the 'honour' of the family, tribe and community.

The rural/urban divide is also important in Afghanistan with most of the educated being urban based, while up to 85% of Afghans live in rural areas and are involved in agriculture, animal husbandry, handicrafts and small trade (Centlivres, 1988). Kabul, the capital, has in particular been the center of education and 'modernization'. It is partially for this reason that it was targeted by the Taliban. They saw it as the center of corruption.

The development path followed by Afghanistan produced a schizophrenic society; an urban elite whose aspiration of a strong, unified state was at odds with the tribal and ethnic loyalties of the predominantly rural population (Goodhand, 1994:27).

The above divide is a challenge that continues to face Afghanistan though a greater number of the rural population has been now exposed to urban lives through displacement. At the same time, many educated urban Afghans have left and cities have become more and more like rural areas in the course of the ravaging war. A great number of educated Afghans were killed as a result of the war or political assassination over the years. This has created a vacuum in terms of leadership, which the current regime and the international community is trying to overcome with the diaspora and younger educated Afghans.

Some cities like Jalalabad, Herat and Mazar Sharif have grown enormously with the influx of desperate rural residents. Kabul, in particular, witnessed enormous displacement during 1992-94 when the city was fiercely shelled. During the war, some urban educated families – including educated women - took refuge in villages thus

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daughter-in-law, established the Afghan Women's Council in Peshawar, Pakistan, over ten years.

impacting village life. The international aid community attempted to reach rural Afghans and many programmes were implemented in at least some rural areas. Obviously, not all urbanites or rural inhabitants share a uniform worldview and there are many other dividing or unifying factors.

### **2.10 Shifting Identities and Alliances**

All the above groups are constantly changing in their political and socio-economic situation and in relation to one another. Inter and intra-ethnic group alliances have shifted and changed over time. Some have been closer to the ruling elite than others and this too has changed. Also, there has been some level of inter-marriage between these groups as will be shown in the empirical chapters. This has risen and dropped depending on the political situation. Depending on where families have lived, they might say they are Pashtun, for example, but speak Farsi at home or the other way around. Education, ideology, class and gender are all factors in the internal power relations involved in all these constructions.

In addition, there are many shared Islamic and national ceremonies which have been practiced by Afghans and helped bring them together as a nation. Some of these were disrupted by the war and/or ideo-political policies such as the Taliban's ban on celebrating the Afghan/Iranian/Tajik New Year or *Nowrouz* on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March each year. *Nowrouz* is a pre-Islamic celebration of the equinox.

In fact, political turmoil, war and displacement have dramatically affected all these collective identities, changing and shifting them in a multitude of ways. Some of these processes have been discussed in Chapter Six. Women in particular have been affected by many of these changes and in the process, contributed to some further changes themselves.

### **3. Afghanistan's Political History**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

Few countries have experienced as tumultuous a history as Afghanistan, a landlocked country bordering Central Asia, the sub-continent and Iran. The largely destroyed city of Balkh is by some accounts the oldest urban city known to historians (June, 2003, <http://www.geocities.com>). Afghanistan's ancient history includes being part of the Persian Empire (and Zoroastrian), conquered by Alexander of Macedonia in BC 329, overrun by the Kushans of Central Asia, a center of Buddhism, converting to Islam in AD 962 during the reign of the Turkic Ghaznavids, experiencing the attacks of the Moghuls in AD 1219, a strategic point on the Silk Route (introduced best to the West in the writings of Marco Polo in 1283) and in some parts of the country, being ruled by later Persian kings and Indian Moghul rulers until the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Dupree, 1973).

#### **3.2 Monarchy**

In 1747 Ahmad Khan Abadali - a Pashtun tribal leader from Southern Afghanistan - established the Durrani tribal confederacy and extended Pashtun rule over parts of Persia, India and Central Asia. This confederacy lasted till 1880 when Afghanistan became a Pashtun monarchial nation-state. It was during this period (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century) that the British colonialists were most active in Afghanistan – their gateway to India – in what is also known as the Great Game (Hopkirk, 1990). They supported the Afghan central state as a buffer between them, India and their archrivals (including France and Russia) (Olesen, 1995:22).

British intervention led to three Anglo-Afghan<sup>7</sup> wars which eventually resulted in indirect rather than direct British influence in the country. Afghan resistance to the

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<sup>7</sup> The first war was in 1839-42, the second in 1878-80 and the third in 1919 with Afghans obtaining a negotiated agreement to control their foreign affairs. This was seen as a big victory almost equivalent to gaining independence.



British continues to be a source of pride for Afghans<sup>8</sup>. These wars have also inspired the 'orientalized' images in the work of colonial writers such as Rudyard Kipling.<sup>9</sup> The fact that Afghanistan was never an actual colony of the British differentiates its history from that of India in various ways including the development of its bureaucracy, laws and relationship to the English language.

The Anglo-Afghan wars weakened the vulnerable economic base of the country and strengthened the social position of the tribal chiefs and religious leaders, further diminishing the influence of a weak central state (Olesen, 1995:28).

King Amir Abdul Rahman (1880-1901) is credited for the start of Afghanistan's modern era. It was during his reign that the borders of Afghanistan were drawn by the British and Russian colonialists across the Durand Line which divided the country from India initially and now from Pakistan. He established the first national army, organized tax collection and other administrative services. He also passed a unified Islamic (Sunni) legal system for the country, simultaneously bringing clergy/other tribal leaders under his control. He violently suppressed the people of Nuristan and Hazarajat into submission (Mousavi, 1998).

The next King, Habibullah (1901-1919), was witness to a growing urban elite influenced by new ideas from neighbouring countries. He was able to maintain a balanced relationship with tribal and religious leaders. He is also known as the father of modern education (Olesen, 1995:98). The first major Afghan newspaper came out during his reign (Poullada, 1973:9).

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<sup>8</sup> There are many stories about the courage of Afghan soldiers and civilians including a Pashtun woman, Malalai, who is still hailed as a hero. She has been eternalized by the following Pashtun couplet, 'My beloved, if you do not fall a martyr in battle in Maiwand, By God, someone must be saving you for a life of shame.' (Rubin, 1995:25) She ruptures, albeit briefly, some of the gender stereotypes of Afghanistan. Many schools are named after her. I visited the spot where she is supposed to have died in Kandahar.

<sup>9</sup> Kipling has said 'When you're wounded an' left on Afghanistan's plains, An' the women come out to cut up your remains, Just roll to your rifle an' blow out your brains, An' go to your Gad like a soldier' (Gupta, 1986:7).

The Afghan Constitutional Movement under the leadership of the famous Afghan reformer - Mahmoud Tarzi (a Pashtun) – began during this period. He was an anti-colonial, pan-Islamic, modernist reformer, influenced by other Moslem reformers including Jamal-al-Din Afghani in Iran and Rida in Egypt. He was part of the Young Afghan Movement. His newspaper – *Siraj al Akhbar* – or Torch of News disseminated ‘modern’ views including on women’s status and in general, he supported more rights for women (Olesen, 1995, Dupree, 1984:307). Tarzi as Amannullah’s Foreign Minister signed the Declaration of Independence with the British (Sadat, 2002, p.c.).

King Amanullah (1919-1929) is the keenest of modernizers amongst Afghan kings. He strengthened the role of the state including through supporting the ratification of Afghanistan’s first Constitution in 1921. He appointed a cabinet and High Assembly and State Council (like a Parliament). The King was in principle for the first time subject to the law (Olesen, 1995:125-6). He signed many friendship treaties with other countries with which he maintained good relationships including the USSR (Gupta, 1986:7). He has been compared to Ataturk in Turkey and Reza Shah in Iran.

Amanullah advanced his claims to political authority on the basis of his defense of Islam and Muslim territory; however, he was at the same time determined to create a secular and modern nation-state, patterned after European colonial powers...he tried to imitate the West indiscriminately and rapidly (Shahrani,1984:32).

His reforms were resisted by various groups in society including tribal and religious leaders who claimed he was pro-Western and English. According to Poullada (1973), this was not the case at all and in fact the British wanted to weaken and overthrow him because he was independent and progressive. He was eventually overthrown in 1929 by the controversial *Bacheh Saqao* (the water-carrier’s son), a Tajik also known as Habibullah Khan, who ruled for nine months and was later executed. Olesen (1995) believes that Saqao’s uprising is a reflection of peasant dissatisfaction and inter-ethnic power struggles. Once in power, he reversed many of Amanullah’s policies. Amanullah lived in exile in Italy and died in Switzerland (email exchange with M.H. Sadat). Tarzi lived and died in exile in Turkey.

Nader Shah took over in 1929 and pursued a much slower pace of change, trying to please the clergy, tribal leaders and the British. He changed the Constitution, giving himself greater powers. It was during his reign that the Afghan National Bank was established (Emadi, 1993:7). Nader was murdered by a pro-Amanullah student called Abdul Khaliq in 1934.

Zahir Shah (1933-1973) was the last king of Afghanistan and returned to Afghanistan as 'father of the nation' after the fall of the Taliban. His reign was witness to further modernization including on gender issues as well as the pursual of various development plans. By 1967, there were 48 private industries in Afghanistan (Emadi, 1993:7-8) in line with the growth of private and state-owned industries/capitalism. He tried to maintain balanced and good relationships with the US as well as the USSR (during different periods) (Gupta,1986:8) and foreign consultants began coming to Afghanistan.

Throughout this period, most Afghans remained very poor and deprived of many basic services, and the country overall was underdeveloped in terms of its economy, infrastructure and governance system. While, on the one hand, Western-style modernization and reform was taking place, on the other, ethnic, class, gender and other differences continued to permeate society.

Zahir Shah initially supported a more liberal Parliament and the participation of some leftist politicians. This did not last long, however, and leftist leaders were arrested. Their influence was growing amongst urban educated groups including professors, students, the army and bureaucracy. At the same time, various new religio-political groups were also growing in strength including in universities. Both political camps reflected dissatisfaction and frustration with social inequalities, slow pace of change as well as foreign influence. For the leftists, it was Western influence while for the Moslems, it was Western and Soviet influence. The severe drought and famine of 1971-72 added to the crisis and popular dissatisfaction with the prevalent corruption in the regime (Lindisfarne, 2002:3).

Rabbani, Afghanistan's President in the early 1990s under the *Mujahidin*, was a University Professor and one of the first leaders of the new Islamic opposition (later of *Jamiat-e-Islami*). Hekmatyar, another Islamic leader (later of *Hezb-e-Islami* and at some point, Prime Minister of Afghanistan) was a university student in Kabul<sup>10</sup>, as was Ahmad Shah Masoud (Defence Minister, and later a leader of the Northern Alliance). These individuals were critical of the monarchy, the leftists as well as traditional and complacent religious leaders.

These two groups shared not only an aversion towards the Establishment but also a mutual antagonism. However, they were the same social psychological factors which provided the breeding ground...Many young people may have been attracted at different times to both these movements (Olesen,1995:219).

### 3.3 Republican and Communist Period

In 1973, Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud, the cousin of Zahir Shah took over in a coup and became President – ending the monarchical period. He continued, more or less, the same gradual process of modernization swaying between Western and Soviet alliances. The King was in Europe when the coup occurred and stayed in Italy, while his family was allowed to leave Afghanistan unharmed.<sup>11</sup>

Daoud's gradual distancing from his one-time Leftist allies and the arrest of their leaders, eventually resulted in a coup - or the *Saur* Revolution - by the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) in April 1978. Daoud and many of his family members were killed.

The first Communist President was Nur Mohammad Taraki. Through another coup, within about a year, Hafizullah Amin – another Communist leader - gained power. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December,1979, Amin was killed by the Soviets on the night of their military

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<sup>10</sup> Hekmatyar is now accused of being close to Taliban and Al Qaeda and behind some of the current violence in Afghanistan. Rabbani continues to be unofficially influential.

<sup>11</sup> This information has kindly been provided by Mr. Mokhtarzada (Mokhtarzada, 2003, p.c.).

entry into Afghanistan. He was replaced by Babrak Karmal and Dr. Najibollah who was the last Afghan Communist leader, killed by the Taliban in 1997.

Out of the contradictions of the modernization process developed the socialist and Islamicist movements; both were based on the “myth of revolution” and it was the clash between these two ideologies which became the catalyst for the Afghan conflict (Goodhand,1994:27).

Afghanistan, the region and world, entered a new phase with the Communist take over of 1978 and their pursuit of a socialist ideology. Their rise to power and the entry of Soviet armed forces in their support in 1979 precipitated a long civil war with international ramifications which lasted till 1992 and resulted in the death and displacement of millions of Afghans. Jawad as the following to say about the PDPA:

...all their reforms were implemented without a strong economic base and support to the recipients and lacked the necessary infrastructure...As had happened in previous cases, centralized power, imposed upon tribal societies, failed...These events took place against a backdrop of Cold War superpower rivalry, in which the USSR...saw a threat...to its sphere of influence in Asia, and sought to counter this...by militarily invading Afghanistan (Jawad, 1992:18).

Most of the young men and women who joined the Communist parties were educated, middle-class, urban-based and frustrated by the slow pace of the changes as well as the corruption of the elite. Some had studied in the USSR. Though espousing the interests of the downtrodden (including the industrial working class), they themselves represented a minority group in society. According to Centlivres-Demont (1994:351), there were only 40,000 industrial workers in Afghanistan when the coup or revolution occurred, out of which less than 3,000 were women.

The PDPA was initially known as the *Khalq* (masses) when established in 1965. Within a couple of years, it had divided into another group called *Parcham* (flag). *Parcham* – including its leader Karmal - represented the non-Pashtuns and were less radical in their approach (Jawad, 1992:16). The two factions united in 1977.<sup>12</sup> *Setam-e- Melli* and *Shohleh-e-Javid* were two Maoist parties and active in those years. Both *Parcham* and

*Khalq* were initially supported by the USSR. A Friendship Treaty was signed with the USSR in 1978 and was used to justify their military intervention as resistance to PDPA grew. There were over 50,000 Soviet troops within a year after the coup (Hiro,1988:256).

Most of the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan were Central Asians. The USSR forces stayed in Afghanistan for nine years. Their presence itself indicated the lack of success by the PDPA in gaining widespread support. It was also a blow to many Afghan's sense of pride and nationalism.

Some of the controversial policies of the new leaders came out as Decrees. Decree No.8 addressed land reform, while Decree No. 7 highlighted equal rights for women and Decree No.6 abolished rural debts. The PDPA's abrupt enforcement of top-to-bottom and coercive policies was not appreciated by many Afghans. Thus, dissatisfaction gradually gained momentum, as did the suppressive arm of the new regime. This meant an increasing number of mass arrests, disappearances and executions, including of women (Dupree, 1992:1, Lessing, 1987:137). With the support of Soviet advisors, the *Khalqi* authorities arrested, tortured and killed thousands and thousands of Afghans and bombed many locations killing civilians (Rubin, 2003).

The Islamic groups were able to take charge of this oppositional wave. Their hatred of Communism stemmed partially from the predicament of the Central Asia Moslem fighters or *basmachi* (often from the same ethnic groups as the Afghans) who were put down by the Soviets earlier in the century. The Islamic forces known as *Mujahidin* or holy fighters represented numerous groups – many divided along ethnic, parochial, religious, ideological and other lines – impacting seriously upon the political process in Afghanistan. By 1979, there were six Sunni Islamic groups based in Peshawar, seven Shiite groups in Quetta and others in Iran.

With the support of the USA and other foreign countries (European countries, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Iran), the *Mujahidin* were able to assume the upper hand over other

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<sup>12</sup> This information kindly provided by Mr. Mokhtarzada (Mokhtarzada, 2003, p.c.).

more moderate or secular opposition forces. These were silenced in various ways. Borhanuddin Majrooh, a progressive Afghan intellectual, for example, was assassinated in Pakistan in 1988.

In 1978, US President Carter announced his commitment to fighting the Soviet advance in Afghanistan in the Carter Doctrine (Fielden and Goodhand, 2000). It was at this period that the struggle came to be known as a *Jihad* (holy war)<sup>13</sup> and the *mujahidin* (Islamic fighters) were supported with arms, money and much more. Political groups are also known as *tanzims* by Afghans. Their success was linked to the deep faith of many Afghans in Islam (and their mistrust of all that is presented as un-Islamic), strong religious networks throughout the country, as well as outside support.

The fact that an Islamic Revolution had occurred in neighbouring Iran (1979) also helped the cause of the *Mujahidin*. Yet, in other ways, it facilitated the division amongst various Afghan Moslem groups as a result of Iranian support to Shiite parties. The rule of General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan with his Islamization policies further bolstered the *Mujahidin*, as did the support of the US. The US asked Zia to permit the *Mujahidin* in establishing bases in Pakistan. Pakistan's inter-service intelligence (ISI) has played a significant role in Afghan politics.

Unfortunately, many moderate and progressive Afghans were forced to leave the country and many went to the West. The West supported their refugee claims, while closer to Afghanistan, it supported their rivals, the *Mujahidin* and their foreign allies. In fact, the *mujahidin* were hailed as heroes by many Westerners. Sandy Gall, a famous UK journalist, and Doris Lessing (1987) were amongst the pro-*mujahidin* Western intellectuals. Tragically for Afghans, the war in Afghanistan was probably the longest surrogate war of the West against the USSR. In the process, the *Mujahidin* also committed mass human rights violations.

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<sup>13</sup> In Islam, holy war is the lesser *jihad*. The bigger *jihad* is the personal struggle for goodness, piety and social justice (Rashid, 2000).

These political upheavals swayed the country towards new constructions of nationalism, who is a 'real' Afghan and who is a 'traitor' – all these were gendered, as well as ethnicized and generally became more rigid, conservative and essentialized. The war also gradually resulted in a greater vacuum between the central state and its people, impacting or rather further weakening concepts of citizenship. The experiences of displacement also changed Afghans and their relationship to their own country, as well as to the outside world. This is in addition to the destruction of much of the country, its infrastructure, agriculture, irrigation, animal-husbandry, industries, roads, bridges, handicrafts, trade and so much more (including the serious issue of over ten million landmines). The militarization of society and the widespread distribution of arms remain amongst Afghanistan's major problems. It is estimated that over 1.5 million Afghans have died as a result of years of conflict (Ruiz, 2002:8). The tragedy has enormous short, medium and long term consequences.

As a result of the weakening of government services, the *mujahidin* take-over of many rural parts of Afghanistan, as well as funding interests of various countries, many more international and national NGOs began to work in Afghanistan. Goodhand (1994) has provided a good critique of these NGOs. He refers to their elitism, the links many established with commanders, their ethnic/tribal and/or parochial preferences as well as being donor-driven. This is not to deny, however, that some NGOs and/or projects of NGOs have been very important and effective in serving many underprivileged Afghans in the course of the conflict.

### **3.4 The Mujahidin Era**

As a result of the *Mujahidin* resistance as well as changes in the Soviet Union, including *glasnost*, Soviet forces left Afghanistan under great international pressure in 1989. The process had begun in 1986 when Soviet President Gorbachev called the Afghan war 'a bleeding wound' and ordered the withdrawal of officers and initiated steps to end the war. President Karmal fled to the USSR around the same time. He was replaced by Dr. Najibullah (former head of the Afghan secret police or *KHAD*) who attempted to find a



middle-way with his *Watan* Party but it was too little, too late. In 1992, he handed over power to the *mujahidin* leaders in a UN brokered peace agreements (the Geneva Accords of 1988, Peshawar Accords of 1992 and the Islamabad Agreement of 1993).<sup>14</sup>

Mojadadi (a Sufi and Pashtun leader) became the first head of the Interim Government. He was followed after a few months by Rabbani (a Tajik), as President. Rabbani held on to this position beyond the UN based agreement and kept the title until the appointment of Karzai in 2002.

In 1992, Afghans were led to believe that the war was finally ending in their homeland and over a million refugees returned. Unfortunately, rivalry between the various *Mujahidin* leaders resulted in new wars and further devastation<sup>15</sup>. The country was divided amongst various *mujahidin* commanders who have also been called warlords. This process has been referred to as the Lebanonization of Afghanistan (Roy, 1990). Foreign governments continued to arm and support one or the other faction while the national army fell apart (Mohammad, 2002) and Afghanistan was being ravaged by a destroyed economy and militarized culture (also known as the *kalashnikov* culture).

### 3.5 The Taliban Era

Afghans no longer had a common 'outside' enemy and were being dissipated by themselves. This situation continued until 1994/7 when Taliban (literally, religious students) took advantage of the legitimacy, governance and military vacuum<sup>16</sup> of the country and consolidated its position in most of Afghanistan. Taliban emerged in 1994 in the South, close to Kandahar where their leader, Mullah Omar, was originally from and

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<sup>14</sup> Jawad (1992) like many others has blamed the international community and the UN for a quickly put together peace agreement which was unable to hold and a regime which did not represent the interests of various important Afghan groups including the minorities.

<sup>15</sup> In particular, rivalry between the Pashtun Hekmatyar and the Tajik Rabbani/Masoud was fierce. Hekmatyar has been held responsible for much of the destruction of Kabul. Fighting between the Shiite Party (*Hezb-e-Wahdat*) and that of Hekmatyar also had tragic consequences including ethnic rape.

<sup>16</sup> Many organizations including Amnesty (1996) blamed part of the problem on the West which did not firmly support the peace process and rehabilitation of Afghanistan. Yet, it was these same countries who had played such an important role in the equipping of the armed groups. As some Afghans have told me, 'we were good for the West as long as we died to destroy their enemy and then they forgot all about us'.

expanded in all directions. Mullah Omar was declared leader (or *Amir-al-Muminin*, leader of the believers) of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (instead of the Islamic State of Afghanistan) in 1995. Initially, some Afghans were hopeful that perhaps Taliban would bring peace and later hand over power to more moderate forces (Rashid,2000).

In 1995, Taliban captured Herat, to be followed by Jalalabad and Kabul, in 1996. In Kabul, they ruthlessly executed Dr. Najibullah and his brother. Dr. Najibullah had been living in the UN compound where his safety had been guaranteed by the *mujahidin*. The Taliban captured Mazar Sharif in 1998 and killed eleven Iranian diplomats and nationals in the city. In August 1998, a UN security adviser who broke the curfew was killed in Kabul by Taliban forces. This incident happened one day after US missiles hit Khost aiming to destroy 'terrorist' camps.

Taliban forces (and their Arab and Pakistani allies) were never able to take over all the country, mainly due to the resistance of the forces of Masoud in Panjshir valley<sup>17</sup> which is strategically difficult to penetrate and those of the *Hezb-e-Wahdat* (the main party of the Hazaras) in Bamiyan, Samangan and Ghor. Masoud, in particular, became a hero in the eyes of many Afghans for his resistance during the Communist and Taliban periods of rule. The various anti-Taliban forces (known as the Northern Alliance) were also supported by foreign countries including Iran, Uzbekistan and Russia. Masoud was quite popular in France as well. After September 11, 2001, the Northern Alliance was also supported by the USA, in their efforts to overthrow the Taliban and destroy *Al Qaeda*.

The policies of the Pashtun-based Taliban are now well known throughout much of the world and documented in various books (Maley, 1999, Ahmad Rashid,2000). In 1998, in a matter of a few days, between five to eight thousand peoples were massacred by the Taliban (International Herald Tribune, August 7, 1999) only in Mazar Sharif. Taliban's ideology was largely the outcome of a rural-based and reactionary interpretation of

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<sup>17</sup> Resistance by Masoud and other Northern Alliance forces also existed in Badakshan and a few other locations.

Islam, mixed with the *Pashtunwali*, plus deep hatred of all that was non-Pashtun and, according to them, non-Islamic, as well as Western. The Taliban were also the product of a highly militarized, violent and traumatized sub-culture. They were supported by Pakistan<sup>18</sup> until the events of September 11, 2001. Many Afghans believe that they were initially also supported by the USA (Johnson, 1998).

The Taliban had links with some Arab Islamic fundamentalist groups especially those pursuing *Wahabism*, referred to above. Afghanistan also became a base for many non-Afghan Islamic extremists including Pakistanis, Arabs, Uzbeks and Chechens.

The Taliban benefited from the war economy of illegal goods trade, with the cooperation of a transport mafia (Rashid, 1998: 76), and drugs (Maley, 1998:2). As other sources of income disappeared due to the long war, opium became even more important for many farmers, as well as the authorities. This is why Afghanistan became the largest producer of opium worldwide during this period. It is believed that the Taliban pocketed most of the approximately US\$80 million annual revenue from heroin (Hazara.net quoting CNN). In 2001, under intense international pressure, the Taliban leadership banned opium production with some success. In 2001, Taliban's destruction of the two 2000 year-old statues of Buddha in Bamiyan, gave rise to some of the strongest international and national condemnation of their regime.

The UN and other international agencies, over the years of conflict, faced many dilemmas working in Afghanistan. One was how far they should go in taking a principled position vis a vis the Taliban? Also, for how long they should continue with their negotiations and compromises? Is there a point at which they should just pack and leave? Would people not suffer more if the UN were to leave? By staying, were they in any way contributing to the prolongation of the war? (Keating, 1998: 136).

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<sup>18</sup> President Musharraf officially made a couple of pro-Taliban statements before September 11, 2001. He said it was in Pakistan's interest to have a Pashtun-based government in Afghanistan.

The UN imposed sanctions on the Taliban in response to their human rights violations in 1999. UN and non-UN peace talks continued all through this period, off and on, with very little progress. Some of the UN senior officials responsible for negotiations with Taliban included Holl, Brahimi and Vendrell. Brahimi, an Algerian, is now heading the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA).

### **3.6 The Post-Taliban Era**

On September 9, 2001, Masoud was killed in Panjshir by Arab assassins in the guise of journalists linked to Al Qaeda and Taliban. Then, the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001 took place and Afghanistan's fate changed. It prompted the US and its allies to mobilize their political and military will to overthrow the Taliban<sup>19</sup> through a war which continues, though with less intensity, upto the present. The US-led war called Operation Enduring Freedom began on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2001. In the process, the US has committed human rights violations, including the killing of civilians 'by mistake' (reflected by the US as collateral damage), as well as inhumane treatment of alleged and real Taliban and Al-Qaeda combatants.

It was with Western support that anti-Taliban forces, especially the Northern Alliance, gained strength and together with the Western forces were able to topple the Taliban regime. Through the UN-supported Bonn Accord (Grandi, 2002:11), a new phase in Afghan history commenced towards the end of 2001. In Bonn, Afghans representing various factions inside and outside the country came together with other stakeholders to discuss post-Taliban Afghanistan. Hamed Karzai came to power on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, 2001, as an outcome of this process.

The participants of the Bonn Agreement have strongly expressed their determination to end the tragic conflict in Afghanistan and to promote national reconciliation, respect for human rights, and lasting peace and stability (Mohammad, 2002:1).

Consequently, since January 2002, a new and overall more moderate regime (the Afghan Transitional Government) has come to power in the country with the expressed intention of bringing peace and democracy. This arrangement was further bolstered in June 2002 through the *Loya Jirga*<sup>20</sup>. The government is not homogenous and nor do all its members maintain similar views on the future of Afghanistan or the status of women.

The International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) have also been set-up and are active, though only in Kabul. The peace is fragile, as is the grip to power of the current leadership. Many old and powerful commanders continue to be in power and the enormous task of peace-building and peace-keeping as well as reconstruction and development has only just begun. Amnesty and other human rights organizations have expressed their serious concern on various human rights violations, including ethnic-based retributions especially in Northern Afghanistan towards Pashtuns, and the continuing security concerns, especially for women.

The degree of devastation and the financial and human resources required to rebuild the country are enormous. Though donors have committed themselves to this endeavor at various important meetings, including the Tokyo international conference in November 2001, many of their promises remain unfulfilled. According to the UN Secretary General's Deputy Special Representative for Reconstruction in Afghanistan, the US \$1.8 billion promised in Tokyo for 2002 falls far short per head of what was promised by the international community in the Balkans, East Timor or Rwanda (IRIN, 20/1/03). This is also in comparison to the US\$ 1.5 to 2 billion which has been spent every month in Afghanistan by the US military (CNN website, 2 September 2002). Based on the Tokyo Conference, the US agreed to provide US \$296 million in the first year to Afghanistan as reconstruction/humanitarian aid and the European Union, US \$500 million.

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<sup>19</sup> Before September 11, 2001, the Afghan conflict was referred to as the 'orphaned' conflict (Atmar and Goodhand, 2002:6).

<sup>20</sup> About 1,500 representatives who were elected by Afghans in various regions as well as the diaspora sat on this council with the support of the UN and international community. One hundred and sixty seats were reserved for women. Masooda Jalal candidated herself for Presidency. There were quotas for different ethnic groups, nomads, the diaspora, religious scholars and others. The *Loya Jirga* elected Mr. Karzai as President. For a critique of the *Loya Jirga*, please read the article by Adeena Niazi and Omar Zakhivel (NYT, June 22, 2002). They represented Afghan-Canadians.

The international community will need to provide considerable and long-term support to an Afghan-led peace process for the country to once again assume some sense of stability and justice. Political and social reconciliation amongst various Afghan groups will be a very arduous process, especially in view of continued regional and international interference in support of one or another armed and/or political group. One of the issues currently debated in Afghanistan is having a strong central government or greater regional autonomy. This too is a very complex discussion with many potential political and ethnic repercussions.

No doubt, many Afghans and friends of Afghans are hopeful and determined to make the best of these changes.

A viable central state, supported materially and politically by the international community, can help keep outsiders at bay...If civil strife is not ended judiciously under neutral international auspices – and if recovery is not organized with similar impartial support – then Afghanistan will be the puppet of foreign powers or a vulnerable, war-divided territory ripe for illicit pickings. Either consequence would be a recipe for inevitable regional conflict...If Afghanistan is to survive its latest fate and if central, west and south Asia are to survive with it, then the international community needs to ensure that Afghans have the right and opportunity to make their deserts bloom (Newberg, 2002:39)

#### **4. Afghan Women and Education**

##### **4.1 Introduction**

There is great diversity amongst Afghan women based on class, location, education, ideology, religion, language, ethnicity, marital status, age and other factors and consequently, one can not talk about Afghan women as though they are homogenous. Earlier literature on Afghan women in Western languages (mostly in English) includes the work of Nancy Tapper (1991,1988,1977), Nancy Dupree (many different articles over twenty years), Audrey Shalinsky (1994,1986,1984), Centlivres (1988), Tavakolian (1987), Inger Boesen (1983), Erika Knabe (1977), Dellayoe (1980), Lajoinie (1980),

Christensen (1990), Doubleday (1988), Wali (1995), Moghadam (1994), Emadi (1993) and later, Ellis (2000) and Pont (2001). There are many UN and NGO as well as Amnesty Reports on Afghan women.

Post September 11, 2001 books include those by Sally Armstrong (2002), Cheryl Benard (2002), as well as Latifa and Zoya's stories (2002), Women for Afghan Women (Mehta, 2002) and articles by academics (Lindisfarne, 2002). While not wanting to put all that has been written about Afghan women recently into one basket, overall, many project the sense of Afghan women being suddenly 'discovered' or focus on the Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association or RAWA (which represents a small group of Afghan women). Quite a few provide a stereotypical representation of Afghan women as only victims, and offer westo-centric solutions to their problems. Notable is the repeated use of the word 'veiled' in the titles.

Afghan women have suffered from male-dominance (as in other societies). Honour killing (or killing in the name of honour) has existed in Afghanistan for many years (Emadi, 1993:16), as has forced and early marriage, polygamy, lack of access to property, *mahr* or brideprice, *badal* or using women to end family feuds. (Emadi, 1993:16-21). They have been the custodians of 'honour' and 'authenticity' – only too often at the cost of their own human rights and well being. War exacerbated the situation. 'Veiling and other practices associated with Islamic family values became a way of creating an oppositional Muslim identity and supporting the war. Curtailing women's freedoms and their right to...work was a way of masculinizing and militarizing power generally' (Lindisfarne, 2002:3).

Inspite of patriarchy, some Afghan women – mostly elite – are featured in certain historical narratives. Rabia Balkhi, the princess-poet of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and Malalai who contributed to her people's struggles against the British colonialists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century are amongst Afghanistan's most famous women (Dupree, 1988). According to Dupree in her presentation in Mazar on Afghan women (CCA,1994), other earlier Afghan women that are famous include Razieh Soltan who ruled over India in the 8<sup>th</sup> century,

Mahasty who was jailed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century for her outspoken views and Queen Gohar Shad who ruled over Herat (15<sup>th</sup> century) and is known to have been a very strong and cultured woman. Bibi Zainab is also well known in Afghanistan for her powerful role in the affairs of the royal court in the 18<sup>th</sup> century including her support to educating the *harem* women. The International Human Rights Law Group's advocacy brochure (2001) also refers to Queen Bobo Jan who trained women of her court in military skills.

Prior to the establishment of schools, a number of largely more privileged Afghan women were educated in Koranic studies and poetry. Initially Islamic studies were more diverse and rich. Over time, they became static and sterile, in the hands of a rigid religious hierarchy afraid of undermining its own power base (Majrooh, 1986). This also helps explain the resistance of traditional religious leaders to formal education, especially for girls.

Women have had their own traditional gatherings in Afghanistan, though these change and evolve and vary from one region to another, as well as amongst different social classes. Nevertheless, New Year gatherings, marriage-related events, picnics (*mileh*) as well as religious occasions and life-cycle events are popular amongst most Afghan women in Afghanistan<sup>21</sup> and in Pakistan.

Poetry is important for many Afghans, including women. Pashtun women's love for poetry is known as *landay*, while Tajik women have had their *ghezals* and Hazara women their *Makta* (Mousavi, 1998:23). Uzbek women recite *sowzawans*. Lullabies are also popular with all ethnic groups.

## 4.2 Monarchial Period

As regards the policies of the state on women's issues, amongst the first references is to Abdul Rahman (1880-1901) who outlawed child and forced marriage (but who permitted

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<sup>21</sup> Most of these events were banned under the Taliban.



the sexual abuse of Hazara girls and women by his forces). Abdul Rahman supported only elite male and religious education (Olesen, 1995:77) and tried to bring it under state control.

During the time of his successor, King Habibullah (1901-1919), the Constitutional Movement took shape, calling for social reforms including on the status of women. Tarzi, who was mentioned earlier, was the foremost reformer and champion of women's rights during this period. According to Olesen (1995:118), he wanted the state and society 'to recognize their abilities, and to acknowledge their right to education and monogamous marriage' and did this also through his newspaper. For Afghanistan to progress, Tarzi like many others believed that its men and women had to change (Pourzand, 1999).

King Habibullah is known as the father of modern education. He encouraged the first secular and western-inspired schools for boys, as well as the first government education department. In 1904, the first secondary school for boys was opened. He argued that such education was consistent with Islam (Olesen, 1995:98). It was also during this time that an admiration for Western values, modernization, science and technology was beginning to develop in Afghanistan (as in its neighbouring countries). Education was critical to achieving what was seen as 'progress' and 'advancement' in these and related fields.

Tarzi's daughter married Amanullah who became King, and he was thus better able to encourage the open-minded King in his policies for women's advancement. His wife, Queen Soraya, was the first Afghan woman to be seen in public unveiled – to the shock of many. This first happened at the *Loya Jirga* of 1928. She also often spoke in public in support of women's rights. His sister, Qubra Jan, established the first Association for Women (*Anjoman-e-Hemayat-- az- Neswan*) in the 1920s (Poullada, 1973:73).

Queen Soraya founded the first women's magazine (*Irshad-e- Neswan*) which was edited by her mother, Rasmiyah Tarzi (Emadi, 1993:38). The King approved a law

allowing women to marry their men of choice as well as reducing dowries and the bride price. Overall, he wanted to grant citizenship rights to Afghans which was integrally linked to 'emancipating women to become equal citizens' (Olesen, 1995:119). This was needed for ALL Afghans to build their country in line with new ideas. Women were granted equal rights under the Constitution of 1923 and allowed to vote for the first time in 1919.

Nevertheless, many of these changes did not spread far beyond elite women though they gradually did have an impact on some sectors of society. It was during Amanullah's reign that the first secular school for girls (*Esmat* or Purity) was established in Kabul (1921), to be followed by others. A new secular curriculum was written by Indian/British educators in 1920 and later the French in 1923 (Poullada, 1973:72) and primary education was made compulsory and free. Afghan girls were sent abroad, to Turkey, for the first time ever in the late 1920s. The involvement of foreigners in girls' education and its expansion was to be used by his opposition later in his reign, as was his overall policy on women's status in society.

Saqao, the next ruler, opposed female education in his short reign. Nadir Shah, however, tried to resume some of Amanullah's policies but with greater restraint, fearing clerical and tribal opposition. For example, it took him a couple of years before he re-opened *Esmat* (the girls' school), this time as a nursing school. Also, in the new Constitution of 1931, marriage between Moslem women and non-Moslem men was prohibited (Emadi, 1993:44).

The last King of Afghanistan (Zahir) who ruled till 1973 supported female education though the overall literacy rate for women never surpassed 4%. This is less than the same rate at the time in a number of countries in the region. More girls' schools were established in Kabul, other cities and some villages. Girls had access to higher education for the first time, beginning with Kabul University in 1948. The government advanced secular concepts in its nation-state building efforts, including through education. A greater number of girls were being educated, also at university levels and some were

being sent abroad for higher education. Many of these were from more affluent Pashtun families.

Women also increased in the labor force and in various ministries, though more in the traditional sectors of health and education. Over 70% of all school teachers were women (International Human Rights Law Group). There were a few women at senior level government positions including Kubra Nurzai as Afghanistan's first female Minister (of Health). The first female senator was also appointed during this period (Centlivres-Demont, 1994:338).

The King's wife, Queen Homeira (who died in 2002 in Rome) established the Afghan Women's Society (Delloye, 1980:18) and an all-women's cinema was operating in Kabul from 1946 to 1958. For the first time, Afghan women attended an Asian women's conference in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1957 and women's voices were heard over the radio. Singers, actors and other artists from neighbouring countries, including Iran and India, began to visit and perform in Afghanistan during this period and vice versa. In 1959, Prime Minister Daoud imposed the 'voluntary' removal of the veil (Centlivres, 1994) without resulting in much immediate and widespread uproar.

In 1958, the Afghan government posted its first female official to the UN in New York. Women's right to vote was reaffirmed in 1964 (Gupta, 1986: 51). According to Emadi (1993), the first rural Afghan women to vote were the followers of Nasir Naderi (the Ismaeli leader) in Baghlan province. He had encouraged them to vote to ensure his own seat in the Parliament.

During this period, the Government also promoted beauty pageants in Kabul through a women's magazine edited by Shukria Rad (Emadi, 1993:11). Privileged urban women became increasingly interested in Western-style fashion and lifestyles. Thus, the gap between them and the majority of poor Afghan women increased. Yet, in comparison to the period to follow, some of the changes/reforms were carried out with more 'discretion'.

### 4.3 Post-Monarchy and PDPA Period

President Daoud (1973-1978) continued to support women's rights and education as he had done earlier as Prime Minister. During his rule, female singers and announcers were hired by Radio Afghanistan (Emadi, 1993:46) and women were encouraged to remove their veils. Also, during his reign, four women were elected to the legislative assembly and another eight were appointed to write the new constitution in the *Loya Jirga* (Emadi, 1993:73). In 1975, he established the Women's Institute within the Ministry of Education with ambitious plans for female literacy campaigns.

The 1977 Constitution – used up to the present by Afghan women's activists for advocacy purposes - gave Afghan women equal rights with men in Article 27. Daoud's plans, however, were not fully realized due to his short presidency. Throughout this period, religious education also continued to exist hand in hand with secular education, including for girls. This was either home-based or in mosques and other centers. His modernization efforts were resisted by tribal and religious leaders. In some cities, demonstrators beat women without veils (Emadi, 1993:47).

The PDPA and their supporters espoused women's equality and one of their leaders was Anahita Ratebzad who led the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW). It had 1000 plus members in 1978 (Dellayoe, 1980:21). Other influential women of this period include Esmat Wardak. She later became Chairperson of the All Women's Council of Afghanistan under Dr. Najibullah. Girls' education as well as female literacy efforts were encouraged. In fact, education was once again declared compulsory. Girls and women, like boys and men, had to change and become 'socialist' Afghans, committed to Soviet-inspired modernity and progress. Ratebzad said 'the duties of women and mothers, who shape the future of the country...is to bring up sons and daughters who are sincere and patriotic'. She also said that all Afghan women should 'take steps to consolidate your revolutionary regime as bravely as the heroic and brave men of this country' (Dupree, 1984:312).

During this period, some Communists from neighbouring countries moved to Afghanistan. For example, a number of pro-Soviet Iranian Communists fled to Afghanistan after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Some were highly educated women who taught in Kabul for a few years before moving on to the West.

The new regime wanted to pursue a rapid education and literacy programme believing that dramatic changes in society were possible in a short period and through coercive measures, underestimating the power of tradition and the resistance to foreign-backed change. The education system also became witness to a Sovietization process such as the teaching of Russian instead of English, as well as enforcing socialist ideology through compulsory classes and lessons (Ekanayake, 2000:27). Many young Afghans, including women, were sent to the Soviet Republics for education and training. Some did so only to benefit from the opportunity to study, rather than as a sign of their commitment to socialism. During this period, arranged marriages were also abolished (Centlivres, 1994).

However, because of the Communist ideology as well as coercive methods and the strength of their opposition, their policies did not succeed and in fact, it was partially as a result of their gender-related policies that they alienated much of Afghan society. It is said that a number of Afghans left their country because of the PDPA's education policies. No doubt, schools were targeted by the opposition in order to further destabilize the situation.

Young girls and women joined the opposition to the PDPA. In fact, one of the first martyrs (*shaheed*) of the struggle is Naheed, a high-school student in Kabul, who was killed during one of the first anti-regime demonstrations.

In Mazar-I-Sharif...women demonstrated in protest after Russian soldiers stomped through the women's sections of the sacred shrine of Hazrat-I-Ali without removing their shoes...Women sent requests to the mujahid for small pistols with silencers which they could carry under their veils...Nuristani women were credited with destroying the first Afghan army patrol...(Dupree, 1984:331-333)

The *Mujahidin*, especially the more conservative or reactionary amongst them, wanted to curtail women's rights and return them to their 'authentic' traditional position in society through various means, including those of terror. At that point in time, the West overlooked their oppressive gender policies in their zeal to support their anti-Soviet activities. Some *mujahidin* were more moderate and had female followers and supported projects for girls and women.

Overall, Afghan women suffered enormously all these years, being witness to the ruin of their homes and communities, loss of their loved ones, forced displacement, poverty and hunger. Their various traditional support networks were also severely weakened. Many women were victims of inter-group rapes as well as abductions, forced marriage, trafficking, prostitution and other humiliations and violations. There are various stories about young Afghan women who committed suicide in order not to be raped by approaching commanders or combatants<sup>22</sup>.

Rape of women by armed guards belonging to the various warring factions appears to be condoned by leaders as a method of intimidating vanquished populations and of rewarding soldiers...Some armed guards target women from ethnic minorities they regard as enemies (Amnesty, 1995:6).

#### **4.4 Mujahidin, Taliban and Post-Taliban Period**

When the *Mujahidin* came to power in 1992, they did not agree on various gender-related issues. However, overall, they initiated a more conservative policy than the King or PDPA. Women were strongly encouraged to wear the veil and dress more 'modestly', and also some offices began a policy of segregation and other restrictive measures.

When Rabbani became President of Afghanistan in 1992, his government also broadcast orders telling women to stay at home and modify their behaviour.

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<sup>22</sup> There are also many stories of sexual abuse against young boys by commanders.

Most women defied the order; they had little choice for in many families women were the only bread-winners (Johnson,1998:47).

Girls and women were frequently harassed by reactionary groups for their attire and other reasons. One of the worst episodes of contemporary Afghan history, the ethnic-based rape of women in Kabul by the various *Mujahidin* factions, occurred during this period. Still, girls could in principle continue going to school and women to work. It was during this period that RAWA expanded its activities, denouncing the *Mujahidin* as reactionary and misogynistic.<sup>23</sup>

During the *Mujahidin* period of struggle against the Soviet forces (late 1980s), the University of Nebraska – funded by USAID - coordinated and published a series of books for Afghan schools (in Pakistan and Afghanistan) with anti-Soviet militarized language and exercises. Some Afghan educators had also been involved (Ekanayake, 2000:50) under the rubric of the Education Council of Afghanistan of the Peshawar-based Interim Government (the seven party alliance)<sup>24</sup>. These were later revised in the mid-1990s (during the regime of President Rabbani), under pressure from NGOs, and with UNHCR support for refugees, and references to killing and shooting were taken out, though the religious/moral content remained.<sup>25</sup>

By ostensibly focusing on protection of women and girls the Taliban took the position that if women's physical attractiveness...could be hidden from the eyes of men, then men would not be tempted. The stated objective was to protect the honor of families...In short, women were reduced to anonymous, faceless being useful only to produce and care for offspring and their immediate households...(Benjamin, 2002:6)

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<sup>23</sup> RAWA began as a Maoist Organization in the 1970s and is probably the oldest Afghan women's organization. Its leader, Mina Kishwar, was assassinated in 1987. Her killers were only recently, in 2002, sentenced to death and executed in Pakistan. RAWA became famous and popular with many Western countries and groups especially after September 11, 2001 when the tide against the Taliban grew. Today, they are less popular amongst Western governments due to their critique of the current Western-supported regime.

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to the information provided by Ellen Kalmthout (Kalmthout, 2003, p.c.) and Julie Dicum (Dicum, 2003, p.c.) who have worked with Afghans in the area of education.

<sup>25</sup> Revised UNO textbooks are being used now in Afghanistan and amongst refugees in Pakistan.

The Taliban from 1997 onwards officially banned girls' education, women's employment (with the exception of the health sector), greatly restricted women's mobility and banned women's association. Their various policies, including on girls' education were condemned by the UN and other organizations. For example, in 1998, the UN Security Council demanded that the Taliban discontinue its policies against women and girls, as did the UN Commission on Human Rights. In 1996, UNICEF also adopted a 'principle-based approach' by not supporting the Taliban Ministry of Education as long as it did not allow girls into formal schools. Instead, it began to support home and community-based schools and focus on developing a vision for the future of Afghan education.

Taliban's enforcement of the full veil or *burqa* is well known now in much of the world.<sup>26</sup> Overall they were no doubt THE most reactionary regime in Afghanistan and for Afghan women. The Taliban's Vice and Virtue Ministry became notorious for handing out severe and inhumane punishment to women and men. It was also condemned by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy. Men were punished if their beard was too short and women if they were not 'appropriately' covered. They also stoned women and hanged men in public.<sup>27</sup> Some of these terrible killings were very bravely documented by RAWA. The impact of Taliban policies was most severely felt by educated, urban and working women whose life dramatically changed for the worse.

Many Afghan women (like men) resisted Taliban in different ways. They did this through demonstrations (in Herat, 1995), through organizing home schools (in many parts of the country) and/or lobbying with foreign governments and groups in the diaspora. Nevertheless, they suffered enormously under Taliban rule. The devastating gendered impact of war was exacerbated by institutionalized gender discrimination.

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, even under Taliban, older women or nomadic women were seen at times without the *burqa* and foreign women were not obliged to wear the *burqa* but all dressed conservatively and covered their hair.

<sup>27</sup> Women were stoned for adultery, men were killed by walls for sodomy and others had their arms chopped off for petty theft, including sometimes children. I visited a Taliban prison for children and women in Kandahar in 2000. Having no beard or a short beard was also punishable, as was non-attendance at mosque prayers.



In March 1996 a group of women in Mazar Sharif gathered in front of the shrine of Hazrat Ali<sup>28</sup>, one of the most important shrines in Afghanistan, and prayed for peace. They call across frontiers. In the words of one woman: 'The international community need to do something, they gave us support in the time of the jihad, why not now? They need to put any pressure they can, to demonstrate for the women in Afghanistan. Other women need to know what is happening to us, we need their support. You can publish things, work with us, we must be united and help each other (Johnson, 1998:47).

Gradually, over the years of Taliban rule, their 'gender apartheid' policies began to grab the attention of human rights and women's rights organizations, as well as some prominent women and men in other countries. One of the first high-level Western women to come to Afghanistan in solidarity with Afghan women and to organize a campaign on their behalf was the ex-head of the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the Italian Ema Bonino. The campaign called 'A Flower for the Women of Kabul' was on the occasion of International Women's Day in 1998.

Another Western based women's group that engaged with Afghan women's issues was the Feminist Majority in the US. They lobbied with the US government against its support for UNOCAL (a California-based global energy company) and its planned oil/gas pipeline treaty with the Taliban. Partially as a result of their efforts, these treaties were not signed at the time. Other international organizations that condemned Taliban's gender policies those years include Amnesty, Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights.

By mid-1990s, it was estimated that most Afghan teachers had left the country and many schools were fully or partially destroyed. In 1988, 'fewer than one in four children in Afghanistan was receiving an education' (Johnson, 1998:55). According to a UN document, only 250 thousand out of 4.4 million school-age children were going to school in Afghanistan in 1998 – under the Taliban. In negotiations with the UN on girls'

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<sup>28</sup> Traditionally women do not go inside mosques or places of worship in most parts of Afghanistan. However, there was an old tradition of women going once a week or twice a week to the shrine of Hazrat Ali. The Taliban stopped this tradition, afraid of women's resistance at this location.

education, the Taliban would state that the ban was temporary and would be lifted, as soon as they had control over all the country and could ensure 'secure and Islamic' education for girls. The UN, especially UNICEF, and various NGOs, as well as the World Bank, continued their interest in and commitment to Afghan education.

A World Bank supported series of conferences on Education for Afghans were organized in November and December 1999 in Islamabad and Washington D.C., highlighting the situation and what had to be done for its amelioration. Comments were made on the poor quality of education, the problem with rote memorization, the poor design of textbooks and the multiplicity of books being used thus undermining any acceptable standard of education and the absence of a national curriculum. Reference was also made to the lack of peace-and gender equity related messages in the textbooks. Nancy Dupree referred to the traditional bonds of Afghan students and masters/teachers as well as respect for the learned and for books, and the tension between religious and secular education in Afghan history which continues up to the present (Kalmthout, 2003, p.c.).

One of the poignant points made in the afore-mentioned meetings was that only 4.8% of international aid in Afghanistan was intended for education.<sup>29</sup> Other such meetings also took place in Pakistan and Iran. UNICEF and its partners organized additional meetings with Afghan educators in 1998 to develop a Strategy for Afghan Education and later in 2000, to review this Strategy (UNICEF, Andrea Rugh, 2000). An important part of these strategies was the development of Basic Competencies in math, Pashtu and Dari as well as supplementary materials for math and languages. In the relevant follow-up documents, focus is on access, quality and capacity. Forty-three agencies/NGOs were active in education, even during the Taliban (UNOCHA, 2001:3).

While boys were allowed by the Taliban to continue their formal education, the quality of education provided was very poor and over the few years of their rule, schools became more and more Islamic in their content and the students and teachers were forced to dress like clergymen/the Talibs themselves. In addition, there was more

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<sup>29</sup> This point was made by Anders Fange, Country Director, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan.

pressure on non-Pashtu speakers at schools and a focus on Pashtu. Discipline in many schools was despotic and a cause of great concern for many parents.

There have always been vast regional disparities in the country, including in education. For example, education indicators for Kabul, Herat, Mazar Sharif and Jalalabad have always been higher than Kandahar or the Central Highlands. This has been due to various reasons, including degree of poverty and ethnic constitution. While most Pashtun areas are witness traditionally to lower levels of education, including girls' education, some areas such as Khost have been receptive to NGO home-based education programmes, also for girls. Some communities even dared to resist Taliban orders to close these schools.

Various UN agencies<sup>30</sup> as well as NGOs were active all these years in Afghanistan and attempted to find innovative ways of reaching women under these circumstances and supported different kinds of projects and activities for women. For example, International Women's Day continued to be celebrated with the efforts of the UN/NGOs and their partners during the reign of the Taliban in various Afghan cities. One of the main areas of contention between the international aid community and the Taliban was on gender and women's issues including girls' education, women's work, Moslem non-Afghan women working for the UN and NGOs and other issues. It was a critical, intense and ethical dilemma for many organizations. How could they balance their concern for human and women's rights violations and yet continue their humanitarian work?

The UN established its first Gender Advisor's post for Afghanistan as a follow-up to the first Inter-Agency Gender Task Force in 1997. The Gender Advisor, a Muslim Iraqi exile, worked in Afghanistan from 1999 to 2001. She attempted to negotiate with Taliban, as a Moslem woman, and obtain some concessions on gender-related issues. As a Moslem woman, like myself, she faced the challenge of the Taliban '*mahram*' decree which stated that non-Afghan Moslem women would not be allowed to work in

Afghanistan unless they were accompanied by their close male-kin (i.e. father, brother, husband). This Taliban decree, issued in early 1998, was one of the points mentioned in the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding between the UN and the Taliban. The UN obtained the views of Al Azhar Islamic University in Cairo, Egypt, on this matter in an unsuccessful attempt to convince the Taliban to change their position.

Those of us who were identified and restricted by the '*mahram*' edict<sup>31</sup>, obviously, felt very strongly about it and resented the fact that we were thus being discriminated against and one aspect of our identities was determining our work and lives. Though never officially rescinded, as a result of UN pressure and negotiations, we were eventually given visas and allowed to travel to Afghanistan for our work.

Another controversial Taliban decree was Decree No.8 issued in July 2000 which stressed the restrictions on employment of Afghan women, specifically by international organizations. This impacted female food monitors of WFP who ensured aid was fairly distributed to women in need. This decree made aid workers, especially Afghan aid workers, feel even more insecure. It also added to the tensions between the Taliban and the UN (Azerbaijani-Moghadam and Fielden,2000).

In Badakshan and Panjshir, which were in the hands of the Northern Alliance, girls were allowed to go to school (where and when it was available), and a small group of women did work. Nevertheless, overall, women were still deprived of many of their basic rights. According to Azerbaijani-Moghadam (1995:2), the Rabbani Government introduced forced veiling of women in Badakshan inspite of its anti-Taliban statements. I came to learn about other restrictions on women in the region from my trips. To quote a 2001 report by Afghanaid (a UK based NGO that focused on this part of the country):

In the rural areas where Afghanaid works, the situation varies with local commanders. In Badakshan, Nuristan and Ghor segregation of women is strictly

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<sup>30</sup> The UN developed a Strategic Framework (SF) for Afghanistan, as well as a Principled Common Programming (PCP) Approach after an important meeting held in 1997 in Ashkabad. For more information on these, various UN related websites can be visited including that of UNDP.

<sup>31</sup> There were very few Moslem international women working for the UN Afghanistan offices at the time.

enforced, though education of girls is possible in Badakshan but very limited. Women can still work but only in specific sectors (health and education), recruitment of local women is difficult but possible in certain circumstances.

An important issue not often mentioned in articles about Afghanistan is the fate of Iranian women married to Afghan refugees. I have met some of these women and heard their sad stories in Afghanistan. Though most are from lower middle-class or poor families, they were still used to a higher standard of life and greater mobility in Iran than what they faced in Afghanistan. Also, according to Iranian citizenship legislation, these women cannot maintain dual citizenship and their children are considered Afghan, therefore making their chances of return to Iran very difficult. While inter-ethnic marriages were reduced during the years of conflict, ethnically-mixed married couples did not face the problems which appeared during the war in former-Yugoslavia. This inspires the hope that Afghans from different ethnic groups can live together in peace once again.

Women's rights in Afghanistan became a central political issue for the US and its allies after September 11, 2001. It was used by them to help justify the war against the Taliban. Afghan women were often depicted as only veiled victims of their own people and religion who needed to be saved by the West, especially the US. This neo-colonial construction was obviously an ideological discourse for particular political interests and stereotyped, homogenized, simplified and essentialized Afghan women, men, Afghanistan and Islam.

This war, like most others, has been characterized by a simultaneous bombing campaign and a propaganda war. Central to the propaganda campaign has been particular representations of the Afghan people and, of late, the fate of Afghan women under the hands of the Taliban (though not the Northern Alliance or the relentless American bombing), (Eclipse, *The Anti-War Review*, January 2002).

The new Interim Administration assumed power on 22 December 2001 and immediately invited women civil servants back to work and made statements in support of female education and other rights (Benjamin, 2002:6). Afghan women's participation – from the diaspora as well as inside Afghanistan – was actively sought by the international

community and the new regime in its various peace-making and peace-building efforts including at the Bonn Conference, the Civil Society Conferences (December 2001 and May 2002), the Brussels Conference on Empowerment of Afghan Women (organized by UNICEF) in December 2001<sup>32</sup>, and the *Loya Jirga* in June 2002. This is the result of many years of struggle by progressive Afghan women and their supporters. For the time being and until the ratification of the new Constitution, the Constitution of 1964 is in effect which is relatively progressive for women (Gross, 2003).

Many Afghan girls, women and men were very happy to see the end of the Taliban and a resumption of girls' education and work, as well as the respect for some of their other rights as well. According to Benjamin (2002:3) 'Women welcome the end of fighting but with some skepticism about the immediate future and the prospects for lasting peace'. Many Afghan activist women have contributed consistently and significantly to the awareness of the outside world about Taliban's violations of human and women's rights and the peaceful aspirations of most Afghans. I have interviewed some of them. Dr. Sima Samar became the first Minister of Women's Affairs as well as Interim Vice-Chair. I met her, with other UNICEF colleagues, in Kabul in January 2002. She resigned in mid-2002 amidst pressure and condemnation from more conservative forces who did not find her sufficiently 'Islamic'. She is now the Head of the Afghan Human Rights Commission.

Not all the problems and concerns of Afghan women are resolved or will likely be resolved in the near future. Amongst their many concerns are security, re-imposition of religious restrictions on women<sup>33</sup> and lack of income-generating activities. Many educated Afghan women (even in Kabul) continue to wear the *burqa* – out of fear and for other reasons. Some of the other concerns of Afghan women include the acquiring of various legal rights – property, inheritance, passport and marital. However, a new phase has begun, at a very high cost, and many brave Afghan women (and men) are working

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<sup>32</sup> I represented UNICEF Afghanistan at this meeting.

<sup>33</sup> The new regime has also established a form of Vice and Virtue Department for the control of the 'moral' behavior of Afghans. Also, the Justice Minister (Shinwari) has begun to reinstate various conservative and

together with their progressive allies in the rest of the world to ensure this situation is sustainable and that all Afghans benefit from the 'peace dividend' (Atmar and Goodhand, 2002:7).

The UN and international community are also supporting various gender-related efforts. For example, UNIFEM has now established an office in Afghanistan and the UN Secretary-General's Representative to Afghanistan has a Senior Gender Advisor, as have many other organizations and agencies. The number of Afghan and non-Afghan NGOs focusing on gender issues has also increased, as have publications and other activities by and for women. However, much of this still remains focused in Kabul and other major cities. Also, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women – CEDAW – in March 2003. It had been signed by the Islamic Government in the early 1990s. A majority of Afghan women remain poor and lack access to basic services for themselves and their children and families. More intense efforts and greater investment is needed to make up for the 'human rights deficit' (Mohammad, 2002) in Afghanistan. As Benjamin correctly points out:

International agencies must work hand in hand with Afghans to protect and promote the human rights of women and to ensure that they play a key role in the structuring and maintenance of peace. Solutions to the problems women and girls face will come by mainstreaming gender issues in every aspect of social, political and economic life in Afghanistan. Rights –based humanitarian action and development programming highlight the importance of countering the discrimination and marginalization that is largely responsible for the suffering and deprivation in the lives of the vast majority of women and girls in Afghanistan (Benjamin, 2002: 19).

Education became a focus of the new post-Taliban regime as well as the international community – especially UNICEF and UNESCO - as it was seen not only as a right of the children but an important symbol of hope and peace for the people, of return to normalcy and faith in the government and its credibility, as well as renewed nation-state and peace-building. Already in November 2001, UNICEF organized a meeting on the future

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even reactionary rules and regulations. There have been controversies over what should be shown on TV and how women should appear on TV and in other public spaces.

of Afghan education, women's status, health and child protection with the Afghan diaspora in Peshawar, Pakistan. I was one of the organizers. The education sub-group mentioned the following, as well as the need to prioritize girls' and female education:

For nearly a quarter century, turmoil in Afghanistan has deprived a generation of Afghans from the personal benefits of education as well as the benefits that might have accrued to national development. Education provides the underpinning for social and economic development and until education services are restored there is little hope for significant progress in Afghanistan. Perhaps even more important for the future of Afghans, education has the potential to provide a unifying experience, allowing for a national culture to emerge that is respectful and tolerant of all elements in society.

The above meeting was followed by a larger conference addressing the rehabilitation of Afghanistan after the conflict, organized by the World Bank, Asia Development Bank and UNDP in Islamabad, Pakistan, in November 2001. Education and women's status were important aspects of those deliberations as well.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, over three million Afghan children – 30% of whom are girls - had returned to schools by late 2002 with the support of the international community with great joy and hope but many still remain outside of the system. Many schools continue to lack basic facilities and there are many other shortages as well. In addition, the regular pay of teachers continues to be an issue of great concern. Other issues include the presence of older girls (who missed out on education due to the war and Taliban) in the same class as younger children. In October 2002, the UNICEF Representative in Afghanistan, Dr. Eric Laroche, made a press statement about the issue of destroying schools and especially schools for girls in a number of locations in Afghanistan by anti-Government forces. The challenges for education, as for all other sectors, remain great.

Afghans and friends of Afghanistan are very concerned about the repercussion of the US led war in Iraq in March 2003 and its involvement with post-Saddam Iraq. This includes

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<sup>34</sup> In one of the relevant documents it is mentioned that according to UNESCO, at that point in time only 38% of Afghan boys and 3% of Afghan girls were going to school, out of a total of 4.4 million school-aged children. In the same document, it mentions that over 60% of schools are 'shelterless' and 80% in need of extensive repair.



concern about the diversion of international attention from Afghanistan to Iraq, reduced international commitment to sustainable peace in Afghanistan and a cut in donor support and funding. Such a scenario will no doubt have a negative impact on all Afghans but especially Afghan women and education projects in Afghanistan.

## **5. Conclusion**

Afghanistan has had a very turbulent history especially since 1978 when the war began. Afghan women's lives, suffering and resistance has been integrally linked with the political situation in their country. Today, they are faced with a new set of challenges and aspirations, as captured by Nasrine Abu-Bakr Gross, an Afghan women's right activist based in the US who has spent most of the post-Taliban period in Afghanistan:

...war, everywhere, creates a situation and mentality that makes it easy to violate human rights. And Afghanistan is no exception...Since last year Afghanistan has put several mechanisms into place to bring back the rule of the law and put on track once again the human rights situation...To be sure, we are facing some very difficult problems such as the fact that our legal system of justice has been ruined...Creating the right atmosphere and attending in a responsible and legal way to the gross violations of human rights of all these years will help our country heal from the wounds...We should also remember that during this period of war, foreigners also, violated the human rights of Afghans and the sanctity of Afghanistan...Afghanistan must continue to work to reestablish the rule and environment of law that will ensure justice and rights equally to each and every Afghan citizen. It is only then that the success of human rights will be Afghanistan's success, nationally and internationally (Abu-Bakr Gross, 2003).

## Chapter Four – Muhajerat and Muhajirin: Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

### 1. Introduction

Over six million Afghans have been dispersed in Pakistan, Iran, India, Central Asia, the Gulf States, Europe, North America and elsewhere over the past twenty plus years of war. The largest numbers by far have consistently been in Pakistan and Iran, the two neighbors of Afghanistan. In February 2002, there were 2 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, 1.5 million in Iran, 200,000 in Central Asia and several hundred thousand elsewhere (UNCHR). Whether refugees flee to the 'near abroad' as compared to the 'distant abroad' is itself an important differentiating factor in their experiences. It influences the kind of movements involved. For example, it might mean leaving as an extended family, rather than a nuclear family or single person. It can also be an indicator of class status, with the more affluent moving to the West earlier. In addition, it has to do with gender, with men usually having easier access to travel farther. It also has repercussions in terms of the production and reproduction of the community.

From 1991 to 2000, 149,600 asylum applications were made by Afghans in 20 European countries (UNHCR, July 2001). Most applied to Germany, and others to the Netherlands and the UK. Afghans have also been arriving in Australia, Cambodia, Cuba and Iceland – overall 68 countries (UNHCR, July 2001). 'Twenty years ago, there were hardly any Afghans in England – eighteen or nineteen families. Today, there are as many as forty thousand...Many of them are highly educated professionals...' (Kramer, 2003:64). Afghan refugees who entered Australia in the summer of 2001 were not accepted by the Australian government which caused considerable media coverage at the time and highlighted their plight and that of all refugees.

In this chapter, some comparative information on Afghan refugees in Iran will be provided. This will be followed with overall historical, demographic and other general information on the changing and diverse socio-economic conditions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan at different points in time. The refugee policy and aid paradigm will also be

reflected upon. In addition, some information will be provided on the current situation of Afghan refugees and returnees. This will be followed with a section on Afghan refugee women and refugee education in Pakistan during different historical phases of displacement.

## 2. Afghan Refugees in Neighbouring Countries

The presence of Afghans in Pakistan and Iran is not a new phenomenon. Afghans have been moving to neighbouring countries for a long time. The current borders with Pakistan, historically speaking, are rather new. They have often been difficult to control and relatively easy to cross. There are great similarities between people on the border of both countries, especially amongst rural Pashtuns<sup>1</sup>. Pashtuns make up about 10% of the population of Pakistan and over 40% of Afghanistan. The national divisions are colonial, political and linked to nation-state building in both countries.<sup>2</sup> Afghans have been coming to Pakistan as merchants, laborers, exiles and nomads for many decades.

Approximately 600,000 Afghans were already in Iran when the Afghan wars began, 'drawn by the oil boom' (Johnson, 1998:36). They later filled a gap in labor created by the Iraq-Iran war (1981-88) which killed over a million men on both sides. Some stayed and others eventually returned to Afghanistan or moved onwards, depending on the situation.

Pakistan and Iran have no doubt been hosting one of the largest and longest refugee populations ever. Both countries have been witness to the presence of Afghan refugees

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<sup>1</sup> While in Afghanistan, Pashtuns have often had the political upper hand, in Pakistan, they do not have a similar position. Pashtuns are now dispersed all over Pakistan and in fact, throughout the world. Many Afghans feel that the NWFP of Pakistan belongs to 'greater' Afghanistan. Even today there is a lobby to change the name of NWFP to *Pakhtunkhwa* (land of the Pashtuns).

<sup>2</sup> The following quote from a NWFP newspaper is a reflection of the ethnic differences within this province of Pakistan. '...the most damaging has been the glorification of the Pakhtun culture and Pakhto language at the expense of other cultures and languages by the colonial writers and administrators... This mindset of Pakhtun superiority at the expense of other languages and cultures was reinforced and condoned by the colonial administrators, writers and historians... Sir Olaf Caroe...' (The Frontier Post, Feb.28, 1998). Nevertheless, some of Pakistan's Pashtun leaders were very progressive, leftist, but unable to sustain their success in elections.

from 1980 onwards ranging from above three million in each country at its peak, to perhaps about two million during most other periods up to the fall of the Taliban.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Pakistan where Sunni Moslems predominate, in Iran, Shiite Islam is the official religion and many Shiite Afghans preferred to go to Iran. In addition, since Farsi is the official language of Iran, Farsi-speaking Afghans felt more comfortable than Pashtu-speakers in Iran. The political situation in Iran was also different from Pakistan. Unlike Pakistan, Iran was going through an Islamic Revolution and 8 years of war with Iraq. Iran's Islamic Government restricted the work of the international community including International NGOs in Iran and it is only recently that a few INGOs (three, as far as I know) have been allowed to work amongst Afghans. This is very different from Pakistan where there are numerous foreign organizations. The UN in Iran, especially UNHCR, received far less funding for their Afghan refugee programmes than they did for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, partially due to Iran not being considered a Western ally. As an oil-producing country, Iran was also seen as more prosperous than Pakistan. As a result, there was less non-Iranian assistance to Afghan refugees in Iran, as compared to non-Pakistani assistance to Afghans in Pakistan.

Also, fewer Afghans are in camps in Iran than in Pakistan. According to a report of the International NGO Symposium on Needs of Refugees in Iran (ICRI, 1999), only 5% were in camps. According to the same report, most refugee women rely on themselves and/or their husbands, rather than NGOs or others. Many of the Afghan refugee women in Iran were found to be working at home and earning some income, for example, by shelling pistachios. Also, they have been positively influenced by living in Iran in terms of access to media, education and health services. According to a survey undertaken by ICRI (the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran) and reflected in the afore-mentioned report, most refugee women want more education facilities and access to higher education. In Iran, there are also Iraqi Kurdish, Iraqi Arab as well as Shiite refugees. The

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<sup>3</sup> This is while the UK has about 69,800 refugees and asylum seekers, Canada has about 70,000 and Australia approximately 21,800 (New Internationalist, October, 2002:18/19).

Arabs, or Marsh Arabs, were previously living in the marshlands of Southern Iraq before it was drained by Saddam and his regime in Iraq .

Until the late 1990s when restrictions on Afghans without official documents (which meant most Afghans) increased in Iran, many Afghan refugee children, including girls, were allowed to go to Iranian government schools. For some, it was the first time they had access to formal education and for others, it meant better quality education. Many Afghans were also able to find work in the labor market in Iran, including Afghan women. Afghan men worked primarily in the construction, road repair and animal husbandry sectors prior to the Government's increased pressure on employers not to hire 'illegal' Afghans. Consequently, the situation of Afghan refugees, including Afghan women, in Iran has its own specific context and is quite different from that of Afghans in Pakistan.

### **3. Afghan Refugees in Pakistan from 1980 to 1992**

The dramatic increase of Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, including Pakistan, began with the Soviet military intervention, about a year after the Communist take-over of April 1978 (*Saur* Revolution), in December 1979. Afghans made the difficult decision of leaving their country for various reasons. Some opposed the PDPA and its atheistic and socialist policies, their coercive methods of implementing, the presence of Soviet forces as well as the more physical repercussions of the fighting between the central Government and the *Mujahidin* forces. This included the killing of innocent people, destruction of homes, roads, schools, agricultural land, water canals and, in general, rural areas.

'Among the first to leave were members of the royal lineage and their close associates, many of whom were professionals and intellectuals who marched in the forefront of modernization' (Dupree, L, 1980 quoted in Dupree, N, to be published in 2004, 8). Moreover, a number of Western educated as well as moderate, liberal and progressive Afghans who opposed the Communists also left the country. Many first went to Pakistan but left for the West within a short period of time. They quickly realized that there was very little, if any, space for their views and activities in the refugee community of Pakistan

where the various Islamic parties had great influence (supported by Pakistan and US governments). Some had ties with the West through having worked for various Embassies or the Peace Corp and this made their move to the West easier.

This was equivalent to 'leaving the scene in Afghanistan and in Iran and Pakistan...to the religious-oriented parties' (Olesen, 1995:274). Thus, a vacuum occurred in Afghan politics which was to have very negative repercussions for many years, including through indirectly contributing to the long-term hold of various Islamic political parties and an absence of other strong alternative voices. It significantly reduced the secular space available in Afghan society and politics. It in particular had negative repercussions for Afghan girls and women who suffered immensely as a result of this extreme politicization of Islam and the spread of a reactionary and gendered interpretation of religiosity. This happened also in diasporic communities especially that of Pakistan and Iran where similar processes of shrinking secular spaces were taking place.

In general, the importance of the 'braindrain' as a result of the war and displacement is a very significant issue for any country, but especially for Afghanistan which had a growing but small intelligentsia with higher secular education and/or the equivalent skills and knowledge even before the war. Also, unlike other countries witness to the 'braindrain' like Iran, in Afghanistan because of the protracted war, for many years there was no significant new generation of university educated young men and women entering the labor force to at least partially replace those who had left, even if for a short time, before they too leave.

Some educated Afghans stayed in the region, for example in Pakistan, in order to serve other Afghans, remain close to Afghanistan and/or for political, family or property-related reasons. There was also a new generation of Afghan refugees who were educated in Pakistan (or other foreign countries). They remained a minority in their community, though an important one. Also, not all educated Afghans who left for the West, left for good. Some stayed in the West for a few years and then returned, or returned every now and then, or continued to contribute and influence the processes of change in the region.

Now, with over two decades of war, a small group of Afghans have been able to complete their higher education abroad as refugees (especially in the West) and an even smaller group is returning to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. However, the country continues to need many more and better educated women and men.

The *Mujahidin* had contacts in Pakistan, including with the Pakistan government, even before the refugee flow began. However, these contacts were strengthened after the Communists took power in 1978 and the armed conflict began. It is noteworthy that the conflict began during the reign of General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan. He pursued an Islamization policy, the repercussions of which continue to impact upon every aspect of life in Pakistan (Saigol, 1995).<sup>4</sup> Many of these Afghan Islamic groups established bases in Pakistan, especially in Peshawar, and to a lesser degree, in Quetta, Baluchestan<sup>5</sup> and in fact, all over Pakistan. UNHCR has also had a sub-office in Quetta, as it has in Peshawar, for Afghan refugees. Some NGOs including Save the Children – US – have been active in Quetta, but definitely not as many as those in Peshawar. Many Hazara Shiite Afghans as well as Pashtuns from the South went to Quetta. Dr. Sima Samar, the first Minister of Women's Affairs in 2002, lived and worked in Quetta during the conflict, as did many other Afghans. RAWA has also been very active in Quetta. Many Afghans from the South (including Kandahar) fleeing the US/allied attacks on the Taliban moved to Baluchestan, Pakistan, after September 11, 2001.

Seven Sunni Islamic Afghan parties, based in Pakistan, established an anti-Soviet and central government alliance with the support of the Pakistani government, the US and others. They formed a government in exile and declared *jihad* (or holy war) on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1979 in Pakistan (Olesen, 1995:276). 'The Soviet action gave the mujahedin legitimacy and a political rationale to organize, with large-scale foreign assistance' (Zolberg, Suhre and Aguayo, 1989:152).

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<sup>4</sup> Some of his fundamentalist policies included the *hudoob* ordinance of 1979 which criminalizes women for extra-marital sex, at times for even rape. Pakistan's progressive groups continue to lobby for the repeal of this ordinance (Haeri, 1995).

As the fighting intensified in Afghanistan, so did the devastation and the number of refugees in Pakistan. Most of the refugees had nothing more than the clothes on their backs when they came to Pakistan. About 300,000 Afghans left for Pakistan between April to November 1978 (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1989:153) and by 1983, over 2 million had reached Pakistan and over 3 million within a few more years (Refugee, II, 1995: 22). As many as 1,000 Afghans were crossing each day in 1979 and almost 5,000 per day in 1981. From 1985 to 1990, over six million Afghan refugees lived in Iran and Pakistan. All data on Afghan refugees remain estimates even at the best of times – with many undocumented and ‘illegal’.

Nevertheless, we do know that in the first years, many Afghans were moving with their extended family (tribal lineage) and/or with their whole village. According to Refugee (II, 1997:3), when villages like Rozay Qala were bombed, all its surviving inhabitants came to Pakistan together. Others arrived with their own smaller group of nuclear or extended family networks. Due to the continuous bombardments of farm lands and water canals, over 90% came from rural areas of the country (Dupree, 1992). In the beginning, many came from Southern and Eastern Afghanistan and were predominantly Pashtun, but over the years, they came from all over the country.

Their plight was not only an outcome of war but it also became a symbol and tool of war. It was used by the *Mujahidin* and Pakistanis to sustain and justify the war. It was a complex situation. ‘The resistance to the PDPA government and its Soviet sponsors developed out of the interaction among spontaneous social movements, political elite, and international actors...Foreign powers and organizations tried to aid and influence the mujahedin’(Rubin, 1995:179).

Pakistan became a base for the West and Arabs to provide financial, military and material support to the *Mujahidin*. This was welcomed by the regime of General Zia. ‘The US aid program, which previously had been terminated on the grounds that Pakistan appeared to

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<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that these two cities tend to be amongst the most conservative in Pakistan. Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad are more liberal.



be developing a nuclear weapons capability, was restored. A package of \$4.4 billion over five years in military and economic assistance was agreed to in 1981 and renewed in 1987' (Rubin, 1995:152).

Over three million refugees needed support, thus various Pakistani government organizations/departments as well as the international organizations appeared on the scene. This enormous number should be contrasted with the approximately one million refugees who reach Western borders each year.<sup>6</sup> The Pakistan Commission for Afghan Refugees was established, as were many other smaller bodies. Though Pakistan has not signed the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees (1951) and the related 1967 International Protocol, it has over the years adopted its own refugee regulations through negotiation with UNHCR and others. It has also attempted to register refugees in a sporadic way. At some point, passbooks were given to a number of refugees. Overall, 'the majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan have not been registered, granted legal status, or issued identity documents' (Human Rights Watch, February 2002).

According to the Chairperson of the Pakistan Human Rights Commission (August 2001), Afghans have continued to face a legal vacuum in Pakistan. He adds that Afghan women 'were not directly registered as refugees. In most cases, they were mentioned in the refugee registers as wives, sisters or daughter of men, not even mentioned by their own name' (Khattak,2001:8).

The UN, INGOs and Afghan NGOs began to respond to this enormous humanitarian refugee situation. Some obviously had their own political agendas for the support provided to Afghan refugees. Many new INGOs were established including by the Swedes, Danes, Norwegians and others to support Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) 'was formed in 1980, shortly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan...Originally, the aims were to work for the withdrawal of the Soviets from the country and to support the Afghan people in their struggle for national

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<sup>6</sup> I heard this number at Tom Clark's presentation at the Center for Refugee Studies at the University of York in Toronto in February 2003.

independence' (SCA, 1995:1). SCA later expanded its activities into education, health, agriculture and other sectors. Some of these agencies, including SCA, continue to be active in Afghanistan. Afghan NGOs also greatly increased in number. Some were coordinated by the Afghan NGO Coordinating Bureau (ANCB).

Approximately 75% of all refugees were children and women, as many of the men stayed behind to fight or were mobile between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Some women had already become widows in Afghanistan and many others became widows while in Pakistan. Others had husbands who had been captured and were in prison or had disappeared. An estimated three fourth of all refugee households were female-headed (Moghadam, 1992:438).

Afghans used the term *muhajerat* to express their situation and called themselves *muhajer*. The terms underlined a justified reason for leaving their country and seeking refuge in another Moslem country which, within the framework of the Islamic *ummat*, had the duty to provide them sanctuary. In addition, hospitality is one of the main features of the *Pashtunwali* and therefore, the Pashtuns of Pakistan were expected to welcome Afghan refugees. This was in addition to the historical, cultural and linguistic affinities between Pashtun Afghan refugees and the Pashtuns of Pakistan. However, as the war was prolonged, the Cold War ended and financial support of other countries decreased, Afghan refugees were less and less welcome in Pakistan.

Afghan refugees either lived in refugee villages/settlements, spread in other villages or in urban centers of Pakistan.

The 321 designated settlement areas for Afghan refugees in Pakistan are strung out on a 240 kilometer area along the border with Afghanistan...The original tented refugee housing gradually gave way to mud constructions resembling larger villages in Afghanistan...the overcrowded, closely built dwellings afford no private space...lack of private space produces acute psychological distress...Traditional female roles...are gravely marginalized in the refugee villages (Dupree, The Situation of Afghan Refugee Women, no date:3).

Tenure arrangements were made with tribal communities and landlords in a locality, or refugees were located on government land. Accommodation areas mushroomed in various provincial districts and tribal agencies, some rather small, while others became huge concentrations of cramped human habitation (Christensen, 1990:15).

Over the years, new camps were erected and some old camps have been closed. Nasir Bagh in Peshawar is one of the largest such camps which was closed down by the Pakistani officials in 2001/2002. Other famous camps include Jalozai and Kotkai. Its residents either went back to Afghanistan or were moved to new camps closer to the border.<sup>7</sup> According to Human Rights Watch (February 2002), in early 2002, there were more than 150 refugee camp settlements inside Pakistan, most in Peshawar and some around Quetta.

Many of the camps were run, at least until very recently, by one or another of the Islamic groups. Though all were very conservative on social issues, they did not have a uniform interpretation of Islam. Shamshatoo, which I visited in 2002, was run by *Hezb-e-Islami* until very recently. Consequently, the Islamic group in charge would make decisions about running of the camp, whether or not it would have schools (including girls' schools) and whether or not the various agencies could work there with ease. The militia of these groups would control the lives of camp inhabitants with an iron fist. Some had their own prisons. Also, the camps in Pakistan became bases for these groups and their families. Their families would stay in the camps while they went back and forth on combatant duty to Afghanistan. Consequently, as noted by Olesen (1995:276) they were at times both *mujahid* (holy fighter) as well as *muhajer*. Camps were also used for the military recruitment of children, young boys and adults, as well as enforcing various reactionary ideological positions, especially on women (Ekanayake, 2000:157).

Some camps were ethnically more mixed than others throughout these years. Also, some camp dwellers had one or more members of the family who gradually were able to rent a

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<sup>7</sup>All such changes are very controversial and raise a lot of uproar and discussion in Pakistan and amongst the refugees, the Government, UNHCR and other agencies. Some such changes were made primarily due to political reasons.

place in the city or out of the camp and would try to benefit from two sets of opportunities. Keeping a camp base was good for times when aid was distributed. Within the camp, class divisions also existed with some homes being larger and better than others. Similarly, within one extended family, there would be those who were better off and lived in the city and others who were poorer and remained in the camp. Remittances from Afghans abroad often provided much needed support to the camp-dwellers. Human rights violations took place in many of these camps, from the murder and assassination of dissenters, to violation of women's rights, forced early marriage and rape.

