

The Family During Crisis in Afghanistan

NANCY HATCH DUPREE*



INTRODUCTION

Some say the family institution in Afghanistan is rapidly deteriorating. Others say the family remains the rampart on which the survival of its people rests. Surely these radically divergent views about what all agree is the most influential social institution in Afghan society warrants investigation. Yet, with too few exceptions, assistance providers have made few attempts to unravel these contradictions, even as they doggedly push gender issues to the forefront with singular aggressiveness. Often the surfaces of activities are thoroughly probed, but the quality of the related institution of the family receives barely a passing mention. A serious look into the current status of the family in this beleaguered society is long overdue.

The reality no doubt lies somewhere in between. I do not pretend to have answers. Nor am I in a position to conduct the type of in-depth research that is necessary. I have, nonetheless, long been a concerned observer; constantly seeking enlightenment from varied sources. The most telling responses come from Afghans who, almost without exception, reply: "It all depends." It is always dangerous to generalize about Afghanistan where the intricate geographic and cultural mosaic is so complex. It is especially foolhardy to make sweeping statements at this time when new political tiles are being inserted roughly with no smooth fit.

During its recent history, the Afghan society has been buffeted by a bewildering variety of contrasting, contradicting and competing ideologies, introduced in rapid succession, one after the other, in little more than half a century, while the country underwent unprecedented physical and economic development. As the physical infrastructure improved and an industrial base was established, the economy prospered and concomitant social modifications naturally followed. The face of modernization gleamed. Modernization, nevertheless, implies change, and change inevitably brings a sense of disruption, felt more by some groups than others. Predictably, the events unfolding in Afghanistan occasioned various reactions, ranging from intense zeal to fanatic opposition, while others proceeded more moderately toward goals they believed would enhance the quality of life for the population at large.

The following discussion seeks to place these developments in perspective by describing

*ARIC, U.P.O. Box 1084, University Town, Peshawar, Pakistan Email: aric@brain.net.pk

some of the major events that gave rise to the maelstrom of war and civil unrest that swirled around family life in Afghanistan for over two decades.

PRE-1778: TRADITIONAL, FAMILY STATUS AND FUNCTIONS

Interneecine struggle for the throne of Kabul characterized most of the turbulent years of the 19th century, leaving the social structure largely untouched. The society continued to adhere to their traditional ways in which the family remained endogamous, with cross-cousin marriages preferred, patriarchal, patrilocal, and occasionally polygamous. By 1978 the levirate, a practice explicitly forbidden in the Koran (Sura 4.19), was gradually decreasing. Afghan society is profoundly influenced by patriarchal attitudes. The hierarchical structure within families leaves little room for individualism, for senior male members, the ultimate arbiters, maintain family honor and social status by ensuring all members conform to prescribed forms of acceptable behavior. Nonconformist behavior invites social ostracism and community pressure becomes a formidable control factor, even within modern urbanized settings. Males, therefore, learn to exercise their authority at an early age. Very young brothers often chastise their older, post-puberty sisters for momentarily stepping beyond the bounds of seclusion.

In typical households where at least three generations reside together, family bonds are normally extremely close. Mothers are treated with deep affection, and widows most often find a home with their sons. Grandparents are held in high esteem, and children often spend more time with their grandmothers than with their parents. From their almost limitless store of folk tales and adages, these elder women spin hours of magical delight while passing on important messages that perpetuate the society's values. Often mothers and grandmothers exercise considerable influence over sons and grandsons. Close bonds between siblings are the norm. In times of stress, girls frequently turn to their brothers for solace and protection. A host of requirements govern the obedience and respect fathers expect from children. Nevertheless, in most households the affection fathers show to children, especially daughters, is very deep. In return the care and protection of parents in their old age is a basic filial duty observed by all. When considering relations between spouses, one must be particularly sensitive to a myriad of complexities covering a wide range of standards depending on age, education, economics, geography, residential location, ethnic affiliation, and political sophistication.

The differences in rural and urban settings are most telling. The stereotypes describe rural women as ignorant chattel with no egos, living lives of unmitigated drudgery while being used solely for purposes of reproduction and sexual pleasure. In reality, although household responsibilities and labour is gender-based, the interconnectedness of male/female roles in the economy of these rural kin-oriented, subsistence-oriented households, accord women considerable status. In addition, all rural women engage in various sorts of handicrafts that offset marriage expenses, enhance egos, and boost status among peers and in-laws. Women seldom work alone. Socializing and gossiping are vital daily interactions that strengthen community cohesiveness (Hunte, 1991).

In urban areas, on the other hand, where middle and lower class males engage in occupations outside the ken of their women, the interdependence of roles is lessened.

Consequently, urban women from lower income families tend to be less self-assured, are confined largely to purely domestic activities, and are subject to many more restrictions. Female urban networks, nevertheless, are dynamic and provide a variety of social services (Doubleday, 1988). In both urban and rural settings, social occasions such as engagements, weddings, births and funerals, provide significant bonding experiences.

Areas in which both urban and rural women do exercise considerable influence are in domestic management, nurturing, child socialization, community network activities, information dissemination, and marriage brokering, a role carrying wide-ranging influence. While marriages are linked with considerable material exchanges of cash, land and herds, liaisons between close kin are designed to keep economic and political resources within the extended family, and serve either to perpetuate or modify local networks and alliances. Furthermore, in this patrilineal structure, when a girl moves to her husband's home, all decisions pertaining to her rights and duties are transferred to the husband's family. One often hears it said that a girl is merely a guest in the house of her parents, where she prepares for life in her husband's household. Although the motivation for some arranged marriages — child marriages, compensatory exchanges, the levirate, political and social accommodations — can be decidedly discriminatory, in most, close bonds normally flourish based on affection, mutual support and respect. Multiple wives are taken to overcome barrenness, to secure sons, to provide security for spinsters, and to cement political and social ties. Although this practice was declining before the war, as was the levirate, some educated men, especially after study abroad, took educated girls as second wives for more congenial companionship. Divorce is rarely contemplated, much less concluded. When separations occur, wives are sent back to their father's home, which is the cause of much shame.

