

## **Models and Realities of Afghan Womanhood: A Retrospective and Prospects<sup>1</sup>**

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In order to conceptualise what human rights can signify for women in the dominantly rural society that is Afghanistan, it is necessary to understand the models and stereotypes available to them in recent history and how these have been reworked in every day life. Theirs is not an isolated situation occurring in a vacuum; it has to be understood in relation to the developments in the Indian sub-continent from the British Raj onwards as well as the spread of present-day Islamism. In the context of what may well be Asia's most tribal and patriarchal society, the resistance to Western modernization is unique in a country which could have been, alongside Turkey, at the avantgarde of progressive Muslim nations as early as in the 1920s. All efforts by reformist kings from the early 20th century onwards were doomed and when the communist government attempted to introduce an egalitarian society and implement women's rights after the April revolution of 1978, acute civil strife ensued. This generated full-scale war when their Soviet allies came to the rescue and the US, through their assistance to fundamentalist groups, turned this into the last conflagration of the Cold War.

The defeat of positive reform in Afghanistan has produced a unique form of reactionary modernity, not regression to some kind of archaic past. Contrary to most centralized nations where the most enduring transformations emerge from the capital and then affect the rest of the nation, the opposite here has taken place, because the state is as weak as the rural tribal population is strong.

The situation experienced by Afghan women since the fall of the pro-Soviet government is the result of the hard line Islamic radicalisation and the exacerbation of traditional patriarchal practice in refugee camps situated in Pakistan over the past twenty-five years. This push from the periphery to the centre is the single most difficult challenge facing President Karzai today, quite in keeping with the problems that Afghan rulers have always had to face. The main difference is that, because of the hold of worldwide Islamism today, the oppression of women through a fundamentalist application of Sharia is increasingly seen as a valid option to Human Rights principles. To improve matters, this situation has to be addressed globally, and encompass simultaneously health, education and empowerment at a workable rhythm taking into consideration religion and customs, as well as encourage truly democratic political alternatives where women are involved at every level.

This paper examines three developments presented in chronological order with reference to the present situation. First, we examine the spectrum of contradictory models and stereotypes taken from religion and politics that have moulded perceptions of women in Afghan society. Many of the social configurations defining the rural Afghan population are duplicated on both sides of the Durand line, a most porous and artificial frontier inhabited by the 22 million strong population known as Pathan on the Pakistani side and Pashtun on the Afghan. Second, we explore how fundamentalism triumphed over the progressive forces. The refugee camps provided laboratory conditions to experiment social forms of women's repression and provided

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a model of Afghan fundamentalist society which then was imported back into Afghanistan after the fall of the pro-Communist government. Finally, we elucidate change and resistance to change that have affected predominantly Pashtun female Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, in cities and especially in refugee camps in the NWFP (the North Western Frontier Province) between the late 1970s and 2005, that is to say in the wake of two major foreign military interventions, the first by the Soviet Union (1979) and the second by the US led coalition (2001). This part will also review the consequences of humanitarian ethics, and, especially since 9/11, consumerism and the media. Each set of influences has evolved contradictory prototypes of female behaviour and expectation which Afghan women have had to renegotiate into their own experience. These camps have proven to be far more than just Afghan enclaves on foreign soil. They are, indeed, a uniquely modern product of post-colonial history, liberal economics, and global culture. In conclusion, the possibilities of evolution will be described along with a few modest recommendations, based on an acute awareness of the limitations of any such endeavour so long as the political situation is not effectively addressed.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted between December 2001 and April 2005 in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including Afghan enclaves within Pakistani cities (namely Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Peshawar), and several Afghan camps situated in the NWFP in Pakistan, such as Jalozai, Kobobian, Nazir Bagh, Katcha Gari, Shamshatoo, and Akkora Hattak. Most research was carried out in two smaller camps, Sharwali run on pro-Taliban lines and Khewa, exceptionally open where a small and dynamic secular Afghan NGO, RAWA (Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) has been instrumental in bringing about significant change. Research also includes interviews with returnees from these camps inside Afghanistan. The concept, ideas and approach to this paper are part of the author's doctoral thesis.<sup>2</sup> Living and staying in Khewa camp was made possible through humanitarian work in the area undertaken by the author, through her NGO FemAid working with RAWA.<sup>3</sup> Theory was tested by direct experience of the everyday life of rural refugees.

Apart from journalistic and partisan writing glorifying the so-called Afghan freedom fighters<sup>4</sup>, most research work on the camps dates back from the early days of the war in the 1980s with occasional articles on this by then unfashionable theme in the 1990s. Until now, there has been no extensive gendered research on Afghan refugees in refugee camps, save some articles by Micheline Demont-Centlivres, Inger Boesen, and especially Nancy Hatch-Dupree, whose publications and resource centre in Peshawar have proven invaluable, as has Valentine M. Moghadam's critical approach to recent Afghan history. The anthropological milestones produced by veterans in the Pathan field are essential, such as the writings of Fredrik Barth, Charles Lindholm, Akbar Ahmed, and Benedicte Grima, as are those works on Afghanistan by Pierre Centlivres, Louis Dupree, Oliver Roy, Nancy Tapper and David B. Edwards.<sup>5</sup> The feminist approach to the British Raj by Meredith Borthwick, Geraldine Forbes and Dagmar Engels have proven enlightening in trying to comprehend the models of progress applied by Afghan rulers as well as the problems encountered by modern humanitarian aid.

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<sup>2</sup> Presented at the EHESS in Paris in January 2006.

<sup>3</sup> [www.femaid.org](http://www.femaid.org), a Paris based charity, established in July 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, "If heroism has been your chief weapon for seven years then heroism is what you value most... Yes they 're a flamboyant lot, but they break your heart, they are so brave and they have so little : even now, most of their weapons have been captured from the Russians". Doris Lessing: *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, London, Picador, 1987, p.47-8.

<sup>5</sup> These authors are listed in the references.

## The Pashtun way

In a society where the notion of state is very weak, tribal affiliation forms the basis for identity and solidarity. Pashtun law, a tribal code not necessarily tied to Islam, provides at once identity and guidelines to the local Pashtun population, sedentary and refugee alike on either side of the Durand line. Versions of this basic code are practised in similar segmentary, previously nomadic societies, such as Bedouins, Nuers or the neighbouring Baluch. It has turned into a standard applicable to other ethnic groups of refugees which have been able to accept Pashtun domination within the camps because it efficiently vouchsafed family honour through systematized control over women. Three institutions dominate the major areas of activity, as described by Fredrik Barth in the 1950s and 1960s and still valid today in traditional Pathan areas in Pakistan (FATA and NWFP) as well as the refugee camps:

“*melmastia*= hospitality and the honourable uses of materials goods; *jirga*= councils and the honourable pursuit of public affairs; *pardah*= seclusion and the honourable organization of domestic life” (Barth, 1981)

The principles are validated through territorial connection to inherited land through the male lines only, which is difficult for refugees estranged in the camps who nevertheless continue to refer to their patrimony as a framework for the visible practise of their Pashtun identity.