In 1979, the Government of Pakistan officially asked UNHCR for assistance in the coordination of aid, though camps continued to be administered by the Pakistan government. The Pakistani government services for refugees, UNHCR and NGOs worked with Islamic groups in the camps for many years. Some camps over the years became slightly more liberal. RAWA, for example, has been able to work in a few of these in the past years. In addition, there were between 500,000 to one million Afghan refugees who were scattered outside of the camps in Pakistan (Dupree, forthcoming, 2004:12).

In the 1980s, UNHCR channeled aid valued at US\$75 million per year (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1989:154). The World Food Programme was to become and remain the largest programme for refugees for many years. It had a budget of US\$100 million during those initial years. The USA was the largest donor to support Afghan refugees. By 1986, it had contributed over half a billion dollars. This is in comparison to over US\$3.3 billion of USA military aid to the *mujahidin* over the *jihad* years (according to the comebackalive website), largely channeled through the Government of Pakistan. This includes the value of stinger missiles.

Other major donors to refugee programmes were Germany, Japan, Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. According to Refugees (II, 1997:4), UNHCR had spent over one billion dollars on Afghan refugees in Pakistan by 1997.<sup>8</sup> Gradually, the Afghan

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast, according to an Iranian official (IRIN, November 13, 2001), Iran has spent over US\$2.9 billion on Afghans, receiving only US\$12.4 million per year from the international community.

diaspora in the West also began to mobilize and organize, and a few aid programmes were run with their funding.

The support provided to refugees was in the form of food assistance, some raw material, basic items for the tents and families as well as services such as those of health, health education, social mobilization and some education. UNHCR itself remains critical about the lack of sustainability of many of the projects it supported (Refugee II, 1997:23), a view shared by many Afghans and others with whom I have spoken. The percentage of assistance which was misused by the various Afghan political groups, as well as the Government of Pakistan, continues to remain a sensitive issue. Also, the culture of dependency which this aid created has been a topic of discussion and concern over the years.

The parties undermined traditional social structures, food rations turned refugees into dependents and ran counter to their own systems of mutual obligations; and the administrative structure of the camps, which worked through heads of families rather than through the village representative, increased individualism and social fragmentation (Johnson, 1998:37).

The lack of attention to the needs of girls and women, especially in the first few years, has been expressed and shared by many international organizations as well as progressive Afghans, as further discussed below. Rations to refugees in Pakistan were halved in January 1991 and stopped in September 1995 (Dupree, N. to be published).

Amongst the refugees, there were Afghans from all walks of life – from farmers, to bureaucrats and from teachers to artists. ‘Most found at least subsistence work in the local economy or rented land to cultivate. Some maintained a foothold in both countries by living in Pakistan while hiring tenant farmers to work their land in Afghanistan’ (Ruiz, 2002:9). A whole genre of Afghan journalism, literature and poetry gradually began to take shape in the diaspora. Some were political and others nostalgic. Songs of resistance against the Soviets, were being written, as well as against fundamentalism and despotism of the various groups. Olesen (1995:278) refers to the anti-PDPA songs of Rafiq Jan. Some singers were more popular within their own ethnic group, like Sarvar Sarkhush who

was a Hazara and sang against the PDPA as well as in support of minority rights. Many Afghan publications began to appear in Pakistan (and Iran), some representing the various political groups, others more independent.

The Afghan Information Center, established in the early 1980s, defended freedom and democracy and was based in Peshawar. Its founder was the prominent and later assassinated poet/writer, Majrooh. Majrooh, a former Dean of Kabul University, was killed in 1988 in Peshawar. It is believed he was killed by one of the reactionary Islamic parties, for his outspoken and brave criticism. He underlined Afghan nationalism over dying in the name of Islam (Hyman, 1999:86). Intellectuals like Majrooh also lamented about the loss of positive Afghan values during the *jehad* years. Quite a number of Afghan intellectuals were killed this way. Others who were targeted included former allies of the Communist leaders. Some of the *mujahidin* leaders who were more independent and principled were also killed over the years in Pakistan by their rivals.

Cross-border operations into rural areas of Afghanistan not in the hand of the central government became one of the foci of the work of the NGOs based in Pakistan. Many NGOs established community-based activities in such rural areas over the years, gaining valuable experience. They were able to provide health, water, education, agriculture and other services to needy rural populations.

#### **4. Afghan Refugees in Pakistan from 1992 to 2002**

With the fall of the regime headed by Dr. Najibullah in 1992, and establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, many Afghans were hopeful about the future of their country and decided to return. For some, it was also a decision out of destitution because they possessed very little as refugees. This return was supported by UNHCR and the rest of the international community in the form of a repatriation programme.<sup>9</sup> Over 1.6 million refugees returned to their country within a few months after the change of regime

in April 1992 in what at the time was called one of the largest and fastest repatriation programmes ever (Refugee,II,1995:24).This also happened from Iran, on a smaller scale and due to pressure from the Iranian Government.<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-1990s, interest in Afghan refugees began to decrease, as the Soviet Union retreated from Afghanistan and eventually collapsed. Many Afghans felt that the objectives of the West and others had been attained and they no longer cared about Afghans. Of course, it would be an exaggeration to say all organizations and donors lost an interest. Many continued to work in Afghanistan, and support refugees, though with smaller budgets. There was growing concern about 'donor fatigue'. For example, USAID which had a very large office and budget for Afghan refugees suddenly stopped all its projects and closed its office in the early 1990s, after the fall of the Communist regime. USAID had spent over US\$150 million in the late 1980s on health, education and other such sectors (Barnett, 1995:181). The number of NGOs in Pakistan, especially Peshawar, was also reduced.

UNHCR and WFP stopped refugee food rations in September 1995, in the expectation that more Afghans would return to their country (Johnson,1998:37). This, of course, worsened the plight of refugees and many more henceforth depended for their subsistence on meager wages from exploitative work – such as carpet weaving or brick making.

It was at this point in time that the UN 'created Operation Salam to assist returnees through mine clearance, health programmes, rehabilitation of the water supply, and basic education...Since the Soviet pull-out from Afghanistan...the West's interest...had faded. Funding...dried up. Operation Salam soon collapsed...' (Ruiz, 2002:9).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> UNHCR facilitated different repatriation programmes including spontaneous, group and individual. In most such programmes, returnees are provided very limited financial and material incentives. UNHCR also has a mandate to monitor the situation of returnees in areas of return to ensure they are protected.

<sup>10</sup>In Iran, Afghan refugees had relatively higher living standards and were able to save enough money to send back to their families (Johnson,1998:36).

<sup>11</sup> The UN later established UNOCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (for Afghanistan). UNOCHA had its HQs in Islamabad, Pakistan with offices in all major regions of Afghanistan (like most other UN agencies). Since the fall of the Taliban, the UN has established its main office as the UNAMA or United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, headed by Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative to Afghanistan.

Thus, as a result of the combined effect of renewal of war, this time amongst the various *Mujahidin* groups, as well as limited assistance to returnees, many of the returnees once again became refugees in neighbouring countries. Their hopes had been dashed one more time.

Repatriation in the absence of peace, security, physical protection, freedom from hunger, and respect for equity is an empty concept, encoding, largely, a political agenda created by the end of East-West conflict...It also denotes a lack of political will to finance refugee care and relief in an ailing global economy (Wali, 1995:180).

As if all the above problems were not enough for Afghans, from 1995 onwards, many were faced with the reality of Taliban rule and a further exodus began as a result.<sup>12</sup> Afghans left their country because of poverty, lack of employment, educational facilities, especially for girls, the unbearable reactionary policies of the Taliban, and ethnic, linguistic, religious and ideological discrimination and repression. Many who came this time were from amongst the educated and urbanite Afghans who had somehow managed to stay and work in places like Kabul until the arrival of Taliban. Moreover, many more members of ethnic and religious minority groups fled the country. Thus, once again in 1997, with over 2.7 million Afghan refugees living in Iran and Pakistan, they remained UNHCR's largest caseload worldwide, for the 17<sup>th</sup> year in a row.

Obviously, the presence of so many Afghan refugees for over two decades has had a significant influence on life in the various locations where they lived in Pakistan. Peshawar, for example, became more and more like an Afghan city with Farsi spoken in many places. Numerous shops, hairdressers, tailors, restaurants and clinic were run by Afghans. It increased from a small city of 200,000 when the influx began to one of about 2 million after the influx. I am told by Afghan friends that Peshawar also became a more sophisticated city with the presence of many educated Afghans.

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<sup>12</sup> Many first became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and then refugees, and some became returnees, then IDPs again and refugees once again. Many Afghans have experienced this cycle a few times during the course of their lives.



Many Peshawaris became wealthy because of the Afghan refugees, by selling them goods, by renting out their rooms and houses to them and by exploiting their cheap labor. Afghans were also involved in the Hayatabad market and other markets, bringing all kinds of items from Afghanistan, from fruits to jewelry to carpets and smuggled electrical items. Hayatabad, is a new part of Peshawar, built largely by Pakistanis for Afghan home-renters. Since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, it has become nearly empty as many Afghans have returned to their country.

There are significant class differences amongst Afghans, a small minority are very rich and have had comfortable homes in Pakistan, where you see many Afghans sitting outside begging for help. The majority are very poor and live in deplorable situations with very little to eat, wear and keep warm with. A middle class also exists with remittances from abroad and/or UN/NGO salaries and/or engaging in trade. No doubt, some of the richest Afghans have made their capital through drug and arms smuggling as well as other kind of illegal activities.

Age is also an important factor in defining refugee experiences. According to a study undertaken by Columbia University School for International and Public Affairs in Pakistan on Afghan refugees in early 2001, good quality education was the primary concern of refugee youth. The youth were also concerned about their livelihoods and finding a job. Many, especially girls, had sacrificed their education because of income issues. It was also found that inspite of all the existing problems, family and community remains very important for refugee youth.

Pakistan and in particular, Peshawar, also became a meeting place between Afghans in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, with their growing number of relatives in the West. These relatives would come every now and then to visit their elder parents, attend weddings, for business and other reasons, almost always bringing some financial support with them.

Afghans have increasingly been victims of discrimination, racism and harassment in Pakistan (and Iran). Animosity towards Afghan refugees has increased over time. For example, in an article in *The Nation* (24/2/98) it said:

An emergency meeting of the Pasban<sup>13</sup>, NWFP, expressed concern over law and order situation, rise in crime rates, unemployment and continued huge influx of Afghan refugees in the province...The meeting demanded return of the Afghan refugees to their homeland and till that time, their restriction be limited to their camps only.

In the same article, it criticized Afghans for taking over the commercial sector from Pakistanis. Every now and then, Afghan traders, even small street-vendors with their wheel carts were attacked, their goods confiscated and/or arrested. They would bribe/pay their way out of the problem until the next time they were harassed. This became a way of life for many Afghans. Many Afghans have been languishing in Pakistani jails without any due course of justice for years. The Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA) which is a human rights organization lobbied at all levels on their behalf. In their August 1997 issue, they refer to Afghan refugee prisoners in Baluchestan prisons. Pakistani police are particularly hated by many Afghan refugees for their harassment and extortion.

The contribution of Afghans in the 'near abroad', including in the form of the remittances they receive from their relatives and friends in the West and elsewhere, is often overlooked in the rush to undermine them in Pakistan (or Iran). Afghan refugees have at times, especially since 2000, been deported back to Afghanistan. Many have had to manage a return through dangerous mountain passes. Non-Pashtun Afghans have claimed that they were subjected to more harassment than Pashtun Afghans. Afghan girls and women tended to be harassed less frequently than young and adult Afghan men. Thus, during deportation 'campaigns', Afghan men stayed at home while their female kin would go out to run errands for the family. Nevertheless, almost all Afghans experienced discrimination and racism in one way or another.

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<sup>13</sup> *Pasban* means guard.

Towards the end of November 2000, the Government of Pakistan (and Iran) became increasingly tough on Afghan refugees and both countries closed their borders on asylum seekers.<sup>14</sup> This coincided with the devastating drought in Afghanistan and the dramatic increase in IDPs as well as asylum-seekers. UNHCR estimated that 172,000 Afghans entered the country in 2000 (Ruiz, 2002:10). Both countries also passed laws which were contrary to the well being of refugees.<sup>15</sup>

...the Pakistani authorities have also engaged in border push-backs of Afghans seeking to enter their country, and have forcibly returned some Afghans from inside Pakistan to serious conditions of insecurity and abuse, in violation of the customary law norm of nonrefoulement. Even so, the Pakistan government allowed most Afghan refugees who have been able to enter its territory unofficially to remain inside Pakistan and, at the Chaman<sup>16</sup> official border crossing point, the authorities have screened refugees and granted entry to those considered most vulnerable (Human Rights Watch, February 2002).

In January 2001, the Governor of the NWFP and federal Government issued orders for undocumented Afghans to be detained and deported. Without registration of new comers, aid programmes were also negatively influenced. Nevertheless, the serious humanitarian situation which was a combination of the impact of war, drought, as well as inter-group fighting continued to force many Afghans to leave their homes for neighbouring countries.

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<sup>14</sup> The closure of borders has been denounced by various international organizations and human rights groups as they are contrary to the right to seek asylum.

<sup>15</sup> For example, all Afghans without work permits were required to leave, unless they could demonstrate real danger to their lives. Within a few months, Iran had repatriated 130 thousand Afghans with the support of UNHCR and other agencies. I was witness to one of these flows at the Afghan/Iranian border during this period.

<sup>16</sup> Chaman is the border point between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Baluchestan, closer to Kandahar and Quetta.

Thousands of Afghans became refugees after September 11, 2001 during the US led bombing campaign. UNHCR and Human Rights Watch maintained that once again Afghan refugees should be accepted on a *prima facie* basis<sup>17</sup>. Towards the end of 2001, in a UNHCR public information flyer, the following information was provided:

-83% of all Afghan refugees live in the NWFP

-95% are Pashtu speakers

-over 77% are women and children

Between the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001 and August 2002, over one and a half million Afghans have returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan and Iran – many supported by UNHCR's repatriation programmes. However, over a million continue to live in Pakistan (and many more in Iran where the return has been slower). Some have nothing to return to, others have a relatively good life in Pakistan and some fear another round of conflict and fighting, ethnic-based attacks, local commanders and other reasons. A considerable number have become new refugees due to harassment of Pashtuns in Northern Afghanistan by the Uzbek forces of General Dostam. There is considerable concern that many more might once again seek asylum due to lack of security, accommodation, jobs and other opportunities in Afghanistan at the present time. This will largely depend on the quantity, quality and timeliness of international assistance as well as the policies and practices of the new regime.

## **5. Afghan Refugee Women and Refugee Education**

In general, women face specific issues in patriarchal societies during conflict and displacement. Afghan refugee women in Pakistan are no exception. They have suffered as a result of gender discrimination practiced by both their own leaders as well as Pakistani authorities. This is in addition to the pain they have felt as a result of the duration and

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<sup>17</sup> *Prima facie* (at first sight) in general means accepting people as refugees based on their own rendition of events and while being unable to contradict them. Specifically for UNHCR, it means that when conditions are dangerous in a country of origin and a very large number of people move to neighbouring countries, without having to or being able to review each and every case, they should be accepted.

intensity of the conflict, its many repercussions and the experience of displacement. Nevertheless, they have consistently struggled to survive with dignity, leaving behind a truly heroic legacy.

One of the important issues which faced many Afghan women as refugees in Pakistan, in addition to all that they had lost in their homeland and the pain in their hearts, was the pressure from the Islamic political groups to abide by a reactionary interpretation of 'real' Islam and Afghan culture. It was women who had to pay the highest price. They were the ones who were restricted in their behavior, movement and public efforts in order for the male political leaders to demonstrate their commitment to 'authentic' Afghan and Islamic values. It was in response to the links made between female education, modernization and Sovietization, that millions of Afghan girls and women had to be deprived of education. Some of these Islamic parties argued that girls' education was frowned upon by Afghans and many Afghans had left Afghanistan during the Communist era because they did not wish their daughters to be educated in the Soviet system. Thus, they also justified stopping girls and women's education in the refugee setting.

Soon after my husband and I were thrown out of Afghanistan in 1979, we went to a refugee camp...where I made the innocent remarks that it might be nice to have a girls' school. I was immediately accused of being a communist, an infidel, and a traitor to Afghanistan. Among the conservative groups at that time, there was a genuine feeling that education had brought communism to Afghanistan...Any secular school was anathema for many, and girls' schools – forget it (Dupree, *The Women of Afghanistan*, no date:10-11).

Initially, this was not resisted by the host-countries or the international aid community. What was more important was to support these Moslem parties in their struggle against the Soviets. More moderate Moslem and Afghan voices were ignored. Moghadam criticized the UN and NGOs for their justification of the gendered politics of the various Afghan groups in the name of cultural relativism and said:

...the Afghan Mujahideen...are not taken to task for what are actually...reactionary gender practices...Surprisingly, UN officials have acquiesced to Afghan male resistance to teaching girls. Thus in 1988, 104,600

boys were enrolled in UN-run camp schools, as against 7,800 girls...During the 1980s the UN ran 161 middle schools for boys and two for girls (Moghadam, 1992:426 & 437).

UNHCR provided education to about 700 thousand Afghan refugee children in 1995, out of which 90% were boys. (Refugees, II, 1995: 24). At the same time, largely due to poverty and lack of alternatives, as well as the proactive advocacy/ coercion of the Islamic groups, a greater number of Islamic *madrassas* (schools) were established in Pakistan for refugee boys. These have now become infamous as they are known to have been of the main recruitment fields for Taliban and Al Qaeda. We lived close to a *madrassa* in Islamabad for four years and I saw the very young and poor boys when they were out on walks or to play sports. Like many, I could not help but think about whether they and their parents had many other choices but to send their sons to these *madrassas*. It is also important not to generalize about all *madrassas* or religious schools. They are definitely not all breeding ground for 'terrorists' and 'fanatics'.

Also, what often does not appear in the literature on Afghan refugees is the gendering of terms such as *mujahidin*. Since the Afghans opposing the Communists became known as *mujahidin*, and it was these fighters who were important in the struggle against the Soviet Union, women who were rarely *mujahidin*, became invisible. This is also linked to the whole gendered impact of militarization of a society and its politics. Not only was the ideological political struggle often fought on the lives and bodies of women, the armed struggle was also gendered as was the politics of displacement. The 'heroes' of the West in the late 1970s and 1980s were in fact imposing their restrictions on the lives of all Afghans through despotic means but in particular on Afghan girls and women. This is not to deny that there were variations between the main Islamic parties, with for example Masoud and Rabbani being more moderate and Hekmatyar and Sayyaf more reactionary.

It was not only Afghan male refugees who were at risk of assassination. Ashara, an Afghan NGO activist (who was always well covered), disappeared in Peshawar around the same time that RAWA's female leader was killed in Quetta (Mayotee, 1992:152). Many

other Afghan women were also harassed for their activities and activism, especially in the early years of the refugee experience.

Afghan women working with agencies funded by foreign money are served with warnings to quit...female facilities entirely managed by Afghan women share the abuse...The Afghan Interim Government in Pakistan is at times called upon to enforce the closing of all female institutions so as to "save ourselves from punishment by Allah." (Dupree, *The Situation of Afghan Refugee Women*, no date:5).

In the camps, Afghan girls and women were also restricted, by their own male-kin but largely through the politics of the various commanders and Islamic groups. This was made possible by the international community's initial silence vis a vis gender abuse and discrimination, low levels of education and employment amongst Afghan women, as well as overall poverty. The presence of other Moslem groups in Pakistan further facilitated the discrimination faced by many Afghan refugee women in Pakistan.

Among the Mujahideen are many who call for the return of compulsory veiling and gender-segregated education...Women's separateness and invisibility from the public world outside the home characterize Afghan traditional society. This has been reinforced in the refugee camps in Peshawar, where women's seclusion has been intensified (Moghadam, 1992:436).

While all Afghan women suffered the consequences of the above in one way or another, it was more difficult for educated, urban and working women to face these restrictions as refugees. All Afghan women suffered from the loss of supportive networks and positive cultural values. More traditional Afghan women who had lived in rural or nomadic communities also went through much loss and suffering. They often had better lives in Afghanistan. Many were at least in contact with their neighbors, went to the local market and supported the family by doing farm work. All this was now curtailed as well. They were no longer even able to fulfill their traditional roles as food preparers and household managers, which negatively affected their self-esteem (Christensen, 1990:17).

It took many years of effort on the part of progressive Afghan women (and men), as well as individual committed staff of the aid agencies and the dramatic changes in regional and

world politics for refugee women's lives to gradually change. Many more Afghan women began to work with the aid agencies, run schools for Afghan children and establish their own NGOs. In these schools, Afghan languages, history and culture were also taught. International organizations increased their programmes for girls' education as well as for Afghan refugee women (please refer to my two recent articles in the annex for more information).

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) began its programmes for Afghan refugees, with a focus on female education, in 1980(Ekanayake, 2000:178-9). Many educated Afghan refugee women have at some point received training by the IRC especially in the English language. Save the Children (STC-US) also developed a large education programme for Afghan refugees, largely based in Baluchestan, Pakistan. GTZ, the German Development Agency, also helped develop textbooks for Afghan refugees and others.

UNHCR, with the support of the WFP, began its food for education programme in support of Afghan refugee girls. Also gradually, more income-generation activities, health education programmes and camp social mobilization campaigns for girls and women began to take shape. In addition, many Afghan women had to do domestic work, carpet weaving and many other hard tasks, in support of their own and their family survival. The Muslim Women's University in Peshawar was established in the 1980s providing higher education to several hundred refugee girls and young women. It was closed by the Pakistani government during the Taliban period in the late 1990s. Many other courses were also established for Afghan women including those who taught English, computer and other skills. None of this was easily implemented, at any point in time. I heard many Afghan women say that they wonder why Westerners and others who are so concerned about Afghan women and girls' education do not support the relevant efforts of Afghans more in Pakistan, where though difficult, such programmes could be implemented even during the Taliban period. I visited quite a few Afghan refugee schools and was witness to their limited resources and extraordinary resourcefulness.



A growing number of Afghan refugee women resorted or fell prey to begging and prostitution and/or were forced into sexual trafficking in Pakistan. Wali refers to Afghan virgins who are sold to Saudi and Kuwaitis or work in Pakistani brothels (Wali, 1995:27).

However, Afghan women gradually began to raise their voices and concerns regarding the war, connect with the outside world and organize greater activities for women's rights as well as peace in Afghanistan. It was after participation in the Beijing World Conference for Women that Afghan female participants returned to Pakistan and began organizing the Afghan Women's Network which has been one of the most active in the past years. Please refer to the annexed article on Afghan Refugee Women's Organizations.

Overall, many Afghan women over the years have 'gained strength and self-assurance in new ways. The uncertainties of male support due to their absence...have caused women to assume more responsibilities, including the task of raising children without paternal support'(Dupree, The Situation of Afghan Refugee Women, no date:3).

While women have always made up a large percentage of the refugee population, many left Afghanistan after the *Mujahidin* began to exert their power and restrict women and then later, during the Taliban period due to Taliban's severe restrictions on women. For example, female artists were forced to leave, as they could no longer work and earn a living. Some lived in complete destitution in Pakistan, at least until they were accepted by a Western country within a resettlement programme. Some were never quite so fortunate. According to Johnson (1998:36), older refugees saw these women as 'communists'.

Hameeda, her husband and three children, fled to Pakistan six months after the Taliban captured Kabul. The 28 year-old mother had been teaching in the northern suburb of Khair Khana for five years...There was a bitter irony in Hameeda's tale. Her family survived four years of fighting only to be forced to flee Afghanistan during the Taliban-imposed peace...Virtually all females have been victims, or know someone who has suffered...Women such as ...Hamededa...eventually decided to flee Afghanistan for a combination of reasons, including the denial of economic, cultural and educational opportunities, as well as the preservation of their own psychological well-being (Refugees, II, 1997:29).

According to a UNHCR information note in April 2001, over 37% of its budget is spent on refugee education and 28.5% of all its students are girls.

Human Rights Watch (February 2002) has referred to various protection problems faced by Afghan refugee women in 2000-2001, including the absence of policewoman in the camps to ensure the security of women refugees, the violence during distribution of aid which resulted in women being sidetracked or reluctant to seek aid, the fact that women on their own were deprived of various powerful networks which benefited more from the aid than others, overall camp security problems such as abduction of teenage girls and increased domestic violence against girls and women.

The US and a number of other countries began resettlement programmes focusing on Afghan refugee women in view of the growing restrictions on them. These programmes gave preference to female-heads of household, single women and others at risk. Thousands of Afghan girls and women benefited from these programmes. There has been a continuing debate as to whether those most at need were able to benefit since accessing a UNHCR office, writing a good official letter of request and responding articulately during an interview requires certain levels of education, networking and resources that were not always available to the most deserving. Still, overall:

The rule of thumb in most of the Third World is that men get West and the women get left behind. Even the women who did manage to flee Afghanistan rarely got much farther than the refugee tent camps across the border in Pakistan or Iran...The few Afghan women who have made it to Britain on their own, without husbands or fathers shepherding them into exile, are, almost by definition, women who would be remarkable in any country...(Kramer, 2003:64).

While a number of human rights organizations, as well as various UN agencies, increasingly raised concerns regarding the institutionalized gender discriminatory policies of the Taliban, as did progressive Afghans in the diaspora, it took the tragic events of September 11, 2001, for the West to focus on the dire situation of Afghan women and to use it as a further reason to justify its attacks on the Taliban, the war in Afghanistan and the support to the new regime.

Khattak interviewed Afghan refugee women around the time of the attacks, especially about their experiences and sentiments regarding security and home. For most of these women:

The story of Afghan refugees contains tales of terror unleashed by major powers, neighbouring states as well as their own people. Their experience cannot be grouped under neat categories associated with exile, migration or refugeehood. Indeed, their experience can be analyzed in all these contexts and several others at several levels. Therefore, at one level it does not matter whether bombs are manufactured in the USA or the former USSR. What matters to the people is what the bombs do to them when they are dropped. As one Afghan woman in Pakistan, a recent refugee from the bombing, explained, "*Jung sho-Kabul taa raalo*" (fighting erupted and it reached Kabul)...For the women then, what mattered was that they had to flee their homes in order to be secure (Khattak, 2002:7).

Many Afghan women activists in the diaspora, in Pakistan, and elsewhere, have gone back to Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban, with the intention to support peace and help in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. For many, their experiences as refugees including exposure to higher levels of health and educational services, as well as varied job-related experiences have changed their perspectives forever. A considerable number of educated Afghan refugee women have gone back with many new skills to work for the Government, UN and NGOs. These include organizational skills, human rights advocacy, fundraising and management experience, as well as new skill-development abilities. They are trying to direct their energy towards the support of Afghan girls and women so that they will never have to face such terrible conditions again. They are part of the Government, international aid community and civil society and thus contribute to all these institutions/processes.

Their years of experience as refugees are primarily now being channeled into peace-building of Afghanistan based on respect and rights for all Afghans, men and women, of all ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, with greater opportunities for economic fulfillment and skill development. It is hoped more educated Afghan women will be able to work together with less privileged women and contribute to the rebuilding of their country and an environment which is supportive of human and women's rights.

Yet, as mentioned by Dr. Seddiq Weera, an Afghan working on peace issues at McMaster University, in a lecture at the University of York, Toronto (March 2003), there are new differences with old roots emerging, such as that between the Western diaspora returnees and the former *mujahidin* commanders or those who remained in Afghanistan or the region. He noted how accusations and stereotypes are encouraged by certain elements on both sides, one claiming the other is un-Islamic and Western-manipulated, and visa versa as fundamentalist and 'backward'. These problems exist amongst Afghan men as well as women.

Many Afghans and especially Afghan women continue to face many challenges, problems and restrictions, as is reported in the media and various reports of the UN and NGOs. These are a result of many factors including the presence of powerful armed commanders with a history of human and women's rights violations. Other factors are the very conservative religious leaders who continue to exert power, the gap between the promises of donors in terms of assistance to Afghans including Afghan women and what they actually delivered. In addition, Afghans are witness to the continuation of US attacks in certain parts of Afghanistan and ethnic-based conflicts in other parts of the country.

This situation obviously has a serious impact upon returnee women especially the majority who are poor and vulnerable. It also gives rise to further displacement inside and outside the country. The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children mentioned in an email message circulated in March 2003 that many returnee women will be left on their own in 'overcrowded homes in Kabul or in remote camps and settlements' in Afghanistan while their male-kin go to Iran or Pakistan in search of work. In addition, Afghan women who continue to live as refugees in the region – possibly over one million - are at risk of being forgotten by the international community and being further deprived of assistance and living in greater poverty than ever. They are also at risk of being forced to return by host-Governments when the situation is not conducive for them to return. In addition, sometimes refugee families are split as their male-kin are forcefully deported.

## 6. Conclusion

The experiences of Afghan refugees are very important for the whole field of refugee studies for many reasons, including the massive numbers involved, the long duration of exile as well as the political contexts and the continuous change in local, regional and global politics. An improved understanding of the critical role of the international community, its failures and successes, including the UN, INGOs, NGOs, donors, as well as the various host countries and others in their work with Afghan refugees is also very important for the future predicament of Afghans and other refugees. The experiences of Afghan refugee women are, in particular, significant in understanding gender and displacement, the politicization of women's issues, women's education as well as women's 'agency'.

Thus, listening to Afghan refugee women and attempting to analyze and understand their lives and experiences in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran is critical. No doubt, a coherent presentation needs to be informed by sufficient contextualization as well as relevant social theories. Having thus presented the two contextual chapters, in the next three chapters, the relevant theoretical discussions on gendered collective identities, gender and war, refugees and displacement and education will be examined.

## **Chapter Five - The Power of Gendered Collective Identities in Peace, Conflict and Displacement**

People shoot each other every day over the question of labels. And yet, the very people who do so tend to deny that the issue is complex or puzzling or indeed anything but self-evident

(Wallerstein in Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991:71).

### **1. Introduction**

Following the introductory as well as methodological and contextual chapters, in this chapter, I present a number of other relevant theoretical debates on collective identities (i.e. nation/nationalism, the nation-state, ethnic/religious, linguistic and tribal collectivities), patriarchy, gender and collective (re) constructions, as well as gender and conflict issues. All these concepts are inter-linked, contested and require contextualization. Their inter-sectionality plays a determining role in the lived experiences of individuals and the challenges which they face in life.

The various collectivities (communities of people) to which we 'belong' play an important role in our lives. Some are of our own choosing – such as an ideological collectivity of feminist, anti-war and anti-racist forces. Others are not, as we are basically born into them. Yet, at the same time, we are often challenging the limits and criteria of the same collectivities in our personal and political lives. Collectivities are a product of history and social constructions which change and are dynamic as well as fraught with ruptures and contradictions. The gendering of collective identities is a key concern of this dissertation, as will be elaborated below.

One of the issues which is of concern to this study is the complex link between collective identities/membership to location as well as values and agency. Anthias (2002) has highlighted the importance of differentiating between 'narratives of location' and identity issues in the deconstruction of static and essentialist notions of identities. The former is more about 'how we place ourselves in terms of social categories such as those of gender, ethnicity and class at a specific point in time and space...and is also a story about our practices and the practices of others, including wider social practices and how we experience them' (Anthias, 2002:498-499). This

distinction and what I believe to be the linkages between location and identities is further highlighted in Chapter Nine of this dissertation.

Colonialism, imperialism, modernization, globalization and/or Islamic revivalism influence these collective identities. Other global, regional, national and local economic and political interests as well as the ideologies/values of the state and/or popular forces, also impact upon these collective identities, resulting in constant tensions over definition, 'representation' and 'authenticity' – ultimately shaping complex power relations. Such tensions facilitate and are heightened at times of conflict and displacement. The consequences of war and displacement on identity issues are further discussed in Chapter Nine.

Afghanistan, often at a tragic cost to its people, demonstrates the power and problematic of essentialized nationalism, the nation-state, citizenship, ethnic/religious/linguistic/tribal and other social divisions as well as the integral, inseparable and pivotal role of women's status in these debates. These influence the social construction/reconstruction of various aspects of the identities and lives of all Afghans, including the educated refugee women interviewed. Yet, they are also constantly challenged and deconstructed/reconstructed by one or more forces in society as well as by the 'agency' of individual women and men. As is further discussed in Chapter Seven, education also influences the above debates.

The enormous challenges which Afghanistan faces today, as does the international community, in peace-making, peace-building, nation-state building, governance and respect for fundamental human rights, tolerance and mediation are but one stark reminder of the continued influence of these socially constructed collective identities in the lives of Afghans as individuals and members of various collectivities.

Social collectivity and political identity have for a long time been central for those policy-makers who are accountable to nation states or local government authorities...Historically identities have been created in a tension between policy-oriented definitions from the outside and self-definitions. They fluctuate in accordance with local, national and global power politics: they are pragmatic and contested...Identities spring from people's core experiences. But not from any essence...Conflicts over definitions of identity are often violent (Wilson and Frederiksen, 1995:1-2).

## 2. Collective Identities

### 2.1 Nation and Nationalism

The difference between nation and nationalism, as mentioned by Balibar (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 46), is that the former deals with the actual people being (re) constructed as 'a nation', separate from other nations, while the latter is concerned with the ideology involved in this process. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) outline in their work the historical and history-less nations described by Marx and Engels. Stalin's definition of the nation has been referred to frequently, at least within leftist circles. He has said 'A Nation is historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture' (1972: 13). On the other hand, Wallerstein believes nations are 'a socio-political category, linked somehow to the actual or potential boundaries of a state' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991:77). There is some validity to all the above but there are great variations amongst nations which requires contextualization.

The work of Homi Bhaba (1990) on the pivotal role of narratives in national and other collective constructions and how history is told and retold as well as the role of literature in the (re) constructions of nations and other collectivities is important. What was until recently taught in American schools as the history of the US as a 'nation', excluding issues pertaining to the near extermination of Native Americans is a case in point.

Like many such socio-political terms, nationalism is rather ambiguous and means different things to different people. Nevertheless, it is one of the most important ideologies of the past and current centuries.

There are three main camps amongst the theorists of nationalism. The primordialists (Geertz 1963, Van den Berghe 1979) portray nationalism as a natural entity which has and will always exist without much questioning. The second group proposes that nations have a common ethnic origin (Hutchinson and Smith, 1994). Smith has said:



The 'modern nation' in practice incorporates several features of pre-modern ethnies and owes much to a general model of ethnicity which has survived in many areas until the dawn of the 'modern era' (Smith, 1986:18).

He has also described nationalism as 'an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential 'nation' (Smith, 1986:15). Ideological movements are influenced by intellectuals and this is why Smith has, in addition, attached importance to their role as a driving force behind nationalism.

The third group of theorists (the modernists), with some variations, have attempted to understand the socio-economic roots of nationalism and demonstrate it as a specific historical construct which changes over time, means different things to different people, is integrally linked to power relations and is often exclusive and violent. A number of scholars, including Anderson (1983), have linked these 'imagined communities' to the project of modernization, including the expansion of the written media. Gellner (1983) focuses on the cultural homogeneity sought through nationalism in modern society. Hobsbawm (1990) is another academic of the modernist school. 'All these modernist approaches see the development of nationalism, like capitalism, as originating in Europe' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992: 24). This is while nationalism's history is also linked to decolonialization, the breakdown of empires and progressive national liberation struggles.

Within this third group, Marxist academics have stressed the economic foundations of nationalism (Amin, 1978, Bauer referred to by Yuval-Davis, 1997, Nairn, 1977, Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991).

Nations are portrayed to have a common past based on their constructions of a shared history with all its cultural and political manifestations. Wallerstein (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991: 78) describes the strength of this (re) constructed 'pastness' or 'social past' in the perpetuation of nations. They are also expected to have a common future or common destiny as coined by Otto Bauer (Yuval-Davis, 1997:19). This concept of common destiny is one of the reasons the people of a specific national collectivity feel they are bound together and to each other's 'destiny', thus willing to fight and die together. This is in particular the case for settler societies where there is

no long history of a common past but rather the vision of a common future (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis, 1995).

It is important to note that most of the scholars quoted in Western academia (Hobsbawm, 1990, Gellner, 1983, Anderson, 1983, Smith, 1986) until recently, have been Western men. This is significant since the history and historical process of nationalism has varied in different parts of the world and what applies to the Western nations will not necessarily apply to all the nations of Asia, Africa or South America. Similarly, most of the above afore-mentioned primarily male scholars have overlooked the role of women in nationalism and the gendering of nationalism as a result of their patriarchal ideologies.

Nation and nationalism are also about territory, frontiers, boundaries and borders, flags, anthems, inclusion and exclusion, membership and positionality in a world of power inequalities. Maps are the products of human beings within the context of their various social and power relations (Massey, 1994). I concur with the notion that countries have not always existed but rather been (re) constructed through history.

Nations are linked to the project of the nation-state, a national government and its power and control machinery. They assume material reality and help shape the lives of those concerned. The role of the economy and expansion of capitalism has been one of the most important forces behind the advancement of nationalism.

Some nations pay a much higher price for their membership in a particular collectivity than others. One example is the people of Afghanistan who have been suffering from war since 1978 just because they happen to be born Afghan. These differences are linked to local, national, regional as well as international unequal power relations.

Not all people within a nation have equal rights and indeed, there are many internal differences, including based on race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender and stage in the life cycle. Those who are not considered to be part of the nation, such as refugees, are excluded in various implicit and explicit ways. Refugees, for example, are often portrayed as 'not belonging' and 'a burden' – sometimes even if they are ethnically or religiously close to the residents of the host-country or highly-skilled and perform

important economic roles. This is usually experienced by refugees who are at the same time also excluded from their own original national collectivity.

This brings us to the important link between racism and nationalism as it is often nationalism that excludes and discriminates against 'the other', sometimes in a genocidal manner and at other times in more subtle ways. Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), the French Marxist philosopher and American Marxist historian explain this link further. With variation, they see it as an outcome of the exploitative division of labour and need for an ever-expanding accumulation of capital. They note that in the West at present, immigrants are the main targets of racism – as those who are not part of the national collectivity – for the same exploitative reasons. Earlier, it was targeted at 'the colonized.' According to Balibar:

...the memory of past exclusions is transferred into the exclusions of the present, or how the internationalisation of population movements and the change in the political role of nation-states can lead into a neo-racism' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991:9).

While overall agreeing with the above analysis, I believe it is not all encompassing of the various forms of racism which exist. Brah (1996), Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992), Sivanandan (1983), Gilroy (1987) and Cohen (1988) are other scholars who have elaborated on the racism in British nationalism.

Fascism such as was tragically experienced by millions of Jews, leftists, the Romani people, homosexuals and others during the genocide of World War II was an extreme manifestation of national chauvinistic discourse linked up with that of race and religion.

Balibar (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991:59) refers to the *pan* movements such as pan-Turkic and pan-Arabic which is a further expansionist model of nationalism pursued by certain collectivities at particular times in their history for various ideo-political and economic reasons – including as a response to neo-colonialism and internal opposition. The Egyptian leader, Nasser, played an important role in pan-Arabism. Ahmed (1999) has deconstructed Nasser's 'myth' of an Arab collective identity. The Baath Party

which ruled over Iraq (until March 2003) and continues to dominate Syria's political scene began as a pan-Arabic effort.

Diaspora communities often pursue their own definitions of the nationalist project and directly or indirectly contribute to such efforts in their country of origin. These are further discussed in Chapter Six.

There are currently a number of encouraging positive efforts, such as in post-apartheid South Africa, to define and practice more inclusive nationalisms. In fact, nationalism in particular moments of history has been a progressive ideology such as in anti-colonial national liberation struggles or the continuing struggles of Palestinians and Kurds.

There are various relevant typologies on nationalism (Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1992:29). Bannerji, Mojab and Whitehead (2001: 20) elaborate upon a particular typology of nationalism. They outline national-liberation movements and bourgeois anti-colonial nationalisms. Within the latter, they refer to the more 'liberal' trend which is also interested in somewhat improving women's status, as well as the 'revivalist' which aim to return to some 'root', disagree with notions of modernity and maintain a reactionary gender ideology. While overall agreeing with the above typology, I believe there is a continuum between them and in each situation, contextualization is needed. Pakistani nationalism, for example, was largely founded on the concept of religion while maintaining a focus on reform and anti-colonialism. The increasing role of the international community – including the UN - in supporting some nationalist movements such as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina or East Timor in the establishment of new nation-states is another important development.

Nationalism is often violent, undemocratic and exclusionary of various groups in society and aggressive towards 'outsiders'. That is the reason that Nairn (1977) called nationalism 'the modern Janus' or the God with two heads, one looking back and another forward, one good and the other bad. Nationalism is often given as the reason for wars between countries and amongst competing forces within one country. During war, nationalism is frequently manipulated to destroy the 'other' and silence all internal dissent. Words such as unpatriotic and disloyal are thrown around to tarnish

people's reputations and endanger their lives. Nationalism is also linked to a concept of 'homeland' which invokes different sentiments amongst various sub-groups in a country.

The aspiration of many people of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia to establish themselves as separate countries is an example of the changing quality of nationalism during different historical and political periods. It is also indicative of an upsurge in nationalism after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the case of Central Asia, nationalism has been linked to ethno-religious identities and changing political ideologies influenced by local as well as global events (Rashid, 2002).

## 2.2 The Nation-State

Nationalism and the nation-state apply to different concepts. To be part of a collective national identity, you can also live outside of the borders of that particular country. It is different with the nation-state:

The concept of the 'nation-state' assumes a complete correspondence between the boundaries of the nation and the boundaries of those who live in a specific state. This is, of course, virtually everywhere a fiction. There are always people living in particular societies and states who are not considered to be (and often do not consider themselves to be) members of the hegemonic nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997:11).

The nation-state also underlines the existence and role of the state (government) – with all its machinery including formal education as discussed in Chapter Seven. The state itself represents the interests of certain social groups – either class/ethnic and/or religious and/or ideological – more than others and is predominantly run by men and is, therefore, patriarchal, as elaborated upon by feminists quoted below. The class-based ideology of states has been elaborated upon by Marxists (Engels, 1984). In addition to class, states usually maintain the interests of a particular race (apartheid South African state), ethnic and/or religious group (i.e. the Turkish state). They are thus one of the most powerful (re) producers of nationalism (Zubaida, 1979, Amin, 1978, Wallerstein, 1974). At the same time, it is important to note that states are not the only (re) producers and custodians of nationalism. Civil society, religion, artists,

writers, the mass media and many other social forces contribute to the (re)constructions of nationalism(s).

The authority of states varies from country to country. There are sufficient examples of 'interrupted, incomplete or failed state-making' efforts in world history (Cockburn, 1998:37). Some countries have stronger central governments than others. International commentators have referred to war-ravaged countries such as Afghanistan as being either 'failed' states (Tarzi, 2002) or a 'rogue' state – the latter referring to the internationally unrecognised and criminalized state. It is in such situations that the international community, including the UN and international non-governmental organizations, are often called upon to fill the gap created by a weak central government. They usually do this with the support of the country's civil society.

The nation-state, nationalism and national sovereignty have become corner stones of the international political regime. For example, it is governments of nations that are represented at the UN. Unfortunately, even at the UN, governments do not exert equal power. This is done, according to Balibar:

...by a new world which is formally organized into equivalent nation states (each represented in international institutions) but traversed by constantly shifting frontiers – irreducible to the frontiers between states – between two humanities which seem incommensurable, namely the humanity of destitution and that of 'consumption'...(Balibar, 1991:44).

While agreeing with the gist of what Balibar outlines, I believe the reality is even more complex, as there are, for example, foci of consumption also in the so-called Third World, as there is poverty in the affluent West.

It is governments representing nations that sign/ratify or do not sign/ratify international human rights treaties at the UN or declare war on their neighbours or distant countries, targeting 'terrorism' or 'weapons of mass destruction'. It is the perceived 'national interests' of countries which drives international politics, often aggressive and exploitative. Too often, 'national interest' actually means the interest of only a small minority in the country, frequently the owners of big industries and fundamentalist ideological centers of various religions. Fortunately, there are

exceptions and various efforts exemplified by progressive elements of civil society and social movements throughout the world, within and outside of the UN, in the struggles for equity and social justice.

There are also nations without a state, such as the Kurds (Mojab, 2001), the Roma or Catalonians. There are many other nation-states, like Turkey, which have been established at the cost of other potential nation-states, such as the Kurds. Their voices and efforts are a reminder of the enormous cost by which other nation-states have been (re) constructed over time.

The indigenous understanding of concepts like nation, country and homeland varies from country to country and over time for different members of the collectivity. I believe it is important to understand these concepts within a particular context, allowing for diversity as well as distancing from westo-centric constructs. For example, in Afghanistan, homeland/country is often referred to as '*vatan*'. At the same time, '*vatan*' can also refer to one's specific region in the homeland/country (a more parochial understanding of the term). Similarly, '*vatandar*' means compatriot, as well as someone from one's own particular region.

There is another trend of academic work demonstrating the decreasing role of the nation-state vis a vis the growing trend of globalization and global powers, including the direct and indirect power of the transnationals (Brah, 2002, Amin, 1997, Turner, 1994). This has also influenced the sovereignty of the nation-state with organizations such as NATO making unilateral decisions on military action in individual countries. In most countries, both processes exist in parallel. These all have gendered, class, racialized and ethnicized consequences, with the poor, girls, women, members of minority groups and the environment (Brah, 2002) being detrimentally affected.

### 2.3 Ethnicity

As Afghanistan is an ethnically heterogeneous country, it is important to provide a theoretical framework for discussions on ethnicity in this dissertation. Afghan women, in particular, have often paid a high price for 'belonging' or being seen to belong to

one or another ethnic community, especially in war and displacement, as outlined in Chapter Nine.

Within one nation-state, there are usually more than one ethnic group living together within particular national boundaries. Pieterse (1997) has noted the similarities between national and ethnic processes. The ongoing problem in Cyprus between Greek and Turkish Cypriots is an example of ethno-national constructions and its violent potential consequences.

The term ethnicity became increasingly crucial in the social sciences in the 1960s, a period marked by the consolidation of the process of decolonisation in Africa and Asia as numerous new nation states were created. Anti-colonial and anti-racist arguments contributed to the generation of a new vocabulary in which the term 'ethnicity' was used by sociologists and others...(Guibernau and Rex, 2001).

The breakdown of the former Yugoslavia along ethno-religious divides and the tragic genocidal violence which followed in the 1990s exemplified the continued importance of gendered ethnicized constructions (Bennett, 2001, Cockburn, 1998). It is somewhat ironical that gendered ethno-religious identities and their potential danger came to the attention of many more individuals (especially in the West) only when it led to conflict in Europe and amongst white people. The increasing number of immigrants and refugees in the Western world has also increased interest in ethnicity and ethnicity studies in Western academia.

Max Weber, a Western sociologist, called ethnic groups 'those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or of both, or because of memories of colonisation or migration...The whole conception of ethnic groups is so complex and so vague that it might be good to abandon it altogether' (Weber, 1968:386). Thus while pursuing the concept of some conceived biological roots, he has in addition noted relevant cultural factors and the historical and political context. He has also pointed out the weakness of ethnicity as an analytical category due to internal heterogeneity.

Barth (1969) is amongst the first Western academics/anthropologists of ethnicity and ethnic groups. In his work on Pathans in the North-West Frontier Province of



Pakistan, he has addressed the political projects involved and their link to ethnic identity. Barth has claimed that it is ethnic 'boundaries' which are important, though their contents may shift and change over time, and it is these boundaries which unite ethnic groups. Anthias (2002) mentions instrumentalist views regarding ethnicity and its role as a political mobilizer to lobby for greater resources within society.

Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) have elaborated upon the economic structures which facilitate the ethnicization of a people for greater exploitation. Amin (1997) has linked the growing importance of ethnicity to the breakdown of old economic growth models, globalization and weakening of the nation-state. While agreeing with the above Marxist scholars on the very important role these factors play, I believe that at times, other factors are also very important, including the self-ascribed ethnization which occurs as a response to 'outsiders' and hegemonic ideologies and cultures.

Cohen has referred to ethnicity as 'a real process of historical individuation – namely the linguistic and cultural practices through which a sense of collective identity or 'roots' is produced and transmitted from generation to generation' (Cohen, 1988:24). I agree that these issues are important but believe that more than linguistics and culture is involved in the process. It also involves factors such as history, geography, religion, politics and economy. It is about where a people have come from, where they are now and their power relations with others inside and outside the community. It is also about having been oppressed and/or oppressing others (sometimes, at the same time) and issues of inclusion and exclusion. Some ethnic groups are more politically active than others, at various points in their historical narratives.

With regards to ethnicity and culture, Cohen has said 'ethnicity has come to be regarded as a mode of action and of representation: it refers to a decision people make to depict themselves or others symbolically as the bearers of a certain cultural identity' (Cohen, 1994:119). As mentioned earlier, I believe that depending on the context, ethnicity is and yet is not about culture alone. Also, within any given ethnic group, there are always many cultures and sub-cultures, including based on class and gender. Or, as Said has said:

Cultures may then be represented as zones of control or of abandonment, of recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing, all taking place in the global history that is our element (Said, 1989:225).

Cultural superiority has also been used by hegemonic powers, including colonial powers, to justify discrimination and is therefore, an important point of analysis. Consequently, culture and cultural studies are important to the analysis of identity issues (Narayan, 1997, Hall and du Gay, 1996, Balibar, 1995, Bhaba, 1994, Rosaldo, 1989).

Stuart Hall's 'new' ethnicities (1996) is also important to note as he challenges us to separate ethnicity from its essentialist and nationalistic notions, and instead use it for more thoughtful and complex constructions of one's roots.

Being majority or minority ethnic group makes a big difference in terms of power relations. First of all, majority ethnic groups often do not see themselves as a socially constructed ethnic group but assign this label only to minority groups, which is of course a racist practice (Wallerstein in Balibar and Wallerstein:1991). Not all minority ethnic groups are positioned equally within a nation-state. For example, in Afghanistan, the Ghizilbash minority ethnic group were closer to the center of Pashtun power than Uzbeks.

Yuval-Davis (1998:28) pinpoints that both nationalism and ethnicity are socially constructed collectivities or the 'imagined communities' of Anderson. Like nationalism, ethnic differences can lead to war, with conflict changing the status of concerned ethnic groups. Ethnicity like all other constructs is not static and should not be essentialized, as it is after all a social construct. In reality, within all ethnic groups there are many sub-groups and divisions, based on class, religion, location and gender.

## **2.4 Religion**

Religion, another social construct, is an important aspect of Afghan society and politics. It is affected by and impacts upon other social categories in various contextual ways. Religion inspite of its overarching features (i.e. belief in an ecclesiastical power

or powers), has varied relationships with other collective identities - some of which are mentioned below.

Religion has at times been used as the founding purpose of a nation-state, such as in the case of Pakistan (1947). In the case of many Central Asian communities, Islam as a religion is often linked to (re)constructions of national identity – largely as a response to Sovietization (Atkin, 1992). In Western liberal democracies, religion is somewhat (though not completely) separated from the state and there is greater scope for secularism – with its advantages for women in particular.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979, the religious hierarchy has attained the highest level of Government, basing most laws and policies on a conservative interpretation of Islam (Moghissi, 1999). Religious establishments can contribute to ethnic genocide, as happened with the Catholic Church in Rwanda in the mid-1990s. Yet, progressive religious elements and congregations have, at times, participated in liberation struggles such as in East Timor, the youngest country in the world having won independence in 2002.

Ethnic and religious identities sometimes become integrally linked as in the case of Bosnians and Serbs, for example, and support each other in gendered (re)construction of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' (Morokvasic, 1998).

Constructions of religion, as well as its practice, change over time and are not essential. Similarly, they are influenced by, as well as influence contemporary developments. For example, currently, even reactionary and anti-modern religious groups such as fundamentalist Islamic groups make use of 'modern' technology including the computer and satellite phones. Their networks and strategies are also global, transnational and therefore fit into contemporary paradigms (Roy, 2002).

While within national/ethnic collectivities, dissent is labelled as unpatriotic or treacherous, in religious collectivities labels such as sinful, unbeliever or atheist are called upon to exclude and punish voices of opposition, both within as well as outside of the collectivity. However, dissent from within is often frowned upon more seriously than from outside.

Some religions, including Christianity, encourage active proselytising. Christian conversion has its roots in the colonial project but has by no means ended. Others, like Zoroastrians, are against conversion of 'outsiders' and are therefore decreasing in size as a collectivity. The migration of certain religious groups at various points in history has also had enormous impact upon their changed affiliation to particular territories and nation-states. This is the case with Ismaelites from Iran to India and onwards to West Africa and more recently, to Europe and North America.

Like ethnicity, in most societies, there is a majority religion and one or more minority religions. Sometimes, minority religious groups are at the same time also a minority ethnic group. Similarly, often more than one ethnic group within a nation-state belongs to one of the religions of the country. Thus, religion is frequently cutting across ethnicities within countries. At times, a collectivity is only known by its religion rather than ethnicity. For example, in Afghanistan, the Hindus and Sikhs are known as Hindus and Sikhs rather than as Indians. Reference to ethno-religious groups demonstrates situations where both these factors are linked together in the construction of a group identity.

Consequently, there are great variations on these issues, constantly changing and interacting with one another in different ways. Again, it is important to remember that all these identities are gendered and experienced by women differently than by men. Women have been discriminated against by almost all religious institutions and have attempted to find their own voice within patriarchal religious hierarchies (Mernissi, 1996). Religious education, as part of formal government education or informal and private education, plays an important role in the (re) constructions of particular religious, religio-national or ethno-religious identities. Religious music and literature are also important in this context. These are usually in support of the status quo but sometimes also in dissent, such as Islamic *sufi* music and poetry.

In Islam, there is a concept of belonging to another larger religious collectivity (a transnational collectivity) – that of the Islamic *ummat* (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996). Islamic solidarity is supposed to be more important than allegiance to a particular nation-state. However, this has been overplayed or underplayed by political and religious leaders in the Moslem world in different ways. Sometimes it has been in the

service of nationalism (such as the pan-Arabic movement) and other times against nationalism (such as the more contemporary political conservative Islamic movements).

The consequences of belonging to the Moslem *ummat* has very different meanings for various sub-groups of Moslems including women and minorities. As there are many sub-groups within the *umma* (such as Sunni, Shiites or Ismaelites), it is in fact a heterogeneous collectivity. There is, however, a powerful male-dominated religious hierarchy involved in most cases. The exact shape of this hierarchy differs from one branch of Islam to another.

For many Moslems, the *umma* has no 'real' connotation while for others it continues to be quite powerful. Fighting for the Islamic *ummat* is also linked to the discourses of transnational military Islamic movements, *Jihad* and *hejrat* (leaving one's homeland to escape persecution). Islamic fundamentalist movements have often called upon the Islamic *ummat* to unite against certain national leaders as well as the West, especially the US. There is considerable diversity amongst these groups and movements based on nationality, ethnicity, ideology, class and other factors (Roy, 2002).

Religious identities change over time – like other collective identities - and no singular line can ever be drawn from their historical inception to their current (re)constructions. These changes are a result of many factors including colonialization, decolonialization, modernisation, westernisation, development, and globalisation. Privileging religious collective identities over others such as is pursued by Huntington and his clash of civilizations theory does not reflect the actual complexities of contemporary societies, including Islamic societies, and does not serve the interests of the worlds' disenfranchised. I fully agree with the following quote, adding Moslem and non-Moslem to the suggested binaries:

Essentialism is not merely an interesting theoretical concept. It is a dangerous political force, designed to shore up differences and inequalities, to sustain domination. It operates through stereotypes that fix identities in eternal dualisms: woman victim, male warrior, trusty compatriot, degenerate foreigner (Cockburn, 1998:13).

## 2.5 Language and Tribes

Language is an important aspect of the identity of an individual or collectivity. It is an identity marker. Sometimes it is linked to ethnicity. In Quebec, it has been used as a rallying point for a separate nation-state (Keating, 2001). Wallerstein sees the power of language as stemming from 'the *common act* of their own exchanges, of their discursive communication, using the instruments of spoken language and the whole, constantly self-renewing mass of written and recorded texts' (Balibar and Wallerstein, 1991:97).

It is important to note the growing hegemony of the English language in the world. This process began with British colonialism and has continued with more current neo-colonial and imperial unequal power relations.

Some languages are spoken by more than one ethnic group, for example Farsi/Dari in Afghanistan. Sometimes, in Afghanistan, people speak of ethnic and linguistic discrimination together, meaning the one and same issue. For example, I have heard many Afghan friends say that '*mozuyeh lesan as*' (it is an issue of language) when others would say ethnicity. Language is also relevant in terms of cultural, literary and historical links with neighbouring countries speaking the same language<sup>1</sup>. Gender and language is important considering the issue of the 'mother-tongue' and women's roles in passing on their linguistic heritage to the next generation.

On tribal identities, Eickelman has said that they are 'more exotic to Westerners than those based on kinship, religion, or city quarters and ...tribal identities have appeared exotic because of their initial unfamiliarity and because of the way in which some anthropologists have chosen to depict such social form' (Eickelman, 1988:123). Like other such constructions, tribal ones also need to be deconstructed, contextualized and considered in view of various other social divisions and related contestations. Within a nation-state and ethnic group, other socially constructed collectivities exist - including that of tribes. These tribes often have a presence within more than one modern nation-

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<sup>1</sup> Many Afghans of all linguistic groups but especially Farsi/Dari speakers are attached to mystical/Sufi Persian poetry and Farsi-poetry of the classical school including Hafez, Saadi and Rumi. Educated

state, as the case of the Pashtuns who are based in Afghanistan as well as Pakistan (Lindholm, 1996).

Tapper has provided the following definition:

...tribe may be used loosely for a localized group in which kinship is the dominant idiom of organization, and whose members consider themselves culturally distinct in terms of customs, dialect or language, and origins' (Tapper, 1983: 9-11).

Tapper (1983) mentions how Afghans often use the term *qawm* instead of *ghabeleh* which also applies to tribes. As an example of the contested nature of all these concepts, in my Afghan experience, the word *qawm* is also used for ethnic group and other collectivities. Rubin (1995) has outlined a similar understanding as has Johnson (1998) who believes it applies to a range of group identities which change over time.

Other academics who have elaborated upon tribes, their segmentary lineage and the prevalent patrilineal kinship include Gellner, 1969, Barth, 1959 and Evans-Pitchard, 1949. The Tuareg of the Sahara are an exception where tribal identity is matrilineal (Eickelman, 1998).

While in the case of Afghanistan, tribal identities continue to be considered important, Rubin (1995) and Shahrani (1984) have both questioned calling the Pashtuns a tribe over and above a geographically-specific kinship group.

In some societies, communities identified as tribal are a minority and face severe discrimination by the central state. This can be related to various reasons, including the ideology of its leadership. In Iran, for example, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there was a strong leftist movement amongst Turkmens and Kurds which was violently suppressed. While in Pakistan, Pashtuns are a minority, in Afghanistan, they have been the dominant ethnic group. 'Their ethnicity has more to do with their separation from the 'other', while their tribalism has to do with the particular structure of their community' (Pourzand, 1996:31).

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Afghan women are often attracted to the poetry of Iran's women poets including Parvin Etesami and Forough Farrokhzad.

The Pathans (as Pakistani Pashtuns are called) are also an example where a particular ethno-tribal collectivity assumed a particular position in the colonial imagination. In fact, ' they were viewed either as brave and honourable, or as treacherous scoundrels' (Lindholm, 1996:3). This was further elaborated in Chapter Three.

The relationship between various tribes and religions is relevant to the understanding of social dynamics. In the case of Pashtuns, Islamic affiliation is very important (Ahmed, 1976). Tribal codes of conduct such as the *Pashtunwali* (also interlinked with Islam) have been influential and had serious consequences for women (Grima,1992).

Tribes, like other collectivities, have often been essentialised and stereotyped by various forces, including the colonialists and other groups, whereas they are fluid and ever changing as well as linked to other social categories. Commonalities/ alliances between individuals identified as members of certain tribal groups and others have also existed. These have, however, often been overlooked with the focus on essential tribal identities.

Collectivities known as tribes have at times been pitted against each other by colonial powers as well as central governments. The example of Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda is one such tragic situation. Tribalism, in certain literature, has denoted 'primitivism' and been a sustaining colonial and westo-centric explanation for many of the problems facing parts of Africa and Afghanistan - without due consideration for all the other global economic and political factors involved. Like in other areas of anthropology, the colonial ideologies involved in *studying* tribes has been criticized (Lindholm,1996, Geertz, 1963).

Having briefly outlined issues pertaining to constructs of collective identities, I will now proceed with a discussion on gender, women and patriarchy as a link between the above section and the sections on the gendering of collective identities.



### **3. Gendering of Collective Identities**

#### **3.1 Women and Patriarchy**

After Boserup's (1970,1989) pathbreaking work on women and development, various feminist-inspired women in development (WID) and gender and development (GAD) theories were advanced. These emphasized that gender roles were socially constructed and therefore, could be changed. This was a breakthrough in its own time and influenced development paradigms, resulting in numerous gender analysis frameworks, modules and training packages (Moser, 1989).

Nevertheless, there was still a belief that sex categories were a biological and scientific fact, not directly related to gender roles which were socially constructed. That has now changed. There has been a growing concern amongst post-modern and post-structuralist feminist academics about the category 'woman', some seeing it as a social construct like that of gender roles and relations (Assiter, 1996, Butler, 1990, Scott, 1988). Feminists concerned with the deconstruction of the category 'woman' have been influenced amongst others by the French post-modern theorists (Althusser,1972, Foucault,1972) who encouraged the deconstruction of societal concepts. Their contribution has been very important in challenging the perception that the current status of gender is 'natural' and eternal. Foucault's contribution to understanding diffused power relations and processes of power is also important in the study of gender, as it is for colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism and racism.

Gender should be understood not as a 'real' social difference between men and women, but as a mode of discourse which relates to groups of subjects whose social roles are defined by their sexual/biological differences as opposed to their economic positions or their membership in ethnic and racial collectivities. Sexual differences should also be understood as a mode of discourse, one in which groups of social subjects are defined as having different sexual/biological constitutions. In other words, both 'gender' and 'sex' can be analyzed as modes of discourse, but with different agenda (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 9).

In spite of the above, in many societies, the experience of being a man or woman remains a persistent reality with material consequences. Thus, continued research on women as women, though not in an essentialized and homogenous way, remains

important in struggles for gender equity. There still needs to be debate and political action around the category 'woman' in order to understand such experiences and in support of women's human rights.<sup>2</sup> This is also a challenge to hegemonic male-centric understandings of social phenomena. This does not, however, exclude the linkages which exist between women's identities as women and their national, ethnic, class and education-related identities. The various components of an individual's identities cannot be reduced to one of them – it is an intermesh of them all – depending on the particular context and situation. These are also influenced by powerful cultural interpretations. Nevertheless, being a 'woman' remains an important and defining aspect of the lives of many people around the world.

This also does not mean that alliances between men and women cannot exist. There are situations and moments in time when the interest of men and women are close to one another. For example, in the context of Afghanistan, men and women were both equally at risk of being hit by rockets in Kabul in the early 1990s, and consequently it was in the interest of both that the war stop, or that they leave Kabul. In addition, considering the continued pivotal role of the family in Afghanistan (and in many other countries), women and men's emotional and material wellbeing is often connected. This is one arena where prevalent westo-centric feminist discourses on the family unit fail to capture the particular gendered familial dynamics in other societies.

When referring to patriarchy in this dissertation, I mean 'a structural and ideological system of domination which produces, sustains and reproduces authoritarian, asymmetrical sexist values and practices' (Moghissi, 1996:1). Other academics who have elaborated upon patriarchy include Walby (1990), Ramazanoglu (1989) and Eisenstein (1979). 'Dichotomous constructions of social spheres such as the public/private domains or nature/civilization have been central to these analyses' (Yuval-Davis, 1997:5).

Though a very useful term in the context of this dissertation and the unequal social status of women in society including Afghanistan, patriarchy is not without problems

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<sup>2</sup> For example, as long as a Pakistani girl of 18 can be gang-raped with the consent of a tribal council as punishment for her 11 year-old brother who walked with an upper-caste girl, how can we deny the

as a concept. For example, there is more than one kind of patriarchy and we should speak about patriarchies since like all social relations, patriarchy is also a construction and therefore, different from one context to another. Joseph (1993), for example, has mentioned how in Lebanon patriarchy applies to the power of men over women and older people over younger people. Thus, some older women also exert power over others, including younger men.

‘Val Moghadam (1994), on the other hand...locates patriarchy in a specific geographical zone...’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 7). Patriarchies are not static and change over time in response to different levels of socio-economic development. In addition, patriarchy is affected by other systems of oppression which exist in all societies as well as social movements including women’s rights movements. It is therefore not helpful to generalize or reduce all power differences amongst women and men to patriarchy. It needs contextualization at all times to become meaningful.

As theorized by Yuval-Davis and Anthias, ‘women’s oppression is endemic and integral to social relations with regard to the distribution of power and material resources in the society’ (Yuval-Davis and Anthias, 1992). Still, specific gendered social relations and distribution of power need to be understood as each is different from the other.

Place, space and geography are other gendered experiences, as highlighted by feminist geographers (Uguris, 2000, McDowell, 1999, Massey, 1994). This begins from the home, the local, to rural/urban environments, the national space, international or global space and the geography of displacement and movement.

The experience of conflict and displacement, in particular, can impact upon patriarchal structures and either restrict or open-up spaces for dialogue and positive change. The ‘agency’ of women (and progressive men) will continue to interrupt patriarchies and cause fractures from which liberatory frameworks develop. It is often at times of crisis that women are able to ‘bargain with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti, 1988).

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importance and material reality of being a ‘girl’ or a ‘woman’ (Toronto Star, 5<sup>th</sup> of July, 2002).

Afghan patriarchies definitely have their own features as well. In Afghanistan, the issue of age and relationship is very important and many sons often listen to their mothers on important issues including marriage and career choices. I am reminded of an Afghan male friend who called his father '*ghebleh gah*' or place of worship. This is a further indication of patriarchy and its links to the familial relation/age hierarchy. There are also patriarchs who exert power over other men (and women) as a result of various other power relations. One example, is the power of the leaders of Afghan *Sufi tarighats* (orders) who are traditionally respected like a father (Olesen, 1995). Consequently, gender and age hierarchies are often linked to religious status<sup>3</sup> and/or religion is used to sustain them.

Having framed issues pertaining to patriarchy, I will now return to the issue of gendered collective identities.

### 3.2 Collective Identities and Gender

Until recently most of the work on nationalism, the nation and nation-state had been undertaken by Western male scholars who ignored gender in their analysis (Smith, 1986, Gellner, 1983, Anderson, 1983). This is linked to the patriarchal framework of most societies as well as the patriarchal ideologies which dominate many academic circles. It is also connected to the public and private divide of patriarchal societies – with men (or most men) assuming public roles and women (or most women) being located at home, in the private sphere. Consequently, issues such as decision-making about the politics of a 'nation' has usually been considered male domain. In spite of the fact that national political power has been primarily maintained in the hands of men, gender has continued to be an integral but overlooked part of the process of nationalism.

Feminist scholars (Giles, 1999, Pettman, 1996, Alwis, 1995, Kandiyoti, 1991, Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989, Enloe, 1989, Pateman, 1988, Connel, 1987) have challenged patriarchal ideologies in the academia and have shown the important gendered aspects

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Similarly, the exploitation of women's sexuality in many Western advertisements continues unabated.

<sup>3</sup> There is a belief amongst many Moslems that loving, respecting and taking care of your parents is what God expects from you and for such deeds, you will be compensated in this and the other life.

of relevant processes. Similarly, non-White feminist scholars (Collins, 1990, Jayawardena, 1986, Chatterjee, 1986, hooks, 1981) have provided a better understanding of the racialized and ethnicized experiences of different groups of women and pointed to existing white and westo-centric biases. They have also referred to the central role of women and the gendered processes of colonialization, independence struggles, modernity, nation-state building and the increasing power and resource inequities which exist in the world – especially that of the ‘North’ and ‘South’ – and its gendered dynamics.

It is in the important work of Anthias and Yuval-Davis that the critical role of women in national, ethnic and other collectivities is outlined, as follows:

- (a) biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
- (b) reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
- (c) participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its cultures;
- (d) signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
- (e) participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989:7)

The issue of being biological reproducers of the next generation is very important and in more traditional and conservative societies, is often seen as ‘the’ main duty of women. The conditions of this reproduction (also linked to sexual control) are often determined by others, not the woman herself – sometimes with tragic consequences. If she does not oblige, she is often assumed to have ‘dishonoured’ the collectivity and is therefore, liable to the highest punishment.<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that women’s rights

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<sup>4</sup> The killing of women by their families for issues of ‘honour’ is not limited to Moslem societies. On Canadian TV on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2002, a programme was shown about the killing of a Sikh woman from the Canadian diaspora by her family’s hired assassins as she had fallen in love and married another Sikh in India who was poor (unlike her own family).

activists have often focused on reproductive rights.<sup>5</sup> In fact, women's bodies are often the terrain of inscribing (re) constructions of patriarchal collective identities.

Barriers to and discrimination against mixed marriages is another example of the gendering of national/ethnic constructions. Marrying an 'outsider' often continues to be depicted as a betrayal of one's own. Mixed marriages suffer in particular during times of war. The negative consequences of the war in Bosnia Herzegovina on 1.7 million mixed marriages (out of a total population of 5.7 million) has been a frequently cited example by feminist scholars. In addition, through heterosexual marriage, the maintenance of particular family units, usually patriarchal, is important in the constructions of collective identities (Narayan, 1997).

The issue of the 'mother' tongue is also related to identities. Women's role in maintaining constructions of collective histories through story-telling, oral traditions, poetry and handicrafts is another important consideration – sometimes in the service of the status quo but in other times, as a sign of resistance. In fact, the 'homeland' is often also identified as the 'motherland' (Narayan, 1997).

During times of crisis such as war and conflict, the above dynamics become even more powerful as mostly male soldiers fight for the 'motherland' while mothers, wives and sisters are encouraged to see the soldiers off with 'courage', welcome them with 'joy and tears' and should they never return, grieve for them with dignity. War is linked to militarization and militarization is integrally dependent on patriarchy and specific constructs of masculinities and femininities (Enloe,2000) The *kalashnikov* culture of war in Afghanistan has meant more harassment and restrictions for women. Militarized zones take over most of what little space women have to live their lives with dignity. War among national, ethnic and/or religious collectivities often challenges the notion of women's solidarity. Issues related to conflict and women are further discussed below.

National/ethnic narratives are (re) constructed in order to strengthen patriarchy.

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<sup>5</sup> The American religious right continues to be an influential lobbying force in the US and has, for example, influenced the US government's decisions to withhold support to UNFPA and its reproductive health programmes (June 2003, <http://www.unfpa.org>).

In the process of developing a new nationalist consciousness, tradition is reinvented and women are constructed as the bearers of the authentic/ated culture (Pettman, 1996).

This is accentuated when religion is at stake, such as the case in Afghanistan. Though by no means limited to Islam, there is currently a greater focus on conservative religious politics and practise in many Islamic countries for various internal and external reasons (Moghadam, 1993). Women become 'metaphors for the integrity of the Islamic community, expressing its purity in an idiom common to Muslim culture – honour and chastity of women' (Petet, 1993: 53). Women are supposed to symbolize both the national and religious collectivities (both being integrally linked). Unfortunately, in cases like Afghanistan, a reactionary interpretation of Islam has been advanced in a militarized environment. Consequently, supportive, safe and/or secular spaces for women have been tremendously reduced.

Women haven't had an easy relationship with nationalism. Even when they have suffered abuse at the hands of colonialists and racists, they have often been treated more as symbols than as active participants by nationalist movements organized to end colonialism and racism (Enloe, 1989:42).

In fact, they have not had an easy relationship with any of the afore-mentioned collective identities, as they have all sustained women's subordination.

Connel (1987) has elaborated upon the nation-state as the main site of 'hegemonic masculinity' as it connects nationalism, ethnicization and patriarchy. Balibar (1994) has also elaborated upon the integral role of sexism in nationalism and the development of the nation-state, inspite of the more universal projection of the latter. Wallerstein (1974) has linked sexism to the global capitalistic economy and the requirement for cheap labour. While agreeing with this argument, I believe however that economy is not the only cause of women's subordination, as outlined also above in the quote by Anthias and Yuval-Davis. The gendering of collective identities has as much to do with inter-group dynamics as with reaction to external events. Afghanistan is a prime example of this situation, as presented in Chapter Three. The presence of 'aliens' has provided patriarchal male leaders with the excuse/justification to exert greater control over women and also men through women.

Rai argues that 'Western feminist state theory has largely ignored the experience of Third World women under the post-colonial state' (Rai, 1996:5) While attaching importance to her comment, I would add that there is great diversity in 'Third World' countries as well and not all were directly colonized, and thus experienced post-colonialization differently. Rai interestingly mentions that:

Women in Third World countries are more removed from the state in all its manifestations than are Western women. This is because the state in the Third World is unable to provide the kind of safety network that the Western liberal state does with its welfare provision...women in these states do not become aware of many areas of state legislation and action....the lack of infrastructural power of the state means that its laws are altogether ignored in many parts of the country (Rai, 1996:17).

Again, while in principle agreeing with the above points, there is diversity in terms of states in the 'Third World' as well and some are stronger and more centralized than others. There is also considerable difference in national infrastructure development both within and amongst 'Third World' countries. These differences help shape women's lives in various ways. The ideology (ies) of the leadership of the state also makes a gendered difference for women depending on whether they are Islamicist, secular, nationalist or socialist (Molyneux, 1985) as well as the tactics the state uses to influence its citizens. These can either be democratic, consensus-based, coercive and/or violent.

Gender also plays an important role in the politics of the diaspora with women often expected to carry the 'burden of representation' (Yuval-Davis, 1998: 29) as is further discussed in the next chapter.

While intellectually and politically contributing enormously to anti-colonial and other liberation movements, women have often been denied leadership roles and have had to be witness to an outcome which has perpetuated their exploitation. Women who organize against war are often denounced as 'westernised' or 'estranged' from their own roots, thus allegedly playing into the hands of the 'enemy'. The challenge for feminists and/or women activists at time of war has been intense, especially with having to cross a very thin line of not supporting reactionary forces within one's own country as well as outside.



Women by supporting nationalism in their own country or their own nation-state, have often directly or indirectly supported the oppression of other nations/ethnic and/or religious groups. The support provided by Turkish feminists to Turkish nationalism at the cost of the rights of Kurdish and Armenians is but one example (Mojab, 2001). Consequently, nationalism has often divided women. Some nationalist movements, including the Kurdish, are tainted by their patriarchal attitudes and tolerance of practices such as honour killing (Mojab, 2001). Women as individuals and/or groups/movements have also resisted the patriarchy of these collective identities in the search for more inclusive, democratic and liberating definitions.

As to *identity*, my hunch was quickly confirmed. The women were suffering a lot of what I came to think of as 'identity hurt'. The pain occurred when there was friction and disjunction between a woman's sense of self and the identities with which she was labelled, that she was held to account for, or felt seduced by. The women were assailed by identities that contradicted their politics, that seemed to position them uncomfortably, and they were bereft of identities they would have liked to have (Cockburn, 1998:10).

Education is a potential opportunity for transformation including that of collective identities, as outlined in Chapter Seven. However, such transformations are shaped and limited by other factors. To quote from Sherry Ortner, 'it is important to undertake a careful analysis of the cultural meanings and structural arrangements that construct and constrain their "agency", and that limit the transformative potential of all such intentionalized activity' (Ortner, 1996:2). Similarly, it is important for feminists to know 'how to be sceptical of modernity's progressive claims of emancipation and critical of its social and cultural operations and yet appreciate the forms of energy, possibility, even power that aspects of it might have enabled, especially for women' (Abu-Lughod, 1998:12).

Women (like men) have also continued to be nurtured and in return, have nurtured positive aspects of their national/ethnic collectivities, such as its history, folklore, literature, music, dance, dress, story-telling, food, spiritual beliefs, positive values and expressed as well as demonstrated sincere solidarity towards their compatriots when their countries have been in crisis or in danger of destruction (Cockburn, 1998). It is

often as members of their particular collectivities that women learn about social inequality and injustice, and begin to struggle for human rights and freedom.

As citizenship and citizenship rights are matters of great relevance to women's status within a nation-state, a discussion on citizenship and gender follows.

### 3.3 Citizenship and Gender

State citizenship is an important – though contested - factor most commonly perceived as an issue of being a 'legal' citizen of a given country (nation-state) – thus having the 'right' to a national passport or to vote, for example. Unlike the collective identities discussed earlier in this chapter, everyone who can fulfil a specific set of government – set criteria can in principle become a citizen of a country. It does not have to be linked directly to your national background, ethnicity, religion or other differential social constructions.

Afghans, including the women I have interviewed, have experienced citizenship in various dramatic ways. Experiences of citizenship also vary according to class and other social divisions. For example, very poor and uneducated rural women of Afghanistan have not experienced citizenship the same way as educated and urban Afghan women. Many poor rural women do not even have a government issued birth certificate, much less passport, and have never/seldom exercised their right to vote. The issue of passports is important for women in another way too. In some Moslem countries, including Iran, married women are still obliged to obtain a formal 'permission' from their husbands to travel abroad.

Afghan refugees in Pakistan (and Iran) have faced their own obstacles in terms of citizenship. Very few have had access to the citizenship of these countries through legal channels, unlike the situation of Afghans in the West. Many Afghans in the West now maintain dual nationality. In order to understand their particular experiences, it is necessary to provide an overview of citizenship issues in general.

According to Yuval-Davis (1998: 27), T.H. Marshall has defined three aspects of citizenship and inclusion in the national collectivity, namely the civil, political and

social. Bryan Turner (1990) has elaborated upon two dichotomous dimensions of citizenship – the public/private and active/passive.

The idea of citizenship is largely a Western concept, introduced during the French Revolution with its concepts of ‘rights’ and ‘obligations’ within a republican and democratic framework. It is about the ‘egalitarian utopia’ of Toqueville (Mouffe, 1988: 94). All citizens based on an individual ‘contract’ with the state are supposed to have equal rights – though from the beginning this was meant more for men, than women.

Citizenship is also related to the ‘right’ to vote (voting is also an ‘obligation’) and therefore, collectively determining government leadership and policies. This too was a prerogative of men until such time that women’s suffragettes/activists – together with progressive men – were able to change the situation and obtain women’s right to vote. In liberal democracies, it is also related to benefiting from the welfare-state (Orloff, 1996) - as and when it exists - and contributing through various channels, including a free civil society, to the well being of the country and its citizens. It is, therefore, also about civic rights.

In less or non-democratic countries, the situation is different. The possession of official citizenship and a passport does not automatically result in a set of civic and political rights, for example, freedom of speech or membership in political parties. Nevertheless, one is still considered a citizen (a member of that particular collectivity) which determines one’s situation though in different ways. Encompassing various forms of citizenship is more permissible within T.H. Marshall’s definition which allows for ‘multi-tier citizenship in both sub- and supra-state collectivities as well as the question of the relationships of these collectivities to the State’ (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 70) rather than the liberal definition of an individual citizen’s relationship with the State.

Participation in armies and fighting for one’s country is also an important part of citizenship ‘obligations’. In most countries, at least until very recently, this duty and the prestige attached to it were the sole domains of male citizens. The situation is different for ‘non-state’ armed forces where other factors such as ideology, religion or

ethnicity are a determining factor in filling up the ranks – such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka (de Alwis and Jayawardena, 1996).

As feminist academics (Lister,1997, Sylvia Walby,1994, Pateman,1988) have demonstrated, not all members of a national collectivity – even in Western liberal democracies - are equal in their citizenship rights, nor are all considered citizens. Women, for example, continue to be considered demi-citizens in many countries. Even in Switzerland, it was only in the mid-twentieth century that women were allowed to vote. Women's participation in the military is also related to citizenship especially since fighting and dying for your country is seen as the ultimate sign of allegiance as a citizen and soldiers are often privileged citizens (Enloe, 2000, Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Nevertheless, discussions around equal rights of women to citizenship are important and valuable in opening up new arenas for women's advancement and empowerment. Third world feminists (Mohanty,1991, Kandiyoti,1989, Jayawardena,1986, Sansarian, 1982, and Abrahamian, 1982) have shown how women in non-Western countries have struggled for equal citizenship rights, often through their contribution to the anti-colonial, reformist and democratic social movements. Equal rights were often denied to women by male leaders once they have achieved their objectives and are in charge. This sidelining often begins with the non-inclusion of women in the process of writing the Constitution and continues with the patriarchal hierarchy of political parties and in many other ways.

Similarly, in certain contexts, racialized, ethnicized and other minorities are also considered 'second class' citizens and are deprived of many rights granted to more powerful groups (Gordon, 1989). Frequently, even second or third generation immigrants/refugees are still considered 'outsiders' and are discriminated against – explicitly or subtly. This happens in many different ways for political as well as economic reasons. A more political example is that of many Moslem Americans after September 11, 2001 who felt as if they were 'less' American than others. Some also experienced imprisonment and other forms of abuse, which they would not have otherwise. Definitely, their civil rights are now more at risk than before. Japanese-Americans and Japanese-Canadians experienced a similar fate during World War II in the US and Canada.

Palestinian citizens of Israel are another example of citizens of a nation-state facing discrimination and exclusion (Abdo and Lentin, 2002), as are Kurds in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria (Mojab, 2002). Yet, amongst Palestinians and Kurds, there are also many other social divisions including those based on class, gender, sexuality, age and ability/disability and consequently, not ALL members of a racialized or ethnicized collectivity will be treated the same within and/or outside the collectivity.

In many Western countries, the cultural presence of immigrants in ethnic parades, festivals and indigenous musical events is now more accepted than several decades ago. This is often linked to various multicultural policies. At the same time, there is resistance to their sharing of political and economic power as citizens (Werbner and Modood, 1997). Refugees face an even worse situation, as is further discussed in the next chapter. In some ways, migrant workers fare worse than even immigrants or political refugees, since they do not have the right to seek citizenship (Sharma, 2000).