The extended family thus functions as the major economic, social and political unit of the society and guarantees security, from birth to death, to each man and woman. It is the central focus where individuals find status, socialization, education, economic security and protection. And, because the state service infrastructure is so inadequate, or, for too many, totally non-existent, family networks replace government as a support system in which the reciprocal family rights and obligations are clearly defined and readily acknowledged by all.

The innate belief in the appropriateness of male control over women not only permeates all levels of the society but is made stronger through the bonds that link control to the ideals of honour. Honour is the rock upon which social status rests. Any infringement on the institution of the family, therefore, is regarded as repugnant and must be resisted unto death. Women, seen as central to the family, the measure by which standards of morality are judged, the guardians of society's values, the veritable symbols of honour, must be kept inviolable. It is this tradition above all others that accounts for the legendary ferocity with which Afghan men protect their families.

1929-1978: MODERNIZATION BEGINS

The Amir Abdur Rahman (1880-1901), while assiduously limiting contacts with outsiders, made tentative moves toward modernization late in the 19th century (Ghani, 1978)). He introduced military, political and administrative reforms, and on the social side, using the

dictates of the Koran to align customary social practices with the egalitarian prescriptions of Islam, forbade child marriages, forced marriages, the levirate, exorbitant bride prices and marriage gifts. He granted the right of women to seek divorce in the case of nonsupport. The impact, nonetheless, was minimal and did not fundamentally affect the socioeconomic structure.

More extensive attempts to modernize early in the 20th century floundered. King Amanullah (1919-1929) lost the throne because he brought in reforms too rapidly, and planted them too shallowly in the upper strata of society (Stewart, 1973). His successors took up the challenge with measured determination, introducing reforms heavily mirroring western models. This movement was nurtured primarily among urban elitist intellectuals from families who had been exiled by Amir Abdur Rahman. Returning from India and Syria, their aims were directed toward constitutionalism, nationalism and Islamic modernism (Shahrani, 1986). A constitution was written, a parliamentary system was introduced, secular education took precedence over religious instruction, and considerable attention was paid to economic reform, increasing technical skills, and establishing nation-building cultural institutions.

Rural-urban migration, both permanent and seasonal, increased after 1960 as road systems improved and a nascent industrial sector was established (Sweetser, 1976). These population movements modified familial situations as the predominantly male migrants came under the influence of urban life, while the women, left alone in their villages, learned to cope in novel ways. Thus, new family relations began to emerge along the paths of development. Populations beyond these networks, however, remained virtually untouched.

A move to involve women extensively in nation-building activities was then taken when the government announced their support of the voluntary removal of the veil and the end of seclusion or purdah. To underscore the government's sincerity, the Queen and the wives of cabinet members appeared unveiled at the public celebrations for Independence Day in 1959. These innovations were introduced in a non-threatening, non-confrontational way, for the leadership left it up to each family to decide whether or not to comply. Therefore, the announcement was not seen as an intrusion into family prerogatives. Opposition remained muted and positive attitudes toward women moving in public spaces gradually developed throughout cities and towns (L.Dupree, 1959).

For thirty years after 1959, the voluntary, family-oriented acceptance of more participatory roles for women was accepted by a growing segment of the society. Women, mostly from educated urban backgrounds, moved into the public arena with poise and dignity, with no loss of honour to themselves or to their families. While little changed in the rural areas, and the urban lower middle-classes were at first slow to follow, the government bolstered their support by providing women opportunities for higher education and employment in mixed male/female environments. There were, nonetheless, few attempts to organize women. The Women's Institute, independent after 1975 but closely tied to the government, provided welfare services as well as adult literacy courses, but their programs emphasized better motherhood and concentrated on traditionally appropriate female activities, such as embroidery and tailoring, that were primarily family oriented.

The 1964 Constitution, while insisting that no provisions be repugnant to Islam, automatically enfranchised women and guaranteed them the right to free education, freedom of choice in marriage and employment, and equality in the workplace. Girls flocked in great numbers to educational institutions, including Kabul University, which became co-educational in 1960. They became highly visible in public areas; no career was closed to them, except for menial work such as sweeping streets and carrying bricks at construction sites (Rahimi, 1986). Many discarded the chadari, also referred to as the burqa, the veil that had hitherto shrouded women in public from head to toe. They choose to wear headscarves instead. Most significantly, the increase of unescorted chadari-clad women seen shopping for themselves in Kabul's crowded bazaars was a clear indication of easing strictures within many city households.

By 1978, women among growing segments of the society were viewed as symbols of a family's modernity, as well as symbols of honour. The two ideals, however, did not always sit easily in many households because traditional dictates remained strong. As is so often the case, qualitative change did not necessarily follow just because a legal framework was put in place. Working women were not expected to socialize with their colleagues; social gatherings for most took place almost exclusively within the extended family; life-crisis decisions, such as whom to marry and whether to take up a career after marriage, were still firmly in the hands of males. In attitudes concerning work ethics, family obligations most often took precedence over responsibilities for office duties. On marrying, girls tended to leave their offices, for motherhood was still the ideal vocation for most women. Working in offices and factories did not necessarily increase a woman's social status, as many still believed work outside the home for monetary gain deprived women of their dignity. Gainful employment was, therefore, seen as a blot on the reputations of males who countenanced such behaviour.

