

AFGHANISTAN'S INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN: COMPLEX REALITIES



WRITTEN BY BY PALWASHA HASSAN • EDITED BY BEENA SARWAR AND CHELSEA SODERHOLM



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA

WHO IS AN IDP?

For the purposes of these Principles,
internally displaced persons are
persons or groups of persons
who have been forced or obliged to
flee or to leave their homes or
places of habitual residence,
in particular as a result of or in order to
avoid the effects of armed conflict,
situations of generalized violence,
violations of human rights or
natural or human-made disasters,
and who have not crossed an
internationally recognized State border.

— *UN Guiding Principles 1998*

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And last but not least I would like to thank the women and men in IDP settlements who gave me their time and trusted me, sharing their stories and openly participating in community conversations.

—Palwasha Hassan

WRN MISSION

The core purpose of WRN is to amplify the voices of unheard, marginalized women, and together address the interlinked issues of peace and security, justice and governance and growing militarization in South Asia. To this end, WRN connects women peace activists, committed to working collectively within and across national borders in an open, respectful, learning environment. WRN presents an effective flexible platform for collaborating on research and analysis, joint advocacy and representation, and the implementation of well-designed initiatives. WRN develops and delivers specific advocacy campaigns to ensure that grassroots women's concerns and their voices directly shape political discourse, policy development and programme implementation.

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BIOGRAPHIES

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ABBREVIATIONS:

ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
CC	Community Conversations
IDP	Internally displaced person
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
MoRR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

GLOSSARY:

Afghani	Afghan currency
Daesh	Acronym for the Arabic name for the militant organization “al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham” also known as ‘Islamic State’ or ISIS. In Afghanistan, it is commonly called Daesh
Malik	Male community leader



Children overlooking the Community Conversation,
Nasaji Camp, Afghanistan

1. INTRODUCTION

Please note the data collection was in 2015 and information may have changed slightly.

The Women's Regional Network (WRN) is a dynamic network of women from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, including activists, researchers, academics, students, educators, women entrepreneurs and development practitioners, joined by supporters outside the network. WRN is committed to the collaboration of women working within and beyond borders to ensure the enshrinement and protection of human rights, to women's full participation in sustainable development and to equitable growth towards a more peaceful and just world.

The wider focus of WRN is to reflect the voices of women in conflict zones and to highlight their roles in developing communities and building peaceful societies in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Community Conversations (CC) are aimed at reflecting women's concerns and perspectives on the issues of militarization, security, peace and justice.

Human levels of displacement across the world are higher than ever before, surpassing World War II and its aftermath, and becoming a global issue no country can ignore. Afghanistan is the world's highest producer of refugees, with multiple displacements forming the life narrative of almost every Afghan. Women IDPs, bearing the brunt of such displacement, are the key to understanding not only how to prevent displacement but what strategies could be used to address this issue. This particular CC is part of a three-country study that focuses on the internally displaced women at the nexus of conflict and displacement who are confronting multiple dimensions of insecurity. Their fears, priorities, and most importantly, their roles as unacknowledged peacemakers in rebuilding their families and communities, form the basis of WRN's Community Conversations. This process also informs a Scoping Study aimed at determining the injustices

that internally displaced¹ women face, moving towards a regional people's tribunal to honor IDP women's voices and seek justice.

This particular CC aims to deepen the understanding of the complex realities of IDP women in Afghanistan, enabling women leaders in Afghanistan and the region to work together to foster a thoughtful and critical network of engaged and committed social activists and peacemakers.

1.1. BACKGROUND OF DISPLACEMENT: AFGHANISTAN

Displacement and large movements of populations have become a common aspect in the lives of Afghans since 1979, when the largest flow of Afghans outside Afghanistan in contemporary history began. This flow continues today.

