

The very magnitude of the international response to the Kosovo crisis is a complicating factor. While there is a perceived need for cooperation among international organizations in Kosovo, including NGOs focusing on women, the reality on the ground indicates great duplication of efforts. There is a danger that, as in Bosnia, all organizations will establish the same type of project (such as psychosocial counseling and material assistance), only to switch at a later date to another type of project (for example, microcredit projects). This approach fails the population, which needs both. At the present time, for example, attention is being paid to reproductive health assistance, but few projects are aimed at the creation of economic projects for women. Both of these projects are needed, along with many others.

Another complicating factor is that long-term peace in the region cannot be reached without a regional solution that involves indigenous groups in long-term development and peacemaking. The entire South Balkan region will remain unstable as long as economic, social, and political conditions are degraded. Deprivation of human rights in any part of the region contributes to the insecurity of the entire region. This means that women's assistance and protection projects must be developed in Kosovo and in neighboring areas.

The refugee population in Albania brought international attention to the extremely inferior health conditions there and the utter lack of infrastructure for economic development. International organizations that planned to support the Albanian government in improving schools, maternity hospitals, and other institutions should not abandon their plans simply because most Kosovar refugees have left. Instead, they should support the Albanian government in its own efforts. At the same time, they should refrain from creating parallel structures that would compete with local efforts and they should consider projects for Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, and other neighboring areas. Only if all assistance and protection programs are long-term and regional will individual activities contribute to long-lasting peace and justice.

### Afghanistan: Women Survivors of War under the Taliban\*

Few places have focused world attention on women's human rights more than Afghanistan. International interest in the country waned following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 and the end of the Cold War. Interest was rekindled, however, when a little-known force, the Taliban,

\* The Afghanistan section was researched and written by Judy A. Benjamin.

captured Kabul in September 1996, driving out the opposing Northern Alliance. The military maneuver might have drawn little general notice if not for the new rules announced in radio broadcasts by the Taliban.

Women and girls were banned from schools and universities, forbidden from working outside their homes, and required to have a male relative escort them in public. A strict dress code required them to be veiled from head to foot. Men were affected as well. They were not permitted to shave or trim their beards or to wear Western-style clothes, and were required to pray five times a day. Movies, videos, televisions, games, kite flying, dancing, and music were forbidden. Anything associated with Western practices was outlawed as “un-Islamic.” Violators were dealt with severely and publicly, with amputations and executions in the Kabul stadium after Friday prayers.

In larger compass, poverty, death, and loss of family has defined the lives of Afghans for two decades of conflict. The country is the world’s largest source of refugees, with more than 2.5 million Afghans residing in Iran and Pakistan in refugee camps and communities. Like many of their sisters in other war-torn societies, Afghan women shoulder the brunt of war’s impacts. They have buried their husbands, parents, and children and are profoundly traumatized by the seemingly never-ending power struggle that plagues their homeland.

Afghan women are divided by class, education, ethnicity, and tribal linkages. In addition, rural and urban women perceive issues in vastly different ways. Rural women follow traditional, more-conservative practices basically in line with the Taliban’s edicts. In fact, some of the edicts affirm practices from before the Taliban’s ascendancy to power. Yet even among rural populations the edicts are widely resented because they compel behavior that had previously been done of free will. Conversely, urban women—typically better-educated and used to Western practices—suffer a great loss of freedom under decrees that completely deny their previous lifestyles. Key issues for them may be of little concern to women who live in rural villages and represent the majority. Furthermore, women inside the country show a degree of resentment towards refugee women, who, they feel, haven’t suffered as much as those who remained in Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup>

The ravages of Afghanistan’s long war produced over fifty thousand widows in Kabul alone.<sup>58</sup> For widows, freedom to work outside the home may mean the difference between starvation and survival. Under the Taliban, widows cautiously negotiate the streets of Kabul, shrouded in the anonymity of the all-encompassing *burqa*<sup>59</sup>; many beg, relying on the kindness of strangers to feed their children. Widows fortunate enough

to get their names on the beneficiary lists receive food rations from CARE or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which distribute food to some twenty-five thousand widows each month.