The laws were full of ambiguities and contradictions and the family court system functioned as a compromise to avoid open trials that would embarrass family sensibilities. It acted primarily as a shield to protect honour from public exposure so as to preserve family unity. Yet expectations among the young, both girls and boys, were rapidly changing and challenged traditional family prerogatives. Their desires were set on their interpretations of western standards, many of which centered around conflicting ideals of family life. This created tensions in numbers of agnate households. Young couples chaffed under the restrictions of extended-family living and complained of suffering from "family sickness," the term they used to describe the continued insistence on patriarchal decision-making (Knabe, 1977:330). A very few, however, did receive the blessings of their elders to chose partners outside their kin networks, and set up nuclear housekeeping on their own (Gauhari, 1996). Others, even those from elitist circles who were encouraged to enjoy unprecedented freedoms while living abroad, bowed to family pressures over the issue of marriage partners. For them, preserving family honour took precedence over personal desires. Still, the evolutionary path progressed steadily toward fuller emancipation—modest, patient, gradual, culturally-sensitive—without major disruptions for several years.

The world watched Afghanistan's progress with considerable admiration and extended its seal of approval by investing in its development. This created a need for workers with new skills. Men and women in large numbers, from all levels of society, were sent abroad to acquire the technical skills to build and operate factories, hydroelectric plants, and land

reclamation schemes, as well as for training in education, home economics, and medicine, the police, the army and the air force. In Europe, the Soviet Union, India and the United States their minds were also opened to a variety of political and social alternatives, not to mention totally new lifestyles. On their return, they began to create an increasingly westernized facade in Kabul. This rapid immersion in western ideas alarmed the conservatives who warned that the society was being corrupted and heading for disaster. Confrontations, often violent, took place throughout the 1970s and the stage was set for the calamitous events that have yet to end (L.Dupree, 1970).

1978-1992: SOCIALISM COMES AND GOES

The heady era of the 1970s was characterized by several periods of student demonstrations and a spate of labour strikes that kept the country in general unrest. Conflicts over societal values intensified. Technically, no legal political parties existed, but the heated confrontations soon split the antagonists into groups on the left and on the right, each with its own vision of preserving Afghanistan's integrity. However, again, as in King Amanullah's time, the protagonists of change were isolated from the bulk of the population living in the countryside.

The leftist groups purported to follow Marxist-Leninist ideologies, but, because there was no strong working class, their membership consisted mainly of university professors and students, secondary school teachers, civil servants, figures in the entertainment world, and, significantly, military personnel. Their movement was an urban phenomenon; only one group with Maoist tendencies attempted to mobilize the rural areas. On the right, the guardians of Islam, influenced by the Egyptian Ikhwan ul-Muslimin, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Pakistan's religious/political Jamaat-i-Islami party, were determined to eradicate the alien leftist influences they believed were undermining society. The pattern of dependence on foreign ideologies, on both the left and the right, was already set during these early days of contest.

In the end, the leftists prevailed. A coup d'état on 27 April 1978 brought to power the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), consisting of two groups which together could boast no more than about 4,000 members. Parcham (The Banner) members were predominantly westernized urban bureaucrats, students, writers and other intellectuals from upper-middle class families, some of whom socialized in royal circles. Although the Khalq (The Masses) membership represented more diverse backgrounds, the majority had spent most of their lives in Kabul. Most prominent members of both parties had studied in Kabul's foreign-run high schools and at Kabul University. Numbers had studied or held government positions abroad, in India, Europe, the USA or the USSR. Some had been indoctrinated in prison (Adamec, 1979). All had been excluded by the former regime from positions of power and decision-making.

Despite fractious internal wrangling, the new regime verbalized a commitment to achieve equality between men and women. They devoted much effort to mobilizing women so as to bring them to the forefront through political activism. Girls were repeatedly brought into the streets alongside with men to shout slogans extolling the glorious revolution. Many of these demonstrations ended with the startling sight of "nice" girls sweeping the streets of their

neighborhoods and removing garbage. Women were assigned to organize ward meetings at which their oratorical skills were truly impressive. They spoke passionately on women's rights with scathing condemnation reserved for traditional cultural practices. Radio and television, newly introduced under the DRA, were also heavily exploited for the airing of these messages. Adult education for women was aggressively promoted and large kindergartens were opened to free mothers for political and social welfare activities. Their messages, although numbingly repetitious, were loud and clear.

The Director of the Women and Development Secretariat sat on the State Planning Committee so women could be more actively involved in the formulation of laws and national policies. As stated at the first Seminar on Afghan Women and Development (April 1987), the goal was to bring about a complete attitudinal change among men and women as to women's role in society (US AID, 1987). The idea was to elevate women to the same level as men. Only absolute equality between the sexes would do. To this end, socialism and dialectical materialism were added to the revised curricula throughout the education system (Elmi, 1987). Not content with these measures, preparations for the future leadership were begun by sending young girls and boys to the Soviet Union for as many as ten years of study so as to remove them from traditional family influences while they were young and impressionable. Some reports estimate as many as 2,000 a year participated, willingly or unwillingly, in this program.

The principal regulation directed toward the family was Decree No. 7, entitled Dowry and Marriage Expenses, which was put forward for "...removing the unjust patriarchal feudalistic relations between husband and wife for consolidation of further sincere family ties" (N.Dupree, 1984). It prohibited child marriages, forced marriages without the consent of both parties, marriages in exchange of cash or commodities, the levirate, and holiday gifts to the bride, and it limited the dowry to a token amount. Meant to curtail the economic exploitation of women and family indebtedness, the decree was inadequate, as it did not address the complex manifestations of discrimination beyond simple monetary values. Nor did it recognize the many other functions marriage alliances served in the society (Tapper, 1984).

A growing sense of unease permeated the population at large. To them, the DRA was perceived as unlawfully interfering with Islamic values and violating social traditions, which were seen to be the provenance of Islam and beyond the competence of secular law. The unladylike public activities were viewed as undignified and detrimental to family honour. As proof that sexual anarchy was imminent, they pointed to women who expressed their new-found freedoms by flaunting their sexuality. Even their male supporters were embarrassed! Rhetoric urging children to defy family restraints and inform on their parents was repugnant.

