

Afghan refugees in Iran: the needs of women and children

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Since at least the 1970s Afghans have been coming to Iran, some in search of work, others to seek protection. The political dominance by the Taliban since 1995 has been a significant factor in the acceleration in the flow of refugees.

Refugees who came in the 1980s were given 'green cards' which entitled them to live and work in Iran, and to benefit from schooling and health care. In the early 1990s the government's policy towards refugees changed in the face of the worsening domestic economic situation. After 1992 the authorities stopped issuing refugee cards. The vast majority of Afghans who arrived in Iran since 1992 are considered illegal and have no right to asylum. Furthermore, between 1992 and 1994 many thousands of refugees lost their legal status in a systematic campaign of confiscations of green cards from Afghans living in Khorassan province (bordering Herat). It is not uncommon to find families who repatriated under the UN-sponsored programme in 1996 and 1997, who have returned to Iran because of hardship or fear of persecution. These families had to give up their refugee cards when they

repatriated and now live as 'illegal' refugees who risk being arrested if found.

In such a situation it is extremely difficult to keep accurate figures on the number of refugees in Iran. According to recent official figures, there are about 1.4m Afghans in Iran at present, of which only 22,000 (1.7 per cent) are living in camps. The vast majority of Afghans live integrated into Iranian society scattered around the country, mostly in cities where they can get jobs but also in villages and settlements in rural areas.

The need for better information

For NGOs trying to plan programmes of assistance, the lack of reliable information makes it difficult to identify priority areas or to target particular groups of refugees. This is particularly true of those refugees who do not possess green cards. These refugees tend to be the most vulnerable as they cannot travel to find work and are not allowed to attend schools or use public health services. They are vulnerable to exploitative work conditions, and to random arrest and deportation. Because of their lack of official status they are reluctant to let NGOs gather information about their situation.

It was in this context that the International Consortium for Refugees in Iran (ICRI) started trying to gather more systematic information on the needs and situation of Afghan refugees. As the coordinating body for local and international NGOs working with refugees, ICRI tries to raise awareness of the problems facing refugees in Iran, by disseminating detailed information on their situation.

(1) Individual interviews

Starting from a base of virtually no information on those refugees outside camps, we started the process of information collection between 1996 and 1998 by visiting and interviewing refugee families in all the major refugee areas: Kerman, Shiraz, Sistan-Baluchistan, Mashad, Teheran and Shahriyar (Teheran province). Because of the insecure situation of many of the refugees, it was not possible to conduct systematic randomised sample surveys in any given area. We had no choice but to conduct low-profile individual interviews with refugee families (usually women) who were introduced to us by someone they trusted. Generally, we spent about 4-5 days in each area, accompanied by local community leaders who took us to the homes and workplaces of a selection of families.

We were usually able to interview about 30 families, using a standard list of questions. These included the composition of the family, the work done by different members of the family and how much each was paid, their living expenses (rent and related expenditure) and accommodation situation, any health problems, their occupation and place of origin in Afghanistan and their views on returning to their country. In all we interviewed over 200 families. Based on the information gathered, we compiled a series of reports in which we looked at Afghans' access to work, health, housing and environmental conditions, and in particular the situation of women and children in each area.

Taking stock

By conducting a large number of interviews and cross-checking information we obtained a very rich picture of the lives and problems of some of the poorest refugees. We identified the area in which refugees face the most difficulties (in the south-eastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan), and highlighted the neglected issue of child labour. We were also able to draw up a set of indicators for vulnerability which included the origin of the refugees (rural/urban), the number of people in the family, the material and financial resources they had when they arrived, and the sex and age of the head of household. We gathered a great deal of information on the types of work done by women and children to supplement men's increasingly insecure incomes.

Limitations of individual interviews

The individual interview approach incurred a number of drawbacks:

- (i) It was relatively time consuming, which limits the number of people who can be interviewed.
- (ii) The results and recommendations were based on the interviewers' judgements of the refugees' situations rather than on what the refugees identified as their own priorities. A research method was needed which would both allow more participation by the refugees themselves, and also yield results from which more general conclusions - less reliant on the situation of individual families - could be drawn.

We needed to find out in more detail what NGOs could do to help these groups of Afghans. Both NGOs and UNHCR are increasingly interested in helping refugees to support themselves through credit schemes. It was clear that women needed opportunities to learn skills so that they were not stuck in the most unskilled and low-paid work, but more information was needed on the obstacles to women's work and the type of skills which would be most useful to them.