The key word here is honour for which there are several words in Pashto each conveying different aspects that make up a complex identity based on economic moral and social independence, whereby each family or group is entrenched within its own self-sufficient boundaries. This is an extreme form of classic patriarchal society with built-in hierarchies and oppositions between male and female values (Kandiyoti 1988; Tapper 1991; Moghadam 1992) Male honour is pro-active and expressed through exacerbated virility whereas for females honour is necessarily passive, submissive, and centred round avoidance of shame. Its members are organized according to a tight patriarchal hierarchy with one dominating male right at the top of the pyramid, followed by his married sons, sons and grandsons, then his wife and at the bottom the youngest as yet childless (or, more precisely son-less) daughters-in-law, just above the daughters of the family. Male domination is never questioned, indeed it is seen as God-given even by women themselves who perceive the frequent marital brutality as a normal part of marriage, which they believe ordained by the Koran, even though they have never read a line of it.<sup>6</sup> Pashtun proverbs are eloquent in this respect ‘*A woman’s place is in the home or in the grave*’ or ‘*Women have no noses, they eat shit*’. ‘*One’s own mother and sister are disgusting*’.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in traditional non-fundamentalist settings, women have negotiated their place; older women are respected and the eldest daughter is often the father’s favourite. Just as in other patriarchal societies in the West (Jewish and Christian) up until the end of the 18th century, the official line never favoured women but did not entail automatic oppression. In farms and rural enterprises in Afghanistan or Ancien Régime Europe, men and women always worked hard together in complementary ways, even if the woman’s contribution was never recognized as such. Yet Pashtun women, despite their ritual seclusion were not always passive.

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst researching the issue of violence, I have frequently heard women in different camps say “It is normal, my husband is allowed to beat me when he is not happy, the Koran says so”.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Lindholm (1982), p.113.

Afghanistan's national hero is Malalai, some kind of Joan of Arc, a woman who was killed in the battlefield in the Anglo-Afghan war. Rudyard Kipling, the bard of the British Raj, shared this view.

*"When you're wounded and left,  
On Afghanistan's plains,  
And the women come out,  
To cut up your remains,  
Just roll on your rifle,  
And blow out your brains,  
And go to your Gawd,  
Like a soldier."*<sup>8</sup>

Yet a century later, any such latitude for heroic action has definitely been evacuated from Afghan society. Islamism was to truly turn men against women, and transform prejudice into institutional misogyny.

Afghan family units relate to different kindred segments through variable forms of exchange which go from marriage in the best of cases, to transgenerational vendetta, known as *Badal*, not forgetting partnerships in battle or in business which have to be perpetually renegotiated- a configuration that still operates on different degrees round the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Rivalry, which is about having others continuously acknowledge one's own worth, is present at every level of interaction, so much so that the Pashtun word '*tarbur*' (cousin) on the father's side is synonymous for enemy. Something which contributes to a woman's woes is that the preferred marriage partner is usually the self-same *tarbur*, i.e. her first cousin on her father's side who will often find himself in conflict with her own brother, usually her favourite close relation.

Hospitality (*melmastia* and the concept of refuge, *nanatawey*) here takes up the ancient Hebrew and generally Middle-Eastern practise known under the Biblical term of 'Cities of Refuge' where the right of asylum was given to anyone who had unintentionally slain another in order to be protected from the 'avenger of blood'.<sup>9</sup> In the tribal frontier forts, local Pathan villages and refugee camps traditional institutions have undergone modification in tune with the times. Thus customary law has been reinterpreted in order to legitimate aspects of drugs trade and protection of terrorists. This explains how Osama Bin Laden has been offered protection in the region, especially the autonomous enclave known as FATA, Federally Administered Tribal Area. As one of his daughters has married a son of Mullah Omar, the two families are henceforth bound through mutual indebtedness for generations to come in true Pashtun (or tribal) fashion.

These societies are egalitarian, at least on the level of the patriarchs themselves who, as a group of elder males, take decisions after lengthy deliberations through council meetings (*jirga*). President Karzai, by convening the Loya Jirga, deliberately chose this most traditional parliamentary form to re-organize the country's institutions in Kabul.

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<sup>8</sup> Rudyard Kipling: The Young British Soldier, A Souvenir of the Anglo-Afghan wars, in Daniel Karlin (ed), *Rudyard Kipling* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> See Numbers XXXV, 6. The Old Testament contains many Pashtun prescriptions that are in fact common to most of the Near-East, thereby indicating that this population may have migrated from the area. Older Pashtuns frequently admit in private to believing the ancient local tradition which upholds that they themselves are descended from Hebrews, as one of the 'Lost Tribes', something which they prefer not to elaborate upon openly in view of the Muslim world's attitude to the state of Israel.

In what remains an acutely tribal context, nation-and-state building has proven to be a near impossible challenge for all Afghan rulers. The conflict usually flares up over issues concerning the ‘woman question’, which is inevitably perceived as an intervention into the heavily secluded private sphere of responsibility (mahram), indeed the personal property of men in traditional Pashtun society.

### **A history of progress: change and reaction on the Afghan political scene**

The Afghan exodus is generally perceived as being the direct result of the Soviet military intervention designed to support the communist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan’s government. The measures in favour of the status of women put forward by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) are said to have been too revolutionary for such a conservative deeply Islamic country. On closer inspection, it seems that the reforms attempted by the earlier rulers were far more radical in content but their implementation was more timorous. Certainly, these brave efforts cost King Habibullah (reigned 1901-19) his life and at one point brought the country near civil war, during the reign of the most innovative of all, King Amanullah (reigned 1919-29), ousted by a Tajik adventurer known as Bacha Saqao in 1929 (Dupree, 1973). Yet these reactions pale in comparison to 25 years of war that followed the Soviet intervention.

What was this notion of modernity about? It is usually said that the reforms by Mustafa Kemal known as Ataturk in Turkey provided the major inspiration, but it seems that the British rule of India (1858-1847) was at least as influential.