Citizenship has been experienced differently by Indians and Pakistanis with the history of colonialism than by the English in the UK (Lentin, 1999). Colonial 'subjects' did not have citizenship rights even in their own countries, whereas citizens of the colonizing country enjoyed more rights and could also determine the rights of the colonized. This was one of the main motivating factors behind anti-colonial movements. However, even in post-colonial situations, not ALL members of the national collectivity in fact have equal rights.

Some of the above inequalities continued beyond colonial times as a result of neo-colonial unequal power relations. For example, before the 1979 Revolution in Iran, Americans were not held accountable to Iranian laws while working and living in Iran (the law of capitulation). Even if they hit and killed a pedestrian, they could not be tried and charged in Iran.

Concepts of citizenship are changing as a result of new regional and international (supra-national) agreements. For example, the European community-related agreements entitle most Europeans to have many citizenship 'rights' in other European countries. Pettman (1999), Lister (1997), Eisenstein (1996) and Soysal (1994) have elaborated upon the gendered impact of globalization. The participation of soldiers

with different citizenships together in international missions – such as those of the UN or NATO – is another relevant issue. The role of the international community including the UN in supporting particular notions of citizenship within good governance and women's rights projects is also relevant in countries emerging from long periods of conflict – like Afghanistan.

Isin and Turner (2002) have attempted to update the analytical frameworks of citizenship based on the growing multinational and plural nationalities context of certain countries, including Canada, Australia, France, Germany and Japan. They correctly argue that older (modern, liberal) notions of citizenship based on the nation-state concept are no longer valid because of the increase in migration, supra-national bodies like the EU and international human rights.

It is to a great extent through the concept of citizenship that governments try to shape and direct their population. This effort is linked to gendered economic as well as religious, cultural, racialized and ethnicized frameworks. For example, the 'ideal' citizen of a country moving in the direction of Western modernization is different from that of a Socialist state or a theocracy. Similarly, constructs of the 'ideal' man will differ from that of the 'ideal' women in patriarchal societies.

The symbolic value of the veil in defining female citizenship by various Iranian leaders is but one example. Reza Pahlavi, the former King of Iran, forced women to take off their veils in the 1930s in line with his 'modernization' efforts. The Islamic Republic of Iran forced it back on women in the early 1980s in order to 'Islamicize' its female citizens. Though not always as controversial or restrictive, men's attire has also been influenced by concepts of citizenship. The focus on appearance and attire is by no means limited to Islamic countries. There are also many direct and indirect ways of determining the appearance and attire of citizens in liberal democracies including through peer pressure, the media and fashion.

Economic policies, the education system, media and other channels are all mobilized to influence the population in particular ways. As highlighted by Najmabadi in Abu-Lughod (1998), women as mothers also become subjects of citizenship with the government attempting to influence 'motherhood'. An example of such efforts is the

annual Model Mother awards that were presented in Iran during the *Shah's* regime in the 1970s.

Fortunately, there is always some degree of dissent and demand for more inclusive definitions and practices of citizenship. It is in the spaces of discontent that the system is challenged and the situation can change for the better. Many women – including my interviewees - have been amongst the forces challenging particular patriarchal and exclusionary notions of citizenship.

This chapter will continue with a discussion of Gender and Armed Conflict, as it is critical to the understanding of Afghan women's experiences and the lives of millions of women all over the world.

### **3.4 Gender and Armed Conflict**

Armed conflicts are an outcome of unequal power relations at community, national, regional and/or international level. There is a continuum between every day political and socio-economic violence and armed conflict. In this section, the focus is on armed conflict. Wars very often are the result of decisions and actions taken by male leaders though women (or some women) might support these for various reasons. Though both are destructive, the socio-economic and ideo-political frameworks which result in war vary.

History has been witness to wars for national liberation as well as national expansion and/or colonial exploitation. Nevertheless, the practice of conflict is always masculine as is its symbolism (for example, the expression 'penetration into enemy territory'). Yet, women are an integral part of the process of conflict in many ways (Enloe, 2000), as recently recognized through the groundbreaking work of feminist scholars. These scholars, referred to below, have engendered the studies of international relations and politics, nationalism, ethnicity and war, breaking down public (male)/private (female) dichotomies. The 'earlier literature was largely gender-blind, with women's participation simply not identified...Similar to this was the notion that related women to peace (passivity) and men to war (aggression)' (Moser, 2001: 3).

The political economy of war also has gendered repercussions (Moser, 2001, Enloe, 2000, Cockburn, 1998, Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998, Vickers, 1993).

Militarization is accompanied by high expenditure on arms. This is often at the expense of public services, including health and education. In the main, poor countries spend a greater proportion of their national product on arms than rich countries (Cockburn, 2001:18).

This obviously has serious ramifications especially for poor women and their families. Militarization as a social process is much more than just militaries (Enloe,2000). It is an ideo-cultural and political/economical process which can envelope almost every aspect of social life with various repercussions for girls and women.

Lentin has illustrated how various catastrophes of a genocidal typology have been gendered tragedies. She refers to 'slavery, sexual slavery, mass rape, mass sterilization...' (Lentin,1997: 2). She makes reference to the Armenian genocide of 1894-96 in Turkey and the Nazi genocide of World War II. Colonial projects have also at times been genocidal – such as the treatment of native Indians in North America. More contemporary genocides include that of Rwanda in 1994. By gendered, Lentin does not imply that only women are affected, but rather that women and men are affected in sometimes similar but often different ways, linked to their social positions and the social constructions of gender. Nor does it imply that women are always only victims.

Mojab (1999) refers to the targeting of women political activists and/or spouses of guerrillas in the case of Kurdish women's experiences of conflict, which is also very important in certain contexts.

One of the most tragic ways war is fought on women's bodies is rape – though it does not only occur during war. Rape of the 'other' women is unfortunately common in wars, with the soldiers of one side feeling they are entitled to the women of the other side. Rape is at times seen as a legitimate 'payback' for having fought – for having been away from one's family for a long time. The overall macho ideology of war facilitates rape of women in different ways.



Rape of the 'other' women has been used as a weapon of war to humiliate the 'other' men and interrupt the process of reproduction within the collectivity (Copelon, 1995). It has also been used to terrorize the 'enemy' population in general. Rape is often connected to national, ethnicized and religious divisions in society such as the rapes which took place in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia where many Bosnian women were raped by Serb nationalist armed forces (1990-92), or the mass rapes which occurred during the partition of India in 1947, between Hindu and Moslem communities (Butalia, 2001, Andric-Ruzicic, 1999 Menon and Bhasin, 1998, Brownmiller, 1994, Coomaraswamy, 1994, Mackinnon, 1994). In war, often, armed men on both sides of the battle rape women of the 'other'.

Turshen refers to the role of rape in the wars of Mozambique (1976-1992) and Rwanda (1990) for the purpose of extorting women's assets and that 'rape during armed conflict is a socially constructed experience, that it is produced by a series of deliberate policy decisions, and that it is therefore neither inevitable nor unchangeable' (Turshen, 2001:56). In Mozambique, girls and women were kidnapped for sex as well as to provide other services to the fighters (Turshen, 2001:57).

The trauma of experiencing war rape is very difficult to address by social and aid workers or Truth Commissions during and after a conflict, though certain successful experiences exist, including the work of Medica Zenica in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Krog, 2001, Andric-Ruzicic, 1999). Issues such as protection of raped witnesses are also very important. Women raped during war are often stigmatized even by their own community (Butalia, 2001). In Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1993, the Islamic religious leadership issued a *fetwa* saying that women raped during the war should be supported, not rejected, by their family, friends and communities (Andric-Ruzicic, 1999). Claims and denunciations of war rape have at times been used by male political leaders for their own nationalistic and political objectives, robbing the women involved of their subjectivity (Butalia, 2001). Women in such cases are often treated as the 'property' of men. The media often plays an important role in such debates.

After years of activism by feminists at the international level, war rape was acknowledged as a crime against humanity at the UN Human Rights Conference and Vienna Declaration of 1993. The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 further endorsed

this point, as well as other issues related to conflict and gender. Similarly, gendered crimes against humanity such as rape are now also part of the mandate of the International Criminal Court (ICC), established in 1998. Unfortunately, it continues to occur including in the state of Gujarat, India in 2002 when many Moslem women were raped by extremist Hindus. Though less often, men are also sexually abused in times of conflict and/or the men of the 'enemy' are feminized in order to prove their weakness vis a vis the masculinity and virility of 'their own' men' (Zarkov, 2001, Basu, 2000).

Enloe (2000) has shown how increased prostitution around army camps and establishments is another gendered and exploitative ramification of patriarchal militaries. The rape of a 12 year old Japanese girl by an American soldier based in Okinawa in 1995 (Takazato, 2000) is another outcome of masculinized militaries, as is the familial murders which occurred in US bases by American soldiers who had returned from Afghanistan in 2002.

The homeland is often symbolized as the mother, with men as its gatekeepers and saviours. Soldiers must prevent 'the rape' of the homeland. It is usually men who go out and fight for the 'motherland' as soldiers, with death as a possibility. Their 'sacrifice' is repaid in many ways including their higher social status in society at times of peace. Men go out and fight, while women are expected to stay behind, deal with all existing pressures at home and provide the required support. Women are obligated to be the cheerleaders with men in the field doing the 'real' thing.

Armies are usually made up of men who are presented as macho and brave in their willingness to defend and die for their 'womanandchildren' (Enloe,1983). They are therefore provided certain privileges in society not available to most women. Not all feminists agree with regards to women's participation in military establishments (Kovitz, 2000). Even when permitted into armies, they are often restricted in their roles (Yuval-Davis, 1985) and face various forms of gendered discrimination. Women have also been direct perpetrators of violence in war times (Moser, 2001), either as soldiers, guerrilla fighters (Ibanez, 2001), military arms production workers or in other ways. The participation of women in the Sri Lankan conflict as armed

members/suicide bombers of the LTTE is one example (Abeysekara, 2003), as is the more recent phenomena of female Palestinian suicide bombers.

Therefore, women are not only victims (or 'objects') of conflict but rather play an active role (Moser and Clark, 2001), even if behind the scenes, the modality of which depends somewhat on the context of each war (Turshen and Twagiramariya, 1998). In 2002-3, for example, Condolizca Rice, an African-American woman and member of President Bush's cabinet, has been a key proponent of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. War also influences and changes other aspects of women's identities, including their national, ethnic and class identities. Sometimes, war opens up new spaces for women or some women (Sharoni, 2001), though I believe always at a very heavy cost.

A number of the other tragic consequences of war for girls and women include injury, disability, psychosocial trauma, torture, death, abduction, forced marriage, increased domestic violence, widowhood, assuming the role of the head of the household, losing one's children, loss of other family members and friends, family separation, destruction of one's home, destitution, loss of agricultural land, livestock, other sources of income and jobs, deprivation from health (especially reproductive health) and educational services, and increased patriarchal restrictions on mobility and attire.

The issue of widows, mothers, daughters and sisters of war-martyrs is also important in the gender analysis of war and its consequences. Hans (2000) refers to the symbolic role of the widow in the nationalistic imagination of mainstream Indian politics within the context of conflict with Pakistan over Kashmir. In the case of Iran and eight years of war with Iraq, war widows became prominent in the official government propaganda through the media and other channels<sup>6</sup>. Female kin of martyred soldiers and paramilitary fighters (sometimes very young boys of 12) were brought on TV and radio and expressed how proud they were that their husband, sons and/or brothers had died while defending their religion and country.

However, the reality was more complex and gradually some of these same widows began to express their dissatisfaction with the policies and slogans of the government,

lobbying for greater authority including over their children, with limited success. Some of the senior clergy, including former-President Rafsanjani, used the Friday Prayers tribune to encourage marriage with widows of martyrs as well as the practice of *sigheh* (temporary marriage). Makhmalbaf, an Iranian director, made a movie called 'The Marriage of the Good' about the marriage of a young girl to a traumatized former soldier, a practice encouraged by the Government as a 'patriotic' and 'pious' act.

Once wars result in displacement from 'home' to other locations inside one's country as an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) or beyond as refugees, the whole sense of self is changed forever. Displacement is also a gendered experience, since women experience leaving 'home', living in a 'strange' country and amongst 'strangers' in a different way than men. These issues are discussed in the next Chapter.

Wars have been framed in religious terms though the main objectives have often been economical and political. For example, the Christian Crusades used a religious framework to mobilize the masses but in fact were an effort to expand Western colonialism. *Jihad* has been the Moslem term used for war in the name of God and Islam. The *mujahidin* used the term in their anti-Soviet struggles, though the war had many other socio-political and economic reasons and was not only about Islam. In the current conflict in Algeria, women have also been targeted by fundamentalist Moslems in order to force them into compliance with their reactionary notions of what the 'rightful' place of women in society is (Helie-Lucas, 1998).

Considering the patriarchal hierarchies of most organized religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the religious framing of conflicts also has its own particular gendered ramifications – including for example, greater stress on the role of women in ensuring religious 'authenticity' and 'purity'. US President Bush has been utilizing religious terminology in the 'fight against terrorism' such as 'axis of evil', 'crusades' and 'evil-doers' making it important to remain vigilant about invocation of conservative religious values not only in Moslem countries but also in the West.

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<sup>6</sup> This is in contrast with the attitude towards the families of political prisoners who were killed and who were denied any kind of voice by the authorities.

Women peace activists have gained in numbers and strength over the past years including Women in Black, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Voice of Women (a Somali diaspora peace group based in Toronto). Many women have lobbied for peace in their communities and internationally – as have progressive men. Women’s role in peace-making and peace-keeping has been recognized by the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of October 2000 (Bunch, 2003). Without women being fully represented at peace talks, it is very hard to ensure their equal rights are respected once war is over.

Many Afghan women have also been active for peace under the aegis of their NGOs during the past two decades of conflict. They have at times referred to the traditional mediation undertaken by women in Afghanistan – such as by throwing in their veils as an important symbolic gesture and to ‘shame’ men. The international community, in principle, recognizes the important role of Afghan women and women in other conflict zones. However, it is the translation of such commitments into actual and sustained action which is often missing.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Individuals and their experiences are influenced by their various identities and the socio-political context which define these identities. Some of these identities are more individual – such as one’s sex, sexuality and age – though still socially constructed in terms of the relevant ideologies, unequal power relations and politics. Gender identity is of particular relevance to this dissertation as it is based on interviews with Afghan women.

Other identities are more collective such as those briefly discussed above – nationality, ethnicity, religion and citizenship. These are all linked together and cannot be seen in isolation. Class is another important social division which intermeshes with all the above. Various aspects of one’s identity become prominent at a particular time or interlink with other aspects in ways which will vary from one time to another – depending on the context and the various unequal power relations involved. Other collective identities include being from the ‘Third World’ or ‘developing world’ and no such discussion can ever be exhaustive.

Attainment of formal education is another socially differentiating factor with powerful influence on the lives of individuals – especially women in patriarchal societies. This will be discussed Chapters Seven and Ten.

Individual experiences, such as those of the educated refugee women interviewed, cannot be understood unless the different aspects of their identities are understood – though always in an unessentialized manner which allows for contextualization and ‘agency’. Their repercussions on the day-to-day lived experiences of individuals and communities and visa versa needs to be kept in mind at all times. This has to do with the differential resources and status available to individuals and groups as a result of the interplay of these various social categories and the challenges and struggles for greater equality.

War is one of the most dramatic outcomes of competing imperial, national, ethnic and/or religious as well as class interests. Similarly, displacement alters the identities of those concerned as will be further discussed in Chapter Nine. The importance of ‘agency’ in questioning, subverting, challenging and changing various aspects of our identities is integral to progressive struggles for social change, emanating from individual and group experiences and culminating in powerful social movements.

The concern here is not with differences per se, but rather with how we can start with differences to construct a particularist understanding of human rights which is both universal and specific (Eisenstein, 1993: 6).

## Chapter Six - Refugees and Diasporas: Gendered Journeys of Arduous Times

### 1. Introduction

Of the women forced to leave their countries, many said that nothing could prepare them for the shock of their new status...dealing with the problems of overcrowding, shortages of food and health facilities, and tensions with the host community... (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995:14).

In the previous chapter, some of the theoretical discussions related to this dissertation on positionality and constructions of identity have been discussed. Another important aspect of the positionality and identity of the women interviewed is that of having been refugees, displaced, exiled and in the diaspora. These powerful new aspects of their identities have influenced their *weltanschauung* for all times.

In order to understand the experiences of Afghan refugees better, and specifically the women interviewed, a summary of some of the relevant theoretical debates is outlined below. This chapter will begin with a discussion of pertinent concepts, including refugee, asylum-seeker, exile and diaspora, as well as journeys, followed by sections on war, displacement and gender as well as refugee women and refugee regimes. Refugee women's 'burdens of representation' will also be discussed.

An effort has been made to consistently address the various tensions which exist in migration-related discourses. Some are that of legal vis a vis sociological definitions of terms such as refugee, and between westo-centric and subaltern articulations. In addition, deconstructing a singular and homogenous notion of the displaced or those who are forced to migrate is attempted. This heterogeneity is based on many factors including location (i.e. internally displaced persons, refugees in the 'near abroad' or in the West) and gender, class and other social divisions. The chapter will end with a conclusion looking at further links and elaborations of the above concepts.

## 2. Refugees: What is in the Word, Power or Victimhood?

The internationally recognized legal definition of refugee emanates from the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Rights of Refugees<sup>1</sup> and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Convention was initially developed for refugees in Europe in the aftermath of World War II. It also did not take into consideration the unique challenges faced by women refugees. As Valji (2001) points out, it was written by white, Western and educated males.

According to Article 1 of the Convention, a refugee is a person who:

...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion...is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or...unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country...or unable...unwilling to return to it...

UNHCR organized a conference in December 2002 to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention for signatories to reaffirm their commitments. 'These activities were taking place in a climate that, for more than a decade, had been marked by increasing scepticism, most notably in Europe and Australia, about the inappropriateness of the Convention in the current times'(Newland, Patrick, Selm and Zard, 2002:5). Some of the critical issues debated in this connection include responsibility and burden sharing of refugees within the international community.

Palestinian refugees, though one of the largest and oldest refugee populations, do not fall within UNHCR's mandate, largely for political biases against them. A technical reason given for this non-inclusion has been the existence of UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), established before UNHCR, to provide relief to registered Palestinians. In fact, considering the repatriation of over 1.5 million Afghans after the fall of the Taliban, Palestinians are now the largest refugee group in the world and yet no international agency has the mandate to provide them with protection as refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> See Refugees in Europe: The Hostile New Agenda by Minority Rights Group International, 1997, for a short history of the links between the formation of new nation-states (growing importance of nationality and national passports), the two World Wars, decolonialization, power struggles and refugees, as well as the birth of the new refugee system.



The lives of millions of refugees are too rich and complex to be captured within the confines of a legal definition. Thus, the current mainstream understanding of the term refugee does not capture the historical and sociological complexity or diversity of the lives of refugees, or the continued importance of their experiences 'back home'. Refugee seems too static and 'global' a concept – almost too easy to use. It often conjures images of refugees as a homogenous group - which they are not. They do not come from homogeneous backgrounds and do not become homogeneous just because they are refugees. They also become refugees for very different reasons. Their differences based on gender, sexuality, age, class, education, profession and religion are often overlooked in legal approaches. For example, there is very little work being done on older refugee women or female refugee youth.

The experiences of refugees also vary considerably depending on their location of asylum or positionality. Are they refugees in a country with similar ethnic or religious/linguistic or political frameworks or one that is different on all these accounts? Are they refugees in a neighbouring country or in a distant land? As has been discussed in Chapter Four, refugee experiences in the 'near abroad' as compared to the 'distant abroad' are a reflection and contributor to many differences amongst refugees – in terms of class, education, gender, ethnicity/religious majority/minority dynamics, politics and other social factors. Being in the 'near-abroad' or a Western country, for example, impacts upon the social networks which refugees have access to and in particular, social networks available to refugee women (Camino and Krulfeld, 1994). However, very few researchers have paid sufficient attention to this distinguishing factor in refugee studies. I hope this dissertation will make a modest contribution to the above debate.

Refugees have been subjects of a proliferation of research from various aspects – yet much remains to be done. This section focuses on a sociological perspective which is at times in tension/contrast with the legal approach mentioned in the beginning of this section. International refugee regimes have been studied by lawyers (Hathaway, 1991), politicians, development/humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers as well as the

academia.<sup>2</sup> The same can also be said about actual refugee communities – they too have been studied by various disciplines.

The root causes of refugee outflows have been analysed, as have the various patterns of migration (Essed, 1995), as well as institutional responses. For sociologists, the interest has been on changing identities as well as the refugee situation as an outcome of internal and external power relations. Feminists have been particularly instrumental in bringing out the specifics of refugee women's experiences as is further elaborated below. In 1993, York University in Toronto organized a landmark International Conference on Gender Issues and Refugees: Development Implications, which was one of the first of its kind.<sup>3</sup> It is important to take note of the point made by Indra below:

Most of the world's forced migrants are neither Northern natives nor are they located in Northern countries. But academics, other researchers, government policymakers, and international agencies from the North dominate such discussion...(Indra, 1999:3).

In spite of the universalism projected in the term refugee, the particularities of each situation varies enormously and is not usually captured by studies of refugees for various reasons, including those mentioned above by Indra. Situations vary as do the perspectives of those who study and write about them. More on this was mentioned in the methodology chapter. McGown (1999) has, for example, focused on the experiences of Moslem Somali refugees in the secular and Judaeo-Christian liberal democracy of Canada and their efforts to maintain their own identities in such an environment. This is a different experience from that of Afghans, for example, living in Iran or Pakistan, both of which are predominantly Moslem countries. This is different, from sub-continent refugees in the UK, with their history of colonial relations of subjugation and exploitation.

In the West, where refugees are far fewer than in the South, individuals make official refugee claims if they want a 'legal' status. In Asia and Africa, very often, when a

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<sup>2</sup> See various issues of the International Journal of Refugee Law.

<sup>3</sup> The Oxford Refugee Studies Center and the Center for Refugee Studies at University of York in Toronto remain two of the best such research establishments. The Oxford Center was established by Barbara Harrell-Bond and Belinda Allen and the York Center by Howard Adelman.

massive and sudden influx of refugees occurs, there is no such process, or the process is different, a matter of registration, and providing official permission to stay for a limited period, such as the case for Afghan refugees now in Iran.

This concern for the term 'refugees' is linked to many stereotypes, especially in the West but also in other host countries, regarding refugees as basically uneducated, unskilled, victims and a burden on the host community<sup>4</sup>. These stereotypes facilitate a patronizing and racist attitude on the part of Western and other host countries towards refugees, overlooking the root causes of forced migration and its links to colonialism and current unequal global distribution of resources.<sup>5</sup> This also supports discrimination against refugees and undermines the subjectivity and 'agency' of refugees.

Thus, refugee remains an ambiguous concept. Fortunately, current definitions are being increasingly questioned, especially in terms of their legal application (Valji, 2001, Nicholson and Twomey, 1999). UNHCR's definition related to fear of persecution is applicable to only a percentage of all refugees, and was originally framed within the male-and westo-centric context of WWII European refugees<sup>6</sup> though it intended to have a more 'universal' definition (Sztucki, 1999: 56).

There are a large number of individuals known as refugees who are indirect victims of various life threatening situations (Zulberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1989) not only fear of persecution as defined in the Convention. In fact, there is increasingly greater attention being paid to those displaced as a result of environmental issues and/or development projects. The Center for Refugee Studies at the University of York, Toronto is involved in such research.

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<sup>4</sup> This is in turn connected to stereotypes of the 'developing' world in mainstream Western media images. These portray the majority of the world's population as poor, ignorant, superstitious, victims of war, on the run and with no subjective agentic presence of their own. Also, any media interest in such groups is usually short-lived and they are forgotten as soon as there is another 'emergency' resulting in superficiality and lack of sustained engagement to their plight.

<sup>5</sup> The October 2002 issue of the *New Internationalist* provides advocacy and awareness-raising information on the myths perpetuated against refugees, especially non-white and Moslem refugees, as well as the hardship and discrimination they face.

<sup>6</sup> This has had great impact in South Asia where millions of refugees have been living. Pakistan and India never agreed to ratify the Refugee Convention feeling it completely overlooked the experiences of their countries after partition in 1945 and some ten million Moslem refugees moved from India to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs moved in the other direction.

Consequently, the definition of refugee as it stands now is too reductive, constricted and summarizes the lives of refugees and refugee women into just being refugees (a persecuted people, according to a specific set of criteria). Yet, refugees are always simultaneously so much more and even as refugees, their experiences are very diverse and linked to specific yet global contexts.

Typically, it is assumed that immigrants move voluntarily, mainly for economic reasons, and plan their departure in advance; whereas refugees are suddenly forced out of their homeland to preserve their lives. However, this distinction is often externally imposed and ignores the self-definitions of those in exile. Many who are not officially recognised as refugees feel that they have been forced to leave their homes to save their lives. In such cases, externally ascribed labels do not necessarily correspond with self-definitions. (Matsuoko and Sorenson, 2002:63).

One way to problematize the concept of refugee and contextualize it more appropriately and in a manner which is more liberating and less westo-centric is to understand the terms used by refugees in their own languages. There are many different words used to reflect the experience of becoming a refugee in different languages, which can shed light on the complexity of such experiences.

A few articles (Shahrani, 1995, Olesen, 1995 and Centlivres, 1987) have been written about how Afghans perceived their own move more as '*muhajerat*' rather than as refugees. *Muhajer* is an Arabic word and refers to the *hejrat* or forced departure of the Prophet Mohammad from Mecca. It had a religio-political significance in the 1980s when many Afghans were leaving their country to escape a Communist regime of 'infidels' and for a struggle in the name of Islam.<sup>7</sup> The situation has changed now, but the word *muhajer* is still used to signify being forced to leave one's homeland, being displaced, away from home and suffering. Very often Afghans will say 'well it is *muhajerat*' in a way that you can not use the term 'refugee' since it means the state of being a *muhajer* and there is no such term in English – refugeehood. The religious significance of *muhajer* also implies that neighbouring Moslem countries have a religious duty to be welcoming and hospitable towards the *muhajerin*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One of the interviewees, refers to her grandfather's '*hejrat*' from Kandahar to India many years ago.

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Iranian refugees use the terms *panahandeh* or *panahju* which literally mean those who seek asylum.

There is another group of *muhajers* in Afghanistan originating from Central Asia. They moved south to Afghanistan during the Moslem *Basmachi* Resistance Movement of the 1920 which followed the Bolshevik Revolution (Rashid, 1995, Shalinsky, 1979). Pakistan too has its own *muhajers* who are the Indian Moslems who migrated to Pakistan after partition in 1946 from the United Provinces. The MQM (*Mutahida Ghaumi Movement*) is the most powerful group representing these *Muhajers*. Khattak, based at SDPI, Islamabad, conducted interviews with women connected to MQM and Afghan refugee women in 2001. This was a comparative study on gender and conflict.

In order to contextualize and problematize the word refugee, it is useful to understand the history of the people concerned and the role of movement in their context. This facilitates an understanding of a current refugee coming with a particular history and it links his/her current movement to other historical and local movements. It links them to those before and after him/her. It challenges the homogenous and ahistorical understanding often conveyed in mainstream media regarding refugees, and can be empowering for refugees in terms of situating themselves. It also facilitates the deconstructing of the image of some of today's refugees as being an exception or very different from the rest of us. It shows that individual and collective movements have always been a part of human history and have taken place all over the world.

Many progressive groups and social movements continue to challenge the increasing restrictions that exist for refugees in particular and human mobility in general. Some of these include the No One is Illegal and No Borders Organizations and Networks which go beyond trying to negotiate better conditions for acceptance by Western governments to questioning the whole concept of legal and illegal movement and domicile.

By far the greatest number of refugees are hosted by Asia, Africa and South America - 13 million out of 16 million (UNHCR website). Of the three million refugees in the West, 2.2 million are in Europe and the rest in North America. While many Western countries are concerned about several hundred or several thousand refugees at their borders per year, some Asian or African countries are faced with hundreds of thousand and sometimes millions of refugees within a short period and without prior notice.

### 3. Asylum-Seekers

Not all refugees are treated the same way by host-governments. Sometimes, for ideological reasons, certain refugees are much more welcomed than others. For example, during the Cold War period, Soviet asylum-seekers such as the famous ballet dancer, Rudolph Nureyev, was welcomed because of his artistic ability but also because his decision – and that of others like him - was seen as a victory of the West over the Soviet system. In fact, West Germany gave asylum to any East German who succeeded in crossing the Berlin Wall during those years.

Asylum-seekers are individuals – sometimes high profile persons such as artists and diplomats – who seek asylum/protection with another state/government /embassy for political reasons. This process can happen both within one's own country (such as seeking asylum at a foreign embassy) or abroad (while on a tour or mission). Once accepted, asylum-seekers become *defacto* refugees (Stalker, 2001) and go through the same refugee procedure. The term refugee and asylum-seeker are often used interchangeably.

In order to enhance and expand the understanding of the lives and experiences of refugees in new, less westo-centric and more egalitarian ways, it is important to investigate other related concepts. Hence, this Chapter will follow with a discussion of exile, diaspora and journeys.

### 4. Exile

I would like to briefly touch upon exile which has also been used by academics (Abdo and Lentin, 2002, Yuval-Davis, 1997) and others when describing displacement.

Exile is a term often used to refer to individuals - including intellectuals and artists - who are forced (Heitlinger, 1999) to leave their cities or country, or decide to leave their cities or country for political reasons or as a matter of principle. Once beyond national borders, exiles often become refugees and members of the diaspora. Asylum-seekers also become exiles once they are abroad. Some exiles assume leadership roles in the diaspora due to their political activism, and those who are artists or

activist/artists express and share the feelings and experiences of exile to a larger audience. They also sometimes engage with issues in the host-country<sup>9</sup> and broader issues of racism, discrimination and unequal power relations, while continuing to reflect and critique the situation back home. Both are therefore important within the diaspora.

The Farsi/Dari word (though of Arabic origin) used for exile is *tabied*. In Iran, various regimes have practised exiling individuals with actual or perceived anti-government views and activities to isolated locations in Iran. Mosadegh, the nationalist leader of Iran, was exiled to his home village of Ahmadabad till his death after the American supported coup d'etat of 1953. The Iranian playwright, Saedi, chose exile in France after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979 and in his work, reflected on the pain and suffering of artists in exile. This includes feelings of loss, rootlessness, melancholy and nostalgia. Milani (2000) refers to how Iranians use the term *ghorbat* or being away from home and alienated when talking about exile. He also refers to the 'hyphenated' identities used by Iranian exiles in the USA when introducing themselves as Iranian-Americans and the role of cyberspace in linking Iranian exiles with their homeland inspite of its oppressive regime.

##### 5. When Refugees Become a Diaspora

If one day  
Your jasmine sweet memory  
Came with the Zephyrs of Spring  
Ruffling the page of my poetry-  
Which drop of rain  
Would wash away my homesickness

M.Khaki (Kurdestan, The Bend in the Road in Refugee  
Writing ed. by J. Langer, 1997)

After September 11, 2001 and the fall of the Taliban, the international community has been increasingly referring to the Afghan diaspora, including diaspora women, and their role in the peace-building and reconstruction of their country. Though the Afghan diaspora has existed for many years, it is only now in the post-Taliban era a more prominent feature of discussions on Afghanistan. Thus, it is important to understand

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term 'host-country' without any illusions that refugees are welcomed and treated like guests in these locations.

what the term means and its relevance to the Afghan experience. Possibly, the Afghan experience can enhance conceptual understanding of diaspora and diasporic experiences.

In general, one of the differences between refugees and diaspora is that the former refers more to individuals while the latter denotes a community - whether national, ethnic/linguistic or religious. In refugee literature, unlike that of the diaspora, there is more focus on the material situation of individuals as refugees. This is obviously a very important issue for the majority of impoverished refugees in the world. The diaspora is also not limited to refugees. It includes, for example, immigrants, migrant workers and students. In addition, it is not limited to only the first generation but also includes the children of refugees, for example, who have since become citizens of the countries to which their parents came. According to Stalker (2001), there are 150 million people living outside of the country in which they were born and each year this number increases by several million. Out of this, approximately 16 million (UNHCR website) are refugees.

One of the important aspects of diaspora which makes it a critical sociological topic is that it brings out the varied and continuous connections between refugees, immigrants and exiles, on the one hand, and their country of origin, on the other hand. It also analysis their influence on the countries in which they are currently based.

While diaspora is not a new term<sup>10</sup>:

...its contemporary revival can be largely attributed to the influential work of black writers like Stuart Hall (1990) and Paul Gilroy (1993, 1997), writing within a cultural studies tradition and using a post-modern frame. 'Diaspora' has also been used as a descriptive typological tool for understanding migration and settlement in the global era (Cohen 1997)...The old usage of diaspora restricted it to population categories which have experienced 'forceful or violent expulsion' processes...but in the modern usage it refers to a population category or a social condition entailing a particular form of 'consciousness' which is particularly compatible with postmodernity and globalization... (Anthias, 2001:631).

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<sup>10</sup> The term was originally used to refer to the dispersion of Jews mainly in the 8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.



In the past decade, diaspora 'has been used increasingly across academic disciplines, referring to experiences of community and identity which include, as well as transcend, the nation-state, in the emergency of capitalism as a global economic system' (RFR Call for Papers, 2002).<sup>11</sup>

Unterhalter refers to three theories of diaspora. She notes that in the work of Cohen 'it is the evidence of linkage between members of transnational communities – through language, religion, food or dress – that identifies them as members of a particular diaspora' (2000:108). In this framework, not enough attention is paid to the divisions and power relations within the diaspora, including that of gender (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1989) or the more political aspects and aspirations of the diaspora. Unterhalter (2000) continues by referring to the relevant theory which is inspired by postmodernism and post-colonial studies and developed by Hall, Bhaba and Gilroy amongst others. In this theory, more attention is given to the 'hybridity of culture... and the ways in which...dominant discourse' affect them (Unterhalter, 2000:108). Feminist academics (Spivak,1997, Brah,1996, Mohanty 1988) have focused on the changing gendered identities of diaspora amongst and within other changing identities. Unterhalter notes how Brah,

...sees diasporas as conceptual frameworks for thinking about relationality...In addition, she develops a notion of diaspora space which marks the simultaneous conditions of dispersal and staying put, and attempts to theorize dimensions of cultural, political, economic psychic and social intersectionality (Unterhalter, 2000:108).

Reference is made above to the seminal work of Avtar Brah - *Cartographies of Diaspora* (1996). According to Brah, diaspora communities have more a 'homing desire' rather than a desire for the 'homeland' (Brah, 1996: 16). Her thought - provoking and valuable definition is largely based on her experience with South Asian communities in the UK whose return to their countries of origin on a permanent basis is unlikely.

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<sup>11</sup> Reference is made to a Call for Papers by Resources for Feminist Research at OISE, University of Toronto, for an issue on Transnational Feminisms and Diaspora.

Unterhalter refers to the third position, that of Segal and Grosz, as the interpretative sociological position in which:

...the diaspora provides its own meaning which interact with those of the analyst and of diaspora peoples...the diaspora is linked because of its common construction of a different notion of 'home' in this case conceived in terms of more abstract principles (like freedom or social renewal), to which diaspora peoples aspire to go (Unterhalter,2000:110-111).

The definition provided by Safran, cited by Moghissi, is also relevant within the third category. He says that diasporas are:

...“expatriate minority communities” (1) that are dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places; (2) that maintain a “memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland”; (3) that “believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country”; (4) that see the ancestral homes as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are ‘importantly defined’ by this continuing relationship with the homeland (Moghissi, 1996:21).

Anthias (1998) has criticised much of the above literature for essentializing the diaspora and not looking into its internal divisions. The greater recognition of such divisions would facilitate stronger political alliances amongst various diaspora communities and with particular sub-groups within the host community.

Most contemporary diasporas, including the Afghan and Iranian, maintain aspects of all three of the above theories. For various sub-groups within the diaspora and at different times in their history, one or the other may become more or less prominent – always gendered and in relation to other social constructions. In addition, it is important to link discussions on refugees with that of the diaspora. This is in spite of the possibility that discussions on diasporic experiences and identities – though pertinent - can be perceived to be a luxury when refugees are facing severe hunger and lack of basic amenities.

I also agree with Anthias (1998) as there are many variations amongst diaspora communities, making any generalization very problematic. Nevertheless, however varied and vague, there is still reason to maintain the concept of diaspora as a result of

increasing population movements. However, more attention should be paid to the unequal power relations within each of the host countries and how they bring together or bring apart various sub-groups, including within the diaspora. These unequal power relations interlink with inter-diaspora power differences and sub-categories, forging new alliances and/or antagonisms. Also, as mentioned by Brah, 'Diaspora space...is inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendents but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous' (Brah, 1996:181). This latter issue is very important as it points to the various (re) constructed power relationships and categories and their links to one another. One exists because of the other and vice versa but neither is static, homogenous or dichotomous.

I concur with Matsuoka and Sorenson who say:

Diaspora communities are structured by the politics of the homeland and driven to intervene in them; but they are also shaped by the global forces and external interventions that helped create the conditions of exile. Thus, the politics of diaspora nationalism are central but overlooked issues in studies of refugees and immigrant populations (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2002:8).

The Afghan diaspora in the 'near-abroad' is somewhat different from those communities often referred as diasporas - where they continue to be involved with their country of origin but usually remain abroad. Most Afghans continued to consider their presence abroad - especially in neighbouring countries - as temporary and that impacts upon the 'confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes' (Brah, 1996:181). These include (re)constructions of memories and nostalgic sentiments about the homeland and its historical trajectories.

There is an important link between postcolonial studies and the diaspora, including the fact that a significant number of diaspora communities are results of and linked to different colonial projects and/or decolonialization. In a recent conference on post-colonialism at the University of Toronto (September, 2002), R. Cheran discussed the links between the diaspora, culture, home and authenticity and commodification or the global market economy, within the framework of the Tamil diaspora in Toronto, to which he refers as diaspora postcolonial:

The Tamil diaspora postcolonial is not being created through cultural negotiations alone but the core of this creation...lies in the political economy of investment/expansion of the ethnic market places in Toronto mediated by nostalgia, fantasy and "homeland tourism."

Diasporic communities are always changing. For example, the Afghan diaspora's situation was quite different in 1997 when I began my research to what it is today after the fall of the Taliban. While in 1997, returning to Afghanistan seemed very far away for many, by December 2001, the Taliban had been overthrown and there was hope of relative peace and work opportunities. Thus, many Afghans abroad were deciding whether or not to return to Afghanistan. For those who do not return, there is again the decision to be made as to be actively involved in supporting a project in Afghanistan, for example, or simply to remain engaged in one's own individual and family lives abroad. While, in many families, men will be making the decision to return or not to return, there are a growing number of educated and young Afghan women who are making this decision themselves<sup>12</sup>.

Are refugees in the 'near-abroad' and those in the West both members of the diaspora? Is it about distance? When do you stop being a refugee and become a member of the diaspora or can you be both at the same time? Does it mean you were forced to leave your country? Is it that a nation, a people, has been forced to spread in different directions? And do you have to be away for a certain period to become diaspora? Most Afghans have not been away for that long (perhaps just one generation) and in many cases, it was due to the war and they were forced to leave in order to save their lives and that of their families. Many continue to have close ties with Afghanistan. So can we still refer to them as diaspora rather than refugees, or both – depending on the context? I choose the latter since it is the comprehension of existing complexities and diversity which is sought, not allegiance to a single term.

First of all, when referring to refugee groups as the diaspora, there is a greater sense of their 'agency' in changing the situation inside their country from outside than the word refugee implies. Also, when talking about diaspora, there is a sense of some form of organization amongst refugees which facilitates their links with inside their country of

origin. This is in line with the concept of 'diasporic communities' mentioned by Brah (1996).

Nevertheless, in the case of refugee communities, there is also a need to differentiate between the situation of those in the 'near-abroad' and those in the West and this differentiation exists between refugees themselves as well. Due to geographic proximity to their own country of origin as well as living in less privileged or affluent societies, the experiences of refugees in neighbouring countries is quite different from those in the West. This geographic location also helps shape the return of refugees. Refugees in neighbouring countries are more likely to return to their country of origin permanently than those in the West. The latter often feel they have more to lose as their standards of life are higher and their children have access to better education and future opportunities.

The term diaspora does not exist as a word in many languages, for example in Farsi/Dari or Pashtu. Thus, in addressing the westo-centrism of some of our terminology, it is important to try and find out words used by refugee and diasporic communities in their own languages. I have referred earlier to the word *muhajer*, in the case of Afghans. Nevertheless, the theoretical work done on terms such as diaspora is important to relate to the experiences of refugee communities, even if the actual word does not exist in the native languages of refugees.

It is important not to homogenize diasporic communities by using this term. There are innumerable differences within all diasporic communities, including those based on gender, age, class and education. Women's experiences of and contributions to the social (re)construction of diaspora are usually quite different from that of men. Nevertheless, women's experiences also differ as a result of their class, age, family and sexuality, as well as national, ethnic, racialized and other identities.

While studying the experiences of refugees and diaspora, it is also important to maintain an eye on the influence they have on the host community - in terms of

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<sup>12</sup> This includes the US educated Rina Amiri who worked on a research project with Harvard University before returning to Afghanistan, as well as Safia Sediqui who left Canada to work in the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs.

economics but also gendered socio-political ramifications. This is often under-researched for political reasons and the desire of host-country authorities to maintain the myth of refugees being a burden on society<sup>13</sup>. Especially in the case of Afghans, who have lived in Iran and Pakistan in great numbers for over twenty years - the consequences are considerable, though insufficiently addressed by researchers.

As a result of being influenced by multiple contexts, diasporic communities are often referred to as hybrid (being mixed, having values from more than one country or culture, having shaped a new culture from this mixing). Some diaspora writers such as Salman Rushdie have romanticized this notion of hybridity with a focus on its linguistic and cultural advantages. They have been criticized for maintaining an elitist notion in their views on the subject matter (Heitlinger, 1995). Anthias (2001) and Yuval-Davis (1997:59) have also criticised the concept of hybridity for its essentialism. First of all, you do not have to be a member of the diaspora to be hybrid, and secondly, there are unlimited ways of being hybrid. In fact, sometimes diaspora members react to their conditions by even greater attachment to their 'root' and 'national' culture. They resist becoming hybrids (Malkki, 1995). This often has particular impact upon women such as in the case of Afghan refugee women in Pakistan who initially had to face the oppressive gender restrictions of the Islamic parties in the early 1990s in the name of 'honour' and 'authenticity'. The terms 'transnational' and 'transmigrant' are also being used to denote various complex and unequal individual subjectivities.

Whether a refugee, asylum-seeker, in exile or a member of the diaspora, the below quote captures some of the important experiences of displacement.

The typical image of "uprooting" suggests that the process of displacement, of becoming a refugee or an exile, constitutes a complete break with one's past, culture, and identity. Yet the break is not always complete, the past is not always past, and not all exiles are powerless. Those who undergo this experience are not simply passive inhabitants of a dead zone of loss and estrangement. Exile is also a fecund space for new ways of organizing experience – for creating new affiliations, associations, and communities and developing new identities...As exiles form communities abroad, they engage in

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<sup>13</sup> I have heard about the reluctance of Pakistani authorities to publish the results of a study which showed the enormous resources Afghans brought into Pakistan through remittances.

joint reconstructions of experience, and shape specific forms of identity involving ethnic, regional, or national affiliations. In fact, some regard exile not only as a creative process but also as an emancipatory one in the sense that movement between cultures and perspectives provides deeper insights. Seen this way, exile is a vantage point from that which cultures can be perceived from their margins; it allows that which is normally unseen to become visible (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2001: 4).

While adhering to the earlier part of the above quote regarding the diversity of refugee and diaspora experiences, I believe it is important to reflect upon the cost through which refugees experience new situations and learn from them. Otherwise, the unequal power relations that underscore most refugee/diaspora experiences – both at ‘home’ and in the host-country will not be sufficiently challenged. Refugees/diaspora are potentially powerful invokers of the injustice from which they flee and the discrimination which they often face in their host-countries. However, this potential is usually sidetracked through the mainstream representation of refugees as a burden and victims of a local political problem rather than as indicative of more complex global tensions and inequalities. This sidetracking/silencing, even when unconscious, reflects various powerful and hegemonic political agendas.

## 6. Powerful Journeys and Change

Nomad body traverses west-north-east-south...My nomadic body has travelled from nation to nation, building homes...Refugee. Immigrant. Ex-immigrant. Am I settled yet? Where is the place called “home”? (Hua, 2000:110).

No matter what term we invoke - refugee, exiles, asylum seekers, *muhajer* or diaspora - the experiences of displacement is incredibly powerful for all those involved. Most displaced persons have lived through incredible times and experienced unbelievable challenges in their lives. It is through such changes that the (re)negotiation of identities and the related unequal power relations becomes ever more urgent, resulting in lasting changes in refugee lives and communities.

...the women...were forcibly driven from their homes but hoped to retain, in their place of refuge, the essentials of the culture and lifestyles which were theirs at home, and they looked forward to their return to their countries of origin at some future date. However, the exigencies of being migrants, and sometimes, refugees, forced them to examine their preconceptions and to adopt both social and economic roles, which

would have been rejected at home. This remaking of self was often a traumatic experience...As Eastmond points out: 'The commonality of the refugee experience may be seen to lie in the forced uprooting from familiar patterns of everyday life, involving multiple loss and a struggle to recover continuity and control (Buji, 1993:2).

In view of the complexities mentioned above, the framework of journeys – personal and geographical – is also valuable in capturing the diversity of refugee experiences. The personal journey can capture their lives as members of particular social groups, living in a particular time and place and within a particular family and community with their own individual character and 'agency'. The geographical journey captures their journeys from rural to urban areas or from one province to another for education and professional reasons and/or from the capital to other places of the country as a result of family opposition to the Central Government and/or political exile, marriage or war.

In other words, internal displacement, personal and professional trips outside of the country under different regimes, the move to neighbouring countries as a result of the war, for some the move to the West, and for others the move back to their country of origin – all represent the geographic journeys of their lives and in some ways, are a continuum of their lived experiences.

However, it is important not to romanticize such journeys. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997:9) engages critically with Rosi Bradiotti's post-modern concept of 'travelling identities or nomads' as a positive development of our times. Unfortunately, it is very often not quite so positive (Karpinski, 1995). 'Yet enthusiasm for these new transnational objects of research sometimes overstate the ease of such frontier crossings' (Matsuoko and Sorenson, 2002: 4) since millions of displaced and travelling persons move out of desperation and with access to very limited resources. Related issues of race, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, war and exploitation cannot be overlooked or simplified.

The two journeys (personal and geographic) are connected in many ways. Women's 'agency' is reflected throughout and is affected by these journeys and vice versa. Education is a potentially powerful factor in both these journeys, influencing and being influenced by these experiences as will be further elaborated in the next Chapter.



## **7. War, Displacement and Gender: Gendered Experiences and Decision-Making**

First, displacement has to be seen as a multidimensional process, which does not stop at the moment of arrival in the city, nor end with the first struggles for material survival. Legacies of the past and orientations towards the future are indispensable parts of it. Second, displaced people – men and women – although they have been victims of war and terror, are also active shapers of their future. Agency is therefore an important element of analysis (Meertens, 2001: 133).

One of the prominent features of wars throughout history has been the displacement it causes – for those who are lucky enough to survive. Displacement is often the only choice left for individuals, families and communities. It is a decision made to cope, to sustain life, human aspirations and hope. Once war results in displacement from ‘home’ to other locations – be it inside the boundaries of one’s country as an Internally Displaced Person (IDP) (Benjamin, 1998, Cohen and Deng, 1998) or beyond as refugees, the whole sense of self is permanently affected.

War is not the only cause of displacement but it is one of the most important and dramatic ones. Other reasons include environmental degradation, poverty, human rights violations targeted at individuals or communities because of their gender, sexuality, political views, race, ethnicity and/or religion. Involuntary and voluntary displacement is a complex phenomenon (Willis and Yeoh, 2000). While on the one hand a decision to leave might seem voluntary, on the other hand it was made when one’s life and that of one’s family was at risk and there were very few, if any, other options. Forced eviction (Farha, 2000) during conflict is another modality of forced displacement which has occurred in Kurdistan and Palestine, amongst other locations.

According to UNHCR, around 80 per cent of the world’s refugees are children and women (Forbes-Martin, 1992) since more men stay behind to fight and in many cases die. Displacement is a gendered experience. ‘During the process of displacement, women and men deal in different ways with terror, trauma and uprooting, renegotiate diverse aspects of their identities, rebuild social networks at a dissimilar scale, and reformulate sometimes divergent hopes’ (Meertens, 2001: 134).

Since women's links with 'home' are different from those of men even before conflict and displacement takes place, women's experience of leaving 'home', living in a 'strange' country and amongst 'strangers' is also different from that of men. 'Home' has a gendered meaning for women and men in most societies and is regarded as women's 'rightful' place (the private domain) vis a vis men who are expected to be sustained by women at home but to feature prominently in the 'public' world. Nevertheless, the private/public dichotomy is never intransigent and there are always leakages and infiltrations, even in very traditionally segregated societies (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992).

Still, in many cases, women have a special bond with 'home' as it is where they can carry out their societal roles and explore their creativity and 'agency'. It is often also a location of oppression and abuse. Sometimes and to the same person, it can be both. Home, in fact, has various connotations for refugee/immigrant women (Giles, 1999, Bhattacharjee, 1997). It is the familial (patriarchal) 'home', as well as the ethnic and/or national 'home.' These are all gendered constructions/reconstructions and change with the experience of displacement. In any case, the disruption/ breakdown/transformation of social and cultural structures and familiar support networks are dramatic events in the lives of refugee women (and the lives of refugee men, though in different ways).

Similarly, women's relationship with 'strangers', those who do not belong to one's family or community are different from that of men. Men are expected to mix with 'strangers' in the public domain, while women are socialized to limit their contacts to 'familiar' persons. This has to do with what is too often only a myth of 'security' at home and with kin. In fact, research has shown how many abused women are victims of kin rather than 'strangers'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the experience of displacement is gendered. Obviously, since women are not a homogenous group, their definition of the above terms will also depend on their class, age, sexuality, education and other social factors.

Also in terms of decision-making, it is important to understand the role gender plays. Who made the decision to move at a particular time and to a particular place? Was it the men in the family or the women who made the decision or was it a joint decision?

Which women and which men have more power within the family and community? What has been the position of disabled relatives, for example, or a woman who is single, from an ethnic minority, lesbian and/or disabled? How was the issue raised and discussed. Was there any negotiation involved? The dynamics involved in such decision-making is very important and has not been addressed sufficiently<sup>15</sup> in research. Such intra-family dynamics no doubt impact upon the gendered experience of displacement and later, adjustment to the new environment. For some the move might have been voluntary and for others, involuntary – a result of the decision made by their husbands and/or fathers.

Omidian, an American anthropologist working for an Afghan NGO in Kabul, shared with me in April 2002 how in her research, many Afghan urban refugee women said they were involved in the decision to return now to Afghanistan while most rural women said they were not (Omidian, 2002, p.c.). Similarly, Dr. Annette Ittiq (a Canadian scholar with regional expertise) shared with me how based on a study conducted in July 2002 more women than men were reluctant to return to Afghanistan from Pakistan. This was due largely to the fact that they were more concerned than men about access to water, electricity and health (Ittiq, 2002, p.c.).

Stereotypes about refugees are abundant and inaccurate. Such stereotyping is also gendered. In her work on Kosovar refugee women, called 'Mothers in a Headscarf', Stetz (2000: 67) has demonstrated how the West portrayed them primarily as victims. Their Moslem and maternal identities were privileged in order to construct them as suffering from tradition and religion, therefore oppressed and in need of Western 'salvation'. Such stereotypes do great injustice to the diversity, resilience and creativity of refugee women the world over. In fact, such women are usually much stronger than the women who wish to 'save' them and have much to teach us all. Refugee women (like refugee men, but in different ways) feel the brunt of racism in

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<sup>14</sup> A study in the UK which was published in the national media towards the end of July 2002 revealed the same trend.

<sup>15</sup> I am aware of UNHCR's surveys and questionnaires which attempt to answer some of these questions in view of repatriation programmes. In Afghanistan, I participated in some informal interviews with IDPs from the Taliban in September 1999 and we did try to draw a picture of the decision-making process. The picture was very complex. Sometimes women escaped on the spot while their men were being shot at in the village square and other times, whole villages decided to move together after seeing smoke from burnt houses in another neighbouring village.

host-communities (Essed, 1995) and in fact stereotyping is one of the detrimental processes involved in racism<sup>16</sup>.

Refugee women also have a special and potential role to play in peace-building efforts as shown in the relevant contextual and empirical parts of this dissertation. In a March 2003 presentation at a conference on refugee women at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Helene Moussa spoke of refugee women as agents of peace. This is also in line with UN Resolution 1325 on the role of women in peace-building. Moussa brought a particular example of a Sudanese refugee friend of hers who has now returned from Canada to Sudan and is actively involved in peace efforts.

#### **8. Refugee Women, the Refugee Regimes and 'Agency'**

An increase in the number of widows, women involved in begging and prostitution, and traumatized women, are some of the gendered repercussions of conflict (as mentioned in the previous Chapter) as well as the refugee experience. Women's experiences are also very different from that of men because they usually have lower levels of education, fewer professional skills and less previous job experiences. They often tend to find it harder to work and earn money as refugees, compared to men. This is, however, not always the case. In Pakistan, for example, a minority of highly educated Afghan women had a better chance of finding UN/NGO jobs than men as there was an unwritten policy of affirmative action for women. This exception to the norm might also be related to the fact that women were considered 'safer' employees and less politically connected and active.

Nevertheless, overall women tend to be physically and sexually more vulnerable, in terms of security in refugee camps or settlements. This is also related to the fact that it is largely men who possess arms and control camps. Many cases of rape of women in refugee camps have been confirmed all over the world (see the previous Chapter). Moussa (1993) has pointed out how Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees were sexually more vulnerable because as refugee women they had no legal rights in the host-country. Women's trauma resulting from witnessing war-related atrocities is also often

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to point out that racism towards refugees is by no means limited to refugees in Western

overlooked by service providers. Obtaining testimonies (Agger, 1994) from refugee women in a sensitive and appropriate manner is another important matter for consideration. Sometimes boys and men also face physical and sexual abuse though it is less frequent than that experienced by girls and women. In addition, refugee women are more at risk of being abducted and trafficked (UNHCR, EC/GC/ 02/8).

Girls' and women's refugee experiences are gendered in other ways as well (Wali, 1995). For example, in allocation of space in refugee camps, provision of identity and registration cards and rations, distribution of food and other relief items (Van Esterik, 1996) training and recreational opportunities, health (Getu and Nsubuga, 1996) and education services and representation in refugee camp committees. Many women in poor countries of the South do not have identity cards, resulting in numerous problems when they become refugees, including in family reunification.

UNHCR, other UN agencies and NGOs have attempted to improve the situation through various guidelines<sup>17</sup> and gender training. However, much still remains to be done.<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, like many other organizations, established a Senior Gender Advisory post in the early 1990s which was later integrated into the terms of reference of another senior position. These organizations, as well as that of the host government, donors and refugee leadership/political groups all are influenced by, as well as themselves influence the gendered experiences of refugee girls and women in various ways.

According to an April 2002 UNHCR document on Refugee Women (EC/GC/02/8) and the Global Consultation on International Protection, 51% of all persons of concern to UNHCR are women. UNHCR, in fact advocates the two-pronged approach of gender mainstreaming and targeted interventions for refugee girls and women.

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countries. Refugees face racism in countries neighbouring their own as well.

<sup>17</sup> See June 2003, <http://www.unhcr.ch> including Overview of Events Relating to the Protection of Refugee Women and Refugee Children. Also, UNHCR's 1991 Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women and the High Commissioner's Commitments to Women as well as UNHCR's Guidelines on Gender-Related Persecution.

<sup>18</sup> Considerable critical literature exists on the work of UN and NGOs in the area of development as well as refugee programmes. Many raise important and valid points which are not the focus of this dissertation including the donor-led process of much aid work, the politics involved, ineffective utilization of funds, inappropriate distribution of aid, poor/top to bottom planning, implementation and

The importance of UNHCR's 'gendered political economy of recruitment' in the work for refugee girls and women is analyzed by Hyndman (2000:48). I have personally experienced the relevance of issues such as gender, language, cultural sensitivity, ideological, political and/or moral commitment and professionalism, in determining the quality of work undertaken for displaced girls and women (and other groups) by aid agencies. The various hierarchies of these agencies are a reflection of broader global power relations and also influence the quality of the work undertaken. All aid workers come to the job with their own socio-cultural and experiential baggage which affects what they do and how they do it. This issue is rarely taken into account in the provision of staff training or the monitoring and evaluation of the work undertaken.

Malkki (1995) has shown how humanitarian agencies and the media stereotype refugee women as passive and having lost their sense of identity by being displaced. This is not at all the case, as I hope my empirical work also shows.

Indra (1999) asserts that changes in the discourse of women in development (WID) to gender and development (GAD) have been paralleled in that of women/gender and forced displacement. She recommends that researchers/practitioners move from the women and displacement module to that of gender and forced migration (GAFM) as it will allow for greater contextualization and attention to gender relations in the relevant processes. While agreeing with her in principle, I believe that all the factors mentioned in the former two paragraphs will continue to play a determining role in how refugee women are supported (or not supported) and also how they are perceived by outsiders (including researchers/practitioners).

In many countries, refugee (and immigration) rules and regulations have discriminated against women in various ways, including for their lack of knowledge of English or in connection with their reasons for establishing a justifiable refugee claim (Crawley, 2001, Hyndman, 1999, Bhabha and Shutter, 1994). Sometimes it is also more difficult for female refugees to bring their families with them. This latter also has to do with the patriarchal dichotomy of the public/private divide and in most countries until very

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monitoring, and parallel work. More general critiques question whether or not UNHCR and other

recently, asylum has been granted based on public persecution only (Valji, 2001). In Canada, for example, in 1993 only one-third of all refugee claimants were women (Foote, 1994). In fact, as Valji (2001) points out, the usual image of an asylum-seeker in the West is a man, while the image of the refugee in the South is a powerless woman.

As a result of the women's and refugee rights movement, some of the above-related barriers for women have now changed. Canada was the first Western country to accept gender discrimination as a case for refugee claims though various weaknesses continue to exist within the system (Macklin, 1999). Possible grounds for gender-based claims include rape, female circumcision, and punishment for sexual behaviour or escape from traffickers. Provision of appropriate and confidential legal advice to women is also another important arena of work which has been pursued by women's rights activists. A few other countries have now followed Canada – at least in terms of their legal system though implementation is always another problematic (Crawley, 1999).

However, some of the earlier gains in refugee rights have now been eroded by the 'fortress Europe' mentality and policies of many European leaders (Minority Rights Group International, 1997) and more recently, by the stricter controls which exist after September 11, 2001 especially in the USA. The USA and Canada in late 2002 signed the Safe Third Country Agreement which no longer allows Canada to accept asylum-seekers from the USA. Refugees – especially from Moslem countries - are in general being increasingly presented as 'security risks' by conservative forces in Western countries (Martin, 2002). Since March 2003, most Canadian immigrants also require visas in case of travel to the USA. Many 'foreign' citizens of Western countries are increasingly concerned that their citizenship means less and less in terms of security and protection. This is felt especially by those with Moslem origin. All these restrictions and discriminatory factors obviously have immense consequences for women as well.

Even when allowed into Western countries, refugee women continue to face a myriad of problems and challenges within their own communities as well as in relation to the

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agencies in fact substitute humanitarian support for the international protection for refugees.

host-community. They also continue to face racism and discrimination. One of the most important is the limited job opportunities which many refugee women face or the 'de-skilling' which they experience. (Mojab, 1999). Also:

...immigration and multiculturalist policies, linked as they are to nationalism, define immigrant women in patriarchal ways, contributing to their invisibility in state policies and legislation and thus also in migration histories...Thus, cloaked in cultural relativism, the state may support the retention of 'the old country' culture by downplaying the importance of women's contribution outside the household and promoting their role as wives and mothers (Giles, 2002: 18).

As mentioned earlier, fewer women than men refugees usually have decision-making roles in the refugee environment. There are exceptions and not all refugee men also have the same level of power. The above gendered dimensions of the refugee experience have often been overlooked by host country governments and the international community. Improvements are more recent and the result of the struggles of progressive men and women the world over. Being a refugee is not, however, always only negative for women (or for men). Sometimes, it provides women with opportunities to become more independent and resourceful and learn new skills. For example, many refugee girls/women have education opportunities they did not have before or/and access to improved health education and services.

Many refugee women have demonstrated incredible resilience, coping mechanisms as well as leadership roles through their 'agency'. These very same skills have challenged hegemonic and patriarchal attitudes within their communities as well as amongst refugee-service providers such as national and international refugee agencies and organizations. Refugee women have organized around mutual issues of interest in many contexts – some to do relief work within their own community, others to represent refugee women and their needs to aid agencies and donors or a combination of these and other reasons.

Baines (2000) elaborates upon the experiences of Guatemalan refugee women and their organizations, as well as the importance of this experience once they return to their own country in the struggle for greater equality and justice. Also, in my article on Afghan refugee women's organizations in Pakistan in Annex IV, relevant issues are raised. There are also many women's organizations which bring together refugee



women as well as skilled female migrant workers, care-givers and immigrants. This includes the Philippine Women Centre of Ontario. They address issues of exploitation and encourage organized and collective movements for the assertion of Filipino women's rights in Canada. They also raise issues related to sex trafficking of women and children from Philippines.

Yet, Crosby (2000) has highlighted the hurdles faced by Guatemalan refugee women returning to their country after the end of conflict in maintaining the critical space which exile provided them for political organizational efforts. She refers to internal power inequalities and competitions as well as the negative consequences of the international community's work with returnee women and provides recommendations for action. Such experiences are important for Afghan refugee women.

In several studies undertaken by Iranian scholars (Moghissi, 1996) of the Iranian diaspora in the West, it has been found that overall Iranian women tend to adapt easier to the greater opportunities for women's work in the West than their husbands who have often left more senior positions in Iran. This amongst other reasons often results in changed gendered family relationships and new differences and tensions amongst spouses. Such experiences shape and change their lives and that of their daughters forever.

Fortunately, there is now a growing feminist literature on refugee women (as mentioned earlier), which is encouraging and needed in terms of refugee and aid policies and projects (Giles, Moussa and Van Esterik, 1996, Ager, Ager and Long, 1995, Forbes-Martin, 1992). I believe that many of us who have known or worked with displaced women either as IDPs or refugees can bear witness to the inspiring and remarkable strength, compassion and commitment which so many of them demonstrate.

## **9. Refugee Women and the Burden of Representation**

As Malathi de Alwis has pointed out, the refugee woman is "frequently produced as a cipher for all that was (temporarily) lost as well as what must be preserved for the future; the purity of displacement (is) imbricated in her moral purity, "thus legitimising even stricter surveillance and disciplining of her body, dress,

and bodily practises by her family, community and society at large. (Giles, Project Report, 2000).

As pointed out above, it is often women as refugees who are given the responsibility of ensuring the 'purity' and 'authenticity' of the culture of the homeland/nation and/or ethno-religious collectivity. Thus, they are forced to abide by many traditional restrictions.

For various reasons, these are often stricter in refugee communities than they were 'back home'. One reason is a concern with 'outsiders' and their perceived danger to the 'moral integrity' of the collectivity, integrally linked to women. As mentioned by Fabos, 'A Sudanese person who is able to maintain his or her 'Sudanese'ness' in Cairo through adherence to the propriety ideal contributes to the belief that Sudanese are different from Egyptians and have a unique identity that is worthwhile preserving' (Fabos, 2001:106).

Another reason for this sometimes exaggerated focus on 'authenticity' is a reaction to the discrimination and racism felt in the host-community. This results in a 'return' to some essentialized notion of 'roots', 'tradition' and reassertion and reconstruction of collective identities – often with very conservative repercussions for girls and women. Though such processes are largely initiated and supported by men, women are also involved and not always as passive players. This also has to do with inter-community and intra-community changing power relationships. Controlling women is often also a way of controlling 'other' men.

The dramatic changes in the circumstances of Sudanese residence in Cairo have challenged the cultural norm of gender complementarity as men 'stay at home' for want of work while women seek and find new opportunities for themselves. This unstable situation has led Sudanese to place more emphasis on 'proper' ways of behaving and being, an assertion that helps define the ethnic boundaries of the Sudanese community (Fabos, 2001:107).

The focus on 'authenticity' in diaspora communities also influences intergenerational relationships, often with greater restriction on daughters, vis a vis sons (Higgins, 1997).

Political parties of the refugee/diaspora community also play an important role in such processes, as has been the case with Afghan refugees. As mentioned in *Women Living under Muslim Law's Dossier 19*:

...self proclaimed religious-cultural spokesmen are clearly interested in becoming the sole managers of this 'territorial space' using an imaginary Islamic social cement...In all this Islamists seek to assume exclusive charge of the interpretation and definition of the content of their tailor made Islam. The obvious losers in this process are women, who in the name of religion, culture and tradition, are once more subjected to playing roles defined by the new custodians (*Dossier 19: 5*).

Moslem refugee women in particular contexts such as Afghanistan have been under severe pressure because of their national/ethnic and religious identities (Elmadmad, 1999), as also mentioned in the contextual chapters. Nevertheless, inspite of the keen interest of the West in the 'burden of representation' borne by Moslem women in particular, and Moslem refugee women, this is by no means limited to them and in various ways is experienced by many other groups of refugee women (including, for example, Buddhist Tibetan refugees in Nepal). And when it does occur, it is not only a result of their Islamic identities. It is a combination of factors which shape these processes, as has been previously highlighted. The politics of the host-country also play a significant role and facilitate essentialized notions of 'real' national/ethnic and religious collectivities, to the disadvantage of women and other discriminated groups such as homosexuals, transvestites and transgendered individuals.

Refugee women directly or indirectly, singularly or collectively, resist efforts to construct and locate them within specific and conservative frameworks and through their own 'agency' push and sometimes break such barriers. The achievements of millions of refugee women all over the world are a testimony to such efforts and courage.

## **10. Conclusion**

While the above theories facilitate a better understanding of the lives of Afghan educated refugee women interviewed in Pakistan, gaps continue to exist. Continued challenging of the westo-centrism and male-centrism of many of the afore-mentioned

concepts is required. One gap, as mentioned earlier, is between studies on refugees and diaspora. In the former, there is more focus on the material reality of refugee lives, while in the latter on the existential constructions of diaspora communities. I believe the two are linked in the case of refugees and should be further elaborated to the advantage of refugees and improving their conditions.

Also, I believe that each new refugee group/diaspora has its own specific conditions which calls for further theorization. However, this theorization should move from the academia into the various refugee/diasporic communities and be developed by the members of the community. There are different inter-connected historical phases of the development of a diaspora which are important to analyse. For example, the Afghan diaspora is rather new, especially in the West, and has to be seen accordingly. The current generation of the diaspora are really setting the tone for the future.

The potential role of diaspora communities, with all their heterogeneity, in changing the political situation of the 'homeland' is also very important and needs further study. The international community invites and encourages diasporic intellectuals to return. But when they return, how much space is provided for them to contribute independently and critically to socio-economic and political development efforts? Are they welcome as long as they contribute to the objectives of those in power? This is also important and relevant for women's rights activists of diasporic communities who choose to return to their countries of origin.

Not enough research has been undertaken amongst diasporic communities in non-Western countries, for example, Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, or Sudanese in Egypt – the 'near-abroad'. There are a few exceptions like the Palestinians in Lebanon who have been given some attention but in most cases they are far less studied than those in the West. I hope that this dissertation can make a modest contribution to such an effort.

With regards to war-related displacement and women, while there has been a welcome increase in the attracting of attention and research, much remains to be done to improve the lives of millions of refugee girls and women worldwide. For this to happen, the work of activists, academics, practitioners and/or policy-makers have to link up in creative and effective ways. In order for the voices of refugee women to be

heard, there needs to be a more serious commitment at different levels. Similarly, it is crucial that their 'agency', survival skills, resilience and struggles are recognized and respected, contributing to their empowerment.

The next chapter will deal with issues of education, as a key potential arena for women's empowerment whether in their own countries or as refugees abroad. It will also lead the discussion into the empirical chapters presenting the voices of educated Afghan refugee women in Pakistan.

## Chapter Seven – Education: Dreams, Promises and Politics

### **1. Introduction**

In this dissertation, I am analyzing the experiences of educated Afghan refugee women in Pakistan and their diverse encounters with formal education and its impact upon their life journeys. Also, education's integral links with other aspects of their identities, including as women, as Afghans, as refugees and as members of particular ethnic/religious groups is pursued. These inter-linkages change in relation to self-ascribed as well as external ascriptions which are linked to socio-economic and political developments within the family and community, at local, regional and international levels.

More specifically, I am concerned with the interviewees' experiences of different levels of formal education in Afghanistan especially in times of war, their experiences with education as refugees in Pakistan and their own 'agency'. In addition, issues pertaining to traditional and religious education, as well as non-formal and other approaches to education and educational activities of the UN and NGOs are issues addressed by the interviewees and important to the understanding of Afghan refugee women's experiences in the 'near abroad'.

Education is one of the most important processes in the (re) construction of identities – including gender, ethnic, national and religious. It is important for those who have access to it and for those who do not – albeit in different ways. At the same time, because of the power attached to education, as well as individual 'agency' which allows for creative utilization of education and knowledge, it has a transformative potential at the individual and collective level. However, this potential is often only partially realized as a result of the various educational ideologies reflected in rules and regulations, criteria for teacher and student selection, curriculum, pedagogy, language of instruction and other factors. These are a reflection of the overall socio-political and economic framework of education in a given historical moment..

In this Chapter, I will attempt to further elaborate on some of the above and other related issues, so as to further set the tone for my understanding and analysis of the

interviews with Afghan educated refugee women. This is also a continuation and expansion upon my earlier academic work on the links between women's education, gender and national/ethnic identity constructions in Afghanistan (Pourzand, 1999,1996). In addition, I am informed by my experiences as a development/humanitarian practitioner in Afghanistan and earlier in Iran.

I begin with a general discussion on education and different types of education/learning, and then continue with a discussion of the more direct political and ideological roles of education. This will proceed with a section on international education discourses and then move into areas more directly linked to my interviews. These are female education, Moslem women and education, education and conflict and refugee education.

## **2. Education: A General Overview**

### **2.1 Different Types of Education/Learning**

While education/learning in its broader sense has existed for thousands of years as one of the prominent features of human endeavor – often in the form of non-formal, informal and/or religious education or just day-to-day learning - modern and formal schooling/education is more a product of the 'modern' era and one of the most significant tools of the nation-state building project.

Education has indeed been one of the first and most important tools of the 'modern' state in implementing its socio-economic policies and attempting to reproduce/produce particular citizens for the attainment of national goals. In addition, education indicators are amongst the most important overall development indicators monitored by governments, the UN, World Bank and other institutions and based on which countries are judged.<sup>1</sup> This is also in line with the *human capital* model of education (Coombs, 1985).

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<sup>1</sup> Though mentioned as a priority by donors, education continues to receive less funding than many other 'hard' sectors and by far, less than military expenditures (June 2003, <http://www.unicef.org>)

There is definitely a privilege attached to the attainment of formal education, often discriminating against other forms of learning and knowledge. The prestige attached to degrees from Western institutes of education is another manifestation of hierarchies which are perpetuated through education.

School-attendance is obligatory by law in many countries though not always enforced. Formal education is usually provided by the government through public schools or by the non-profit as well as private sectors. There is a great variation in this regard from country to country. However, with the growing trend in privatization and reduction of public funds and programmes, there is an increase in private education in many countries. Privatization of education is one of the ways in which class and other privileges are reproduced from one generation to another. Private schools can be secular, religious and/or specific to a particular ethnic or national collectivity. Sometimes, political parties also run education programmes, as has happened with various Afghan *Mujahidin* groups in Iran and Pakistan and or *Hezbollah* in Lebanon, *Hamas* in Palestine and the LTTE in Sri Lanka.

Formal education is divided into various levels in all countries – with variation. For example, there is early childhood education (which has increasingly been advocated by UNICEF), primary, secondary and tertiary education as well as adult education, literacy and functional literacy. In many countries, there are also separate education programmes for nomadic, rural, minority group, out-of-school, working and street, children with physical and learning disabilities, children with high IQs and other special groups such as former child soldiers and children in prison. Each of these is framed within particular sociological and educational discourses and debates, and demonstrates changing social constructs.

In spite of the dramatic increase of formal education in most countries in the last decades, non-formal, informal and religious education has also continued to exist. Sometimes this occurs parallel to formal education and at others, in its absence. Religious education also can take place both inside as well as outside formal schools. The focus on religious education in formal schools depends on the composition of the government and its ideology, as well as the strength of the religious lobby. For



example, in the USA, the Christian Right has been lobbying for more religious education in formal schools (Giroux, 1988).

Education is integrally linked to *learning* (Coombs, 1985) and to knowledge, all important and highly debated by scholars. It is through education that 'knowledge, values, representations and ideology are transmitted' (Stromquist, 1996:5). Indeed, education is about knowledge for whom, by whom, where, for what and in fact, what knowledge is and who defines knowledge (Giroux, 1988). The various inequalities which exist in society are often reflected as well as reproduced in the education sector. The issue of values and morality are also at stake in education (Giroux, 1988). These are often linked to the issue of religion and status of women in society (i.e. being a 'good' mother and wife).

There has been a growing awareness that learning does not occur only in educational institutes and is not limited to a particular age-group but is rather a life-long process (Williamson, 2001, Coombs, 1985). In fact, learning is increasingly being provided through the media, cyberspace and other new technologies, as well as social movements and street theater, dance and song. In the context of this dissertation, it is also important to note the learning which has to take place, for example, by refugee women in order to survive in a new and alien environment (Giles, Moussa and Van Esterik, 1996). This includes finding their way around a new city to using different currencies or public transport.

Often, there is a separation between education which is supposed to focus mostly on intellectual development (creativity) vis a vis more hands-on, skill-oriented vocational training (life-skills). This also facilitates class and other divisions in society with the less privileged often driven to pursuing vocational training.

Life-long learning and adult education have become very important in many education debates and are linked to the job market in a globalized economy. They concern the need for employees to constantly update and adapt themselves in order to maintain their jobs or find new ones. Children are expected to be brought up ready to face these changes in their adult life. This is all also related to issues of globalization (Walters,

1997), technology and its related competition as well as the issue of increased immigration to the West (McNair, 2001).

Notions of basic literacy skills and the three main areas of reading, writing and mathematics – are consistent in most systems of education. In many more affluent countries, and also amongst the elite of poorer countries, computer literacy has attained the level of a necessity. The knowledge of English is also increasingly considered as a requirement for social mobility.

The debate on whether to invest in children's education or adult literacy is also a lively one amongst educators and policy-makers. Some believe considering the limited resources at hand, priority should be with the future, with children. Those who endorse the importance of adult literacy programmes can be divided into two camps. These are, according to Stromquist, the modernists who believe 'the inability to read or write in increasingly technological societies is thought to place individuals in disadvantageous positions vis a vis the labour market...' (Stromquist, 1977:3). For this group, also known as the followers of the *human capital model*, literacy is linked to national development and urbanization. The other group, the *social transformers*, endorse adult literacy for its role in raising popular consciousness and challenging social inequalities and injustice. In this connection, Carnoy and Samoff (1990) have analyzed educational experiences under several revolutionary regimes.

A broader definition of education encompasses health education which is an increasingly important arena of work both in the West as well as in developing countries – including in critical areas such as HIV/ AIDs or hygiene. HIV/AIDs is having a devastating impact, in fact, upon education and educational achievements in many African countries with the dying of many teachers and students (see the website of the Uganda AIDS Education Trust for more information on this).

Sex education and legal literacy (including on the UN Human Rights, Women's Rights and Child Rights Conventions) are other important areas of focus for certain education programmes, as is peace education, environmental education and global education (Fontain, 1999). Increasingly, social marketing skills are being used to change the behaviour of individuals in this connection. Some of the terms used for educators

involved in the above areas include social mobilizer, outreach worker and health/hygiene educator. Education, in fact, is sometimes expected to do miracles and make up for the deeper problems of society such as poverty, resource differences and absence of effective government programmes (Coombs, 1985).

## **2.2 Politics, Ideology and Education**

### **2.2.1 Social Inequalities and Education**

Politics and power is central to education since it shapes the minds and lives of the members of a collectivity in spite of it often being presented as a 'neutral' terrain. It is influenced by class, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationalism and international relations. Similarly, education does not take place in a vacuum, but rather within a specific and political context of power relations (Carnoy and Samoff, 1990). This politics and power is acted out both in education policies as well as in the 'silence and invisibility of the official and hidden curricula' (Stromquist, 1996: 3).

The *reproductive role* of education – as one of the main state ideological apparatus – has been highlighted by scholars (Althusser, 1972). Any such ideology is gendered, racialized, ethnicized and influenced by other social categories such as class, in particular, as well as ability/disability and sexuality. The French sociologist/ education theorist, Pierre Bourdieu has referred to the critical role of education in reproducing class differences in society (1990). He has outlined how the powerful classes don't only count on the application of force in maintaining their status but also, on coercion. Such coercion is to a large extent implemented through the education system. Powerful classes determine the structure and content of education and thus also the acquisition of the 'appropriate' educational/cultural capital of various members of society.

The further away you are from the privileged class, Bourdieu (1990) argues, the less the chance that you will acquire the cultural/educational capital needed to be upward mobile in terms of class status. The access to this knowledge, skills and/or education is negotiable (and arbitrary) and determined by various factors, but overall and for most individuals, it facilitates the reproduction of class differences. This *reproductive role* of education has been framed within various paradigms (Carnoy and Samoff, 1990).

Class issues are, thus, pivotal to education and in fact, good quality education has been and continues to be much more readily available to the children of the rich, thus continuing the cycle of class privilege. This happens in the West, as well as in the rest of the world (Jarvis, 2001, Yalnizyan, 1998).

Formal schools 'are seen merely as instructional sites. That they are also cultural and political sites is ignored, as is the notion that they represent arenas of contestation and struggle among differentially empowered cultural and economic groups' (Giroux, 1983:3). The related issue of power is also about access to the written word with all its advantages and privileges, thus it entails language and communications (Egbo, 2000).

### **2.2.2 Changing Ideologies of the State, Citizenship, the Market and Education**

Green has referred to the 'different modes of state formation in different countries' (Green, 1990:x) in order to offer 'a more coherent theoretical basis for understanding the origin of national education systems and their different patterns of national development '(Green, 1990:x) which is welcome. However, he does not engage with collective identity or gender issues and focuses on the West.

Education ideologies are changed once regimes and their ideologies change, as I have outlined elsewhere (Pourzand, 1999). War also changes and often disrupts education, impacting upon the lived experiences of teachers, parents and students. In addition, displacement and migration disrupt education, while on the other hand, sometimes providing new and/or different opportunities for education in diaspora. Refugee education, should a refugee have this opportunity, has its own unique features. The above experiences are all gendered, especially in more traditional and conservative societies where girls' and women's rights to education cannot be taken for granted.

In addition, education and adult education is linked to issues of citizenship, the relationship between individuals and the State and nation-state, as highlighted in the example below from the United Kingdom:

The 1919 Report was written against a background of social unrest, both military and civilian. In this situation, 'citizenship' was seen as a moral and civic virtue, but also a means of social control. This is clear in the lecture notes prepared by the Army Education Service in 1918...This stressed the 'duties' of citizenship, the need for education to enable the citizen to make up 'his' mind about the facts of an argument and significantly, lectures on the evils of Bolshevism (MacKenzie in Jarvis, 2001: 5).

Also on education and citizenship, the below quote about the UK is quite explicit:

Even at the national level, our understanding of how learning and citizenship are related remains embryonic...The comparative study of how citizenship is learnt remains in its infancy...Is a learning society the product of a strong civil society, or is a strong civil society the outcome of a learning society?...If they can be resolved, we may make progress on more prosaic issues such as how the institutional mechanisms by which learning is delivered can be more effective in delivering appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes related to citizenship and democracy, and what kind of civil society is necessary for the construction of a learning society (Holford, 2001).

In fact, in many education institutions/organizations, more is being done to familiarize children with democracy, tolerance and mediation processes through new approaches to education. Interest in civic education is also important within the overall system. In some countries and/or schools, there is also growing interest in human rights education. For example, in the UK since the election of the New Labour Government in 1997, citizenship education has been added to the curriculum with a focus on human rights and equality (Cole, 2000). However, overall, much of the education provided continues to be very traditional and/or conservative, though for different reasons.

The traditional assumption that schooling is fundamentally tied to the imperatives of citizenship designed to educate students to exercise civic leadership and public service has been eroded. The schools are now the key institution for producing professional, technically trained, credentialized workers for whom the demands of citizenship are subordinated to the vicissitudes of the marketplace and the commercial public sphere. (Roberts, 2000, Forward).

While agreeing with the above statement, I believe the situation in non-Western countries is somewhat different since the growth of capitalism remains uneven and, therefore, somewhat less influential on the system of education. In the West, there is also resistance to the current mainstream education policies by progressive educators,

though their power and influence remains limited.<sup>2</sup> Where there are progressive components in education, their influence is often curtailed by various other macro factors (Cole, 2000).