Decree No.7 was an encroachment on family decision-making and therefore intolerable. Coercing women into adult education classes threatened male control over female activities outside the home. Kindergartens jeopardized the family's paramount role in child socialization. Sending children for education in the Soviet Union was a particularly barbarous weapon designed, it was widely said, to break up the family through the replacement of stable, traditional extended family relationships with fragmented, individualized interactions. In short, the espousal of ideas championing the individual over the family accentuated the tensions that already existed in Kabul.

Rural communities were equally contemptuous of the new society. The DRA cadres were intolerant of the majority of the population outside their political circles, and openly described them as ignorant, superstitious and beyond enlightenment. Poorly disguising these feelings when sent to spread the word about land reform, women's rights and other innovations, they were not well received in the rural areas. Also, because they dismissed the rules of etiquette (as they were seen to encourage submissiveness and perpetuate male-centered patriarchal attitudes), their bad manners did not endear them to the elders of the rural elite (N.Dupree, 1988a). The language of their imported rhetoric aped radio programs coming out of the godless Soviet Union, leading many to equate the two. Among the many grievances, perceived threats to family honour loomed largest, and their heavy-handed approaches served to intensify the symbolic value of women's honour, thus fueling the resistance. "We have nothing, but at least we know how to protect the honour of our women," it was said.

As rumblings of discontent flared into open dissent in the cities and the villages, the government responded harshly. The country slid into chaos and the jihad or holy war began, prompting the Soviet Union to invade in December 1979. Heavy bombing of villages precipitated a massive exodus of refugees. During the next thirteen years, the mujahideen (freedom fighters) leading the jihad gradually reduced DRA control to the larger cities, until, finally, the government was confined to Kabul alone. Nevertheless, even after the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan in February 1989, the besieged government hung on until April 1992 (Bradsher, 1998).

EXILE AND DISPLACEMENT

The saga of the massive displacements that wrenched populations from their homes reached tragic proportions as they continued for over two decades. Over half the population would leave, six million for Pakistan, Iran and neighboring countries, thousands more to the West. Another three million were displaced within Afghanistan's borders.

Over the years several waves of refugees occurred, each differing in composition. Among the first to leave were members of the royal lineage and their close associates, many of who were professionals and intellectuals who marched in the forefront of modernization (L.Dupree, 1980). Family networks proved absolutely crucial at this time. Party members inside government departments would give notice of imminent arrest to family members and assist in making clandestine arrangements for the disposal of property and cross-border travel. In other words, family obligations, rather than loyalty to party held precedence. The polarization of attitudes within families aligned on opposing sides caused rifts in some families, but for most duty to family came first.

Most of these early refugees resettled in Europe, the United States, India or Australia where relatives had already settled. King Amanullah's family, for instance, had resided in Rome since he was exiled in 1929. From what little has been written about these groups, it would appear that the relocation process was anything but easy and that much unease centered around the difficulties these refugees had in viewing themselves as members of extended families in surroundings where so much emphasis was placed on the individual. Determining rights and obligations became problematical (Omidian, 1996).

Typically, groups with common origins and languages gravitated to kindred Afghan colonies abroad where kinship networks played a significant supportive role on their arrival. Social interactions between related families continued to function as the focal point for expressions of solidarity. Few middle-aged and older men, however, were able to pursue the careers in which they had once excelled. This eroded their patriarchal status and left them feeling diminished.

Many women, on the other hand, proved to be more flexible in learning to cope. They learned new skills, were willing to take unskilled jobs and thus became the primary breadwinners in many homes, adding further to male sensitivities about their patriarchal prerogatives. Some women, on the other hand, became overly dependent because they could not, or would not, adapt to new surroundings, even refusing to learn English or how to get around by themselves. Their strong matriarchal influence disappeared as a result. These role reversals required adjustments in relationships that were often the cause of considerable tension. In addition, both older generation men and women suffered from depression caused by guilt feelings over not being able to fulfill their obligations to parents who had preferred to remain in Afghanistan.

The younger generation found it particularly hard to find a place for themselves, torn as they were between blending in with their peers while at the same time struggling to conform to the traditional behaviour expected from them at home. It is difficult to practice the rituals of respect when parents are totally dependent. Parents also found it increasingly difficult to convince girls on the merits of arranged marriages because too many boys refused to honour their obligations and simply abandoned brides foisted upon them.

Yet one must note that many sons return to find brides among kin living in refugee communities in Pakistan. The ties were far from severed. Also, almost all expatriate families sent a large proportion of their income to relatives in Pakistan where many refugees would find it next to impossible to survive with any dignity without these remittances (Ittig, 2001).

The second and largest flow of refugees took place between 1980-1990, and peaked at 6.2 million in Pakistan and Iran. The majority were from rural areas. The decision to leave Afghanistan was typically made by the joint family and most moved out in kin-oriented groups (Hanne, 1990). Sometimes individuals would come first in order to be sure adequate services were in place for those to follow. This was vital in many instances and considered a family responsibility. During the exodus, when male family members were killed by the bombing of refugee caravans, and women and children found themselves widowed and orphaned, male kinsmen honored their obligations to protect them no matter how distant their relations might be. As a result, few suffered the traumatic harassment common to similar migrations among other refugee populations.

Having arrived in their areas of resettlement, the majority settled in kin-related groups, either in clusters of nuclear families living in separate housing, or in extended family households within high mud walls. Eventually the outward physical appearance of the refugee settlements closely resembled their home villages. Nonetheless, the harsh physical conditions in these arid, dusty surroundings were a far cry from the cooler, greener habitats,

secluded courtyards and walled gardens at home. The densely populated settlements in some cases crowded together as many as 120,000 individuals into areas no more than 5 square miles and included mixes of many unrelated families and ethnic groups (N.Dupree, 1987).