### Overview of the Problem

While a comprehensive description of the political and historic context of Taliban policies exceeds the scope of this book, an understanding of the complex mixture of Cold War politics, tribal and ethnic differences, gender roles, relief assistance, and religion is required to discuss the challenges confronted by humanitarian organizations in responding to women's needs for assistance and protection.<sup>60</sup>

Afghanistan has been the location of wars for many centuries, but the first notable conflict of the last century was the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919. Under the leadership of Amanullah Khan, the Afghans successfully defended their country from the British, who wanted to make Afghanistan a colony. Although successful in maintaining the sovereignty of Afghanistan, Amanullah did less well in his attempts to Westernize his people. Requirements that people wear Western attire and attend coeducational schools were met with stark opposition from religious conservatives, whose revolts ultimately led to his downfall. Subsequent leaders who took control during the country's ensuing periods of unrest allowed the more traditional religious and cultural practices, such as the use of the veil for women, to be reestablished.

During the 1930s, Zahir Shah succeeded to the throne and his cousin Mohammad Daoud Khan became his prime minister. Continuing into the 1940s, they sought to develop the country and attracted Soviet and U.S. funding in the post-World War II period. Without adequate consideration of the real needs of the Afghan people, the Soviet and U.S.-funded modernization projects often failed. Ultimately, the more-educated Afghans became increasingly influenced by Soviet advisers. In contrast, rural Afghans were upset by the attempts to change their traditional practices. In addition to the urban-rural split, divisions developed between the conservative and moderate Muslims. Daoud's efforts to allow females into schools, for example, were fiercely opposed by conservative religious and tribal leaders. Similarly, efforts to free women from the veil were also opposed. Ultimately, Daoud, who had been fired, seized control of Afghanistan and declared himself president of the new republic.

During his presidency, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a left-wing party, led the Great Saur Revolution, murdering

sary to preserve the honor of women. Despite the way the Taliban exerts control over women by removing their right to employment, education, and mobility, and despite the egregious human rights abuses it commits against them, the Taliban cannot be blamed for all their suffering. The effect of the long years of war, poverty, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, stress, fear and depression have created untold misery for everyone in Afghanistan, especially for women.<sup>64</sup> More men were killed and disabled in the fighting, but women and children were victims of the relentless shelling of homes and markets and countless land mine injuries.

Afghan women bore enormous hardships throughout the conflicts, including gender violence and physical and mental torment in many forms. One study reports that more than 76 percent of women's deaths during the war were due to aerial bombings.<sup>65</sup> Another study describes the lifelong trauma Afghan women suffer as a result of "multiple rape, forced prostitution, slavery, and other forms of gender-related violence."<sup>66</sup> Urban women, accustomed to moving about without restrictions, were devastated by the edicts. Severe depression led to some suicides. International health workers reported a number of women brought to hospitals after ingesting caustic soda—a painful but common means of suicide among women. Cultural stigma and religious prohibitions cause most cases to go unreported; some deaths are recorded as accidental. Depression also plagues men who feel ashamed of their inability to support their families. Some react to the stress by lashing out at their wives and children.<sup>67</sup>

While international publicity has highlighted the loss of Afghan women's rights under the Taliban, little has surfaced about the abuse of women in earlier years during the Soviet occupation, when armed fighters on all sides raped, abducted, and trafficked in women, girls, and boys.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, international shock at Taliban edicts that removed the rights and mobility of women and girls tended to be expressed in a historical vacuum. The stage for such policies was set during the Cold War, when the United States and other Western governments channeled million of dollars, often disguised as development assistance, to support the *mujahidin* fighters. Those shocked at the strictness and cruel treatment by the Taliban, however, tend to forget the behavior of the *mujahidin* and some of the customs of rural and tribal Pashtuns.