The Western model of progress which acquired the status of paradigm was experimented in British India from the late 19th century onwards and has remained influential in the whole area. Progress meant medical and scientific improvement (from public health to the building of schools, hospital, post offices, and roads) as well as reforms deemed to bring the colonized lands up to Western standards of propriety and morals. Social legislation aimed at improving the life conditions of women, which included raising the age of marriage and introducing education, became emblematic of Imperial achievement, rather like the priorities of present-day humanitarian agencies. Ideals of Victorian femininity were exported to India, aspects of which had much in common with the local prototype in their dependence on male validation and their primacy of a self-effacing maternal role. (Engels, 1999)

The educated classes living in the cities – be it in Afghanistan or India during the Raj had always associated itself with Western modernity, which permitted access to privilege and power in the capital city, something which is equally true in present-day Kabul occupied by allied forces. The poorer classes were excluded from this process, retaliated by setting themselves up as the sole champions of ethnic tradition, which they defended with orthodox zeal as riots against the Raj in Peshawar and today against aid agencies in rural Afghanistan prove. The development of Muslim fundamentalist reformist movements from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards (especially the rigorous Deoband mosque) assimilated any form of Western progress to Infidel propaganda, including secular education. The reticence in attending English schools shown by Muslims of the British NWFP,<sup>10</sup> was echoed by the Afghan population each

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<sup>10</sup> “So far as the Musalmans had shown an indifference to the education offered them, that was ascribed by the Government to the disproportionate attention given by them to religious studies, to a preference, as more practical, for the course of study in indigenous schools”. Hunter Education Commission Report 1882, Superintendent of Government Printing Calcutta 1883, p. 482.

time Afghan rulers attempted to enforce education. This problem was also encountered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) when setting up schools within the refugee camps. In more recent years, this hostility toward education and modernity has resurged with the frequent torching of girls' schools by Taliban elements in Afghanistan, despite the official reinstatement of girls' education.<sup>11</sup>

King Amanullah in the 1920s went further. Presaging the Communist government fifty years later, he simultaneously attempted reforms concerned with land tenure and marriage customs, both of which were closely connected and at the heart of Pashtun identity and self-definition. When Amanullah ordered the population of Kabul to wear Western clothes (something which the British never dared attempt in India), the enforced unveiling of women was designed to turn them into equal partners of their freely chosen husbands in the national quest of modernity, reinforced by co-education. Here, he had followed the lead taken by Mustafa Kemal, known as Ataturk, the Turkish reformer of the newly founded republic, himself much inspired by Lenin. In turn, the Amanullah marriage reforms proved inspirational to the Soviets in the Central Asian republics.

This reconfiguration of Afghan identity with modern aspirations bringing together British, Turkish and Soviet influences did not help unite the Afghan population and indeed achieved the opposite. The absence of communication and mutual incomprehension between the ruling class and the vast rural majority were largely caused by the foreign and secular criteria for modernisation. They meant cultural alienation for those who felt threatened by these new norms, a situation which became acute when a Marxist modernizing elite started to exert its influence within the government from the mid 1960s onwards and which is being experienced once again today.

In 1965 the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was formed, a pro-Communist group which may have helped Mohammad Daoud to seize power from his cousin King Zahir Shah and declare Afghanistan a republic. He was toppled in turn by his former PDPA allies in April 1978 during what is known as the Saur Revolution. The true innovation lay in the women's group, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW), within the PDPA, also founded in 1965 which set about to address specifically every aspect of women's condition, not just limited to marriage, with the aim of turning women into citizens and partners in an egalitarian secular society. (Moghadam, 1994)

Nevertheless, the distance between reforms on paper and actual practise was considerable. DOAW and its supporters were generally sophisticated middle to upper-class women with a foreign education- just like the progressive circles round Kings Habibullah or Amanullah with equally limited connection to the rural majority. In the city, however outward looking, each family nevertheless accommodated with aspects of modernity compatible with their general outlook, which generally meant a certain degree of compliance with patriarchal demands and norms when it came to important decisions regarding female mobility and above all marriage. Such intimate family matters belonged then as now to personal space and suffer no interference in urban and rural families alike. Therefore, in the 1960s and 1970s, if family fathers were willing to let their daughters attend university, get a job in one of the government offices and even wear fashionable European dress for a few hours a day, it is unlikely that they were allowed equal latitude in the choice of their husbands, a situation which does not appear to have changed today.

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<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, the latest episode had occurred on June 23rd 2005 in the Lugal province, Afghan girls' school attacked, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/education/4124482.stm>.

Oliver Roy and others (including RAWA rhetoric) have maintained that the PDPA coup of 1978 met with violent opposition with some circles of the elite not so much because of progressive ideology of the PDPA but because of the brutal way of putting it into practise, which cost the lives of thousands of Afghan citizens. Roy argues that the problem was that instead of presenting the reforms in a pragmatic, technical manner, they were given a Marxist packaging that alienated the pious traditionalist population who would have been the principal and not unwilling beneficiaries (Roy, 1985). The rural populations closest to the Pakistani border began to leave the country and move in with their relations and allies in the NWFP. One Afghan acquaintance who grew in deeply rural Badakhshan during the war heard his mother explain that Communist meant 'No God'<sup>12</sup> (Khoda neest).

In the early 1970s, the presence of pro-Communist and especially anti-fundamentalist elements in Prime Minister Daoud's government met with violent reaction amid university-educated Fundamentalist circles. Most of the leaders of the future struggle against the Soviet intervention had been active in Muslim youth movements (including Rabbani, Massoud and Hekmatyar) at the Sharia faculty of Kabul in the late 1960s and early 1970s, inspired by the teachings of Hassan-El-Banna, founder of the Muslim brotherhood in Cairo. (Rubin, 1992) Gulbedin Hekmatyar, the US's favourite "freedom" fighter, achieved early notoriety for hurling acid at unveiled girls in short skirts in Kabul.<sup>13</sup> Also present on the campus was an alternative secular anti-Soviet left, somewhat more nationalist with Maoist leanings popular amidst certain circles of the upper middle-class youth, which has been hitherto been largely unexamined. This formed the ideological background of what was to become RAWA which soon distanced itself from standard Maoist rhetoric, uniquely concentrating on women's predicament, just like the much-maligned DOAW.

Whilst reflecting on the failure of the brave PDPA reforms, one has to realize that Afghanistan of the 1970s was no longer the same as in Amanullah's time. The king's attempts at change had only affected an urban elite, yet nevertheless, each generation had produced a number of ambitious, forward looking women who had discarded the veil. One example was Anahita Ratebzad, who founded the DOAW in the 1960s with her friends, who were all the products of progressive circles connected with the court. Many Afghan women of all ages today speak warmly of teachers, nurses, doctors as powerful role-models who influenced them as girls. Doubtless, tales about these women circulated in traditional rural areas as apocalyptic visions harboured by labourers who had been to the city. The difference with earlier times was the possibility of visualizing new stereotypes of women through television, video-cassettes, news items which led to a juxtaposition of negative visions of Western influenced women. Particularly popular in those days were Iranian films of the 1960s and 1970s showing scantily clad women lounging about in Western-style living rooms, tumbler of whisky in hand.<sup>14</sup> Film after popular film displayed the iconography of *gharbzadegi*<sup>15</sup> (Westoxication) decried by the luminaries of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the traditionalists on the Afghan side who could only find their worst suspicions confirmed with tales of American films screened in Pakistan and accessible by video-cassette. This, in the West, was the time of flamboyant,

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<sup>12</sup> Interview in Kabul, April 2005.