A closer look also revealed numbers of other stressful differences. In Afghanistan, when several units of an extended family resided together, each woman had her own space around the courtyards where shared work and entertainment took place. Private spaces in refugee settlements were rare. In addition, women were tightly restricted in these uncongenial and hostile environments by the political maneuvering of the various mujahideen parties that came into existence as the fervor of the jihad accelerated. Seeking to attract members and assert the measure of their power and influence, among these bewildered, insecure populations, the mujahideen parties outdid each other in projecting their image as upholders of Islamic values.

In their scrambles for power, the ability to enforce purdah became a predominant declaration of their Muslim rectitude. Not only did the parties insist on the strictest observance of purdah, harassment and violence against women who deigned to participate in aid activities, as recipients or as providers, characterized these early years of exile. The preservation of the sanctity of the family of which women were the core became a priority that was commonly manipulated for political purposes, overriding considerations of the well-being, even survival, of women and children.

Male heads of families now not to contend not only with social pressures in order to uphold status and honour, but also had to consider the possibility of violent intimidation if they were seen to be lax in obeying the regulations, for it was they who were held responsible for women's behavior. Women now became symbols of the jihad.

Although initial family cohesiveness sustained individuals within households, displacement interrupted routines that forced readjustments in family life and created strained relationships in many of them. Being severely curtailed in their movements, women were consequently denied access to services, such as health clinics for themselves and their children and they were no longer able to engage in the interconnected activities that had once gained them respect and given them a sense of self-fulfillment. They began to feel marginalized; the days were long and empty and they grew bored and easily subject to depression, which manifested itself physically as well as psychologically, and severely tested their confidence and self-esteem.

Many women, who had lost their husbands, lost status when they were compelled to live as appendages, at times almost as servants, in extended family households. Children of widows in these households were frequently passed over when opportunities arose, as for instance, for schooling. Multiple marriages and the levirate were increasingly adopted in order to stabilize families, to provide economic security and cement political alignments under the new circumstances. But marriages for girls became problematical. As battlefield fatalities, increased so did the surplus of girls and young women. The capacity of families to absorb them was a great concern, particularly after the birth rate, which had already reached

418/1000 by 1988 began to soar (Dupree and Dupree, 1988).

Fertility was always a measure of a woman's prestige. Childlessness was a disaster and the inability to produce sons caused much anguish. That husbands might be responsible for infertility was not a part of common knowledge. The wife was always blamed. The messages aired on BBC's popular soap opera, *New Home, New Life*, that discussed the causes of infertility and explained that males, not females, determine the sex of a child provided considerable solace to scores of women. High infant mortality, coupled with the need to ensure parental security in old age, accounted in large part for the desire for large families in the past. Now the jihad provided a new incentive. It was patriotic and psychologically soothing to produce replacements for the fallen heroes of the battlefield.

The rearing of children was a considerable burden when fathers, traditionally responsible for discipline, were so frequently absent. The honorable behaviour of children is as crucial to family reputations as that of adults, and now many temptations beckoned idle youth. Women must be credited, for the relatively low incidents of drug abuse among Afghan youth, for substances of many sorts were readily available near the refugee settlements. They were cheap and pushers were everywhere.

The depth of the psychological scars afflicting children has yet to be fully explored (Campbell, 2001). Mothers who subsisted on unbalanced diets and did not space pregnancies were prone to give birth prematurely; even full-term babies were underweight. Many children, therefore, suffered from mental and developmental problems and children suffering from war trauma became withdrawn. Distraught parents agonized over new tendencies to abuse their children. Child labour that amounts almost to indentured slavery existed in carpet and brick factories, in car repair establishments and in other working environments. The number of children disabled by war was distressingly high.

Noting these disturbing developments, some, but by no means all, aid providers began to focus on the family, instead of exclusive for women-only programs that isolated women from their families. The new programs delivered identical parallel messages, training and services to men, women and children, so as to strengthen the integrity of the family and in so doing, they strengthened community environments (Le Due and Sabri, 1996).

There were, however, thousands of families beyond the reach of organized aid. These were mostly urban families who, unable and unwilling to face the hardships of life in the designated settlements, but with no opportunities to go abroad, settled along side Pakistanis in towns and cities. Referred to as Scattered Refugees, they were uncounted, although estimated to number anywhere from 500,000 to a million, and not entitled to rations or services. Their experiences paralleled those discussed above, but meeting family obligations was particularly stressful because space was so limited. Affordable housing could barely accommodate single families, yet these families had constantly to take in relatives coming from Kabul as repressive conditions there worsened. None could be turned away. Nor could they be asked to leave until jobs and separate lodging were found.

This group of refugees came from both traditional and progressive backgrounds.

Conservative families were able to blend into the Pakistani scene with little difficulty because Pakistani society is equally conservative. Those families that had taken to Kabul's progressive attitudes and had long taken education and careers for granted, however, found adapting to their surroundings, and to the resurgence of social conservatism galling. They did not take kindly to being accused by the mujahideen of whoring in the streets, just because they went shopping without male escorts. Yet these families were supremely conscious of the need to uphold personal and family honour by comporting themselves according to the new dictates. Men and women alike found psychological shelter in self-imposed conformity and, for fear of losing their good reputations, more rigidly observed socially prescribed, restricted behaviour.

Some women wore the chadari (burqa); others donned the chader, a large shawl wrapped around the head and most of the body, which could be draped to cover all but the eyes when moving in public. The sexes did not mix. Even highly professional men employed in international organizations kept their wives and daughters safely secluded within prescribed family social networks, which did not include mixed study or working environments. Men working in aid agencies objected to the hiring of women for fear their reputations would be compromised. Nonetheless, persistent advocacy finally won acceptance for separate institutions in the education, health and income-generation sectors. This gave thousands of girls and women new opportunities.