In the Cold War political milieu, the *mujahidin* and their quest to defeat the Soviets were romanticized, their efforts supported by massive U.S. government resources.<sup>69</sup> During that period, the international community not only ignored Afghanistan's gender and social policies

but also failed to probe the wider effects of U.S. support of the “freedom fighters.”<sup>70</sup> During the 1980s, most aid agencies paid little attention to the needs or rights of women. Some even provided direct assistance to the *mujahidin*, an approach that had serious negative effects on Afghan women’s human rights within Afghanistan. Abuses against women also continued during the anarchy following the Soviet withdrawal and in the years immediately preceding the Taliban takeover.

Today the pernicious poverty and other effects of the ongoing civil war remain the principal problems for women. Everything must be weighed in light of extreme deprivation. Food stalls in Kabul and in other areas display seasonal vegetables but people do not have the financial resources to purchase adequate food supplies. Most men and women are jobless. Families have sold nearly all of their household belongings. The longer people live in such poverty, the worse their health becomes. Tuberculosis is increasing, with 70 percent of the cases among women.

Each year Afghanistan sinks lower on the UN Development Index. The life expectancy is estimated at 44 years for women. The maternal mortality rate is the second highest in the world (nearly 1,700 per 100,000 live births).<sup>71</sup> Family planning and reproductive health services are rare. One-quarter of all children die before the age of five, and literacy rates for females are an estimated 13 percent in urban areas and 3 to 4 percent in rural districts. Some NGOs believe that the literacy rate has actually fallen in the past three years. Land mines injure more than eight thousand people each year, mostly civilians, including women and children. These troubling statistics help explain why women are more likely to talk about their desire for peace, health care, food, education, and shelter than about having to wear the *burqa*. To many in the outside world, however, the garment has become a symbol of the ill treatment of Afghan women.

Notwithstanding that the generation growing up now has known only conflict, Afghans hope for peace and a time to rebuild their lives. Afghan women request information about civil society and human rights. Refugee women’s organizations in Pakistan report an increase in the demand for courses in Islamic law: women want to know their legal rights in the context of their religion. They also study the Koran and consult Islamic scholars regarding their rights. Most scholars discredit the Taliban’s interpretation and criticize its ban on education for girls, noting that it is an obligation to educate all Muslims.

Despite present trends, it would be a mistake to write off the country as historically backward or unaware of human rights issues. Under

previous governments, Afghanistan signed important international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the UN Charter itself. Many Afghans value learning highly; a large number want their daughters to be educated.

The edict that forbids women from working outside the home brought additional hardships to employed women. Most families desperately need such additional income. For many widows and women heads-of-household, establishing a source of income is worth risking disobedience to Taliban restrictions.

### Assistance and Protection Efforts

International humanitarian agencies operating in Afghanistan have wrestled for years with fundamental issues related to women's rights and needs. They have failed to achieve consensus on how to resolve the evident tensions between protecting human rights and providing for human needs. Many NGOs and some UN organizations have adopted the rights-based approach recently promoted by UNICEF.<sup>72</sup> However, few workers in the field understand the distinction between rights-based and needs-based programming. Agencies face immense challenges as they try to structure programs to meet the needs of women and girls and also to uphold a human rights-based framework. The problem is made more complex by the fact that agencies are committed as a matter of principle to respect local cultural and religious practices and by the fact that Taliban policies differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Forced to grapple with the restrictive policies of the authorities, NGOs have charted their courses in different ways. CARE, for example, articulated a position of "principled engagement," negotiating with the Taliban to carry out programs but also suspending operations when its principles were violated. CARE suspended its widows' feeding program on three occasions when the Taliban violated negotiated understandings, using those incidents as opportunities to uphold human rights and demonstrate its principles to the authorities.<sup>73</sup> Oxfam and Save the Children suspended selected activities to protest the Taliban's edicts blocking equal participation of women and girls. Save the Children-U.S. closed programs in Herat when the Taliban refused to allow girls to attend school and to meet with international female staff.