The Soviet Occupation, 1979-1989

The number of Afghan refugees reached its highest point in the mid- to late 1980s, following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979. The occupation caused a refugee exodus of more than six million Afghans, most of whom fled to neighboring countries like Pakistan or Iran. Officially, three million went to Pakistan, two million to Iran, and one million

¹ Internally displaced persons are persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border. — *UN Guiding Principles, 1998*



AFGHANISTAN IS THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PRODUCER OF REFUGEES, WITH MULTIPLE DISPLACEMENTS FORMING THE LIFE NARRATIVE OF ALMOST EVERY AFGHAN.

to Europe and the U.S.² However, the actual number of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan greatly exceeded these 'official' numbers.

The massive flow of arms and sophisticated weaponry that entered Afghanistan in those years caused a militarization process that has only been augmented since. This militarization laid the foundation for the violence that persists to this day.

The 1990s: Civil War, Taliban, and natural disasters

The decade of the 1990s saw what is commonly referred to as the "civil war" in Afghanistan. While many Afghans returned to their country expecting liberation and peace, others joined a migration pattern that became a circular flux of people moving in and out of the country depending on where the conflict raged. Various mujahiddeen³ factions began fighting with each other after toppling the last Soviet-backed government of Dr. Najibullah. As Kabul came under siege, the destruction caused further displacement of Afghans. The UN estimates that 600,000 Afghans fled Afghanistan between 1992 and 1995.⁴ The rise of the Taliban to power in 1996 and their medieval governance policy, coupled

with poor economic conditions and further isolation of the country, caused more Afghans to flee. Additionally, in the late 1990s, the country experienced earthquakes, floods and acute drought. Each of these environmental disasters caused the displacement of thousands more.

Early 2000, pre-October 2001

Over the past decades, Iran and Pakistan have not legalized the status of refugees.⁵ The uncertainty of the Afghan refugees' residency status in both countries has encouraged police harassment, threats, and extortion eventually leading to the intermittent forced repatriation of Afghans.

By the end of 1999 and in early 2000, the UN, under pressure from both Iran and Pakistan, began voluntary repatriation packages that consisted of minimal support for refugees re-establishing themselves in the home country, including cash per family plus in-kind support in building basic shelters.

October 2001 onwards

Beginning in 2001 after US and coalition military intervention and political changes in Afghanistan, hundreds of international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) arrived in Kabul. Earlier, only a limited number of NGOs could operate in the country, and

2 World Refugee Survey, U.S. Committee for Refugees, Washington DC, 1981 and 1986.

3 Plural of 'mujahideen' or 'holy warrior, a term popularized by the US-led fight against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

4 Afghanistan and the United Nations <http://www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/un-afghan-history.shtml>, accessed 4 December 2015.

5 Iran is party to the 1951 Convention on Status of Refugees, while Pakistan is not.

the Taliban had imposed a total ban on women's activities including shutting down girls' schools. Encouraged by the political hegemony in the country, the hope of a new start, and the possibility of a job market opening up with the influx of aid organizations and NGOs, thousands of Afghans returned from Pakistan and Iran.⁶

However, the last 15 years have seen an ongoing process of militarization in Afghanistan as international forces, government and Taliban continue to battle it out. International forces, now in the process of withdrawing, have been training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take over state security and counter-terrorism. The date for the international forces (13,000 NATO forces including 98,000 US troops) to withdraw has been extended from 2014 to 2016.

The Taliban and other anti-government groups such as Hizb-e-Islami and Daesh (ISIS) remain engaged in insurgencies throughout the country. The ongoing conflict has exacted, and continues to exact, a heavy toll on Afghan civilians. Although anti-government elements are held responsible for the bulk of civilian casualties, IDP women interviewed for this report said that they get hurt by "all sides".⁷ The protracted conflict has become a vicious cycle with different phases and different groups periodically emerging as antagonists. The reasons for the displacement of Afghans not only persist today but have also been exacerbated since 1979.⁸