While Afghan women donned outwardly demure modes of dress and behaviour, beneath these wrappings they retained the personality characteristics for which they had been renowned for centuries — strong and vibrant, poised and graceful, few women anywhere are as consummately charming as Afghan women. As time wore on, circumstances brought about substantial changes that altered their lives, but not their personalities. Men were obliged to spend more and more time further and further away from home, seeking work, in addition to fighting the jihad. This left many homes for long periods in the charge of women who were obliged to make decisions that would normally have been taken by men. Later, when donors showed a distinct preference toward the employment of women, many men lost their jobs and households depended entirely on women for survival.

Consequently, objections concerning the propriety of employment outside the home dropped considerably, mainly for economic reasons. In addition, the stigma against gainful employment was minimized because women working with programs aiding the less fortunate were respected for their part in contributing to the jihad. Major adjustments in attitudes occurred, but domestic tensions also increased, or so the women complained. As women took on new responsibilities, men tended to shirk their family obligations, leaving women emotionally isolated.

Weariness increased as the years dragged on. Expectations for a return after February 1989 when the Soviets pulled their troops out of Afghanistan drew some refugees back, even as new refugees fled conflict areas where the mujahideen fought to dislodge the Kabul government from the isolated pockets they still controlled. Many of the refugees who took part in sporadic repatriation to liberated areas during 1991 did so because they found it impossible to survive after rations were scaled back in January to almost half the former allotments (Batson, 1992). Most waited for Kabul to collapse.

1992-1996: CONSERVATISM RETURNS

The succession of mujahideen governments that ruled Kabul precariously from 1992-1996 brought no lasting peace. Despite the chaos, hopes once again rose so high that 1.2 million left Pakistan for home during the six months following the installation of the Islamic State of Afghanistan in April 1992. On the way, they passed a third wave of mostly urban refugees headed for Pakistan who moved into the houses vacated by those returning. The physical adjustments were difficult for these city families used to electricity, piped water and flush toilets. Many women, however, were professionals and quickly found jobs with aid agencies. The men were generally not so successful in obtaining jobs commensurate with their skills.

High profile members of the fallen communist-backed regime were swiftly rushed through Pakistan to other countries, though the majority was absorbed by relatives scattered here and there in Peshawar. Family obligations largely overrode political differences, although some were excluded from supportive family networks because of their close association with the communists. Others found the claustrophobic environment in general too oppressive. As a result, requests for political asylum swamped the UNHCR and sympathetic western governments.

In Kabul, families conditioned by tales of mujahideen behaviour were at first terrified at the sight of the uncouth bands roaming the streets, but fear quickly changed to contempt as the girls discovered the young men, unused to interacting with the opposite sex, shrank before their tart retorts. Once again women ventured out, now demurely dressed in ankle-length, long-sleeved coats worn with a waist-length head covering drawn over the face in public, although the head coverings soon became so small they failed to serve their purpose. Under their coats fashion-conscious Kabuli women wore smart western-styled suits and dresses. The only concession they made to the new conservatism was the baggy trousers worn under their high fashions. Schools were open, and female teachers outnumbered males. Women jostled with men on staircases of government offices, lobbying for supplies and salaries. Thus, women began to assert themselves with considerable confidence. Sadly, the optimistic bubble soon burst as party infighting erupted, law and order broke down, and the city was reduced to rubble. The way was paved for the rise of the Taliban — and a fourth influx of refugees.

1996-2001: EXTREMISM COMES AND GOES

The Taliban established themselves in Kandahar in 1994; by September 1996, they were ensconced in Kabul. To them, the liberalizing changes introduced since the reign of King Amanullah were anathema. Their avowed purpose was to cleanse society of the evils perpetrated by their predecessors, and install a pure Islamic state with the sanctity of the family as a stabilizing cornerstone. The politicization of women's issues soon became a volatile global issue (N.Dupree, 1998b).

Taking advantage of the deeply embedded attitudes toward the centrality of women in the social concepts of family and honour, Taliban policies wrapped entrenched customary

practices and patriarchal attitudes in the mantle of Islam. They were then manipulated to maintain power. By imposing strict restraints directly on women, the new rulers sent a clear message of their intent to subordinate the personal autonomy of every individual, and thereby strengthened the impression that they were capable of exercising control over all aspects of social behaviour. These policies were among the most potent instruments of their rule.

They implemented their policies through irrefutable edicts sanctified by Islamic injunction. To question them was to commit heresy, which was punishable by death. They enforced the wearing of the burqa (chadari), excluded women from educational institutions and places of employment, inhibited their movement in public except when accompanied by a mahram (close male relative), and rigorously segregated men and women under all circumstances (Fielden, 2000). Men suffered as well. The fervid attention to beards of a certain length and bushiness, dress forms, head coverings, and enforced attendance at mosques took away male personal choices. Even children were denied freedom to play. Individual self-expression was stripped from all.

The rural areas were not so perturbed over these directives, for rural women have long found ways of coping with the traditional constraints that shape their lives. Nevertheless, refugee experiences and increasing access to information, such as the radio, had changed the dynamics of village life significantly. Village women were now much more aware, their horizons and expectations had vastly expanded. They now knew of the benefits of health care, they wanted education for their children, and some even discussed the finer points of women's rights (Pont, 2001).

Law and order was relatively well reestablished in areas under Taliban control and cosmopolitan Kabul reverted to the days before 1959. In their zeal to rid society of Western corruption, these self-ordained arbiters of Islamic rectitude regarded Kabuli women as personifications of the sins of the past. Although prime targets, Kabuli women had trouble adjusting because the regulations were so alien. Many failed to comply, which resulted in public confrontations, insults and beatings. Rarely did women suffer extensive physical injuries, but the psychological affect was devastating. The intent to humiliate and thereby control was most effective. Notably, men were most often punished for infractions committed by their women, underscoring the universal acceptance of male responsibility for the behaviour of female family members.