### 2.2.3 Colonialization, Modernization and Education

Education has been an important vehicle of the colonialization project with the colonialists establishing religious and other schools, often promoting Christianity and English, as well as the continued exploitation and discrimination of colonial times (and therefore, racism)(Altbach and Kelly, 1984). Shorish (1984) has also addressed issues of Russian colonization including in Central Asia. Some old colonial schools continue to be run by foreigners even today in the South while others have been taken over by post-colonial Governments (Ahmed, 2000). Colonial education has also been gendered. Ellis (1986) has analyzed how British colonial education further exacerbated gender inequalities in the Caribbean. Chanana (1990) has made a similar argument in the case of India.

Postcolonial studies (Mohanty, 1992, Spivak, 1988) have alerted us to the pivotal role of culture/knowledge in the colonial project and its contemporary forms. Consequently, education has also played an integral role in this connection. In addition to the objectives of 'transforming' colonial subjects in mind and spirit, other colonial objectives of education have included the development of skilled labour and clerical staff for government jobs.

The above process occurred parallel with the devaluing local knowledge/science including, for example, indigenous knowledge of herbal medicine and environmental protection as well as forms of local governance and community sustenance (Sefa Dei, Hall and Rosenberg, 2000). It was also linked to the West/colonizer being 'rational' and the East/colonizer being the 'irrational other' in need of salvation. The negative consequences of colonization continues to influence education in many parts of the world, as eloquently articulated by the Egyptian feminist, Nawal El Saadawi:

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<sup>2</sup> It is ironic that mainstream educators from these same countries usually provide 'consultancy' services to the UN and World Bank in the reform of education in developing countries, maintaining a

...the influence of modern Western culture has established systems of learning and education which...encourage *imitation*...and stifle creative processes...it has developed *language barriers* ...elite have been brought up to use foreign languages...The problems of learning by rote and of imitating Western culture...exercise a negative influence on creativity...The colonizers aimed at creating a limited number of skills and at reinforcing mental attitudes and modes of thinking that would help to maintain foreign domination and its ally, internal oppression...Taboos on thought still hold sway, especially in... politics (class and national struggle), religion and sex (El Saadawi, 1997:192-3).

While no doubt a colonial endeavour, some of the children who attended some of these schools benefited and were able to build upon that experience and contribute to their families and communities with their own intelligence and commitment, while resisting and sometimes even leading popular and progressive struggles . In a recent conference on postcolonialism at the University of Toronto (September, 2002), Chandrima Chakraborty referred to the English educated middleclass of Bengal who initiated the anti-colonial movement.

In addition to the issue of colonialism, formal education has been directly linked with the state project of modernization (Pourzand, 1999, Najmabadi, 1995, Kandiyoti, 1991). It has been through modern (seen primarily as secular) education that these states and reformers/intellectuals aspired to 'modernize' their societies and achieve 'progress'. It is also for this reason that modern and secular education has been resisted by many traditional and religious forces (Taliban being an extreme example). This is also linked to the teaching of particular subjects such as modern science (including Darwinism) at schools.

Education topped the national agendas of many newly independent countries of the developing world in the 1960s and 1970s as a core strategy to erase disparities, unify nations and fuel the engine of development. "Education," said Julius Nyerere, a former schoolteacher who became the first President of the United Republic of Tanzania, "is not a way of escaping the country's poverty. It is a way of fighting it" (SOWC, 1999:11).

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discourse of greater democracy and good governance in these countries while these are being eroded in their own.

It was in this overall atmosphere of decolonialization that a number of international UN conferences on education were organized in the 1960s. Indeed, the number of children enrolled and benefiting in schools of many former colonies improved dramatically. In some places like sub-Saharan Africa this increase did not last for long due to the various economic and political crises faced by these countries. Unfortunately, in South Africa, the racist implications of apartheid on education continued until recently and the country continues to be facing the challenges of providing equal education opportunities (including to girls) in a post-Apartheid era (Enslin, 2000).

#### **2.2.4 Socialization through Education**

The socialization of children through formal education is very important. This process is influenced by the curriculum, pedagogy, teachers, peers and other factors. For example, pursuing the rote method in education influences the socialization process of children by not encouraging critical thinking. It is as a result of a realization of the above that a greater number of educators and agencies working on education (including UNICEF and UNESCO) are now advocating for more participatory, hands-on and student-centered teaching approaches. In the West, Piaget and Dewey's pedagogical work influenced some of the afore-mentioned methods (Jarvis, 2001).

Other education-related factors that influence socialization of children include the schoolyard culture (Cohen, 1988), the 'old boys' networks perpetuated in certain schools, gangs, sports and other school clubs/activities and processes. Education, thus, also provides different levels of *social capital* - or leverage within and amongst different circles - to an individual, which in turn impacts upon their position in society (Coleman, 1997). This in turn influences access to the job market. These issues also play a role in the impact of education upon gendered and racialized class structures/elitism and/or various sub-cultures.

Unequal access to education or marginalization experienced by different racialized and ethnicized groups, or/and for class, linguistic reasons, as well as disability, within a particular context is an important human rights concern. Similarly, the language of instruction is a critical and often controversial subject in countries with more than one



ethnic/linguistic group. This is related to the importance of language (and also literature and history), in the debates over nationalism, nation-state building and centralization. Examples of the importance of language include the lobbying undertaken by Welsh nationalists to ensure Welsh is taught at schools in Wales and the role of modern Hebrew in the Zionist project. Other examples include the ban on teaching minority languages in a number of countries, including Kurdish in Turkey. The latter has also been analyzed from the perspective of linguicide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

### 2.2.5 Resistance and Education

Education as a form of *resistance* is an important phenomenon to understand – perhaps initially most effectively outlined by the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972,2000). Freire influentially outlined how most existing education systems are meant to sustain exploitation and oppression by ruling classes and the need for a new critical consciousness to question and challenge hegemonic practices through education and aim for greater human liberation through education. His work aimed to influence formal education for children as well as adult literacy programmes.

Feminists and other activists have also been influenced by the work of Freire – including his concept of conscientization as well as that of popular education (Walters and Manicom, 1996). Henry Giroux (1983) – the education sociologist - has also contributed to critical pedagogy and the vision of transformative education. Giroux is himself influenced by Pierre Bourdieu as well as the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and his definition of ‘ideological hegemony’. Resistance to colonial powers, their values and validation of certain privileged 'knowledge' over others, other local ruling regimes, classes or patriarchy are all relevant issues in education debates. Social movements are therefore themselves sometimes both outcomes as well as facilitators of various forms of education, including labour unions, anti-racist, pro-refugee, anti-globalization, environmental, women's rights and peace activists.

Education can thus also promote and provide the opportunity for change. This can happen in various ways. ‘One is the ability of education to create more critical and

analytical minds so, irrespective of the content learned in school, educated individuals perceive contradictions in their environment and may develop alternative understandings of them...The other mechanism occurs through the role of enlightened teachers...Schools are certainly more amenable to intervention than families...'(Stromquist, 1997: 9).

While overall agreeing with Stromquist, I believe much depends on the education environment and the overall situation of the students and community concerned. Also, sometimes those who have not benefited from schooling have very good critical minds and develop alternative visions of society.

Revolutions have influenced education with many prioritizing large education and literacy campaigns in order to empower the disempowered as well as reach more people with the messages of the Revolution (including changing concepts of citizenship and class and/or gender roles) (Carnoy and Samoff, 1990).

Molyneux (1985) has written about the gendered impact of the Nicaraguan Revolution. While noting the limits of women's advancement in that particular situation, she has also mentioned its positive influence on female education.

Mass campaigns under revolutionary regimes such as those in Cuba and Nicaragua boast a large number of literacy students – something which is possible in cases of widespread social mobilization and a spirit of economic and political transformation. Under non-revolutionary conditions, literacy efforts mobilize very few people (Stromquist, 1997:10).

In the countries of the former Soviet Union, education was provided to most children and adults, though often in authoritarian ways and with ideological sloganism. Unfortunately, with the breakdown of the Soviet Union, many of the communities concerned are now facing 'transition' into the global markets, civil unrest, war and a consequent drop in education achievements (Zouev, 1999).

The portrait is not just one of general decay but of re-emerging inequality, with poor families less able to pay for their children's education, and children in rural areas and from ethnic minorities disproportionately affected...In Central Asia particularly, educational provision is spiraling down towards standards not seen in a generation...The social impact of the transition from central

planning to a market economy is all too often forgotten, as if the economy is the only thing that matters (SOWC, 1999: 17).

It is important to mention the enormous effort, hard work and self-sacrifice which many poor parents and especially, poor mothers, endure in order to educate their children and sometimes, in particular their daughters. Often it is also the children's own strong desire to be educated which motivates them to walk long distances, work and study at the same time and experience many forms of hardship with the objective of gaining education. It is the incredible spirit in these endeavors that makes up for what the system lacks and provides hope for the future. Some of the problems of 'modern' education are reflected below:

Buddha said an educated person is one who knows the higher values of life, who sacrifices lower values for higher values, who sacrifices material goods for love. Today we find people sacrificing love, friendship, family, every meaningful thing for money and power...Money and power are supreme values today (Bhasin, 1994).

### **2.3 The International Community and Education**

Education has been amongst the priorities of the international community for many years, from the United Nations, to the World Bank, to the International NGOs. To quote from Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the UN, 'Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development' (SOWC, 1999). In 1999, 130 million children in the developing world were still denied the right to education. Two thirds of this total were girls. Also, one billion adults remain illiterate, the majority of which are women. Drop-out rates for girls are higher and school completion rates lower in most countries (SOWC, 1999). According to the above UNICEF report, lack of education accentuates poverty and poor health, limits access to work and decreases productivity<sup>3</sup>. Also, it has a negative impact upon democratic efforts and by extension, peace and security. The report also refers to the pleasures of learning which so many people are unable to enjoy.

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<sup>3</sup> It is believed that with improved education facilities, the number of 250 million children involved in child labour would be somewhat reduced or at least, their lives would be enhanced (SOWC, 1999).

The UN Declaration for Human Rights in 1949<sup>4</sup> referred to the right of education. The 1960 UNESCO Declaration against Discrimination in Education is another important document. In most other human rights covenants including the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>5</sup>, the right to education is also mentioned. In 1987, the International Literacy Year was approved by UNESCO which focused attention on female literacy efforts. The World Conference on Education organized by the UN in Jomtien in 1990 was another major effort to improve the status of education and resulted in the World Declaration on Education for All which continues to inspire education efforts in the international arena. Thus, education is no longer seen as only a need but also a right. Many reviews of progress towards the goals of Jomtien were organized and documented in 1995 known as the Mid-Decade Reviews (Kalmthout, 1995). The UN has also appointed a Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski.

The Jomtien commitments were reviewed in Dakar in 2000. According to the many related documents and statements, including by UNESCO and UNICEF, the fact that the promises of Jomtien - including universal education coverage by 2000 - were not met was highlighted. In fact, in a number of areas, the situation is much worse today than it was in 1990. Donors have not lived up to their promises and repayment of debts has further harmed education programmes in many countries. New commitments were made in Dakar with the hope that achievement would be better in the years to come. One of the outcomes of the Dakar conference was the UN Girls' Education Initiative which began in April 2000 (see the UNICEF websites for more information). In addition to the above, there are many regional documents and commitments regarding education, including by the Arab League and Organization of African Unity.

While certainly agreeing with the importance of education and bearing witness to some of the excellent education work undertaken by the international community in

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<sup>4</sup> Article 26 mentions that 'Everyone has the right to education. It shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages...It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups...'

<sup>5</sup> It mentions that 'the education of the child shall be directed towards...respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values...peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes...Children of minority communities and indigenous populations have the right to enjoy their own culture and to practise their own religion and language.'

partnership with national and local stakeholders, the international community is often unable to and sometimes unwilling to deal with the root causes of lack of access and/or unequal access to education. By root causes, I am referring to unequal power relations and distribution of resources. Its approach to poverty alleviation including through education is framed in apolitical discourse and thus, fails to address infrastructural causes. Also, issues related to the role of politics and ideology in education is often overlooked, thus allowing for the continuation of at times reactionary politics in and through education. The international community is itself not homogenous or neutral in its position vis a vis development in general, or education, in particular. There are different interests working through the system at all times including that of powerful countries, donors, governments, political parties and the private sector.

Stromquist (1998,1997) has demonstrated the potentials but also limitations of many current education programmes in being liberatory and emancipatory in view of broader macro-issues. She refers to the issues around limited funding for female education, as well as the fact that many education programmes do not challenge hegemonic power relations/structures but rather work within their framework (1998). This is also referred to in her study of a Brazilian literacy programme (1997).

Nevertheless, several international experiences have shown that political commitment and effective planning and management of education programmes can make a difference in improving education indicators. Sri Lanka prior to the conflict, for example, was lauded for its effective investment in education. Thus, enhanced commitment to education is needed at various levels, at the overall global level and in challenging unequal power relations, as well as at the national and local level, in efforts to improve the day-to-day practice of education.<sup>6</sup> The role of civil society and NGOs in such endeavors has been very important. However, even in cases where more children are enrolled now than in the past, such as Iran or Zimbabwe, one is left with the questions of whether this improvement has been paralleled by an overall enhanced environment for democracy and social justice or not, and if not, what does it signify about the education provided.

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<sup>6</sup> Quality of education is another major focus of the UN including issues such as how learning takes place, 'joyful' learning, the physical education environment, education material, teacher training, in-school discipline and/or punishment.

Unterhalter (2003) refers to the *capabilities* approach which is increasingly being used by organizations like UNICEF. In this approach, education is seen as a human right in itself and quality learning is deemed an important aspect of achieving human rights. This approach has been inspired by the work of Sen (1999). This too is critiqued by academics for its lack of consideration for other power-related issues (Unterhalter, 2003).

Another assumption in some of the UN literature on education (Ahmed, 1994) is that the nation-state is an uncontested entity, which in reality it never is. It also assumes a strong and centralized state as well as that all members of the collectivity (including girls and women) support and benefit from the notions of 'national development' pursued by the state and other players. As shown in the theoretical chapter on collective identities, nationalism (like development) is a contested concept which does not benefit all members of a collectivity equally. Social categories such as class and gender have differential relationships with 'the national' as well as 'development.'

The promise of education often fails or is partially fulfilled because of the:

...continuing inequalities in economic and political relationships between the industrialized North and most states of the South. Whatever the policies of governments in the South, they are subject to external economic pressures to which education, along with other types of social provision, is very vulnerable...In the worst instances, these new difficulties have combined with political conflicts to bring national development efforts to a virtual standstill. Education has not escaped these pressures (Brown, 1991:2).

The whole discourse of international education 'experts' like those in other areas of development is also worthy of analysis. Such experts – usually from Western countries - though often very well educated and experienced, come with their own ideo-cultural baggage, for a very short time and know little about the context in which they are working thus impacting upon the effectiveness and sustainability of the work at hand, as well as maintaining some of the various related power relations. This issue has been analyzed in development critique literature (Frank, 1967).

The development enterprise for the most part has been predicated upon the assumption that certain peoples and societies, are less developed than others, and that those who are more developed, i.e. more modern, have the expertise/knowledge to help the less developed (or developing) achieve modernity (Parpart, 1995:221).

Control over expert knowledge became increasingly important and institutions to ensure control over the acquisition and use of this knowledge were developed and refined over the years. The legitimacy of the professional classes depended on widespread belief in their ability to define and transmit the scientific knowledge/truth needed by the modern world...The gatekeepers in these institutions thus became the guardians of regimes of truth identified with modern societies...(Parpart, 1995: 223).

This is also linked to what Saigol mentions and with which I agree:

...the dominant knowledge system globally is the Western one. Although there have been famous education theorists in the so-called East, for example, Imam Ghazali and Ibn-e-Khaldun, the current system is based on what are primarily Western forms of knowledge...As many educational projects in countries like Pakistan are funded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, new forms of official, practical, usable knowledge are flowing from these West-dominated agencies into these countries...The dominant paradigm is modernization...These institutions are proponents of the human capital theory which regards all human beings as resource potential and overlooks the *human* aspects of the issue (Saigol, 1995:26-27).

Besides the afore-mentioned Eastern scholars, it is important to remember that these countries were the 'cradles of civilization' where the first ever examples of human hymns, writing, scripture, texts and technology were developed. There is a wealth of historical and cultural heritage of knowledge which is continuously being eroded by hegemonic discourses of the West.

This is, however, not to overlook the positive contributions of certain Western or Western-based experts and/or the need for more equal international exchanges to continue. Also, because of the growing awareness of the power relations involved and the ineffectiveness of this top to bottom approach, agencies are increasingly trying to make their work more participatory. This means encouraging the local community to assume a leading position, and the expatriate staff, one of facilitation rather than 'expertise.'

## 2.4 Female Education

Our life partner will be knowledge  
Which teaches us our rights and responsibilities  
Which empowers us to fight injustice  
We have decided, yes, we have decided (Kamla Bhasin)

Within the context of patriarchy and structural inequalities faced by girls and women, education has often been denied to them and/or because of their various traditional social roles linked to collective identities and the socio-economic context, they have been unable to attend or complete school. Even when they do, they are often not provided with the cultural resources required to challenge patriarchy and other inequalities. It is in such a framework that human rights and women's rights movements, and feminists including feminist educators, have contributed enormously to discourses of gender and education (Weiner, 1997). As a result, the right to education for girls and women has been on the top of the agendas of not only civil society organizations but also the UN and most Governments.

The World Bank, UN and other development/funding agencies have undertaken studies, showing that an increase in the education level of mothers has a direct impact upon the health and education of children – especially daughters – which equates it, therefore, with a sound investment policy (Subbarao and Raney, 1993). Women's education is also considered, by the UN (including the United Nations Fund for Population Activities or UNFPA) and World Bank, to be an important factor in population control – one reason being that it delays marriage.<sup>7</sup> As highlighted in Chapter Five, women's reproductive roles are central to the (re)constructions of various collective identities and therefore, any discussion on population control is important and potentially sensitive.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Heward (1999:6) refers to studies which show that it takes more than basic education for women to reduce their fertility rates which are themselves a result also of their increased autonomy to make informed decisions/choices. It takes more years of education and an overall receptive development environment.

<sup>8</sup> One of the main stereotypes of the developing/underdeveloped countries in the mainstream Western media is a very superficial understanding of these locations as overpopulated because of the ignorance and/or superstition of its people and ineffectiveness of its governments.



Especially for the World Bank, education is also seen to increase women's contribution to the labour market. Heward (1999: 1) refers to the 1995 World Bank statement prioritizing girls' education as an important turning point, within classical liberal economics. Consequently, girls' education becomes a priority for many reasons, as her human right (more for organizations like UNICEF) and as a positive investment (more for the World Bank), overall contributing to the development process. The World Bank and UNDP have also defined education as a focus in their poverty-alleviation programmes.

The fact that the market economy and globalization needs educated women should again be pointed out in any discussion on female education, as it has been one of the conscious or/and unconscious reasons some states have supported girls' education (Kelly and Elliot, 1982). Such education is supported without it significantly altering the basics of a patriarchal system or the gendered division of labour at home and at work.

The discourse of girls and women's education is linked within the overall development framework of the international community. It too has gone through the Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD) phases and been faced with much of the same critique as well (Heward, 1999). According to Heward (1999:3), in the late 1990s, the debates on gender, education and development changed and became more comprehensive with a focus on empowerment and participation.

Some of the critique of the above frameworks includes that of expecting education to do what is actually possible only through a more comprehensive social reform programme (Jeffery and Basu, 1996) with which I fully agree. Others include the fact that many international education 'advisors' know the country they are working on very little and therefore, their plans and programmes are not realistic or effective (Unterhalter, 1999). Though increasingly challenged, much of the attitudes towards girls' education are reductive and simplistic, overlooking the economical, political forces and socio-cultural factors involved. Similarly, the increasing load on the shoulders of girls' and women with the various Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and its consequences for education have often been overlooked (Emeagwali, 1995).

Unterhalter (2003) mentions that the national Ministries of Education and the international community have until recently focussed on female *access* to education in the South, whereas in the West, more attention has been on the gendered impact of actual education itself, as highlighted by education practitioners such as teachers. She calls for greater exchanges between the two analytical/academic efforts which indeed has considerable potential.

Postmodern and post-colonial frameworks have more recently also influenced the study of gender and education.<sup>9</sup> In addition to addressing the role of education and female education in colonial projects, these have also raised issues related to education and identities (Unterhalter, 2003).

Many UN and other international agencies have supported various local initiatives to enhance girls' education and female literacy. Increasingly, these are through NGOs. These include the BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Centre) programme for rural girls, the Egyptian model of community schools for rural girls, the projects of the African Girls' Education Initiative and the Agha Khan Rural Education Programme in Northern Pakistan.

In 'most developing countries, state gender policies have in reality been "projects" funded by donor agencies' (Stromquist, 1996: 12). I have been witness to many such small projects, and though at best, positive for their small number of beneficiaries, their outreach is limited. Some such projects are unfortunately determined more by donor criteria and policies, rather than local contexts and priorities.

Though there has been considerable success in increasing women's educational attainment internationally, there remains a considerable gap still in many countries and regions, as well as between different regions of one country. The battle has not been won and girls' education and female literacy continue to be foci of work for many agencies, including UNICEF and UNESCO.

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<sup>9</sup> I presented a paper at a conference on post-colonial education in Manchester in 1999, for example.

Adult female education which is usually provided through non-formal channels has been important in its potential, sometimes actualized, to improve the status of women.

Adult education has contributed to women's empowerment and responded to the social conditions of women's learning experiences...Women's individual learning and learning in women's organizations will illustrate empowerment for women in community-based adult education (Morrish and Buchanan, 2001: 256).

It is important that these scholars (Morrish and Buchanan, 2001) link adult female education with social movements, including women's and feminist organizations. Female literacy programmes are often provided by such groups.

Women adult educators have expanded the study and practice of adult education to address feminist concerns...as well as women's learning in social movements and organizations...Women's contributions historically, nationally and internationally are a vitalizing force for the future of adult education to work towards social development and social justice (Morrish and Buchanan, 2001: 269).

While agreeing with most of the above statements, I do believe that not all adult female education programmes in the West or in developing countries are quite as effective as we would like them to be and also, even if a programme is effective, its impact is tainted by the remaining deeper social inequalities which need to be addressed through other channels as well. This is also reflected below:

...few large-scale literacy programmes exist and, for the women served through them, even fewer seek to offer what might be considered the *raison d'être* for literacy skills – exposure to knowledge that helps them to understand micro and macro forces shaping their lives and to visualize alternative realities (Stromquist, 1997:1).

Girls' education/female literacy does not automatically translate into a higher social status for women, as there is usually a disregard for deep gender inequalities. For example, in a September 2002 conference on post-colonialism at the University of Toronto, Alta Kumar referred to how while men now want an educated wife, at the same time they want her to be time obedient and traditional. This is a very pertinent issue which I have also seen and experienced in different locations.

There are various analyses of the reasons behind the gender gap in education as well as the possible approaches towards addressing this problematic. An influential analysis provided within the mainstream development paradigm has been that of the World Bank as reflected in the work of King and Hill who suggest 'that gender differentials in education endure because those persons who bear the private costs of investing in schooling for girls and women fail to receive the full benefits of their investment' (1993:23).

Elsewhere, I have criticized the above perspective because of its positivistic and westo-centric approach (Pourzand, 1996). While valid in some cases, it assumes that parents everywhere educate their daughters as an economic investment and this is not the case. The reality is much more complex. Similarly, investment means different things to different people. For some, investment in one's 'honour' and 'religious salvation' and/or 'social prestige' is possibly more important than pure economics. In the above positivistic approach, identity issues are completely disregarded. Similarly, as mentioned by Unterhalter (2003), it overlooks the many other reasons behind women's low social status.

Some of the other UN literature – such as Khadijeh Haq's *Strategies for Girls' Education* (UNICEF, 1993) focuses on supply and demand – consequently, if there are enough schools and female teachers, it assumes that the problem of girls' education will be largely solved. There is an assumption that education is value-free and therefore, only linked to issues of availability.<sup>10</sup> Though not denying the importance of the above point, I believe it does not sufficiently resolve the issues involved.

The history of Afghanistan demonstrates how sometimes even when schools were available, girls were not sent for other socio-cultural and political and/or security-related reasons. Education is not value-free and nor is it perceived as value-free by parents and others in the community. Education is an important aspect of the overall political atmosphere of a country and/or community – always linked to collective and gendered identities. The issue of girls' and women's education is particularly sensitive

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<sup>10</sup> Mention is also made in such publications about the important of distance to school, presence of female teachers, separate toilets and physical security which are all important factors, but not the only ones that matter.

due to the symbolic and actual role women play in the (re) constructions of collective identities as mentioned in Chapter Five.

Feminist educators (Stromquist, 1995, Conway and Bourque, 1993) have challenged the unproblematic presentation of the state in education literature and its 'romanticization' (Stromquist, 1995) in much of the relevant development literature. Informed by feminist and other progressive scholars, they highlight the 'legitimizing' process of political systems and the patriarchal state, in particular through educational institutions. In the case of Stromquist (1995), however, she does not pay sufficient attention to the various social categories within a nation-state, including ethnic, religious and class and their influence on girls' education.

Other scholars (Shaheed and Mumtaz, 1993) have focused on the importance of curriculum content and non-formal education in enhancing female education which is welcome but not sufficient. As my earlier work and this study show, it is pivotal to analyze the links between different constructions of collectivity and education (Conway and Bourque, 1993: 5) or '*the agency of education*' and the linkages with collective and individual 'agency' of its participants. In other words, what is education expected and perceived to change in society by different groups? Is it 'regarded as the means by which individuals internalize values and attitudes consonant with modernization' (Chanana, 1990: 5)?

The potential role of the teacher in impacting upon gender relations as well as the parents and students themselves as 'agents' of change is also very important and is reflected in the interviews of this dissertation.

Arnot and Dillabough have focused on the links between gender, education and citizenship including 'the relationship between male power and the construction of the modern citizen in schools' and 'the part played by feminist theory itself in affecting contemporary educational concepts' (2000:1) concluding that 'the drive for citizenship and citizenship education are gendered in ways which may serve to further marginalize, rather than emancipate, women' (2000:17).

While most colonial education was modeled on male-only institutes in Europe and supported gender discrimination (Egbo, 2000), some Westerners during the colonial period did support girls' education as well, though within traditional Western ideological frameworks and the objective of 'civilizing' the colonized. In others that were not directly colonized, such as Iran, Christian missionaries (including female missionaries) played an important role in supporting girls' education (as well as other formal education).<sup>11</sup>

Decolonialization and the surge of independence movements and nation-state building, resulted in further efforts in girls' education in many former colonies (Egbo,2000). 'New' women and men had to be shaped through education. This was linked to the focus on girls' education in the goals of international organizations, as referred to above. However, there were variations.

Clearly, circumstances have favored those states that women their independence in the late 1970s and 1980s versus those that embarked on the uncharted territory of nation building in the 1960s...The mobilization of rural populations for wars of national liberation could also be undertaken with ideologies that rejected Western devaluation of traditional knowledge and preserved some traditional forms of authority and leadership for women (Conway and Bourque, 1993:7).

As mentioned earlier, revolutionary movements also influence education. Latin and South America is a region with many popular social movements which include 'newly politicized women' (Conway and Bourque, 1993:9) who have had a positive impact upon girls' and women's education. However, this is often being eroded by more recent economic problems related to the various 'structural adjustment' programmes, as well as continued racialized gender discrimination such as in Brazil (Rosemberg, 1993).

The stereotype that girls are better in literature and history than they are in science and mathematics has persisted though been increasingly challenged by feminists as well as girls themselves (Chennabathni and Rejskind, 1998). Notions of appropriate

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<sup>11</sup> One of Tehran's most famous streets is still known as Jordan after Dr. Jordan who was an American Presbyterian missionary and established one of the first and best formal schools for boys called Alborz.

masculinity and femininity, sexuality and family are directly and indirectly transmitted through education (Fox, 1999). The curriculum plays an important role in conveying the status quo in gender relations. Girls are often discouraged from taking certain subjects such as math very seriously even by their own parents and teachers. Fortunately, in many countries, this is now changing. In fact, in a number of countries, there are more girls graduating and going to university than there are boys (Unterhalter, 1999). Many more such young girls are going to non-traditional fields.

Women's knowledge through their various experiences in life – including that of indigenous women - and what they have learned from their mothers and other women in their lives (as well as men) are also important but often undervalued knowledge systems (Aikman, 1999). This includes knowledge of the environment and herbal medicine as well as local history and culture (Conway and Burque, 1993). Education as a state apparatus has the power to validate certain kind of 'knowledges' over others. Women without formal education and/or literacy skills also have much to offer their families and communities.

Women's learning through other processes such as participation in community groups and various social movements is also of growing interest to scholars and of increasing importance in the struggles for justice and respect for human rights (Chatty and Rabo, 1997). In many situations, educated women are seen as role models and leaders amongst other women and are expected to play decisive roles in societal matters. Attainment of formal education often changes the expectations of women and their relationship with their family and community.

Permission to study and go to school is in many communities the first and only public experience of girls and women. It is the only place they are allowed to be besides their own home and perhaps those of close relatives. In addition to the socialization experiences at school, girls benefit from being able to read, write and do mathematics and this often allows them to further develop their skills and access new information, literature, politics and other subjects. For many, though not enough, this opens up their horizons to new worlds.

Education can also become a dividing factor amongst women, together with race, ethnicity and other factors. Educated women, especially those with higher education, can become or assume the position of elite (Conway and Bourque, 1993), representing other women in various national or international contexts. This has happened with feminist women and organizations as well. For example, Said Khan (1986) has elaborated upon the fact that most Pakistani women activists are from the middle and higher classes. Ensuring this does not endure is one of the challenges of any progressive women's movement. This dividing factor, together with others, is also involved in the differences amongst Western feminists and grassroots workers in the developing countries.

Many Western women as well as non-Western women based in the West also maintain 'power' over the less educated women of the rest of the world through their higher education levels and access to mainstream knowledge. This allows them to research and represent these 'other' women in various fora. This has been discussed in the methodology chapter as well. As mentioned also above, education 'experts' who are women from primarily Western countries is another related such example which is very much a part of the current development paradigm. These 'experts' come with many related power inequalities including that of location in the global economy, race, ethnicity, class, education and language. This is again not to underestimate the positive contribution of some such experts (Parpart, 1995).

In many countries, teaching has become a feminized profession for various reasons including that it pays little, is seen as a 'safe' environment for women in traditional societies and women are assumed to be better with children. There are also some practical reasons such as that of conservative societies where parents prefer their daughters to have female teachers and therefore, having more female teachers can increase the enrollment rate of girls. Male teachers are seen as a possible threat to girls' morality and security. According to various national census undertakings, the percentage of women working in the education and health sectors are usually the highest.

Feminist educators, either as teachers, policy-makers or curriculum designers, continue to make an important contribution to challenging gender discrimination in society



through education (Clover, Follen and Hall: 1998). In much of the development and education literature, female teachers are considered *agents of change*, a promise only partially fulfilled in view of the many other factors involved. Also, women are teachers (in its wider definition) in their more traditional roles as mothers, grandmothers and sisters.

The gendering of education and the influence of education on women needs to be linked to the impact of race, gender, class, ability/disability, sexuality and other social categories upon education. Not all girls or women are treated the same by the education system or have equal access to education. Consequently, it is the complex and changing linkages between these various components of one's identities, their material reality and the overall political, economic and socio-cultural setting of a country/community which impacts upon a girls' or woman's relationship with education. In and out-of-school factors are all interlinked and determine the access of girls and women to education and the outcome of education for various groups of women. I agree with Egbo who writes:

It is my position that juxtaposed with critical social policies, the right kind of literacy will continue to empower women...Admittedly, literacy is not a panacea for all the social problems faced by women and other marginalized groups...It is however a necessary prerequisite for enabling women understand their social, political and material world (Egbo, 2000:11).

## **2.5 Moslem Girls/Women and Education**

The issue of Islam, women and education has been of interest to researchers especially feminist researchers from Moslem countries (Pourzand, 1999, Najmabadi, 1995, Kandiyoti, 1991, Mehran, 1991). This has happened for various reasons including the continued gender gap in many Moslem countries in educational attainment. While agreeing that Islam, its religious hierarchy, links to state and policies and patriarchy are indeed important factors in the continued oppression of women in many Moslem countries, Islam alone should not be seen as *the* root cause. In addition, wide gender gaps in education are not limited to Moslem countries. According to UNICEF, they are persistent in South Asia, Middle East & North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, thus not only Moslem countries.

Interpretations of Islam, reference to Islam, assertion of Islamic identity – all are linked to other socio-political and economic factors, including global inequalities and poverty, and other collective identities such as nationalism and ethnicity. The intersectionality of all these different factors changes over time and is manifested in different ways in various contexts – even within one region. Different contexts in the Middle East include, for example, that of the secular state of Turkey (Gok,1991), Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Mehran, 1991) and Saudi Arabia with its dual system of male and female education (El-Sanabary, 1994).

Koranic and religious education, which included some poetry as well, was prevalent for women in many Moslem countries prior to the expansion of formal education and provided basic reading and writing skills to many women who would otherwise not have had such an opportunity. Some of my interviewees refer to their mother's religious education and how much they had benefited from it. A number of Moslem countries have in fact been witness to considerable progress in their female education indicators, including Iran<sup>12</sup> and Saudi Arabia. Hoodfar (1996) has elaborated upon the link between women's education, the labour market and family planning policies of the regime and how since the late 1980s, Iran has succeeded in reducing its high birth rate parallel to an improvement in female education indicators. These changes in Iran have occurred in the absence of any radical shift in the conservative and dominant ideology of the Government.

With regards to Pakistan, another predominantly Moslem country, Shaheed and Mumtaz (1993) have expressed their ambivalence towards the expansion of girls' formal education during the period of General Zia and his authoritarian Islamic rule in Pakistan since an ideology of gender discrimination was perpetuated through the education system. Pakistan continues to have a considerable gender gap in its

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<sup>12</sup> Iran's female literacy and girls' enrolment and completion rates have increased since the Revolution. It was below 40% at the time of the Revolution, by 1990 it was 53.1% and had gone up to 69.2% by 1998, according to UNESCO statistics. This is due to various reasons including parents' demand for education, increase in number of schools in rural areas, the increase in the urban middle-class, the religious milieu of schools which encouraged conservative parents to send their girls to school and unlike Taliban, the clergy's support of girls' education – though within the framework of an Islamization project.

education system (and low education indicators overall), which, I believe, has more to do with poverty, poor governance and other factors than with Islam alone.

Reflecting upon the same period and the ideology of education, another Pakistani scholar/feminist activist, Saigol has asserted that:

...the state chose to use what I called 'Islamic ideology'. This ideology served several purposes...tying the citizen to the state as a religious duty, receiving weapons from Islamic and anti-communist countries...and taming and controlling women and workers by presenting their dissent as sacrilege...As a part of Islamic ideology, the state was thus engaged in constructing the 'good Muslim woman' as the opposite Other of the 'good Muslim male' (Saigol, 1995:12).

Even in a country like Turkey, where the state and education has been secular, traditional gender roles are not challenged and therefore girls' education does not have much of a transformative role, especially in rural areas and girls continue to lag behind boys in education (Gok, 1995, Mortensen, 1983,).

Some conservative Moslem parents (especially fathers) have at times asserted that sending their daughters to school was not in line with the Islamic faith. They have been concerned that their daughters might learn un-Islamic behavior at school. Or, they have not wanted their daughters to be taught by men, or have insisted that they must go to school with a scarf (as has happened in France with some Moslem North African girls and their families). Such positions are often assumed as a reaction to powerful ruling local and other elites and their ideologies (Ekanayake, 2000), imposed Westernization/ modernization, state intervention in the 'private' realm of their homes or other coercive processes and is therefore, linked again to politics and power relations and not only the control of women on its own. Nevertheless, women's control often becomes a primary symbol of such tensions with women paying the price. Yet, many Moslem parents have tried very hard to send their daughters to school and support their education, sometimes firmly believing it was not only practical but also pious behavior.

The persistence of patriarchal attitudes is by no means limited to Moslem societies. Lee (1993), for example, refers to the continuing influence of Confucian values and

patriarchy in Korea, inspite of the progress made in education for girls and women. Kalia (1982) refers to the gender stereotypes in Indian school books. Feminist educators in the West also continue to face many challenges (Arnot, 2002).

Within the Islamic context, religious education for girls is also an important matter (Mehran, 1991). In Iran after the Islamic Revolution, for example, girls of nine years of age are officially acknowledged through a school ceremony to have reached the age of religious responsibility (puberty). As a result of the children's own 'agency' as well as the influence of their families, peers and media, they often go through these formalities mechanically and without faith in them.<sup>13</sup>

Girls in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 are obliged to go to school with a uniform which includes a *maghnieh* which is like a large scarf. Some flexibility regarding this uniform has been shown recently. Since the Revolution, schools have been segregated, text books have been revised and religious education has increased (Afshar, 1998, Moghadam, 1993). Overall, secular space has been much reduced but not completely destroyed, as a result of the individual and collective struggles of progressive Iranian youth, men and women (Najmabadi, 1998).

In Iran, and many other countries, girls/women of religious and ethnic minorities face additional restrictions and challenges in their education. In Iran, some religious groups including the Armenians and Zoroastrians are allowed to have their own schools and also teach their own religious tenents. Overall, in a religious government like Iran after 1979, education plays an important role in shaping the 'ideal' pious man and woman, with particularly significant consequences for women.

While not denying the influential role of Islam in many Moslem countries and its gendered impact, I believe that the concerns of girls' and women's education in Moslem countries are often similar to that of their peers in other societies. These are determined by various socio-economic and political factors, including class and ethnic/linguistic discrimination and/or war and displacement. The role of individual and family 'agency' can also make an enormous difference in the outcome of

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education, as well as other less evident influential factors, such as that of dissenting sub-cultures created by youth themselves.

## **2.6 Education and Conflict**

In times of conflict, girls' education is often one of the first victims, as parents feel insecure about sending their girls to school in a militarized environment. Though the sense of insecurity also exists for boys, the reasons and modality is different. This is in addition to the possible conservative/reactionary ideology behind the conflict, such as what happened in Afghanistan. During times of war, parents are also more likely to earn less money and often make the decision to keep their daughters at home, while their sons continue to go to school. The dreams and aspirations of millions of girls and women all over the world are shattered when war stops them from going to school. Yet, the efforts of girls/women as educators and/or students (sometimes with the support of their progressive fathers, husbands and/or brothers) in order to continue learning even during war is remarkable and heroic.

Often in wars, schools, like other important community centers, become targets of the 'enemy' and are destroyed, forcing students and teachers to abandon their endeavors. Schools also can become foci of resistance in support of the opposition or recruitment grounds for the army and/or militia. Revolutions and dramatic change of regimes and hegemonic ideologies also impact upon schools enormously – both in terms of management style, as well as content, pedagogy and criteria for success and achievement. The effect is gendered, sometimes allowing more space for girls and women to improve their social status.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) - who are globally speaking amongst the most vulnerable groups in society - have special education needs for their children as they are no longer in their own communities and often live in camp-like settings with no access to school (Deng, 2000). Sometimes, IDPs have not had any formal education in their original location and therefore, for the first time, have the opportunity to experience formal education as IDPs which is another reason why this is an important issue. The IDP Guiding Principles also highlights right to education.

Due to the increase in conflicts all over the world, education in conflict situations (or emergency education) has also become an important area of interest, especially for the UN and NGOs. In addition to actual schooling, this often also includes landmine education, conflict resolution, psychosocial interventions and health/hygiene education. Such programmes are sometimes mainstreamed into the formal education programme and at other times, they are separate UN/NGO or community-based initiatives. Civil society often plays an important role in such activities as well.

The provision of education is seen as an important symbolic and actual service in emergency situations that provides some sense of 'normalcy' (UNICEF, Education in Emergencies for Reconstruction, 1999) to the children as well as parents in otherwise turbulent times. Education in post-conflict situations is also seen as very important in bringing back hope to countries and/or communities as well as facilitating social cohesion and recovery (UNICEF, 1999). In fact, it has also become linked to security debates in several ways. One argument is that it will help former child soldiers reintegrate into society and prevent a new generation from taking up arms.

## **2.7 Refugee Education**

There are at least 1.5 million refugee children aged 12-17 in developing countries today. Only 3% of them have access to education. Yet their generation will be called upon to lead their war-torn societies tomorrow. Let us give them the skills to rebuild. ( June, 2003, Refugee Education Trust, in <http://www.ineesite.org>).

In every world region women refugees were shown to be seriously disadvantaged with respect to...educational services...Traditional barriers...are exacerbated...where there is a disruption of support systems, lack of basic human needs and an absence of the sense of security that is essential for learning...The unmet educational needs of refugee women present an enormous challenge that must be met, if women are to assume active and meaningful roles in their exile/return environments.' (First International Consultation on Refugee Women in Ptolemy, 1989: 23).

The increase in number of refugees and migrants has resulted in a whole important category of refugee and migrant education, as well as issues pertaining to multiculturalism, heritage education and English as a second language (ESL).

There are a growing number of experts, conferences, sections in organizations, agencies and resources (including websites) on emergency education including for displaced populations.<sup>14</sup> These include the Refugee Education Trust established by Ms. Ogata, the former High Commissioner of UNHCR. Some of these resources provide information on rapid survey of education needs, the set-up of education facilities in refugee camps, teacher training as well as monitoring and evaluation.

One of the deprivations faced by millions of refugee children is their lack of access to education and, in particular, quality education. Many refugee children have lost years of education as a result of war and displacement with all its repercussions. 'Illegal' refugees or undocumented refugees/migrants and their children face additional problems as they and/or their children are not registered at school without a particular set of documents. Only 12 percent of refugee children attend school (Foster, 1995:2).

Racism towards refugees/migrants in schools has been another important issue for those concerned (Arnot and Dillabough, 2000, Foster, 1995). Sometimes, refugee children attend regular schools of the host-country and in other situations, they attend special refugee schools or both options exist for those with some resources. Refugee schools can be either supported by the private sector of the diaspora community or the aid establishment. Refugee schools are also often supported by political parties, as in the case of Afghans in Pakistan and in Iran. The language of instruction for refugee children is important. In most cases, it is the language of the host country and initially unknown to them, as well as socially and culturally alienating.

The provision of education for refugee groups poses particular problems related to their language and culture...Should educators make a priority of helping them to adapt...or are they to be educated in preparation to return home?' (Brown, 1991:225).

The situation of refugee education varies from country to country, for example whether you are a refugee in Pakistan or in the UK, influences the challenges at hand. Millions of refugees live in countries where many of their own children do not have access to school, and certainly, do not have access to good schools. Refugees in some

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<sup>14</sup> Including ginie.org which is a joint effort of UNESCO and its partner organizations called the Global Information Networks in Education as well as ineesite.org or the Inter-Agency Network for Emergency

countries and in the West, are situated in conditions where many of their children attend school and conditions are, at least in terms of basics, not bad. Nevertheless, even in such circumstances, refugee children often face many problems such as racism (Jones and Rutter, 1998).

The educational and other skills which refugees and migrants bring into their host country is of pivotal importance in the enrichment of the economies and social context of these countries though so often overlooked and undermined within the mainstream discourse on refugees/migrants. The issue of the 'braindrain' is also relevant as more and more educated people leave from Third World countries to the West. Countries like Canada accept immigrants based on a number of factors, including education and specializing in specific areas. In the West, these educated immigrants and refugees are often underutilized, overqualified for their actual jobs and de-skilled in the process (Mojab, 1999).<sup>15</sup>

Amin (2000) has analyzed the linguistic capital of English which some more educated immigrant/refugee women possess and can help them adjust in their new locations. However, as she discusses, the issue of having an 'accent' is at times used in a racist manner against her, with 'accent' and 'native speaker of English' as a social construction itself. There are exceptions and some refugees/migrants do very well and are extremely successful but that is not the norm. The indirect education and learning which is experienced by refugees who have lived and survived through conflict, flight and displacement is often overlooked. Even those who have not participated in formal or informal education, have been learning at every crossroad of their tumultuous lives. Becoming a refugee often equates loss of education opportunities, especially for girls, whose education is not deemed a priority – in certain circumstances. Yet, for many, it means new and better opportunities that change their lives (Azarbaijani-Moghadam, 2000) and impact upon their home countries as well – once the conflict is over and refugees repatriate. In the case of many Afghan refugee children, as a result of living in Pakistan, they were able to learn Urdu as well as English, the latter in particular

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Education.

<sup>15</sup> In Canada, there is great focus on 'the Canadian experience' which works against refugees and immigrants in spite of their education and years of experience.



being important for their future options in life. The opportunities and experiences of education as refugees, potentially supports return and repatriation programmes.

The education of diaspora communities is itself a matter of great importance, as is the role the diaspora play directly or indirectly in the status of education back in their countries of origin. This sometimes occurs within the framework of particular political parties, as mentioned earlier. Occasionally host governments, including for example the Government of Iran, have been reluctant to provide education to Afghan refugees claiming it would be a pull-factor and more refugees would come and stay.

The issue of diaspora education is important from another perspective as well, as demonstrated in the case of the UK where a serious debate has been underway in the past years on government support to religious schools, with feminists and progressive groups against such support as it facilitates gender discrimination by the religious hierarchy. This includes Moslem schools which often promote the *hejab* and conservative attitudes and lifestyles with its own gendered repercussions. These debates are also linked to critiques of multiculturalism (Guibernau and Rex, 2001).

The below quote highlights some of the related issues in the context of Algerians in France:

Where girls are concerned, this collective positioning in favor of school and education furthers the dynamic of rupture and displacement because it necessitates the breaking of certain “traditional” rules...For instance, girls must be allowed to venture into public space...the discursive insistence of the idea of school as opportunity, create specific boundaries within which young women of Algerian descent in France come to construct themselves within and in relation to school (Raissiguier, 1995: 83-83).

As highlighted by academics such as Mirza (1992), the experiences of all refugees and immigrants with education is not the same, including that of for example, black girls vis a vis black boys or South Asian girls and boys in the UK (Brah and Minhas, 1985). This homogenizing/stereotyping is one of the processes of racism as well as patriarchy, both related and interlinked.

Refugee/immigrant children are also located differently within the efforts of national education programmes to 'shape' its citizens and contribute to the narratives of the nation-state. They are usually marginalized from and by such discourses in school (Brooks, 2000).

### **3. Conclusion**

As I hope to have demonstrated above, education is a complex terrain linked to other social phenomena and social categories, upon which it in turn impacts. While primarily reproducing social inequalities, it also provides an important opportunity for change and learning which cannot and should not be overlooked – especially at particular times in the history of nation-states and individuals. Education during periods of dramatic upheaval, such as conflict and what is experienced by refugees, is of potential importance in terms of continuity, adjustment, transformation and empowerment (or the absence of it). It is also related to power relations, social mobility and opportunities to improve one's intellectual as well as personal status.

In particular, for girls and women, it has the potential to enhance their 'agency' in improving their own lives and that of their communities. However, all these are potentials which are only too often not realized or not fully realized because of other factors, including the dominant ideology of education as well as other aspects of the identities of the girls and women concerned – including their national, ethnic, religious and class identities. Nevertheless, on those occasions when it is realized, it can be very powerful and important. Similarly, education cannot be seen in isolation but rather together with other social and political developments, as well as the role of the government, political parties, development agencies, civil society and communities/families as well as the individual.

There is a continuum between colonial processes, stereotypes and racism with that which continues to be reflected in more contemporary mainstream discourses of development/underdevelopment (including education in this case) and also various refugee regimes. I realize, however, that this continuity has been uneven and continues to be ruptured including by the resistance of various subjugated peoples. The form and shape of the unequal power relations between colonialism and contemporary neo-

colonialism, in the age of globalization, have changed but the main thrust remains and influences these various processes. In fact, these processes are essential to the continuation of these unequal power relations at the local and global level.

...questions of difference and equality in education take on a certain urgency in a world where the fate of first world citizens is inextricably tied to the fate of the refugees, exiles, migrants, immigrants in the first world, and of similar constituencies in the rest of the world. The struggle over representation is always a struggle over knowledge. What knowledges do we need for education to be the practice of liberation? ...Finally, how do we hold educational institutions, our daily pedagogic practices, and ourselves accountable to plural and unequal subaltern truths and subordinate knowledges? (Chandra Mohanty, 1997:xvi).

## **Chapter Eight - Afghan Educated Refugee Women Interviewed:**

### **Who Are They?**

#### **1. Introduction**

As reflected in the methodology chapter, I have interviewed twenty educated Afghan women for this dissertation, approximately half of them in 1998/99 (while Taliban was still in power) and another group in early 2002 (when Taliban had fallen from power), in Peshawar and Islamabad. It is to them that I owe much of what I have learned about Afghanistan and Afghan women. It is important that I introduce them to the readers and allow them to contribute to this introduction through relevant quotes prior to going further into the interview analysis. Such an introduction is also more respectful of them as complex and dynamic individuals than just beginning by quoting them under various theoretical or thematic sub-headings.

I will begin by providing some general information about the interviews and then a biography of six of the interviewees, as an indication of the lives of the other women concerned as well. I will attempt at some common biographical trajectories which are illustrative of the lives and thoughts of all the interviewees. However, in the next two chapters that deal with the experiences, positions and attitudes of the interviewees with regard to issues at hand, and the analysis of these, I will refer to all the twenty interviewees rather than just the six introduced in this chapter.

#### **2. Revisiting the Sampling and General Issues Pertaining to the Interviews**

As elaborated in the methodology chapter, I began by interviewing some of the Afghan educated refugee women whom I knew and who knew me and in some cases, through them, I was introduced to other educated Afghan refugee women. However, at all times, I attempted to identify and interview a range of women in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, class, level of education, work, age, and years of displacement. In terms of education, I attempted to interview women with high-school education and higher. I also consciously wanted to speak to some mothers and daughters as happened in three cases. As a result of my own positioning as a UN worker, I knew

and interviewed quite a few women working for the international community and/or Afghan non-Governmental organizations.

In the process of interviewing, I realized that there were many other differentiating factors in the experiences of the interviewees as well, including their urban/rural backgrounds, marital status, religiosity, ideology, relationship to one another and degree of engagement with social and women's issues. Some of the interviewees are linked through various social networks to each other.

Though I have focused on educated Afghan refugee women and they by no means represent all Afghan women, many of their experiences and views would echo those of other Afghan women as well. In general, Afghan family and other networks continue to be quite extensive even in Pakistan and after so many years of war. For this reason, even educated and more privileged Afghan women usually remain in constant contact with other groups and social strata and are not isolated from the rest of the refugee population – though of course they do not experience that degree of poverty first-hand. Also, none of the women I have interviewed are very rich and living in great luxury or in ivory towers. In fact, most in spite of their education have very modest lives. This has sometimes happened because of displacement but for many, even in Afghanistan, they had modest, if not difficult, lives in terms of resources. Most of the very elite and especially those who had Western university education left for the West earlier in the history of the conflict, as mentioned in the contextual chapter and my interviewees do not fall into that category. They represent mostly the lower to upper middle strata of Afghan society.

Also, in spite of the fact that they are all educated, they are still very different from one another in many ways. This is indeed also a reflection of the heterogeneity of Afghan society as well as gender as a socially constructed phenomenon which changes at all times. Yet, women as a social category continue to share some wider experiences of discrimination and gender-based violence in many contexts which is important to highlight and challenge. As women, for example, quite a few have experienced some degree of gender discrimination as girls/women and some have experienced domestic violence in their families and/or polygamy.

The diversity within this small group of interviewed Afghan women also disrupts the homogenizing stereotypes of Afghan women, refugee women and Moslem women in mainstream Western academia and media. It is also to a great extent these various differences that allow for multiple reflections of women's agency and the different struggles and coping mechanisms of women, including Afghan refugee women.

Being educated, as mentioned above, means that the interviewed women are indeed a minority amongst Afghan refugees. There are no exact figures on the number of educated refugees in Pakistan at any given time but it would surely be less than fifty percent, even for men, and far below twenty percent, for women. Twelve percent of Afghan women are literate (UNICEF, 2000). The women I have interviewed have much higher education levels and, therefore, represent an even smaller minority amongst Afghan women and refugee women.

I have interviewed four Pashtun, six Tajik and two half/Tajik and half/Pashtun women. I have also interviewed three Uzbek women, three Hazara women, one of which is Turkomen/Hazara, a Ghizilbash, and one woman who did not refer to her ethnicity and said that as *Seyed* – descendants of the Prophet – they are neither. I tried to interview women of all the above ethnic groups in the earlier as well as latter interviews. Amongst the above categories, there are internal differences including some based on religion though these are not always so clear with mixed marriages, different definitions, possible conversion and other reasons. Nevertheless, as presented to me, fourteen of the interviewees are Sunni Moslems (with one possibly having converted to Christianity), one just wanted to be known as a Seyed Moslem and five are Shiite. Of this five, four are 12 imamite Shiites and one is seven imamite Shiite/Ismaeli. She is also a Seyed but an Ismaeli, Shiite Seyed. All the interviewees are urban-based refugees, unlike many Afghans who live in refugee camps and/or villages.

Approximately seven are under the age of 30 at the time of interview, nine are under fifty and four are fifty and over. At the time of the interview, nine were single and the rest or eleven were married. Of those married, two were not living with their husbands out of choice. Three, at least, had ethnically-mixed marriages. The relatively high number of single women is an indication of the higher rate of single women amongst educated and working Afghan women than in the general population. This also applies

to marriage at an older age (refer to Annex II). Of those who are single, most are responsible for their families and live with their families (parent, parents and/or siblings).

Seven have gone to or completed school, and the rest, University at various levels. Three have completed their Masters courses as well and three are medical doctors. About 5 left when the struggles against the Soviet-supported regime began, in the 1980s, eight when the Mujahidin inter-group fighting was taking place in the early 1990s and seven with the Taliban victory in much of Afghanistan after 1995. This is quite representative especially of educated women. Five were not working for a salary at the time of the interview. Of those who were working, four were working for the UN, five with NGOs, two as domestic workers, two as teachers and one with a small income-generation project. Those who worked for the UN had the highest salaries. As mentioned earlier in this section, this is not representative but it is true that many of the educated Afghan refugee women did work for the UN and NGO sector these past years and if not in this sector, many then worked as teachers and some as domestic workers.

Since my interviews, the lives of most of the interviewees have changed in dramatic and significant ways. At least ten have left the region for the West, nine between the interviews and the fall of the Taliban (therefore, during the rule of the Taliban), and only one since early 2002. Some have become quite prominent members of the Western diaspora community. One who worked as a domestic worker is now in the USA and has a much higher standard of life for herself and her family. Of those who remain in the region, many have gone back to Afghanistan. Again, a few are very active members of Afghan civil society. Sadly, the family of one of these interviewees who had returned to Afghanistan in the summer of 2002 has already decided to become refugees one more time in Pakistan because of the poor quality of education in Afghanistan. One has since divorced which is not common among Afghans. I am in touch still with many of these women who are my friends. I have asked and received responses from five of those who were interviewed in 1998 about their more recent experiences.

The women interviewed all have many rich, incredible, fascinating and encouraging as well as sad, tragic and devastating experiences. They are all survivors who have struggled, lost, gained, learned, taught, loved, believed and made a difference. Many are leaders in their own ways. Though they do not represent a majority of Afghan (refugee) women because of their higher levels of education and relative prosperity, they do reflect the suffering as well as resilience and strength of most Afghan women including Afghan refugee women in Pakistan. Their life stories reflect various family, community, local, national, regional as well as international unequal social and power relations as experienced and perceived by women, as well as the continuous challenges to these inequalities by millions of women throughout the world.

### **3. Six Educated Afghan Refugee Women and their Lives**

I have chosen six of the interviewees to introduce in a bit more detail.<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed for various reasons. It has been a difficult decision to make since all of them seem very interesting and important to me and in different ways are my heroines. These six women will reflect different ethnic groups, age groups, personal ideological tendencies, duration of stay in Pakistan, education and work, as well as family status, time of interview and other differences. Rather than in sequence of the time of interview, I will introduce them from the oldest (57 years old now) to the youngest (30 years old now) but according to age at time of interview.

#### **Rehaneh: Interviewed in 1999 in Islamabad, Pakistan**

Rehaneh is Tajik and Sunni, married to a Pashtun. She is 54 at the time of the interview. She left her husband in Kabul when the Taliban came in 1997 and closed formal girls' school. Her younger daughter had been attending school. The Taliban also stopped female civil servants like herself from working. In addition, her husband married a second woman to have a son. With Rehaneh, he had four daughters. She is educated and very spiritual. She lived in Islamabad, Pakistan, and worked as a domestic worker first with her youngest daughter but was later joined by another older daughter (whom I also interviewed) and who had an abusive husband (whom she

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<sup>1</sup> In Annex No.III, a biographical summary paragraph is provided for each of the interviewees.



eventually divorced). They are all living in the US now as refugees and doing relatively well.

Rehaneh was born in 1945 on Monday night at 10 pm. In response to how come she knows it so exactly, she says:

My father, God bless him, had written it all in the Koran.

Her father was trading cloth and later had small shops. Her father, a Tajik, had studied upto grade six in the North and her mother was a Seyed from Kabul. They were Dari-speaking. She had learned how to read and write at home. Her mother had been widowed young and married Rehaneh's father as her second husband. Her father had another wife, when he married Rehaneh's mother. She was the only child of her father from his second wife.

His first wife...she was the fiancé of my paternal uncle, he died early...so they wed her to her dead fiance's brother. My father was not happy. She was his cousin and she was much older...God bless her, we were very young when she died.

Rehaneh went to school when she was in Baghlan, Northern Afghanistan. She was amongst the first generation of young girls to go to school in the region and in her family. After her mother passed away, she and her family moved to Pol-e-Khomri, also in Northern Afghanistan, where she studied till 9<sup>th</sup> grade. The particular school she went to did not go beyond 9<sup>th</sup> grade and her family situation did not allow her to go further. Overall, she liked going to school very much:

...my mother, if she had been alive, I would have continued...my father remarried, finally, they wed me. My husband and I, we were together in Pol-e-Khomri for a few years. I wanted to study but it did not work out – my husband's family would not allow me to work or go out.

Her father remarried again when Rehaneh's mother passed away. About the reason for her mother's untimely death, Rehaneh says:

...but because she was very upset about her son who had died at two and her daughter who had died, the doctors said as long as she has these worries, she won't improve. I was 13 when she died.

As a young woman, she also worked as a teacher for one year in Parwan.

I was 16 – because it was newly established (the school), they had a problem of lack of teachers, there were no educated people, so they took me...

One of her earlier bad memories is relatives and friends wanting to force her parents to marry her off at a very young age, when she was under 13, and her mother was still alive. They were able to resist for only a few years, when she was married to her husband who was a civil servant.

In 1973, they moved to Mazar Sharif, also in Northern Afghanistan, for her husband's work and stayed until 1978. They lived in Kunduz for one year as well, after which they moved to Kabul.

...in the beginning, it was good, it was Daoud Khan's period, it was free, we wanted to go to Mecca, then the 7 Saur Revolution happened – coup d'etat – the Communist period...I went for typing courses – when I graduated, it was the period you had to be a Party member, and I was not a Party person or in any Party – I knew that there is work but when I went, they would say, no, there is no work...afterwards someone was found in the Cartography Department – I worked there for 10 years – there was also a Women's Organization and Trade Union – I was in the Women's Organization.

Rehaneh's work and salary contributed to the wellbeing of her family. She also worked with the Ministry of Planning for a short while – as a typist/clerk – until the Taliban came and she was unable to continue her work. She was witness, directly or indirectly, to all the terrible fighting and violence, as well as other forms of hardship, in Kabul until the time she left in 1997. She experienced it under the Communists as well as the *Mujahidin*,

During Amin's time...Some grooms of two, three days, disappeared with brides at home, many of our friends, our neighbors. There was a woman, they had taken her three sons, she died of the fourth from a stroke, when the 3<sup>rd</sup> came back, his mother had died already...they stopped that boy, he was very young, 17, he was from the North of Kabul, they took him and imprisoned him for six months, he had not seen water...his hair had not been combed and he

told us that each moment they harassed the Tajiks...they took many beautiful girls with them. When Mazari (the *Hezb-e-Wahdat* leader) was killed, they found the bodies of girls, naked...in the university. Girls had become pregnant for example, what a loss of reputation (*bee aberugi*).

On her marital problems, she says:

...we had a happy life with my husband, for 17/18 years and unfortunately, it was the issue of boys, I had boys but they died and his mother made him marry this woman. Now, fortunately he has two boys and girls. We lived in one house but we had not so much to do with each other...Now his situation is bad...from last year...till now he has not got even half of the year's salary (from the Taliban)...he has sold everything and ate it.

Out of desperation because of her marital but also the various Taliban restrictions, she had asked a relative who worked in Peshawar, Pakistan, to notify her of any opportunities to work and live there, even as a domestic worker. When he did, she sold her belongings and took the radical decision of leaving her husband and coming to Pakistan to work and allow her daughter to be educated. In Peshawar, initially for the first year, they had rented a very uncomfortable, unequipped and damp room in a very congested and unclean area of the city. Later, in Islamabad, they had somewhat better facilities in the home of the person they worked for. Working as a domestic worker has been very difficult for Rehaneh who worked as a civil servant and had her own social status but as a result of her own character, she was also very much respected by her employers, thus somewhat reducing the negative impact. Her younger daughter was also able to continue with her education as a refugee in Pakistan and learned very good English and computer skills, which made Rehaneh very happy. Still,

...I am of course worried about our future, if we go from here or if the Government of Pakistan puts more pressure on Afghans, where can people go, almost half of Afghans have lost their homes, sold their goods, so many widows who can not run their lives, they have no men, they have to work, I am so scared about the future. But *panah bar Khodah* ((I seek sanctuary with God).

A cousin of Rehaneh's wrote a letter on her behalf to UNHCR. In a matter of about one year, she was called for an interview and the process went forward very quickly and in the summer of 2001, Rehaneh and her two daughters, left for the USA, leaving behind two older and married sisters and their family as well as Rehaneh's husband

and his new family. She is ironing, her older daughter is a kindergarten teacher and her younger daughter is going to graduate from high-school soon. About her life now, she has the following to say, based on an email exchange facilitated by her younger daughter in 2002.

Since I have been interviewed by you, lots of changes has come to my life, first of all my daughter...has been divorced from her husband, and after a long waiting period, I came to US, to build a brighter future for my daughter...and lots of other small changes like being separated from my other daughters, families and friends like you.

**Nazanin: Interviewed in 2002 in Rawalpindi (close to Islamabad), Pakistan**

Nazanin is an Uzbek, Sunni woman, 38 years old, university educated, single, taught at University in Afghanistan and who now lives with her siblings in Rawalpindi (close to Islamabad), Pakistan, and runs a school for refugees in her house. She has strong views regarding the rights of her own ethnic minority group and their collective history.

It was only during the interview that I realized I had met and spoken to Nazanin in Mazar Sharif, Northern Afghanistan in 1996 when I was there for my MA fieldwork. She was born in 1964 in Kabul, where her family was exiled. Her family is originally from Faryab, Northern Afghanistan, where they were prominent leaders as well as landowners. Her mother was illiterate but believed in education very much.

...but for political reasons we had no choice, our families had to migrate, to go to the center to run their lives, they were exiled from their own place....they were political people of their society...during the King's period, Zahir Shah, for political reasons, they could not live there with their own people...they had to be politically exiled, they had to be in Kabul and we were born in Kabul for this reason.

This was not the first time her family had been exiled. It had happened earlier when her grandfather was alive. Due to her family's history, she and her siblings have a reputation to live up to and feel very strongly about ethnic discrimination. Her grandfather led Uzbeks in the North and fought against the Pashtun leader, Abdul

Rahman Khan, who was trying to extend his rule. Her grandfather was subsequently arrested and exiled. The Pashtun leaders took land away from Uzbeks, raped Uzbek girls, forcing them to learn Pashtun and deprived them of formal education. Many Uzbeks were killed in the process. About the situation of all non-Pashtuns, she has the following to say:

This was not only the fate of Uzbeks, it was also the fate of Tajiks and Hazaras, Hazaras more than Tajiks and Uzbeks. ..Hazara people were...simple...and more vulnerable – and the biggest duty for Hazaras was to sweep, wash for families...or *Khaneh Kuch*, was a new slavery, that a family was the servants of another family from grandfather to father, from one generation to another...I have seen it myself, we had Hazaras and Panjshiris (from North of Kabul) working in our own home...for example, in our family, one room in the corner of their home, their food, they cleaned, washed and things like that including Mrs. Begum, she was in our family more than one generation, we knew her as our nurse, she was Hazara.

Nazanin's older sister was the first educated woman in their family. Nazanin went to school in Kabul, till grade 12, and then on to Kabul University. She attended the first university course at the new Department of Uzbek Literature, established after the Communists took power in 1978.

...I was amongst the first group of students to enter this field. I liked it very much, my mother tongue and to serve my compatriots...graduated with honours and was accepted there as professor in the University in 1982...later until the Mujahidin came I taught as a Professor...and entered the Masters degree, I got a Masters in Farsi...I completed it, not all of it in Kabul, we went to Mazar Sharif, it was not better, than I finished it here in Pakistan.

Nazanin left Kabul in 1981 when the *Mujahidin* entered Kabul due to ethnic fighting. Their house in Kabul was hit by a rocket and they survived by pure chance and luck. They went to Mazar Sharif where she worked at the University. The leadership of Mazar was in the hands of an Uzbek, General Dostom, which helped them live in Mazar without many problems. She was also the head of Social Welfare, as appointed by Dostom. She and her family moved to Pakistan when the Taliban took over Mazar in 1998. Regarding her experience in Pakistan, she says:

...Migration has its own problems, distance from homeland, we suffered a lot here, I came here, what shall I say, I saw my own characteristics reduced to zero...the things I knew were not useful in this land, and I became a useless

person...By coincidence, I met two Pakistani women, we became friends...I went to learn nursing...I have a medical certificate now...I was able to serve my own Afghans...I could cooperate with the *muhajerin* (refugees) with less money or no money in their deliveries at home or in my home...Then I tried to set up a school and before that I taught in an Afghan school...my school went very well for two years...

As for her own ideology, she says:

My ideology was always Islamic...Islam itself, the growth of Islam, implementation of Islamic rules in the real sense not in the corrupt way...Islam is now a tool for politics...

She now teaches Afghan refugee children in her very modest home, with the help of her sister-in-law and some other friends.

...I have many students from different classes, there are young girls, who have been left illiterate, besides teaching them literacy, I teach them other things, the negative thing is that superficiality, cosmetics, materialism has had such an impact that it has overshadowed education. For example, if I tell a girl, it is necessary that we beautify ourselves with the jewel of science and knowledge rather than with clothes and things...they look at me with surprise...

She seems very much to be in charge of the family, including her brother and his family. She has preferred not to get involved with Afghan women's NGOs in Pakistan.

...I was witness that many women without having a special ideal or ideology made NGOs...they made NGOs for themselves, their own interest...

She blames her education for remaining single.

...I was so busy that I forgot myself, when I came to the land of *muhajerin* (refugees), I realized that life has other sides that I had not thought about at all...I did not think that I am young and should think of a life for myself and now that my eyes are open, it is too late (with a small laugh)...I think it is too late, I am very tired...

Nazanin preferred not to make any judgment about the post-Taliban regime and situation as she thought it was too early to be very positive or negative. She also

intended to stay in Pakistan until such time that they were sure things had improved in a sustainable way in Afghanistan.

**Nejla: Interviewed in 1998, in Peshawar, Pakistan**

Nejla is a Seyed, Sunni, 34 (at the time of the interview), married with children, works for the UN as well as Afghan NGOs, on gender and other issues, in Peshawar, is quite religious and was working on her Masters degree at the time of the interview. I believe she did at some point sympathize with one of the *Mujahidin* parties, though this is not something she openly shared with me. She has now completed her degree and lives in Kabul and works with the UN on gender issues.

Nejla was born in Kabul in 1965 and is a Farsi speaker.

I was born in an educated family. My mother was a teacher. She had post-baccalaureate and my father had a BA. They had studied when we were born and my uncles had studied abroad, in America. Almost at the age of my grandmother they had been educated – in Beirut and elsewhere.

And elsewhere, about the respect her family has, she says:

...our grandfathers were poets, they were a religious family and understood the importance of education for men and women. I can say we were Seyeds from mother and father's side.

On the matter of being a Seyed, she says:

I told you we are a people called Seyed, Sadat, and in which ever region we are, we are either Pashtun or Farsi, depending on which area we live, or Uzbek if we live in those areas...Their roots are from Arabia...

And,

...it is respected, they are the family of the Prophet, Afghanistan is a very Moslem country but sometimes, with very nationalist Pashtun people, for example during the Khalqi (Communist) period, the people of Taraki (one of the Communist leaders) told some of our relatives, you do not belong to this country – they understood that this is a religious group who brought Islam –

they did not like it and said 'what are you doing here, go, extremists' – also Tajiks – cause problems, but in general, people respect Seyed.

Regarding her family's class status, she adds:

...they were middle-class, they had land, from the villages but not royal family like the Mohammadzai...in our family, it was their own struggle, not political power.

Part of her high-school education coincided with the war.

...In high-school, it was the revolution – I studied 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade in the revolution. It was very stressful, opposition, fighting – in our class, with the exception of 2 or 3 people who were in favour of the (Communist) government, others were all opposition...

And further down, she adds:

...We had a classmate whose 6 brothers had been killed by Amin...They (the students) participated in all the demonstrations, they had a leading role...We were so strong, when we said no studies, then it was no studies. We were from no Party but it was our strong emotions, we realized the system was a wrong system....So this was our *Lycee* (high-school) period.

Nejla, owes some of the opportunities she has had including working for an international organization to speaking English, which she began learning while in Kabul, with her parent's encouragement.

Nejla and her family came to Pakistan in 1983, when the Communists were still very much in control. As the reason for their early move to Pakistan, she says:

Difference of idea with the government, during Karmal's period, the cruelty to people, no freedom, forcing to join the Party, threatening of nationalist and people-loving people. This began with family, cousins, there was no security...my father was punished a lot because he was very active during Daoud's time (the last pre-Communist ruler of Afghanistan)...He was head monitor at the Ministry of Education. The first thing the *Khalqis* (Communists) did was to transfer him...That was the main reason and another was that my brother was 16 and he was the age of forced conscription – our family did not want him to go...And because my parents were both educated and religious, they were opposed (to the State) and we knew we had to leave – it was not safe for any of us...



In Pakistan, the siblings continued their education and some went abroad for further education, including Nejla's sisters. Nejla had left Kabul when she was in her second year of Agriculture at Kabul University.

With her mother's encouragement, Nejla was amongst the first group of Afghan refugee women to work outside of their homes in Peshawar, Pakistan.

...When we came here (Pakistan), women were not allowed to work, to go out, I am proud of my mother always, she was brave and said you must study and meanwhile work. I and my two sisters went to a hospital, the one who had studied medicine knew something of medicine, my mother knew a bit (an uncle was a doctor). He gave me the responsibility of a nurse. Something I had not studied at all...I became an operation nurse...

Gradually, she moved into other areas of work, including with an Islamic NGO in support of refugee widows and later the UN landmine and disability programmes, from junior to more senior positions. While working, she also went to the Afghan Moslem University for Women (*Omayat-al- Momenin*) and completed a degree there. In addition, she gradually became more involved in women's issues.

For a while I worked with a school, there was a publication we brought out – a women's publication – previously in an organization I worked for, they had a publication, but afterwards I had a problem, well, it is Afghans for you, then I noticed the publication was ruined – it used to be the only accepted women's publication...It was published by an NGO...All two or three of us came out, it became too controversial...nationalism, one ethnic group tried to have the NGO because the majority belonged to them. It was a crisis...It was a security issue. We are refugees, we have no legal center, many weak points for refugees exist for us. I was a mother and a wife.

Her husband, who is also educated, and her cousin, has been very supportive of her work, travel and other efforts.

Nejla lost her exceptional mother when she was only 52 a few years before the interview. Her mother had returned to Kabul and passed away there, disillusioned by the *Mujahidin* like so many Afghans who had initially supported them.

...she was very sensitive, she said why is there war, cruelty for people, people struggled for a holy cause, to make their nation peaceful and for cruelty not to

exist and today the *mujahidin* kill each other, rockets hit Kabul – her blood pressure went up and she died...

In July 2002, in an email exchange from Kabul, she has the following to say about more recent developments:

It is a big change in the lives of Afghan women after September 11, when the world took an interest to help Afghans. Now girls are going to school, women start to work as teachers, civil servants and other walks of life. Women also for the first time participated in the *Loya Jirga* in big numbers (around 250)...I wish that these changes have a positive impact on my life and that of my family as individuals and my community as well. I feel I can contribute more to be an agent of change for sustainable development as I am back in Afghanistan.

**Rahimeh: Interviewed in 1999, in Islamabad, Pakistan**

Rahimeh is a Turkmen/Hazara/Shiite woman, a doctor, 29 at the time of the interview, married without children, unemployed at the time of the interview, had worked at a senior level with one of her ethnic-groups' main political parties (*Hezb-e-Wahdat*) before the Taliban took over Bamiyan, Hazarajat and lived in Islamabad at the time of the interview. After the fall of the Taliban, she has gone back to Hazarajat, to serve her people and work with *Hezb-e-Wahdat* again.

Dr. Rahimeh first says,

In the name of God, my name is Rahimeh and I was born in 1970 in Kabul, in Pole e Sorkh, Karte Seh, of course, our origin, our *meliat* (nationality) is from the Hazara Turkmen people of Sorkh Parsa (province of Parwan).

Regarding her childhood, education (which began in 1975) and work, she adds:

Though we are Hazara, from a family which is relatively *rowshanfekr* (intellectual) and economically a bit higher, since birth my life in the family has passed with affection and *safa* (harmony). From age of six, I entered primary school...I finished primary school there, then secondary school...I finished school in 10 years. In 1984, I graduated, then after university exams in 1985, I entered Kabul University, Institute of Medical Sciences. I finished in six years. In 1990, I was appointed by the Ministry of Health to the Institute of Tuberculosis...then gave an exam for specialization, fortunately I was successful...I officially began the internal medicine specialization, and worked at Wazi Akbar Khan hospital (Kabul)...because of the wars in Kabul, we had

to leave in any way possible...we went to Mazar Sharif, and from that year I taught at the Faculty of Medicine in Balkh and worked...I taught for 4 years.

Due to the fact that she was relatively well off, Dr. Rahimeh did not face discrimination to the degree most, poorer Hazaras did, but nevertheless at some point she too experienced it at school.

...except in grade 2 of school, one of the teachers, over this issue of being Hazara treated me very badly...and even made me not want to read...they were Tajik, some Tajiks were very sensitive towards Hazaras...

During the Communist period in Kabul, her father as a Hazara and Shiite felt particularly in danger.

Because some of the uprisings, the Chowndahar uprising, was the first in Kabul and in a Shiite area, and the first in Afghanistan was in Dareh-e-Sauf by Hazaras and for this reason plus the ethnic discrimination that existed, they (Hazaras) were mostly imprisoned, though so were others from other ethnic groups.

She too was witness to anti-Soviet and state demonstrations of high-school girls in Kabul. She continued to feel the violence and repression of the Communist regime into her University years as well.

From the repression of Amin (one of the Communist leaders), I have very bad memories, then when the Russians came...they moved their truck towards the pedestrians and 15 male students were involved, 7 died and 8 were injured. These were things we saw with our own eyes and were very bitter for us.

She is also critical of the *Mujahidin* targeting Kabul with their rockets and killing innocent people.

Like most Hazaras, she was particularly affected by the tragedy of ethnic-based rape in Afshar, Kabul in 1991 by the men of *Jamiat-e-Islami* and *Ettehad-e-Islami* (Tajik and Pashtun groups). Such violence was carried out by all the Parties, including *Hezb-e-Wahdat*.

...women's breasts were cut and displayed, women were cut in middle...After one week, I was better and it had a deep impact and that made me think I have to do something.

It was this massacre which triggered the call for a Hazara/*Hezb-e-Wahdat* Women's Military Brigade.

...in Beysud – with Ms. Roghieh as a commander with 100/150 men and women fighters – then she came to Bamiyan, to expand – but then though it had begun...she was a special women, great hunter, I do not know where she is now – until we were in Bamiyan, I knew.

It was in Mazar Sharif where she was an internally displaced person like so many other Afghans that she became active in women's groups. These were affiliated to her own ethnic/religious group's political organization. However, she mentions several times that she wants to serve all needy Afghans, not just Hazaras. In spite of all the hardship, this was a satisfying period of her life.

In 1992 I became a member of the Islamic Cooperative Union of Mazar Sharif (*Ittehad-e- Taawoni-e-Islami*) – the main branch was in Kabul, because of the war it had been established and some of the capitalists helped to support education courses, some primary schools, courses for children and youth, and preparing ground for work for needy women, support to needy students and families without support. From this Cooperative, I began my work with women and succeeded to get 6 carpet weaving equipment for deprived areas of the city – like Ali Chopan – so women can be busy – and two primary schools, one in agricultural center of Mazar Sharif, they were mostly migrants from Kabul – called Shirin-e-Hazara – Shirin Agha – and one in Ali Chopan of Mazar called Gol Chehreh Bamiyani...its students were able to study till grade five but with Taliban's attack on Mazar (1997), they stopped.

As for her more overtly political affiliation:

...In 1994, I began through the Islamic Association of Sisters of *Hezb-e-Wahdat*, I began cooperation. Through them, I organized two first aid courses and ...Then in 1995, I tried my own cooperative...and foreign organizations including MSF helped me and fortunately it became the best clinic...Then some of the women who worked informally came together as the Commission of Women which was run by *Hezb-e-Wahdat*...I had the first position...we organized some events on various occasions for women in cooperation with other organizations...like the Women's Council of Balkh (which was supported by General Dostam)...

And her rather radical decision to go to Hazarajat, the 'home' of Afghan Hazaras.

In 1996/97, I traveled to Bamiyan...and also met with the UN Representative...and saw the needs and problems of the people of Bamiyan, I thought it necessary that I go there and work...the first day, New Year, in 1997, I began my work there. The first step was to organize a Committee for Women in Bamiyan...*Hezb-e-Wahdat* fortunately welcomed it seriously...we were able to do some things – including 16 literacy courses...organizing 8<sup>th</sup> of March, International Women's Day...Besides the Women's Commission, I also taught at Bamiyan University...And I was a member of *Hezb-e-Wahdat's* Central Committee...representing women...Then I came to Islamabad.

It was during those same years of living and working in Bamiyan that she met and married her husband, who also is highly educated, in quite an unconventional manner for Afghanistan.

I did not want to marry because I wanted to work but afterwards I faced some problems and realized working single in Afghanistan is difficult...I decided in Bamiyan. I studied him and saw that he (her future husband) would not prevent my work. ...Family had no role...he and I did not speak directly...I told my friend (to tell him) that I will have to be free in my social work...I have to deal with people, with men...after he asked me (to marry him), then he was someone who I was sure about...

Dr. Rahimeh became a refugee only after Taliban was taking over the Hazarajat and the chances of her being killed was very high, as so many of the members of her ethnic group were in the months and years which followed. She moved to Islamabad in 1998. She was not very secure in Pakistan either, as the Taliban had influence, and therefore kept a very low profile. She was planning to go abroad to further study but with the fall of the Taliban, once again decided to go back to the 'home' of her people and work in the region. Her memoirs were destroyed when the Taliban attacked Mazar. Maybe she will write it again now.

#### **Saffron: Interviewed in 2002 in Islamabad, Pakistan**

Saffron, 30, is Hazara and Ismaeli. She is single and lives with her parents. Her family's financial status in Kabul was always poor, though she is from a prominent Ismaeli family in religious terms. She studied in Kabul, later came to Pakistan herself, before the rest of her family moved as well. She has worked as a domestic worker in

Pakistan and was also involved in helping a Canadian-Ismaeli woman of South Asian origin manage a small income-generation project for Ismaeli Afghan widow refugees. She has supported her family for many years now. She too was planning to move on to Canada and is probably in Canada by now.

Saffron was born in 1972 in Kabul to and Hazara/Ismaeli family. Her father had a small shop. They are Ismaeli Seyeds of Sanglak (which is close to Bamiyan, Hazarajat). Her mother was illiterate but her father had formal education till grade 8. Her family is highly respected amongst Ismaelies,

...my mother's father was a very important person, very, in Afghanistan...He was a leader of Ismaelis, who lead the Ismaelis, in the *Jamiat Khaneh* (place of worship), as a *Moki* (leader), he was the *Moki* of Kabul. When he built the *Jamiat Khaneh* in Kabul, no one dared say they were Ismaeli, they were frightened of the government but my mother's father said "I will even pour my blood for Ismaelis for their *Jamiat khaneh*. It is called the first *Jamiat Khaneh* of Ismaelis, he built the first one. During Karmal's time (Communist period), they took him alive to prison and we did not find out what happened...till today.

About her childhood, she has the following to say:

I do not have much good memories...Since I came to know myself, there has been war, war and war in Afghanistan. I am 29 years old and almost the war in Afghanistan has been there for 25 years. It was still better before the *Mujahidin* came here, there were schools, everyone was there, I studied till grade 12. We had economic problems. I left school and went in search of work. I got a job at the Bakhtar News Agency. For two years I worked there. In these two years, the *Mujahidin* came, it was very difficult, I left and came to Pakistan. It was rumored that young girls...(unfinished sentence) One day I went and on the way, a rocket hit the ground in front of me and I fell on the ground...Such conditions were very, very bad – very – now I will cry.

More specifically, about her father and his opposition to her education:

My father, no, he did not want to, he had entered my two brothers in school, he said what is a girl to study, but my mother said no....She forced my father...I do not like this attitude of my father, though my father is still alive, there is no rights for women, we did not have the right to say anything at home, because (he said) you do not know, you go to the corner...