1.2 INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSON PROFILE

The Afghan National IDP policy defines IDPs as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who

have not crossed an internationally recognized State border."⁹

With the last national census in Afghanistan having taken place in 1979, the dearth of accurate and complete statistics has been one of the difficulties in development planning over the years. Numerous studies by various organizations conducting development work in Afghanistan have culminated in varied and often unreliable statistics. The World Population Statistics (2015) puts the current population of Afghanistan at around 33 million. The IDMC estimated the number of natural disaster-induced IDPs in 2014 to be 13,300, while the UNHCR in a monthly update (October 2015) estimated the number of conflict-induced IDPs to be over a million (1,116,546; See Table A for the geographic and monthly variation in 2015). These figures have not yet been updated to include the ongoing influx of IDPs from the northern areas (primarily after the Taliban attack on Kunduz, in September 2015). Also, these numbers can be contested as internally displaced people are often not identified as IDPs when they integrate and assimilate into local communities through networks of kinship and tribes.

About half the conflict-induced IDPs in Afghanistan are women and girls, and 62 per cent are children (girls and boys). According to a 2015 study by Samuel Hall, a consulting organization, there has been a 50 per cent increase in Afghanistan's IDPs since 2012.¹⁰

1.3 IDP GOVERNMENT RESPONSE AND IMPLEMENTATION

In 2013, the Government of Afghanistan approved a National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons that reiterates the government's responsibility to protect IDPs as a right they possess as citizens of Afghanistan. President Ghani, in his inaugural presidential speech (2014), acknowledged the IDP issue and asserted that his wife Bibi Gul would be looking after the IDP issues in her new role as First Lady.

On June 30, 2015, the Afghan Government adopted a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 — on Women, Peace and Security. The resolution stresses the rights and status of women in

6 UNHCR cited in: "Afghan Refugees Stream Back", CNN World, Dec. 15, 2001.

7 UNAMA Press Release "Civilian Casualties remain at record high levels in First Half of 2015" https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/august_2015_press_release_civilian_casualties_mid_year_report_english.pdf

8 Central Statistic Organization (CSO) of Afghanistan refers to the only census carried in Afghanistan, in 1979, <http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/Population.pdf>; also see Encyclopedia Iranica <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/census-ii>

9 The definition is adopted from International Guidelines on Internal Displacement, mentioned in footnote 1.

10 Policy Brief of National Policy on IDPs in Afghanistan: From Policy to Implementation: Engaging with National Procedure, National and International Stakeholders, 2015.

<http://samuelhall.org/REPORTS/Afghanistan%20National%20IDP%20Policy%20Brief.pdf> (accessed 6 December 2015)

TABLE A

Region	End-July 2015	Newly profiled	Decreased	30 October 2015
South	229,256	1,125	–	230,381
West	337,289	7136	–	244,425
Central	181,225	26,942	1,737	206,430
East	167,839	1,990	–	180,829
North	109,738	9,265	6,318	105,817
Northeast	82,298	83,327	58,268	107,357
Southeast	33,513	809	–	34,322
Central Highlands	117	–	–	117
Grand Total	1,041,275	141,594	66,323	1,116,546

UNHCR monthly update on IDPs, October, 2015

peace building and conflict prevention. Shortly afterwards, the Taliban took over the northern city of Kunduz, a crucial corridor of the country, which represented their most significant gain since the Allied Forces ousted them from power in 2001.

Both government and the UN had failed to put in place an early warning system. As result many women's groups and NGOs in Kunduz were impacted, their activities discontinued, and their offices burnt or shut down. Many women activists fled the city. The government had also failed to include women in a post-conflict assessment mission, despite pressure from the women's movement.

The National Policy on IDP does not present the IDP issue as solely a humanitarian one, but as one to be addressed comprehensively — it is also presented as a national development imperative. The document is gender sensitive to a large extent, and includes a number of sections on issues like the importance of considering the different protection needs of women and girls, as well as women's involvement in the durable solutions, strategies and decision making processes that impact their lives.¹¹

11 The 55-page (before annexures) Afghan national IDP Policy refers to either women, girls, widows, female headed households, pregnant women, expectant mothers, mothers with young children, mother, women with disability or sexual or gender-based violence over 40 times. Various sections also make specific reference to women's needs, protection, and participation in strategies and initiatives.