Women eventually learned to cope, but beneath their burqas emotions boiled. At home, mental stress disturbed family harmony. Stricter seclusion curtailed the normal social interactions that formed an integral part of their daily lives, creating a sense of isolation. Children denied the right to play became hard to manage and emotionally insecure. Girls could not go to school; schools for boys were woefully inadequate. Sub teen-age boys recruited by the militia were given a license to beat and berate their elders in public for being inappropriately dressed or for not attending mosques on time. This struck at deeply rooted traditions of showing respect for elders.

The rapidly deteriorating economy forced professional males into menial occupations or

put them out of work entirely. Economically destitute and disabled, men could no longer fulfill their supporting obligations, but the women were still bound to fulfill their traditional role to feed, clothe and shelter their families. The streets of Kabul swarmed with female beggars. Men shared their shame. Family honour was distressfully bruised.

To add to the misery, the severest drought in living memory hit the country during this period. An estimated 1 million people were forced to leave their villages. These internally displaced persons (IDPs) flooded into Kabul and other cities where services were already struggling beyond the breaking point. In September 1998 a reported 100,000 persons fleeing from renewed fighting in the Shamali valley just to the north of Kabul swamped the city. The population of Kabul, which was 750,000 in 1977, rose to 1.78 million in 1999 (Rodey, 2000:1). Many headed for Pakistan as the ebb and flow of refugees continued to follow events in Afghanistan. Scores of old-time Kabul residents joined them.

By this time, conditions in Pakistan were anything but congenial. Ration entitlements had been terminated on the 30th of September 1995, so the refugees arriving in 1998 were on their own. Furthermore, most were from Kabul and their urban support networks, being smaller and not so strong, collapsed more readily. Relatives among the long-time resident populations professed to have nothing left to share. Husbands spent what money there was in buying smuggled passage abroad, leaving wives and children stranded. Domestic violence increased commensurately with frustration and despair.

The streets of Peshawar filled with female beggars. Islamic tradition commends those who give alms, so individuals prefer to give directly to the poor rather than to organized charity. Consequently, the women begging in Peshawar found they could survive quite well. They could earn more, feel more independent, and suffer less, they said, than those women who were being exploited in sweatshops producing burqas and handicrafts for male commercial entrepreneurs. The effect on children was more grave. Children, both girls and boys, scavenging in garbage heaps for anything reusable that could be sold to scrap dealers, were vulnerable targets for the sex trade. Not only did they miss out on education, they now distrusted adults who could no longer fulfill their obligations, and viewed the future with diminished hope. Even small children incapable of comprehending the problems their parents were experiencing developed neuroses from feelings of neglect, particularly during the holidays when they failed to receive new clothes as is the custom.

It is not difficult to find cases of mental and physical suffering that resulted from the erosion of family networks and relationships. Needs are easy to identify, for they are often aired. These complaints attracted investigators who poignantly reported on small samplings. It must be remembered, nonetheless, that over the years the refugees learned to tailor their responses to expected benefits. Outsiders have dispensed a lot of benefits to further their own agendas. While the manipulation of outsiders by the refugees is understandable, the manipulation of the refugees by outsiders for the purpose of aggrandizing their own programs is less commendable. Caution, therefore, must temper generalizations about social trends under such circumstances.

It is not that concern should be minimized, for too many problems are very real; the

situation is deteriorating, not improving. With the change in its government in October 1999, Pakistan's attitude toward the refugees radically altered. After all the years of exemplary refugee care and maintenance, the government now declared that it was time for the refugees to go home. Unmindful of the severe drought that was forcing populations to leave their homes, Pakistan insisted the new arrivals were in reality economic migrants, not refugees, and after November 1999 when the border officially closed, concerted moves to demolish established refugee settlements were initiated.

Nevertheless, when heavy fighting between the Taliban and the rival Northern Alliance intensified, families fleeing war zones poured through the passes, avoiding official border crossings. Starting in June and accelerating rapidly by October 2000, this influx exceeded anything seen since the Taliban had taken Kabul four years earlier. Because the assistance infrastructure had been dismantled, the new arrivals were forced to live under appalling conditions in temporary makeshift camps. Those unable to cross into Pakistan lived under even more distressing conditions in holding camps inside Afghanistan, close to the Pakistan border. Still, the government of Pakistan discontinued all refugee registrations early in 2001. In October, the massive bombing raids associated with America's war on terrorism swelled these camps with even more desperate families. Never in the history of the Afghan refugees have families been reduced to such misery and it will be long before the effects of these tragedies on the society is known, but there are strong indications that many have been alienated from the support networks that once sustained them. The fact that they even survive is ample testimony of their courage, resilience and determination.

2002: AMBIGUOUS HIATUS

Today, Afghanistan swings uneasily from a tangled fragile thread. The Taliban are gone, but the moderate Islamic Transitional Government of Afghanistan, installed in June 2002 following the Interim Administration set up in December 2001 after the Taliban fell in November, has yet to find its way. Rural, urban, refugee, IDP, returnee, leftist, progressive, conservative, extremist, men, women, children, affluent, and poor, each has his or her own expectations. Each has been touched by events that propelled them through unsettling social disruptions.

Rural populations look forward to resuming the fundamentals of family life. They still cherish aspirations that are almost exclusively oriented toward family and children, even as they hold heightened expectations for more equitable access to health care, education and economic opportunities. Hopefully, the aid community will heed the lessons learned over the past decades. Programs are needed to promote the integrity of the family, for one can ignore the family only at the cost of social stability.