<sup>13</sup> This frequently quoted assertion (in numerous articles as well as Anne E. Brodsky and Melody Ermachild Chavis, both authors of books on RAWA as) may have originated in early RAWA publications

<sup>14</sup> Shahla Lahiji: Portrayal of Women in Iranian Cinema, An historical overview (undated) <http://www.iran-bulletin.org/art/CINEMA2.html>

<sup>15</sup> Title of a famous 1962 polemic by Iran's Jalal Al-e Ahmad denouncing the influence of West and later hailed by the Islamic Revolution.

much-publicized Women's Liberation manifestations, which also had put Afghanistan on the hippie trail in the 1960s. On top of these representations of women's lives in the Muslim republics of the USSR relayed by Uzbeks and Tadjiks living on the Soviet border: reports, films and images about liberated Muslim girls from the villages leaving their families and leading independent lives must have caused additional alarm, as this was the model these Marxist reformers were proposing to implement. The superimposition of contradictory images relayed by the media and a new awareness of world politics in a shrinking 'global village' may well have sent a tidal wave of panic down to the remotest villages.

Between 1980 and 1990, between five and six million Afghan citizens fled their homeland mainly in the direction of Iran and Pakistan, thereby constituting the world's largest refugee community. Some 3, 274 000 officially registered refugees were present in Pakistan in 1990 (with about 500, 000 to one million unaccounted for) of which 70% resided in the border area known as the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) by the Durand Line which forms the frontier with Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup> According the UN census dated March 2005, despite all the efforts of repatriation the area still hosts about 1.8 million refugees out of three million still in Pakistan, living in the 150 or so camps, some registered, some not.<sup>17</sup>

### **The rise of Fundamentalism in the refugee camps**

The very first refugee camps were probably extensions of military training camps that the Pakistani government built for the opponents of the left wing and pro-Soviet elements in the Afghan government. Since 1973 (nearly six years before the Soviet intervention) Hekmatyar, Massoud and Rabbani,<sup>18</sup> future fundamentalist warlords and leaders of the fight against the Soviet army had fled to Peshawar to build up support with the help of the Pakistani government. A number of camps, military in origin, may have been conceived as rallying points round specific war lords with strong fundamentalist leadings, not just as neutral gathering places for refugees.<sup>19</sup>

In the early days of the 1980's war, fighters and tribal eldest competed for power within the refugee camps. Cashing in on the *kudos* of warfare and heroic warriors, the Mujahidin skilfully manoeuvred to redefine themselves as tribal chiefs leading their troops, bolstered by Pashtun tradition and a mission of Jihad, one legitimating the other. Their influence was far more important in exile than on home ground where they did not immediately ingratiate themselves with the Afghan population who according to Olivier Roy did not trust them to defend Islam (Roy, 1985). Influence and power in these regions depend on exchange and the possibility of building up support through a system of retribution. This only became possible when they evolved from guerrillas being becoming fully-fledged warlords posing as legitimate representatives of the Afghan people, thereby benefiting from US military help and directing humanitarian aid and soon the narcotics trade. (Cooley, 1999)

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<sup>16</sup> The subject and numbers are still under debate. See *Encyclopedia Iranica* VV(4), NY, 1995 pp.385 and following.

<sup>17</sup> National census carried out by the government of Pakistan with financial and technical assistance from UNHCR, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2/5/2005

<sup>18</sup> All three were to fight over the control of Kabul in the early 1990s, thereby destroying the city and killing tens of thousands of its inhabitants.

<sup>19</sup> Nobody seems to have noticed that all the major refugee camps were built round Cherat. A practically undocumented military camp at Cherat in the NWFP the US built in the 1950s for the training of elite units; this is where Massoud and other Afghan anti-Soviet leaders were trained in the mid 1970s and probably Osama bin Laden. This author suggests that it is likely that the United States may have been active in Afghan politics well before the first rumblings of Soviet tanks. Information given by journalists at The Nation, daily newspaper in Peshawar in October 2003 and references to a remarkably well informed website: <http://www.specialoperations.com/Foreign/Pakistan/SSG.htm>.



Indeed the war against the Soviet intervention provided a focus for all opposition and helped unite people who had very little in common, such as Kabuli intellectuals, peasants, mullahs and Islamic fundamentalists. It was as military commanders that these leaders managed to rally support and ultimately came to represent all forms of opposition to the Soviet intervention. This manoeuvring continued what they had begun back in Kabul on the university campus even before the PDPA took over. They wanted to be the only entities to represent organized opposition to the Communist government and later the Soviet intervention, thereby ensuring their status as sole recipients of massive aid pouring into the region. Initially this was by no means an obvious process: indeed RAWA's founder Mina Keshwar Kamal was invited to France at a major Socialist conference as the official representative of the Afghan resistance. Gulbedin Hekmatyar set about to eliminate the major figures of dissident intellectuals who also happened to oppose the Mujahedin groups.<sup>20</sup> The hitherto unstudied consequences of the active eradication of any kind of alternative secular opposition to fundamentalist ideology on women's rights in Afghanistan were catastrophic on a long-term basis. This meant that when the pro-Communist government and its allies fell, no organised political groups were left to defend what had been achieved to improve women's lives and that RAWA as probably the sole remnant of this secular opposition active for women, had henceforth to function in a clandestine, underground manner, even though it has achieved world-wide recognition.

In 1977, Pakistan's dictator, General Zia-Ul-Haq enforced an Islamic constitution, ostensibly to bring legal, social, economic and political institutions of the country in conformity with the Quran and Sunnah. He naturally backed the Afghans militants in Peshawar and financed the building of thousands of madrassas in the vicinity of refugee camps, with help from Saudi Arabia. Reassured by the promise of regular meals and a minimum education, many desperate widows eagerly sent their sons to what became the training grounds for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda supporters. Herded in decrepit boarding houses, cut off from contact with mothers and sisters, they were fed an extremely simplified messianic Islam which was to become the Taliban creed.<sup>21</sup> When they came to power in Kabul in 1992, the Islamist warlords brought with them this ideological mix from exile, and it proved to be a basis on which the Taliban could build on, with an idiosyncratic set of rigid rules and regulations based on their own sectarian interpretations of Islam resulting in true gender apartheid.

Whereas the struggle against the Soviet intervention provided unity from the outside, inner harmony was ensured by religion. The treatment of women served to brook any differences between modern Islamism and a tribal code, all in the name of Allah. Patriarchal prejudice was reformulated into a fundamentalist ethic deliberately misogynist in a way that had never been imagined, even by the most traditionalist patriarchs. War conditions made compromise possible: for instance the Islamic right to female inheritance could remain a rhetorical question for families in exile who had lost anything that could have been inherited. Under Mujahidin control, the camps provided laboratory conditions to experiment with modern forms of gendered repression. The rigorous separation of the sexes made the moral and psychological divide more acute: women were rooted in the camps whereas men operated in army formations, virtually estranged from their own families, with as solace, the company of young

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<sup>20</sup> His most famous victims include Sholay's leader Saydal Sukhandan (1972) Faiz Ahmad, leader of the ALO, Afghan Liberation Organization (1986) and his wife RAWA's founder Mina (1987), as well as internationally acclaimed poet Seyed Bahauddin Majrooh (1988).