[http://morr.gov.af/Content/files/National%20IDP%20Policy%20-%20FINAL%20-%20English\(1\).pdf](http://morr.gov.af/Content/files/National%20IDP%20Policy%20-%20FINAL%20-%20English(1).pdf)

However, the IDP policy ownership is weak at the national government level. The process of bringing onboard government directorates and ministries to understand the policy and to integrate IDP related concerns in provincial planning and budgeting is likely to take a long time, according to the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR). Many also consider the IDP policy as overly ambitious. An international NGO worker (who chose to remain anonymous) says that the policy appears to be more about “dumping responsibility”, as funding is decreasing for “returnees” and IDPs and the UN is prematurely handing over this responsibility to an Afghan government that is not yet ready for it.

Afghanistan's National Unity Government (NUG) in 2015-2016 faces challenges in the transition period related to the ongoing international troop drawdown and handover to Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). The announcement that international forces would withdraw from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 led to further insecurity in a country already facing immense economic and political changes. The U.S. President's subsequent announcement that U.S. troops would remain in Afghanistan, although mostly in a training and advisory capacity, until the end of his term in 2016 gave Afghans a breathing space.

Meanwhile, the National Policy for IDPs has been initiated as a pilot in only four provinces, says the MoRR Director for IDPs. The major challenges facing comprehensive implementation are capacity and resource allocation — both

of which hinder the smooth implementation of the National Policy. The main coordination body, the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR), is responsible for bringing on board its own and other related ministries (health, education, women's affairs) through a comprehensive implementation plan to address IDP issues. With the ongoing process of awareness raising and engagement across the ministries having already taken one and a half years, there is a long way to go in implementing the policy.

Other challenges, according to national and international United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff,¹² are practical ones such as the unavailability of female staff in emergency situations. There are other systems in place focusing on the needs of women and child survivors of gender-based violence — Child Protection Action Network (CPAN), women's shelters run by NGOs, UNFPA programs run through hospitals and others at the provincial level, a gender focal point at the UNOCHA, besides sub-clusters on gender-based violence that address issues faced by women IDPs. However, the functioning of these programs depends largely on the on-the-ground presence of humanitarian workers and actors. The presence of humanitarian actors in turn depends upon the security and political conditions in the provinces. Support tends to be limited to provinces where security is relatively better.

1.4 FIELD STUDY

In order to amplify the IDP women's voices more specifically and focus on their needs and concerns, WRN conducted a study among the IDP population in Kabul. Conversations with the IDP population reveals several shortfalls in the National Policy with regards to addressing the needs of long-term IDPs in Kabul, most commonly referred to as living in "informal" settlements.

The Afghanistan Community Conversations series focuses on five groups in IDP settlements on the periphery of Kabul city: the Bagrami district called Nasaji, and the Pul-e-Sheena camps. The arrival of settlers in these two camps varies from a few months to 12 years. The main ethnic and geographic groups represented are Helmandi and Kandahari (mainly Pashtuns from the South), Laghman and Ningrahary (mainly Pashtuns from the East), and Baghlan and Kapisa (mainly Tajiks from the North.) The languages spoken are

Pashtu and Dari with a few Pashai (local dialect) speakers.

The IDP settlements are largely divided into clusters, with families from the North and South living in the same area of the camp. Although there is communal harmony in the camps and women are secure within their own clusters, younger women in particular do face restricted movement outside these areas due to perceptions about the dangers posed by 'other' tribes. There are 50 such informal settlements in and around Kabul alone, according to the director of MoRR.

Most IDPs describe their livelihoods in places of origin as that of landless peasants, with young agricultural laborers traveling in search of work during harvest season, leading a semi-nomadic life away from their families. Now, they have not only lost their homes due to conflict and disaster, but also access to livelihood as most of their land remains uncultivated due to either conflict or drought in the place of origin. These factors — conflict and/or drought — also reduce their desire to return home.