In the cities, Kabul especially, undercurrents heave like fermenting yeast. How these undercurrents will rise is impossible to predict. Kabul is a cauldron filled with a complicated mix: native and long-time resident Kabuli, displaced from every corner of the nation, repatriated refugees, returned Afghan expatriates. Some are skilled professionals, others traders, farmers, artisans, educated, semi-educated and non-literate. Afghan expatriate feminine activists impatiently spread their messages. Remnants of Khalqi, Parchami, Taliban and Mujahideen,

each with their secret agendas, mingle with the majority who are more concerned with economic survival than political ideologies. Something new is being sought, yet the hierarchy of authority in these moments of transition is unprepared to guide. There is no clarity, so opportunism flourishes and goes unchallenged.

On the surface, the people of Kabul seem happy and full of dynamism. Houses sparkle with new paint and whitewash. Bazaars are laden with local produce. Shops are open and people are crowded together by commerce. Traffic jams, a totally new phenomenon, clog the streets. The female beggars that congregate where foreigners gather are noticeably fewer, officiously aggressive and look suspiciously affluent. It is said many are so well off they take taxis home at the end of the day. True or not, it is impossible to tell, for they hide behind their burqas, but the very suggestion speaks of the opportunism that prevails.

Opportunism in the positive sense generates dynamic action, which is welcomed, unfortunately, however, many negative aspects are also evident. Afghans in the streets, Afghan expatriates, foreign aid providers, bureaucrats, and landlords, all scramble after a piece of the \$4.5 billion bonanza pledged in Tokyo in January 2002. Not enough has been received, no one knows when the rest may come or how long the world's largesse will last, but the opportunists ready themselves in anticipation. Most expatriate Afghans come for short periods and have no plans to shift their families to Afghanistan. The future is too unclear, security is minimal, their old residences are in ruin, rents are exorbitant, and services such as water, education and health, are inadequate. They find it hard to relate to this society from which they have been absent too long, and they cannot imagine their wives and daughters coping with life in Kabul today. This creates a Catch 22 situation, for only resident families with the requisite skills to move reconstruction forward can provide the stability that is vitally needed.

The city, already clotted with heterogeneous groups, is braced for yet more arrivals as unassisted and UN assisted repatriation continues. An estimated 1.7 million have returned since renewed repatriation programmes began on 1 March 2002; two million are expected before the end of 2002. Some 400,000 have already gravitated to Kabul, although the city offers next to no services. The social climate is therefore measurably stressed. Families that split to follow alternative ideological paths or were distanced from one another through exile or resettlement, may now have to come together. However, the reunions are often uneasy. How to act is no longer clear.

From an historical perspective, women, particularly, have received many perplexing signals. Traditionally taught to be obedient and subservient, they were first told to assert themselves without the knowledge of how to do so. This was unsettling in itself, but then the wheel turned full circle and traditional behaviour was again enforced. Those who had learned to enjoy the self-esteem that came with education and careers felt severely thwarted. For many, these dizzying changes robbed them of their identity. They have lost the clear perception that came with traditional roles, while alternatives remain clouded.

As has been emphasized above, everything an individual does affects the status of the family in Afghanistan. Ambivalent situations arise when wives used to living progressive

lifestyles now reside with families where fathers, husbands, or more likely in-laws, insist on traditional behaviour. The generational gap is particularly wide, although deference to elders and male family members remains firmly entrenched. This often manifests itself when women desiring to work are prevented from taking jobs because the stigma of working outside the home is still strong, particularly against jobs that were previously not permitted, such as housecleaning and laundry for non-kin families. Yet, while antipathy toward work thought to diminish the honour of the family is strong, economic need often forces these prejudices aside. Those who find themselves in such predicaments welcome the chadari as a shield to hide their discomfort when moving to and from places of employment.

Desperate economic need is driving many women to seek work, yet they must continue to fulfill their domestic responsibilities. Therefore, many requests for kindergartens are being received, not only to lighten workloads, but also to provide children formalized learning environments away from elderly illiterate relations unable to start children on the rudimentary path of education or instill discipline. Thus, old prejudices give way to new priorities.

Increasing numbers of single women over 30, well past the normal marriageable age, are now the major income-earners for their families. They seem to be content not to marry, perhaps because this would jeopardize their own security and self-esteem, but also because marriage might well minimize their status within the family. Economics has probably done more to modify male/female relations than all the rhetoric of the past. Traditionally, and in Islam, the wife's right to maintenance is in consideration of her submission to her husband's authority. When she becomes economically self-sufficient, or even takes over the economic sustenance of the entire family, this premise is naturally challenged. Male expectations of total obedience are thus eroded, while women who once accepted diminishment in exchange for security no longer need to do so.

Not only have women at all levels taken on added economic responsibilities, aid programs devote much effort to women's rights messages. Modernization, the socialist experiment, and refugee experiences have given women more strength, sometimes deliberately through political processes, sometimes unintentionally through economic necessity. Young men, on the other hand, were deprived of an education when they went off to fight, and are now neither intellectually nor emotionally prepared to enter into meaningful, productive activities. They tend to find answers to problems at the end of a gun, or in other forms of violence. Disabled men and those unable to find jobs must face the fact that they can no longer command the authority they once took for granted within their families, but must now bow to the economic leverage women use (Azerbaijani-Moghadam, 2000). Women need not be so passive, and men must seek new identities. Many Afghan folktales celebrate strong women as long as they keep their chastity, but when a woman steps forward to take on male roles, this impinges on a man's sense of manliness (Edwards, 2002:171-173).

Do men feel emasculated because women are more self-sufficient? Much emphasis has been placed on the rights of women. It is time to pay attention to what is happening to the dignity of men.

The vibrancy of a society is maintained by keeping a balance between welcoming the

new while treasuring the past. Innovation plus continuity imbue a society with that sense of identity essential to keep it strong. But while the political and economic environment continues in flux, while none are sure where they are really headed, Afghans need something solid on which to stand. As shaky as it is, in some instances, the family is the only stable institution available. Afghanistan has changed, in many ways irreversibly. But much is still recognizable. Amidst the confusion and the ambiguities, the basic integrity of the family survives.

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