<sup>21</sup> The reality of these madrasas reveals frequently appalling conditions and mistreatment for children, see Amnesty International : Children in South Asia: securing their rights 22 April 1998 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engASA040011998>

boys.<sup>22</sup> It is highly significant that unlike other revolutionary and resistance movements in the world (including Muslim Iran, Algeria, Eritrea, Oman), women were totally excluded from any participation in the struggle, military or civilian. (Moghadam, 2003) The fundamentalist attitude to women could be summarized as a vindictive application of Sharia within the context of the political programme aiming at the establishment of a totally Islamic state of a political, justified by a literal interpretation of the Koran. Traditional appeals to modesty and self-effacement were turned into systematic persecution of any visible kind of expression of femininity interpreted as anti-Islamic.

It has to be said that Western intellectuals bear a heavy responsibility having refused to support the secular non pro-Soviet left and reified these sanguinary warlords. The sentimental intellectual West – with such prominent figures as novelist Doris Lessing or French salon philosopher Bernard Henri Levy – as well as Hollywood, via ‘Rambo’, provided ideal propaganda and moral justification for US Cold War policies by promoting the image of rugged resisters, without ever pausing to examine their attitude towards women or modernity. The aid that was channelled through these warlords in fact contributed to finance fundamentalist Afghan politics and the oppression of women which has not relented since. This too has been what David Rieff, discussing Band Aid and its consequences on the Ethiopian famine, calls “an exercise in deadly compassion”.<sup>23</sup> Since 9/11, the questionable figure of Massoud has been reconstructed as a national hero, with posters and souvenir door-mats of the man are on sale in Kabul everywhere,<sup>24</sup> a process which has helped legitimate the ethics behind such repression even further.

### **From the Taliban until today**

The rule of the Taliban had direct consequences in the refugee camps. Religion and customary prejudice were reconfigured in a modern but reactionary mould. Women were henceforth perceived as an unnecessary, indeed dangerous temptation, best explained by Ahmed Rashid “*They felt threatened by that half of the human race which they had never known and it was it was much easier to lock that half away, especially if it was ordained by mullahs who invoked primitive Islamic injunctions which had no basis in Islamic law. The subjugation of women became the mission of the true believer and a fundamental marker that differentiated the Taliban from the former Mudjaheddin*”. (Rashid, 2000)

Pashtun custom is famous for its extreme seclusion of women which acts as marker for the respectability of the family. In refugee camps just as in villages, the first thing that is built is some kind of fence to define and limit private space, as separate from male, public space. Likewise, women are confined within its perimeter and if one of them has to leave, she will be forced to shroud herself into the all-covering anonymity of a burqa, the equivalent of her enclosure. This already difficult situation has considerably worsened in the refugee camps. Compared to traditional villages, private space has shrunk and public space expanded as men reach out to the open, modern world. Until today, women are locked into a grid of multiple forms of repression, what Foucault (1975) calls “schémas de docilité”,<sup>25</sup> where domestic space

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<sup>22</sup> Homosexual relationships involving adult men and young boys are well known in the camps and discreetly commented on. Some press articles refer to them; see, for example, “Kandahar's Lightly Veiled Homosexual Habits” (unsigned) Los Angeles Times April 3, 2002.

<sup>23</sup> David Rieff: Did Live Aid do more harm than good?, *The Guardian*, London Friday June 24<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, in April 2005 this author encountered only disbelief and dismay from the vendors of this articles who remembered the destruction of their city by Massoud’s forces during the civil war.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault: *Surveiller et Punir*, Gallimard, Paris 1975 p.161.

has been extended to encompass the shared space in the camps. In Jalozai in December 2001, the present researcher observed male guards swinging the butt of their rifles in the direction of the women who attempted to walk away from their make-shift tents. This goes well beyond customary purdah, even within the harsh Pashtun context.

Having lost their land, honour needs to be displayed more prominently through other channels, namely the reputation of wives and daughters, representatives, more than ever, of what Bourdieu calls the “symbolic capital” of the family. Even widows have internalised these values in order to maintain their children’s reputation and their daughters’ economic worth on the marriage market, in a society which operates through bride-price (i.e. money given by the groom’s family to the bride’s father), rather than dowry.

A number of researchers, including Bernt Glazer, have noted that purdah was particularly strict in the camps during the war, despite a dominating female population.<sup>26</sup> He attributes this to the weakening of male institutions, as in traditional society, male authority imposed itself naturally without any outside constraint. This was also observed by Nancy Dupree and by Kathleen Howard-Merriam, writing in the 1980s. However, much more than male insecurity might be at stake, something which appears with hindsight when considering the long-term consequences of the West’s massive support to Islamist warlords. The condition of women not only in camps but in the NWFP Pakistan and Afghanistan are the result of a quarter of a century a pro-active fundamentalist reading of the Sharia enforced by Islamist warlords, which duplicated and stiffened strict tribal custom.

Gradually, many of the Taliban’s more fundamentalist injunctions were discarded in favour of a radicalised Pashtun code, henceforth presented as true Islam and this indeed is the situation today. This could be seen as a move to fend off the globalizing traits of fundamentalist Islam which tend to erase any national particularities, thereby presenting a threat to ethnic identity. Thus many rural Pashtuns today pride themselves in keeping many of those injunctions which are expressly forbidden by Islam and which were on the wane before the fundamentalist backlash. These include the levirate (widows being obliged to marry their deceased husband’s brother), the refusal of inheritance for women, the giving of daughters to compensate for a murder committed by a son of the family, “honour” killings, blood feuds, the stoning of women on the suspicion of dalliance (as opposed to the proof required by Islamic courts). The ubiquitous burqa has become the symbol and uniform of this new kind of ethnicized Islamism, ubiquitous even in areas such as Northern Afghanistan which had scarcely worn it before the Taliban made it compulsory.