1.5 METHODOLOGY

The country data for Afghanistan was collected through three methods.

- Community-based dialogues in the informal settlements of Nasaji and Pul-e Sheena, in the eastern periphery of Kabul city. The Community Conversations form the bulk of the research for this report'
- Conversations with key informants in the government, UN, INGOs and national NGOs;
- A literature review of the various reports, policy documents and articles about IDPs in Afghanistan.

The study does not aim at universality or the representation of all the lives of internally displaced women living in informal settlements in urban spaces in Afghanistan. The research was conducted at sites that continue to be affected by conflict. These informal settlements were chosen for number of reasons, including accessibility from Kabul and relatively better security compared to the provinces. The applicability of the IDP policy and ideas about a durable solution could have been better tested with chronic IDP cases.

The Community Conversations aim to present the narratives of women at these informal settlements and camps that have a wide representation of multi-ethnic IDPs from the North and South of the country. At these CCs, conducted in local languages, women voiced their concerns and shared

12 Interviewed for this research between August-November, 2015.



SINCE THE PARTICIPANTS WERE HIGHLY SENSITIVE TO AND WARY OF CAMERAS AND TAPE RECORDERS, THE RESEARCHERS ONLY NOTED THE DISCUSSIONS AND ANSWERS WITH THE WOMEN'S AGREEMENT.

their experiences and key observations about what it means to be an internally displaced woman in Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan Community Conversations included eight Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 14 follow-ups with a selected number of women for more in-depth discussions of the research focus area. The data set included one FGD with youth (males) in camps and three interviews with Maliks (male community leaders). Ten different key informant interviews were additionally conducted. The CC was guided by a general WRN guideline questionnaire adapted to the Afghan context, translated and adopted in the local language.

In the field, the lead researcher included research assistants tasked with taking notes, discussing and confirming data, and recording the day's reflections. Since the participants were highly sensitive to and wary of cameras and tape recorders, the researchers only noted the discussions and answers with the women's agreement. Due to cultural sensitivities, women were also often reluctant to give their names; their names have accordingly been changed in this report.

The research sampling was supposed to follow the existing structure of the camps but it was difficult to meet these criteria, as the camps are based on tribal and geographical divisions. The Maliks were the main decision-makers and organizers of the meetings, which would affect the outcome of the discussions, including what topics were discussed,

and how. WRN tried to account for this bias by individually meeting with as many women as possible, in order to verify what they shared within groups, and to have more discussions with women who were unable to share their concerns in larger groups.¹³

In addition to factors like security and accessibility, the sites were selected to include a larger representation of the population from Afghanistan's Northern and Southern areas.

Several studies show that informal settlers are economically more deprived and disadvantaged as compared to the exiting poor in host communities. There are many cases of long-term IDPs living in informal settlements who are politically less visible and have a lower economic status. The government has reluctantly included them in the IDP category, as indicated in WRN discussions with relevant government staff.

Entering an IDP site without the backing of a well-known organization is not an easy or safe option. The researchers reached out to the Tribal Liaison Office, a local NGO with a record of working in these camps; they facilitated our visits to the IDP settlements.

¹³ This was less than ideal research methodology because such power constellations greatly affect the outcomes of focus group discussions. These dynamics need to be taken into account in both the design and implementation phases of future projects that use focus group discussions in CCs.

2.COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

2.1. SALIENT THEMES

Inclusive definition of security

When women spoke about security, their descriptions went beyond physical security. In discussion after discussion, it was clear that their notion of security extends to schooling their children, access to livelihood, maintaining the concept of honor as part of their culture and traditions within the narrative of purdah (veiling as well as restriction on women's public mobility), and safety within a culturally appropriate framework.

