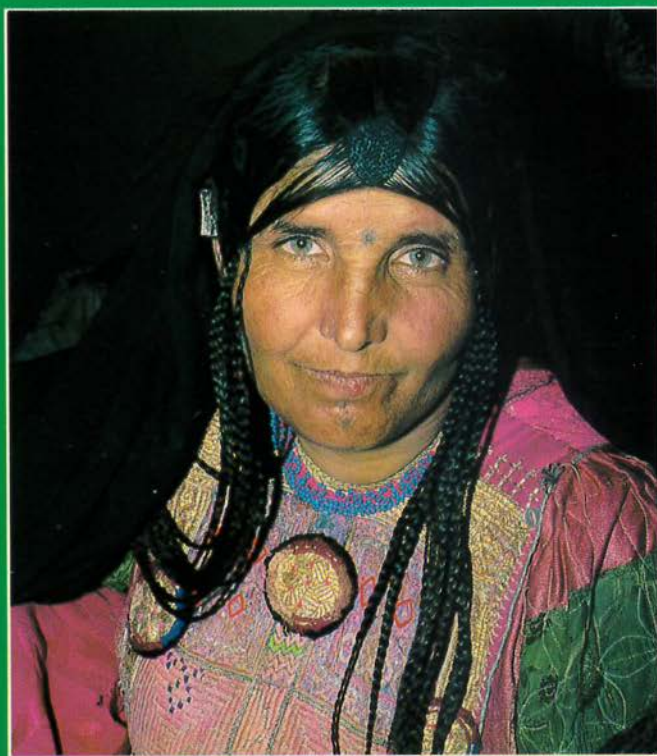




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The Reconstruction of Afghanistan: A Chance for Rural Afghan Women



Hanne Christensen

United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AFGHANISTAN: A CHANCE FOR RURAL AFGHAN WOMEN

PREFACE

Although the issue of women's participation in development is important in all countries, it is perhaps unusually important in the case of Afghanistan. The position which women should occupy in the public life of that society has been the subject of contention over many years; and the dislocation of much of the population as a result of civil strife during the late 1970s and 1980s has only heightened the urgency of resolving this question in a manner ensuring equal opportunities for all Afghan people.

As steps are taken toward the eventual repatriation of Afghan refugees currently resident in Pakistan, all parties to the repatriation process will find it necessary to engage in actions which affect the future role of women in society. In doing so, they should be oriented by a general understanding of the place of women in traditional Afghan culture, as well as by a vision of how women's lives and expectations have been affected by the experience of exile.

This study contributes to providing such background. The author, Hanne Christensen, first carried out field work among Afghan refugees in Pakistan during 1982 and 1983, when she visited Baluchistan and the Frontier area, including the Tribal Agency of Orakzai, as part of her work within the UNRISD research programme on the Social Integration of Refugees in Developing Countries. She returned in 1986 to conduct a random-sample survey of 2,300 households spread over 58 refugee villages, and then went back once more to spend autumn 1989 in the Akora Khatak refugee camps in the North West Frontier Province.

In the following pages, Christensen draws upon these experiences, and particularly upon her most recent field work, to explain the current position of rural Afghan women (of the Pushtun group) who have had to adapt to the realities of life as refugees in Pakistan and who now await repatriation. Over the years, refugee families have made noteworthy efforts to recreate and sustain their

traditional forms of social organization, in which women's interaction with the world outside their families is severely restricted. But, at the same time, the circumstances of exile have encouraged inventiveness and creativity as women have been required to contribute to the household economy, developing income-generating projects in ways which broaden networks of social relations without stepping beyond the bounds of acceptable behaviour within their own culture.

In fact, men's often low and irregular earning capacity, as well as their occasional absence during unpaid *Jihad* service, have made it imperative for many refugee women to engage in moneymaking activities; and in some refugee families the realities of war imply that there are no able-bodied males at all. Therefore, although women's moneymaking activities are usually carried out within their homes, and are in consequence not visible to the outsider, they form a vital part of family survival strategies and will continue to do so if the households return to Afghanistan.

Christensen argues that in planning and implementing the reconstruction of Afghanistan, schemes to promote employment, as well as health and education, must be structured in ways which take women specifically into account. Given the pervasiveness of the institution of *pardah*, home-based micro-enterprises could provide appropriate employment opportunities for many women; and health and education programmes should similarly include outreach services which allow women to gather and learn within the setting of their homes. In a situation where certain parts of the population may not move about freely, it is important to recognize the need for aid programmes to go to the recipients, rather than simply relying on people themselves to come forward for assistance. The research report concludes with a series of detailed recommendations for rebuilding rural Afghanistan in ways which should permit the entire population to benefit.

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