The escalating fundamentalist society that evolved in the refugee community in Pakistani camps over the period of twenty-five years has had a lasting influence both in Pakistan Afghanistan itself. The powerful ultra-conservative Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) coalition in the NWFP in Pakistan has grown out of the fundamentalist/Taliban ethic which is indeed applied in the whole region. The hybrid constitution governing Afghanistan today brings together orthodox Shariah and conventional democratic forms that are completely at odds with the reality of equal rights within an Islamic state, even if Afghanistan has signed the CEDAW convention. The major political formations depend on former warlords who remain close to fundamentalism: alone in the new generation of women entering politics stands Malalai Joya a 27 year-old elected representative of the Farah province who in 2005 had yet to build up her following. In 2005, the Chief Justice Minister, Fazul Hadi Shinwari, exclusively

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<sup>26</sup> Bernt Glatzer: *Sword and Reason among Pashtuns, notions of individual honour and social responsibility in Afghanistan*, paper presented at the 14th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies in Copenhagen August 1996.

versed in Islamic law, had attempted to institutionalize the repression of women, banning female singers, opposing co-education, and stating publicly his lack of reticence regarding stoning of “adulterous” women. Shinwari was responsible for naming judges all over the country who like himself had no training in secular law; they are bound to have a far greater influence than anything attempted by foreign NGOs working on short to mid-term projects out of their offices in Kabul. The general outlook is very bleak indeed.

### **Afghan refugee women in Pakistan**

The formulation of a new social and moral order in the span of twenty-five years in the refugee camps reflects a complex process simultaneously taking into account the developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the rise of world-wide fundamentalism, humanitarian aid and many aspects of global culture which have penetrated the remotest refugee camp through television. Since 9/11 the distorted reflection of Afghan women as set out by the world media has to be renegotiated into their personal experience.

Amongst the many changes affecting their lives, has been the reconfiguration of families. The patriarchal scheme outlined earlier whilst remaining the reference and ideal, has in practise been transformed. Although specific statistics are unavailable, it is known that refugee camps all over the world are largely populated by women and young children. All kinds of new configurations have evolved, of which the most interesting is the presence of single, unmarried girls within the home in the camps and cities in Pakistan. In contrast, in the villages in Afghanistan itself, girls continue to be married off in between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. This privileged daughter, her mother’s favourite, the *khub dokhtar* (the good girl/daughter) carries her family’s honour not through passivity and submission, but by her achievements, by going to school, or by obtaining work with an NGO. Her illiterate married sister-in-law (the wife of her elder brother) might have to do all the housework while she attends to her studies. A comparable process has been observed in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, where single girls (*Banat*) are emblematic of their families’ respectability.<sup>27</sup> In both cases, a new closeness between mother and daughter has evolved which may persist throughout the years, even when the daughter gets married, something which was rare previously.

### **In the cities**

The populations that settled in the city benefited from far less aid than those in the camps and were obliged to fend for themselves. Contrary to the camp dwellers, many more men were present. Liisa Malkki’s research on Hutu refugees in Tanzania found many differences between these two categories of refugees. Those in the camps cultivated their tribal identity and their traditions whereas the city dwellers were more permeable to changes and the possible integration into the local society, especially as in the Tanzanian border areas just like in the NWFP, the same population was living on either side of the frontier.<sup>28</sup> Urban populations from Afghanistan tended to avoid camps as much as possible and settle where they could in Pakistani cities and shanty towns, which turned into veritable Afghan ghettos. Even though their living conditions might often be inferior to those they may have enjoyed at a later date in some of the refugee villages, it was important to them, in terms of image and status, to escape the humiliation of living in a camp situation. As refugees, even the professional categories did not have access to official employment health-care or education for their children. Whole

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<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Sayigh: “Exile in Lebanon”, in Abdo and Lentin (2002) op.cit.p 61

<sup>28</sup> Liisa Malkki: *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press UP, 1995.

families piled up in tiny shuttered apartments overlooking open sewers and the only links between different members of the refugee communities were based on their previous relationships and affiliations.

Valentine M. Moghadam (1994, 2003) was able to compare life in Kabul and in Peshawar under the PDPA rule in 1989, and the contrast was startling. Whereas women were present and visible in practically every level of society, from social organizations to airlines and offices, in Peshawar they were completely absent, the Resistance movement did not even have a female spokesperson, as gender segregation had become the official way of life, even in an urban setting. Educated and peasant women alike were removed from any presence in the public space and confined to the home and enforced domesticity. RAWA was the only organization to publicly denounce what they called “fundamentalist fascism”.

The abysmal conditions explain why the urban population was the first to attempt a return, as soon as conditions, with each change of government, appeared to improve. Audrey Shalinsky in her study of emigrated Uzbeks from Ferghana describes the inward looking mind-set of these families solely preoccupied by piecing together a coherent life-style from salvaged scraps of their past. The powerful patriarchal mould, even in educated families, was and is a further barrier to pervasive change. In the most privileged circles -- such as the wealthy émigré families living in Hayatabad quarter of Peshawar -- boys and more rarely girls might be sent to top private schools with a British curriculum, but at home, the strictest restrictions prevail. In most other comparable war and refugee situations, there are a number of single men on the loose who manage to integrate and help introduce changes. This is less the case among Afghans, as unmarried men are generally housed with members of their own extended families. They may be able, to a limited extent, to cultivate socio-professional contacts with their contemporaries in the workplace, in the mosque and in schools – though this is unthinkable for women who are far more secluded than they ever were in their Afghan home cities. Cities outside the NWFP, in Sind and Punjab, must have seemed quite alien with the vivid colours, hot spices, anarchic bustle mixing of East and West, for the more stoic sometimes dour Afghans. The opposite has happened in Iran, where women have been able to avail themselves of educational opportunities within a uniquely Islamic framework, therefore acceptable to their families. In most other urban societies in Europe and Muslim Africa, women constitute the interface with everyday life, the market, school, neighbours, landowners whereas men work far from home.

In Afghan exiled society, the women who have been able accede to this kind of independence have been a tiny minority of urbanized and educated widows or wives of men living abroad, provided they received a modicum of support allowing them to claim some of the progress available to them in the city, usually healthcare and schooling for their children. As in the camps, RAWA has been particularly active in empowering this category of women usually rejected by the own society as well as the hostile Pakistani environment. Likewise, the daughters of more enlightened urban families that actually remained in the have been able to accede to a much higher level of education than what is available in Afghanistan, hence the regrets of many young returnees. However, there does seem to be a future for them in the major Afghan cities. Since the fall of the Taliban, when more middle-class families returned to Afghanistan, the boys usually attempt to get employment with one of the numerous foreign NGOs who offer far larger salaries than any government jobs. These are gradually being taken over by the girls who have learnt English in Pakistan, especially in the provinces because of family pressure, they cannot leave home for the capital. The result will become apparent within

the next ten years or so when it is likely that, if the fundamentalist forces are held at bay, the Afghan civil service could be run by women.

### **In the camps**

Refugee camps have survived the Soviet retreat in 1989 and offer an acceptable alternative life-style to nearly two million Afghans unwilling or unable to face harsh conditions in their devastated homeland. Through the years, the refugee camps have become self-contained tribal enclaves, part rural, part urban, without any reference to outside law or interference; the mode of governance, so to speak, reflects that of its chief, generally a hard-line post-Taliban ethic and customary law is applied.