Parents often stopped their children from going to school because they feared the school would be bombed or, if the school were near an international forces base, that the children would be caught in violence. IDP Fouzia notes,

"Our children could not go to school in the village as the school was close to the American base. It was always being targeted by someone who was against the Americans."

Women's insecurity persists even in IDP camps. Mahbooba, a 30-year old from Kapisa in the Nasaji camp, describes her fears for her children and the decisions the family has to make that impact the future of their children:

*"After the suicide attack in Kart-e Naw (June 2015), we were told that the schools are targets, so we decided not to send them to school. The schools are far away from us anyway. Our children now work on the street and collect plastic and papers. They have no future; we don't know what dangers await them on the streets."*¹⁴

¹⁴ The Taliban have been attacking Kabul with suicide bombs and explosions as a fighting strategy against the government; however, the victims are mostly local passers-by and school children.

Post Emergency: Shelter Concern

The IDPs' biggest concern is a safe and adequate shelter where they can live in peace with their children and family. IDP families in these camps are not allowed to build proper rooms — their huts are made of mud with roofs with ceilings fashioned from wood, paper and plastic. When residents attempt to build proper roofs or widen their compounds, landlords backed by the police destroy their huts. During WRN visits to these camps, there were at least two incidents of walls and huts being destroyed. This, despite the IDP policy that clearly recognizes the right to adequate housing and land rights, and holds the government responsible for taking "measures to ensure that IDPs in informal settlements are permitted to upgrade their accommodation to meet at least the (Sphere standards¹⁵) for emergency shelters; and take measures to assist the extremely vulnerable, especially women-headed households, the elderly, the disabled and chronically ill in this task, while looking to progressively realize their right to adequate housing."¹⁶ In these cases of hut destruction, the government is not only not fulfilling an obligation, but is also part of the violation.

At the Nasaji Camp, Khoraygul, a widow in her 50s from Kapisa, told us,

"Life was good in Tagab (Eastern part of Kapisa province) before the war. We were working on our lands and fields, men were selling things and were able to make living. Our children were going to school. Now we have nothing here in Kabul. Still, we are happy our family is safe here."

¹⁵ The Sphere Handbook, Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, is one of the most widely known and internationally recognized sets of common principles and universal minimum standards in life-saving areas of humanitarian response.

¹⁶ National IDP Policy, 2014

At the same camp, Jamila, a mother in her 40s, also from Kapisa, Joybar District, said:

"We came here from Kapisa to avoid war and to save our lives. But here the landlord is not letting us live in peace."

Reflecting on conflict, women also associate conflict with external interference. Very few have any hope that peace will return to their homes. Another woman, also in her 50s, at Sheena camp says,

"There is no end to this war. We are suffering at the hands of Pakistan."¹⁷

Militarization and Extremism

Ordinary Afghans see no distinction between the effects of the violence at the hands of the Taliban or the international forces. In either case, they are displaced and impacted in the same way. The UNAMA's Human Rights and Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict Special Report on Kunduz illuminates the damage and harm inflicted on civilians by all parties during the siege of Kunduz city in 2015.

Educated and socially active groups of women fleeing Kunduz — whose projects and home offices were attacked, forcing them to become IDPs — talked to WRN about the continuing impact of extremism and security threats on civilian lives. Women IDPs are vulnerable to violence from all groups, and when talking about conflict, they have no complaints against any specific group. For example, they narrated stories of how government soldiers would come and search their homes looking for Taliban, and then the Taliban would come and search for men collaborating with the government.

"We lose in either case," says a mother in her 50s. "The Taliban were killing us and so were the government, and the foreign forces. We have been crushed in the middle of the fight between the Taliban and the government. We had no choice — the Taliban would come to our house to hide and get shelter and food, and if we did not help them they would kill us. When they stayed with us, the government and foreign forces would shell our houses."

¹⁷ Pakistan is perceived as providing safe sanctuaries to Taliban and other groups fighting in Afghanistan.