In addition to gender discrimination in the family, she experienced ethnic/religious discrimination in society.

...because they said you are Hazara...if I wanted to give my opinion...I did not have the permission...because you are Hazara

Elsewhere, about the same issue:

Yes, in school, in the bazaar, they also said you are Hazara, because Hazara are very poor, Hazaras are very hard working, very hard working, they had no rights, no rights, if there was a fight in the *bazaar*, anywhere, they would insult the Hazara...and when the *Mujahidin* came, it got worse.

She came to Pakistan after the *Mujahidin* took power in Kabul in 1994 to learn English so she would be accepted for a resettlement programme but it was to take longer than she expected.

In Pakistan, she has worked as a domestic worker for two Canadian/Ismaelis and is now involved in the small project already mentioned. About her experiences as a refugee, she says:

Pakistan, I have seen so many problems here that I have never seen in my life. In Kabul, we did not have a good economic situation, but I had not worked in other people's homes, washing clothes, but in Pakistan, I had to, I was forced to work...

However, as the main breadwinner of the family, and single daughter, she has the following to say:

...now my father understands that his sons whom he put in school have not done as much for him as I have, the rent of the home is with me, my father has become incapacitated, he cannot work, he will get old, he cannot, he cannot always be strong like in Afghanistan and work, my brother married and went, the other married and is busy with his home, my sister married and is busy with home, I am only left with them, if my mother had not entered me into school and I came here, I would not be able to be sent to Pakistan and to go to Canada now...Now my father understands...now he knows I can manage myself, I can even manage a family...

As she is leaving for Canada, she is personally not so concerned about what is happening in post-Taliban Afghanistan but of course she hopes that it will be much better for all Afghans. As for her aspirations in Canada,

I will try to work hard and support the remaining family in Pakistan who have such a bad situation, I will try to study, to get a future...these are my dreams.

**Banafsheh: Interviewed in 1998, in Peshawar, Pakistan**

Banafsheh is Pashtun, Sunni and 27, when interviewed. She is single, worked for an Afghan as well as international NGO in Peshawar and had a rebellious streak since early in her life and was engaged in women's rights issues in Pakistan. She had been unable to go to University due to the war. Now, she is in the US and has also been able to bring the rest of her nuclear family from Afghanistan.

My mother says that I was her first child, it was a hard winter – Paktia usually has very hard winters – my mother was all alone, there was no one else at home, she was 16. So, I was born in Paktia. When I was one, we moved to Kabul.

Banafsheh was born in 1971 in rural Southern Afghanistan to Pashtun parents. This is before the dramatic political changes of Afghanistan took place and in times of relative peace. She was the first child of her parents, including her very young mother who like so many Afghan women did not have an easy pregnancy or delivery and had many pregnancies, one after another, as well as multiple family responsibilities.

From my childhood, what I remember, after my father left, my mother was pregnant, she had twins, she was 7 months pregnant, my (paternal) grandmother died, she had been paralyzed for a long time and my mother took care of her and therefore, lost her children.

Banafsheh's family moved to Kabul when she was very young. Her family lived very close to her paternal uncles, who were all educated. Her father is also educated and has lived abroad as well. In the absence of her father, Banafsheh, her mother and siblings suffered enormously at the hand of her paternal uncles.



After my father left, our life became very difficult. You saw in the report on violence that I mention this. My uncles were both students, one in school and another in university. They had no income of their own, my father sent money and what he sent, they used, we were usually without food, hitting was frequent...

And somewhere else in the interview,

My mother says that when she was shopping, when she left for some other business, the same uncle would add salt or other things and then at the meal, they would say you can not cook or when she cleaned, they would make it muddy, and another would say you can do no work...my uncle was looking for my mother, he asked me where she is, I knew he wanted to hit her, he told me to find her or he would hit me, I would never show her to him...

Another important influencing factor in Banafsheh's life has been the illness of her younger sister (who has since passed away).

One day she came and said I want to cut my hair. It was the first time my father got upset at her...She was in the basketball team of her school, but my father said she could not go...She was very upset...One day at school, she fell off the chair, and then began to lose her memory...We were at home, father was praying and we were doing our homework. My sister was watching TV and writing (without looking) very strange things. Father saw it and hit her...Next morning when we waked up, she did not even remember her name...Several factors, the fall, her being spoiled, my father hitting her...

Inspite of the above tragedies, Banafsheh's family wanted her to be educated, especially her mother, and she was amongst the first girls from her village to go to formal school in Kabul. She gradually grew to like school and did well until she graduated. However, her inability to dress well at school made her feel insulted and looked down upon.

...I did not have correct boots and wore the plastic shoes of my cousin. The teacher called me and when I replied, she told me 'why are you wearing a baby's shoes'. The whole hour that she taught I was punished to stand, only because I did not have the right shoes. All the children laughed and that was bad, it hurt.

Like so many Afghan families, hers also suffered at the hands of the regime's surveillance system, resulting in many being forced to lie and relatives and neighbors no longer trusting each other.

My mother's family were *Mujahidin* supporters. So, for the Communists not to find this out, we said we have no uncles. Even in the school documents, we had no uncles...We had an English typewriter, they came to our house, they ripped the pillows...They found it and thought it was a bomb, they took it to the department...Finally, my father proved it was not a bomb, then they said you distribute night leaflets. Finally, we got it back... One of our neighbors had a young boy, he ran away each time (they came), once he got into a barrel and after they had left, the barrel was removed and he had died.

Like many school pupils under the Communist regime, Banafsheh also reluctantly was forced to attend Party marches every now and then.

Her university aspirations were not fulfilled, for various reasons, including pressure from her family as well as the Communist Party that was in power by then.

Well, after school, I took part in University exams, I liked law a lot but my father did not like it and said I would be nothing, a director, a judge is not possible...I went for a while, but they forced me to stop and wanted me to study medicine. I dislike medicine.

Further down in the interview, she says:

...because I was very active in school, they (the Party) wanted me to join *Parcham* Party or *Khalq* Party, even in school there was a lot of pressure and in University they told me either you become a member or...At university, the officials said if you do not become a member you have to leave...So I decided to leave...Then, I found the job with an international organization.

However, at a very young age, she had an interest in learning English, which was later to help her very much in her life and work with the international community, including when she was to become a refugee.

Yes, I learned it at home, with cassettes. The first time I began was in grade 6. I hated English...I became interested because of the teacher. I liked her a lot...she encouraged me so much...she said you have a good future...At home, my uncle read books about, um, um, men and women's relationships. I went to a bookstore and saw that book and wanted to know what it is about and it was in English...I decided to learn better to read this. That was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

Banafsheh was very young – only 17 - when she began working for an international organization in 1987 when the fighting between the Communist state and the

*Mujahidin* was at its peak. Most of this time, she worked in their hospital. It was an experience that was to change her life, including working for an international organization, meeting non-Afghans, some who would become life-long friends and other reasons.

...I had only seen the route from home to school...At the office, I gradually found friends, went out with them, saw Kabul...

Already in Afghanistan, she became involved in women's activities.

In Kabul, she was a member of the Women's Network. We had little time – June/July till September 1996 – we had brought women from various groups. There were many women's parties, there the objective was to link these together, solve their differences, to a certain extent we were successful.

Banafsheh came to Peshawar, Pakistan as refugee with some of her siblings after Taliban took over Kabul in 1996 and she was no longer able to work or go out of her home. She was head of the household, taking care of the whole family, albeit with great difficulty, while working on gender issues with an international organization and Afghan women's groups. With others, she organized a workshop on Violence Against Women in 1997 which was not at all welcomed by other Afghan women with whom she worked, with many refusing to accept this as an important issue to work on at the time in Pakistan. In one of the articles she prepared for an international gathering at that time, she says:

I'll never forget how so many of us spent frightened, lonely nights without relatives in the frontline, waiting patiently for a single loaf of bread. How many of us were abducted by armed men from the *Mujahidin* parties in the middle of the day in busy streets. How many of us were raped. How many of us threw ourselves from buildings to keep our chastity. How many of us were taken from the scorching refugee camps in Jalalabad to become a commodity for men in neighbouring countries. Ho many widows were forced to sell themselves to feed their families...Dear Sisters! We were not born to decorate ourselves with ornaments, when we know that our most prized ornaments are pens and books...Only we can try to move forward towards our freedom, there is no magic wand or hand in the world to give it to us.

By 1998, she was being threatened by the Taliban in Pakistan and sought asylum in the US where she has lived since 1999. She continues to work on Human Rights issues as well as study for her MA in Law.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above six short biographies have shown a range of experiences and situations of educated Afghan refugee women. Their life-stories open-up an important window towards understanding Afghanistan's contemporary history from the perspective of its educated women when they are refugees in Pakistan. The interviewees have collectively lived through the Pashtun King's period, the Republic of Daoud Khan, the rule of the Communists, the wars led by the *Mujahidin*, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under the *Mujahidin*, as well as the Taliban and the early post-Taliban period. They have experienced living in urban and rural places of Afghanistan, through war-related internal displacement and the various regimes in each of these locations, as well as displacement beyond their borders to Pakistan, where they have collectively experienced several Pakistani regimes (from General Zia to General Musharraf). Many of them have by now also experienced living in the West, and some in post-Taliban Afghanistan.

The interviewees have also experienced the harshest days of *Mujahidin's* strict gender regime in Pakistan, to the more recent years of somewhat more opportunities for at least some educated Afghan refugee women. This is due largely to the incrementally increasing experiences of Afghan refugee women activists in Pakistan (as well as growing contacts with Afghan refugee women in other countries of the region as well as in the West). The interviewees have all, one way or another, also encountered the international community and its work and experienced its impact upon Afghan refugees as well as Afghanistan in general. With the fall of the Taliban, the potential of return and working with women inside Afghanistan to build a better future or to remain in Pakistan or remain or move on to the West and build a better future in the diaspora are possibilities for some of the interviewees.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Being accepted in the West in the post-Taliban era has become more difficult for Afghans as they are told that they have no reason to want to leave their country, except if proven otherwise. This is an issue which is being campaigned against by Afghan activist groups as well as refugee activist groups.

Though almost all have experienced patriarchy, other forms of discrimination, war and tremendous hardship as well as living as refugees in Pakistan, their remarkable strength, determination and agency is clear. They have put it to use in such a way that has served their families, themselves and often also their wider communities. This is in spite of the great collective tragedy and individual loss they have experienced as victims of war and as refugees. Though often on terms not of their choosing, they have tried to overcome and move forward with dignity and hope. They have not won all the battles they have faced, but they certainly have come out of some of them with flying colors. Their struggles will continue wherever they are and by future generation of Afghan women but hopefully they will not have to be as difficult as those of Afghan women who have lived through the past over 24 years of war.

In the next two chapters, I will be revisiting these women and the other women interviewed in order to analyze and share their experiences of being members of various collectivities (the importance of which I think has already been somewhat demonstrated above) as well as that of their education (the critical role of which is also clear in the above quotes). Both these chapters will also explore the experiences of displacement (being a refugee) as a new and powerful identity component, linked with that of their other changing and inter-linked identities, as well as its impact on their experiences of education, and the utilization of education in fulfilling their various aspirations. The inter-linkages between all of these, in view of the theoretical and contextual framework, will be further elaborated in the final chapter.

## Chapter Nine - Afghan Women and Collective Identities in Conflict and Displacement

### **1. Interview Analysis: Introduction**

Having examined the methodological, contextual and theoretical concerns and frameworks of this dissertation and an introduction to the interviewees, I will now embark upon the analysis of the interviews in two further chapters.

In this chapter, I will first briefly set the tone by sharing some of the conflict and displacement related experiences of the interviewees. I will then analyze their experiences of changing and inter-linked positionings and identities, as women, as Afghans, as members of their particular ethnic and religious groups and also as refugees in Pakistan. Under each of the above categories – I will try to present their experiences in three time periods to better understand the influence of the changes in relation to women and collective identities in Afghanistan. In reality, there is of course always overlap between these positionings and identities, as well as historical periods.

- 1) Pre-war years
- 2) Conflict
- 3) Displacement

As elaborated in Chapter Five, gender as well as other aspects of our social positioning as well as collective identities as members of a national, ethnic and religious groups are socially constructed and we ‘learn’ to be or to challenge the women and men we are supposed to be through various complex and changing social processes and influences, ranging from our families, to education and the broader political/ideological powers at play.<sup>1</sup>

While many women continue to share in their subordination within patriarchy, and their struggles against it, their experiences vary enormously. It is this difference which

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<sup>1</sup>Unfortunately, the section on the interviewees’ experiences as daughters, with domestic violence, polygamy and marriage - initiation into ‘womanhood’ – had to be deleted due to limited space.

provides opportunities for change and needs to be highlighted, in order also not to homogenize or stereotype gender relations in Afghanistan. Conflict and displacement have significant impact upon these constructions as they exacerbate unequal power relations and unleash new gendered dynamics.

In Afghanistan, gendered collective identities have been dramatically mobilized and exploited in war and displacement. Therefore, it is important to locate and understand these positioning and identity issues, especially from the perspective of Afghan women of different ethnic groups. The experiences of Afghan refugee women in understanding these various aspects of their roles and identities and the influential factors in aligning and/or distancing them from various representations of these identities is significant as it also sheds lights on their 'agency'.

In reality, various identity (re) formations occur at the same time making it very difficult and artificial to separate one from another as they shape and determine the lives of Afghan women. It is often impossible to find the cause of her suppression or empowerment in only one aspect of her positioning and/or identity but it is rather a combination of various social divisions within a particular and historical context that shapes her life and struggles.

The various aspects of the interviewees' identities will have been constructed through living in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in particular historical moments. They will also have been constantly changing as a result of their own 'agency' and the events around them. Being a refugee too has been a new identity which they have had to assume but to which they have provided new meanings.

While not claiming that the interviewees' experiences are representative of that of all or most Afghanistan women, I believe that many of the issues they share (i.e. gender discrimination, gender violence, personal experiences of war, education and other aspirations, worries and concerns in Afghanistan and as refugees) are typical and many other Afghan women would also be able to relate to them.

## 2. Afghan Women and War

Some of the older interviewees were born and lived in Afghanistan before the conflict began in the late 1970s and their view of gender issues were at that time more restricted to the women in their families, at school and/or in the media. The influence of politics and its ideology was not so obvious to them – though it continued to impact upon their lives.

It was the various upheavals and changes which made Afghans, especially women, realize the direct consequences of politics and ideology on their lives. It began to influence all aspects of their lives, from the way they dressed, to the way they studied, worked as well as their lives as members of families in which the men went off to war or were victims of political plots, or as women who were no longer safe on the streets (or in their homes). This was not experienced or viewed in the same way by all Afghan women. Afghan women, in fact, began to represent the war and politics of their country, with their suffering and plight, as well as their resistance. Afghan children and men also suffered from war, sometimes in the same ways as women, and in other times, in different ways.

### 2.1 Women and War

Below are two gender war-related quotes, the first about the early 1990s and the rule of General Dostam in the North of Afghanistan and the other more general.

...in Mazar I saw that only because the commander had money, for two or three thousand dollars, parents gave their daughters, though the man had two or three other wives...(Davudi)

...you know the security situation got worse, for example, the armed men entered homes, there was theft, they took girls by force, married them by force, some young girls and those who were young and widowed during the war, they wanted to take them, some girls threw themselves down from heights because their *efat* (chasteness) should not be touched...After the Taliban came, the situation changed completely, not only the rights of women was violated but of men, of human beings, humans, women had no rights, but as the popular saying goes “the beard is mine but decisions related to it are the mullahs to make (*rish az man , waghesh as mullah*)” (laughing), it was also for men, not only for women, girls, women were deprived from education and work, though



they knew that during all these wars in Afghanistan, how many women were widowed, they were the breadwinners of their family, they brought up their children, they stopped them from working, they did not allow their girls to go to school, they kept them all at home, it brought a situation that there was poverty in Afghanistan, but it increased the poverty, when a mother sees that her children are hungry, she is forced to beg, or she is forced to sell herself and that is the bad thing that happened, that some of our very pure women with morals were lost in bad ways and that was out of need because they did not want their children to die, to turn to selling yourself, to begging... If that situation had not happened because of the Taliban in Afghanistan, our women were the purest women (*afiftarin*) and our men, have world fame, in their manly honour (*gheyrat*) but unfortunately, all these things were destroyed...(Khaledeh)

In Khaledeh's quote, reference is made to the morality of Afghans and how moral they were before the war, men and women, and how the war changed all of this – obviously essentializing these issues and Afghan identities but nevertheless, making an important point about the negative impact of the conflict. The moral qualities she assigns to Afghan women and men are revealing – women are 'chaste' and men 'honourable' – those who will kill for their honour. She also refers to women committing suicide rather than being raped. I denote a sympathetic but somewhat patronizing tone towards poorer Afghan women who turn to prostitution and begging. This is sometimes the case with more elite Afghan women who in their work with international and Afghan agencies have had the 'power' over more deprived Afghan women.

She also links the fate of Afghan women and men, which I think is valid, by saying that both women and men suffered at the hands of Taliban in particular. Her reference to rape and abduction of women, suicide by women out of rape fear, forced marriage, the fate of widows, women who turned to begging and prostitution – all reflect some of the gendered tragedies of the Afghan war – and which she as an Afghan activist is aware of and also highlights in her work. Nevertheless, she still uses certain patriarchal and traditional terms in describing the situation.

### 2.1.1 During the Communist Period

The war began when the Communists assumed power in 1978 and the *Mujahidin* responded with an aggressive armed struggle against the regime. While the

Communists did express and implement new policies to enhance women's status in society, these were often top-bottom and coercive and partially for this reason, they backfired.

When the Communists came, they said man and woman are equal. Woman can do what they want...Women (referring to anti-Government sympathizers) wanted to show they are equal...(Banafsheh).

Examples of women's active role in the struggles against the Communist regime are reflected below. It is also mentioned that this applied more to young and urban women.

Yes, in our school...girls struggled against the Russians, Communists, in favour of the *Mujahidin*. Many were arrested, tortured. City girls did this most. Some participated in 'terrorist' activities like putting bombs in exhibitions, bus stations. (Azadeh)

There was Nahid of Ayesha Durrani school, she was killed by the Russians.(Banafsheh)

I told you I participated in demonstrations at university with other classmates, maybe some others were told to organize these by some Party but I did it for support of righteousness (*haq*)...(Nazanin)

In Azadeh's quote reference is made to the participation of young girls in the struggle against the Russians and their punishment by the Communist state. These are quite untraditional roles that these women are assuming though sometimes within the context of Islamic religious groups. These are the same groups that would later restrict women in many different ways.

A minority group of women actively supported the Communist regime. None of my interviewees seem to fall into that category, though some had less negative feelings about them. Most of the Communist elite left for Central Asia, India and the West, rather than Pakistan or Iran where they were at greater risk. One of the interviewees resisted joining the Party inspite of her husband's insistence. He held a senior position under Dr. Najibullah, the last leftist leader of Afghanistan. In Nazanin's quote it is also clear that all active opposition to the Communists did not come from Islamic Parties.

In Afghan traditional society, women were not supposed to be arrested but obviously, politics changed all of that very quickly. Some of the interviewees also refer to female members of the various Islamic parties – *Hezb-e-Wahdat*, *Jamiat-e-Eslami* and *Hezb-e-Eslami*. For more on this, please refer to my article on Afghan Refugee Women's Organizations in Pakistan in Annex IV.

The top Communist female leader was Anahita Ratebzad. She was head of the women's wing of the Party and later also became the Minister of Education. The interviewees who commented on Ratebzad did so with mixed feelings. They admired her courage, skills and advancement as a powerful woman in a traditional society but do not endorse her allegiance to the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. Davudi, for example, said:

Ratebzad, we liked her for some things...they wanted...to attract us, we kept our distance, Ratebzad was very senior during the Soviet period, my husband did not want me to help Ratebzad...since my family had fled from injustice of Soviet government, he did not want us to have other problems...

It is interesting that while Davudi's husband did not want her to support the Soviets, her son-in-law did not want his wife (her daughter) to pursue her Islamic tendencies at a later time. In both cases, husband's wielded influence over their educated wives' ideo-political positions.

Shahrareh refers to some of the 'moral' judgments made about Ratebzad, which is an issue faced by many non-traditional women.

...I was first in favour of her...though some people did not say good things about her because she came out without *chador* (scarf) they said things about her but I was in her favour, I was happy that among men there is a woman as head of a Ministry, that they followed a wrong policy is a different issue.

On Ratebzad, Fariba had a different view,

She was not liked by me. I knew that she defended mostly her Party and policies rather than women. She was like a man, not like a real woman, or so I thought. She was not the example of a woman for me and I did not count on her, to defend women...

Several of the interviewees' refer to the Communist decree reducing the bride price as important in rallying more people against them. This is because the bride price played a very important role in traditional Afghan society and the policy was pronounced without sufficient preparation. Katayun, for example, said:

...Another thing they did was reduce the bride-price and in areas where people were not so aware, they were against this, why should I give my daughter for so little.

In Parvaneh's experience, shared below, it is evident that many of the Communist leaders continued to hold very traditional views about women. She is referring to a time when she was very well dressed and a young soldier was admiring her.

...one of the boys said "Sir, if she says hello to me then I will become a soldier right away" (laughing). The Commander said "go to the army and such girls will be found for you and they will wait for you to say *salaam* (hello). And he said "I won't come back alive". He was very handsome.

### 2.1.2 The Mujahidin and Taliban

On the *Mujahidin's* harsh treatment of women after taking power in 1992, Banafsheh has the following to share:

...They brought an injured women, I recognized from school, she had been injured because she had lipstick or they threw women in Kabul river (which was not deep) for bad *hejab* (head cover). With time, it improved and thin *chadors* (veil) were worn with a dress or long skirt. The reason Talib leaders are so tough with Kabul people is because they say "Kabul women corrupted the Mujahidin – who were themselves good..."

While demonstrating the gender violence involved, it also provides an insight into how women are seen as 'dangerous' and 'corrupting' and therefore, having to be controlled. It also shows women's 'agency' and how they changed even the *Mujahidin*.

Parvaneh has different views about what was wrong with the period of *Mujahidin* rule:

Q: What about the Mujahidin's opinion about women? A: They did not bother us, they only said put the *chador* (head scarf), there was pressure on wearing the *chador* but it was not important for our women, they put something on their hair, they made-up, the same clothes, socks, no issue, in the offices, they did not say why do you go, they did not care about these issues at all. The problem was there was no peace, the schools were weakened and finally destroyed, offices were weakened and finally they were closed, people lost their hope and became refugees (Parvaneh).

Most of the interviewees are critical of the Communists as well as the *Mujahidin*, though the emphasis is somewhat different. Under neither regime, did they live comfortably or with a sense of security and respect for their rights. Under the Communists, it was more lack of respect for them as Afghans and Moslems wanting to be more independent, under the *Mujahidin*, more as women. All the women interviewed had either left by the time Taliban took over or soon afterwards so they do not share as many personal experiences with the Taliban. However, they all agree on it being the most extreme especially in terms of restrictions on women and condemn it with all their heart.

## **2.2 Afghan Women, Leaving 'Home' and Becoming Refugees**

### **2.2.1 The Flight**

For many of the interviewees, the process of deciding to leave Afghanistan and the experience of the actual journey remains vivid. It is also gendered because often it is the men in the family who made the final decision to move (though sometimes also influenced by the views of the women in the family). In addition, women experienced leaving their homes and household belongings in a different way from men, considering the relationship of women in patriarchal societies to the 'home'. The actual experience of the journey is also gendered and harder for women who often had to wear the *burqa* (full cover) to protect their identity, had no privacy, felt the additional threat of being abducted or abused as a woman as well as having the main responsibility for childcare.

It is true that men were usually at greater political risk because, as compared to women, more were involved outside of their homes in work and politics, and therefore

were more vulnerable to various dangerous situations. This resulted in many families leaving because of their male kin. Sometimes it was in order to save their sons from forced conscription. Khaledeh, for example, mentions:

...In 1988, we became *muhajirs* (refugees)...the reason for our migration was my husband and two of his brothers and my son who was 12, they were arrested by the Communist regime and the reason was that... they (the regime) thought my husband, his brothers and my son were running away from Kandahar to Pakistan.

The Communist regime tried to prevent Afghans from leaving their country, as it further indicated their growing unpopularity amongst Afghans, driving them to become refugees.

Some of the interviewees left without their spouses. Rehaneh left with her young daughter, without her husband who had remarried. There were many checkpoints on the way, some run by notorious commanders who looted, raped and killed whoever they wanted. One of the interviewees (Katayun) was pregnant when they had to flee Kabul on a truck with many other people. Some of the interviewees were witness to mine explosions and subsequent deaths on their way to Pakistan. These were extremely difficult trips for all who made them.

My worst experience in life...it was the day I left my house. There were rockets from four sides...My worst memory was when I was letting go of my housedoor, I was crying like anything. I had left my life and that is what happened. Everything was destroyed. Nothing is left. And here, we began from scratch (Katayun).

...when we arrived in Islamabad and combed our hair, you would think thousands of leaches had bitten us, it was very terrible, this was our memory of *jihad*...(Haedeh).

Katayun's reference to her 'house' and 'housedoor' is indeed a reflection of the important role 'home' plays in the lives of many women and the devastating impact of losing one's home. Haedeh links the terrible journey she had to her opinion of the *Mujahidin* in general and their war (the *jihad*) and what it brought for the people.

Samira, who is Uzbek, and her family fled Mazar Sharif when the Taliban took over in 1997 through the Jalalabad border. Her husband and father were arrested by the Taliban at the border. The women of the family, with their *burqas*, had to stay at an inn with extremely poor services and were very worried about the fate of their male kin. However, the inn owner took pity upon them and succeeded in releasing their male-kin through his own connections. As an Uzbek, and with ties to previous regimes, they felt particularly at risk in Taliban-held areas.

### 2.2.2 The Arrival

Overall, Afghan women who had faced many challenges back in Afghanistan from patriarchy, other inequalities, political upheaval and war, were thrown into a situation where many of the existing inequalities in Afghan society plus new inequalities and hardship was to be experienced, including the discrimination resulting from being an 'outsider/foreigner' in Pakistan.

Upon arrival in Pakistan, it was also initially more difficult for the women to live in cramped homes with other relatives and/or strangers until they were able to find a place of their own.<sup>2</sup> Men were less bothered about privacy and also had more mobility to spend time elsewhere. Financially speaking, most of the interviewees faced great difficulty in Pakistan, especially in the initial years. The better off they were in Afghanistan, the harder it was for them in Pakistan with little or no resources.

...those days (in Afghanistan) life was peaceful, it was not like now, no one thought of economics then, or what will I eat or wear, one person had no income but the land gave them everything...we did not think there was anything in the world for us to worry about, unlike now...now I think completely differently, as if I am in a different world, especially here in *muhajerat* in Pakistan, in Kabul it was good...in Pakistan (laughing), everything is expensive, the rent, the electricity bill, the gas bill, clothes, food, illness...it is very difficult...(Parvaneh).

The hold of the religious groups was not only strong in Afghanistan, but also in Pakistan. Parvaneh points out to the case of her older sister – one of the first Afghan

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<sup>2</sup> These are relatively more prosperous Afghan refugees who did not go to camps but rather eventually found homes to rent in urban areas.

women refugee leaders - who in the early 1980s, in Pakistan, was threatened by one of the religious parties to stop her projects. They opposed her work for women as well as her non-compliance with wearing a full *hejab*. This is inspite of the fact that her father was a respected *Mujahidin* commander and Pashtun. Also, a relevant quote from Haedeh about the early 1990s:

...there was a journalism center, Afghan Women's Media Resource Center, I became a teacher there – it was supported by Canada Fund – teacher of video, I taught video...from University of Alabama and Kentucky, they sent scholarships, we sent two Afghan girls and the US Embassy, their Cultural Center, had promised free scholarships for Afghans...Unfortunately, in its 2<sup>nd</sup> year, a car came with armed people (the group of Moulavi Khales<sup>3</sup>) at that time, the *Mujahedin* were very active in Pakistan and they said, “you must close this center, because women do not film, video or do journalism. Instead open sewing and religious classes.” We struggled a lot but we had to close the center and they opened a sewing and handicraft center which does not...improve women's value in society, it is work but not valuable...

Also a quote from Katayun:

Yes, the first days we were here, we were insulted, even though I covered myself with *chador*, we were called Communist...Till now I never go to the bazaar alone. Always with my husband...I am worried to go alone.

Afghan diaspora women faced many disappointments and challenges in their endeavors. In the above quote, amongst the interesting points is the progressiveness of such work in the early 1990s amongst refugees. The power of these groups is shown in that they could just come in a car (armed, of course) and threaten groups and get away with it. By suggesting ‘alternatives’, the Islamic group is also pinpointing what they consider ‘appropriate’ for women. Haedeh's own differentiation between the type of work the Center did is a reflection of her gender awareness and desire to be involved in progressive projects for women.

Katayun's experience is one shared by many Afghan refugee women. In better times, in Kabul, they were more mobile on their own but not in Pakistan, where they felt insecure. This has made some Afghan women more reliant on their husbands, at least in this respect.

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<sup>3</sup> A leader of *Harekat-e-Islami*.



Sometimes, Afghan refugee children became more religious in a dogmatic way as a result of studying in Afghan refugee schools, some of which were very religious. In Pakistan, Banafsheh was living with her siblings alone, as her parents were still in Afghanistan. She shares her relevant experiences with her siblings in Peshawar:

...Also some people here are so religious, that we can not even talk to them. My sister, in her school here, she had to wear black *chadoris* (veils), fully covered, even in this heat...I have problems with my sister, it has its impact. She links everything to religion. She turns off music. She says Islam does not allow this.

She also told me how her brother had become very dogmatic and spoke about the 'rightful' place of women in the family and society. Fortunately, often such views do not last and Banafsheh's siblings who now live in the USA have changed and adopted many 'Western' values. These too are not always very positive.

Yet, as refugees, the younger women were exposed to new cultural values and influences, some of great concern to their parents – which is common to many other parents in the world as well. This plus being in an 'alien' environment in addition to the pervasiveness of political Islamic dogma and 'gossiping' resulted in greater restrictions on girls/women, particularly in Peshawar. Islamabad, the capital, is more 'modern' and there are a greater number of women working outside their homes, driving and living independently.

For example, when they told us (in Pakistan) you can not go out without a big *chador*, we would not, but she (my daughter) tries to use the small *chador* that she likes, and shows her nail polish or lipstick or things she wants to buy, but now we are migrants, she can not buy everything, she has to adapt (Davudi).

Davudi's experience with her younger daughter is for social as well as economic reasons and a reflection of the gendered generational differences of many Afghan refugees.

In addition, war and displacement, according to Haedeh has resulted in a younger generation of Afghan refugee women who regret not having lived the lives of their mothers, who experienced peace and some level of financial security in Afghanistan. Thus, it is obvious that Afghan girls and women have been affected by conflict and

displacement in different ways – all gendered. However, these new experiences will hopefully have enhanced their desire to work towards peace and respect for human rights.

In the course of war and displacement, the unity and mutual support of family members was very critical to basic survival and many Afghan families lived up to this challenge. It often meant sacrifices and compromises from all sides, especially from the women in the family.

...I see my mother and some of my relatives...they have borne so much load during these 20 years of war, all the difficulties... they just never complain...I think they are strong (and later in the interview)...My mom has...strength...she earned (money) with my father...she did stitching, when my father was not working...(Goli).

### 2.2.3 Displacement Changes Women's Lives

Very important have been the new roles many women have assumed as refugees, including as the sole breadwinner of the family and/or activist. The quotes below reflect some of the changes in families from different ethnic and class backgrounds.

I think in our family, there have been changes in the thoughts and perspectives of my brother. He was very young when he worked with the *Mujahidin*, my big brother, and he was sometimes less open, compared to my uncle and father, and his relations was not so good with my sisters and today, about me working, he might not be encouraging, but he does not create problems. I think there was a change in him too. (Parto – Pashtun/Sunni).

Now my father understands. In Afghanistan, I was not allowed to work outside of the home, I did not have permission as a young woman, but now he knows I can manage myself, I can even manage a family and that is what has happened, and I have managed and now my father has changed a lot compared to Afghanistan (Saffron – Hazara/Shiite/Ismaeli).

The changes were not always quite as positive and it all comes with a price.

In our family, Samira's husband, he has become depressed. In Mazar, he was a professor at University...Now he has bad depression, his wife is busy whole day...he has deep depression, because he sees that his wife is working, the man is unemployed...(Davudi – Uzbek/Sunni).

...the problems and worries, husband's unemployment, that we had lost everything, a lot of guests, these had its negative effect on life, problems that we did not have in our 8 years of marriage in Kabul, things I had never seen, appeared between us, stress, a lot...connections had been broken, we were in a strange environment...in migration, families are hurt seriously because there is no one around them and for whom they overcome/ignore problems they have or are careful...(Haleh – Pashtun/Sunni).

To depend on your wife for your income is quite tough for many Afghan men who have been brought up with quite traditional expectations regarding men being the main breadwinners of families. However, to the credit of quite a few Afghan men, some have been committed and supported their wives and their work throughout these difficult years.

Haleh points to an important issue towards the end of her quote and that is the supportive network in Afghanistan which families no longer had in Pakistan and which sometimes resulted in spouses being less considerate towards each other (especially the men towards their wives). In Afghanistan, some would not be so inconsiderate because they were concerned about their own parents or their parent-in-law or their neighbours/colleagues and friends finding out and condemning them. Also, their wives had someone to turn to in despair. Much of this is lost in the process of displacement (especially in countries such as Pakistan), without any other system to replace it. In the West, at least some refugee/immigrant women over time are able to partially benefit from the legal rights of women in their new adopted countries.

In some families, such as that of Katayun the changes are there but her own overall feeling about it is ambivalent. She cannot forget everything from the past. Yes, her husband is at the time of the interview a homemaker and she is the breadwinner but she still has to do more than her share of housework when she is at home and in the past, he too had been influenced by his mother against her. They both desired a son and that is why she has tried five times and all have been girls. They are both now proud of their daughters and their main goal in life is their happiness and success.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> She lives in Canada now and works for an international organization. Her husband is also working part-time but in a lower position. One of her daughters is going to university and the rest are still in school.

The youngest woman I interviewed (Goli) was very concerned not to upset her mother by showing how different she had become, largely as a result of studying and living in Pakistan and being exposed to new experiences. She says, 'I do not want my mother to think I am different from her. I thank God that he has given me this quality'. She already speaks four languages, has studied the equivalent of a high-school degree and hopes to go to the West for her higher education<sup>5</sup> (though her family would prefer her to go with her brother). This concern for the gender gap between mother and daughter is shared by Parto as well, as is the effort not to flaunt this gap especially in front of their mothers.

In terms of marriage, one of the outcomes of the war and displacement, was many parents wanting their daughters to marry Afghans in the West to 'escape' life in Pakistan. Such marriages also mean new social networks and support for the whole extended family. The girls have often also wanted to marry and live in the West.

...and especially girls that are married to those abroad, Australia, America and Canada, some money is received and even girls of 14 and 15 are married to men of 60. These issues exist and unfortunately, marrying abroad is one of the main wishes of the girls, just if it is outside, there is no questioning...It has now been reduced...Because now the girls go single from here and are married there...(Ziba).

Reference is made to the marriage of very young refugee girls, children, to much older men in the diaspora by their parents in exchange for money and other expected benefits. It is an old patriarchal practice which continues even in the diaspora. Ziba thinks some of the girls also, initially at least, willingly accept thinking in the West things will be better for them. The last point in the above quote indicates the change over time and how Afghan refugee women have gradually been able to fight and improve their opportunities, including acceptance by Western countries as women at risk rather than just as wives of refugee men.

Sometimes, inspite of the education and activism of some of the Afghan refugee women mentioned, they would still go for traditional and arranged marriages, for

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<sup>5</sup> She has since returned to Afghanistan with her family and is working for the UN.

example, the sister of Parto who was one of the first refugee women to establish a Center for women and resist the threats of reactionary groups.

No, no, it was not love, our marriages are mostly arranged but she was willing maybe because she had worked a lot, she thought it is time to marry, her friends had married so she accepted but she thought it would get better if she goes, and she would change them (her in-laws).

Overall, women suffered tremendously through the war and displacement. Parto mentions that her mother looks 70 when she is only 58 because of this suffering. She says that her father who was active as a *Mujahidin* leader looked younger than his wife, even when he was sick. It seems the activism was his with all its glory (even in hard times) but the worries and suffering were that of his wife, who was to later become his widow as a refugee. Parto mentions how in spite of having lost so much by leaving Afghanistan, she has also gained new knowledge, for example, about Pakistan, its gender relations and international organizations.

Ghamar's articulation of the changes in her life since our first interview, as conveyed in an email exchange in 2003, is significant to mention at this point. Ghamar is now in the USA, divorced from her abusive husband, away from family gossip and pressure and earning her own income – as she lives with her mother (Rehaneh) and her younger sister.

...a lot of changes has come to my life...as a free woman I got my right...it was not easy for me and still it is not easy for me...but I am glad that now I am free as other women, and I can understand that I am also a human and I hope that one day I will bring this right to my country and give it to the women who suffer from cruelty, and whose voices has been locked in their throats for years, I have divorced my husband since your interview...

### **3. Afghan Woman and Their Collective Identities**

Afghan women belong, simultaneously, to many different collectivities and have many changing identities. I will focus on some of the most important - nationality, ethnicity and religion in this chapter. 'Belonging' to these various social groups has had immense impact upon the lives of all Afghan women, including those interviewed.

Conflict facilitates the intensity of social constructions, often exemplified by greater restrictions on and violence against women, as discussed in Chapter Five. Becoming refugees has a significant influence on women's relationships with these collectivities by changing their meanings, often adding to the pressures on women but at the same time, motivating many women to seek new and empowering forms of expression. In addition, women often enjoy, contribute to and are inspired by their various identities.

As will be shown below, becoming a refugee has dramatically changed the perspectives of the interviewees on being Afghan, not only because they were no longer in their own countries where their 'being' was not questioned but because they were being exposed to the realities of other countries, therefore also changing the perspective on their own. These experiences are gendered and often allow women to have raised expectations regarding their own status and role in society. As refugees, they were all seen as Afghans by 'others' and their complex sub-divisions were often overlooked. This was sometimes good and other times, not so good as it let differences brew unrecognized by 'outsiders'. Greater exposure to international organizations was another impact of life in Pakistan for many Afghan women.

The experience with ethnicity is different from that of nationality in various ways, though it is connected. The tensions between ethnic groups have no doubt increased in the course of the war and also continued amongst Afghans in Pakistan. Many more Afghans from minority groups have become increasingly sensitive about their own status and have been able to assert it in various ways. Some such efforts have not been constructive. For example, the work of the ethnic-based Islamic groups has often only fuelled difference and violence. Each group has attempted to demonstrate its 'authenticity' as true, patriotic and committed Afghans and/or Moslems, for example, in the war against the Communists and the Soviet army. In this process, the concept of nationality has changed in Afghanistan with the non-Pashtun groups demanding representation and more rights as Afghans and Pashtuns feeling increasingly undermined and/or realizing the need for more inclusiveness and rights for all Afghans.

Six of the interviewees come from parents of two ethnic backgrounds (if not more) and/or are married to Afghans from other ethnic groups. As far as I was informed, in

all these cases, it is half-Tajik and half-Pashtun with both sides being Sunni Moslems. This is significant as it indicates more inter-ethnic marriages between the two more powerful ethnic groups (and amongst Sunnis) than otherwise.<sup>6</sup> This is in spite of the fact that in terms of language, for example, Tajiks are closer to Hazaras who also speak Dari.

It seems to me from the interviews and my own observations that mixed marriages occurred more in urban areas such as Kabul where there was more ethnic mixing than in rural areas where one group would strongly predominate. It is somewhat linked to levels of education, as it was often more educated women who were in urban areas and had the opportunity of meeting men outside of their family network at university or work. It also reflects a certain level of open-mindedness. However, ethnically mixed marriages also exist in other social groups in Afghanistan, depending on the location, family and other factors. This process is also gendered and related to class and power, with richer and/or more powerful men having the option of making the decision to marry women from other ethnic groups with less difficulty than women making such a choice, especially poorer and less educated women.

As will be shown below, women from the two main ethnic groups, Pashtun and Tajik, remember less discrimination as children in Afghanistan, while the Hazara and Uzbek experienced it more. Nevertheless, their experiences also demonstrate how complex ethnicity is and how dangerous the essentializing of identities, so often a cause and outcome of conflict.

Overall, in terms of their various religious identities, again the experiences of majority and minority religious groups vary. Yet, it is encouraging that almost all the women differentiate between their understanding of Islam and that of its manipulation by others, mostly powerful men. In spite of its variations amongst them, there is no doubt an overall more tolerant interpretation of Islam than that presented by the male spokesmen/leaders of the extremist Islamic groups or traditional clergymen. As the interviews indicate, Islam has been an important component of not only their religious, but also their ethnic and national identities.

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<sup>6</sup> A few interviewees, however, knew of marriage between Sunnis and Shiites.

All the women interviewed have experienced the power of these identities in one way or another. The 'moments of truth' have depended on various factors, including their ethnicity, family position, location, date of departure for Pakistan and other issues. Almost all of them have tried to challenge the most oppressive gendered constructions linked to these identities, and tried to mobilize the positive factors in their lives in order to improve their own situation. Within an overall patriarchal and undemocratic framework, they have continuously used their 'agency' to challenge the status quo.

Almost all the women interviewed share in their desire for peace in Afghanistan, a desire that has been fuelled by the experience of being refugees, unwanted in a foreign land. Within various frameworks and notions, they all hope for an Afghanistan where there are fewer social differences based on gender, ethnicity, and religion. Nevertheless, there are also some differences amongst them in how to reach and sustain such aspirations.

### **3.1 Afghan Women and Nationality**

#### **3.1.1 In Afghanistan**

Being an Afghan has changed its meaning for the women interviewed many times and this is related to the momentous events in their lifetime, which resulted in the (re)invention, (re)negotiation and (re)construction of their national identity in dramatic ways. Being Afghan is also related to their other identities, as women and as members of particular ethnic and religious groups. In particular, in Afghanistan, national and other collective identities – especially ethnicity and religion – are integrally linked.

One of the many factors related to nationality in Afghanistan is your village and region of origin – parochial attachments – as referred to earlier in Chapter Three. The interviewees come from various regions, for example Paktia in the South, Ghazni and Bamiyan in the Central Highlands, Kunduz, Faryab, Balkh, Baghlan, Shomali and Badakshan in the North, and Kabul and Logar. Some have ancestors who came from the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia.



The diversity of Afghanistan, its regional/parochial variations and its many cultures are all intertwined with the experience of being Afghan. Being Afghan is a combination of these sentiments. Azadeh, for example, lived in Kunduz and the love she has for the Kunduz of her childhood and youth is undistinguishable from her experience of being Afghan, as well as a source of pride and inspiration.

Kunduz was SO progressive, the first civilization came to Kunduz, before Kabul, and if I show you the photos of those days, you won't believe it is me. Everything (with stress) fashion, freedom, clothes (NP: Why was Kunduz like this?) It was a border with Tajikistan, back and forth of foreigners, guests, gathering, anyone who came from all over by Zahir Shah or Daoud, in their times, they first came to Kunduz for *buzkeshi* (traditional Afghan male sport, a bit like polo only with an animal being used instead of a ball), it is a very interesting game (NP:Yes, yes), it is very interesting and Kunduz had a very good field and the best *buzkeshi* was there and then when the foreigners and guests came, they also invited others, including women, there were very good chances for women...

Banafsheh, who will be quoted below on this matter, in fact, first learned to dislike her place of origin because she was told by her mother that people there were very traditional and conservative and treated women badly. Nevertheless, either way, regional affiliations have a strong influence on the sense of being Afghan. I can sense in some of the interviews contradictory feelings about their nationality which is not surprising. For example, while they love their country in many ways, they realize that they have also suffered enormously and been restricted because they were born Afghans. This is sometimes reflected in what they say about how younger Afghans feel about their country, as is quoted later in this chapter.

Goli remembers how she first learned about nationalism by being taught that 'this is our flag, this is our President, this is our national anthem, our this and that' when she was in elementary school in Afghanistan. This indicates the important symbolic role of the flag, leader and national anthem as well as the role of education in the inculcation of nationalism.

Many of the interviewees in one way or another make comments about what other Afghans think and say, especially when it comes to gender issues. Shahrareh, for example, responds in the following way to my question about the possibility of

marrying a non-Afghan, since she says it is tough to find an Afghan who would accept her as she is.

A non-Afghan, I think that would be difficult for us too because maybe our relations will not speak well of me, they will say other things, she was not a good girl, she did not find an Afghan husband, she married a foreigner to cover up her problems. That is difficult as well...you have to be careful about people, the society you live in, you have to act in a way so that they can not say anything about you...

In her quote, she clearly highlights the almost glib yet serious moral judgements made by many other Afghans, about Afghan women and their choices. She also refers to the almost constant need of being attentive to such criticism, if one wants to continue living in these communities. It is about knowing how far to go and how to go that far, as Shahrareh herself has already broken various norms by living on her own in Pakistan, working with foreigners, remaining single and driving a car.

Many of my interviewees express how it was only later in life and with the dramatic events in Afghanistan that the issue of nationalism became an important factor in their lives. The presence foreign forces in Afghanistan, when the Soviets entered the country in 1979, had a direct impact upon national sentiments and the mobilization and exploitation of these sentiments by various groups. Parto has the following to share on this matter:

But there was stress on being Afghan, because when I was growing up it was when the Russians were there, and I heard from everyone that we were Afghan, we need to live free, I felt very much Afghan. On nationality, and my own country (NP: More than being Pashtun?) Not specifically Pashtun, in our house, all Afghans, during the Russians, whether Hindu, Moslem, Dari or Pashtun-speaking, Afghan means everyone and this was stressed, anyone who is from Afghanistan, there was unity then, it affected all families, very much in our family. I felt a tie to my compatriots.

Her quote indicates a number of interesting issues. One was the qualities attached to being Afghan – ‘we need to live free’ – which is a reminder of the earlier anti-colonial wars of the Afghans. Another is how having a common external ‘enemy’ was supposed to unite all Afghans around a common cause. We now know how fragile this unity, if it ever existed, was. But Parto was a young child those years and, therefore,

was uncritically affected by idealistic sentiments. Others have felt differently and the conflict prompted their first experience of ideological, ethnic and other differences in Afghanistan.

On what being Afghan means to her, Goli has the following to say, at a more personal level:

It means (silence for a while) I feel just human, that is, being an Afghan is like my name. I am proud I am an Afghan, and I like my nationality and I am not disappointed in it, but I am just human.

Her statement reflects the kind of contradictory feelings which often exist regarding nationality. There is a sense of association and internalization of the identity, but yet a resistance also to being identified primarily from that perspective. As Goli is a young Afghan refugee who has spent many years of her life living in Pakistan, when she says she 'likes' her nationality, it is also an indication that in spite of all the hardship she has faced as a result of being Afghan, she STILL likes it.

Shahrareh expresses this contradiction in a different way:

I only judge people by their character, are they human/humane, can I talk to them, not that they are Shiite, Sunni or Afghan or Pakistani or else. Even though I see that these things are ...everywhere...I see these things have an important role.

Shahrareh has felt the 'power' of these identities in her own life, having lived in Kabul, moved to Mazar Sharif, then to Pakistan and also having worked with other nationalities in the UN. Her experience has shown it is those who are kind and sincere – regardless of nationality - that impress her most.

### **3.1.2 In Pakistan**

As refugees, their experiences of being Afghan changed in various ways. For many, it was the first time they were seeing another country and were thus able to reflect on their own country, in comparison, as well as its relationship with the outside world. They gained an international and comparative perspective.

On being an Afghan refugee student at school in Pakistan, Goli has the following to say:

Because I have tried to be as nice as I can, because my point of view is to study, so things happened in Pakistan because of Afghanistan, so the charges came, the blames came, so they thought I was responsible for that, personally I was the only Afghan in their access, so they thought I was the only person who did all of this (a small laugh), they did not know that I was suffering from all of that, worse than them. So that is the first time I have been through this, not being the majority nationality, here in Pakistan.

She is referring to how many Pakistanis blamed Afghans for all their woes (Afghans were the scapegoats in many ways, also in Iran) and in this case, targeted the only Afghan they were in touch with personally at school, oblivious to her much greater suffering because of the events in Afghanistan. This is a sad yet typical refugee experience. In this case, it was a new experience for Goli, as she realized she was a minority in terms of nationality as a refugee. This would never have happened in this way if she had continued to live in Afghanistan. Parto also experienced similar sentiments in Pakistan.

Katayun, like most Afghan parents, is very concerned about her children losing their Afghan culture in Pakistan, attending Pakistani schools:

...I wanted them to study and make progress but I did not realize one thing then and that is forgetting your culture but I know now that no matter how good that education is, children will get their culture, no matter what I say in my home to them, still at school...One thing tortures me and I wish that my children grow up like in my own country...my small daughter writes better than I, it makes me feel very happy and proud. But only if they are losing their culture, it pains me.

This also represents an essential sense of what one's national culture is. Nevertheless, for many Afghans, it also means knowing about Afghan history, literature, religion, holidays, as well as respecting elders. These are gendered notions and include 'appropriate' attire and appearance, as well as interaction with men, with all its conditions and codes in traditional Afghan society.

Samira says the following on the issue of changed aspirations amongst young Afghan refugee women, as compared to her generation earlier in Afghanistan:

...the spirit of nationalism, love of country is lost, the 15-25 generation think of leaving, going to Canada, America, how to get a husband who is Afghan and a citizen (of these countries)...why do we, why do I love Afghanistan, because we have memories there, we have classmates...this generation does not think of Afghanistan.

Her views also indicate how women used marriage as a traditional institution to escape their lives in Pakistan. Also, the realization that being a 'citizen' of a Western country is better than JUST being a refugee or immigrant. She also understands why the young refugees who have spent most of their lives outside Afghanistan would feel differently. Yet, many refugees/immigrants and diaspora communities do not forget their countries of origin, though their relationships to it change. Nevertheless, constructs of our 'homeland' vary based on where we have lived and are living, as well as duration, distance and many other factors.

Others feel that war and displacement has accentuated patriotic sentiments in their families who are now more committed to serving their country, for example, Nejla:

This same feeling of patriotism, my sister came back from America, we think each of us are responsible for our society, that is how we are brought up, if we all say we can not do it than who will do it...

Nejla and her family were very aware of the restrictions on Afghan refugee's work when they moved to Pakistan but her mother insisted that they go out, work and help other Afghans inspite of these restrictions and insults. Later in the interview she also has the following to say about being a refugee:

...Being refugee is not a wrong thing, humans have always been refugees. The world is composed of these movements. But, some nations or generations have to sacrifice for this. They sacrifice but what will they tell their children. They cannot call themselves Pakistani, because they do not have its citizenship and they cannot say they are Afghan, because they do not have the knowledge, to be the future of the country. The fate of the 2 million (Afghans) who live here, even in Iran, is a fate which is bad. In Europe, at least they are settled, accepted that they will live there, adapted themselves, there is a government, they have passports, free education, here it is difficult.

Nejla knows very well that Afghans are not the only large refugee group in the world or in world history. She realizes that this time round the burden of displacement has fallen on their generation's shoulders. Also, in her comparison between the fate of Afghan refugees in the 'near abroad' as compared to the West is interesting. In the West, they are relatively better off and once accepted as refugees or immigrants, can eventually apply for citizenship but not in Pakistan or Iran where it is extremely difficult and rare for 'foreigners' to become citizens.

The issue of citizenship is also important as it in some ways is a symbol of your more permanent status in a particular country. Therefore, Afghans who live in Pakistan or Iran without any citizenship rights even after twenty years, experience diasporic life differently from those who become citizens in the West. Therefore, as Nejla conveys, in Pakistan, there is a sense of being neither here nor there.

The sentiments of these Afghan refugee women are also a lesson they have learned through years of war and displacement. While they cannot and do not want to completely forgo their national identity, they have learned to go beyond this identification in judging others (and by extension, themselves). I believe that this has very much to do with them being women since as women, they have faced the brunt of the hardship in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

I will end this section with the comments of the youngest interviewee, Goli, after the fall of Taliban about her hopes for Afghanistan, as an Afghan refugee woman. She adds that not all Afghan refugee youth feel the same way.

I am hopeful and I hope *Inshallah* (God be willing) it will be calm enough, and secure enough, all the important things that a citizen needs, so I can go back where I belong because I want to go back...Because something tells me this is not my house, I am just a guest here...a majority...think it will be a crazy thing to go back to a ruined place, they want to go somewhere else for a better life...so they think it is better to go abroad (meaning West)...

## 3.2 Ethnicity

### 3.2.1 Ethnicity as Experienced during Childhood

Ethnicity is a complex issue in Afghanistan with many sub-groups and inter-ethnic marriages. Yet, being Afghan cannot be understood without reference to ethnicity. These are all inter-connected identities. This complexity is reflected in what Ghamar has shared:

*You are from which ethnic group? From Noorzais. Noorzai, is that Tajik? Yes, Tajik. But is Noorzai not a Pashtun name? Yes, but it seems our grandparents were from there. So you are Tajik? Yes but it makes no difference, you can also call us Modudi. That is my husband's name. But you remember always being told by family that you are Tajik? Yes. Your religion? Are you Sunni Moslem? Yes. For you, being Moslem, Sunni or Tajik, has had what role in life? Being Moslem is very good and Tajik is our nationality and what shall I say, and Sunni, because we follow the Prophet Mohammad. Those years that you were a child, you remember, how did you know yourself, as Tajik, Afghan, if someone asked you, how would you introduce yourself in childhood? In childhood, I do not remember, but as youth, I would say I am from Kabul, Sunni, what else shall I say. Being from Kabul was more important than Tajik? No, I would also say I am Tajik, we say that to anyone who is a Farsi-speaker. In the north, they are also Tajik Farsi-speaking but in the West there are Pashtun people, Hazara people, we have those three, that is why in Afghanistan, we are known as Tajik, of course we have Uzbeks as well.*

Ghamar's paternal name sounds Pashtun but she is Tajik. Noorzai is only a name for her, not a reflection of her ethnicity, it can easily be replaced with her husband's last name, not affecting her own ethnicity. Her understanding of being Sunni ('we follow the Prophet Mohammad') is also an indication of some of the claims to authenticity by Sunni Moslems over other Moslems that might have influenced her. The importance of being from Kabul, the capital, is also clear, as well as the link between the language (Farsi) and her ethnicity. Others have felt differently about ethnicity as reflected below.

Khaledeh's information on her paternal, Pashtun background is an indication of the many different sub-groups within each of these larger ethnic groups.

...my father is Pashtun...He is Lodhi, Lodhis of Kandahar...They were Pashtuns, they still exist in Kandahar and they are the Lodhis who many years ago had a kingdom and went to India on *hejrat* (migration). My father was from the dynasty of Lodhis, Soltan Ibrahim Lodhi...they have a royal line. They are also called the Pashtaneh Lodhi...Now in India, there is a Lodhianeh Garden, it is theirs, Lodhis live there... I think it is in New Delhi.

From the above more general comment on ethnicity, let us move into a more directly gendered experience, shared by Banafsheh:

Since Pashtun women are particularly oppressed, my mother...hated Pashtuns. Even she did not like to speak Pashtu, she wanted us not to speak it, she had such bad memories. Now, I think my mother is a hero, how she could tolerate all of this.

Banafsheh's mother seems to have blamed a lot of the gender discrimination and violence she experienced in her personal life on her ethnic group, extending to even dislike of her mother-tongue. Again, this issue of ethnicity is linked to more regional and parochial connections. Banafsheh and her family are Pashtun but specifically from Paktia.

...the people of Paktia are very proud, they said they are the best people of Afghanistan, because of their morals, their manlihood, in Paktia's culture, manly is someone who is always frowning and harsh to women. If a man helps his wife, he is looked down at.

In the above quote, the clear linkage between ethnic 'authentic' morals and values and gendered discrimination is made. I believe these experiences have indeed shaped Banafsheh's own life, her efforts to escape from all of this and also her women's rights activism. She, in particular, remembers her mother's suffering at the hand of 'her own people'.

Davudi, an Uzbek, primarily remembers experiencing ethnic discrimination from the majority groups in Afghanistan (Pashtun and Tajik). These different experiences influenced her sense of being Afghan and an Afghan woman.

In the streets, it was said, for example, if we bothered someone or said something, they would say 'go get lost Uzbek' or '*Uzbek Kalamatoo, Balayeh Man Sar e To*' (mindless Uzbek, my pains unto you)...and we told them 'go



Pashtu Kabuli' (Pashtu from Kabul)...street language, we called them names, they called us names.

In the above, some common ethnic derogatory stereotypes of the time are mentioned. Such racist comments did not go unanswered. Later in the interview, Davudi adds that the issue of ethnic discrimination especially hit her when she realized as an Uzbek she could be denied a scholarship and the opportunity to study abroad. However, she eventually was given a scholarship, through the patronage of an influential Pashtun Mohammadzai female neighbor.

Banafsheh, herself a Pashtun, also points to some of the identifying factors about the Pashtuns and Hazaras, when she was going to school in Afghanistan:

...Hazaras were known by their looks/features and Pashtuns by their accents and that they had recently come to Kabul (from rural areas).

So, for Hazaras it was their physical features which identified them, while for some Pashtuns, it was the fact that they spoke Dari/Farsi with an accent and many had recently come from rural areas to the capital. This also points to an interesting issue in Afghanistan's ethnic relations. While some elite Pashtuns have ruled over the country for most of its history, the majority of rural Pashtuns have been looked down upon by more 'sophisticated' Pashtuns as well as Farsi-speakers in Kabul. This is also shared in Parto's comments who says 'speaking Dari was a superiority, we tried to speak Dari amongst ourselves.' This is while she is Pashtun herself.

Davudi and Banafsheh's early experiences with ethnicity are not shared by all the interviewees. Katayun (a Tajik) told me that she did not even realize what ethnic group she was from in her childhood. In response to my question 'how different is it now?' - she had the following to say:

About ethnicity, no discrimination existed, nothing was said at school, we learned that there are 72 languages in Afghanistan but there was not discrimination...during the King's period...

100% it is different now. Sometimes if someone asked me about my nationality, I would say I am *Mosalman* (Moslem), not even Afghan. In my

own thoughts, Afghan was applied to the nomadic people, and we urban people are *Moslaman* (Moslem).

In her quote, there are a number of interesting issues mentioned besides an indication how her perception of herself changed with time. She had an understanding, as a child, that she was just Moslem and that was a very special thing to be and related also to living in the capital. It was a sophisticated identity to have. And she understood Afghan as being equivalent to nomads. She must have heard that the *koochis* (Afghan nomads) were Pashtun and that Pashtuns are also called Afghan and therefore this identification in her mind. However, she later also mentions how all civil servants had to pass a Pashtun test prior to 1992, indicating the preference of the Pashtun-based regimes of that period.

### 3.2.2 Ethnicity, War and Displacement

The Communist regime spoke of greater ethnic equality and established various ethnic minority studies centers and increased programmes on radio in ethnic minority languages but many, especially non-Pashtuns, felt that they too were oriented towards Pashtun hegemony and that there were few exceptions. Haedeh, a Tajik, provides a different, yet similar, experience:

...during this period...there was no ethnic, racial discrimination, In their government (the Communists), there was from all classes, for examples, Ministers were from the Hazaras, from Badakshan...but for example in the Ministry of Interior, they said, the Minister has to write on the door that "Entrance of Tajiks Forbidden"...all Tajiks were sent to the provinces...There was discrimination at that level, but not so much in schools, or universities but at decision-making and national level...

Davudi, referred to earlier, has come to realize her ethnic rights later in life and as a result to greater exposure on issues pertaining to ethnicity (including during the Communist regime), as reflected below:

I realize now...I as an Uzbek can not read in Uzbeki, our culture was destroyed, I was an Uzbek, I should have publications, news in Uzbeki at least, I can not read, I can only speak and that is different too. My children do not know it either because I did not know it and now I feel they oppressed our language, our culture, for example, I can understand Pashtu news very well but

if they say it in Uzbeki I understand it a little. I am very sorry now about this.

Davudi shares another relevant observation as well, in terms of her work with a NGO in Northern Afghanistan under General Dostom (an Uzbek), in the early 1990s and how it made her realize the same discrimination in other ways:

Many directors of NGOs, like OXFAM and STC, have worked on textbooks but in Turkemen area we took the STC books and they told us we do not understand anything, we are Turkmen. I told Mary, they said what I want, I understand after twenty years that my language was dominated by Farsi, they understand now, they want Turkmen books, they did not have it. So literacy did not take place there...some study from having no choice, they say, well, we did not learn Turkmen, let us learn Farsi...

This awareness is also linked to her high level of education, as well as international travel, experience of internal displacement (to Mazar Sharif where an Uzbek was in charge at that time from 1992-1996) as well as becoming a refugee in Pakistan (where for example different regions use their regional languages and learn them at school as well) and the whole discourse of human rights. Also as a mother, she feels a special responsibility for not having taught her children their 'mother-tongue'. Her daughter, Samira, thinks that the war and breakdown of central government has facilitated Afghans seeking security in their own ethnic group.

As some of the interviewees' indicate in their comments, certain neighbourhoods in Kabul became identified with particular ethnic-based Islamic groups (especially from 1992 to 1994) and were therefore seen as unsafe for 'others', especially women of the 'other' in terms of abuse, harassment as well as rape. This changing concept of localities – space – in terms of conflict, ethnicity and gender, is important in Afghanistan.

Dr. Rahimeh is perhaps the one interviewee who most overtly and consciously decided to work with an Islamic political party representing her ethnic/religious group. She worked with them as an internally displaced person in Mazar Sharif, and also later when she moved to Bamiyan at a senior level. If the war had not happened, she would most probably be a much less political person, practicing medicine in Kabul.

Ziba, who is Hazara/Shiite, but does not look very Hazara (according to herself at least), now wishes she did, as she wants to be identified with her group.

And sometimes they tell me 'You really do not look like a Hazara.' I am not happy about this. It makes me suffer. Because I am happy to be a Hazara with tight eyes and small noses...

Ziba also shares how in the eyes of Pakistanis and the aid community in Pakistan, all Afghan refugees are Afghans and not seen as Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek or Pashtun. She also mentions that all Afghans have felt the linguistic, cultural and religious affinity with Pakistanis which has in ways made their lives as refugees easier in the 'near abroad'.

Ghamar noticed and felt ethnic discrimination more as a refugee in Peshawar, Pakistan, where the Pashtun Afghans had relatively more power.

(Earlier) No, not at all, we did not notice these things. Like here now, there is someone who publishes a Pashtun magazine and tells me 'I have a magazine without a single Dari (Farsi) word, eat your heart out (*del at siyah*)'. I tell her, it is a black spot on your forehead...

Ghamar thinks that such 'small-minded' attitudes are related to the fact that most of the highly educated and open-minded Afghans migrated to the West and most of those who are based in Peshawar come from rural backgrounds.

The fact that Haleh now regrets not having taught her children, from a marriage to a Tajik, Pashtu is probably also related to the stronger sentiments of Pashtun Afghans in Pakistan about these issues – as compared to the pre-war years in Kabul. It is, like in the case of Davudi, also a reflection of how responsible she feels as a mother for not having taught her children their 'mother-tongue' and thus 'weakness' in asserting her own ethnicity.

...since my children speak more Farsi than Pashtu, it has made me sensitive, why do my children not speak their mother tongue maybe I was not strong enough, and now I want to begin with my baby with Pashtu because everywhere when they say that your mother is Pashtun but the children do not speak Pashtu, I feel a weakness, I think I was weak and could not do this even though that is not at all important for me because people's judgment says this –

they should speak both languages, as languages of their country, not as discrimination, as two languages that they have to learn.

Goli, who is a child of another mixed marriage, has had a much more positive experience. :

...I think I am both Pashtun speaking and Farsi speaking, both, I feel I am just Afghan, I am not a Pashtun speaker or Farsi speaker, they (parents) always made me feel I am just Afghan, both my parents...

This difference might also have to do with Goli's mother having always been very proud of her Pashtun heritage. In her case, her Tajik husband is also very fond of Pashtuns and speaks fluent Pashtu himself.

Haleh's comment above is also related to her more recent worries about how her marriage to a Tajik is perceived by others:

...now that I am a bit more sensitive about these issues, I think that maybe people think that I was not good, to get a Tajik or that I was not proud of being a Pashtun and that is why...I do not want someone to think like that, I am very proud to be a Pashtun but as much as I have respect for that, I have for others too, the person is important for me but I do not want someone to think I married a Tajik because I thought Pashtuns are lower class.

So, now as an Afghan refugee woman, having lived in exile in Pakistan where there are many Afghan and Pakistani Pashtuns, and with the whole ethnicity discourse of the war years, she is more concerned. This quote is also a reminder of what Shahrareh had said earlier about marrying foreigners. So in the views of these women (as a reflection of what many in their community will feel), marrying an 'outsider' whether in terms of ethnicity or nationality, can be a sign of the woman concerned not being 'good', having something to hide, as well as thinking she is better than 'her own' ethnic group.

Parto, who is an activist, and a Pashtun, says she consciously tries to work with all Afghan ethnic groups in Pakistan, which has alienated her from the more nationalist Afghan Pashtuns in Pakistan. Many of the interviewees and other Afghan activist women would identify with this in principle as well as in their actions.

The aspirations of Ziba, who is a Hazara and whose community has faced some of the harshest violence and discrimination, including under the Taliban are important to share. Her views are also a reflection of the potential contribution of women to the peace building process in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

Well, Afghanistan is the home of all Afghans, everyone, wherever they are as Afghans not as Hazara, Tajik...only as Afghan women to serve the home of Afghanistan and build it. If I ever reach a position, I will make an Afghan (meaning Pashtun) work instead of a Tajik, Tajik instead of an Uzbek. This house is yours, build it. If we again consider where we are from and what we want, history will repeat itself and suffering. Only to forget the past, a general amnesty, including of the Taliban, all return to their places and live in a peaceful and friendly atmosphere.

### **3.3 Afghan Women and Religion before the Jihad**

Religion has played a very important role in the lives of Afghan women (and men) in different ways, at the level of their family and communities as children, in terms of the politics of religion in the over 24 years of war in Afghanistan, the politicization of Islam and especially its gendered regimes. It is also important to differentiate between individual religious beliefs and collective identities, though these are inter-linked and impact upon each other.

Islam has always been an important aspect of the Afghan national identity. Many Afghan women have continued to gain strength through their religious faith. Some have been turned off by religion but these are few – at least amongst those who are willing to admit it – and none of my interviewees mentioned it.

Only one of my interviewees (Haedeh) begins to indicate that she has spiritually begun to move towards another direction which is in her mind more open and tolerant. I heard from other Afghan friends that she had converted to Christianity. Some of the other interviewees focus less on religion than others. None of them are very fanatical or dogmatic, which does not mean that all educated Afghan women hold similar views.

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<sup>7</sup> This is also in line with the UN Resolution 1325 on Women's Role in Conflict and Peace

At the time of the interview, none of the women expressed that they were secular or atheist. I am sure there are doubts in some of their minds, every now and then, especially in view of their experiences as Afghans but these were not shared with me. Overall, I think most of my interviewees are representative of most Afghans in the sense that they believe in their religion but also in other universal values of human and women's rights and do not want Islam to be practiced in an extreme way. They have paid a very heavy price for intolerance and have had enough with such practices.

### 3.3.1 Identification with Religion

Those who are Sunni Moslems realize that they are the majority religion of Afghanistan and followers of the official religion of Afghanistan (at least under the previous Constitutions). However, those who are from minority groups such as the 12 and 7 imamite Shiites have a different relationship to religion and the position of their religious community vis a vis the state. Most of the Shiites happen to also be ethnic minorities – especially the Hazara – so this sense of being a minority comes from multiple factors. But in a country as diverse as Afghanistan, there are always also others who are Shiite, including from example, Tajiks and the divisions are much more complex. As mentioned earlier, there are many other groups and sub-groups including the *Seyeds* (believed to be the direct descendants of the Prophet).

On being *Seyed*, Nejla has said the following:

...the Shiites have their own *Seyeds*, who came from Arabia and lived in those areas and in Sunni areas, they are called *Padeshah Saheb* and the Farsi speakers call them *Agha*.

Most of the interviewees learned about Islam first in their own families and had parents who prayed and fasted. This was often done in an encouraging manner and again, mothers played an important role in the passing on of this knowledge/faith, as well as grandparents and other relatives, as shared by Parto:

It was not as something strict...We were not forced to pray but we had examples, our grandfather, we were encouraged...My mother prayed and fasted, and maybe without force, we wanted to do the same, fast and pray...we

had discussions in our family, my uncle talked about religious and political issues, to make us understand.

Yet, Samira was discouraged by her husband (a doctor) to pursue her interest in Islam:

...he says it is all useless, he sees it from another perspective, he says in Islam, you have to say whatever the clergy say or you will be a *kafir* (atheist), human beings are independent thinkers...

He is clearly critical of Islam and how he has seen it used to silence dissent especially by clergymen. I am not sure how he developed his views of Islam and whether it was an outcome or partial outcome of education during the Communist era or not. In any case, in view of his power relations with his younger wife, he seems to have been able to stop her from pursuing her Islamic interests but nevertheless, she continues to be a believer in her own moderate way.

Some of the interviewees have good experiences of their religious studies as students in Afghanistan, it was like story telling for them. Others, had this experience turn into bitter memories at some point in their life, for example, Haleh:

...he (the *mullah*) punished me for *Koran-e-Sharif* (Holy Koran), I had forgotten, I had put another lesson's book in a handkerchief...he insulted me very much and said 'because she has green eyes, she is a *kafir* (atheist) and an atheist is an enemy of all'...I am not very hard on religion, but I have an attachment to religion, it is very private for me...

In spite of this bad memory, the interviewee has maintained her personal connection to religion. However, her experience with the clergyman shows how sometimes lack of religiosity is blamed on not being a 'true' Afghan and foreign in some way or another – such as in his ridiculous accusation that it has to do with her eye color.

Saffron, has heard that her grandfather dared to challenge discrimination and build a place of worship – *Jamiat khaneh* - for Ismaelis in Kabul. This happened when Ismaelis were frightened to reveal their religious identity in public. Even bread was not sold to them. Being Ismaeli was also linked to being from the ethnic minority of Hazara:



...the Ismaeli and Hazara people during those times were so poor, they did not have their own homes and lives. They worked in Hindu homes, then there were many Hindus in Afghanistan...and when an Ismaeli died in a Hindu home...no one read a *fateheh* (respect to the dead) prayer for him or anything...

Saffron adds that being Ismaeli is first for her, before being Hazara or Afghan. Other interviewees did not feel that the same way, as is shown below. This depends on various factors including family status or the particular identity which is most discriminated against by other more powerful groups or the one for which you feel your collectivity has paid the highest price to maintain.

Ziba, a 12 imamite Shiite Hazara, has also faced religious discrimination, including in her work environment in Pakistan, vis a vis other Afghans.

Sometimes I felt it, since I was Shiite, I prayed Shiite at home, in school, the system of curriculum was different. That was always a conflict that which one...In the end I did not pray. At work, I did not pray at official times. Even here, once even one of the...trainers mentioned it, and I said I was Shiite and I prayed at home...therefore I think humans should be respected, not as Shiite or Sunni.

Ziba also told me that her people were Hazara before they were Moslem, so for her, her ethnicity is in some ways the first aspect of her identity.

...I have been Moslem for 1400 years and 5000 that I am Hazara (laughing)...it is possible to change your religion but to change your race/nationality is difficult...our religion is our humanity and we are first humans and then Moslems. I hope this is not *kofr* (anti-religious sentiments)...

### 3.3.2 Religion, War and Displacement

For some of the interviewees who came from well-known religious families, like Nejla (who is a *Seyed*), under the Communist's rule, their families were threatened, as the regime assumed they were collaborating with the *Mujahidin*.

...the *Khalqi* (Communists), the people of Taraki (their leader) told some of our relatives, you do not belong to this country, they understood this is a religious group who brought Islam, they did not like it and said what are you doing here, go...

Other interviewees who were not affiliated to well-known religious families faced fewer problems in this arena. Nevertheless, some in reaction to the pressure of the Communist State on Islam, turned to it, as shared by Samira:

...Maybe it had to do with the Government suppressing religion, there was a reaction in society, that is why we liked religion...

Katayun, whose husband worked closely with the Communist regime and who is also not too critical of them, feels somewhat different from Samira:

Most people who came to Pakistan it was not for religious reasons, for example, they (the Communists) did not close the mosques on anyone. They even fixed mosques, put broadcasters, mirrors...but on the other hand they forced people to join the party...

In Pakistan, the 'near abroad', Afghan refugees did not face the same situation they face in the West where Islam is a minority religion and now with a lot of political baggage attached to it. In Pakistan, Afghans were amongst Moslems and therefore also part of the wider majority religious group there, especially Sunni Afghan refugees. Shiites, felt somewhat undermined, as do Pakistan Shiites with the increase in inter-religious violence. This difference is indicated in a quote from Davudi, about her daughter and son-in-law who live in the US:

Yes, they are a very religious family, they have to pray and fast. (NP: Is he Uzbek too, your son-in-law?) He is Uzbek. They have to show to Christians that if we are Moslems, we are good Moslems, so they try to do everything Moslem, so Afghans who are there, try to do these things, and one thing they suffer from, is that their children are not like that, the new generation does not know how to pray, they do not learn at school... we have to be real Moslems.

In her quote, she refers to a number of important issues, first the centrality of prayer and fasting in Islam in showing others that you are a 'real' Moslem. Also evident, as a response to racism in the West, is the desire to show you are 'true' Moslems. You have to show your 'authenticity' faced with the 'other'. Yet, this same sense of responsibility is not shared by the new generation who grow up in a very different environment, according to Davudi.

Nazanin who is a practicing Moslem herself and has lived in Pakistan believes that Afghans have turned away from religion because of its politicization and extreme interpretation, which she believes is contrary to the spirit of 'real' Islam. Her experiences also show the gap between the Islam many people believe in and the Islam that is represented today by exclusionary and undemocratic forces and regimes.

...Islam is now a tool for politics, not a religion to save science and education...and I hope that Islam should be a tool for education of people, to save them from ignorance, poverty...As a Moslem, I do not discriminate against other religions, I do not have a fight with nationalities...if I had power, I would allow Jews, Nestorians, Hindus, Moslems, all to hold their religious ceremonies, there will be no force because this is not the age of force...as Hafez (the poet) says 'to save their own wheat' – why should we say do not plant wheat..."...who are we to judge other people...

And elsewhere:

... Islam has enough of a bad name in front of the people, it has been diverted, in the name of Islam they did things that for now the most ordinary person in society does not even want to talk about Islam, Islamic principles and faith...

She also refers to the role of Khadijeh, the Prophet's first wife, to show that 'true' Islam has given rights to women:

...Islam has given equal rights for men and women, for education, for work, we know that the Prophet's wife, Khadijeh, did business, she was his best adviser...they ruined the reputation of Islam, what is in Islam, they put it all aside, and made their own Islam...

In her words, one can also sense the pain felt by a believer about the 'bad' reputation of Islam as a result of its misuse by political and religious leaders.

Goli, who is much younger, has the following to say about Khadijeh,

...My best role-model is the Holy Prophet's wife, Khadijeh...she has done what I feel like doing. Like inspiring people, not saying that I want to do this big great thing...but help people, support people in what they are doing...

Azadeh, who has many years of working on women's issues, insists that:

...in Islam, for women, there is a right that she study, work, very many social rights...Now (after the fall of the Taliban), I am happy that women again can regain their rights...but within a framework...because freedom of women had become a lot, freedom in different ways, if that freedom can be within the framework of Islam, and if it again exceeds that framework, I think, that tragedy will repeat itself.

In the above statement, she also indicates that inspite of all the changes which have taken place now in Afghanistan, women will still have to be careful and not 'exceed' the gender expectations of more traditional Islamic groups/perceptions in society.

A couple of the interviewees have referred to Afghans converting to Christianity during conflict and displacement, as a reaction to Islamic extremism and the efforts of Christian missionaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most came to these countries under the aegis of NGOs.

While many of the women I have interviewed wear some form of *hejab* in public because of their work or for other reasons, none wears a full *hejab* or is very extreme about it. Rahimeh is amongst those who consciously want to wear a small veil even during the Communist period.

...most families did not want their daughters to come out with a lot of make up...and many of my classmates said (laughing) "we do not want our parents to see you, because then they will want us to be like that"...for me it was my own choice.

My youngest interviewee, Goli (who speaks English fluently and aspires to study in the West), mentions why she has consciously decided to wear a relatively full hair scarf as a result of a spiritual experience and inspite of her parent's opposition. She refers to the misunderstandings wearing a *hejab* can cause, even with her own parents. Her mother also wears the looser shawl over her hair and shoulders when going out but that is seen as different from what Goli does. She continues to fully cover her hair now that she is back in Afghanistan and working for the international community. In a 2002 photo with Mohammad Ali, the UN special ambassador for peace, she also has a scarf.

...No, it is not personal, I can share it...but to a person who can understand me, because some people think I am one of the extremists...but...it is just something, my inner person wanted me to do...it is my soul's choice...I had

some WONDERFUL dreams...so when I got up, I prayed and I felt very comfortable, so then I decided that I needed something that would always remind me of that...so I found my scarf to remind me...my mother thought I would only wear it at home, and pray with it...she was shocked, like 'what is wrong with you'...sometimes she thought that some people...kind of influenced me and even my dad up to now thinks that I am influenced by some people...my mother starts talking to me like...'you are a good person, what is required is the goodness of the person, not that you are covered'...I do not tell her of course that she is wrong, I respect her a lot...

This is also an example of the different connotations of *hejab* – one more traditional and one out of personal choice – and then there is a big difference between both of these and state enforced institutionalized *hejab* of fundamentalist regimes.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate some of the various complex, interlinked and diverse influential factors in the lives of the interviewees including their gendered collective identities, in times of conflict and displacement. I hope to have shown how these have changed over time, and been experienced by various women differently. Obviously, the ideo-political changes in Afghanistan as well as the experience of being a refugee have also altered the dynamics of these various identities and their significance for Afghan women.

The experiences and perceptions are all varied but nevertheless demonstrate the intensity of the lives of Afghan women in the past over twenty years of conflict and displacement, as well as the strength of their response – and that is what they share as Afghan women inspite of their many other challenges and differences.

The analysis indicates that the interviewees – within a continuum - have constantly been not only 'bargaining with patriarchy' (Kandiyoti, 1997) but also hegemonic nationalism, ethnicization as well as religious dogmatism, trying to find a middle way which is defined by themselves (though mindful of other powerful groups) and respectful of women and the communities they come from. Based on their personal as well as collective experiences of various forms of extreme ideologies and practices, they largely seek moderation and harmony in terms of social processes. The realization of such a situation is itself indeed a very radical vision considering the realities of

Afghanistan's recent history. They are tired of definitions imposed upon them by Afghan or non-Afghan men (and a small group of associated women), and even more so, those men who have been responsible for the war, the destruction and injustice, as well as the displacement of millions of Afghans.

The interviewees are all clearly cognizant of the impacts of the changes in Afghanistan and upon refugee women and all Afghans. Their aspirations are for all Afghans though, in addition, they have special concerns for Afghan girls and women, as well as their own ethnic and religious groups.

The analysis also shows that while most of the interviewees believe in Islam at the personal and collective level, and have also experienced and rejected Islamic extremism, Islam and the Islamic veil are not all-consuming issues for them, either in terms of their concerns, nor their struggles. They realize that its manifestation depends on many other factors, including community, local, regional and international power relations and again, in this too, to various degrees, they seek tolerance, sincerity and wisdom.

Overall, most of the interviewees are path breakers in their families and communities, in different ways. Their experience of life in Afghanistan and in Pakistan has enriched their exposure to new situations and enhanced their coping mechanisms. For many, it has indeed meant an improved status in their position with their families and communities – at a great cost. However, this applies more to areas such as education and work, rather than greater personal freedoms. And it does not apply to many other, less privileged Afghan women who continue to struggle for daily survival and are denied even their basic rights.

Also, there have been various pull and push factors working at the same time, especially as a result of conflict and displacement, in the dynamics of social constructions in Afghanistan, in particular for women. For example, while because of their increased roles as breadwinners in Pakistan, their position has improved, the pressure of Islamic political parties on women, restricted their mobility and scope of action. Though far from being static, Afghan women's position continues to be 'monitored' by their families and the political system in which they live. Nevertheless,

many Afghan women, especially educated women with greater cultural capital, have through their own 'agency' made the best possible use of their various resources and been creative in accessing new ones in order to redefine what it means to be an Afghan woman. As some of the interviewees have now returned to Afghanistan and are in positions of influence, they will hopefully influence the gendered developments of the country.

Being a woman of any country or a female member of an ethnic and religious collectivity, in this case in Afghanistan, changes its meaning over time. It is in these spaces of change that transformations happen, sometimes subtle, sometimes more radical. Stereotypical and static representations of women are not able to capture such changes and are therefore, not supportive of women's struggles in such contexts in a sustainable and indigenous manner.

Goli's quote on ethnicity is a reflection of the more inclusive and diverse possibilities which exist for Afghans and Afghan women of different groups in the younger generation of refugee women. These have no doubt been influenced by the harsh experiences of war and displacement and are positive changes which will hopefully be carried back into Afghanistan:

...my parents never make me feel like, I think I am both Pashtu speaking and Farsi speaking, both, I feel I am just Afghan, I am not a Pashtu speaker or Farsi speaker, they (parents) always made me feel I am just Afghan, both my parents...(talking about her experience at school)...No, most of them (classmates) haven't realized I was Pashtu and Farsi speaking because I speak both languages and sometimes they ask me "Where did you learn Pashtu from" and my mother is actually Pashtu-speaking so I tell them that I am mixed, my father is Farsi speaker, so I know Farsi from my father's side and Pashtun from my mother's side...