Even today each camp could be viewed as a fortress run by a chief with specific political allegiances amongst local politicians and tribal chieftains whilst in direct competition with its neighbouring camps. According to Ahmed Rashid, the whole region has been thriving on illicit economy. What he calls the “heroin pipeline” runs through the entire region, which may well include some of the camps, as a number of their officials could be linked to local tribal chiefs. (Rashid, 2000) The camps operate largely as unofficial embassies for groups active inside Afghanistan whilst maintaining facilities generally associated with refugee camps, provided and paid for by international humanitarian agencies, namely schools and dispensaries. The complexity of these structures s needs to be re-evaluated by media and donors alike.

Men were afforded new possibilities right from the start, whereas the women were locked into their make-shift homes. Former farm labourers, they were able to find work in local bazaars and small towns, in local brick or textile factories and markets and a number of them were hired by oil-rich Gulf states. The fact that they provide cheaper labour than the local workforce has contributed to erode sympathy between people related by ethnic identity. Once or twice a year, they have been returning to their home villages to check the prospects for return and work on their land when possible, thus the link with Afghanistan is never broken. One unfortunate consequence of the urban proximity is that children from the age of about six onwards are sent out to work, often by widows who have no other source of income. Leaving the camps at dawn, they collect rubbish in the street for recycling, toil at vegetable stands or simply beg. It is generally known that a number of them disappear into prostitution in Pakistan or in the Gulf States.<sup>29</sup> All along motorways and in petrol stations, clusters of tiny barefoot Afghan children in colourful rags scuttle towards cars or passers-by.

The excruciating poverty, so typical of the region and the sub-continent generally, does not signify obligatory social stagnation. Camps provide a paradoxical area for change, being a hybrid of urban and rural constructs. Despite the now-fashionable deconstruction of humanitarian aid into strategies of control by the capitalist world,<sup>30</sup> there nevertheless have been positive durable side-effects, especially for women. Whereas the situation of men has stayed the same since the beginning, women’s has evolved. The camps, unlike local villages, possess structures donated in the 1980s by UNHCR, that is to say (at best) a modest dispensary and sometimes a school and workshops nominally accessible to women even if in practise attendance is often weak, in view of their enforced seclusion. Access to water, electricity and sometimes a telephone are available. Television and video-cassettes have brought the world media into the most remote mud hovel and most loved of all are Bollywood productions: women are far more aware of the media, as much of the day is spent with the TV or the radio

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<sup>29</sup> Amongst others, UNHCR 1999 report quoted and expanded by Watch list on children and armed conflict <http://www.watchlist.org/reports/afghanistan.report.php>.

<sup>30</sup> viz. David Rieff, Michael Ignatieff, David Chandler and others.

on. The Pashtun-language BBC radio series 'New Home, New life' which has been running since 1994 has brought a new awareness of problems and their solutions as themes like vaccinations, drug addiction, female literacy have been woven into the stories. RAWA's publication *Payam-e-Zan* (Women's Message) has brought news about women to the remotest refugee camps.

Living conditions in the old-established camps are better than in equivalent Pakistani villages in the vicinity and in fact infant mortality is lower amongst the refugees than in the local rural Pakistani population (Bartlett 2002). One easily understands the reticence of many refugees at the prospect of returning to their destroyed homes, bereft of even the most elementary basics. The simultaneous presence of traditional and modern institutions has been instrumental in effecting a measure of change: the constant friction between mullahs and medical doctors over the respective merits of rituals against the evil eye and modern medication have given new options to women in looking after their children and indeed considering the whole issue of disease.

Camps are indeed porous and absorb many contradictory aspects of their time. Paradoxically, the rural illiterate women have been the ones to take advantage of the offers of modernity, especially those available to them through humanitarian aid. Health programmes by addressing women have challenged the inevitability of pain and suffering and introduced a notion of personal well-being, which entails the even more novel concept of self-worth. This does not happen in Afghanistan, where medical structures are as inexistent as the roads that would be necessary to get to them. The attention lavished on children's health and education and the toys and goods available on the bazaar or advertised on TV are contributing to introducing the notion of childhood as a specific, self-contained state, as opposed to an unfortunate intermediary stage between babyhood and adulthood- rather like in the West in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century which saw the invention of pediatrics. Furthermore, just like in Europe at that time, women are slowly being made aware of their responsibility as educators as well as nurturers, which is why they are increasingly involved with their children's schooling. The ensuing sense of empowerment is bolstered through literacy programmes which can give women a measure of control of their environment and introduce the possibility of independence. Unfortunately, the level is very low, and without the back-up of minimal reading-material, any skill acquired through a literacy course is generally doomed to rapid failure.<sup>31</sup> But clinics and classrooms are places where women (if their fathers and husbands allow them to attend) from different unrelated households can meet, discuss and compare as never before in the villages. If women find themselves meeting in these 'modern' spaces, men continue to congregate, as before in traditional male areas, the madrasa, the mosque and in the small shops in the camp, with little or no contact to alternatives.

Humanitarian agencies all over the world have attempted to set up handicrafts centres so that women can use their skills to generate direct income, something which never happens in traditionalist rural Muslim backgrounds as men are paid for women's labour. In the case of Afghanistan, embroidery and related crafts never were commercialised and strictly restricted for family use. Hippie fashions of the 1970s onwards put beads, shawls, ethnic wear generally on the global market and provided outlets for cottage-industry, via Pakistani businesses operating from Islamabad. Carpets are also manufactured inside refugee camps, but increasingly according to a predetermined scheme given by merchants, rather than according to ethnic tradition. Nevertheless, in a pre-industrial country, awareness of exploitation has not

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<sup>31</sup> A capital point made by Margaret Mills (2002).

surfaced yet despite the enormous profit margins. Women are pleased to make money for the first time and their lives and actually spend it.

Since 9/11, women circulate considerably in the nearby towns and bazaars, provided they are shrouded in their burqas. The same things happens in Kabul, where since the fall of the Taliban the main difference is in the compositions of the crowds that now throng the markets. Turbans and beards have been replaced by clean shaven men in Western anoraks and jackets and women have indeed returned to urban space, but more veiled than they have ever been at any time of modern Afghan history save the Taliban.

The female refugee community, even in the most remote camps, has at present been exposed to consumer goods and fashions, in a manner which startled this author in April 2005: sometimes, even in a very conservative camp, when the veil slips, multiple piercings and silver hoops are revealed on a fashion-conscious young girl's ears! A few days later in Kabul, a woman was observed slipping a cellular phone under her burqa! But this is all worked into acceptable practise; these Afghan "fashionistas" are all young brides who are meant to be attractive to their husbands: fashions are simply replacing older modes of beautification and do not entail any kind of in-depth questioning of the patriarchal institutions. Boys in Khewa especially, just as in Kabul, also tend to copy styles of Bollywood super stars such as Tere Naam or Shah Ruch Khan, whereas most of the Pakistani male population, because of the pressure of the reigning fundamentalist coalition, don traditional brown shalwar-kamiz and only the wealthier middle-class wears jeans and shirts.