Many agencies placed highest priority on keeping their activities functioning, seeking to avoid what they considered political issues. One such NGO is the International Assistance Mission (IAM), a Christian

Afghan women employees of international agencies. There were undoubtedly less obvious repercussions as well.

### Summary of Gender Impact

Understanding the gender dimensions of the situation of Afghan women and reflecting these in programs presents a tremendous challenge to all involved. Interagency collaboration on crucial gender issues has ranged from nil to passable, but rarely has it been excellent. Where specific attention has been paid to gender concerns, some improvement in the status of women has been realized, particularly in access to health care and education. However, much work remains to be done to ensure equal access and services for women and girls. Efforts by UN agencies and NGOs to expand dialogue with the Taliban have opened the door to better communication with the expressed goal of improving conditions for women and girls.

The Taliban, motivated by a strong desire for international recognition and yielding somewhat to international pressure, have lessened certain restrictions on women. They allow women to work in the health sector and in other special cases. They have allowed home schools to reopen and operate throughout their territory. Most agencies, however, are acutely aware of the fragility of such tacit approvals. Human rights advocates continue to report abuses and to press the Taliban to respect international law and conventions. Flagrant disregard for human rights persists and, despite some improvement, there is no evidence to suggest that the Taliban's policies circumscribing women are changing. However, the gains are significant. Private home schools, home delivery of services for maternal care, and somewhat expanded employment options for women, while not a durable or complete solution, alleviate at least some suffering and provide a basis for change.

That said, the Taliban's edicts continue to present formidable obstacles to designing and implementing aid activities and to protecting the human rights of women and girls. To be effective, assistance programs must work within the narrow boundaries set by the authorities but at the same time not perpetuate the abuses inherent in the Taliban's policies. Agencies must take expedient measures as they deal with the unpredictable authorities, who remain largely without international recognition.

At the same time, however, a gender perspective must pervade all such activities, informing them with sensitivity to and clear understanding of the different roles, rights, and obligations men and women hold

in Afghan society. Until peace comes and the opportunity exists to build a civil society where women can participate freely, humanitarian organizations and the wider international community may be forced to rely on short-term stopgap measures to ensure some degree of gender equality.

### Conclusion: Three Stages of Inquiry

The gender perspective suggests three stages of inquiry for working on gender-based violence and gender bias against refugees, internally displaced persons, and others affected by war.

First, gender-based or bias violence may be the reason for their flight. For example, rape and sexual torture may be a calculated part of a plan of forcing entire populations to flee their homes. Although men and boys face such sexual violence as well, the primary targets for such abuse usually are women and girls. Chapter 3 explains that rape and other forms of gender-based violence have occurred in war throughout history. Bosnia brought the issue of rape in war to the attention of the world community. In Kosovo, some women reported rape and many testified that they had fled because they feared that Serbian forces would rape again. The crimes of rape and sexual violence in Bosnia and Kosovo compounded the alienation because female refugees as women may experience social and physical persecution and shaming should they report the abuse.

Other forms of gender-based violence that target women and girls and cause them to flee include female genital mutilation, bride burning, forced sterilization or abortion, forced prostitution, and legal domestic abuse. Women and girls fleeing from gender-based violence need protection from their abusers and, should the conditions that caused them to flee remain, opportunities to start life anew through resettlement. One imperative, therefore, is recognition of gender-based violence and abuse as a form of persecution entitling the victims to international protection. Chapter 3 discusses the legal basis and mechanisms for such claims.

Second, while all uprooted people are generally more vulnerable to exploitation and violence than is the general population, displaced women and girls are particularly susceptible to gender-based violence and abuse—in flight, in receipt of assistance, and in access to help. Male refugees, refugee camp workers, members of the local population, marauding paramilitary troops and even international peacekeeping personnel—all have been known to sexually abuse women and girl refugees and other women imperiled by war. Such was the case in Bosnia;