The experiences and impact of formal education – always a controversial and sensitive issue in Afghanistan - upon their lives as women of Afghanistan, their particular national, ethnic and religious groups, will be further analyzed in the next chapter. It is through education that many have and will continue to be able to further develop their skills and challenge societal inequalities. For the interviewees, education has played a central facilitating role in their work and activism in Afghanistan and Pakistan, allowing them to observe and analyze their own experiences and that of their various

communities with the lenses of the small but important group of Afghan women they represent.



## **Chapter Ten - Educated Afghan Refugee Women: Education in Peace, Conflict and Displacement**

### **1. Introduction**

In the previous chapter, the experiences and views of the interviewees were outlined on war and displacement, as well as their nationality, ethnic and religious identities. One of the reasons the women interviewed are in a better position to articulate their experiences and views is their common experience of formal education. While by no means totally positive or uniform, nevertheless, their experience of education has provided them with new opportunities and skills to analyze and reflect upon their experiences and express the aspirations they have for themselves, their families and communities.

Their gendered experiences of formal education have been shaped by the war, ideological changes in Afghanistan and displacement. It has also been influenced by their collective identities, ethnic and religious backgrounds, class, access to urban areas and other factors. While education has influenced their decision-making and coping capacities, it has also exposed them to the intense politicization of education and especially female education in Afghanistan. Education is a critical and important, as well as sensitive and controversial, issue in all societies for reasons outlined in Chapter Seven. It is even more so in the case of Afghanistan, where it began as a top to bottom process with resistance from conservative forces and has been manipulated by groups with different ideologies (Pourzand, 1999, 1996).

The more widespread formal education becomes, generally the more accepted it is amongst the population. However, in the case of Afghanistan, where still only 12% (UNICEF, 2002) of women are literate, it continues to be basic access which is at stake. In view of the fact that most of the interviewees are the first or second generation of women in their families – and some even in their larger communities - to have access to formal education, their experiences are historical. This makes them pathbreakers but also amongst the more privileged minority of educated Afghan women. It is, therefore, important to understand why they were amongst the first or

second generation of formally educated women and the dynamics and challenges involved.

In this chapter, I will attempt to analyze the interviewees' experiences of education in Afghanistan and Pakistan as refugees. Experiences related to family, community and ideo-political issues will also be shared.<sup>1</sup> It is indeed such experiences which have contributed to the role of Afghan women at home, in their communities, as well as at the national and international level, in support of peace and human rights.

There are also limits on what education can change for women, on its own, and these too will hopefully become apparent. The inspiration, motivation and commitment of many of the educated Afghan refugee women I have spoken to comes from the awareness that the majority of their sisters (and brothers) are less privileged and that something must be done, collectively, to benefit all. International aid has also been important for Afghans and Afghan women, as refugees in Pakistan, and this issue will be reflected upon in this chapter as well.

## **2. Girls, Education and the Family**

### **2.1 Generational Issues of Women's Education**

While many of the interviewees are the first or second generation of formally educated women in their families, quite a few of them had mothers who had learned to read and write at home, with home-based teaching, and especially through religious education. Some of the interviewees mention, in fact, how well their mothers read or wrote, and how much they knew about various issues, without having gone to formal schools. There are also those interviewees whose mothers though illiterate were still very smart and knowledgeable and have been an inspiration for their daughters and others.

Parvaneh, who is Pashtun and initially lived in her village, mentions how even 70-80 years ago, women in her family had access to home education. This was, no doubt, an exception.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the section on women's work and activism has had to be deleted due to limited space.

...I am not exaggerating, we have no uneducated persons because our mothers had education, 70-80 years ago...yes, they studied the Holy Koran...

She refers to one of her father's cousins, Hafiza, who was a scholarly woman and had completed University and taught at a girls' school a generation before Parvaneh. It might be that as a Pashtun of an elite family, she had access to formal education earlier than most other women. The role of religious education in the past, when formal education was not available for girls/women is also interesting. It seems in the pre-*Mujahidin* and Taliban days, a greater number of educated and elite families respected what mosques and religious people had to share and teach, as they were amongst the small educated group in society and not as politicized as they were to become later.

Khaledeh, who is half-Pashtun and half-Tajik mentions:

And my father again told me that my paternal aunt was the first woman who in Amanullah Khan's time went to school, she was amongst the women who were sent to Turkey for higher education...Yes, you understand in those times they did not want girls to go out especially during the Amani period, they took off their face cover, they did not want to wear the *chadori* (veil), they wore clothes which they wore when they went abroad in Afghanistan, there was a lot of opposition, my grandfather because he was knowledgeable, he stopped all opposition and said when my son studies, my daughter also has to study because, my father said...that Afghanistan will not stay this way, it is moving forward, new things will come, people are making inventions, inventions will come here, therefore it is a sin if I do not send my daughter or son to school...

Her grandfather, a reform-minded person, supported the King's vision of a 'modern' Afghanistan and was therefore willing to defend his position and send his daughter abroad (so she could contribute to a 'modern' Afghanistan as a Afghan 'citizen'), as well as allow her to dress less conservatively. The word 'sin' is used above which is a reference to a religious belief that encouraging or/and striving for education – including for girls - is the duty of a good Moslem. Unfortunately, this understanding is not shared by all Moslems nor is it the common image of Islam in the non-Moslem world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There are many Islamic references on the importance of education/knowledge including 'Go even to China if it is in search of knowledge' and 'Search knowledge from cradle to the grave' or 'I am forever grateful to the person who has taught me even one single word' which many of us have learned over the years.

The link made by Khaledeh's father between 'new inventions' (science and technology) and the need for more educated men and women is also apparent. In Khaledeh's family, on her maternal side (who were Tajiks), the situation was quite different, a further indication of the heterogeneity of Afghan society and even within one family. 'New' educated Afghan men and women were needed for a 'new' Afghanistan. Education was valued largely for this reason rather than the role it could play in addressing, for example, deeper inequalities in society.

...Yes, my mother was from the Khojeh family, Khojeh Abdollah Ansari<sup>3</sup>, you know them? (Niloufar: Yes, they are the family of the famous religious scholar). They were a conservative/dogmatic (*motasseb*) family, during their time, those times my maternal grandfather lived in Mazar Sharif and they did not send their daughter to school BUT they got a teacher for them and they studied at home, my mother was educated, always, she helped her children in their studies. My mother was working with the management of the Afghanistan National Airlines until 1982...

Nejla, who is Seyed, shares another experience about the education of women in her family. Her reference to the role of newspapers in improving literacy of women in the family is interesting. This was one of the ways women who stayed mostly at home could have access to reading material and information about the outside world.

...my aunts who have grandchildren my age, were educated at home, they brought newspapers home, and had female mosque schools at home. It existed in Kabul in the old times, someone called *Khalifeh*, we have been told by our elders. *Khalifeh*, teenage girls went to her and they learned the Koran, the family supported them, then books and papers were given to them. Though they had no formal education, my mother was lucky to have had formal education, but they can read everything, literature, literacy, numbers, they can write and read.

Davudi, who is Uzbek, mentions how women in her family received traditional education, which also included learning mystical Farsi poetry.

...In Kabul, since my mother was a bit educated, educated at home, she had not gone to school but she could read the news, she could read the Koran, four

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<sup>3</sup> Abdollah Ansari is a well-known Islamic scholar who lived in Herat, Western Afghanistan, and was Farsi-speaking. He lived around 800 years ago and is also 'claimed' by Iranians.

books, Khajeh Hafez, Beedel,<sup>4</sup> in Andkhoy (Northern Afghanistan) she had learned this...girls got together in one home, they got a woman to teach them, each Thursday they gave her some money, they began with the Holy Koran, she is called the *Majomal* of the house...it is Turkish but Afghans use it a lot too. It was a woman who teaches Koran and literacy...'

Haedeh and Ziba, from different ethnic and religious groups, Tajik-Sunni and Hazara-Shiite, shared poignant experiences of their illiterate mothers.

No (sigh), my mother was illiterate. But she was a very strong supporter of education and she was one of the very talented people who when we studied in school, when we read wrong, our illiterate mother would understand that we were reading wrong...She was SO, SO much in support of education, no one was as effective as our mother... (Haedeh).

And my mother, unfortunately not educated but, Niloufar *Jan*, I do not know, in relation to education, reading and writing is part of education/literacy (*savad*) in my opinion but there is other educations (*savad*), experience and life is *savad*, life is experience, experience is life and my mother has *savad* of life (Ziba).

Ziba's comments about her mother are indeed a reflection of the importance of other forms of women's knowledge, often underestimated and overlooked.

It is illuminating how women's education was appreciated, especially when the women concerned also had other skills deemed necessary for women. For many Afghans, this continues to be important and a matter of pride.

She was a teacher...And in addition, she was a skilled tailor. In addition, our mothers, besides education, and our family's girls, do the best sewing, housework, upbringing of children... (Parvaneh).

## 2.2 Family, Parents and Education

Almost all of my interviewees had access to formal education because of their parents' support. In most cases, it is in fact their mothers who encouraged them to go to school,

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<sup>4</sup> Hafez is one of the most popular Farsi-speaking mystical poets who lived in Shiraz in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Beedel is another mystical poet who lived later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Both have highly elaborate, symbolic and complex spiritual styles of writing.

sometimes inspite of resistance from their fathers and/or other relatives and with quite heroic efforts and self-sacrifice. In their mother's efforts, one can so clearly sense the urgency and 'agency' of women even under the most traditional and confining of situations. Saffron's mother had the courage of registering her at school secretly since she knew her husband would never agree unless faced with a *defacto* situation. Rehaneh, who is Tajik-Sunni, for example, mentions:

...my grandfather, I had given my exam and I came and said...I am going to first grade and he said, you will ruin a world, he was upset instead of being happy, then my mother complained to my father saying that my daughter came with such excitement to tell her grandfather (about school) and he disappointed/hurt her...(The grandfather said) your mother has put you at school, God prevent, your character will be bad, well, that is for you the men from the past...<sup>5</sup>

Or Parto, who is Pashtun-Sunni, says:

...But my mother had studied in the city and that affected her, and she forced my father and said that his children should study, when we were born, this is in the village...When my (older) sisters had to go to school, they faced some problems in the region.

Parto's experience indicates the influence of urban life also on rural areas through the exchanges which existed and the challenges faced by educated girls in more traditional Pashtun rural areas of Afghanistan about 30 years ago. This resistance has decreased but not disappeared over the years.

Khaledeh too seems to have had a remarkable mother,

...until her death, one week before her death, she taped a cassette for us "children, if you want to progress, if you want to serve your country...you must study, books should be your friend in life...instead of a bag, hold a book, put money in a book...never be far from books, the best friend in life is a book"...

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<sup>5</sup> Further down in the interview she mentions how she was able to read the Koran for the same grandfather as he was dying and how her mother then told the grandfather "You see what you said and now my daughter is praying for you".

Sometimes, the atmosphere at home, including domestic violence, early death of mothers, remarriage and polygamy had a negative impact upon their ability to study. Banafsheh shares her own experiences, as well as her mother's wishes:

...Always when I came from school, close to our house I heard my mother's cries...I was very lazy at school and did not like to study. At home, my uncle asked me about my studies. I think I wanted to take revenge from my uncle through not studying. But my mother always told me that the reason she did not want to return to Paktia is for us to go to school and that our lives should not be like her life, that we should have our own life. Gradually, after grade 4/5 I grew to like school...

Sharareh felt somewhat the same with a father who was a womanizer and a mother who died in childbirth. He wanted all his children to be educated but did not provide a suitable family environment for them to study in. Therefore, it was really her own determination which made it possible for her to continue studying and go on to university.

Rehaneh also mentions how upon losing her mother at the young age of 13, her life was never the same again and while her mother had wanted her to receive higher education, with her death, it was no longer possible for her. Without someone as strong as her mother to defend her, her education faltered. Her stepmother did not care as much as her own mother, nor did her father. As women often without formal education, these mothers wanted their daughters to have what they had not had themselves. Having suffered themselves from gender inequalities and/or illiteracy, they wanted more and better for their daughters.

Katayun shares the excitement her mother felt when her first-born was going to school for the first time, as well as her mother's high ambitions for her. This occurred about 40 years ago.

...my mother supported me – she said that she had not studied because her mother had not been there so she wanted me to study, especially as I was her first child. During my first day of school, she did not want to leave school, she was so excited that her first daughter was studying...She even told me, I dream that you will become a big politician...when I went to grade 6, my mother was so happy, she distributed sweets and told everyone my daughter is going to grade 6 and has finished primary school...

Quite a few of the interviewees also mention that it was their father who supported their education and in a few cases, it was more the father than the mother. A number of these fathers were educated themselves and many were Government employees, civil servants. Their fathers were amongst the minority of formally educated men with relatively progressive attitudes. Fathers, at times, faced resistance from their relatives and as Ghamar mentions, relatives would indirectly talk about the negative aspects of female education to them (if they did not dare mention it directly) with the intention of '*be devar megoftan keh dar beshnovad*' or telling the wall so the door listens. Or as Parto, a Pashtun, mentions:

My father, though he lived in a village, he proceeded with a village and tribal life, he was open and did not really oppose it (education)...My father, in terms of tribe, was the elder of the tribe and all that he did was observed by the people, he was the leader of the tribe and they did not expect him to do things like sending his girls to school. It was not good. They were suspicious of sending daughters to school... my father had to rent a house in Kabul. During our life...we moved from the village to an urban area.

Or elsewhere, Parto continues:

...my father accepted that primary education is enough, especially for his daughters. Then when primary was completed...again my mother tried to convince him...my paternal uncle...forced my father to allow post-primary education...he put conditions...his daughters are young and they have to study with boys, then he had pressure also from the people of his region...they said what are their relations in the city like, have the girls...forgotten themselves because during those times people wore western clothes...such pressures existed.

Fortunately, in spite of this opposition, many fathers persevered in encouraging their daughters (as well as sons) to study, setting the pace for the future.

The opposition to girls' education especially amongst tribal Pashtuns is referred to above and how it evoked 'suspicion' and was 'not good' – the concern with being with boys, 'wrong' attire and in general, 'immorality'. Yet, it is also reflection of how some Pashtun men (including tribal leaders) were more progressive and willing to take major steps to ensure their daughter's education – such as move their families to the capital, Kabul. Parvaneh has had a similar experience. Their fathers represented a minority, though a growing and important one. At the same time, in the above quote,



the continuing role of the mother of the family and in this case, another uncle, is also reflected. It sounds as if an alliance was forged by her mother and paternal uncle to convince her father.

Azadeh, who is Tajik, and studied a generation before Parto in Northern Afghanistan, relates the following from about 40 years ago.

My father, very much (he supported education). He worked himself but yes, especially he gave me the best chances, he told me that wherever you will go in the world to study, I am willing..." and later when she talks about her university results being printed in the paper, she says "when his colleagues told him that your daughter has been accepted to University, congratulations, my father became very happy, emotional and he told me "will you go and study" and I asked "why" and he said "Well, go, you have become successful, it is *kheir* (good)"and he gave me permission.

Her father's willingness to allow his teenage daughter to go to the capital in order to continue her education is indeed impressive considering the times we are talking about. *Kheir* has a religious connotation, signifying that what has happened is blessed and will have good results.

Sometimes, such as the case with Katayun, their fathers had also faced resistance from their own father in pursuing higher education abroad as young men. Afghan men, like women, though in different ways and to different degrees, face considerable family pressure.

Frequently, the parents agreed on their daughter's education. In the case of Ziba, they encouraged her to study as quickly as possible before puberty because after that they were not sure they could resist the opposition of the extended family. Puberty has often been seen as the crossing-line after which girls have to become much more restricted and are at greater danger of 'moral corruption' or sexual abuse in many traditional Moslem communities. Puberty is also the age at which girls are allowed to get married in some of the same communities.

Many of the interviewees use the word '*rowshan*' or '*rowshanfekr*' to describe their parents or families. This literally means 'clear' or 'bright' and is closer to open-minded individuals. These are important terms for many Afghans in distinguishing

between progressive minded people and others.<sup>6</sup> Often those who respect women's rights are referred to in these terms.

Some interviewees also mention the role of other relatives or influential neighbours in their education as a positive factor. For Davudi, who was Uzbek, it was a neighbour who was from a prominent Pashtun family. This is in line with the older and traditional patronage system which was prevalent in Afghanistan.

...when we came to Kabul, we had a neighbour, Nasrollah Khan, they are now in America, they were Mohammadzai...they told my mother, I will take her to school, that is how I went to school, she (his daughter, Aleyeh) registered me...she was a teacher at the school herself...

Many of the interviewees went past high school and most were encouraged by their parents to do so. In most cases, they were the first generation of university educated women in their family and sometimes even in their ethnic or parochial community. However, sometimes there were disagreements about the area of study, with parents thinking one field was not suitable for girls, and another was better. Sometimes, the interviewees succumbed to the wishes of their parents, and in other cases, such as that of Banafsheh, were temporarily discouraged.

Medicine and education were definitely amongst the less controversial areas of higher education for girls. This is also related to the fact that there were more female role models in these two professions than in others.

...I liked law a lot but my father did not like it and said I would be nothing...I went for a while but they (my parents) forced me to stop and wanted me to study medicine. I disliked medicine...

Haedeh had the same experience but the opposition was not as fierce:

...I wanted to study social sciences, they (my family) were against it, my father wanted me to become a doctor, but I was never interested, because I always read books and wanted to work with publications – of course, their opposition

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<sup>6</sup> In Iran this term is used more exclusively to mean the intelligentsia, the top educated elite of society who are professors or writers, rather than open-minded families or people in general and in the beginning of my work, this resulted in some misunderstanding.

was not very serious. They saw I have great interest in my field and their pressure was reduced.

Some like Samira studied what they wanted – medicine. However, even in her case, the story did not end there. Samira wanted to become a surgeon as that was not so common for women those years – early 1990s – and she wanted to be a path-breaker. Unfortunately, this aspect of her dreams has not come true. Somewhere else in the interview she shares with me how she still dreams of becoming a surgeon, though she has a very good position with an international organisation and probably earns much more than surgeons in Afghanistan.

...a very experienced doctor told me – don't do this (go for surgery), you are making a mistake – become an eye doctor, your future is not in surgery...The more they told me I should not go because I was a woman, the more I was aroused to do so (Samira).

Sharareh's father did not allow her to go abroad for her higher education:

...my father found out and said...it is not good for a girl to go abroad to study by herself, if it is a boy, it is okay, it is not a problem but for girls, we do not permit them to go abroad to study...

This was not always the case and, fortunately, some fathers did permit their daughters to go abroad on scholarships. During the Communist period, quite a few went to the former Soviet Union including some women I interviewed for my MA dissertation in 1996.

Some of the interviewees were allowed only to go to school but not to university because that seemed 'too much' or it meant going to another city and their father did not agree with that. As Davudi mentions, many were worried that if their daughter went to University, she would become '*very bee goft*' or disobedient.

### **2.3 Motivating Factors of Education**

Parents were motivated to support their daughter's formal education for various reasons including for her to serve a 'modern' Afghanistan. Other factors included the assertion of one's ethnic and religious group position. This is often shared by the

interviewee herself. They and/or their parents wanted to make sure that as members of their particular ethnic group, they were educated, and also to show others that they could do as well, if not better. This is particularly the case with the smaller ethnic minorities in Afghanistan, including the Uzbeks and Hazaras interviewed.

Davudi, an Uzbek, for example, mentions that as a child in Afghanistan before the war:

In grade 11, I said, I felt I have to show them that if I am a (*ethnic*) minority, I can be number one, let me see who can take away from me my first grade.

Nazanin, another Uzbek, was also interested in asserting her ethnic identity by studying her own language and literature at university, given the opportunity.

Some of the women from the two main ethnic groups – Pashtun and Tajik – also felt pride in their education. Though they came from the two largest ethnic groups, some still were the first women from their particular sub-group or tribe (in the case of the Pashtun women) or village (again, also mostly in the case of the Pashtun women) to attain formal education. Rehaneh, a Tajik, for example, attended the first school for girls in Baghlan in the early 1960s.

Another is the sentiment some of the interviewees, in particular some of the Tajik women, held regarding their ethnic group being amongst the more educated in Afghanistan and therefore, the more ‘open-minded’ and ‘progressive’<sup>7</sup>. This is in spite of the fact that they will say many more educational opportunities were provided to Pashtuns during the time of the Pashtun kings. Some of them also linked this greater level of education to the fact that some or many Pashtuns held a grudge against them and therefore, for example, did not challenge the pro-Pashtun policies of the Taliban. Obviously, there is a construction of ‘intellectual’ superiority/inferiority involved (vis a vis political superiority) that is stereotypical and essentialist.

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<sup>7</sup> Some non-Hazara interviewees mentioned how hard-working most Hazaras are. Consequently, there is an ethnicized division and construction of those who are intellectually ‘more effective’ and those who are physically ‘more effective’ which is stereotypical and discriminatory and is being challenged by more progressive Afghans. These constructions are also gendered, as in the case of Uzbek and Turkmen Afghan women who are acknowledged by other ethnic groups as well for being very hardworking especially as carpet weavers.

Yet other parents saw the benefits of their daughter's education more linked to their personal status as women in a patriarchal society and felt that AS GIRLS at least they should have education as a protective shield. As Ziba mentions, her father felt that:

Boys can do any work and it is no problem. Girls need to have an *emtiarz* (something extra) so at least to have studied.

The economic benefits of girls' education were other important considerations for parents. In Afghanistan before the war, if they were educated, they could have good government jobs, an office car picking them up and government food rations. In Pakistan, as refugees, they could work at an Afghan school or NGO and if they knew English and computer, perhaps even with the UN or international NGOs. As mentioned by some of the interviewees and other Afghan friends, it was them as educated Afghan women who were able to approach the UNHCR office in Pakistan and facilitate the resettlement process for the whole family.<sup>8</sup> As refugees, in Pakistan, Iran or elsewhere, many rural Afghans were exposed to working and educated women for the first time in their lives. Such interaction resulted in many of them valuing female education more than before. But, of course, it is most probably a combination of reasons which results in parents wanting their girls to be educated. Haleh, for example, mentions:

...they saw it as an issue of prestige, the more the level of education, the more respect for the person...

There are also contradictions in some of the families in terms of support for female education, on the one hand, and continued gender discriminating and abusive attitudes, on the other. Banafsheh, for example, refers to her own family and says that they were in favour of girls' education but that some of the men continued to use violence against women in the family. Also, Katayun refers to her father as a dictator, though he supported his daughters' education. Parto mentions how her father set conditions for their education in terms of living arrangements in Kabul, away from their village, behaviour, mobility and appearance. Other interviewees were not allowed to visit friends or go out with friends, and later in life had to agree to arranged marriages.

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<sup>8</sup> I was told by several Afghan female refugee applicants in Pakistan that one of the conditions for their resettlement in the West was that at least one member of the family know English.

## 2.4 'Agency' and Education

The interviewees' 'agency' played a major role in their educational success. A few mentioned how eager they were to go to school, for example, after a cousin had already begun going to school. They would either pretend they were going to school or cry and say they wanted to go to school until they were registered. This thirst for formal education was linked to its availability as well as political changes in Afghanistan which opened up formal schools for girls and universities for women. It is also linked to notions of progress with some of the interviewees mentioning how their parents thought they should be educated to contribute to their society and its progress, as mentioned earlier.

Quite a few of my interviewees as the first generation of educated women in their families were able to play a very positive role in the education of their other siblings, especially their sisters, later their daughters and often, also in the education of other females in their families. They became role-models and showed the way, of which they are proud. In the quote below, the spread of the Afghan diaspora is also evident with four sisters in four countries.

...and the girls under my control and I supported my other sisters, my first sister married before, I encouraged others a lot, I took them to school by force, if they did not want to, and said you have to study, this sister who is in Switzerland, she says I have reached this level because of you (*barekat e to*) and the sister who is in the Czech Republic, I supported her, and the one in Iran, a lot, I was in favour of them studying (Azadeh).

Davudi, who was the first Uzbek Afghan woman to graduate from University, became a role model for many other Uzbek girls, not only those in her family. This was also related to the fact that she was able to work and earn a salary as a result of her education.

The first Uzbek to have been graduated (small laugh), after me others were allowed, especially those who lived far away from the cities, sent their daughters to dormitories...after me others went and by coincidence most also went into my field (education) because I was also able to find a good job after graduating...

Some of my interviewees benefited from the education of their siblings and followed their way. Khaledeh, for example, mentions:

My sisters were all in school before me and when I was born, me too, I continued my education. While we studied, our father always gave us newspapers, magazines and books to read and use, in addition to our studies. My oldest sister studied mathematics in the Faculty of Science, she was a professor of math in one of the girls' schools in Kabul. Another sister is a paediatrician. Another finished Dari Literature and Language Faculty and in Kabul was professor of Dari and then came here to Pakistan. Another sister is doctor of medicine and lives in Quetta for the time being. And I am doctor of medicine.

The above section shows the importance of gender and other family related dynamics in the lives of the interviewees and their education, as well as the key role of many of their mothers, as well as some of the fathers, and the hard work and efforts of the women concerned themselves. These experiences took place in a particular historical moment in Afghanistan as well within specific class, ethnic and religious dynamics.

The memories of the interviewees and their education in Afghanistan occurred in a context when Afghanistan was not as influenced by or dependent upon international aid as it is today. There was assistance from other countries but it was related to 'development' efforts, 'enhancing mutual friendship' and co-ordinated by the Government rather than in the humanitarian form which has become prevalent in the past two decades of conflict, in the absence of a functioning central Government. National sovereignty was more evident in those pre-war days.

### **3. School Related Experiences**

Formal education in Afghanistan has been free and provided by the Government. In the past years, the UN and NGOs have encouraged communities and parents to contribute to the education of their children but it is all still non-profit. This will be changing now in Afghanistan, with a growing number of more educated and prosperous Afghans willing to pay for their children to receive better quality education. This was not the case when the interviewees were studying in Afghanistan. However, the location of the school did make a difference.. So, for example, one particular school was known to have students of the courtiers and another was located

in a poor and ethnic minority area. This is one of the ways class issues persisted through education. Sometimes, non-elite families, like Katayun's, tried very hard to get their daughters into schools in affluent parts of the city with better teachers and facilities.

The intention of this section is, however, to share and analyze some of the actual experiences of schooling of the interviewees as it has played an important role in their lives. It has affected their socialization process, including their gender socialization. For many of the interviewees, in fact almost all of the interviewees, school was the first 'public' space which they entered after the family home, their first experience of being away from their family, where they interacted with children and teachers who were unrelated and from different parts of the country, representing various ethnic and/or religious groups. It was often the first site in which they were exposed to ideas and reactions different from that of their family members.

School was also very important in terms of the influence teachers and friends had as role models and the shaping of their aspirations and visions for the future as individuals, as women, and as Afghans. It was also the location where they came into contact with various ideologies as the political situation in Afghanistan changed. Their schools were in fact part of broader Afghan society. In addition, school was the first site where some of them noted discrimination based on gender, ethnic and religious background, as well as becoming aware of class issues.

### **3.1 School and Teachers**

Most of the interviewees have very fond memories of their school days, saying those were the best days of their lives, even when they just sat on the floor, like Davudi.

Azadeh shared very fond memories of how good her school was in Kunduz (Northern Afghanistan) over 40 years ago. No doubt, this was an exception in Afghanistan, especially outside of Kabul.

...and the school we had was SUCH a good school, we had a principal who was German...any foreigner who came, they first came to our school...they



helped the office, build a laboratory, a library...in 10-11-12 believe me, our teachers, our English teacher was from America, American, our physics teacher was an Engineer...the level of the school was SO high...I was encouraged often, the best memories of mine, and the principal of our school...she facilitated a lot for us, field trips to historic places...with a lot of freedom, sports...

Many of them had one or two popular teachers (often women, but also men) who have played an important and positive role in their lives and friendships with other girls their own age. Regarding their female teachers, it is sometimes their character and knowledge which has impressed them and at other times, it is their appearance, both physical as well as in terms of fashion. This is also linked to the role the female teachers played in conveying a sense of the 'modern' women in comparison to most of the other women the students were in contact with in their own lives. This construct of 'modernity' was also related to the appearance of the teachers, for example, the fact that in Kabul many did not wear any form of scarf, went regularly to the hairdresser and dressed in the European style. They were thus role models of a changing society. Yet, not many seem to have addressed deeper social inequalities faced by women.

Davudi, in fact, refers to all these various aspects.

I was always the group leader and tried to imitate two people, Hamideh Jan (dear Hamideh), our principal, I think she is in Germany...we called her Hamideh *Jan e Shagh* because she walked so straight, she was never bended...Aghaleh Jan...she understood us...if we were sad...she did not discriminate...

And elsewhere,

...Maryam Haq, Zaher Shah's daughter (the King's daughter), she taught us, whenever she taught (laughing), she would go to the hairdresser...she came very well dressed, she encouraged women in their work and education, she was a good woman.

Or Ghamar:

...in tenth grade, our history (teacher) was very likeable...She was very kind to us, she treated us well...

### 3.2 Discrimination and School

A number of the interviewees experienced ethnic discrimination at school as well. Davudi, an Uzbek, mentions how she was discriminated against by some Pashtun teachers of the King's family. She did not like being mistaken for a Hazara – she wanted to be recognized as an Uzbek. This might be related to the fact that Hazaras were more discriminated against than the Uzbeks. Rahimeh, a Turkmen/Hazara/Shiite experienced discrimination at school but it was less than others from her ethnic group because of her affluence and academic success.

...unfortunately something which existed was the social humiliation of Hazaras, that was very much then but it did not affect me very much because in terms of economics I was well off, could compete with other and in terms of ability, I tried hard, and they could not say anything to me but to some extent, this humiliation did exist in society...

Rahimeh also mentions how most of the heroines they learned about at school were Pashtuns, rather than women of other Afghan ethnic groups.

Azadeh, who is Tajik, shares her experience in University in Kabul before the war when her Pashtu professor gave her a lower mark in Pashtu literature though she deserved a much higher grade. He seems to have been unhappy that a non-Pashtun received the best grade in Pashtu literature. What is interesting and encouraging is how her classmates, especially Pashtun classmates, stood up for her. They demanded that the Professor revert his decision. Another Hazara/Shiite interviewee, Ziba, shared the feelings of discrimination she felt when praying the Shiite way at school, deciding never to pray again at school and later at the office in which she worked in Pakistan.

As in the above case, some interviewees did experience ethnic discrimination while others did not. The smaller ethnic minorities such as the Uzbek and Hazara usually have experienced it more than the Tajik and Pashtun, but not necessarily. Davudi who is an Uzbek felt that she should not reveal her ethnicity on university application forms. Some friends said that they would try to elicit the principal's support on her behalf but did not succeed because 'the principal was from the king's family and was related to the government of the king, at that time, no matter what we tried, we were

still minorities'. She later also mentions how most of the students who were sent abroad were from the King's tribe – the Mohammadzai.

Also, on access to higher education, some of the interviewees felt that applicants without connections had a far lower chance of being accepted during the King's time in Afghanistan. This is also an indication of the way education has often reproduced unequal power relations. Katayun, for example, says:

...Poor people could not really enter (University). You had to be rich or have connections, with pressure...

Banafsheh, a Pashtun, who studied mostly in Kabul, mentions that:

...most students were Tajik and Pashtun. We had only one Hazara. In the books, it always said all ethnic groups are equal, no one is better than the other. No discussions took place in class about these issues. The Hazara was a close friend of mine. No one asked about ethnicity. Hazaras were identified by their looks/features and Pashtuns with their accents and that they had come recently...they left their own place (rural areas) because of the Communists (conflict)...

Since most of the education was in Farsi, especially in Kabul, some of the interviewees who came from Pashtun rural areas or spoke Pashtun at home had to try harder to do well in Farsi/Dari. The above quote also reflects the reality that there were far fewer Uzbeks and Hazaras going to school as compared to Pashtuns and Tajiks. It also shows the gap between government policies and statements and what actually happened in schools. The limited number of Uzbeks and/or Hazaras was also related to class issues. Especially Hazaras were generally very poor, working in exploitative, menial and low-paying jobs. This adversely affected their children's educational opportunities.

Rahimeh, a Hazara, however, was exposed to differential power relations later in her educational life. In her quote, the positive aspect of higher education in exposing young people to social realities is evident. This is one of the reasons many social movements begin or are strengthened by the participation of university student and why many regimes are always concerned about the politization of students.

...we did not feel the difference in our own family and maybe we thought everyone was like that...when I was small in primary school, I thought everyone was like me, because we were not very different from our classmates, in *lycee* (high-school) I had contact with a wider group, and saw that there are some differences and in university, I had more social contacts, I had more open perspective and realized that there are differences in society.

It is interesting that she has for many years now committed herself to serving her ethnic community – the Hazaras.

### 3.3 Gendered Morality and Appropriateness

In the case of most of the interviewees, though their lives were quite different from that of their mothers, they were still expected to adhere to many traditional values and gendered moral codes in their behavior. For example, being a good homemaker was encouraged, parallel to knowing mathematics and literature. Though before the war, girls did sometimes go to each other's homes – there was still strict family control on the mobility of young girls. Dating, for example, did not officially happen and was frowned upon – even before the religious forces gained political power in the 1980s and up to the present.

Most of the interviewees attended all girls' schools (at least at the secondary level). Universities, however, were mixed. Haedeh says,

...They were all women (our teachers), except in grade 12<sup>th</sup>, we had some male teachers. In primary school, we were mixed, until 6<sup>th</sup> grade. After that it was separate.

The issue of attire is one component of education and the gendering of education. Before the war began, even before the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was established in 1992, girls were obliged to wear a scarf to school but this scarf was mostly symbolic. The same gendered discipline did not apply to the teachers who were seen as past the 'dangerous' years of youth – at least in Kabul. In many other locations, teachers also dressed conservatively.

Black dress and socks was the uniform...Mini was fashionable, dress should not be above the knees, the socks and dress were black and a white, thin scarf.

We did not take the scarf off in class. Outside school, we had to be this way also. Otherwise we did not wear the scarf. But none of the teachers had the scarf (Katayun).

The father of Goli, who I know and would not consider a conservative Moslem, was insistent that she wear pants rather than a skirt<sup>9</sup> when going to primary school in Kabul in the 1990s. He thought skirts/socks were not appropriate for girls.

Nejla shares a similar experience:

...I remember there were two girls, from the people of Gardez, in our school, during the Communists, they wore pants. Everyday they (school authorities) stopped them and said why are you wearing pants. Finally, their father came and told the principle...he told her if my daughters want to study, this is how they will do it, otherwise they will stay at home...What was the necessity of this – I always ask this –why did we have to follow the colonial idea – we should be open – education is necessary – you can dress as you wish – there must be choice.

This indicates the gendered ideological importance attached to appearance, especially of women, and its manifestation in education institutes. Nejla also sees this focus on forcing girls and women to appear 'modern' as a colonial project, in this case Soviet colonialism.

As mentioned earlier, attire also was a class issue and poor children who were unable to dress as fashionably or in new clothes and shoes felt discriminated against and looked down upon. Banafsheh, for example, mentions how:

...Also one reason was that I did not have suitable clothes, students laughed...

Katayun wanted to look fashionable and appreciated her father's support in this regard:

...My mother sewed my school uniform before but when I went to high school, I wanted to sew it myself, because I wanted to look like the other girls at school. In the first year, my father gave me an expensive school bag, I always think of that, I was so happy that he got it for me in grade 7, I said always my father has got this for me...

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<sup>9</sup> Even educated and liberal Afghan women in Pakistan always wore pants – under a skirt and blouse – and a shawl, *dupatta* or scarf. Pants are very important as they cover women's legs.

### 3.4 Education in Peace and War

Older interviewees overall tend to have fonder memories of their educational years in times of peace in Afghanistan than younger ones. They lived in times of relative stability, wellbeing and had a sense of their country progressing: There was also the excitement of being the first or second generation of educated girls.

Some of the excitement of the older generation of interviewees is shared when they talk about being the 'first'. Azadeh, a Tajik, who was amongst the first girls to go to school in Kunduz in the '60s and then university, shares her joy and sense of achievement. The excitement of competing with others and the satisfaction of success is also evident in a number of the interviews.

When I was registered, it has just begun, this school...during Zahir Shah's period, the school began that year and it had two classes, first and second, I was in first grade and my sister was in grade two. .. And I completed. I was from the first round of the school. It is called Belquis school, the daughter of Zahir Shah was Belquis. During Daoud Khan's time, he did away with royal names and it was called *Lycee Neswan* (girls' school) and till today it has that name. ..I was amongst the first to graduate. In the end we had 12 graduates and I was the first one to go to University...I said I wanted to go but I did not know if I would go to University, they said try your chance, when I went, I was successful and they were all unsuccessful (with a smile)...

Or Davudi, an Uzbek, who studied around the same time onwards, regarding her university degree:

Because my field was education, in the area of home economics...I wanted to have something special, a profession, and in this field they needed teacher training...with a major in home economics...no one had yet been educated (NP: You were the first one?) Yes.

She too was the first University graduate of her ethnic group (Uzbek) and went to the Philippines for her Masters in 1976/77 – during the King's time. Home economics, however, was still a relatively 'safe' field of study for women.

The younger interviewees often express sadness, frustration and unhappiness about not having completed their education due to the war. For them, schooling in Afghanistan

is further linked to the war as it was as students going to school or university that they saw bombs coming and frightened people dispersing in all directions. Or, they heard and saw classmates participate in political activity on the various sides of the spectrum. As students, they were witness to their country being ripped apart with war and difference.

Most of the interviewees have done well at school and university. In spite of the bad experiences of some due to their financial situation or ethnic/religious minority status, or problems in the family, many also received positive feedback at school, which helped them develop their confidence, sometimes even in subjects not conventionally seen as 'women's fields'. Katayun, for example, shares the following:

...I remember in grade 4, our math teacher, asked me a geometry lesson, I got it so quickly, rose and repeated it, explained it. I liked it myself and also my teacher and she told all the students to clap for me.

In fact, Katayun has continued to excel in math, budgeting and accounting and through her excellent work has been able to sustain her family as well.

It is also interesting and perhaps astonishing in view of what happened later with girls' education in Afghanistan, especially under the Taliban, that:

...and one of my Algebra teachers told me you are very talented in science, you have to go to the University to study science, or engineering, or polytechnic but I was interested in literature, he asked me why, you should have followed that other degree...(Azadeh).

This is in contrast to Banafsheh who studied before and after the Communists took over power and remembers the gender stereotyping conveyed through schools, mostly by teachers.

All the messages were using girls' names when she was helping her mother at home and the boys help their fathers. For a long time, it was thought that women should only work at home, girls should/must help at home, must sew and if boys work at home, it is shameful...but the teachers themselves conveyed it. They would say girls must help at home...It was thought that if girls' studied, it was only to become teachers, that is what I thought during primary and junior level. When we grew up, we thought otherwise.

Obviously, from the above quote, Banafsheh's views regarding gender roles changed as a result of her out-of-school experiences and her own 'agency'. Nevertheless, it is still probable that having been educated helped her ponder about these issues and challenge what she had learned at school and at home.

On the same issue, in response to experiences of the gender roles conveyed through Afghan schools, Goli, who studied mostly in Pakistan, during the years of war in Afghanistan, responded:

Well what I just read, this is the first time I am being asked this question, and the immediate answer that comes to my mind is that in those books, women were told to be strong, to tell their husbands, fathers and brothers to go and fight for their country, and they are the ones who welcome their dead bodies and to be proud...that they sacrifice, that was the place for women.

Indeed, Afghanistan is not the first or last country in conflict that has witnessed gendered notions of men fighting for the motherland, while women encourage them from the sidelines. Such constructs are also conveyed through education systems. However, while these notions are important and influential, women's 'agency' often challenges these in different ways. While important, the education process is not all encompassing. It is mediated by many other factors including women's 'agency' which challenges the status quo.

Parto, who studied mostly during the Communist period, has a different perception on gender stereotypes at school:

Our books, I think were very good, we had women in history, their role was shown important, like men, therefore, we did not feel we were less than the boys in our class. If a child wanted to be a doctor, I wanted to be a pilot or engineer, therefore, we did not feel a difference...

As mentioned earlier, even educated girls were encouraged to be good at housework and traditional women's tasks such as sewing and cooking. This is reflected in Sharareh's experience as well:

...we had a history teacher, she had very good taste, she liked cooking...when it was close to *Eid* (festive holiday, usually religious), she would give us the



recipes of some things to make and say that you are young girls, you can make some of these at home, it will help economically and you will learn something.

Though varied and interlinked with other experiences of their lives, those of their years at school and university have been very important for the women I have interviewed. For some of the older women, the 'good times' they had at school or university seems a world away from the Afghanistan they were to experience later as a result of war and their own lives, as refugees in Pakistan. Nevertheless, it shaped their life in many, mostly positive, ways and set a standard for many of them to pursue later in life.

#### **4. Education and Regime Change**

Afghanistan's education system, never very strong, has been through several dramatic changes. Sometimes, it was the actual changes and at other times, the reaction to the changes or both that was dramatic. These were always gendered, as well as ethnicized and interlinked with political, ideological and religious social constructions.

In terms of education pedagogy, not much changed throughout these years under various regimes as the system was still largely based on the rote system of teaching and learning rather than critical thinking. This is indicated in a couple of the interview responses shared below. Within this overall rote system, there was considerable variation in terms of quality. Quality of education is determined by many factors, including class issues.

War and instability have adversely influenced the quality of education in Afghanistan. As refugees, the experiences of the interviewees were diverse, again influenced by class, as well as location. Some had access to better quality education than in the past, some to more or less the same, and others to poorer. No doubt, in addition to the whole debate of basic access to education and especially access for girls and women, the issue of quality and pedagogy is also very important and helps shape the outcome of education including in terms of women's ability to challenge social inequalities.

#### 4.1 During the Monarchy

There was always some degree of resistance to formal girls' education, especially in rural areas. Parvaneh, for example, experienced it as a young girl in a village in Logar where girls from all social classes in the village attended school during the King's reign (perhaps about 40 years ago). Her experience is reflective of a time in Afghan history where the influence of the clergy was being reduced – in line with state 'modernization' efforts:

...the *mullahs* came, we were all in school...so school released us...the *mullahs* arrived...they asked where is the girls' school, the teachers said we do not have one because they were scared...my father was not scared, he was a gendarmerie commander...my father was told you have all become atheists...my father said why have we become atheists...what has God said, has he not said that education is a duty for men and women...my father said do not shout or I will hit you...they (the *mullahs*) were frightened...they went back, they shouted *Allah Akbar* (God is great)...

There is also recognition by some that the old system (under the King's regime), though good in many ways, was based on traditional learning and the rote system. Banafsheh puts it well:

It was more peaceful. It was good from that perspective. But I was not satisfied with the method of education. From psychological perspective, no student was understood...

Or Parto,

Our books had a lot about morality, they were very good, now in the schools we have we see there is so much about war...But in our school, we read a poem about not hurting a fly who also procreates, it has life and life is sweet. That had such influence on me, even when a fly was under my feet, I tried not to hurt it...

Her quote shows a real shift from what existed in times of peace and the militarization permeated all aspects of Afghan life, including education, during the past two decades of conflict.

Nejla, however, believes that the old regime was not sensitive enough to the traditional views of a large segment of the population and that this was further exacerbated by the Communists. She is more religious herself than some of the other interviewees but still an overall moderate person.

...An idea from outside is implemented and if the authorities do not have so much power, patience and bravery and investment to convince people...if they are careless, just become educated, not saying why, no partnership, there will be opposition, it will be against culture. That is how it came to Afghanistan, even though in the beginning women went to school covered but after a while, all of a sudden, this was taken off, imagine for people who over-protect women, it is not something, in a male-dominated society, to change the attitude of people over night or in one year...

Her comments also show the link between education, gender and in this particular context, attire and *hejab*, very clearly. She was also hinting at what the international community should be very careful about in the years to come. Unfortunately, often, the international community either uses cultural relativist rationale to justify not taking stronger positions in support of women's rights and/or for political reasons does not firmly stand up for women and/or pursues certain objectives without the required contextual knowledge.

While many of the interviewees refer to education being free in Afghanistan in the past, it is only Katayun who indicates that even in the King's days, Afghanistan was receiving international and bilateral aid, though it was not as evident as it is today. Today almost all Afghan children know that much of what they receive is from the aid community. This is not very positive in terms of feeling independent and empowered as a people and country.

...It was also free, sometimes even free stationery was given to me. I did not know then, but it was from the UN. They gave us milk from a big holder. They said it was the help of the USA...(Katayun).

#### **4.2 During the Communist Times**

It is the younger generation who remember going to school in times of political upheaval and war. Ghamar, for example, remembers the early 1980s in Kabul:

It was very good, before in terms of discipline, studying, everything was systematic but later years, the situation of our homeland (*vatan*) became very bad and for that reason, for situation of the country, it was not good...It came, yes, I was in 8, 9 or 10<sup>th</sup> grade, on our way, or in school, rockets came and everyone was disturbed in their thoughts, sometimes when there were many rockets and the situation became bad, schools were closed...

Or Haedeh, who says:

...High school, I studied when the Communist Revolution began in Afghanistan and unfortunately these are bitter years of experience for me because schools were used for politicians, for example, during lessons, there was noise of drums. A room in our school had been fixed as the Friendship Room between Afghanistan and USSR...This resulted in many people turning to Party issues and as a result, schools began to differentiate between students. For example those who were not in the Party studied all night and those who were not even in class, in the exam, they got the same grade as those who worked day and night...Those were the years that many of our youth were killed...including one of my young uncles...In schools there was censorship...

In Haedeh's experience, one can sense how ideological differences gave rise to various tensions and power struggles amongst the students, resulting in bitterness and anger. She also mentions how In the Name of God (*Be Esme Allah e Rahman*) was deleted during these periods from books, which further mobilized many Afghans against the Communists. Katayun had mentioned that during the King's time, Pashtuns close to the court had better access to Universities, while Haedeh mentions how those close to the Communist Party had better access in her times. In both situations, there was discrimination which alienated people from the regimes. She also mentions that many of the teachers of Communism did not possess deep knowledge of the subject matter and were, therefore, not convincing, which is the case often also with religious teachers as has been mentioned by some of the interviewees. Consequently, in different ways, it is the imposition of the ideology as well as the lack of depth in its understanding which offends brighter students.

Parto who was also a pupil when the Communists came to power, shares the following:

Many changes...there were marches pro-Government, they took the small children out, to hold the flag, I remember I cried that I will get lost...Or read special Party papers...we all spoke very revolutionary things – we would say

they (the Communists) have come from somewhere else, they are supported by others... before, we would read a children's magazine...After, we...talked about politics...

Katayun has the following more positive comment to make about the changes in 1978, with the Communists taking over power,

...In 1978, with the Democratic Party victory, they prepared separate schools for boys and girls to attract those who had not gone beyond 8<sup>th</sup> for them to continue. Education was encouraged. My first daughter was in third grade, my second in first – the Government gave stipends to pupils to encourage families to send their children to school...education was possible for everyone, especially for poor children, they got scholarships abroad for the first time...They forced people to send their children to school, even those who worked, children who sold bananas...It had good and bad things...

Samira also has good memories of her years as a student during the Communist rule, in spite of the shadow of war:

...in terms of restrictions, it was the best years of my life, since firmly there was no talk of the *chador* (veil) or pants at all when we were students. We did not even think that it would come upon women of Kabul to have to wear *chadori*. We were very free in the university environment. During our time, there were many girls at university, since the boys were soldiers...

Davudi has the following to say regarding the same period:

...sometimes we had class conferences...mother's day, women's day during the Soviets, less about rights, more about what women have done, in other countries, how they have progressed, not so much about rights.

It is interesting how she is referring to the concern with women's participation in the public sector during the Soviet period but not so much with women's rights by which I believe Davudi means also women's status in the family domain as well as issues of choice.

Quite a number of the interviewees share experiences of being coerced to join the Communist Youth Groups, and most say that they resisted it. There was spying and informing going on at schools during this period.

...they (Communist Party) wanted me to join *Parcham* or *Khalq* Party, even in school there was a lot of pressure and in University they told me either you become member or... (Banafsheh).

Katayun, who had been unable to go to university after graduating from high school, went to the Human Sciences Academy after the Communists took over, with the support of her husband who was close to the regime.

...all the professors were Russian...The Russian had an Afghan translator and taught in Russian...I graduated from there and spoke Russian well.

Also, education became more overtly political. Banafsheh recalls how politics was added as a subject during the time of President Karmel. She also adds that while there was more focus on class issues, not much changed in terms of gender stereotypes. In addition, according to Banafsheh,

...Russian artists and Russian was added into schools...and one of the religious books was reduced...Then it was Lenin's name, Karmal's name. With Lenin's name, Lenin the Great, everyone had to rise out of respect...

In addition, those were the years when many school pupils became involved in political activities for the first time, both in support as well as against the Communist leaders.

...There were demonstrations in favour of Karmal in our school, windows broke, books were burned. Those who did not participate were hit by other girls...girls struggled against the Russians, Communists in favour of the *Mujahedin*. Many were arrested, tortured. City girls did this most. Some participated in 'terrorist' activities like putting bombs in exhibitions, bus stations (Banafsheh).

Fariba shares other problems which existed at the time. Not much has changed for most Afghans, unfortunately, in terms of access to electricity and sufficient heating.

...we had many problems, social, economic, our country was in very bad situation, the professors, many had left, we studied with very few professors...there was no electricity in Kabul, we sat under oil lamps and gave exams, and the cold winters of Kabul and lack of heating material...

### 4.3 During the Mujahidin and Taliban Times

After the fall of the Communists and their last leader, Dr. Najibullah in 1992, the *Mujahidin* took over the State in Afghanistan. They too attempted to change education. Banafsheh has some experiences to share on this period:

...The standard was very low...They did not use books of the Communist periods. Kabulites were unhappy about the books from Peshawar with the war messages such as a *mujahed* killed a Russian. It was violent, unlike the past. Boys and girls went to separate classes...more religious studies...First men taught these studies, then women came from Pakistan who knew these...Before *mujahedin*, they wore skirt/sock and short scarf. Afterwards, they had large *chadori* (veil) and had to have pants underneath...

The *mujahidin* brought with them from Pakistan militarized school books and an Islamization drive which entailed greater gendered restrictions.

The interviewees did not experience education under the Taliban since they banned girls' formal education but they all agree on their condemnation of this policy in the strongest possible form.

The linkage between security and female education also comes up in some of the interviews with parents having felt reluctant to send their daughters to school when there was war and the risk of abduction and rape.

The interviewees have experienced education under various regimes in Afghanistan, before moving to Pakistan, as well as war. Overall, during the King's period there was relative peace which they appreciate and stability in learning, though there was also much room for improvement. During the Communists, though there was the potential for more opportunities for the working classes, women and other undermined social groups, this was curtailed by the coercive nature of the state's policies and the resistance which developed from the very beginning. The *Mujahidin's* rule in Kabul from 1992 until the time of the Taliban takeover in 1996, was not as bad as the Taliban, but it definitely did begin some of the gender restrictions which were to be taken to the extreme by the Taliban.

## **5. Education for Afghan Refugees in Pakistan**

Some of the younger interviewees went to school in Pakistan, as mentioned earlier. They went to Afghan and/or Pakistani schools. Some of the same interviewees and some of the others went to university in Pakistan. And others were parents or siblings of younger refugees who went to school in Pakistan or taught at such schools and/or supported refugee education in various ways. For all of them, education of refugees, is a very important issue and close to their heart. This is also related to the expected role of the international community in the provision of education.

Many of the interviewees had to sacrifice their own ambitions and objectives of higher education because of the war and the move to Pakistan as refugees. Either their universities were closed in Afghanistan, or the Taliban came and girls were no longer allowed to go to school or university, or they had to work rather than study in order to make ends meet, or left Afghanistan for Pakistan. Some were able to make up the loss later in Pakistan and some even surpassed their own initial expectations but many more continued to be deprived of the right to education.

Nejla is one of those who was unable to complete her university education in Kabul but did so in Peshawar, Pakistan. One of the many differences about studying in Pakistan (as compared to Afghanistan) was that it was not free and you had fewer options.

...I went to University for two years (in Afghanistan) and studied agriculture and then because of the war, we came to Pakistan. In Pakistan, in private, I studied at the Religious University and one year course of accountancy in a private Pakistani colleague. Always, I have taken courses and tried to learn.

Ziba was unable to attend University in Pakistan but instead completed a physiotherapy course organized by the Sandy Gall Afghanistan Appeal. Such INGOs/NGO courses, in spite of their shortcomings, played an important role in the life of many Afghan women and their families over the years.

A few of the interviewees who received formal education as refugees also mention the importance of making sure Afghan children are educated even in the diaspora so that



there is a new generation who is educated for Afghanistan and who are able to contribute to its reconstruction. Educating girls, in particular, was also seen as a political challenge to the fundamentalists in Afghanistan consciously and/or unconsciously by many Afghans, including some of my interviewees. It was a form of resistance. Education in general was seen as a challenge to the militarization of society and the commanders and their '*kalashnikov*' culture. For many Afghans, it is an effort to save their historical and cultural heritage. It is also linked to challenging fundamentalist definitions of what it means to be a 'real' Afghan woman.

There is also the realisation amongst the interviewees that the international community supported Afghan refugee education, though the support was never sufficient to fulfil all the relevant needs. Therefore, while Afghans continued to be teachers and participated in the planning, in fact, non-Afghans continued to exert power over Afghan refugee education. This was of course also one of the complaints of many Afghans about the Communist period and the role of Soviet advisors, though the situation varies, as does the ideological context. More on this has been mentioned in Chapters Three and Four.

Below is a quote from Azadeh in response to what she thinks of NGO supported education for Afghans refugees and in particular, girls' education (based on an interview conducted in early 2002). It is clear that the NGO schools were able to at least partially fulfil the growing demand for education amongst Afghan refugees, especially poor refugees.

It is good, not bad, because in this circumstances of refugee life, without the NGOs, because the NGOs run schools, they get funds from all over, some private schools have also been built, I am very happy, otherwise the NGO/private school fees are very appropriate but for those who have very poor lives, they can not even pay that but for those with average life, because the Pakistani school fees are VERY high and the system is completely wrong and I denounce it and am proud that in Afghanistan, whatever existed, it was free, but here, if someone is rich, their children are educated, if poor and more than half of the people of Afghanistan are illiterate, but our Afghans inspite of these circumstances of war..., our uneducated are very interested in their children being educated and the schools built by NGOs are very good, useful for Afghans, our children, better than being without any fate, in the streets, they would be corrupted, there are schools in every street, and some schools have a system where they accept very poor people free.

The above raises a number of important and linked issues. While referring to the positive role of NGO schools, she also refers to private Afghan refugee schools that benefit from external support.

Haedeh was much more critical and angry when I spoke to her in 1998 about the role of the international community in general, as well as specifically on education.

The UN has been unable to pressure Pakistan to have laws for refugees – we do not know what rights we have if injustice is done, what law can we use? These things exist in other countries, this is another country, these are issues that the UN should have taken care of. That is why the UN has lost its value in Afghan society. I do not know how the people will treat the UN in the future. In education, the same, sometimes people were trained with the *jehadi*<sup>10</sup> books, maybe it was necessary but afterwards they should have changed these or in addition brought other books – for children especially. We have been here for 20 years, UN did not think of the youth who are brought up here are illiterate, it is the age of serving their country, UN could not get the branch of one university here, I saw the sign of Preston University here – the UN could at least do something like that for Afghans.<sup>11</sup> They would not have been stopped. In the West, our youth do not study either, because they do not have the right circumstances. It is a big gap of 20 years of war, our universities have not had graduates any more, no doctor, no lawyer, no teacher, no engineer, how will this be compensated for, it is without compensation in terms of Afghan society.

Some other interviewees also feel strongly about the '*jehadi*' (war-related) books and while appreciating the work of the UN and NGOs in general, criticize them for not replacing with these books sooner.

Parto has the following to say about UN/NGO gender and girls' education policies. The interview took place in 1998.

I think it is all impressed by politics, for example, the UN was not very successful, or did not try very hard to advance girls' education in Afghanistan somehow, or the NGOs had more difficulties, each for keeping their own work, did not try very hard. I am not very satisfied with the programmes now. If the donors brought pressure, gender focal points were hired, but they cannot change the policies of the NGOs...they might agree with women's progress,

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<sup>10</sup> This is reference to the University of Nebraska supported textbooks which were used extensively during the war years and used militarized language. The books were later changed and the war-related texts and photos replaced (Ekanayake,2000).

<sup>11</sup> The issue of supporting higher education has been contentious with the UN and NGOs who focus on primary education as a matter of policy.

but because of the political groups they work with, they have to be conservative. They have sewing and health programmes, *dai* (birth attendants) training that is not controversial at all. I do not know how effective this will be. I am very frightened that with such conservatism, now the literacy rate is very low – 4 or 5 percent, in the future, we will have no educated women. It is a big concern...especially the UN could bring more pressure or the donors who come from countries mostly who can pressure Afghan politics, they have the money, therefore the policies.

The above two women refer to important issues including the opinion held by many Afghans, especially Afghan women, that the international community should have exerted more pressure over Afghan and Pakistani politicians to ensure their rights were respected. They believe that this was not done in order to please the politicians, often very conservative and reactionary. Similarly, they both feel that the international community should have supported more education amongst Afghans in general, but in particular women and also higher education that can help the development of future leaders, including female leaders. They also criticize some of the education programmes which were supported for political and militarized reasons, rather than education. Afghans have had to pay a heavy price for the compromises that the international community made with conservative forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is a gendered concern as women have felt the links between ideo-political conservatism and the institutionalized gender discrimination with all their heart and soul.

### **5.1 Gendered Restrictions on Education as Refugees**

As mentioned in the historical chapter, the provision of girls' education in Pakistan has involved a struggle and in the beginning (in the 1980s), it was very difficult for female refugees to access schools, considering the stigmatization of female education by the *mujahidin*. Nejlá shares an experience which is relevant.

...Believe me, when I worked in Kachari Camp, I saw a girl...she was 8 or 9 and she was in the streets, I said, "child, why do you not go to school...there is a Commission school, you too, go and study." She said "if I wear the clothes of the Commission school, if I go to school, everyone in the street will call me *maktabi* (school-goer).

In this quote, the young girl indicates that she would feel insecure and would also be insulted by others if she were dressed like a pupil going to school in the camp.

For some, various concerns increased when they became refugees with the parents becoming even more worried about their children's safety but also their behaviour and therefore, stricter in terms of who they saw, where they went and how they were dressed. This is also related to the private/ public dichotomy with some men feeling that what they do in private is one thing, and what goes on in public is another. It is also related to a great concern for 'morality' and 'appropriate gendered behaviour' and 'issues of sexuality'. Many parents felt their daughters were in greater danger in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, as it was not 'their own' country.

Parto, who wanted to go to University as a refugee in Pakistan, faced pressure from her community which eventually influenced her family's decision. The pressure was because she was a young woman choosing a non-traditional field and because they felt she had to be 'protected' from Pakistani boys at University.

...I hoped very much to study engineering, I was successful, but when I wanted to study at University, I was the only girl on the list...people I did not know would phone our home in the evening to say that we saw your name on the list...you should not go, the Pakistani boys will bother you very much...you are an Afghan girl and the decision of my family changed that I must not go to University. Then I studied at the Faculty of Sciences but I did it without interest...

## **5.2 Education as a Refugee**

The younger generation who went to school in Pakistan experienced education from the perspective of a refugee which has been very different from those who experienced it in their own country. It was much more challenging and difficult for refugee families to make sure their children were educated in Pakistan with their many financial and other worries. Yet, it was a challenge that when overcome provided a sense of victory and hope in times of despair. Within a family of refugees, you often have many different educational experiences. Who have those who experienced education in rural Afghanistan, Kabul, abroad during times of peace as a visiting

student and then in Pakistan, as a refugee. These experiences have all been mediated by gender, class and ethnicity.

Nejla shares some of her negative education related experiences and concerns as a refugee in Pakistan:

...The curriculum is not correct, the teachers are not hired according to their experience...it is the ethnic issue, family of the principal who are hired...Some are very good, exceptional cases...the Islamic Party schools focused on religious issues...In grade 10, they did not study chemistry or biology...And the fees, it is a big change, in Afghanistan, it was compulsory and free...all schools try to teach English. It is colonialism...Children who go to Pakistani schools, learn nothing about their own country...

These concerns are shared by Haedeh:

...There are schools that children go to and study but these are commercial, each has their own programme, the teachers are not professionals – these have their problems but a youth can read but not more – in terms of science – they don't have a correct system of education. They are like home schools in Afghanistan...

Concerns about quality of education, the lack of scientific education, as well as the distancing from what is seen as Afghan culture are all concerns for the interviewees.

While many teachers at Afghan schools were not qualified, some remained very committed. Goli, for example, shared her experience of a male Afghan teacher at a refugee school encouraging his female students to take math seriously and another teacher telling his students,

...you should study until the moment you are going to die because you might need that, even if your flight is going abroad, that day, you should come and study, even on that very day, come and get something.

In contrast, some of the interviewees went to Pakistani schools, like Parto:

...our teachers, most of them knew little about what we do or want, no one understood...they were cooperative but not from a psychological perspective, to understand us, no one thought of it...but we have somewhat a common history, Kings who ruled in this region, therefore, it was not very different...

Parto clearly felt misunderstood by her Pakistani teachers and classmates, yet, as she was in the 'near abroad' and in a country with which Afghanistan shared partially a common history, it was also not as different as her own.

Referring to education in Afghanistan and the desire for education amongst Afghans is juxtapositioned against the education system in Pakistan and its elitism and other weaknesses to highlight the advantage of the Afghan system. This form of comparison also happens because Afghan refugees feel nostalgic about their own past. The role of sending children to school so that they are kept off the streets is also worth noting. Many Afghans were more concerned by the streets of Pakistan than those of Afghanistan because it is not their own country and they are living amongst 'strangers'. There was also concern with drug dealing, trafficking, prostitution, organ removal without consent and many other issues.

There was a difference between Islamabad and Peshawar, as well. Islamabad was seen as a more 'liberal' environment. Parto and Goli are amongst two of the interviewees who have expressed that it was easier for them to be mobile in Islamabad.

Islamabad was a bigger environment, girls went to college...their clothing was more free...I went to college by foot, without much bother...in Peshawar...I learned that going of women to certain offices is very difficult...

Many Afghan refugees were unable to send their children to school or only sent their boys. This latter case happened usually when a family was very poor and had to make choices and the male child was given priority. This gendered decision is also made by many poor Pakistani parents.

A small number of more prosperous Afghans, of various ethnic groups, sent their children to the Pakistani/Turkish school in Islamabad which is run by a Turkish foundation. In addition to other subjects, it teaches Turkish language and history. The portrait of Kemal Ataturk is evident on the walls of this school. Some Uzbek Afghan refugees liked this school because of the affinity between Turkish and Uzbeki and they certainly did not seem to mind its secular ideology.

Afghan/Turkish schools run by the same Foundation also exist in Afghanistan and therefore, many Afghans were already familiar with them.<sup>12</sup>

### 5.3 Afghan Refugees in Pakistani Schools

Some Afghan refugees chose to send their children to Pakistani public or private schools. This group of parents felt that if they were going to live in Pakistan for long, their child might as well obtain Pakistani education. They also felt that it provided higher quality education, as compared to refugee schools. However, there was a price to pay, as Katayun shares:

I wanted them to study and progress but I did not realize one thing then and that is forgetting your culture but I know that now, no matter how good that their education is, children will get their culture, no matter what I say in my home to them, still at school, with her classmates, they will get everything. One thing tortures me is that they have lost much of our culture. Even my older daughter who tries not to lose it, she has because she wants to be with her classmates, be like society. This tortures me and I wish that my children could grow up like in my own country. But that they all are so good at school, that they all write so well, my small daughter writes better than I, makes me feel very happy and proud. But only that they are losing their culture pains me.

Several important points are reflected in the above quote. One is, as mentioned earlier, the price many Afghan parents felt they were paying in terms of losing their 'own culture' whilst allowing their children to get 'better' education at private Pakistani schools. The issue of culture here is clearly linked to national/ ethnic identities. And of course, the important role of socialization and peer group influence at schools on children's behaviour and values. There is also the sense of nostalgia and loss regarding being away from one's own country. The pride expressed in her daughters' achievements further indicates the contradictory and mixed feelings many parents, especially refugee/immigrant parents feel about their children's achievements and yet, further alienation from what is perceived to be 'their own' culture.

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<sup>12</sup> The Afghan/Turkish school in Mazar Sharif continued to function as a boys' school even during the Taliban. It was only in late 2001 that Taliban wanted to close the school and the school had to make further concessions such as sending back its Turkish teachers and enforcing harsher dress codes.

Haleh felt somewhat similar about her children's education in Pakistan, when we spoke in 1999:

...gradually they lose their identity, their language...they learned Urdu very quickly, more than their mother tongue...sometimes in school, children had spelling "I am Pakistani" – when they told us that, it was our first tear after all these years...we told her (our daughter) - you are not Pakistani – learn to spell Afghanistan –a-f-g-h...she said, my teacher will be angry with me...our children have no good memories of their country and are ashamed of being Afghan, with what they see...

## **6. Education and the Future**

Afghan women, especially activist Afghan educated women, have played an enormous role in ensuring that the international community and their own leaders do not forget the pivotal role of girls' and female education in all these years of war and oppression. They have also often highlighted the importance of education in general, for boys and girls, men and women.

As female educators, many have also contributed to education policies, curriculum development and teacher training. They have at times done this with their progressive male Afghan colleagues and with the support of male-kin such as their husbands, fathers, brothers and/or sons. For others, it has been a constant challenge within their organization as well as in their own families. It is important to note that Afghan women with no or fewer education opportunities have also played an important role in highlighting the importance of education as mothers of school-aged children. The sacrifice many Afghan mothers have made for their children's education is truly praiseworthy.

Education as a refugee has been a completely new and different experience for all concerned Afghans. Nevertheless, no doubt, for Afghan girls and women it has been an even bigger challenge than for boys/men as well as an act of defiant hope. When asked about the future or what the interviewees wished for their daughters, for Afghanistan, all agreed around peace and education, though stated in different ways.



The interviewees' views were different in 1998/98 when Taliban was very much on the advance, as compared with 2002 when they had been overthrown. For example, Banafsheh, a Pashtun, was asked her opinion about the future in 1998 and said:

If the situation continues, I think, we can have no future. Under the *mujahidin*, people became disillusioned with education, all the leaders who fought called themselves Professor, Engineer...They think everyone who studies becomes like them, a murderer...

Or Haedeh, a Tajik, around the same time:

...when the girls are not educated – they are sisters, or will be mothers, if they are illiterate, I think most of the population are women, the war has taken many men, and the majority is illiterate. Politically, I see a very dark and unclear future, no hope, not even flickers of hope but based on faith, we saw God can go thousands of years in one day, for God it is not difficult, maybe peace will be brought to Afghanistan in a short period. But one good thing, about migration is that here more women have worked...

Parto, a Pashtun, also reflects some of the same concerns in 1998:

For the time being, there is no good perspective...even if peace should come to Afghanistan some time, we will have no one for its future. That always makes me very disconcerted. I remember when I was a teenage, our Pakistani neighbour said when peace comes, our engineers will come and rebuild your country and I wanted to cry, even then, I thought that why should we have no one ourselves and need to have someone from outside.

Davudi, an Uzbek, interviewed in 1990 said:

I think that the education that was 30 or 40 years ago, now it is further back because we have a generation of illiterate people, young girls who marry, are illiterate, the more educated a mother is, the more she can plan her family, for example, she can say what I will cook tonight, she can say which school her child can go to, everything begins from the family, if a woman is illiterate, the whole family goes towards illiteracy. I see a very dark future and am very sad.

All the Afghan refugee women interviewed were very concerned about the situation and especially the fact that Afghanistan was not having a new generation of well educated girls and boys, women and men, to replace and exceed those who had been educated in the past.

Saffron who was interviewed in 2002, has the following to say in response to what is most important for her, when she has children. As you will note, her expectations of education are very high and also linked to material well-being which is not surprising for someone who as a refugee has had to make ends meet at any cost, including working as a domestic worker in other people's homes. She is less directly concerned about Afghanistan, perhaps because she was moving to Canada.

The only thing that is important for me is education, they must have higher education, be free, have equal rights, education is very important...If you have education, you have a comfortable life (in English, she adds, this is the most important thing) good salary, you are peaceful, your life is guaranteed, in my opinion.

Or Ziba who was also interviewed in early 2002:

Yes, I have hope and worries. I have both these feelings in me. Hope because well something has happened and worries because there are other issues...Our problem has not been the *chadori* (veil) or makeup... The mentality of Afghan women is not so low to want life only for these issues. If instead of these things, basic issues were taken care of for women...

Elsewhere, she says the following which is more hopeful about education in Afghanistan:

Fortunately, these wars and migrations have increased the level of families' request for girls' education. Even in Kodkai camp, very poor people, there is effort for their daughter's education...

She does, however, warn that education should not once again become politicized in post-Taliban Afghanistan, otherwise, history will repeat itself and girls' education will once again be in trouble.

Azadeh who was interviewed in early 2002 said:

...Now I am happy that women again can regain their rights, to study, to work, but within a framework...Hamid Karzai (the President) is mature, skilled and very astute...people are very much in favour of him.

And later on the new generation of Afghan refugee girls:

Now they have more dreams...for example my daughter says that I want to be an astronaut...

Afghan girls and women have been fighting for their own survival and that of their families and communities as well as their rights as women in situations which often made it seem like they were reaching for the impossible – like stars in the sky. I hope the dreams of Afghanistan's future generation of women will be realized this time round based on the rich history and struggles of their grandmothers, mothers and sisters (as well as progressive Afghan men).

## **7. Conclusion**

Even educated Afghan refugee women who are more privileged than most of their other sisters have had to overcome many challenges in their lives, at the family level, in society and especially as a result of the war and displacement. However, education has at the same time definitely been one of the most important factors in their lives. By being witness and part of their families' experiences and debates on female education, they were witness to the challenges involved, as well as the possibilities for change.

Education opened up their eyes and perspectives to many issues, some not so good such as gender, ethnic and religious as well as ideo-political discrimination at school and others, very positive such as installing a thirst for greater knowledge and experience, and an aspiration for improving their social status as women. It also provided many of them with the opportunity to work outside of their homes, in Afghanistan and as refugees, support the education of their children, as well as contribute to their communities, in Afghanistan and in the diaspora. These experiences were all connected to their identities as Afghan women, as well as members of their various collectivities, as well as their class and other relational status in society – however, they were also linked to the 'agency' of their families (for example, their mothers) as well as their own.

The interviewees were all able through their own 'agency' and the support of family, neighbours and/or friends to push the boundaries of these gendered and other identities

and open up new horizons for themselves and others, as relevant to each of the phases of their lives and the context in which they were living. Yet, at the same time, there were limits to the boundaries they could push and they often did not even try to challenge certain aspects of their lives as Afghan women or did it very subtly, over time or only when there was really no other choice. Examples include challenging parental or spousal obedience, arranged marriages, restrictions on relationships outside of marriage, or other issues of sexuality, choosing one's career and location of study and/or work, wearing what was seen as 'appropriate' girls or women's attire, living on one's own away from one's family (except when there was really no family in the city concerned) or articulated secularism or atheism.

As a result of the war and displacement, these interviewees were able to reflect upon their own education history, as well as that of other Afghans, in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with a more critical and comparative perspective. They now know better what they do not want in education and indeed, what they would hope education is able to contribute to – for their children's sake and that of Afghanistan's future generation. They do not want an educational experience which discriminates based on nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender and/or class amongst other factors. They do not want an educational curriculum that installs militarization and hatred amongst its students, as well as religious dogma. They also do not want an education which either denies their Afghan history and culture, nor one that provides a one-sided perspective of that history and culture.

Parallel to the above, the interviewees overall want education which is inclusive, encourages peace and peace-building and installs a sense of equal Afghan citizenship amongst all regardless of gender, ethnicity and religion, amongst other dividing factors. They also hope it will contribute to nation-state building in view of Afghan history(ies) and culture(s). They also aspire for good quality education, education which ensures learning of skills required to rebuild their country and provide them with jobs. This includes the learning of the sciences, as well as a moderate and modest component of religious learning, since they are believers themselves and also do not want extremists to have excuses and undermine education once again. They also know very well that for 'real' education to take place, there needs to be peace, security, stability and absence of ideo-political coerciveness and pressure in society at large, as

well as policies and commitment at the highest level to respect gender as well as ethnic, religious and other rights of all Afghans. They also seek some form of affirmative action to provide education to the deprived majority of Afghans, especially Afghan girls.

International aid has played an important role in the lives of most Afghans. Most of the interviewees note this importance, while they have also been witness to the failures of the international community in ensuring the rights of Afghan women, including the right to education, are not denied. Some of the interviewees have been actively lobbying with the international community to ensure it focuses on the rights of Afghan women and refugee women. Meanwhile, many have not waited for the international community's assistance and have taken action on their own in support of their own daughters as well as other girls and women of Afghanistan.

Afghan educated women's gains from the 1920s to the 1970s have been greatly threatened by war and displacement. However, the interviewees and many other Afghan women have struggled with all their energy to control the damage of war and displacement, and push for positive change and greater opportunities for a new generation of Afghan girls (and boys). Theirs is one of the most remarkable histories (or rather, HERstories) of our times.

## Chapter Eleven - Discussion/Conclusion/Future Work: All Journeys End, New Journeys Begin

### 1. Introduction

Journeys have come up often and in different ways in this dissertation. Some have been personal and others collective. Internal and cross-border mobility and displacement, *muhajerat*, immigration, leaving, arriving and returning cut across the lives of the interviewees as well as mine, the researcher. These travels began before I met the interviewees and have continued in all our lives<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, journeys across time and space are an issue to which I return in this final chapter. My discussion is informed by the various methodological, contextual, theoretical and empirical parts of the dissertation and the links between them.

The issue of journeys is also linked to some of the similarities and differences between and amongst the interviewees and me. For example, we are all women from neighbouring countries, from Moslem families, have experienced Revolution, war and Islamic fundamentalism, are able to communicate in Farsi, are educated and have moved beyond our country of origin. Yet, there are also many differences between us based on the complexities of each country and community of origin, as well as our family backgrounds and individual resources, choices and decisions. It is this tension, dialectic relations and synergism between our similarities and differences that has driven my research, as I discuss in this chapter.

Journeys, similarities and differences – what do they have in common? I propose that together they constitute a tapestry<sup>2</sup> which is reflective of our lives and this dissertation. The interviewees all lived in Afghanistan before moving to Pakistan. The national level events – collective histories - which shaped their lives are, generally, the same. These include the last years of the monarchy, the first Afghan Republic in the mid-1970s, the

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<sup>1</sup> I will be moving to Dushanbe, Tajikistan, as UNICEF's Programme Coordinator in August 2003.

<sup>2</sup> The image of the woven tapestry has been frequently used by Black and/or African-American feminists (Johnson-Curry, 1995) to demonstrate their complex, multiple and rich struggles and contributions.

Communist coup of 1978, USSR military intervention in 1979, the *Mujahidin's jihad*, the victory of the *Mujahidin* in 1992, *Mujahidin* inter-group fighting and Taliban's take over in the mid-1990s. Together they have also all experienced patriarchy, ethnicization of differences, ethnic and religious discrimination, war, militarization and fundamentalism.

These generalizations often apply to discussions about the other broad similarities in the lives of Afghan women, namely becoming a refugee in Pakistan, with a large Moslem population, and enormous indigenous social, political and economic challenges. It is with the above mentioned points that many discussions on Afghanistan and Afghan women often begin and end. In this dissertation I have attempted to go beyond these discussions to show also the differences and thus problematize facile assumptions about the lives of Afghan women and in particular, educated Afghan refugee women in Pakistan.

The similarities between the interviewees are, however, also very important and it is partially the knowledge of these, which allows us to reach certain conclusions about, for example, patriarchy, other social divisions, war, militarization, displacement and fundamentalism. Yet, it is often through the effort to understand differences amongst a certain group of individuals and the reasons for these differences, as well as the results of these differences, that we are able to best understand a situation, its dynamics and the 'agency' of the individuals and groups involved. Such an exploration allows us to problematize and deconstruct assumptions/simplifications as well as stereotypes such as those which are sustained by westo-centric, neocolonial and orientalized depictions, as well as by local, national and religious leaders in the South. It is often difference – especially unjust power differences - that breaks the silence of conformity and acceptance and lends its voice to the struggle for peace, tolerance and respect for human and women's rights. These differences include those of gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, education, family, marital status and age.

The above differences intermesh in multiple ways, at various times, resulting in unequal power relations. They also motivate resistance to inequality and struggles for justice. As is shown in this study, it is to a considerable extent these differences which shape the lives

of the women interviewed, in Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan, and make their experiences unique and at the same time relevant enough to many others so that it is important to understand, document and share.

Journeys play a particularly important role in the above dynamics, as they often highlight our similarities as well as our differences and generate new similarities and differences with the same as well as other people. We embark upon journeys for reasons which demonstrate our similarities as well as our differences. The choices of our journeys, the conditions of our journeys, as well as the outcomes of our journeys are all reflections of our similarities as well as differences. Another important aspect of journeys – new locations - is that it unsettles all those involved and pushes us towards new challenges, understandings and action. Journeys problematize how we see ourselves and our communities as well as how we and our communities are seen by ‘others’ and how we see ‘others’ and their communities in return. Journeys bring us to new spatial locations thus affecting our situated gaze. New processes of exclusion as well as resistance to these are another outcome of such journeys. As a result of our journeys, we are often placed in non-mainstream and hegemonic positions in new and important ways which help shape our *weltanschauung*. This allows us, at times, to question and deconstruct essentialist notions of identity in ways we would not do otherwise. This has particular resonance with diasporic communities.

Also, what is symbolic about journeys and is relevant to all our lives, including that of the interviewees and myself, is that while one particular journey ends, there continue to be others which we have to embark upon. To varying degrees, these interlinked journeys are never easy, all have their own risks and dangers, yet we have to make them for reasons of our own, though not always of our own making, and somehow hope that together we will find meaning and work towards a better and more equitable future. Our experiences as women making these journeys is significant as we are all living in patriarchal societies which do not make it easy for most women to make decisions regarding their journeys, nor does it facilitate the journeys or arrival at the point of destination. Yet, it is not only as women per se but as women of a particular national, ethnic and religious collectivity as



well as age, class, education and family background that we make and experience particular journeys in specific ways. It is exactly these complex and sometimes even contradictory dynamics which motivate our efforts and struggles for equity and justice.

It is left to those of us who are privileged and/or fortunate enough to survive global inequalities and national and community differences, war, militarism, forced displacement and patriarchy to tell the stories involved, and in the course, not forget those who did not survive, whether in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq or elsewhere in this turbulent world of ours.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will further elaborate on some of the issues mentioned above and with which I have struggled in the course of this research. These include the positionality of the 'in-between' feminist researcher, understanding refugees and refugee women in the 'near- abroad,' Afghan women and the politics of 'belonging', women's 'agency' in war and displacement and the potential subversiveness of formal education as well as some concluding comments and future work perspectives.

## **2. The 'In-Between' Researcher Position**

There is increasing feminist research on methodologies and methods. I have referred to some of this work in the methodology chapter, including the work of Harding (1986) and Haraway (1990) and research concerning the positionality of the researcher and the researched as an interactive process. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2000) highlight the complex and changing power relations involved between the two. Maynard and Purvis (1995) also refer to the diverse ways in which feminist research can be done. Hill-Collins (1990) and Mohanty (1992) are feminist researchers who have highlighted the importance of racialized identities in feminist research. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989) have, in addition, stressed the importance of ethnicized identities and the inter-sectionality of identities in feminist work. A number of feminist academics from Moslem countries including Altorki and El-Solh (1988) have reflected upon the positive and negative dynamics of doing research in your own country or the country from which you originate.

While being informed by all the above, and concurring with many of their views, I still see a gap in feminist research on the increasing number of non-Western feminist researchers like myself who are 'in-between' and do research in countries of the South that are not their own. My work can make a contribution to the methodology of this category of research. Such research is also linked to challenging ethnocentrism in some of the research conducted by Western liberal feminists.

What do I mean by 'in-between'? I mean that while we (the 'in-between' researchers) are originally women from a Southern country, or a country with a Moslem majority, we have spent a considerable part of our lives abroad, including in the West. While studying and living in the West has no doubt influenced our lives and perceptions, we still do not see ourselves as Western. This is as a matter of conscious political choice as well as a result of the politics of the day which makes sure that we remember that we are not Western such as the racial profiling at certain Western airports these days. Our diasporic lives influence our standpoint and 'situated imagination' (Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002) or vision for the future towards which we strive and aspire.

In some ways, we are hybrid but in our hybridity we also concur with the critiques of hybridity being an essentialist notion (Yuval-Davis, 1997) which we also resist (Malkki, 1995). This means that this 'we' I am referring to does not translate into all of 'us' maintaining a single ideological/political position in our research. As in all groups, there are various differences amongst 'us' as well – including for age, class, education and ideological reasons. It also does not automatically translate into all of 'us' maintaining anti-essentialist positions as well as concerns with challenging Western hegemony.