At best, access to Western consumer goods introduces variety and alternatives that can be purchased in the bazaar, in the worst case, just engenders frustration for those who cannot afford these new-fangled commodities who then may be viewed as less sophisticated than their peers. The one unforeseen consequence of the new attention to which young women are treating themselves is a new closeness between couples; if both members are young, it is likely that they will try and live apart from the grand extended family. Everything that has just been described exists for the moment at a symptomatic level, but could be considered of tendencies that should develop in the near, if not immediate, future.

One camp that stands out, Khewa, is exceptional in many ways. It is multi-ethnic and the law applied there is an approximation of the Afghan constitution of Zahir Shah's time, meted out by an enlightened chief, and his twelve person committee of which three members are women. Women have come out of their enclosures into the public space, wearing bright shawls, not burqas, which by local standards is extremely adventurous. This is the camp where RAWA holds sway and has brought a number of widows and their families as well as set up orphanages. It is run by Basir (known only by his first name) a civil engineer and former Mujahid who hails from the Kunar Province who has been able to turn this camp into what he calls an ideal experimental, miniature Afghanistan for twenty-odd years.<sup>32</sup> His wife Gontcha, originally trained as a nurse and a long-time RAWA sympathiser, heads a separate women's committee composed of three members which directly solves intra-personal problems before they have to be judged on the higher echelons of camp administration. She is a poet who composes *landay*, the Pashtun version of the Japanese haiku, generally written by women. Her terse verses summarize a militant woman's perspective on the years of war and exile. Here are some eloquent examples written across the years which she agreed to copy out.

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<sup>32</sup> Basir is busy today trying to build a city in the Gamberi desert, based on what was achieved at Khewa. See UNHCR:Case Study, Afghanistan "Land Problems in the Context of Sustainable Repatriation in the Eastern Regions" Reem Alsalem, Protection Officer, UNHCR, Jalalabad-Afghanistan 2003



“O Russians, do not be so proud, I will throw you out of my country with my bare hands”

“If our fighters cannot finish their task, O Afghanistan, our young girls will triumph in your stead”

“Our cemeteries are unknown, we spend one day in Lahore, the next in Peshawar”

“I had death make a promise to me: do not approach me whilst I am still in exile”<sup>33</sup>

Her poems demonstrate how some women got involved in the war, in true Malalai fashion, and likewise bring out the nostalgia and heartbreak of the refugee experience.

Gontcha in the background and Basir, visibly in charge, have, as long-time opponents of the jihad, been able to effect change in an otherwise monolithic rural setting. Amongst many other achievements, he has been able to enforce education on the population with a spectacular 85% female literacy rate in co-ed schools. After 9/11, he took the unprecedented measure of making jeans and shirts the compulsory school uniform for boys, a modern-day version of King Amanullah’s revolutionary experiments. This declaration of unilateral secularism enraged his pro-Taliban neighbours in the nearby Sharwali camp. The more courageous families from this ultra-conservative camp send their sons and daughters to the camp, especially since the fall of the Taliban. When the latter ruled in Kabul, the two camps were practically at war with each other and the tensions subsist. Indeed when a daughter of a Sharwali official who had attended school at Khewa accidentally set herself alight in the kitchen, the neighbours saw it as divine punishment: “She went to the school of Satan”, they told this author.<sup>34</sup> Since 9/11, karate lessons and football training have been offered to the girls in Khewa who flock eagerly to the sessions. Once again the authorities in Sharwali were incensed, but now their girls are clamouring to be allowed to go as well.

Women and girls nearly all attend income-generating projects, namely handicrafts centres and health education courses. Such courses have been put in place by many humanitarian agencies, often with far less impact because far too generic and based on wide-ranging assumptions on the needs of these refugees. Access to education, to financial independence needs to be broached within culture-specific terms of reference and sense of timing. Only grassroots women’s organizations such as RAWA can provide life-style alternatives, consistent with both tradition and manageable demands of modern society within the realm of the Afghan experience. Some of those most committed and militant women this author has ever met are widows in their late thirties and forties from heavily rural backgrounds who, through RAWA, come to literacy and independent work late in life. They run projects in several camps, sit on committees in Khewa, solve problems and at home, refuse to let their daughters be married off at an early age and instead push them towards higher education. Nancy Hatch Dupree claims that even Afghan men have been forced to acknowledge that many women have been able to ensure the survival of their families without any male help, something which will change attitudes towards them.<sup>35</sup> The real problem will be the return to Afghanistan where villages are not prepared for these shifts in the status of women.

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<sup>33</sup> Translated by Shafi and Faridoon Atal, November 2003

<sup>34</sup> In a conversation held in November 2003

<sup>35</sup> Interview in Peshawar, April 2005.

## Conclusion

The restrictive practises towards women in Afghanistan and in the NWFP area in Pakistan remain in place. They have created a modern reactionary paradigm, an extreme female fundamentalist prototype, closer to Saudi Arabia than Iran which appears progressive in comparison. Totally inward looking, it is closed to Western possibilities as well as to alternative modern Muslim options coming from Turkey, Egypt or Morocco. It has been reconfigured into a kind of “invented tradition”, imported from the refugee camps in Pakistan into the capital city and still presented today as a fraudulently traditional way of life, based on some kind of customary Islam.

The strong Western presence in Kabul today is making demands for democratic measures and modernity but needs to understand that the state is too weak and vulnerable to enforce change, whereas the tribal solidarities remain extremely strong. For this reason, any policy changes to bring about a civil society and women’s rights must take into account the following:

- If they are to succeed, aid projects must be presented in a way that is relevant, respectful, and meaningful to a population which is largely rural, tribal and wretchedly poor. In practise this means closer contact and understanding of ethnic, social and religious traditions and working with non-partisan anthropologists in elaborating programmes. Pace and tempo have to be adapted to a society which moves much more slowly than the West.
- Projects need to be thought out completely: literacy courses should imply the furnishing of small libraries with relevant material (especially on health and women’s issues).
- Information about women’s rights and conditions both national and international need to be disseminated through the media.
- Projects involving women should always involve their men so as not to create extra friction. Health education and birth-attendant courses should include sessions for men (given in the mosque, for instance). This is where the subject of reproductive health can be broached as well as issues involving the all-too-frequent violence towards pregnant women.
- Aid policies should be worked out with established women’s groups to avoid being controlled by warlords eager to legitimize their actions with the local population by appearing to be the agents of positive change.
- Budgeting and accountability are fields where Western NGOs can teach local ones.

Any kind of progress has to go hand in hand with improving global economic and health conditions, which means working with men as well as women. Ethical standards must be maintained and human rights cannot be compromised. In a society where most women have not even approached the most basic self-awareness as individuals, the fight for their rights can only be understood as improving the well-being and dignity of the whole family unit, for men as well as women and children.

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