(2) Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions (FGD) use specific but open-ended questions put by a trained facilitator, to enable a group of people to express a variety of opinions

on a particular subject. In May 1998, a workshop was held by the International Planned Parenthood Federation to train volunteers of the Family Planning Association of Iran (FPA) in the techniques of FGD. Then, during August 1988 and with the collaboration of the FPA, we held a two-day training session in FGD for nine Afghan refugee women. They would be the facilitators and notetakers for the discussions with groups of their peers.

We decided to start with a general needs assessment survey among Afghan women in southern Tehran. The focus would be on job-skills, the problems of working women, their need for education, and their health problems. We also wanted to ask them to rank these issues in order of priority. About 60 Pashtun and Hazara women participated in groups of 6-12 people. After the discussions, which lasted about two hours, the facilitators drew up conclusions based on the views which had been expressed in the groups. These conclusions were then checked again with a sample of the women who had participated in the discussions. Most of the research process was conducted by Afghan women themselves, with ICRI staff only observing the discussions and writing up the final report. The refugees were enthusiastic at the opportunity to give their own views and have the opportunity to shape decisions - even in a remote way - which NGOs and others make on their behalf.

(3) The results

Women's work

During our individual interviews, we observed that in many refugee families Afghan men are no longer able to support their family by themselves. They need women and children to contribute to the family income.

From the interviews we were able to make detailed lists of the most common types of work done by women and children and the income they earn. Work done at home includes shelling pistachios, cleaning wool, making brooms, cleaning saffron, making chains and carpet weaving. Children usually start work at an early age (sometimes as young as five years old). Once they reach school age, those who can get into school study about four hours a day at school and work between four and ten hours every day.

Many Afghan children attend schools not formally recognised by the Ministry

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

of Education and run by the Afghans themselves. There are at least 10 informal Afghan schools in Mashad and about 24 in Teheran, serving from 50 to 500 children each. NGOs such as Ockenden Venture and Global Partners have been supporting such schools for over a year now with their own funds and some funding from UNICEF. They have provided books and teaching materials, and have conducted eye tests for children and provided spectacles. Ockenden Venture has also organised some teacher training. MSF France has been carrying out a school health project in Mashad, and a local Afghan NGO (Relief Committee for Destitute Afghan Refugee Families) is helping to identify Afghan schools in Teheran and distribute books. Many questions remain unanswered as to why some children attend these schools and others do not.

Amir, a 12 year old apprentice shoemaker: "When we heard that temporary card holders can register at public schools, I asked my father to enrol me in the Iranian school nearby. He said that it might be a trick to collect the temporary cards and that I had better continue at this [informal] school."

Aspirations versus reality

The aspirations of Afghan women and children contrast heavily with the reality of the back-breaking, repetitive and poorly-paid jobs mentioned above. When asked in the FGD study what kind of job skills they would like to be trained in, the answers were: sewing, crocheting, sash weaving, making bags, weaving and embroidery. The Hazara women also mentioned nursing, secretarial jobs,

teaching and flower arranging as their choices. All of these are skilled jobs which are better paid and pose less of a threat to health.

Although we already knew from individual interviews that Afghans do not have enough money to buy instruments for their work, the FGD gave us a better understanding of the constraints women face. We discovered that the most common reasons for taking poorly paid and low-skilled work are illiteracy, being undocumented, having children to look after, and opposition from the husband or his family. The work has to be part-time, home-based and not requiring a 'green card'. One obstacle which the women identified also suggested its own solution. They said that their lack of familiarity with Iran, and particularly with job opportunities, means that they tend to take on the same jobs that other Afghan women are already doing. It was suggested that a job-search service would enable them to access information on other job opportunities.

Education: the top priority

The data on priority needs obtained from our FGD survey gave us some surprising results. Having seen the poverty of many refugee families at first hand, we expected Afghan women to put income-earning opportunities as their top priority. In fact the top priority identified by almost all the groups was education: for the Hazaras it was education in general, but especially literacy; for the Pashtun women it was skills-training. They all believed that they could improve their own lives if they had some education.

In our individual interviews, most of the women and children we had seen were either illiterate or had very little education. We had already noticed that when asked about the future most children had high aspirations: they wanted to finish school and become teachers or doctors. The women we interviewed on the other hand regarded their future as very bleak. All the women stressed the importance of education for their children, picturing a much better future than their own for their offspring. However, until the focus group discussions, we had no way of weighing the relative priority which they gave to education over other needs, nor of asking them about their aspirations.