As 'in-between' researchers, neither Western nor permanently based in the South, we are potentially well placed to locate our research within the wider scope of post-colonial and subaltern studies which intend to highlight the unequal economic, historical and cultural power relations involved in colonialism. This also applies to current Western hegemony and various efforts, including in the academia, to challenge local and global inequalities

(Homi Bhabha, 1994, Spivak, 1985, Said, 1978). Spivak (1992) has also discussed how by 'our' presence in the West, 'we' challenge the cultural homogeneity of the West. However, as a feminist researcher, I also concur with the critiques of especially earlier post-colonial and subaltern studies which highlight the need to integrate concerns around women's issues as well as other socio-economic power relations such as class (Bannerji, Mojab and Whitehead, 2001, Loomba, 1998, Savigliano, 1995) and who pinpoint the dangers of essentializing/homogenizing any notion of the post-colonial and subaltern. That is indeed why I have chosen to discuss the issue of being 'in-between' rather than one or the other.

As 'in-between' researchers, we are no longer so much a part of the communities, countries and regions we originally came from and our lives and situations are very different from most women 'back-home'. How does this impact upon the research choices we make and the way we conduct our research, especially if we tap into being part of a broader region and undertake research in a country other than our own – in a third country? I believe it provides certain important potential opportunities. First, it allows us to tap into our own cultural resources, including the knowledge of language and religion, to interact more easily with other people and communities in the South. We do this, however, with a bit more distance than indigenous researchers as it is not our own community or country. Clifford (1989) has referred to this as the 'critical distance'.

In my case, the knowledge of Farsi, appreciation of Persian poetry, coming from an Islamic background, familiarity with certain common cultural values and other similar factors definitely contributed to my overall relationships with Afghans, as well as more specifically, the interviews which with the exception of one were conducted in Farsi.

We have to undertake one or more journeys for the purpose of the research and these journeys always make us face new situations and understandings, often from the fringe or from the sides. This allows us to be more open as we are not as concerned about censorship issues and the punishment which often follows transgressing in our own countries. In my case, I would have been more concerned and cautious about asking

certain questions in Iran of Iranian women and/or being very critical of the current situation in a document which might at some point be readily available. If I were an Iranian in exile, it would have been different, but I continue returning to Iran - albeit with some level of calculated risk-taking – and therefore, have my own limits. It is very important for my family and me to be able to continue traveling to Iran, at least for the time being.

Being ‘in-between’ also allows us to use our own experiences of political events such as change of regimes and war, as well as ideological shifts, including from modernization to fundamentalism, and that of displacement and diaspora, in a comparative way with that of the other communities/countries we are doing research on. The fact that I have lived through the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the political turmoil of Iran, Islamic fundamentalism, as well as now become an immigrant myself, has provided a different perspective on the lives of refugee Afghan women for me than, for example, an Anglo-Saxon Canadian born woman who has not experienced any of the above.

Also, we are able to benefit from the research and theoretical tools we have learned in the Western academy in order to reflect more critically upon our research topics. As well, our research contributes to the Western academy and hopefully, provides new understandings which do not ‘reincubate’ powerlessness (Maynard and Purvis, 1995). We are often – though not always - energized by the struggles of our own communities, as well as others, in challenges to local, national and international inequalities historically as well as in the present. However, as ‘in-between’ researchers, unequal power relations exist between us and those we interview. In my case, though I tried to minimize this difference by interviewing educated and mostly working Afghan women, I still was differentially situated by working for the UN as well as through association with Western academic institutions.

Overall, such research is one way of potentially further expressing and building our feminist solidarity with women in countries of the South with which we feel close in terms of their struggles and unequal positions at the local, national and international level. We

can also be bridge-builders South to South, as well as South to North (or the Western world). Yet, it also allows us to disturb the hegemony and reductionism of the privileged in the West writing about the 'underprivileged' in the South who need to be saved, as well as that of all women from the South as living under more or less the same conditions and suffering from the same burdens of representation and poverty. In addition, we potentially can disturb the discourses of exclusionary and patriarchal politics and politicians, religious, nationalist or otherwise, in the South who claim 'authenticity' and artificial and politically motivated unity amongst 'their' people and all 'others'.

Braidotti (1994) has written about the nomadic subject, aiming at a 'heterogenous model of subjectivity for the contemporary woman' and 'a transnational and transdisciplinary methodology' (Interview with Braidotti, 1995). In the same interview, Braidotti also refers to her 'own need to continually move'. Is the 'in-between' researcher also a nomadic subject? My response is yes and no. She is a nomad in the sense that she is moving between locations. However, the motivations for these journeys are not always voluntary, do not begin solely for intellectual or philosophical reasons and are not easy. Also, the 'in-between' researcher is still connected to where she comes from in spite of the growing distance and has a political, personal and even perhaps, spiritual, connection with that location. She is not neutral or equally attached to all the various locations which she moves to and from.

Unlike Braidotti (1994), the 'in-between' researcher referred to here does not move between locations which are internationally speaking close in their power relations, all as Western locations. Nor is the 'in-between' researcher herself located within the same power dynamics. She is and will be considered an 'outsider'. Yet, she is usually also in a more privileged position than those who never have the opportunity to travel outside of their own communities/countries or benefit from higher education in the West for various reasons, including class. This is also related to my earlier critique of subaltern studies such as those espoused initially by Spivak (1992).

Nevertheless, like Braidotti (1994), the 'in-between' researcher too attempts to enhance her own humanity through these experiences and modestly contribute to the world to which she has been privy. This is also in line with attempts by a number of scholars (Cheah and Robbins, 1998) to redefine a cosmopolitanism which is not a luxury but rather set within a specific context of unequal power relations, with the potential of challenging and overcoming specific inequalities.

The work of the committed 'in-between' researcher does not finish with the completion of a research project. As individuals who have been privileged enough to undertake such journeys and research projects because of the various aspects of our identities, we are also responsible to share the outcome of our research and continue questioning the issues at hand not only with the Western academic circles with which we are connected but also the communities in which we have worked. For this, we need to find appropriate channels. This includes translation of our work into a local language, in this case, Farsi/ Dari. In addition, it is important to continuously link our academic/professional and activist lives with our research and that of others and the other way around for social change. We have great responsibility in how we convey our experiences to others, be it Western feminist and progressive audiences, or policy-makers and donors, as well as translating some of its conclusions into action.

### **3. Refugees and Refugee Women in the 'Near Abroad'**

One of the theoretical issues which has arisen out of this study is the important difference of being a refugee (especially a refugee woman) in the 'near abroad' (neighbouring countries of the South) as compared to the West. The theoretical and actual significance of these locational issues have not been sufficiently explored in most refugee studies, as referred to in this dissertation. I hope this dissertation will provide some insight on this important discussion and make a contribution to this field of study.

On the one hand, there are many UN and NGO reports and studies on refugees in the South and also women refugees (Crawley, 2001, Indra, 1999, Buji, 1993) as referenced in

other chapters of this dissertation. Most of these focus on the material or legal situation of the refugees and pay little attention to other issues such as changing identities and the dynamics of the encounter with the host population. On the other hand, there is a growing interest in diasporic communities in the West (or North) which is being increasingly theorized (Matsuoko and Sorenson, 2002, McGowan, 1999, Anthias, 1998, Cohen, 1997, Brah, 1996). However, very few make apparent the important distinction/differences as well as continuum/connections in the locations of displacement. Millions of refugees in the South remain for very long periods of time in the 'near-abroad' and in fact, millions are born and know no other location but the 'near-abroad', as is also the case with many Afghans in Pakistan. While issues of basic survival often continue to be priorities, there is a need to further engage with and understand other aspects of their lives and in this case, reference to diasporic theories can be helpful.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to extend diasporic theories to the study of refugees in the 'near-abroad' of their countries of origin (the 'South' in the 'South'). So far, these have dealt mostly with refugees in the West (where the 'South' is located in the 'North'). This will greatly facilitate the understanding of the experiences of the largest diasporic communities of the world, as well as provide further insight for enhanced theorization on this important issue. Refugee communities in the 'near abroad' are connected in fact to the diaspora in the West at many levels, including as a result of the links the diaspora in the West has with the diaspora in the 'near-abroad' – only one of which is through remittances. By attempting to utilize diasporic theories in those contexts, these theories will also be improved, updated and challenged to address the conditions and struggles of some of the most deprived and yet resilient communities and peoples of our world, refugees in the South. In addition, such a process has the potential of making diasporic theories more radical and political in terms of addressing some of the most unacceptable and unfortunate levels of human suffering and injustice.

In this study, I have problematized and unsettled some of the dichotomies which usually exist between studying refugees in the 'near abroad' and diaspora communities in the West. For example, I have showed how some of the processes experienced by Afghans

and Afghan women as refugees in Pakistan can be better understood by referring to the literature on diaspora and that it is not always enough to only refer to the literature on refugees for this purpose. The latter does not sufficiently address the inter-group and intra-group dynamics in 'diasporic spaces' (Brah, 1996) in the 'near-abroad', especially issues pertaining to changing gendered identities in refugee communities. I also believe that this dichotomy is linked in various ways to unequal power relations between the West and the rest of the world. Consequently, the 'South' gets 'studied' in different ways than the 'North'.

For example, the ways in which the interviewees mention their lives were affected by being in Pakistan, the gendered experiences of leaving and crossing the border by land, the challenges to continuing their education in Pakistan, the risks and threats to women's activism and the choices they made with regards to work are all specific to their location in the 'near-abroad' and would have been quite different in the West.

There are similarities and differences between being a refugee or a member of a diasporic community in the 'near-abroad' and in the West. As informed by this research, I will mention some of these here. Like other diasporic communities, in all their heterogeneity, many continue to participate in the politics and events of their country of origin, though with greater proximity and urgency. Afghans in the 'near-abroad', for example, traveled more frequently to Afghanistan and were in day-to-day contact with others in Afghanistan and if involved in politics, were in closer contact with many other Afghans. Today, in post-Taliban Afghanistan, there is also a new schism between Afghans in the 'near-abroad' and Western diaspora.

Those in the region continue to send back remittances like Western diaspora communities. However, the amounts which are sent, the currency in which they are sent, the way the money is sent and other issues differentiate the various kinds of remittances. Refugees in the region are also identified as members of a particular collectivity with roots elsewhere through many factors including their culture, language and religion which are quite different from the hegemonic cultures and/or languages and/or religions of the host-



country, but the kind of identification and discrimination is different from that in the West, as mentioned below. The 'diasporic encounters' (Brah, 1996) are different.

Like other diasporic communities, over time those in the region adapt to some aspects of their new countries of domicile, while holding on to some of their traditions from the past, or the reconstruction of these traditions. This is done in a different way from similar processes in the West, as in the 'near-abroad' they don't feel their religious identity, especially, is as much at risk as it is in the West with the power of its cultural apparatus, especially for their children. Some of my interviewees have mentioned this issue. In Pakistan, at least they were in another Moslem country with some similar historical trajectories. This impacts issue of identity and gendered identity for refugees.

Like many other diaspora communities, these are often also 'represented' by more conservative, even sometimes reactionary, male leaders rather than other more progressive voices within the community or in fact, communities. However, in the West, the leaders are represented as leaders of minority communities, trying to 'integrate' or contribute to their new country of domicile, usually as part of various multicultural policies of Western countries. In the 'near-abroad', their leaders remain as leaders of the refugee community and in terms of mobilizing and reaching out to that community and not in terms of, for example, participating in mainstream Pakistani politics. As indicated in the interviews, some of the refugee women who been in Pakistan for over a decade, direct their contributions towards the Afghan refugee community and Afghanistan rather than Pakistan. This is also what the Pakistani government and the UN and NGOs expect of them.

In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, though in different ways, women are often faced with the burden of representing the 'authenticity' and 'morality' of the community. Yet, in the Western diaspora, with more liberal Western laws, policies and practices, at least some refugee women from countries like Afghanistan have the chance of improving their status. This is also highlighted in quite a number of the interviews of this dissertation where it is made clear that in Pakistan they had no legal protection whatsoever.

There are class differences amongst refugees since the richest and elite will often leave quickly for the West while the less privileged can only move to the 'near-abroad' and in some cases, move to the West later in the process. In neighbouring countries, refugees often find themselves in situations which are not so very different from their own in terms of economic conditions and sometimes religion, ethnicity and language. Often, it is much worse for them as refugees. This has particularly significant impact upon women who are more restricted, generally less educated and find it more difficult to find paid work. In neighbouring countries, refugees often have no possibility of applying for citizenship and therefore, continue to have a temporary sense to their stay, even if it is in fact for several decades and they have married citizens of that country. This also affects their sense of 'belonging'.

In addition, by being in countries of the South, refugees are not located as 'third world minorities' in the North which has obvious impact in terms of power relations. Most refugees in the North – except if they are very wealthy or have very high Western education - immediately sense that they are now located in the 'powerful West' where overall standards of life are much higher. Also, they are now located in countries with greater international economic and political influence than their own. This facilitates different forms of discrimination than that faced by refugees in the 'near-abroad' which in turn influences the self-esteem and sense of self of refugees. While in the 'near-abroad' refugees are also discriminated and are often looked down upon by host-populations, overall there is a sense of greater similarity and globally speaking, a smaller gap. In most cases, the population of the host-country in the 'near-abroad' like Pakistan know more about Afghanistan, where the refugees come from, than those in the West. As one of the interviewees mentions, it is because of this proximity that some of her classmates blamed her as an Afghan specifically for their own problems as Pakistanis. 'Diasporic sensibilities' (Brah, 1996) are constructed and perceived differently based on whether you are in the region or in the West.

The issue of location for refugees also has serious gendered repercussions as, for example, in the case of Iranian women married to Afghan men who are denied an official status and whose children are not recognized as Iranians. As a result, they also participate less in the official local and national politics of the country they have moved to. Also, their sense of home and 'homing' desire (Brah, 1996) is different from those in the West as their expectation to actually go back is more real.

In neighbouring countries, refugees often send their children to refugee schools, also in the case of many of this research's interviewees, and they thus continue to be socialized in an environment which is closer to their country of origin rather than the country of residence. In fact, by being geographically closer, they are usually in more contact with their countries of origin. Being in neighbouring countries, rather than in the West, also has serious impact in terms of access to health, other social welfare services, higher education and job opportunities, at least for 'legal' refugees who can in principle benefit from these services and opportunities in the West. This has serious repercussions for women, for example, in terms of maternal care.

The difference is also quite gendered as refugee women often find themselves in a society which is as patriarchal, if not more, than their own, and once in which there are many restrictions on women, with almost no recourse to the law in cases of abuse and violation. Divorce, for example, is often very difficult for refugee women in neighbouring countries. Living in neighbouring countries rather than in the West influences the mobility, attire and other aspects of women's lives. For example, in Pakistan, Afghan women were obliged to wear some form of head cover/scarf and if at all possible, they were also obliged to continue living with their families as very few women live on their own. Many examples of this situation have been brought in the empirical chapters of this dissertation. In the West, those who wish to continue to wear the Islamic *hejab*, are also often stereotyped and discriminated, if not seen as sympathizers of 'Islamic terrorists'.

Refugee communities in neighbouring countries, and the educated amongst them, including educated refugee women, play important leadership roles and are instrumental in supporting the less privileged through UN and NGO programmes. Thus, these communities become involved with the UN and NGOs in ways which they would not in the West. In the 'near-abroad', refugee women assume leadership positions in a different way and through a different process than in the West. Their work and activism is also more fraught with danger and risks.

Refugee communities in the South are, in addition, important in challenging homogenizing notions about the South in the West (or North) as well as highlighting exclusionary practices and policies in the South. Through the UN and INGOs as well as other channels, the West is in fact represented in these refugee-hosting Southern countries and thus also continues to help shape the lives of millions of refugees from afar. For educated refugee women, moving to neighbouring countries sometimes provides new opportunities, in a different way than it does in the West. This is the case if, like many of the interviewees of this research, by being amongst a small minority of educated refugee women, they are able to access UN and INGO jobs, or set-up their own groups and NGOs and link up with other national and international civil society groups and international organizations. Yet, working exclusively with donor agencies often also limits the energies of civil society in doing political work, as they become focussed on writing proposals and fulfilling the criteria of donors.

Being in neighbouring countries is often also a transit spot in preparation for another journey outwards to the West, as has happened for quite a few of the interviewees of this study. Some also mention how the aspiration of many young Afghan refugees is to go to the West and young girls are sometimes even willing to marry much older Afghan men in the West for this purpose.

Thus, as demonstrated above, there is a need to utilize diaspora-related and other relevant theories to better understand the dynamics of refugees living in neighbouring countries. Also, it is important to extend such analysis to include this majority group of refugees and

especially refugee women who often face great challenges as well as some unique opportunities. The issue of geographical location and proximity/distance to the 'homeland' is very important and makes a big difference in the lives of refugee women and needs to be further researched. There is much to learn from each experience, including that of Afghan refugee women in Pakistan, in enriching existing displacement, migration and diasporic theories.

#### **4. 'Agency' of Moslem Women as Actors in War and Displacement**

Feminist scholars (Moser and Clark, 2001, Turshen, 2001, Ibanex, 2001, Enloc, 2000, Cokburn, 1998), mentioned in Chapter Six, have made a pathbreaking contribution to the realization that all wars are gendered at many levels. This includes the pivotal role of encouraged macho behavior of armed men, the consequences of the militarization of society on women and their physical and emotional wellbeing and the important issue of rape as a weapon of war. They have also shown how there is a continuum between the violence many women experience before war at home and in their communities with that which happens at times of war. The above feminist scholars have also pointed to the reality that women are not only victims of war but that they sometimes participate as fighters, behind the frontline supporters, keepers of the family, community and home and in many other ways. In addition, the resistance of many women and women's groups to war is an important area of interest to feminists.

It has been important for me to link issues pertaining to gender and conflict with those involved in the study of Moslem women in this dissertation, considering the importance of Islam as a political tool, as well as a personal and cultural resource. There is a growing interest and literature available on Moslem women and/or women in Moslem societies as well as their representation in the West (Treacher and Shukrallah, 2001, Yegenoglu, 1998, Abu-Lughod, 1988). This is of increasing importance in view of the post-September 11, 2001, US-led efforts against 'Islamic terrorism' which links debates of war and women in Moslem countries. In addition, there is a growing interest in refugee women's issues (Farha, 2000, Giles, 1999, Martin-Forbes, 1992) as mentioned in Chapter Six.

This dissertation has been informed by the above theoretical and empirical work and is able to add to this growing body of literature at a number of levels. At one level, it adds to the specific knowledge about the tragic consequences of conflict on women including sexual abuse, the loss of loved ones, homes and communities and increased poverty and destitution. This is evident in the contextual as well as empirical chapters. I have also been interested in demonstrating how each phase or aspect of the war and its repercussions such as forced displacement are gendered. For example, the actual decision to leave Afghanistan as well as the experience of the journey towards Pakistan all reflected different gender related power relations and issues.

The narratives of the interviews reveal the importance that controlling women played in the politics and practices of the Afghan wars. This control had roots in pre-war days but was intensified for the purposes of war, as well as being a result of the war. The reactionary interpretations of Islam, as well as Afghan 'authenticity' and ethnic, religious and other differences are also central to the control of women. My interviews describe how many Afghan women were not silent victims of war but rather from the beginning stood up for their beliefs and expressed their opposition. In addition, even in a traditional society such as Afghanistan, women played a very important active role in the survival of families and communities in Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan.

The interviews shows that as a result of women's 'agency' in the course of war and displacement, at least some women were able to make a number of gains – though at a great collective and personal cost. Many Afghan women responded with their many survival skills to the threats of war and displacement, while also challenging fundamentalism and patriarchy in different ways. Some chose, for example, to openly and actively condemn certain politicians or politics and others, more subtly, made sure their children were brought up respecting others in society, while upholding their own dignity/self-esteem as women.

As a result of Afghan women's 'agency' during times of war and displacement, changes in gendered family roles occurred with many more women becoming the income-earner of the family, as well as its emotional pillar. A small number of educated Afghan refugee women were, in fact, able to access better jobs than those they had in Afghanistan, and higher levels of income, especially with the UN and INGOs. These jobs meant greater exposure to international discourses and situations, as well as new skills and understandings which many used to lobby for peace, tolerance, and human and women's rights in Afghanistan. These experiences and opportunities gradually opened up new political space for these particular Afghan women and the causes they stood for.

This study also shows how important it is to look into the heterogeneity of women affected by conflict and not to homogenize all their experiences. Women are impacted upon by conflict differently based on their ethnicity, religion, location, class, education and family background, as well as other factors. This situation changes during different phases of a conflict as well as displacement. As this study shows, understanding the experiences of educated and working women is specifically important as they are often in a better position to articulate their experiences and views and play leadership roles in their communities. Knowledge about their lives and views is also relevant to challenging dominant stereotypes which exist about women facing war in the South, Moslem women as well as refugee women.

Also, as a result of exposure to various ideologies and life in another country, many more Afghan women became politicized and have developed more articulate views regarding politics in their country, as well as in the region and world. The widespread condemnation by many Afghan women of the commanders and fundamentalist leaders, for example, is an indication of their understanding of the links between militarization, religious fundamentalism and control of women. As this study shows, minority groups in Afghanistan and minority group women became more aware of the ethnic and religious discriminations their communities have faced and began realizing that there can be another way. The Pashtun women interviewed – women of the majority ethnic group - also condemned ethnic discrimination. As refugees, the educated Afghan refugee women

interviewed, faced discrimination based on nationality for the first time in Pakistan which challenged their views regarding being Afghan and Afghan women, as well as the loss (and sometimes, stigma) experienced when one does become a refugee.

Many Afghan refugee women, thus, became more concerned with ensuring Afghan children continue to learn about their country and its cultures as refugees and benefit from quality education so that they can contribute to Afghanistan in the years to come. Education was no longer taken for granted, even by educated Afghan women and men. With regards to religion, Afghan women interviewed clearly denounce extreme and intolerant interpretations of Islam which have contributed to and also resulted from the many years of war. They have intensely experienced the manipulation of religious, as well as other ideologies, for individual and group interests, at a great cost for the majority of the people. Yet, most of the interviewees want to hold on to the Islam which they believe is humane, tolerant and forgiving as well as some of its related cultural resources and practices. This is important for many of them at an individual level, as well as in terms of their collective identity.

While pointing out some of the positive developments of this period of war and displacement for at least a group of Afghan women, it is also important to remember the immensely negative influence of these processes on the lives of those involved, including women. This is also linked to the gap between expressed aspirations and lived experiences. For example, while conflict and displaced members of various communities, including women, sincerely hope for peace and tolerance, the actual practice of it in their families and communities is often much more challenging after years of militarization and violent exclusionary mechanisms. It is only as a result of the concerted, conscious and determined effort of many Afghan women and men, as well as their allies, that the lessons learned of these years will be put to positive use and have concrete and material results.



## 5. Women and the Politics of 'Belonging'

Feminist academics (Moghissi, 1999, Cockburn, 1998, Abu-Lighud, 1998, Yuval-Davis, 1997, Memissi, 1996, Alwis, 1995, Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992, Kandiyoti, 1991, Chatterjee, 1986, Jayardewana, 1984, hooks, 1981) have contributed enormously to the understanding of the pivotal role gender plays in the constructions of collective identities including national, religious, racialized and ethnicized identities, as well as the intense impact of these identities upon women and citizenship issues. At the same time, they have pointed out issues of inter-sectionality including the links between the above identities and issues of class, age, sexuality, education, marital status and other factors. In addition, they have shown that identities are not essential and are constantly changing. Also, they have challenged the work of primarily male and white academics (Smith, 1986, Anderson, 1983, Nairn, 1977, Barth, 1969, Weber, 1968, Geertz, 1963) who have often overlooked gender issues, as well as the significance of racialized and ethnicized identities and identity politics.

Based on the contextual as well as empirical work of this dissertation, no doubt, most Afghan women have in many ways been dramatically affected by various aspects of their gendered identities or their 'belonging' as women in particular religious, ethnic and national collectivities, as well as linguistic and tribal ones, in an unique historical moment and in specific locations. Thus, the knowledge of theories related to the ever-changing and dynamic constructions of these various inter-linked gendered identities has been very important in understanding their situation better.

I stress the issue of unique historical moment or moments and particular locations because, as this study also shows, without a comprehensive understanding of these factors, it is very difficult to understand the changing quality of these identities and in fact, even the identities themselves. It is also difficult to capture the responses, challenges and struggles of, in this case, women, in reaction to these frequently viciously enforced identities. It is in fact as a result of the particular historical moment and locations that the

political and gendered dynamics of these identities comes into play. To understand the politics, we need to understand the history and location.

For example, based on the contextual and empirical work of this dissertation, the Afghan women interviewed have experienced being Afghan, or being part of their religious and ethnic collectivities, quite differently from their mothers or grandmothers who lived before the wars began and did not experience displacement or these particular forms of displacement. This is also clear in some of the interviews where we are told how younger girls envy their mothers and tell them how they least spent most of your life in peace. Or how many young Afghans during the war years were bitter about being Afghan as they said it brought them only pain. Many of the most dramatic events of their lives occurred because they were Afghan or belonged to particular ethnic and religious groups and would not have happened if it had not been for the years and places in which they lived. Without the war and migration to Pakistan, they would never have encountered the discrimination experienced by refugees, a new identity (label) they did not have before.

Yet, it is important to note how as a result of their 'agency' or resistance and struggles the interviewees have not completely surrendered to the hegemonic definitions of their various identities throughout these years. They have been able to see through the communal, local, national, regional and international politics involved in the violence of these militarized years of war. More important, they have continued to endeavor to lead their lives in a humane manner and also contribute to processes leading to greater respect for the human rights of all Afghans. They have not given up their visions for a better tomorrow.

This, however, does not mean that they do not feel a sense of 'belonging' to at least some of their collective identities or certain aspects of these identities. This varies from one interview to another and is impacted upon by many factors including their ideology, personality, lived experiences and interactions with others. For example, some of the interviewees feel much stronger about returning to Afghanistan and contributing to peace and reconstruction, while others are eager to move on to the West. In addition, though

they more or less all say that they believe the rights of all Afghans should be respected if Afghanistan is to experience peace once again, they also continue to maintain some degree of concern regarding the interests of, for example, their own ethnic group. And indeed, it is this delicate balance between safeguarding the legitimate rights of the various interest groups in Afghanistan with the overall interest of all Afghans that is amongst the greatest challenges of the new regime.

Many of the interviewees clearly refer to the issue of being women of these particular collectivities. For example, in the case of one of them, she felt her mother was beaten at home at least partially because she belonged to a particular ethnic group from a specific location of Afghanistan. Or other interviewees mention that it was because they were Afghan women that in Pakistan in the 1980s when the *Mujahidin* were strong, they were able to restrict women's education, work, mobility and attire. Through these deliberations, they also challenge the patriarchal, male and militarized forces which claim to represent their ethnic/religious or national collectivity and its 'authenticity'.

Yet, it also partially as a result of these very experiences that many of the interviewees feel they have a unique mission or responsibility as educated Afghan women to stand-up for more progressive definitions of gendered 'belonging'. They do this not only for Afghan girls and women but also with the realization that without greater respect for Afghan girls and women, Afghan boys and men also can not live in peace. Their various political visions are influenced and shaped by positive and negative experiences from their childhood, schooling, work, private and public spheres of interaction, interpretations of Afghan history and religion, war and displacement, as well as greater exposure to universal/international principles of human rights and wellbeing.

In addition, what is quite significant and comes out of the interviews, is the truly great heterogeneity and diversity of Afghans and Afghan women. This allows for a radical redefinition of 'belonging' since it deconstructs all essentialist notions and discourses of 'inevitability' of conflict amongst static collectivities.

The more questions you ask, the greater the variety of answers you receive as to issues of 'belonging'. For example, no two Pashtun interviewees are from the same sub-group of Pashtuns or have the same historical trajectory. And the same applies to members of the other ethnic groups as well. In addition, as a result of probing, one realizes how in the course of several generations, there has been considerable mixing through marriage and therefore, how any notion of 'one' particular understanding of ethnicity or religious 'belonging' is fictitious.

As a result, you are left really wondering, ah, how tragic that so much blood has been shed in the name of these identities when in fact they have always been so very fluid and linked. No doubt, activist Afghan women of all groups will continue to have an important and unique potential role to play in this critical junction of Afghan history. This includes working towards a paradigm in which one can 'belong' based on criteria and conditions of one's own choosing and without violating the rights of others.

## **6. Subversive Education?**

Many scholars including Giddens (1998) and Althusser (1972) have written about the reproductive role of formal education in the West which, in their view, does not challenge hegemonic relations. Other scholars, including the Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi (1997), have referred to the important role education played in the project of colonialism in the South. Stromquist (1998,1997) has focused on the limited impact of most female education and adult literacy programmes in improving women's social status inspite of its prominence in UN and NGO discourses. Others, including Saigol (1995), have written about the role of colonial and neocolonial education in advancing Western concepts at the cost of Eastern forms of knowledge. Regarding the more recent objectives of education, scholars such as Roberts (2000) and Bhasin (1994) have written about its role in fulfilling the needs of the capitalist markets. I too have criticized elsewhere (Pourzand, 1996) the predominant perspectives of the international agencies on female education in the South which are positivistic and westo-centric.

While I agree with the critiques above, my own research for this dissertation also shows that there is a need to look at various contexts in making analytical judgments about education. After completing this dissertation, I am left with an ambivalent sense with regards to education and its role – at least in Afghanistan. While there are overall similarities in various educational experiences, there are also enough differences from one case to another so that it is important to understand the specificities of the context and move from there. While through education, citizens of a particular country might not challenge most or all social inequalities, they might be able to challenge one or more of them. While in no way wanting to romanticize or exaggerate the impact of education, I am hereby presenting some of the challenges to various societal inequalities which education in Afghanistan has resulted from and contributed to. This is done with full awareness regarding the continued and in fact, accentuated inequalities in Afghanistan in the course of war and displacement. It is also a reflection of the complexity of educational sociology and politics.

First of all, regimes are sometimes forced to realize that society has to change in order for it to survive. At times, it is a minority within the regime who seek change, and at other times, it is a majority. Such factions within regimes have sought to realize change through various channels including education. In Afghanistan, for example, in the early 1900s, it was as a result of a reform movement led by individuals like Tarzi and King Amanullah (as mentioned in the historical chapter). Together they believed in the importance of extending formal education, also to girls and women, so as to have educated citizens for a 'modern' Afghanistan.

Consequently, while they did not want to destabilize the regime, they did want to change some traditional relationships in society which restricted education to men and/or religious education. In this they were opposed by more traditional forces that feared such education would undermine their power and influence. Consequently, in this context, formal education did challenge certain inequalities including gender inequality. Education also challenged the inequality enshrined by more conservative forces especially on women who until such time were expected to stay largely at home. It provided some secular

public space for girls and women which did not exist before. As mentioned in the historical chapter, this together with other factors resulted in the overthrow of Amanullah Khan in the late 1920s.

Education policies have sometimes results which are not predicted, expected or envisaged by the concerned regimes. For example, in Afghanistan, as a result of expanding female education especially in urban areas such as Kabul, the regime unconsciously created a pull-factor, at least for middle class and upper middle class families in many rural areas to move their families to urban areas so that they could get educated, including their girls. This is something shared by a few of the interviewees of this dissertation as having happened to them personally. As a result partially of this move, the role of women in these families and communities was to change forever. While more girls were educated and a greater number of educated women began to work, certain traditional norms regarding women's status such as their social life, attire, domicile, relationships with men outside of the nuclear family and marriage, marriage itself, expressed views regarding religion and sexuality have continued to be maintained though in different ways and to different degrees. Again, while such moves and experiences did not result in dramatic class upheavals, for example, they did change a number of social relations, including gender and urban/rural ones.

Also, in school, as shown in the empirical work of this dissertation, many girls and boys experienced at least certain social inequalities for the first time, including that of class and ethnicity. This was to mark their consciousness for ever more and for those who have survived, it has contributed to their resistance and struggles for equity and justice.

The expansion of formal education in Afghanistan, though limited, resulted in a greater number of men and women having access to education. Education was no longer the domain only of the very top elite of the ruling family. This expansion was carried out with the intention of having educated men and women for the civil service, but in fact had many unexpected results. One was that many of these young people (mostly men) who were the first in their families to have access to education and later higher education were

able to understand and articulate the class, ethnic, religious and other inequalities in Afghanistan better than their parents' generation. They were also influenced by other peers at the education institutes which they attended and became eager or impatient for social change to happen. As shown in the relevant contextual chapter, it is amongst this group that the leaders of both the Communist as well as Islamic movements of Afghanistan emerged. Thus again, formal education did result in challenges to the status quo in different and unexpected ways.

Also, when formal education expanded in Afghanistan, the ruling Pashtun elite had no choice but to allow other ethnic groups or at least the middle and upper class of these ethnic groups to benefit from formal education. Thus, the first and second generation of educated minority men and women of Afghanistan were formed which has been significant in majority/minority relations in the country, as well as the role of women within these minority communities and groups. It has been very important for these minority groups to have their own intelligentsia, especially female intelligentsia, as also shown in the empirical chapters.

In spite of all the problems female education has faced in Afghanistan, the history of female education in the country and the presence of even a small group of women with formal education has definitely been a continuous challenge to the various undemocratic and/or reactionary regimes of the country, including the Communists, the *Mujahidin* and the Taliban. It is from this group of women that many of the female leaders of Afghanistan have emerged and these are the women who together with other progressive and educated Afghan men have lobbied inside and outside the country for peace, tolerance and respect for human and women's rights. The 'agency' of many educated Afghan women throughout these years has certainly been subversive in its challenges to war, militarism, patriarchy, national/ethnic and religious inequalities as well as fundamentalism.

The practice of education for Afghan refugees has also often been a subversive act. It has been subversive in different ways. For example, when girls were not allowed to attend

formal schools in Afghanistan under the Taliban, families sent their girls to school in refugee communities, including in Pakistan. Or, in Afghanistan, many women (and some men) risked their lives to organize home-schools for girls and boys which was a direct challenge to the Taliban. Also, when the Governments of host-countries, including Pakistan, restricted access of refugee children to education, Afghans organized their own schools and programmes which in a way, was another subversive act. In these schools, at least some educators (many of whom were women) tried to provide a more moderate, liberal and tolerant education to Afghan refugee children. This too was subversive. The growing demand for education by Afghans in general and its links to the prioritization for education by the international community is also to a large extent a reflection of the positive image many Afghans now have of education and female education.

Thus, there is a need to look at different social constructions such as gender, class, nationality, ethnicity and religion concurrently when analyzing education and its impact. It is important to be reflexive about the inter-sectionality of various identities and how they are affected by education as well as the 'agency' of those involved, in particular, women. Also, it is important to realize that each context varies from another and while benefiting from relevant theoretical and empirical work, it is important to note the specificities of each context. Formal education usually changes some aspects of social inequalities, does not change others and even creates new ones. These all have to be contextualized. It is the dynamics of these various processes which need to be further analyzed and understood in research on education including female education and refugee education.

## **7. Conclusion and Future Work**

This dissertation has focused on the changing complexity of the lives of educated Afghan refugee women interviewed in Pakistan. It has demonstrated how their experiences as girls and women in their families, at school, university and in the work place has been shaped by patriarchy, ethnic and religious differences, as well as issues such as class and family background. Their everyday lives have been affected by and also contributed to the various changing inter-sectionalities of their identities. In addition, they have been



influenced by the desires of many of their mothers, and sometimes their fathers and husbands, to be educated, to work and to have more options and choices in life. Their own 'agency' as girls and women has also played a very important role in their lives. The political and ideological changes in their country, as well as the war, militarization and Islamic fundamentalism have further intensified these experiences. Though the women interviewed did not have much of a say in the events which overtook their country and lives, they were by no means only victims of these changes. Like millions of other Afghans, they struggled to survive with their families and communities and find meaning in their devastated lives.

In Pakistan, as refugees, they continued to face many of the challenges they had in Afghanistan such as living in the shadow of intolerant and in some cases, even misogynist leaders of the *Jehad* and their Pakistani and other supporters. In addition, they faced new challenges as refugee women, unwanted in another country with very little, if any, source of income. These women all took the challenges they faced on board and with remarkable resilience and perseverance tapped into their educational and other resources in order to work and earn money, as well as build a future for themselves and their families. In the process, much has been lost but they have also gained many new and valuable experiences. They have challenged patriarchy, war, militarization, religious fundamentalism as well as other exclusionary policies and practices based on nationality, ethnicity and religion. It has not been easy and they have not won all the battles. However, these experiences will surely enrich their lives and that of their families and communities in the future, wherever they might go and live.

As I reach the end of my Ph.D. journey and read the articles and reports on the situation in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003, I am reminded of the depth of the challenges which the country faces as it looks towards the future. Most Afghans, in fact, aspire for a future in which their basic survival is ensured, as is their access to landmine free space, water, food, fuel, basic health and education services, work, peace, tolerance, rule of the law, justice and respect for human rights and dignity. These are aspirations shared by most Afghan women and men, girls and boys, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara, Shiite and Sunni,

farmer, laborer, civil servant, industrial worker, aid worker, activist, homemaker, student, artist and journalist.

The above are also aspirations of the international community in its realization that Afghanistan's fate is important not only to Afghans but also to others in the world. Also the heartfelt humane belief that Afghans deserve a sustainable break from war, militarization, war economy, violation of human rights, poverty and the disregard for human dignity which ensues. Yet, according to news from Afghanistan up to May 2003, the attainment of these rights and goals remain consistently challenging with continued restrictions on girls and women, ethnic and religious discrimination, unequal distribution of resources and decision-making leverage as well as interference and meddling by other countries based on their own political as well as economic self-interest.

In this situation, Afghans and their friends search for hope, inspiration, precedence, spaces for change, positive role-models, courage, dedication, resilience and vision for all Afghans, by Afghans, especially Afghan girls and women. These are girls and women who have borne the brunt of the hardships of its history and especially of the past twenty odd years of war. In retrospect, having gone through the process of completing this dissertation, I realize that the lives, struggles, efforts and aspirations of the educated Afghan refugee women interviewed in Pakistan indeed provide the kind of dynamics which has defined and will continue to define what most Afghan women (and progressive men) want, are committed to and will hopefully and gradually achieve.

Many of the issues raised in this dissertation are worthy of further research, including the role of educated Afghan refugee women in shaping and changing the overall refugee environment in Pakistan (and elsewhere) and the international discourse on Afghanistan, gendered changes in refugee family relationships. Further research on the difference in refugee women's lives based on their proximity or distance to the 'home-country' is also important and relevant in refugee studies, as already mentioned above. In addition, the role of refugee female Afghan teachers in the socialization of Afghan refugee children, the influence of returning diaspora educated women to Afghanistan after the fall of Taliban on

the peace-building, nation-building, humanitarian and rehabilitation process is important to pursue.

In addition, the power relations between educated Afghan women and 'international' staff of the UN and INGOs and the outcome in terms of policies, plans and projects/activities is important to further study. The power dynamics between educated diaspora Afghan women and the majority of illiterate and much poorer Afghan women is also very important to understand with a view towards providing greater support/voice to other Afghan women. Further research on the changing national, ethnic, religious, class, marital and other aspects of the identities and consequent power relations of Afghan women in view of the transformations in Afghan society is similarly very relevant and important to undertake. Such research can also contribute to peace-building and peace-keeping efforts.

Based on this dissertation including the interviewees' experiences, as well as my own, many recommendations can be made for the Afghan government, the government of the hosts countries (in this case, Pakistan) Afghan civil society, educators as well as the international community. A few are mentioned below and some others are available in the Annexed articles to this dissertation.

- Afghan government: Importance of encouraging and benefiting from the participation of girls and women at all levels of society and politics. Importance of focusing on various channels of undogmatic education at all levels but especially girls' and female education in deprived urban and rural communities. Importance of ensuring multi-ethnic and religious representation at all levels as well as encouraging greater ethnic and religious exchanges and tolerance through all possible channels. Tapping into the potentials of returnee and diaspora populations especially of educated girls and women. Realizing the aspirations of most Afghans, especially Afghan women, with regards to dismantling of the *kalashnikov* culture and working towards 'demilitarized' and secure spaces. This is linked to disallowing certain groups, such as religious or political groups or individual men, to determine what is right and wrong for Afghan women.

- Pakistan government or any host government in the 'near abroad': Ensuring refugees are not threatened and/or represented by the most conservative and violent groups amongst them. This includes paramilitary and fundamentalist groups. Encouraging moderate, liberal and progressive refugee women and men to be heard and work in refugee communities. Providing good quality education to refugee children and youth as a pull-factor away from active participation in armed conflict and fundamentalist movements. Firmly discouraging anti-refugee sentiments by example, as well as other means. Facilitating the work of international and national NGOs with refugee NGOs and visa versa – especially women's groups.
- Afghan civil society: Importance of further reaching out to deprived communities in urban and rural areas, especially to women in these communities. Ensuring Afghan women are representing and make decisions at all levels. Remaining transparent and honest as a prerequisite for community trust and ownership of programmes. Maintaining indigenous priorities rather than donor-driven ones. Not forsaking critical and progressive politics as a result of government as well as donor pressure. Engaging with progressive groups in other countries with experience in war and displacement, as well as peace-building, human rights and rehabilitation.
- Afghan educators/educators working with Afghans: Working towards undogmatic, thought-provoking and relevant quality education for girls and boys especially in deprived urban and rural communities. Using various means to encourage the participation of girls and young women, of all ethnic and religious groups, in educational institutions. Working towards the development of a culture of peace, tolerance and respect for human rights through education, especially respect for women's rights and rights of different ethnic, religious groups and classes. Participation of women at all levels of the educational process. Tapping into experiences of displaced children as well as teachers, in developing educational agendas.

- International community: Listening to Afghan voices, experiences and needs, especially that of Afghan women and progressive groups. Working based on an in-depth knowledge of the country and its history, as well as respect for its people and their experiences. Consistently focusing on human and women's rights issues, as well as the rights of children and ethnic and religious minorities with local civil society. Not being led by the political agendas of powerful countries and lobbies. Building programmes around indigenous priorities with local human and other resources whenever possible, especially with the involvement of women. Providing long-term and sustainable support, including promised and required funds.

While the experiences of Afghan women, in Afghanistan, as refugees, as educated women, from their various communities and class positions are rich and important, they will not automatically translate into better opportunities and times for Afghan women in the years to come. Only a concerted political and collective will is able to bring peace, justice, greater equality including gender equality and democracy to Afghanistan in an indigenous and sustainable manner. Improved knowledge and understanding of the situation can support movements for progressive change. I hope this dissertation is a modest contribution to these efforts. Nothing is to be taken for granted in Afghanistan and what gains Afghan women have made - in the process of paying a tragically enormous personal and collective price - must be actively safeguarded and built upon.

Last, but certainly not least, this dissertation has not only been made possible by but also is a tribute to very many Afghan women who have shown extraordinary strength and resilience in surviving and challenging patriarchy, national, ethnic, religious, class and other inequalities, political despotism, militarization, Islamic extremism, international neglect and displacement with dignity and hope in their life times. Their remarkable experiences, lives, efforts and views are important for us all, as we too attempt to challenge multiple and interconnected inequalities and injustice at various levels through our personal, professional and political endeavors and journeys. May the future journeys of Afghan girls and women be in peace!

## Tapestry of Resistance

Educated Afghan Refugee Women in Pakistan: 'Agency', Identity and  
Education in War and Displacement

Annex



**Afghanistan: Basic Data on Selected Indicators**

Population:	23 million (2001) 1√			
Children under five:	Apprx. 5 million			
Land Area:	652,000 sq km			
Climate:	Continental (extremes of temperature)			
GNP:	US\$ 280 (1994)2√			
Infant mortality rate:	165 per 1,000 live births3√			
Under five mortality rate:	257 per 1,000 live births (1995)3√			
Maternal mortality rate:	1,600 per 100,000 live births (2002)4√			
Adult literacy:	Estimated 24% for men, 12% for women			
Access to safe drinking Water:	Rural 5%, Urban 39% (1990-96)4√			
Malnutrition:	Acute malnutrition 14-35% of children under three years of age5√			
Childhood deaths:	42% result from diarrhea diseases & acute respiratory infections 21% result from vaccine preventable diseases			
Pregnant women:	5% of births attended by trained health personnel 4√			
Immunization Coverage(routine):	<u>Antigen</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>2001</u>
Children under one :	BCG	: 54%	48%	55%
	DPT/OPV3	: 43%	32%	45%
	Measles	: 48%	37%	46%
Women (15-45 years):	TT2	: 12%	15%	26%

**Source:**

- 1√ Projected population  
2√ State of the World's Children report, UNICEF, 1997  
3√ SOWC, 1997  
4√ MMR Study by UNICEF/CDC in four provinces, 2002  
5√ Unpublished data of MICS, UNICEF 1997  
6√ Routine coverage report, 1999, 2000, 2001



## **Annex III**

### **Introduction to Interviewees**

1. Banafsheh was in her 20s at the time of the interview in Peshawar in March 1998. She is Pashtun and Sunni. She was working as the Coordinator of an Afghan women's group at the time. She was single and lived with her younger siblings in Peshawar, while her parents and other siblings remained in Kabul. She had spent the first 20 years of her life in Paktia and in Kabul, Afghanistan. She had been unable to complete her university education in Kabul due to various reasons. Instead, she had begun work with the international community at a very young age. It was towards the end of her time in Kabul, with the takeover of the Taliban, that she became more outspoken on women's rights issues and eventually left Kabul for Peshawar, Pakistan. Her outspokenness on women's rights issues resulted in her being threatened in Pakistan as well and she left for the US with her siblings in 1999. She has continued her human rights efforts in the US, while completing her university education and arranging for her parents and other siblings to also join her in the US.
2. Katayun is Tajik and Sunni. She was in her 40s, married with five daughters at the time of the interview. She had spent all her life in Kabul, Afghanistan, until they left during the peak inter-group Mujahidin fighting in the early 1990s. They first came to Peshawar and later moved to Islamabad. Her husband held a senior position with the Afghan Communist government. She was unable to go to University after her high-school diploma but managed to do so later in life, after she was married and had begun to work. She worked for the Afghan Airlines for some years and later joined the UN. She was working for the UN at the time of the interview as well. In 2001, she and her family left Pakistan for Canada where is now working for another international organization.
3. Nejla is Seyed and Farsi-speaking. She was in her 30s when we spoke and is married and has children. She left Kabul after the Communists took over power in the early 1980s. She was able to complete her higher education in Pakistan. She has had various jobs in Pakistan but worked with the UN at the time of the interview. She was also involved in Afghan women's organizations in Pakistan. After the interview, she left the UN organization for various reasons but continued her activism. She has now returned to Kabul, Afghanistan and is working with the UN on gender issues.
4. Haedeh is Tajik and Sunni, though might have converted to Christianity at the time of the interview. She was in her early 30s, single, lived with her mother and siblings and worked mostly as a journalist. She was involved with Afghan women's organizations as well. She had been unable to complete her university education in Afghanistan due to the war. She left for the US shortly after our interview and was realizing her dream of completing her higher education.
5. Parto is Pashtun and Sunni. She is single and in her 30s. She lived in her village in Southern Afghanistan before moving to Kabul as a child. Her family moved to

Pakistan early during the Communist period as her family was involved in anti-Soviet activities. In Pakistan, she has succeeded in completing her university education. She has been in charge of a couple of NGOs working for women and children in the past years in Islamabad and in Peshawar. She has also been active on women's rights issues. She has returned to Kabul, Afghanistan, and is working for an international human rights organization.

6. Ghamar was in her 20s at the time of the interview. She is half-Pashtun and half-Tajik but Farsi-speaking. At the time of the interview, she was living with her mother and younger sister with another family. Her mother was a domestic worker at that family's home. Her father had remarried and continued to live in Kabul with his second wife and family. Ghamar has two other older sisters who are married, one living in Peshawar, and the other having lived in Peshawar, gone to Iran and now returned to Kabul, Afghanistan. She was herself involved in a very abusive and unhappy marriage and had been taken to Afghanistan, Iran and back to Pakistan several times by her troubled husband. She had lived and studied in Kabul before this round had begun. She had however not been able to go to university due to various reasons. She does not have children. She was unemployed at the time we spoke but had worked in a government office in Afghanistan before the Taliban took over power. In 2000/2001, she succeeded in divorcing her husband, began English language courses and work. She left for the US with her mother and sister in 2001 and is now working in a kindergarten and writing her life story.
7. Samira is Uzbek and Sunni. She is married and had one child when we spoke (now she has two). She is a medical doctor and was brought up largely in Kabul, Afghanistan. During the war, her family moved to Mazar Sharif where she lived and worked until the Taliban took over Mazar Sharif, and she and her family fled to Pakistan. She has worked with international organizations for the past years. She has also been involved in women's issues. Her parents left for the US in a couple of years ago and she herself gave birth to her second child in the US. She has now moved back to Kabul, where she continues to work with the UN on women's issues.
8. Shahrareh is Tajik, Ghizilbash and Shiite. She was in her late 20s at the time of the interview. She is single and living on her own in Islamabad, Pakistan, at the time of the interview. She lived in Kabul and Mazar Sharif, before the Taliban took over Mazar Sharif. Her mother has passed away and she is not in contact with her father who was irresponsible towards his children from several marriages. She is a graduate of journalism from Kabul university and worked for the UN in Mazar Sharif and later in Pakistan. She was also studying French and learning to drive. She has since left Pakistan for the West.
9. Davudi is Uzbek, Sunni, the mother of Samira and in her 50s. She is married and has children, as well as grandchildren. She has lived in Kabul and Mazar Sharif in Afghanistan. She has a first degree from Kabul University and a Masters from abroad. She is perhaps the first women of her ethnic group to have such high level education in Afghanistan. She worked as an educator in the government of

Afghanistan. She later began to work with the international community. At the time of the interview, as she had recently come to Pakistan, she was unemployed. Later, she found work with an INGO in Pakistan but did not stay with them for too long, as she and her husband and unmarried children left for the US. She is now working in various part-time jobs in the US to make ends meet.

10. Rahimeh is Turkmen/Hazara and Shiite and was married at the time of the interview. She is a medical doctor and had studied in Kabul. She had also lived in Mazar Sharif and Bamiyan, before the Taliban took over Bamiyan, and she was forced to flee and came to Pakistan. Her husband worked for the UN but she was unemployed at the time of the interview. She has been very active in various social organizations, including those of one of the Islamic political groups of her ethnic group. She had quite a senior position with the group in Bamiyan. She has now returned to Bamiyan to work once again amongst her own ethnic group.
11. Haleh is Pashtun, Sunni and is married and has children. She was working for an international organization when we spoke. She had also worked for them in Kabul, Afghanistan, before moving to Pakistan in 1992. She was very active in Afghan women's organizations. She has since left for Canada where she has continued to be active in women's issues.
12. Fariba is Tajik, Shiite, and single. She ran a school for refugee children in Islamabad at the time of the interview. She was also involved in Afghan refugee education organizations. She had completed her university education in Kabul and worked in a hospital earlier in Afghanistan. She came to Pakistan after the Mujahidin took over power in the early 1990s. She lived with a couple of her siblings in Pakistan, one of which had recently been killed. She has since left Pakistan for the West.
13. Rehaneh is the mother of Ghamar, is married but separated and has children and grandchildren. She was educated in several locations in Afghanistan but was unable to go to University. She worked in Afghanistan, as a civil servant in two ministries. She left Kabul with her youngest daughter when the Taliban took over, as a result of their ban on female formal education, as well as her husband's second marriage. She worked as a domestic worker in Pakistan in order to make ends meet. She has since moved to the US and is ironing for a living while her dream of her youngest daughter being educated is becoming a reality. She is concerned about the two older daughters she has left behind, one in Pakistan and the other in Afghanistan.
14. Ziba is Hazara and Shiite, as well as single. She works with an INGO in Peshawar, Pakistan on rights issues. She lives with her mother and younger siblings, for whom she is responsible. She has a few siblings abroad as well, as do many of the other interviewees. She studied in Kabul, Afghanistan before moving to Pakistan. She completed vocational courses in Pakistan, which opened the door for her to work in international agencies. Like some of the other interviewees, she has also participated in conferences for Afghan women and on Afghan women's issues.

15. Parvaneh is Pashtun, married to a Tajik and has children. She lived and study in her village in Southern Afghanistan before moving to Kabul as a child to study. She did not go to University. She worked as a literacy teacher in Afghanistan before moving to Pakistan in 1992. Her husband works for an Afghan NGO. In Pakistan, she worked as a tailor to make ends meet. She has since returned to Kabul, Afghanistan but more recently, once again moved to Pakistan in order for her children to have better quality education.
16. Azadeh is Tajik and Sunni. She is married to a Pashtun and has children. She lived in Kunduz, Afghanistan, before moving to Kabul. She is also amongst the first women with university education from her community. She was an educator in Afghanistan and also one of the first and few female members of the Loya Jirga in the 1970s. In Peshawar, Pakistan, she worked with NGOs and was also active in Afghan women's issues.
17. Saffron is Hazara/Ismaeli and Seyed. She lived in Kabul, Afghanistan, where she studied and work, before moving to Pakistan in 1994. She has been supporting her parents since. She has worked as a domestic worker, as well as in a small income-generation project for Afghan Ismaeli refugee widows. She was planning to leave with her parents for Canada at the time of our interview in early 2002.
18. Khaledeh is half-Pashtun and half-Tajik. She is married and has children. She studied in Kabul but also traveled to other countries before moving to Pakistan. She was an educator in Kabul, Afghanistan, as well. She came to Pakistan during the time of the Communists as her family was under pressure. She has worked for an INGO in Peshawar and also been involved in Afghan women's efforts.
19. Goli is the daughter of Parvaneh, under twenty and single. She is half-Pashtun, half-Tajik and Sunni. She lived in Kabul as a small child before moving to Pakistan. She has been studying in Afghan and Pakistani schools as a refugee. She is also the oldest child and therefore has family responsibilities. An American female friend has been living with her family for some time and this has had a strong impact on her life. She has returned to Afghanistan and works with the UN, living with her father.
20. Nazanin is Uzbek and Sunni. She is single and lives with her siblings. In Afghanistan, she was able to study in Kabul and later in Mazar Sharif as well as in Pakistan. She has a masters degree in literature. She has worked as a university professor in Afghanistan and moved to Pakistan from Mazar Sharif when the Taliban took over. She has attended various trainings as well as attempted to do different jobs during this period in Pakistan. She had a small home-school for Afghan refugee children at her home in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, at the time of the interview.

Annex IV

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*Afghan Refugee Women's Organizations in Pakistan (1980-2001): Struggles in*

*Adversity*

**Introduction**

This paper is informed by feminist historical, practical as well as theoretical considerations pertaining to gender, conflict and displacement issues. I do not know of any other attempt to document the history of Afghan refugee women's organizations in Pakistan and hope, albeit modest, mine will be a contribution and tribute to Afghan refugee women and their often heroic efforts.

The scarcity of academic articles on Afghan refugee women's organizations is itself a sign of the neglect of women's endeavors in this field of study until very recently (Indra, 1998). With the exception of articles here and there (Dupree, 1988), the majority of books written on Afghanistan in the past two decades has been related to the anti-Soviet wars and the Islamic Parties from a patriarchal perspective such as for example *War Without Winners: Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition After the Cold War* (Rais, 1994) or in the form of UN and NGO reports. Most of the books written on Afghan women's lives have been published only after the fall of the Taliban when Afghanistan became the center of worldwide attention. Though important in their own way, they largely focus on women's rights violations under the Taliban rather than on other aspects of Afghan women's lives since 1978 when the turmoil and conflict began (Armstrong, 2002).

Afghan refugee women's organizations have not been the focus of my work with UNICEF Afghanistan (1997-2002) nor my PhD but it has always been important for me in terms of my own activism. I have remained engaged with Afghan women's organizations in Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Canada for over seven years. Now, I feel it is time to document what I have learned during this period as women's organizations in conflict situations and in displacement is an important feminist issue. I want to share what I have come to know from many

incredibly brave and resourceful and talented Afghan women. I firmly believe that their experiences are important for Afghan as well as other refugee and women's groups. They are an excellent example of women's collective agency in support of peace and human and women's rights.

### **Historical and Political Background**

It is against the backdrop of the current situation of women's issues in post-Taliban Afghanistan that I am writing this article.<sup>1</sup> As you know, women's status and violation of rights by Taliban became one of the major issues in the protest against the Taliban over the years. Afghan women's rights violations became even more important after September 11, 2001 as another justification behind the US led war in Afghanistan – in addition to that of combating 'Islamic terrorism'.

With the fall of the Taliban towards the end of 2001, there were great expectations for all Afghans but especially Afghan girls and women (Benjamin, 2002). Over a million Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan within a matter of months from neighboring countries, as did some of the Western-based intelligentsia. Indeed, many Afghan women have gone back to work and numerous Afghan girls' have returned to schools and universities. There is a plethora of women's organizations and publications, and also gender programmes and officers in the international community. A Women's Ministry has been established and a number of women have and are participating in the political process.

However, as you might know, unlike the expectation of many foreigners, most Afghan women even in Kabul continue to wear the burqa for various reasons – including insufficient security but also long-held traditional views. This sense of continued insecurity is also due to the power exerted by a number of former Mujahidin (Islamic fighters) commanders who have very disconcerting track records including on violence against women and who continue to live and work with impunity. There have also been controversies regarding the

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a presentation made at the Center for Refugee Studies at the University of York, Toronto, Canada, in November 2002. I am a visiting pre-doctoral scholar at the Center for the 2002/2003 academic year.

outspokenness of the first Minister for Women's Affairs (Dr. Sima Samar) who has since been replaced and growing concerns about the continued restrictions on women and Islamic dogma in interpretation and implementation of the law and other policies.

Similarly, the international community, especially Western donors, have not provided the new regime in Kabul or the various international agencies (UN, INGOs, NGOs) with the funds promised earlier or the expanded International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF). Both these are pressing needs as expressed at various venues by many Afghan women's organizations as well as other members of Afghan civil society, and the Afghan regime and parts of the international community. The situation in Afghanistan remains fragile for all Afghans, including of course Afghan girls and women (September 2002 report of the International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development on Afghanistan written by Ariane Brunet and Isabelle Helal).

Please keep this brief summary of the current situation in mind as I discuss the general historical background of Afghanistan and then go into the more directly relevant history for this article.

Afghanistan is a very heterogeneous country with an ancient history (Dupree, 1973). It is home to approximately 20 million Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, Turkmens and many other smaller ethnic groups. The main languages are Pashtu and Dari, with many others also being spoken. Afghans follow Sunni Islam, Shiite Islam, Ismaeli Islam as well as a small number who are Sikhs, Baha'i, Jews and Christian.

During various periods in its history, parts of Afghanistan have been dominated by the Persian Empire, Alexander the Macedonian and his descendants, Kushans of Central Asia, the Moghuls and others. It was in 1747 under Ahmad Shah Durrani, a Pashtun tribal leader, that Afghan territory was expanded to include most of what is now known as Afghanistan. Afghanistan became a nation-state in 1880. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Afghanistan was witness to a series of Anglo-Afghan wars which demonstrated the zeal of Afghans in fighting for their independence though they still had to make various concessions with the colonialists.

With a very brief gap in 1929 when a Tajik called *Bach e Saqao* (the water bearer's son) ruled over Afghanistan, the country has largely been under the rule of Pashtun leaders (Olesen,1995).

The last King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, ruled from 1933 to 1973 and continued the Western-inspired modernization efforts of some of his predecessors, including in terms of education and women's issues. These efforts benefited the urban and more privileged Afghans more than others. In 1973, the King was overthrown by his cousin, Mohammad Daoud, who proclaimed the Afghan Republic. Daoud initially worked closer with Afghan leftists and the Soviet Union but gradually began to distance himself from them. Thus, in 1978, the Communist forces in Afghanistan under the helm of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) killed Daoud and his family and took over power, beginning their top-bottom social changes.

From the very beginning of their reign, they began being challenged by various forces but especially the Islamic mujahidin fighters who were supported by many Afghans but also the US, its allies, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others. As a result, the Soviet military forces entered Afghanistan in 1979, in support of the Communist regime. What followed was an extensive war which destroyed large parts of the country and resulted in millions leaving Afghanistan. Within a continuum, the Islamic Parties followed a dogmatic vision of Islam with restrictions on women and their lives and denounced both Western-inspired as well as Soviet-inspired modernization efforts as well as the increasing liberties at least a minority group of Afghan girls and women were experiencing in Afghanistan.

Eventually, in 1992, in a UN brokered peace process, the last and conciliatory leftist leader, Dr. Najibullah, resigned and the first Islamic President of Afghanistan came to power – Mojadadi. Unfortunately, the hopes of Afghans were shattered once again when the various Islamic groups continued and intensified their struggles over one another, further devastating the country and its people. This provided a ripe situation for the Taliban to benefit from and eventually, in 1994, they began their expansion from Kandahar in Southern Afghanistan and by 1997 had taken over most of the country. Northern Afghanistan was the only part of the



country that was never taken over by the Taliban until their downfall (Maley, 1998). This is where the famous Commander, Ahmad Shah Masoud, and the former President, Professor Rabbani, were based, the former in Panjshir and the latter in Faizabad, Badakshan. Though not as extreme as the Taliban, the forces in the North also restricted women's lives and work. I was to see this in person in the various trips I made to Badakshan and the one trip I made to Panjshir between 2000-2002.

While restrictions on women's rights increased with the Mujahidin rule, they reached almost unthinkable levels under the Taliban. Taliban banned women from work (except with certain conditions in the health sector), formal girls' education, freedom of mobility and association, amongst other violations of human and women's rights. Their policies and actions outraged most Afghans and gradually the international community. However, it was the tragedy of 11 September 2001 which was to result in the overthrow of the Taliban and the emergency of a new regime, supported by the international community, with Hamid Karzai at its realm.

Afghan women like all Afghans have suffered enormously from over 24 years of war. All wars are gendered and women are often the targets considering their symbolic and actual role as 'mothers of the nation' and its 'authenticity and morality' (Yuval-Davis, 1999). This is, however, not the first time Afghan women have been witness to conflict and violence in their long history. Afghans are very much aware of the collective memory of the Anglo-Afghan wars of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century mentioned earlier (one of the heroines of which is a Pashtun-Afghan woman called Malalai) or ethnic-based expansion into the Hazarajat by the Pashtun Abdul Rahman Khan and rape of Hazara women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Mousavi, 1998).

In addition, many Afghan women continued to face day-to-day challenges even before the more recent wars began because of patriarchy, class differences, ethnic and religious discrimination and other inequalities. This is in particular the case for poor urban, rural and tribal (Kuchi) women. Parallel to this situation, a minority (though gradually increasing) number of women had better and more opportunities and higher positions in the past decades and especially before the war began in 1978-79. Ethnic, class and other social differences greatly impacted the opportunities of Afghan women.

The war resulted in all kinds of intensified and tragic harsh conditions for Afghan women – from losing their jobs and sources of livelihood, homes, communities, family members, being killed or injured themselves, to imprisonment, forced abduction, rape, forced displacement and many other forms of violence and repression. Of course, the experiences of all Afghan women is not the same and their experiences of war-related suffering plus their ability to respond and make choices has depended on many factors – including their class, education and ethnicity. Nevertheless, almost all have in various ways gone through much more than many can imagine.

In spite of the above, it is important to realize that Afghan women were never ONLY victims of war and Islamic fundamentalism as depicted in much of the mainstream media. Their lives have been and continue to be much more complex. Fortunately, in fact, at all times, even during the worst days of their history, many Afghan women were involved in efforts to challenge the root causes of war, patriarchy and Islamic dogma. It is one manifestation of this struggle – Afghan refugee women's efforts and organizations in Pakistan - which I wish to share in this paper. It is also one of the possible indicators of some of the gains made by at least some Afghan women over the many years of conflict, though as a result of a collective tragedy and at great personal cost.

### **Historical Background of Afghan Women's Organizations**

I will now continue with a short historical background on Afghan women's gatherings and organizations. Most of this information is from my own recollection of what I have heard, seen or read in the past years and I am thankful to many Afghan friends for what I have learned from them on these issues.

There had been some top-down and elite women's organizations and charities run by women from the 1920s in Afghanistan – largely organized by the royal family – who were Pashtun and tribal leaders, though reform-minded bent on nation-state building and modernization. Even such seemingly unthreatening women's set-ups were controversial and resisted by

reactionary clergymen and feudal/tribal leaders – nevertheless in most cases they were able to continue in a rather small scale with state support. Many were founded by the King's wife, mother and sister. One was called the *Anojan e Ali e Zanan* (Women's High Association). These were quite elitist organizations (Emadi, 1993) though they did somewhat expand the space for women in general. There were also some women's only public spaces in those decades in Afghanistan such as the Women's Cinema or Women's Parks which have also played a significant role in the lives of many Afghan women of that generation – at least in urban places like Kabul, Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif.

Various women's only gatherings in the private domain around life cycle and religious events and ceremonies continued to play an important role in the lives of many Afghan women. Women were also involved in the arts including as poets, singers, dancers and actresses (Doubleday, 1988). The last artist to get the title of *Ostad* (Ostad) before the war was a woman singer, Mahvash. I was fortunate enough to attend her first performance after the fall of the Taliban in London in March 2002. Of course, over the years, especially between 1960 to 1978, before the war began, more and more women worked as teachers, professors, doctors, engineers, journalists, parachutist and so forth. A few reached very high levels of the government hierarchy.

One of the first all-women's political organizations was the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) established in the mid-1960s (one year after the People's Democratic Party was established) and headed initially by Anahita Ratebzad who became a Minister after the Communists took power in 1978 (Emadi, 1993). It was later called the All Afghanistan Women's Council. Its membership was never high but no doubt after the Communist take-over of 1978, many Afghan women were coerced/ encouraged to join DOAW or its related Youth Organization. Many of these women were involved in the literacy programme of the regime. No doubt, some women did benefit from this period including those who were sent to the former Soviet Union for higher education. However, their Soviet education would often make other Afghans be somewhat suspicious of their allegiance in the post-Communist era. Similarly, under the Communist regime, those who had been educated in the West or knew English well were held in suspicion.

There were always a large number of more independent Afghan women who resisted joining state-sponsored Communist organizations. It took courage to do so at the time – especially if you held a public position - and many had to pay the price for their dissent including by losing their good jobs, including some of the women I interviewed for my PhD and MA dissertations.

Women's organizations affiliated to other leftist groups like the Maoist *Shohleh-e-Javid* (Eternal Flame) were also established around this same time. The Revolutionary Afghan Women's Association (RAWA) was initially also a Maoist organization and began in the 1970s. RAWA is probably the best known Afghan women's group in the West, especially after September 11, 2001. Ethnic/religious minorities especially some of the Hazaras were more sympathetic to these non-Soviet inspired movements and quite a number of their leaders moved to the Scandinavian countries as the situation became more tense and dangerous in Afghanistan. Last year for international women's day, I participated in an Afghan/Iranian meeting in London UK in which a Hazara/Afghan woman who had been with one such group since her youth in the 1970s spoke.

Parallel to this, as the anti-Communist movement grew, there were informal women's groups in support of the Islamic parties in Afghanistan. The first 'martyr' of the Mujahidin is Naheed Saied, a female high school student, who was killed by Government forces at an anti-Soviet demonstration in Kabul in 1979. She seems not to have been affiliated with any of the Islamic Parties but rather was simply against the Soviet military intervention<sup>2</sup>. Whatever her main motives might have been, she was to pay the ultimate price for her courage and commitment. There are many stories of mujahidin women hiding arms under their *chadori* (long veils/Islamic attire) and providing all other kinds of support to the cause of the *jihad*

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<sup>2</sup> I want to thank Najia Zewari for confirming this issue in an email exchange in December 2002. Najia also added that two other high-school girls were killed at the same demonstration. Najia believes that because they, unlike Naheed Saied, were not from elite families, they are now not as well known. Najia also mentions how Naheed was active in various extra curriculum activities at high-school and that she also played the role of Afghanistan's most famous historical female figures and was thus already known amongst some Kabuli circles. Naheed was also admired for her beauty.

(Islamic war) which was at that time very much also linked to liberating Afghanistan from 'foreign' agents – the Soviets – and a rather popular movement.

There were also women's groups organized around literacy, health and agriculture as well as handicrafts by Ministries, the UN etc. – so less overtly political, and more social welfare oriented.

Then as millions of Afghans began moving to Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere and the central state became weaker and weaker, many of the activities for women which existed before came to a standstill and its leaders or organizers left the country and this is where the real focus of this paper begins. Consequently, the nascent Afghan women's groups and organizations inside the country were dramatically weakened and their experiences dispersed all over the region and world through mass displacement.

I have divided the activities of Afghan refugee women and their organizations in Pakistan into three phases for better contextualization, though in reality there is of course overlap and the divisions are not as clear-cut.

### **Afghan Refugee Women's Organizations in Pakistan**

#### **The Jihad Era: 1980-1990**

This is during the main period of the Mujahidin struggle against the Soviet supported regime and Soviet presence in Afghanistan, known as the Jihad or holy war. Also the heyday of the presence and activity of the Islamic parties based in Pakistan with Western, Pakistani and other support. In addition, this phase coincides with General Zia's period of rule in Pakistan and his Islamization programmes which greatly restricted progressive forces and women in Pakistan. Refugee and refugee women worldwide are impacted by not only the politics of their home country but also that of the country they have been displaced to and Afghan women's experiences confirms this.

During this Phase Afghan refugee women are just finding their feet, adjusting to life as refugees, recovering from the various blows they had faced and many maintaining a very low profile. On the other hand, some were gradually beginning to challenge the dominant fundamentalist Mujahidin views which restricted women especially in their public lives. The Mujahidin at this point, however, still had a much support amongst many Afghans including rural Pashtun Afghans who had become refugees in Pakistan.

When Afghan women became first refugees in 1979, it was a wave of largely rural women with little or no formal education and experience of public life. Many moved with their whole village or extended family.

Afghan women had to deal with their own day-to-day lives and tried to establish themselves in a new environment after all the suffering they faced as a result of war in Afghanistan. The displacement, the change and adaptation was remarkably difficult for many of them, as experiences of other refugee women in Asia, Africa and elsewhere shows (Mojab, 2001, Indra, 1999, Wali, 1995). They came to Pakistan (and Iran) as muhajerin (an Islamic term that refers to those who leave their homeland for religious reasons). Many of the Afghans who came to Pakistan were Pashtuns and therefore shared a language and other cultural values with many of Pakistan's Pashtuns – especially those who moved to the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, bordering Eastern Afghanistan.

At the same time, most of the Islamic political parties (Mujahidin) had their base in Peshawar, Pakistan, and enforced strict gender rules and regulations and restricted the activities of women – unless it was in their own support. And there were gradually women's branches of the various Islamic Parties. For example, Hezb-e-Islami had a Women's Association, as did Jamiat-e-Islami. Some of the women involved have had a better reputation than others, based on their commitment, sincerity and work for other Afghans in need.

In the early 1980s, women's issues were an anathema and if you discussed gender-related issues you were either called a Communist (which was not very much liked by many other refugees either) or a Christian trying to convert (Dupree, 1988) This was of course

encouraged by some of the Islamic parties but also supported by a considerable segment of the largely rural refugee population who partially blamed educated people for their suffering and war in Afghanistan. The *maktabis* (those who have gone to school) were looked upon with disdain by many in those earlier years as they were seen to symbolize either the Westernized or Sovietized elite who had departed from 'true Islamic Afghan identity' and/or were somehow responsible for the conflict with many of the leaders on both sides having received formal and higher education.

The disappearance of Ashara, a working nurse, in mid-1990 in Peshawar, further frightened many other Afghan refugee women. No one was ever to know what exactly happened to her after she was dropped home from work (Mayotte, 1992).

Restrictions on girls' education and women in general were not seriously challenged by the aid community at the time. This happened for various reasons including the overall and uncritical support for the Mujahidin against the Soviets and arguments of cultural relativism. It was generally much more important for the West and its allies that the Mujahidin defeat the Communists and the Soviets in Afghanistan than how they treat their own citizens especially girls and women. The Pakistani regime, on the other hand, was benefiting politically as well as economically from its support to the Mujahidin, as allies of the US.

However, there were many Afghan refugee women (especially educated ones) who saw the need for action on their part in support of other Afghan women and their community in general. While being obliged to support their families and address their own survival needs, they also wanted to be part of a larger effort for other Afghans. Sometimes these were linked together – what they could do for themselves would also help others.

It was in fact dangerous for an Afghan refugee woman to be active in the public sphere in those initial years in Pakistan. For example, the founder of RAWA (Mina Keshwar) was assassinated by the Communist regime's secret service (KHAD) in collaboration with that of Golbedin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami's men. She was killed in 1987 (Amnesty and RAWA websites). Those who killed her have recently and finally been convicted in Pakistan and

executed. Nevertheless, RAWA has continued its activities including semi-clandestine or clandestine schools for girls and women under the Taliban, demonstrations, publications and advocacy, always at great risk. It has consistently taken a very strong position against all the various political Islamic groups of Afghanistan, from the Mujahidin commanders to the Taliban, calling for separation of religion and the state. There were other smaller leftist groups active in the refugee environment those earlier years including Saza which was also a Maoist organization and had a female following.

Afghan refugee girls and women, who were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to study in Pakistan, did so, as their studies in Afghanistan had in many cases been interrupted by the war. A considerable number attended English and computer courses over the course of this period. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) established courses for Afghan refugee women which continue upto the present and played a significant role in the lives of many refugee women as they provided them especially with the important language skill of English. Knowing English was and is important, especially if they want to work for the UN or INGO or be considered for UNHCR resettlement. Formal education of Afghan women has been a political, sensitive and controversial issue for many decades (Pourzand, 1999) while remaining a key issue in terms of women's empowerment and advancement.

In the beginning, all those active in these areas faced great resistance from conservative forces. For example, IRC which was and is a well-funded organization was very careful to remain as cautious as possible by ensuring all instructors were women, conservatively dressed and that transportation was provided for the young female students. Yet, inspite of all their concern, IRC's director in Peshawar was also threatened in the late 1980s and had to leave the country (Mayotte, 1992).

### **Islamic States of Afghanistan and Afghan Women Refugees: 1990-1995**

This more or less coincides with the end of the anti-Communist and USSR struggles of the Mujahidin and their success in establishment of an Islamic regime in Afghanistan. Therefore, most of the Mujahidin leaders returned to Afghanistan though maintained smaller bases in



Pakistan – as did many refugees. In Afghanistan, the Mujahidin leaders and their armed forces began restricting women and at times, using violence to control their appearance and behavior. Pakistan was moving beyond the General's Zia extremely oppressive period, though not to the extent anticipated by progressive Pakistanis.

During this period, Afghan women were increasingly building on their skills and experiences and had found a new niche in the refugee environment for themselves and their organizations. Afghans including Afghan women had also become more familiar with aid/humanitarian work as a result of the increasing number of INGO offices which established bases in Pakistan over the earlier period of the conflict.

This period also coincides with a new wave of refugees – many were educated and urban professionals escaping the inter- Islamic party struggles and the growing restrictions on women (Rubin, 1995)

Some Afghan refugee women found jobs with the UN and NGO community or came with their jobs as UN and NGO offices relocated to Pakistan in many cases – for example, UNICEF. These women were of course the more educated ones, with proficiency in the English language. Some found new jobs with the UN, INGOs and NGOs. As mentioned earlier, the number of NGOs had increased in the earlier period due to the funding available for what became known as cross-border operations – so implementation took place across the border, in Mujahidin held territory, especially in rural areas of Afghanistan – from a base in Pakistan.

At some point, some of these agencies preferred to hire Afghan women for various reasons including political 'safety' as well as affirmative action and reaching other refugee women.

Increasingly, more refugees were exposed to health and education services in the camps and gradually their weariness or suspicion towards the education of girls and women and their public role began to decrease. The increased importance of women's financial contribution to their family's survival had also somewhat changed gender relations and perceptions of many Afghans.

Many UN/NGOs developed women-centered projects including for example the Danish Committee for Aid to Afghan Refugees (DACAAR) Afghan Women's Weaving project. DACAAR is supported by the Danes. Its manager was for some time Safia Sediqui, an Afghan woman, who moved to Canada in 1999 (and is now back in Afghanistan again as the Director of Planning and Foreign Relations at the Ministry of Women's Affairs). Quite a number of educated Afghan women became involved in the camps with education, health, income-generation and other activities, serving the majority of poorer and camp-based refugees. As female social mobilizers in camps, some Afghan refugee women carried out various social programmes and gradually also developed women's committees/centers in some of the camps.

A number of these organizations also had gender focal points in their offices which was another opportunity for educated Afghan women. These Afghan focal points would sometimes work with an international gender officer, as was the case with the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan. Some of these organizations were based in Pakistan but their staff, including female Afghan staff, was expected to travel to Afghanistan for the Afghan-based projects. This happened with great difficulty of course, especially during the years of the Taliban, but it did happen.

Some other Afghan refugee women established Afghan schools and/or taught in these schools. One of the first education centers for Afghan refugee women called the Afghan Women's Education Center (AWEC) was established in 1991 in Islamabad, Pakistan by Mahbooba Karokhail, the daughter of a highly respected anti-Soviet military leader from Southern Afghanistan known as Hassan Khan Karokhail or Khan Karokhail. She too was threatened at various times by the Islamic groups but did not give up. Her Center continues to be active and is now run by her younger sister, Palwasha Hassan<sup>3</sup>, who now heads a Canadian Human Rights Organization in Kabul (the only Afghan to do so).

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Palwasha for her friendship as well as sharing of experiences and information.

Tajwar Kakar<sup>4</sup> who is now Deputy Minister for Women's Affairs was also one of the first women to be active in Pakistan in terms of working on refugee women's issues. She had been a teacher in Kabul, worked with the anti-Soviet resistance, been taken prisoner in Afghanistan and suffered torture before coming to Pakistan. In Pakistan, she tried to expand educational facilities for Afghan refugee women including *Lycee Malalai*. However, eventually, Tajwar Kakar had to also leave Pakistan, for Australia, as her life was once again threatened.

An Islamic Women's University, *Omayat Al Momenin*, was also established with the support of one of the Islamic parties, Jamiat-e-Islami, in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1990, and was attended by quite a number of young Afghan women. I have met Afghan women who are not dogmatic in their religious views and yet felt they had benefited from their education at this University. It accepted students in the area of medicine, literature and Islamiat. In 1997, it had 800 female students and funding was provided by the Norwegians, as well as perhaps others. Initially it was free but in 1996, students were asked to pay a modest fee<sup>5</sup>. The Dean of Medicine was Dr. Malalai Salimi, who according to a student of hers, was a very hard-working and committed person. The overall Director, however, was a male member of Jamiat who was not liked by the students. These education institutions were important in terms of refugee access to education, as well as the socialization of Afghan children and youth within an Afghan environment. This University was closed by the Pakistani authorities in 1997.

The Afghan University of Peshawar which was initially established by some of the Mujahidin groups also had female students – 800 female students as compared to 1200 male students. It also had female professors. It too was closed by the Pakistani government for accreditation reasons a few years ago, which obviously angered many refugees and their organizations.

The Afghan Women's Media Center was also established in Peshawar, Pakistan and provided video and journalism training for Afghan refugee women. It too was threatened by Mullana Younes Khales's Harakat-e-Enghelabi-e-Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Movement) and was forced to convert to a center for sewing and religious studies for women.

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<sup>4</sup> Ahmad Masoud shared this information with me in November, 2002 in the UK.

<sup>5</sup> I am thankful to Mariam Mokhtarzada for this information.

Some other Afghan educated refugee women established and/or worked in health clinics/hospitals.

A number of these refugee women established their own NGOs, women's NGOs with their own family resources and/or that of friends until such time that they could do some fund-raising with the international community. Some also had projects inside Afghanistan and their staff would travel back and forth, though with great difficulty. Dr. Sima Samar's NGO – *Shuhada* - was established during the beginning of this period. Shuhada had clinics and other activities in Quetta, Pakistan, for refugees, as well as schools and clinics in Afghanistan especially the Hazarajat where she is originally from. It was that experience that spearheaded her international recognition.

Another Afghan refugee women's NGO from this period is the Afghan Women Welfare Department which in their website says it has trained over 6000 Afghan refugee women in education, vocational training, health and income-generation in Peshawar.

And other women refugees chose to establish or join NGOs with Afghan men in more general areas, including overall aid provision, conflict resolution and human rights or were involved in several such organizations at the same time.

A few continued to be involved in journalism, poetry and other artistic work. There were a number of refugee women's publications in Peshawar, including SADAF of the Cooperation Center for Afghanistan (CCA) – a human rights organization. A few were involved with the BBC/AED (Afghan Education Drama) which was and is very popular in Afghanistan with a great number listening to it regularly. It combines entertainment with social messages including rights issues and women's concerns such as domestic violence.

There were of course the groups who were more overtly political, including the Afghan Women's Council of Fatima Gilani (established in 1993) and RAWA. The Council has run schools and clinics for refugees in Peshawar and also been involved in advocacy activities and

has a publication for women called *Zan-e-Afghan* (Afghan Women). Its leader has also been threatened in the past. She is the daughter-in-law of Seyed Ahmad Gilani, the Pashtun leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (*Mahaz-e-Melli*).

Mention should again be made of the women's groups affiliated to the Islamic political parties like *Jamiat-e-Islami* and *Hezb-e-Islami*. They were less active and visible in the last years of the conflict. RAWA continued its activities throughout this period, condemning the various Mujahidin groups and their supporters.

The Ismaeli Afghan religious minority group was supported by the Agha Khan Foundation and they had their own refugee schools most of this period and provided direct and indirect support to many Ismaelis. At least a couple of income-generation activities/projects were organized by Pakistani and other Ismaeli women for Afghan Ismaeli refugee women. One was organized by the Ismaeli Council of Pakistan and another by Sabrina Kassem-Jan who was a Canadian-Ismaeli living in Pakistan (and also worked with the UN on gender and human rights issues). She sadly passed away in November 2002.

