

Women refugees displaced by war

by Lynda Cassels

In a camp for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the village health clinic is a hive of social activity. Women of all ages, heavily veiled despite the oppressive heat, catch up on local news or sit silently in the comfort of sympathetic company.

Over five million refugees have sought asylum in Pakistan and Iran since the outbreak of the Afghan war, the majority of them women and children. After the arduous trek from Afghanistan many of the refugees are in poor health, particularly children and pregnant women.

In the camps, the 'purdah' (restrictions on women) persists. Afghan society is deeply and devoutly Muslim, and traditional conventions do not loosen even under war-time duress.

"It can be a really tricky situation," says Valerie Delaney, a spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Ottawa. Since Muslim women cannot be examined by male medical personnel, all-female medical teams have been established in the camps. Despite the likely complications of pregnancy under the austere and uncertain conditions, UNHCR reports indicate that most Afghan refugee women have between four and ten children.

In addition, the women are seldom able to leave the confines of their huts, making it particularly difficult to co-ordinate income-earning activities within the



Their condition is aggravated by their situation as refugees.

camp. A visit to the clinic becomes a social event.

In many ways the situation of Afghan refugee women is an extreme one, yet it serves to highlight the difficulties facing women in exile around the world. Recent UN figures place the

world refugee population at over 12 million, approximately 7 million of whom live in camps. The camp populations are predominantly female. In Africa studies have shown that four of the continent's five million refugees come from rural areas; women, child-

ren, elderly people and the handicapped comprise more than 85 per cent of all these rural refugees.

"In many cases the men simply aren't around," says Delaney. "Women in refugee-producing areas tend to be on their own." Either the men have already been killed or they may be off fighting. This is particularly true in Africa, she adds. Even in times of relative peace, men frequently leave their families to seek elsewhere, leaving the women to tend the land and look after the children.

Considering the relatively peripheral role of men in the daily life of many African families the proportionally large numbers of women and children in refugee camps should hardly be surprising. In the past, however, relief efforts frequently failed to recognize the dominant role of women in the family economy.

A recent study of refugee assistance programs in the Sudan noted that despite traditional methods of food production, where women produced most of the food for the family, land was allocated to male heads of refugee households. In the case of the Afghan refugees, women are registered under their husband's name although they and their children are housed separately from the men. As rations and supplies are distributed to the men it is likely that some women have problems getting sufficient food for their families, says Delaney.

"There was a western-based assumption that men are the heads of families, but that isn't always so," Delaney acknowledges that in the past such a bias was inherent in UNHCR relief programmes, adding that the organization recognizes this and is changing its strategy.

"Great efforts are being made to ensure programs relate specifically to women and children," she says. Last year 75 per cent of the beneficiaries of UNHCR aid were women.

While the problems of hunger, sickness and uncertainty about the future are common to all refugees, women and children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Refugee women have been beaten, raped and forced into prostitution, sometimes under the threat that their refugee claim

will be denied if they fail to comply.

Despite the often harsh conditions, women are generally more likely than men to remain in the refugee camps for extended periods. Usually they are accompanied by young children or elderly family members who need their support. Often, they are more poorly educated than their male counterparts and would face greater obstacles in finding work. Women in the rural areas of Africa, Asia and Latin America usually receive significantly less education and formal training than men. Under third country resettlement programs such as Canada's Refugee and Humanitarian allocation scheme, women without employable skills may not be considered good candidates. Although tens of thousands of refugees are re-settled in this manner each year, Halifax lawyer John Robinson says those most in need of protection often miss out.



"We don't go into the camps and select the refugees on the basis of who is a better refugee or who has a better political claim," Robinson says. "We tend to use the same criteria — although I doubt anyone would admit this — that we would use for any other immigrant." Ability to speak English and marketable job skills do much to influence a refugee's chances of acceptance, Robinson says.

"A young mother with a sick child, say with tuberculosis, would be considered too much of a risk."

Amnesty International Focus on Women

by Lynda Cassels

On July 14, 1985, Safia Hashi Madar was arrested in Hargeisa, Somalia. A former lecturer in biochemistry, Ms. Madar was working for an American-based refugee agency at the time of her arrest. She was accused of links with the Somali National Movement, or SNM, an armed opposition group.

Although Madar was nine months pregnant when she was arrested she was denied medical attention. Immediately following the birth, her son was removed from the prison and returned to her family. Madar was not told what had become of her child, and allegedly did not find out until two months later.

After the birth, Madar spent ten months in incommunicado detention and was reportedly subject to torture. In what Amnesty International believes was an unfair trial she was charged with membership in the SNM and sentenced to life imprisonment, although she pleaded not guilty.

Madar was not allowed to consult a lawyer and has no right of appeal.

Since her sentencing Madar has remained in Mogadishu Central Prison. Amnesty International has learned that she has been repeatedly denied medical attention and suffers from a kidney infection, painful dental problems, severe depression and serious weight loss. Prison conditions are harsh and prisoners are frequently ill-treated.

Amnesty International is concerned with the on-going practice of unjust detention and torture of suspected opposition members in Somalia. Apparently as a result of international pressure the Somali National Security Service tried to persuade Madar to deny Amnesty International's allegations of ill-treatment in a televised interview. She allegedly refused.

As part of its special campaign for International Women's Day, Amnesty International urges you to write to the Somali govern-

ment expressing your concern about Safia Hashi Madar's unfair trial and mistreatment in prison. Amnesty International believes that Madar was imprisoned for the peaceful expression of her political beliefs and is appealing for her immediate and unconditional release. Continued international concern for her fate can make a difference. Courteous letters may be sent to:

His Excellency Mohamed Siad barre
President of the Somali Democratic Republic
People's Palace
Mogadishu, SOMALIA

A volunteer-based, non-partisan human rights organization, Amnesty International has traditionally taken International Women's Day as an opportunity to focus specifically on human rights concerns related to women. For further information about Amnesty, or how you could become involved, contact Sarah Keoughan, 454-5819 or Lynda Cassels, 429-5153.

ATTENTION HISTORY STUDENTS

If you are enrolled in a History Major, Advanced Major or Honour Programme, or if you are considering enrolling in such a programme, we'd like to talk to you.

Please drop in to an informal *Course counselling evening* where faculty will be on hand to answer any questions you may have about your programme or our offerings for next year. The up-to-date timetable will be on hand, as will be outlines of those courses being offered next year.

Refreshments will be served.

Date: Thursday, 9 March, 1989, 5:30-8:30pm

Place: Henson College, upstairs seminar room (entrance on Seymour St.)

For further information contact the history department at 424-2011.