We were also very surprised at the intensity of frustration expressed by Pashtuns in the focus groups at the limitations imposed on them by their own culture, and their desire to break through these old customs. One Pashtun woman commented "We want our culture to improve: both boys and girls should work". Another said, "We should have female doctors in Afghanistan". The dynamics of the groups made it possible for women to express these views to their peers. It is unlikely that we would have obtained such responses in an individual interview by an unknown Iranian woman interviewer.

Conclusion

Using focus group discussions in the context of understanding the problems and aspirations of urban Afghan refugees has given us a great deal of information to which we did not previously have access. In particular, the fact that the refugees were able to participate in drawing up recommendations regarding the future work of NGOs was a very positive experience. It encourages the beneficiaries themselves to think about their situation and to come up with solutions. It also gives the organisations working with refugees a much clearer picture of the hopes and fears of a refugee community. Past experience at ICRI has shown us that involving the refugees themselves in decision making improves the implementation process, bringing about better results. This does not mean that one method should replace the other, but rather that the methods should be regarded as complementary.

We know that the single most important factor which determines the living conditions of refugees in Iran is their legal status.

However, the results of our research have

Khodadad, a 16 year old boy, works at a perfume bottle workshop: "We came to Iran about 17 years ago. My father has been sick for more than five years now and cannot work very often. To help my family, I had to quit school for three years and work. Right now I work in a workshop on night shift from midnight to 6am. Of the people working on each shift, six are children under 14 years. The pay for the night shift is the same as that of the day shift, that is about 5,000 Rls./day" (less than a dollar).



shown us that the refugees themselves see many opportunities to improve their situation, even within the bounds of the existing situation. We hope these results will help NGOs to plan effective interventions which meet the aspirations of Afghan women.

Catherine Squire has worked with refugees, mostly in nutrition and social service programmes, since 1982. She has been working in Iran since 1993 and with ICRI since 1995.

Negar Gerami returned to Iran from Germany in 1991 and worked for two years with the Iranian Broadcasting Service as a freelance translator and English news announcer in the overseas department.



Visiting Fellowships

Visiting Fellowships at the RSP are open to senior and mid-career practitioners and policy makers who wish to spend a period of study and reflection in a conducive academic environment, and to academics and other researchers who are working in fields related to forced migration. Each Fellow will normally be assigned an academic adviser and will be expected to undertake a specific programme of self-directed study or research. Fellowships may be held for one, two or three terms in any one academic year. There will normally be no more than ten Visiting Fellows in residence at the RSP at any one time.

For more information, please contact: The Visiting Fellowships Administrator, RSP, Queen Elizabeth House, 21 St Giles, Oxford OX1 3LA, UK. Tel: +44 1865 270265. Fax: +44 1865 270721. Email: Tania.Kaiser@qeh.ox.ac.uk

New research project at RSP : Responses and solutions to the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo

This project has two dimensions: providing recommendations on the immediate international response to the plight of the civilian populations and exploring proposals for the future constitutional status of Kosovo that can form the basis of a negotiated settlement between local actors. The project follows on from a one-day workshop on the Kosovo crisis held on 18 May 1998 with the support of the Department for International Development and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The research will be conducted by Michael Barutciski, RSP Research Fellow in International Law.

This 14-month project began in October 1998 and is being funded by the Department for International Development. Contact: michael.barutciski@qeh.ox.ac.uk

Psychosocial responses to the refugee experience: training module update

The module is primarily aimed at both local and international field workers, as well as managers, administrators and policy makers in programmes of humanitarian assistance. The purpose of the module is to expose all field workers to the psychosocial aspects of their work, rather than to train specialist psychosocial practitioners.

Contributors are currently writing sections on the nature of conflict and the implications for appropriate psychosocial responses, gender and forced migration, refugee children, communication and counselling skills for refugee workers, and community participation.

The module, which will be available both as a hard copy pack of teaching materials and in interactive digital format, will be piloted in April 1999 and available for distribution in December 1999.

The project is funded by the Andrew Mellan Foundation.

For more information, please contact the Project Directors: Maryanne Loughry, RSP (address on p2; maryanne.loughry@qeh.ox.ac.uk) and Alastair Ager, Queen Margaret College, Edinburgh University (a.ager@mail.qmced.ac.uk)



The Refugee Studies Programme's Annual Report 1997-98

Now available. Contact Corinne Owen, RSP (address on p2 or email: corinne.owen@qeh.ox.ac.uk)