#### **Challenging War and Fundamentalism to the End: 1995-2001**

This coincides with increased disillusionment with the Mujahidin and their rule over the country as they spiraled into viscous internal wars, Taliban rule, continued war, as well as increased human and women's rights violations and also a further wave of Afghan refugees to Pakistan.

More Afghan women (and men) were united against Taliban's policies restricting women and their other oppressive regulations and practices. Afghan refugee women's experiences have incrementally increased and they are ready to take more upon themselves and their organizations in the international arena. They are also realizing more and more that their voice matters and they have the potential power to influence others. This realization is echoed in different ways by an increasing number of international organizations and groups as well.

Among some of the new refugees were a number of professional women who had worked first with the last leftist regime of Dr. Najibullah in Kabul and then fled to Mazar-e-Sharif and worked with General Dostom in senior positions. They had to flee once Taliban entered Mazar as well and continued to feel insecure also in Pakistan. Such women usually sought asylum elsewhere in the West as soon as they got to Pakistan.

Initially, the Afghan Islamic Government headed by Professor Rabbani of *Jamiat-e-Islami* was supposed to officially send a delegation to the Women's World Conference in Beijing in 1995. For various political reasons, at the last moment the delegation was not sent. However, Afghan women from the diaspora were represented. It was an important moment for Afghan refugee women's organizational history. After the Beijing World Conference for Women, a number of educated Afghan refugee women in Pakistan who had attended the Conference, and had felt the need for further concerted action for a long time, got together and established the Afghan Women's Network (AWN) in order to enhance the status of Afghan refugee women and lobby for peace in Afghanistan. I will further discuss the AWN later in this article.

I have recently heard from Belguis Ahmadi, who was the first Coordinator of the Network that parallel to the establishment of the Network in Peshawar, another similar Network was established in Kabul just before the arrival of the Taliban by a number of very active women including Zarlisht Mirbacha, Rana Safi, Mina Masoudi, Karima Salik and Zarghuna Lafrai, as well as Masooda Jalal, Mahbooba Hoquqmal and Belguis Ahmadi and that it later continued clandestinely by Masooda Jalal and without contact with the Network in Pakistan under the Taliban. A number of its co-founders had also meanwhile moved to Pakistan and elsewhere.

A number of new organizations were also established by Afghans and Afghan women – including the Center for Refugee Street Children and Women in Peshawar, Pakistan and Irfan Center for Afghan Cultural Activities. These were new types of refugee organizations and some of the work they did was quite risky at that time, for example, organizing mixed-sex poetry events. A few refugee women planned to set-up a shelter for women but they found it a

very difficult task in that particular environment however some of them on a more personal and informal basis did help other Afghan refugee women in need by hosting them temporarily in their own houses.

Afghan Youth Groups were also established with branches inside and outside Afghanistan. The Islamabad branch was headed by an Afghan woman and brought together Afghan youth, represented them at international conferences and made linkages with others inside Afghanistan. This initiative was in its first stages supported by UN/ HABITAT and a particularly committed international female staff member from the UK (Samantha Reynolds) who is still involved in the Afghanistan programme.

Afghan educators organized themselves in the Afghan Education Committee which later splintered into two groups. Its goal was to enhance education amongst refugees and harmonize fundraising. Many of its leaders were women. This was supported by Save the Children (US) and the UN. Some Afghan educators paid a very high price for their efforts. For example, Ms. Khaterzai who had a school in Islamabad lost her younger brother – also an educator – when he was killed in Islamabad a number of years ago in their family home. The family and many others believed it was targeted and not a theft-triggered episode as officially reported.

In 1997 when I had just joined UNICEF Afghanistan, the Afghan Women's Resource Center was in the process of being established in Pakistan with funding promises from donors. I participated in a couple of their meetings. However, due to the lack of support from donors this initiative never really saw the light of day. It is also a reflection how donors often in actual practice did not support Afghan women's organizational efforts to the degree expected and in fact, let Afghan women down at times.

Also, the UN Afghanistan offices though based in Pakistan had a mandate for work inside Afghanistan, while the UN Pakistan offices had a mandate for work amongst Pakistanis therefore Afghan refugees were often not covered by their programmes. The exception is of course UNHCR. Often, Afghan women and men would tell us, " you are all talking about

under Taliban in Afghanistan, you can do it here with refugees, why don't you?". This issue of mandate/territory only began to change with the worsening of the situation in Afghanistan from 2000 onwards as a result of continued conflict combined with the most serious drought seen in the country for 30 years and therefore, a new wave of refugees, and especially after September 11, 2001 and the US led war which resulted in a further wave of displacement.

According to their own documents, the "Afghan Women's Network is a non-political and profits organization of Afghan women. Its aim is to promote solidarity and cooperation among Afghan women, strengthening their capacity to enhance their self-reliance and attain their rights."

It was in fact the AWN which became the foci of much of what was happening in terms of advocacy and humanitarian/development activities for Afghan women in this third phase, inspite of its limited resources. It had at some point branches in Islamabad and Peshawar and wanted to also expand to Quetta. Due to the departure of many of its members in Islamabad, including its leader (Gulalai Habib), to the West, the Islamabad branch was not active these past few years. Though the Peshawar branch also lost its members, but it had more to tap into and for various reasons remained more active. Members of the network worked as volunteers and most of them were either employed at an aid agency or had their own NGO. Many continued to have various links inside Afghanistan.

Gradually, the Network grew in prominence and more organizations did their training through the Network. The Network also made statements regarding the situation in Afghanistan, met with foreign dignitaries and its members represented Afghan women at various international conferences. In 1996, it launched a Peace and Human Rights Campaign, later released statements on the Taliban's discriminatory laws on women, and on the US led war in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. It was the AWN which met the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Afghanistan, Dr. Kamal Hossain, or the UN Special Rapporteur for Violence Against Women, Radhika Coomaraswamy and others. In 1997, when the UN highest appointee on gender issues, Angela King, came to Pakistan with senior staff of other UN agencies, some members of the AWN felt she had not been as generous as



staff of other UN agencies, some members of the AWN felt she had not been as generous as expected with her time and wrote a letter to this effect to her. This act demonstrated their growing sense of confidence. I understand this issue is now in the past and there are no longer any hard feelings on this matter.

The AWN included older and younger Afghan women. Some had experience working in Afghanistan (for example were part of the *Loya Jirga* or Tribal Council in the 1970s) and before the war and others had spent much of their life in Pakistan. There were sometimes generational differences and clashes with the older women saying that these younger women have forgotten our Afghan tradition of respecting older people but nevertheless, they tried to overcome these differences with time. The Network has also seen various phases over the years – including a phase when ideological and ethnic differences were more prominent. In terms of religiosity there was also a difference, some were more religious and/or conservative than others in their views. But those years at least, all Afghan refugee women more or less (and the more or less did matter) wore some form of ‘Afghan’ clothing and a shawl/scarf over their hair (for some this would be see-through and would fall all the time, for others, it was more serious business).

I believe that one of the reasons the Network is important is that it represented and brought together a spectrum of Afghan women with different views, which is also one of the reasons it was and is different from the more radical and overtly political groups like RAWA. RAWA too continued its activism throughout this period and also upto the present. RAWA is currently also strongly condemning the new regime in Kabul as not being very different from the Taliban or the earlier Mujahidin and denouncing what they see as a continuation of fundamentalism.

I don't recollect hearing very radical views expressed by Afghan women at these meetings – judging by Western feminist standards. They were not openly engaged in for example questioning religion in favor of secularism or sexual freedom though they no doubt had differing perspectives on these matters which one could sense in personal encounters. But

when considering their unique context, what they did collectively was indeed very brave and groundbreaking.

I need to mention again that most of the women involved as leaders in these activities were amongst the more educated and privileged which in that situation did not, however, mean they had not been through a lot of problems themselves.

In response to Taliban's institutionalized gender discrimination, as well as the increased organizational experiences of the afore-mentioned organizations, their solidarity with one another grew and they were able to focus on their main objectives of peace and respect for human and women's rights. The Network initially worked out of the Afghan Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), the main NGO coordinating body but more recently was able to rent an independent office in Peshawar and expand its activities. Belquis Ahmadi who is now working for the International Human Right Law Group in Washington, was one of their first coordinators in Peshawar, Pakistan based at ACBAR. It initially had only one full-time/paid coordinator/liaison officer or administrator. That has changed since last year. But still, most of the work is done on a volunteer basis. There were several hundred members last year. I am sure it has increased now. This was an issue also because many of their best members had other commitments and were unable to spend a lot of their time with the AWN though they tried their best.

The AWN also held an annual International Women's Day Campaign which we at UNICEF supported, even or especially during the Taliban years. After September 11, 2001, the Network members all became so busy with visitors from all over the world vying for their time. I think overall they dealt with the rapid changes and focus on their work very well. Their statement on the post September 11, 2001 events was circulated around the world at that time. I was able to provide some modest support to this effort. Its members were invited to participate in all the important international and national meetings related to Afghanistan and contribute towards the various statements and plans. AWN was also involved in research on returnee women at that point. It also facilitated the provision of humanitarian aid to new refugees. Many of the same women are now working for UN agencies, NGOs and other

organizations inside Afghanistan, while the refugee-base also continues to be maintained. The Network now has an office in Kabul as well.

It is very difficult (and sometimes also not accurate) to ideological label the afore-mentioned organizations in view of the complexity of the Afghan context and the changing dynamics of these organizations. However, overall RAWA is no doubt on the radical end of the spectrum, with organizations like the AWN somewhere in the center and the women's organizations affiliated to the Islamic Parties to the right. Nevertheless, the reality is more complex, with each group including members who have a range of personal and political views, as well as ethnic, religious, tribal, class and other affiliations which influence their views and actions in a changing manner. At the end of the day, it is what each of them as individuals and as a group have been able to do to actually serve the greatest number of Afghan women which should matter most. I hope to follow-up this paper with one focusing on an in-depth feminist analysis of the ideo-political positions of the various Afghan women's organizations.

In view also of the extreme pressure on Afghan women in general, including their organizations, in a very repressive atmosphere, I believe that many of them have not had enough opportunity to further develop their various political positions and views on a greater range of issues and articulate them with enhanced depth, linking these to wider and global political and theoretical concerns and movements. On the other hand, they have had remarkable experiences surviving war, displacement and fundamentalism and challenging human and women's rights violations in these contexts. No doubt, given the opportunity, they will be able to expand their political horizons quickly and effectively.

Over the years, the Afghan women in diaspora became more involved in Pakistan as well. Some would spend a few months each year in the region and the rest in the US, for example. Soraya Sadeed of Help the Afghan Children is one such person. For example, she did fundraising in the US and then bought medicine and other items and took them herself as much as possible inside Afghanistan from Pakistan, even under the Taliban. She also established a few center/schools in Pakistan/Afghanistan. Others would just send funds in support of existing programmes, rather than organize them themselves. Ms. Yaqoobi is an

Afghan educator who has spent half of her time in the US and half in Pakistan working with refugees for the past years. Adeena Niazi who is the head of the Toronto based Afghan Women's Organization also visited and supported projects in Pakistan and Afghanistan over the past years. She represented Afghan-Canadians in the Loya Jirga (Grand Council) in the summer of 2002 in Kabul which selected the President and made other important decisions. She has won several awards for her activism in Canada.

And yet others would come a few times during this period to network, provide training, gather material for advocacy with for example the US government and public against the Taliban, war and for more funding for Afghan women's programmes. This included, for example, Afghan women's activists like Dr. Ziba Shorish and Sima Wali. Both these women are founders of NGOs. Dr. Ziba Shorish, an anthropologist, heads the Women's Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (WAPHA). Sima Wali is the President of the international NGO focusing solely on displaced women called RefWid. She was also at the Bonn Conferences on Afghanistan in December 2001 as one of three women at the meeting and had also won several awards in the US.

NEGAR, an Afghan women's organization based in France, led by Shukria Haidari had the very clear political objective of ensuring the international community does not recognize Taliban. This was shared with me in a meeting with Ms. Haidari in Kabul in January 2002. A couple of years ago they took a group of important Western women with some Afghan women to the border of Tajikistan to take them further down to Panjshir which was in non-Taliban hands in order to lobby against the Taliban. The Declaration of Essential Rights of Afghan Women which they wrote was signed by President Karzai in early 2002.

The Western diaspora activist Afghan women have different ethnic and religious backgrounds and affiliations, as well as political positions though they all agreed on the need to end the war in Afghanistan and ensure the rights of Afghan women are respected. Some like Ms. Haidari, it was felt, were closer to the Northern Alliance which is now a big power holder in Afghanistan. Others, like Sima Wali, represented the former King's group at the Bonn Conference and were thus seen as closer to that wing of the anti-Taliban oppositional forces.

However, considering the complexity of Afghanistan and the multiple aspects of the identities and views of the women concerned, one needs to remain very cautious in making totalizing statements about their affiliations.

Remittances from the diaspora also began to support some of the afore-mentioned organizations – an increasing percentage of these remittances were from Afghan women who were beginning to work and earn money in the West. Remittances from Pakistan to Afghanistan were also very important to the livelihood of many Afghans, especially Afghan female-headed households.

And indeed many tried to leave Pakistan by approaching UNHCR, making use of vulnerable women resettlement programmes. Many never got a chance but of course there were those who did and were able to study, work and gradually, support other Afghan women in the region as well. Some also left the country through traffickers and many faced enormous difficulty, such as those who went towards Australia in early 2001 and faced enormous hardship as a result of the Australian government's reluctance to give them asylum. Afghan refugee claimants in Australia have continued to make headlines in 2002 with their protests at Woomera Detention Center.

Some of the Afghan women also engaged with Pakistani Women's Groups and activists, though not as much as could have been the case. For example, there were some exchanges with Sherkat Gah in Lahore and the Sustainable Development Policies Institute (SDPI) in Islamabad and Aurat Foundation in Peshawar. Dr. Saba Khattak at the SDPI has conducted innovative research on Afghan refugee women in Pakistan. There were also some limited contacts with Afghan women's groups in Iran but again not as much as could have been more mutually beneficial. This is partially due to restrictions in Iran on working with international NGOs as well as the tense relations between Iran and most donors.

Some of the members of the AWN were also asked to support research by academics/activists in terms of finding the interview sample, helping in interviewing, translation but also sometimes more, as part of the research team. Examples include research by the Women's

Commission for Refugee Children and Women, Physicians for Human Rights and Women Living under Moslem Law.

Sadly, there were also those thousands and thousands of poorer Afghan refugee women who had no choice but to seek exploitative work such as carpet-weaving, housework, and/or turn to begging, prostitution and trafficking. They represent the true tragedy of the situation. Many of them were and are also educated and had worked as civil servants in Afghanistan. And of course there were those who did not work but stayed at home or in their refugee camp locations, depending on their male-kin (who earned very little) or minimal aid from the various agencies. Some did not survive the hardship, poverty, hunger and illness. The rate of drug addiction amongst Afghan female refugees in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan increased over the years according to the UN Drugs Control Programme (UNDCP) in a report issued in 1999. It is also a sad reality that all these various organizations and agencies together were unable to ensure the basic rights of all or even most Afghan refugees in Pakistan are met and in fact, much more assistance was needed at all times.

The role of non-Afghan women in support of Afghan women is also an interesting/ important issue and worthy of further analysis in terms of the power relations, exchanges and what can perhaps be called transversal politics. They obviously have come from different countries and backgrounds. There were and are a few non-Afghan women who have been involved in the region for decades including Nancy Dupree (who is American), who lived in Afghanistan before the war with her husband, the late Professor. Louis Dupree, who is also a well known Afghan specialist. These women have made the region their home. Their politics and gender politics of course various. A few made critiques of the Feminist Majority and their Afghanistan Campaigns during the Taliban era as being unsuitable for the realities of Afghanistan and self-serving. In extension, some of the work of other Western-based groups on Afghan women's issues was also criticized. This was done in private as well as more formally at aid meetings.

There are those non-Afghan women who were part of UN/NGO Afghanistan programmes for a few years and then moved on. Many were committed to the work they did and were able to

make an impact. Some of the non-Afghan women who left at the end of their assignments have remained engaged with Afghanistan by writing, doing research, lobbying, making regular visits back. I would fall in that latter category as I continue to do research, talk and publish on Afghanistan, as well as provide support to Afghan women's groups and maintain relationships with Afghans in various locations.

Then there are those non-Afghan women and their organizations that have supported Afghan women from outside – including individuals like the Canadian journalist Sally Armstrong (2002), the European Union's Ema Bonino and others. Their politics are also obviously not all the same. Jemima Khan, the UK socialite who is now married to Imran Khan, the Pakistani former cricket champion and now politician, has also supported Afghan refugees and Afghan women as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador and in her own capacity. Some have willingly or unwillingly contributed to the victimhood stereotype of Afghan women and the homogenous representation of Afghan women and Afghan refugee women and/or Afghan women as Moslem and therefore as automatically completely oppressed women who cannot stand up for themselves. Others have been more thoughtful and critical and attempted to present the complexity, heterogeneity as well as agency of Afghan women and refugee women.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Children and Women is a US based organization that has had a presence in Peshawar now for 4/5 years which should be acknowledged. Their first representative in Peshawar was Sippi Azarbaijani Moghadam (2000), an Iranian-British woman with many years of experience in Afghanistan. For the Commission, she wrote several reports including on returnee women from Iran as well as Taliban policies on women's employment. Based on that and other experiences, she now works with the European Commission in Kabul especially on gender issues.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, a great number of Afghan women resisted the tragic situation with which they were faced with various strategies, some of which were mentioned above. They were by no means only victims at any point in time – as I hope to have shown. This is not however to reduce

from the gendered problems and discriminations most of them faced or the suffering of war and displacement which they had to tolerate. Obviously, their situations depended on their class, education level and many other factors – as mentioned earlier. Some suffered more than others and had fewer financial and/or cultural capital to fall back on or to build upon.

You might ask whether I think or believe that these movements and in particular the AWN was and is a feminist organization. I would say if one looks at the context and situation in which they were working, yes. Yet, on the other hand, it is important to reflect and respect the way most Afghan women involved would themselves like to be known. Some might currently not be very comfortable with the label of feminism, fearing it might cause resentment and alienate them from more mainstream processes. Al-Ali (2000) has referred to this same issue in the context of Egypt.

You might also ask whether I think that the afore-mentioned groups are the basis of a women's movement in Afghanistan, to which I would respond in the affirmative in spite of the fact that a majority of Afghan women still remain outside their fold. The women who have been and are involved in the above groups have the potential of providing the leadership required for the women's movement in Afghanistan to gain further strength and move forward.

All these women and efforts put together have been very important and done remarkable work in incredibly difficult circumstances. While supporting less privileged Afghan women, men and children, these experiences have also provided many Afghan educated women who were refugees or are refugees in Pakistan with increased leadership, organizational and advocacy skills, as well as human rights and women's rights awareness, plus that of fund-raising, negotiations and networking, locating themselves on the international scene of women's efforts. It has also played an important role in raising awareness amongst the international community and other Afghans on women's status in Afghanistan. No doubt, much more could have and should have been achieved if there was greater support from the international community and other factors. Much remains to be done now and in the future.



Many women involved in the afore-mentioned endeavors have and will go back to Afghanistan and have or will become involved in peace-building and reconstruction of Afghanistan, as strong members of its post-Taliban civil society. In Afghanistan, they will join their sisters who had stayed in Afghanistan all these years and also tried their utmost to maintain their dignity and remain active, challenging the status quo.

Thus, in summary, I would like to reiterate that many Afghan women have at all times been challenging the various injustices and inequalities in their society and also at the wider level, employing various strategies according to the situation and possibilities. Their choice of action and efforts have been a reflection of the political developments primarily in their own country but also that of Pakistan – in the case of the organizations and efforts I have discussed -as well as the international situation vis a vis Afghanistan.

From these experiences, many Afghan refugee women through their personal and collective agency have been able to learn considerable new and valuable lessons, while supporting their less privileged sisters and brothers and raising the profile of Afghan women and their rights as well as the need for peace and democracy. Afghan women still have a long way to go but no doubt their past endeavours provide them with very rich experiences on which to build and for us all to learn from, given half a chance.

I would like to end this article by suggesting some policy recommendations for Afghan women's organizations and their allies in view of the challenges ahead.

- 1) It is very important for such organizations to critically document/tap into their lessons learned and valuable experiences so that these are not forgotten, lost and/or undermined but rather adapted, expanded and further enhanced.
- 2) It remains crucial that Afghan refugee women are not forgotten as more and more agencies have returned to Afghanistan. Being able to benefit from the potentials of returnee, refugee and Western diaspora Afghan women (and men) will remain important.
- 3) Women's organizations will need to maintain a political and critical though constructive relationship/engagement with the Government, other Afghan players,

UN, INGOs, NGOs, donors and the diaspora so as to effectively lobby and maintain women's rights issues on top of the agenda, within a holistic framework of human rights in Afghanistan. It is important that these efforts reflect the needs of various groups of Afghan women and not be driven by other agendas such as those of donors, neighboring countries or various Afghan political groups.

- 4) Inside Afghanistan, such organizations will need to link up with more community-based organizations and poorer urban, as well as rural women and tribal women (kuchis) and make sure it is indeed the really deserving Afghan women who are the focus of aid and other provisions and whose priorities inspire the efforts of other more educated and prosperous Afghan women and their international allies. This is of course critical.
- 5) It is also important that women's organizations not become/remain elite organizations or an elitist movement (as has happened with women's group and their leaders in some other countries). This is also related to learning from Afghan history and not further widening the gap between the urban, educated elite and the rest of the population.
- 6) Also, it is crucial that women's groups build stronger alliances/coalitions amongst themselves as well as with other groups such as peace groups, human rights groups, environmental protection and cultural groups etc.
- 7) It is essential that these organizations continue engagement with the gendered socio-political scene in dynamic and creative ways including through networking with other refugee and women's groups in other countries who have been through similar transitional periods especially those in the region, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

## **Glossary**

**Badakshan** – a province in Northern Afghanistan

**Chador, chadori** – Veils of different length

**HABITAT** – a UN organization dealing largely with living environments such as housing and urban issues. In Afghanistan, it has been successful in organizing men and women into councils as well as youth groups.

**Harekat-e-Enghelab-e-Islami** – a largely Pashtun ethnic based Islamic group with strong fundamentalist tendencies

**Hazarajat** – Central Afghanistan where the Hazara minority live. Most Hazaras are Shiite and Farsi speaking..

**Herat**- city in Western Afghanistan

**Hezb** – Political Party

**Hezb-e-Islami** – a largely Pashtun ethnic group based Islamic mujahidin group headed by Golbedin Hekmatyar with strong fundamentalist tendencies

**INGOs** – International Non-Governmental Organizations

**Jamiat-e-Islami** – a largely Tajik ethnic group based Islamic mujahidin group headed by Professor Rabbani which was restrictive about women's issues but not like Taliban or

Harekat-e-Enghelab-e-Islami

**Jihad** – Holy war

**Kabul** – capital of Afghanistan

**Kuchi** – Pashtun tribal people

**Loya Jirga** – Tribal Council

**Maktabis** – Those who go to school

**Mazar-I-Sharif** – city in Northern Afghanistan

**Muhajirin** – Moslems who have been displaced for religious reasons

**Mujahidin** - Islamic fighters

**Mullana** – Religious leader

**NGOs** – Non-Governmental organizations

**Northern Alliance** – a coalition of forces based in the North who opposed the Taliban, led by Ahmad Shah Masoud, Professor Rabbani, General Dostam (an Uzbek and secular leader) and at times, Hezb-e-Wahdat, a Hazara-Shiite Islamic group.

**Panjshir** – a valley in Northern Afghanistan

**Sherkat Gah** – a Pakistani feminist group based in Lahore, Pakistan but with wide international recognition and networks

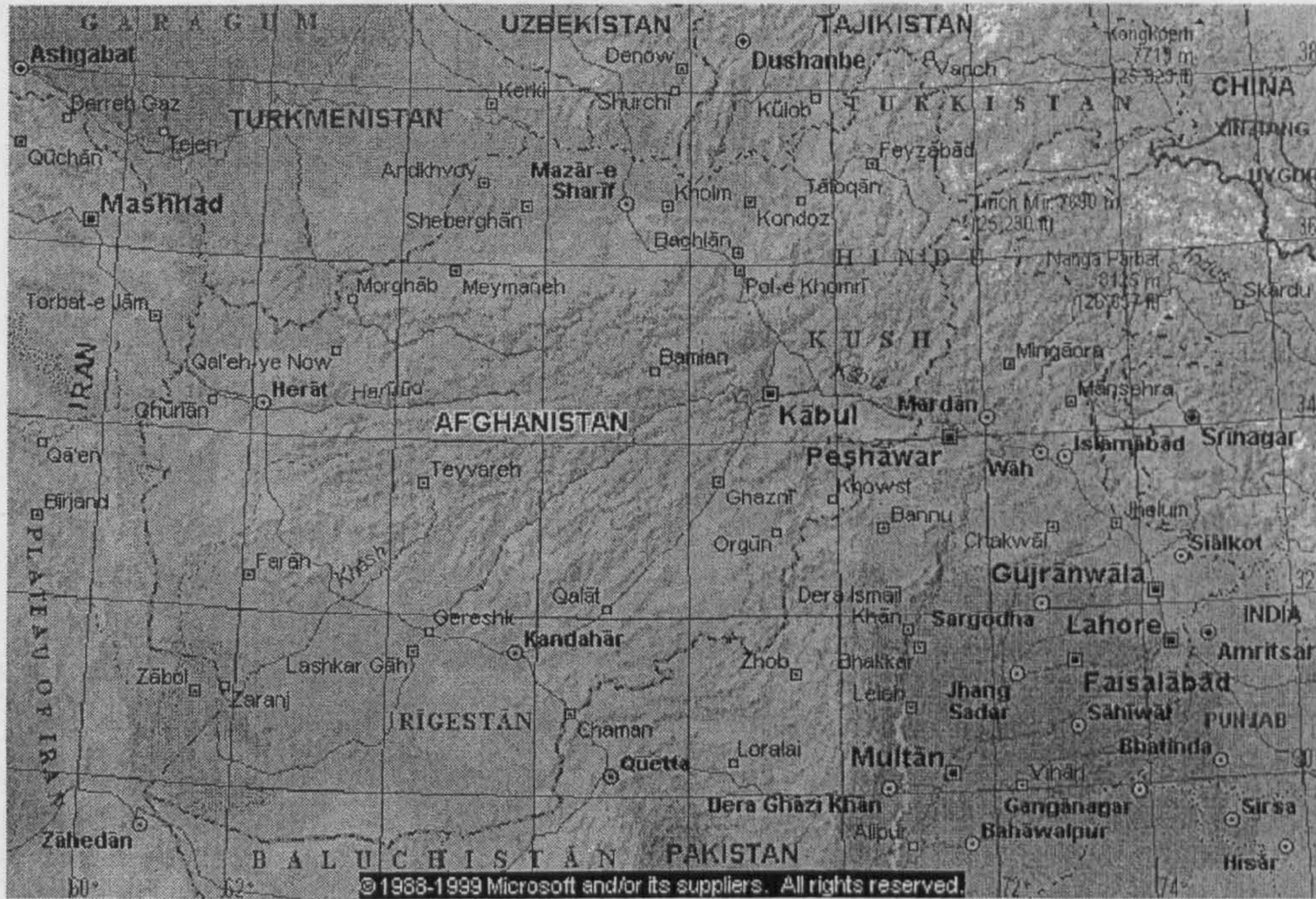
**UNDCP** – United Nations Drug Control Programme

**UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**UNICEF** – United Nations Children’s Fund

**UNOCHA** – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance

# Map of Afghanistan



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Amnesty International, RAWA, RefWid and ICHRDD websites

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## Annex V

### For Publication in Women Living Under Moslem Law, Special Dossier, 2003

#### Education in Afghanistan: A Gendered Ideological Terrain

I will begin by outlining some of the general issues regarding education. I will then move into the specific situation of gender and education in Afghanistan in the past decades, with a focus on the Taliban, women's resistance and some lessons learned.

#### Education: Not a Neutral Terrain

First of all, formal education is not a neutral terrain, unlike its predominant representation. Education is usually a site of the reproduction of inequalities in society including those of class, gender, race and ethnicity. It is to a large part through the various processes of education that our children are socialized to fit within the stratification of the society in which they live. This is also linked to nationalism, religion, citizenship and other factors. All of these are, of course, interconnected though in ever changing ways.

Education is sometimes also used to change the members of a collectivity and/or the citizens of a nation-state, usually based on the aspirations of its rulers – for example, towards Western-based modernization and capitalist consumerism or towards socialism or what we see happening in some of our countries now, towards the so-called ideal and authentic Moslem woman or man. These efforts are always also gendered.

Yet, the processes or decisions or rules and regulations which include and exclude a particular group of children (and/or adults) from formal education is itself a direct and/or indirect reflection of unequal and gendered power relations/resource distribution and the ideologies which sustain them, as is the reaction and response to and the approval or disapproval of particular groups in society of the state of education.

Nevertheless, education also has the potential of providing its beneficiaries with an opportunity to gain and seek new knowledge(s), become more analytical and critical, gain confidence, improve their own social status and seek change in the status quo. It is this potential which is often unfulfilled or only partially fulfilled in most our societies and which we would all like to see become more liberatory and progressive, for all people, especially undermined groups including most women.

The education of girls and women is particularly important since in patriarchal societies women are seen as the symbolic and actual representatives of the 'authenticity/morality' of collectivities, in particular religious collectivities, and of course, 'mothers' of the nation'.

### **Gender and Education in Afghanistan**

Now, to reflect upon the above in the context of Afghanistan – a country many have come to know much better through its Western media representation since September 11, 2001. A country whose girls and women have paid the cost of various ideological and political projects and battles – from Western modernization to Sovietization and more recently, Islamization.

Girls' education in Afghanistan has been a sensitive and political issue for many years. Formal and secular girls' education began as a top to bottom process in the 1920s by a reform-minded monarch (Amanullah) and his advisors in the effort to modernize Afghanistan. The Afghan reformers of the time, inspired by other Moslem reformers, sought to interpret Islam in a new light and rid it of superstition. From the onstart, their efforts were resisted by many religious as well as feudal/tribal leaders who saw this education as a threat to their own power. They denounced it as 'un-Islamic' as well as 'un-Afghan'. It was for this amongst other reasons that the monarch was overthrown in the late 1920s.

However, the process of expanding formal education continued under the same rubric of Western-oriented modernization for several decades with girls being gradually sent abroad for higher education and women beginning to work in the public sector. Resistance from conservative and reactionary groups continued with various ups and downs. Nevertheless, it is important to know that even at the best of times before the war – only 4% of Afghan women were literate – and many of the opportunities were available only to middle-class and elite girls and women. But still, these albeit limited opportunities did make a difference to an increasing number of girls and women. Many of these same women became and have become the progressive Afghan women leaders we hear of today.

The Communist regime of Afghanistan which seized power through a coup in 1978 also stressed girls' and women's education as a critical aspect of the socialist ideology and the creation of the 'new' Afghan citizen. According to UNESCO's Statistical Yearbooks, 1977 and 1988, female school enrollment rose from 14.5% in 1965 to 30.8% under the Communists in 1985. However, considering their coercive and top-to-bottom approaches, as well as the continued religious and traditional beliefs of a majority of Afghans, which was exploited by the mujahidin (Islamic fighters), a considerable number of Afghans resisted the new regime's education policies (even more than they had those of the monarchy which was somewhat more familiar to them). In fact, some Afghans decided to leave the country for this amongst other reasons.

Many of the Islamic political party leaders of what was known as the Seven Parties (and who were initially based in Pakistan) portrayed formal secular education, especially girls' education, as one of the root causes of Afghanistan's problems and distancing from what was seen as its 'authentic roots'. I consciously said many because not all the groups were in agreement on these and other issues.

The mujahidin by and large were supported by Western powers, as well as many Islamic countries in the late 1970s to early 1990s because they were seen as good fighters against the Communist ideology and the Soviet Union. Their frequently reactionary policies

regarding women and girls' education were for many years overlooked by the same groups. Moderate, liberal and progressive Afghan voices, on the contrary, were not heeded and in fact, were often silenced.

In addition, poor Afghan boys with very few if any other options were encouraged by the same political parties to enter madrassas or religious schools as these were expanding in Pakistan where they were refugees. The misogyny of many of these schools is now well known.

In addition, school books were prepared during the Mujahidin period by a group of their own educators and the University of Nebraska, with USAID funds. These books contained militarized and ideological language and examples such as if there are six Soviet soldiers and you kill two, how many are left. These were later taken out of the books as a result of lobbying by the UN and NGOs though the religious stress remained. The depiction of gender roles in these books was and remains traditional.

It was largely from the madrassas that the Taliban gradually expanded their power from 1994 onwards. The Taliban were initially supported by Pakistan, and to say the least, not seriously questioned by many Western governments for some time. They pursued the opposition to formal girls' education to its extreme by officially outlawing it throughout the country. In response to international officials, they would always say that this is a temporary decision until such time that they can ensure security for all girls and Islamic education. In any case, what it meant in reality was the deprivation of all Afghan girls and many Afghan women who were their teachers.

The Taliban used their reactionary interpretation of Islam, together with a reactionary understanding of the Pashtun tribal code of conduct (Pashtunwali) as well as the power of force and guns and other weapons, and inhumane punishment, to enforce this amongst other policies. While the Pashtunwali emphasizes certain egalitarian patriarchal notions, it also clearly strengthens male power over women of the tribe. Adultery is punishable by

death according to this code of conduct and divorce is not permitted, nor is women's ownership of property.

By preventing girls' education, the Taliban sought to resist what they saw as 'un-Islamic and un-Afghan behavior' and 'corrupt Westernization' and not surprising, this resistance was played out on the lives and bodies of women. It also demonstrated that they definitely felt threatened by educated women and women in general (as well as more moderate/liberal and secular educated men). Through enforcing such dramatic and violent restrictions/control on girls and women, they also sent a message to men – you better obey or otherwise you will live to regret it. Thus, it was one amongst a number of policies aimed at the suppression of all Afghans that were not on their side.

The education of boys was also a tragedy under the Taliban as it was of very poor quality and with a great emphasis on dogmatic Islamic lessons (often beyond the level of comprehension of very young boys), Talib-like attire and a discriminatory favoritism of the Pashtu language over Dari (the lingua franca of Afghanistan).

### **'Agency' of Afghan Women in Conflict and Displacement**

Progressive Afghan women and men never sat silent, nor accepted the rule of the Taliban or their reactionary policies on girls and women. They sought and found various forms of resistance. Some families left Afghanistan for other countries in search of education for their daughters. Others established refugee schools in Pakistan and Iran to educate another generation of Afghans in the diaspora. And perhaps the most brave were the women and men (mostly women) who organized clandestine and semi-clandestine home and community-based schools inside Afghanistan during the time of Taliban. I visited a number of such schools and met the women and men who ran them, always being impressed and humbled by their courage and commitment. A number of boys also participated in these classes, since they were usually of much better quality than the formal schools of the Taliban.

At this point, I want to briefly critique the predominant Western media stereotype of Afghan women as ONLY victims, of Afghan men as ONLY reactionary and of the West as THE ONLY possible savior of Afghan women and men – stereotypes which sadly remind us of colonial depictions of the Orient. This is definitely not the case, many Afghan women have continued to resist militarization, patriarchy and religious fundamentalism in small and large ways. Many, though not all, have also been inspired by the more positive and tolerant Islam which they know and recognize. So many of them are amazing and brave women with a lot to teach us all.

Similarly, many Afghan women have been supported by progressive Afghan men in their families and communities. Many of these men have also demonstrated commitment and courage in their efforts for the realization of women's rights in Afghanistan. As for the West, with the exception of individuals and some organizations, its governments have in fact several times overlooked rising trends of reactionary and gendered Islamic politics in Afghanistan and only begun to forcefully raise women's rights issues when it was in their own political interest to do so and not earlier.

### **Activism and Education**

Therefore, I believe that Afghanistan's recent past offers us all many important lessons. I will suggest a few:

- 1) As activists for human and women's rights in Moslem communities and countries, we need to remain vigilant about the various large and small education policies and decisions made in our countries and not leave them only to the state and mainstream education planners (or the religious groups which influence them).
- 2) We need to be able to recognize the negative repercussions of any decisions which affect girls and women in the education system as early as possible and to challenge these through our individual and collective voices and efforts.
- 3) We need to together develop visions of more progressive education for our children and link up with others in civil society in order to lobby for their implementation in

schools. We have to find ways of integrating our activist work with actual day to day efforts which impact the education systems of our communities and/or countries.

- 4) While accepting responsibility for and remaining critical of the growing gendered religious dogmatism in many of our own countries and its impact on the education of our children, especially girls, we also have to remain critical of inequalities at the international level, including in the mainstream Western ideological and cultural apparatus, which often homogenizes and stereotypes all Moslem women and men and their communities and experiences and/or facilitates gendered religious dogma and/or remains silent in its wake.

As for Afghanistan, I can only hope that with all the bitter lessons of the past and the courage of so many of its women and men, the country will be witness to peace and justice, as well as respect for human and women's rights in the years to come and that members of various associations and networks will be able to support them, learning from them in the process. I hope Afghan girls and women won't ever again have to pay the price of the various patriarchal and militarized national, ethnic and religious projects of others as well as that of their own leaders – including in the arena of education.

ANNEX VI

*Social*  
Social Analysis Journal of cultural and social practice  
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*Analysis*



**The Labours of Learning:**  
Education in the Postcolony

edited by **Anthony Simpson**

University of Adelaide



**THE PROBLEMATIC OF FEMALE EDUCATION, ETHNICITY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN AFGHANISTAN (1920-1999)**

*Niloufar Pourzand*

**Introduction**

This paper addresses the ways in which female education has been centrally positioned in constructions of collective identities in Afghanistan since the 1920s and documents the manner in which this factor has prevented female education from expanding. I demonstrate how the status of female education in Afghanistan is linked to the very important symbolic role women play in patriarchal societies as guardians of the collective ideology — societies and ideologies which are always gendered and give rise to various and, at times, conflicting discourses and views with regard to female education. Petet (1993:53) notes that women in Moslem countries in particular are “metaphors for the integrity of the Islamic community, expressing its purity in an idiom common to Moslem culture, honour and chastity of women”. In addition, these discourses and views are linked to the shifting national and ethnic identities of the country.

What is happening in Afghanistan currently in terms of female education is very complex, with its own very particular history. The issue of female education in Afghanistan today is not only a factor in internal differences and alliances but also in terms of the relationship between Taliban (religious students) and the outside world. At present, with Taliban in control of over 90% of the country, Afghanistan has the most conservative policies on female education in the world, with a ban on girls formal education and a ban on female employment except in the health sector. It is important to point out that restrictions on women are not limited to the above; nor are restrictions limited to women, as men face many hardships as well.

The particular context of Afghanistan is significant for several reasons, including its complex ethnic heterogeneity, its problematic experience with both Western and Soviet-style ‘modernization’, nation-state building and direct foreign intervention. These factors have been further exacerbated by 20 years of constant conflict, the major destruction of the infrastructure, as well as the human resource base of the country and the rampant drug trade. Afghanistan was a highly patriarchal society even before the war. However, some gradual changes were beginning to take place, especially in urban centres. The militarization of society, primarily by male leaders in the past twenty years, has facilitated the ‘reinvention’ of patriarchy in a much more abrasive manner. This has had a profound impact on female education discourses.

It is within the above framework that this paper tries to locate female education in Afghanistan since the 1920s up to the present and to demonstrate how various collective identities have expressed and asserted themselves by taking specific positions with regard to female education. This paper briefly covers the situation under several regimes in Afghanistan since the 1920s — including the monarchy, the Communists and more recently, the various forms of Islamic political leadership. The conclusion brings together arguments raised in this paper, linking discourses and views on female education to shifting concepts of nationality and ethnicity in Afghanistan.

### **Background to Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a nation of minorities (Jawad 1992) and a country of difference and diversity. This heterogeneity is integrally linked with how Afghanistan came to be, or, in Anderson's (1983) term, how it came to be "imagined". Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, followed by the Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkomens, Hazara, Baluch, Nooristanis, Aimaq and Panjshiris. These ethnic groups should not be essentialised, as there are many intra-ethnic differences, some of which will bring a particular sub-group closer to another ethnic group. In addition to ethnicity, Afghans are divided along tribal lines and by religion, ideology, language, parochialism, class, gender, marital status and ability/disability. The majority of Afghans are Hanafi Sunni Muslims including most Pashtuns (and the Taliban). Shiites (20% according to Halliday 1978) exist among the Ismaelites (believers in seven "imams"), as well as Twelve Imamites. The Pashtuns speak Pashtu, while Dari (spoken by the Tajiks and some other minorities) was the lingua franca of Afghanistan until Taliban came onto the scene.

The current population of Afghanistan is estimated to be 20 million. Over 85% of Afghans lived off agriculture in 1978 (Centrelivres 1988:142). Exact data pertaining to the present population structure is unavailable. The urban/rural divide in Afghanistan has been quite significant: "The development path followed by Afghanistan produced a schizophrenic society; an urban elite whose aspiration of a strong, unified state was at odds with the tribal and ethnic loyalties of the predominantly rural population" (Goodhand 1994:27). However, it is important not to homogenize all urban or rural populations. Within each, there have always been various trends and sub-categories. The urban population of Afghanistan, for example, were quite divided ideologically in the 1970s, with some supporting the monarchy, others opposing it from a Marxist position and yet others from an Islamic one. As a result of 20 years of conflict, many of the educated urban elite have either been killed or have left the country.

Modern Afghanistan emerged during the 1747-1880 period under the Durrani Kings (Pashtuns and Sunnis), as a result of only partially successful centralization and unification efforts. This is the same period during which the British colonialists were engaged in Afghanistan and three Anglo-Afghan wars took place. What is seen by some as the "xenophobia" of much of Afghan society is often traced back to the animosity towards British colonialists. It was the later Durrani kings who pursued

Western-inspired 'modernization' in Afghanistan, an effort which was always constrained by ethnic differences, strong conservative and traditional groups, limited resources and a weak industrial base.

The country experienced a brief period of Republicanism between 1973 and 1978, before falling into the hands of the Soviet-backed Communist Party, an event that was followed by the military intervention of USSR forces in Afghanistan. The socialist period came to an end in 1992, when the Islamic leadership took over the country, after 14 years of almost constant fighting in the name of an Islamic holy war (Jihad). However, inter-factional rivalries and conflicts — many based on ethnicity — within the Islamic leadership prevented the conflict from ending. This continuing conflict set the ground for Taliban forces (primarily Pashtuns) to emerge on the Afghan scene in 1995 and gradually expand their influence in most of the country, calling for the disarming of the various militias, the ultra-conservative implementation of Islamic *shariah*, the tribal code of conduct (Pashtun Wali) and Pashtun dominance.

### **The Discourse of Modernization (1920-1978):**

#### **Female Education, Colonialism, Élites and Nation-State Building**

Formal and secular female education began in Afghanistan during the reign of King Amanullah (1919-1929) and in line with his overall vision of a modern Afghan society based on western models of 'progress' and 'development'. He is known as the reformer King and father of female education. He wanted to forge a new and 'modern' Afghan national identity, which would surpass the various ethnic, religious, tribal and regional differences in the country. Female education was seen as a key institutional terrain for these changes to take place.

The King was influenced by Mahmud Tarzi, an intellectual who sought a modern version of Islam. Tarzi maintained that "only enlightened and educated women could be good wives and mothers [and] bring up the children in whose hands the future rests" (Olesen 1995:118). The effort to implement female education projects was linked to the "notion of the nation-state based on popular sovereignty" (ibid. 119). He wanted to grant citizenship rights to Afghans based on "liberal Western constitutions" in which "emancipating women to become equal citizens" (ibid.) was a part. It was "free and independent women ... on an equal basis with men who would build the new Afghanistan" (ibid. 132). According to this paradigm, a new national identity was being encouraged and women had to be part of the formulation. Female education was an important vehicle in this proposed transformation of society.

The first girls school was opened in Kabul in 1921. In his efforts to build schools and send young women abroad for further education, the King faced many challenges and much opposition, the most serious of which came from the clergy and tribal leaders. Certain religious leaders contended that education for women "would lead to the breakdown of the family and sexual anarchy and would ultimately degrade women. The honour of the nation would be lost" (Dupree 1984:307).

Such opposition gradually weakened the power base of King Amanullah, until he

was overthrown by a Tajik rebel — Bacha I Saqoo in 1929. Bacha I Saqoo's rule did not last long and another Durrani leader, Nader, entered the scene. Nader was more conservative than Amanullah and closed all girls schools for a few years to appease the opposition.

It was during the reign of the last King of Afghanistan (1933-1973) — Mohammad Zahir — that the greatest efforts towards girls education were made, in line with 'modernization' efforts. It was during his reign that in addition to an expansion of provision of school education for girls, young women began to be accepted at universities and a number were sent abroad for higher education. It seems that during Zahir's rule, a gradual expansion of female education took place without much opposition. After many years of controversy, a fragile balance had been achieved in some parts of the country — a balance that was subsequently lost and has yet to be recovered.

President Daoud, who took over Afghanistan by dethroning the King in 1973, was also a fervent 'moderniser' and advocate of female education. During his rule, the first Institute for Women was established within the Ministry of Education and he had plans for female literacy campaigns. However, overthrown and killed by the Communists in 1978, he did not live to see such plans come to fruition.

In spite of all the above efforts, in 1978 the literacy rate for women was only 4% and for men, 19% (World Bank figures, quoted in Moghadam 1994). Urbanites and certain ethnic groups, benefited disproportionately from educational opportunities, especially those for female education. In 1975, only 8% of girls were enrolled at the primary level and 2% at the secondary level whereas the figures for boys were 44% and 42% respectively. Gradually, however, educated women had entered the public scene and women were active in almost all offices, ministries and sectors. A few élite women were placed high in the Government echelons. The demand for education, both female and male, spread to many villages.

### **The Discourse of Modernization:**

#### **Female Education under Communism (1978-1992)**

The Communists, though driven by a different ideology from the regimes that preceded them, also tried to 'modernize' Afghanistan. Their approach was more radical than that of the monarchy or President Daoud. Female education was central in the construction of a new Afghan identity under the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). Most PDPA leaders were also Pashtun. Dr. Anahita Ratebzad, Minister of Education, was the most senior PDPA female official. In one of her first speeches, she said, "The duties of women and mothers, who shape the future of the country .... is to bring up sons and daughters who are sincere and patriotic". She called on all Afghan women to "take steps to consolidate your revolutionary regime as bravely as the heroic and brave men of this country" (Dupree 1984:312).

One of the first steps taken by the Communist regime was to implement an intensive national education and literacy programme, for girls and women in particular. Article 12 of what is known as the Basic Lines of the Revolutionary Duties of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan concerned

“equality of rights of women and men in all social, economic, political, cultural, and civil aspects” (Dupree 1984:312). The progressive potential of their gender policies cannot be denied. However, the way in which these were formulated, together with the manner of their implementation, did not resonate with most Afghans.

The Kabul Times carried the following:

Education and enlightening women is now the subject of close government attention...to teach people the aims of the Revolution and how to meet these goals...An illiterate person stands outside politics...An illiterate woman cannot carry on the struggle, cannot handle properly the family affairs, and cannot rear properly sound and healthy children (Dupree 1984:316).

PDPA cadres resorted to various forms of persuasion, including physical force, to make village women attend literacy classes. This further alienated them from a large segment of Afghan society:

In the summer of 1978 refugees began pouring into Pakistan, giving as their major reason the forceful implementation of the literacy programme among their women. In Kandahar, three literacy workers from the women's organization were killed .... Nancy Dupree reports that two men killed all the women in their families to prevent them from 'dishonour'. (Moghadam 1994:864)

It is clear that various and often quite contradictory social constructions of 'women' were involved, with female education being the terrain over which these were played out. The Communist regime had a specific image of its female teachers, their socializing role and mission and that of female students. On the other hand, the religious and traditional establishment, which was quite strong, had a different image of Afghan Moslem women, an image, which was seen as threatened by the education policies of the PDPA. Cordovez (1995: 31) notes:

The mullahs were also able to discredit rural literacy campaigns among women by chagrin that the city women conducting these campaigns, often clad in skirts, were spreading immoral ideas....they attacked textbooks containing Khalqi propaganda as 'anti-Islamic', demanding the right to approve teaching material in advance.

The involvement of the Soviets in education only further aggravated the situation and made the policies appear not only 'atheistic' but also 'alien' and 'foreign imposed'. After all, the Soviets had 'invaded' Afghanistan and were killing Afghans all around the country. Moghadam (1992) reports: "In an interview in 1980, Anahita Ratebzad conceded to errors, 'in particular the compulsory education of women'. To which she added, 'The reactionary elements immediately made use of these mistakes to spread discontent among the population'". In addition, Dupree notes:

The mujahidin encouraged non-co-operation by girls .... the mujahidin asked girls to return to their homes in order to protest the Soviet occupation. They promised to reinstate education for girls when they succeeded in expelling the foreigners .... (Dupree 1984:334).

Once again in Afghan history but with greater force, female education became a

terrain over which ideological and political rivalries were fought. The Communist regime's discourse on female education was in serious conflict with that of the opposition, who portrayed it as an effort to brainwash and ruin the morality and dignity of its women and thus Afghan society. Such opposition was quite important in further engraining resistance to female education in Afghan society. It has been said by some Afghan intellectuals, for example Majrooh (1988), that the Communist policies on female education — and the political response to them — put back female education by decades in Afghanistan, rather than advancing it.

### **The Discourse of Authenticity: Female Education and the Islamic Leaderships (1978-1999)**

The above period is best divided into two parts, the first being between 1978-92, when various Mujahidin parties representing different ethnic groups exerted considerable influence over Afghan refugees in Pakistan and acted as an opposition in Communist-ruled Afghanistan. During the 1992-96 period, the Mujahidin were able to move their base to inside Afghanistan and even to the capital, Kabul. However, since 1996 and Taliban's gradual takeover of most of Afghanistan, the Mujahidin's influence has been reduced and largely replaced by that of Taliban.

During the 1978-92 period, the Mujahidin's discourse on female education was critical of both the monarchy and the Communists. They saw themselves as an alternative to both forms of 'modernization' — the Western-inspired, as well as the socialist. It was an alternative based on Afghan and Islamic 'authenticity' and one in which women played a particularly important symbolic role. Also, for the first time in the country's history, non-Pashtun Afghans were able to assert themselves — defining new concepts of what it was to be an Afghan, Uzbek, Tajik, Hazara or Pashtun. These are all factors which have had an impact upon the discourses of female education.

The influence of the Mujahidin was extended to the Afghan refugee community in Pakistan, where in the late 1970s and early 1980s, "The mere mention of education for girls at this early date was an anathema. Even to suggest it was to invite denouncement as an undercover communist, as traitor to Afghanistan, an enemy of Islam" (Dupree 1992:8).

In 1988 some 104,600 boys were enrolled in UN-run camp schools as against 7,800 girls (Moghadam 1992:859). This number is out of a total of approximately 3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan at the time. It also shows that the international aid community did not or was not able to change the state of female education among Afghan refugees significantly. The situation gradually improved, largely as a result of the efforts, courage and sacrifice of active and educated Afghan women, many of whom were threatened by the conservative forces for their activism. Many schools were established by Afghan women themselves, many of which continue to this day. The position of some of the Mujahidin groups on this issue also softened over time. With Taliban's expansion of influence, especially in Kabul, many families became refugees in Pakistan and other countries in search of education opportunities for their male and female children. Nevertheless, much remains to be

done. It is important to point out that there are considerable differences among the refugees as well, in terms of ethnicity, religion, class and ideology — each affecting their positioning on gender and female education. However, the dominant discourse has been of conservatism throughout.

The situation in Iran has been quite different, with less of a role for the Mujahidin groups and more opportunities for Afghan children (boys and girls) to attend formal Iranian schools. Approximately 450,000 Afghan children — about 40% of them girls — have attended Iranian schools (UNHCR 1994). Recently, there has been a further setback with Taliban forces imposing their own interpretation of Islam and the Afghan value system among Afghan refugees in Pakistan and in some cases, withdrawing girls from school by force. Their campaign has so far met with only limited success.

Among the refugees, new national, ethnic and religious identities with a renewed emphasis on Islam have been constructed. The prevalent international discourse further essentialised particular notions of what it was to be an Afghan and what constituted Afghan culture.

Dupree (1990:129) notes:

Women's policies are evolving amidst a debate similar to the conflict which divided Modernists and conservatives at the beginning of the century, with the difference that the ideological turmoil brought about by the invasion of aliens has strengthened the neo-conservatives....thereby politicizing women's lives.

I contend that the above statement is even truer for the current situation with Taliban. One difference is that Taliban's ideological position is not only a response to "the invasion of aliens" but also to the failure of the various Mujahidin groups to solve their internal differences and a reaction to the strengthening of minorities in Afghanistan. It is a resurgence and reinterpretation of Pashtun dominance and cultural values. Both Mujahidin and the Taliban have pursued the discourse of anti-modernism though from different positions. These discourses are linked to their particular concepts of national and ethnic/religious identities.

I now return to the situation in Afghanistan itself. When the Mujahidin gained control of the country in 1992 after the resignation of Dr. Najibullah, the last Communist President, they gradually emptied schools occupied by Internally Displaced Persons and began re-opening schools, including schools for girls. President Rabbani, who was in charge of the Government at the time, is reported to have said: "Islam enjoins seeking knowledge as a duty of every Muslim — man and woman" (Shahrani 1998:54). However, the Mujahidin government did impose restrictions on women, such as veiling, greater segregation, some restrictions on type of employment and so forth. It must not be forgotten that lack of human and financial resources have also hindered progress in terms of education in Afghanistan.

Since 1995, wherever Taliban has expanded its influence in Afghanistan, it has banned girls schools and female employment outside the health sector. By the end of 1996, it had taken over Herat, Jalalabad and Kabul and by August 1998, Mazar I Sharif. Very limited girls education continues through community initiatives, at home-based schools and with the support of the international community. Taliban

have said that this ban will be lifted once they can ensure the security of girls to study and women to work and the provision of Islamic conditions for such activities, principally segregation. When that will be and what the conditions will be remain to be seen. The international community signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Taliban in May 1998, which states, "men and women shall have the right to education", but the implementation of this Memorandum remains a question mark for all those involved. It has been said that certain Taliban leaders are afraid of the reaction of their 'fervent' believers and fighters should they try to change their policies on female education and employment and bring them more into line with what is internationally acceptable.

The Taliban position on this issue seems to be a reflection of their over-all ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam combined with a very traditional understanding of the Pashtun tribal code of conduct (Pashtun Wali). Added to this is their reactionary notion of what it means to be an Afghan man or woman and their power struggles with other groups in Afghanistan and regional/international stakeholders in the country. They want to demonstrate that they are the 'purest' and 'most authentic' Moslems and Afghans amongst all groups. As usual, women play an important symbolic role in these assertions. This has very tragic consequences, as is now widely known and denounced internationally. It is, no doubt, also an issue of controlling men through controlling women, controlling various ethnic and linguistic groups and other factors. The human rights of almost all Afghans are seriously violated.

## **Conclusion**

It seems as if it has been routine in Afghanistan for various collectivities — whether political, ethnic, religious, tribal or a combination of these — to work out some of their differences over the terrain of female education which has become a politicized symbol in the various historical struggles among different groups of Afghans. It has been a site for the expression of conflicting identities as well as the formation of new and shifting alliances or animosity. Each of the various discourses on female education has women's control, in one way or another, at the heart of its rationale. In each case, certain groups or leaders have used this control of women to control men as well. It is important to note that both the Mujahidin and Taliban are highly patriarchal structures, with women playing a very limited role; this is particularly the case with Taliban. On the whole, women's voices have been silenced; they are allowed no role in decision-making processes.

Female education has been central in the constructions of Afghan identities, whether 'modern', 'socialist' or 'Islamist' and is integrally linked to the role of women as bearers of collective identities in patriarchal societies. Female education is a very powerful political issue, which has at all times articulated shifting concepts of gendered nationalism, ethnicity, religion, class and other social divisions. It has become a litmus test for various ideological and ethnic positions or constructions.

Ethnic, religious and parochial differences have become further accentuated as a result of the differences among the Mujahidin and particularly now with Taliban's Pashtun and Sunni policies. An Afghan friend told me:



When I was a child, I only knew I and my other friends were Afghan. Now you are all always asked what is your ethnic group, your religion, and which area you are from.

Many Afghans have been killed recently because they have been Hazara and Shiite (UN Rapporteur for Afghanistan, 1998 Report). Ethnic and linguistic differences have been more marked than ever in Afghanistan's recent history.

Much more remains to be said on this very important issue in Afghanistan. What is provided above is only a summary and introduction to the broader issues which need much more space to be fully investigated. I do not want to further 'mystify' the issue of female education in Afghanistan and would like to end with a recognition of the efforts, courage and sacrifice of many Afghans — progressive men and women, but in particular women, in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere, to forward the cause of girls' education. Their determination is the greatest hope which exists for improving the overall situation of female education and women in Afghanistan and shows the way — a way which will not be taken unless a process of peace-building occurs in Afghanistan — a peace built upon multi-ethnic representation and respect for human rights. Girls' education needs to be seen as a basic human right, as well as a prerequisite for the advancement of national well being, regardless of constructions of nationality and ethnicity pursued primarily by male leaders.

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ANNEX VII

POSTCOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

Women,  
Citizenship  
and  
Difference

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## CHAPTER 5

# Female Education and Citizenship in Afghanistan: a Turbulent Relationship

*Niloufar Pourzand*

### Introduction

Female education has been an intensely controversial issue throughout the modern history of Afghanistan, entrenched in numerous internal social divisions, and reflected in conflicts with various external forces. Always a highly political issue, it has reached a point of acute crisis at the present moment in Afghanistan's history, with the Taliban authorities having stopped formal female education altogether. It is thus particularly important to unravel and understand why female education bears such a heavy symbolic load in Afghanistan, especially for members of the Taliban who have become the *de facto* leaders, dominating most of the country since their Kabul takeover of September 1996. In the light of this, the aim of this chapter is to explore why and in what ways discourses on female education have been central to definitions and constructions of gendered citizenship in twentieth-century Afghanistan.

Prior to elaborating upon the specific case of Afghanistan, however, I would like to point to some general and theoretical issues on citizenship, women's role and education. The subject of female education and gendered citizenship will then be analysed as it was developed in the context of two regimes in twentieth-century Afghanistan, both of which attempted to *expand* female education: first, during the monarchical period of Amanullah Khan Durani in the 1920s, within the framework of a Western-inspired ideology of modernisation and the building of a nation-state; second, in the late 1970s and 1980s, under the regime of the Afghan Communists and their socialist ideology of modernisation. It is against these initiatives that the Taliban directed their more recent campaigns against formal female education.

### Concepts of Citizenship, the Role of Women and Female Education

Various discourses exist relating to concepts of citizenship within countries,

between different countries and at the international level. Yet most of the numerous definitions of citizenship put forward by Western scholars (for example, Marshall 1950; Turner 1990) appear more relevant to Western societies. Citizenship is, let us recall, according to Marshall,

a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed. (1950: 14)

Such conceptualisations have been criticised by progressive academics based in the West (Yuval-Davis 1997; Walby 1994) as being blind to gender, class, race, disability and sexual differences within a country. However, these are not the only reasons which make them inapplicable or less applicable to non-Western, non-liberal or non-democratic systems of rule.

In the West (in spite of all its plurality), citizenship is most frequently used in the context of the rights and duties of citizens *vis-à-vis* an elected government which depends upon their votes and taxes, marked by a strong sense of continuity and accountability. Such governments are elected through a multi-party system (by both male and female citizens). In the West, being a citizen means being the subject of a welfare state which is expected to take care of one's basic needs and to safeguard one's rights. Of course, in the West all citizens are not equal in every respect, nor do they benefit equally from existing resources, but nevertheless there exists at least a minimum set of common understandings regarding the rights and duties of male and female citizens. Inequalities in the West are usually, though not always, more subtly expressed than in those non-Western countries torn by ethno-political struggles.

In a country like Afghanistan, citizenship has a quite different meaning. Being an Afghan man or woman, especially in the past eighteen years of war, has been a very traumatic and insecure experience. It has meant belonging to an almost always contested national entity (either for ideological, religious, ethnic or other reasons, or a combination of these factors); it means being the subject of a non-elected state with its own particular and severely enforced ideology which extends very few if any rights; it means having no non-violent alternative for changing the regime and its instruments of control. It also means being manipulated by state authorities who want to define and redefine what it is to be an Afghan male or female citizen in order to fill its ranks and project its image both internally, within the nation, and internationally.

Citizenship for Afghan men and women has been the equivalent of belonging to a country in which the regime has dramatically, and with almost inconceivable acts of bloodshed and human suffering, changed hands several times in the lifespan of one generation. It has meant belonging to a stateless and divided country interminably at war; being located in the middle of a civil war waged among politico-religious and ethnic groups, each trying to enforce

their own particular vision of what it is to be an Afghan citizen (man or woman), each with the support of various regional and international forces. For millions of Afghans it has meant having to spend all their lives in neighbouring countries and being constantly reminded of their non-citizenship in those countries – regardless of having, in many cases, the same language, religion or ethnic affiliation as the citizens of those countries. For many Afghan men and women, it is their citizenship which prevents them from obtaining visas to most countries of the world – though they might never even have lived in Afghanistan!

In addition, there are all the various internal divisions among Afghans which impact upon their concepts of citizenship and add to its fragility – including gender, ethnicity, language, religion, parochial affiliation, politics, ideology, class, disability, marital and family status, urban or rural origin and much else besides. Citizenship in Afghanistan is thus radically unlike its Western counterpart in almost every conceivable sense.

It is in relation to this fragile and yet dramatically contested arena of citizenship in Afghanistan that the pivotal role of female education has to be understood, as defining and redefining concepts of gendered citizenship by the state and political groups vying to control it. This centrality is based on the important role women play as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities, and thus also of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups. As key participants in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and central transmitters of its culture, women become signifiers of ethnic/national difference – the focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories. They are also participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989).

More specifically, women in Muslim societies are perceived as 'metaphors for the integrity of the Islamic community, expressing its purity in an idiom common to Muslim culture, honour and ... chastity' (Petzet, 1993: 53). This means that the provision of different forms of education to girls and women has been important to the regimes and political parties or groups in Afghanistan, since at times, including the present, it has been the state which has defined the role of female education in its constructs of citizenship, while at other times it has been the various parties. Often, it has been a struggle between the two over what it means to be an Afghan man or woman subject, with the role of female education constrained by the prevailing definition. Both regimes and political groups have been, and continue to be, almost exclusively controlled by men.

All nations are founded on powerful constructions of social reproduction and hence also of gender. Despite national movements' ideological investment in the idea of popular unity, historically nations have often tended to sanction prevailing institutionalised gender differences rather than abolish them (McClintock 1993: 61). Education is one of the main 'public' institutions

where this 'sanctioned' gender difference may be contested. It is one of the first and most important 'public' spaces made accessible to women in the course of 'modernisation' and is therefore important in defining the changing roles of men and women in society. Gender differences may be undermined or reinforced through education in two ways. One is from within the educational system itself, through the curriculum, teacher feedback and extra-curricular activities. The other, which is less common, is in debates about female education *per se*, as is the case in Afghanistan.

Female education in Afghanistan has become the arena in which women's symbolic centrality as bearers of gendered collective identities is expressed and contested, both within the country and in reaction to external forces. It is the transformative potential of education, and its importance in national and international debates on rights and development issues, which makes it so central to definitions of citizenship, in particular for Afghan women. Writing about Turkey and Iran, Kandiyoti (1991) and Najmabadi (1991) have elaborated upon other examples of state-supported female education within the context of nation-state building and 'modernisation'.

### Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked 'nation of minorities' (Jawad 1992) located between Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with a population of about 16 million. Its extreme ethnic heterogeneity as well as its regional and international position has continuously impacted upon local politics. Pashtuns, who speak Pashtu and are the largest ethnic group, have dominated Afghan politics for most of the country's history. The second-largest group is that of the Tajiks, whose language is Dari/Farsi – the *lingua franca* of Afghanistan. Other ethnic groups include the Uzbeks, Turkmens, Hazaras, Aimaq and Baluch. Ethnicity remains a critical issue in Afghanistan and has further strengthened the controversy over female education as respective leaderships take up various positions on this issue. Linked to ethnic affiliations in Afghanistan is tribal affinity. In particular, the Pashtun tribes have played a determining role in Afghan history, their male leaders meeting in *loya jirgas* (tribal councils) to debate and decide about important local and national issues. The Pashtunwali (or tribal code of the Pashtuns) is very conservative in its approach to the role of women in society and has been linked with Islamic ideology, often interpreted in such a way as to discriminate against women.

Another important factor in Afghan history has been the rural/urban divide, with 85 per cent of the population living in rural areas (Centlivres-Demont 1988) while political power has been monopolised by a minority urban elite. The influence of Islam in Afghanistan should not be underestimated. Although various interpretations of Islam have been influential, most predominant have been conservative schools of thought (and their

similarly traditional view on women). The majority of Afghans are Sunni Muslims, with a minority of Shiite Muslims, often in conflict with each other. At times, religious and ethnic divisions have been linked in Afghanistan, as is the case with Hazaras who, as Shiites, are an ethnic as well as a religious minority. An ultra-conservative ideological standpoint towards women's position has been forcefully reinforced by most of these various political and religious groups. Virtually all subscribe to concepts of gendered citizenship, underpinned by ethnic power struggles for dominance and articulated through a rejection of what is seen as 'foreign intervention'.

Hence, another crucial factor in contemporary Afghan history has been its turbulent relationship with the outside world, beginning with the British colonialists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Afghanistan was important to them as a 'gateway to India' and, though it was never directly colonised, British direct or indirect influence over the country was considerable. Afghan traditional mistrust of foreigners and Westerners can be traced to this uneasy relationship. It enables various groups in Afghanistan to revisit female education since it is perceived as a 'Western' phenomenon, as a 'foreign import' and as a threat to what it is to be an 'Afghan' man or woman.

The emergence of modern Afghanistan can be traced back to 1747 when Ahmad Shah Durrani (a Pashtun) extended his influence over most of what is known as Afghanistan today, including its non-Pashtun areas. Abdul Rahman (1880–1901), another Pashtun leader, expanded Afghan territory by forcefully bringing within his jurisdiction areas such as the Hazarajat and Nuristan (known as Kafirestan, 'land of the infidels'). He contributed significantly to Afghanistan's status as a nation-state, building up an army and a state bureaucracy. Rahman introduced formal education for elite men in an attempt to curb the monopoly of religious leaders over education and to develop the required human resources for his army and bureaucracy.

King Habibullah, Abdul Rahman's son, ruled from 1901 to 1919 and is known for his intensive modernising efforts. In these he was influenced by developments in other regional countries, including India, Iran and Turkey, countries which were expanding their education systems in a move to become 'modern'. Habibullah established the first Western-inspired secular schools for boys and declared education obligatory for all boys. A whole generation of Afghan men was educated during his reign, men who would make their impact on Afghan history in the years to come. At the same time, he was denounced by many of the more traditional and conservative forces in society as being a foreign stooge.

It was left to King Amanullah (1919–29), however, to initiate formal female education. Amanullah is known as the great reformer – a title for which he was to pay heavily. He was immensely influenced by his father-in-law, Mahmud Tarzi, Afghanistan's best-known intellectual reformer of the early twentieth century. Tarzi believed that Islamic countries had to



modernise while maintaining their independence and integrity. Amanullah faced serious resistance from the clergy and the more conservative groups in the society, including other Pashtuns, who claimed he was too Westernised. After ten years on the throne, the King was assassinated by a Tajik called Bach-e Saqao, 'the water-bearer'. This assassination no doubt had ethnic and class grievances behind it as well as a concern to maintain conservative values. One of Bach-e Saqao's first steps when assuming power was the closing down of girls' schools!

Bach-e Saqao's reign did not last long and another Pashtun came to the throne – Mohammad Nadir Shah. Nadir Shah was more conservative than Amanullah but, despite this, he gradually reopened and expanded female education. It was during Mohammad Zahir Shah's reign (1933–73) that the largest number of Afghan women were able to be educated; educational institutions expanded throughout the country, as did the social and political activity of urban and elite women (Gauhari 1996). Pashtuns continued to be in positions of privilege, with Tajiks as the second most powerful ethnic group. Ethnic discrimination persisted, however, especially with regard to the Hazara. Class divisions also continued, giving ground to considerable unrest, in particular among the expanding educated younger generation. It was during Mohammad Zahir Shah's relatively peaceful reign that the number of Afghan leftists as well as Islamists (followers of political Islam) increased, emerging from universities, the growing bureaucracy and the military – all responding in their own ways to the various changes and conflicts in society in the region and at the international level.

In 1973, Zahir Shah was deposed by his cousin and Prime Minister, M. Daoud, who ruled the country until the Communist takeover of 1978. The Communist leaders (Taraki, Hafizollah Amin, Karmal, Najibullah) of Afghanistan were among the recently educated elite of the society. Their predominantly urban and Pashtun backgrounds and Communist ideological commitment (especially their atheism), as well as their clear affiliation to a foreign country (the USSR), immediately discredited them in the eyes of many Afghans. The Communists wanted Afghan citizens (male *and* female) to become socialist cadres and comrades – concepts very alien and distasteful to most Islam-loving, independent and traditional Afghans. The Soviet Union's military intervention and its brutal and evident influence over all aspects of Afghan life – including education – transformed Afghan society forever. Resistance to this invasion seriously impacted upon the upward trend in female education that had occurred during Mohammad Zahir Shah's reign. Consequently, from 1978 onwards female education faced a series of severe setbacks.

Afghan Mujahedin, Islamic fighters, from all walks of life and from all ethnic groups, fought against the Soviets and the Communists. In 1992, after fourteen years of war, the Mujahedin succeeded in taking charge of Afghanistan. This was followed, however, by a period of constant fighting

among the various Islamic political groups, each attempting to seize power in Afghanistan. The country has been suffering from war and all its disturbing repercussions for almost twenty years now. Many of these political groups are divided along ethnic as well as religious lines and seem unable to overcome their differences. Most of these groups have taken a conservative view on women's issues and all have, in different ways, restricted women – both inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan's refugee communities.

Since 1994, yet another force has appeared on the scene: the Taliban (religious students), who are predominantly Pashtun and come out of the religious schools or madrassas of Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Most are from rural backgrounds. Of all the groups contending for power, they have imposed the harshest restrictions on women. Girls' schools have been closed down and women banned from teaching. Men too face many restrictions. They are forced to grow beards and to wear clothing deemed appropriate. The Taliban concept of Afghan citizenship for both men and women is ultra-conservative, and especially so in the case of women; they have been prohibited from working in the non-health sector or going out in public on their own. In addition, the Taliban are pursuing a pro-Pashtun ethnic policy at the expense of other minorities (as, indeed, are most other minority group leaders). Taliban's policies have stirred considerable and heated debates among Afghans and beyond the country, in the region and at the international level. These include a focus on the rights and wrongs of female education. Once again, female education has become a central issue in how a political group struggles to construct and reconstruct Afghan gendered citizenship. To begin to understand the very extremist position of the Taliban on female education, however, it is important to refer back to other periods of Afghan history and the development of the debate on female education. What follows is a preliminary effort towards such an end.

### **Citizenship and Female Education During Amanullah Khan's Reign (1919–29)**

Amanullah had aspired towards establishing a new Afghan national identity which would surpass the various ethnic, religious, tribal and parochial affiliations and differences within the country. His aim was to provide an alternative discourse to that of traditionalists on what being an Afghan man or woman was or could be. His was a vision of a Western-inspired 'modern' Afghanistan. The background against which his policies were implemented has been, in the words of the famous Afghan specialists P. and M. Centlivres-Demont (1988), one in which

The image of Self and Other, or social identity in Afghanistan, rested not on an idea of nation and citizenship, but on a feeling of appurtenance both to a supranational entity, the Islamic community or *umma*, and to an infranational one, the regional, tribal or ethnic community. (Centlivres-Demont 1988: 142)

Amanullah realised that to achieve his goals for Afghanistan against such odds he needed to change Afghan men as well as women. M. Tarzi, his mentor, put it in the following words: 'only enlightened and educated women could be good wives and mothers, [and] bring up the children in whose hands the future rests' (Olesen 1995: 118). Amanullah wanted to grant citizenship rights to Afghans based on 'liberal Western constitutions', a key tenet of which was 'emancipating women to become equal citizens' (Olesen 1995: 119). 'Free and independent women ... on an equal basis with men, would build the new Afghanistan', according to the King's vision (*ibid.*).

Amanullah opened Kabul's first girls' school, Esmat, in 1921. Others were to follow, some sponsored by his wife Soraya and her mother. Girls began to be sent abroad for the first time in Afghan history, though in small numbers and to another Muslim but moderate country, Turkey (Poullada 1973: 73). However, the opportunity to study was not provided to all girls equally. Girls of the urban elite, in particular the Pashtun elite, were in a much more advantageous position to benefit from it. Similarly, it is important to note that secular education began as a state enterprise in Afghanistan and not a civil one. It was thus implemented top-down, especially in the beginning. Foreign educators were used for the purpose of curriculum development and teacher training, much to the distaste of some of the clergy and other prominent leaders or groups. In addition, Amanullah attempted to unveil Afghan women and introduce other 'modern' changes into their lives.

Amanullah began facing serious opposition from various quarters in society which claimed that he was too Westernised and was distancing the country from the true Islam, including its clergy and traditional leaders. One of the most important criticisms levelled at Amanullah was related to his encouragement of female education. The religious leaders 'contended that education for women would lead to the breakdown of the family, sexual anarchy, and ultimately degrade women. The honour of the nation would be lost' (Dupree 1984: 307). Many Afghan traditional leaders felt that Amanullah was 'challenging the full authority of a man over his family and particularly his womenfolk' (Olesen 1995: 136). They questioned his policies with reference to Islam and the Pashtunwali code of honour which stems from tribal and religious notions of the integrity of the family and its women, and the unconditional demand for defence of *ghayrat*, *nang va namus* – honour, shame and reputation (Olesen 1995: 136–7).

The closing of girls' schools featured prominently in the demands of the leaders of several rebellions (Khost, Shinwari) against the King. The clergy demanded that girls only study the Koran, that they only study until the age of puberty (which was defined as nine) and that their male teachers be at least 80 (Olesen 1995: 135). Others demanded the closing of all girls' schools and the recall of all Afghan girls sent abroad. It was these rebellions that gradually weakened Amanullah until he was finally assassinated by Bach-e Saqao. Nevertheless, Amanullah will remain known as the father of female

education in Afghanistan. He firmly believed in the link between female education and the construction or reconstruction of concepts of gendered citizenship, in line with the modernisation of the nation. He was influenced by Western-inspired concepts of progress in his vision of the ideal Afghan man or woman. There is no doubt that his efforts to expand female education were one of the main reasons leading to his fall. These efforts came into conflict with traditional gendered ideologies of other powerful groups in the country. Nevertheless, what he began set a precedent for what was to come, and provided the country with an experience of female education never to be fully erased from Afghan memory – neither by its proponents, nor by its opponents.

In spite of the opposition to Amanullah's female education policy, the trend was gradually and without much fanfare to be continued until 1978. By then, many more Afghan men and women had been educated, reached university and begun work in various fields, some women achieving quite high-ranking social positions. By 1976, the country had 888,800 school pupils and 15,000 university students of both sexes (Kakar 1995: 79). This trend at all times faced opposition from reactionary social forces but did not produce a head-on collision again until after the Communist takeover of 1978, perhaps because until then it was not fiercely enforced or radical in its content.

### **Citizenship and Female Education under Communist Rule in Afghanistan (1978–92)**

The PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) came to power in Afghanistan not through a popular revolution but rather through various power struggles and Soviet Union support, terminating in the Saur Revolution or *coup d'état* of April 1978. The female literacy rate in 1978, despite all the political controversy it had created, was no higher than 4 per cent, against 19 per cent for men (Moghadam 1994: 859). One of the first steps taken by the Communists was to implement an intense and widespread national education and literacy programme, focusing on girls and women. The objective was to re-socialise Afghans to support their 'revolutionary' and 'socialist' country. Anahita Ratebzad, the top female member of PDPA and one-time Minister of Education, in one of her first speeches after the takeover said: 'the duties of women and mothers, who shape the future of the country ... is to bring up sons and daughters who are sincere and patriotic'. She called on Afghan women to 'consolidate your revolutionary regime as bravely as the heroic and brave men of the country' (Dupree 1984: 312).

A new concept of gendered Afghan citizenship, as outlined in Article 12 of the Basic Lines of Revolutionary Duties of the government, which called for 'equality of rights of women and men in all social, economic, political, cultural, and civil aspects' (Dupree 1984: 312), was being pursued. According to a Kabul newspaper of the period,

Education and enlightening women is now the subject of close government attention ... to teach people the aims of the Revolution and how to meet these goals ... An illiterate person stands outside politics ... An illiterate woman cannot carry on the struggle, cannot handle properly the family affairs, and cannot rear properly sound and healthy children. (Dupree 1984: 316)

Literacy continued to be hailed as imperative in reaching the objectives of the revolution and to be carried out at all cost. Often, villagers were coerced to attend classes or men were forced to allow their wives and daughters to attend. According to Moghadam (1994: 864), many refugees who came into Pakistan in 1978 gave as their major reason 'the forceful implementation of the literacy programme among their women. In Kandahar, three literacy workers from the women's organisation were killed.' While the progressive potential of such policies cannot be denied, then, the manner in which they were implemented, as well as their formulation, did not resonate with most Afghans. The PDPA underestimated the potential for resistance against their policies and presence within Afghan society, and this included the issue of female education. According to Jawad (1992: 19), 'The National education system was modeled on the Soviet system, curricula were designed by Soviet specialists, kindergartens were run by Soviet women.' In addition, several thousand Afghan youth, including young girls, were sent to the then USSR for education. All these policies were seen as 'brainwashing' and 'anti-Islamic' by many Afghans and were so presented by the opposition leaders, the Mujahedin – who were fighting against all that the PDPA stood for, including its concepts of (un)gendered Afghan citizenship.

One of the differences between the Mujahedin and the religious opposition to Amanullah was that many of the leaders had themselves received formal and more secular education and presented their opposition to female education as tactical and related to the direction and content of such education, rather than its very existence. What actually happened following their takeover in 1992 proved a far more drastic break, however. In the battle against Communist domination, female education became a site of struggle between the PDPA and its opponents. Resistance and opposition to female education were fierce and much more widespread than during Amanullah's period. They were seen by the public and portrayed by the Mujahedin as integral to the opposition to the Soviet military presence (since 1979), to the non-Islamic and atheistic content of that education, to the dictatorial methods of the PDPA and, in general, to an imposed and alien socialist ideology. Female education was constructed as a threat to traditional concepts of Afghanistan's identity, both as a Muslim country and as a proudly independent nation.

In an interview in 1980, Anahita Ratebzad conceded to errors, 'in particular the compulsory education of women', to which she added: 'the reactionary elements immediately made use of these mistakes to spread discontent among the population' (Moghadam 1992: 435).

The Mujahedin instigated this national divide on female education by encouraging non-cooperation by girls ... the Mujahedin asked girls to return to their homes in order to protest the Soviet occupation. They promised to reinstate education for girls when they succeeded in expelling the foreigners. (Dupree 1984: 334)

Once again in Afghan history, therefore, female education became a terrain over which ideological and political rivalries were fought. The divide was so serious and the struggle so fierce and intense that it has impacted upon the discourses of female education and gendered citizenship up until the present moment, even after the downfall of the PDPA, the break-up of the USSR and the passage of considerable time since these events occurred.

In the context of the history of female education in Afghanistan, Amanullah's reign will remain known as the period in which formal female education in Afghanistan began, in spite of opposition from conservative forces in society, while the PDPA years will be known as a major historic setback for female education. This resulted from their broader policies and the reaction to them by opposition Islamic groups and their supporters. Both sides were fighting over what it meant to be an Afghan, whether male or female, and who has the right to define this identity, with female education placed in the vortex of the struggle.

### Conclusion

The complexity of the situation with regard to female education in Afghanistan arises from its integral connection to political, ethnic, religious and class struggles within a broad opposition between parochialism and foreign intervention. This chapter has demonstrated how female education discourses and views have thus been integral to the construction of Afghan citizenship as a contested status, first in the 1920s and once again in the 1978-92 period. Female education has thus always been a very political issue in Afghanistan. Under Amanullah, it was linked to a Western-inspired modernisation drive, to Islamic reform and to concepts of enlightened gendered citizenship within a newly constituted nation-state. With the PDPA, it was Soviet-inspired socialism, carried out in the name of Communism and linked to concepts of equal citizenship under a socialist Afghanistan, that prevailed. In both cases, female education played a key role in the regimes' efforts to transform society and to constitute Afghan citizens, both men and women, in conformity with a specific ideological framework and political objectives. Not surprisingly, then, female education became one of the main targets of opposition forces during both the periods referred to in this chapter. These denounced the education of women as 'foreign-inspired' and a threat to what it means to be an Afghan woman, and thus to Afghan society as a whole. Women – as informed, enlightened and educated agents, or as pious mothers, daughters and wives confined to the home – became a litmus test of ideological tendencies defining citizenship within the evolving

nation-state, the focus and symbol of ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989: 7).

The struggle over female education, with more liberal and progressive forces supporting its expansion and more conservative forces opposing it, continues today in Afghanistan and among Afghan refugees. Female education in Afghanistan was and remains an arena over which male political leaders fight their wars against each other and against non-aligned outsiders, at the expense of women and children, repeatedly denying them access to a basic human entitlement which all Westerners, men and women alike, take for granted.

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