Impact of Bombardments

While discussing the bombings they had endured from all parties to the conflict, women in FDG groups (particularly from the South) showed WRN representatives their hands and feet, which had signs of shrapnel and roughly healed wounds. They also listed family members killed in bombings or husbands who are mentally disturbed, carrying the psychological damage of bombing and conflict. Women shared their experience of being caught in the crossfire between the Taliban and the international forces and how they have literally lost everything in this ongoing war.

Anargula from Helmand, in her 50s and one of the leaders of the camp from the women's Shura¹⁸, said,

"I was baking bread for the Khan's¹⁹ family when our village got bombarded. I left the baking and ran to my village and saw that there was no home. The entire village disappeared and so did my family... Three months later I found those who survived in my family. Now they are in Kabul." She continued, "We never saw the Taliban and then suddenly they would appear and burn the villages and kill people. In return, the planes came and bombed us."

In Sheena Camp, Ayat Bibi from Sangin village in Helmand, told us about the tragic losses she suffered:

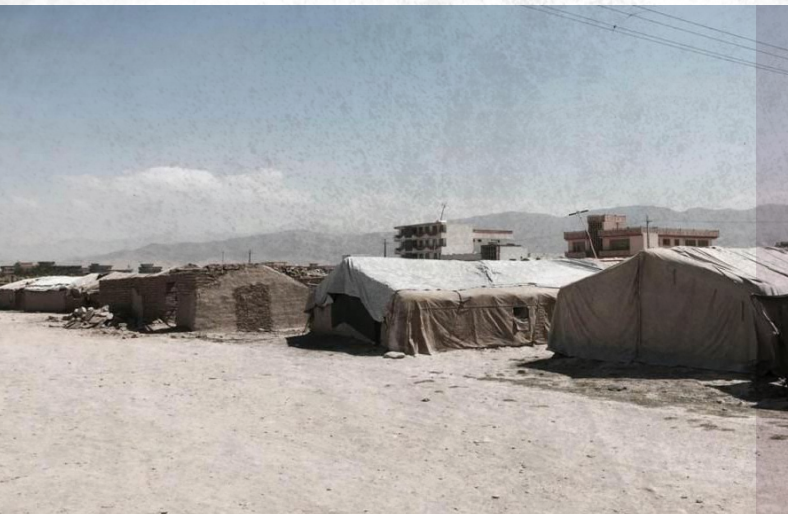
"We escaped war. I was pregnant when a bomb fell on our house. I fell down and I lost the baby. When I looked for my eight-year old son who was missing, we saw that he was crushed under the roof. My grandfather and grandmother were also crushed under the wall, and they died too. My cows died. I still carry shells from bombardment in my arms and thighs."

Impact of Extremism

Afghanistan's war of liberation since 1979, with its accompanying extremism and militarism, has been intertwined with restrictions on women, particularly during the Taliban time when women were completely banned from public spaces. The war has affected women at all levels, including their participation in schools and education. Some women in IDP camps recounted how they had gone to school but

¹⁸ Council or committee consulted on various issues.

¹⁹ Village leader



THE IDP COMMUNITY IN THESE CAMPS IS DESPERATELY POOR. THERE ARE NO EMPLOYMENT FACILITIES. THE LIVING CONDITIONS ARE FAR FROM ADEQUATE. THE MEN IN DESPERATION ARE TAKING REFUGE IN DRUGS, AND CHILD LABOR IS AT ITS PEAK.

their daughters could not. Some women did not remember or speak of anything, except running and trying to survive. Zarmina from Helmand could only laugh as a measure of her helplessness as she said,

"All I remember is conflict and running to survive, from place to place."

While Afghans are generally religious, they are aware that the actions in the name of religion by both the Taliban and Daesh (ISIS) are actually contrary to Islam.

Frishta, a 15-year old from Nijrab, Kapisa province in the Nasaji camp, describes her fears:

"We were scared of the Taliban. If anyone did not accept to work with the Taliban they would kill them. My family came here because we were scared of the Taliban."

Daesh presence with its brutal practices is felt in parts of the country, but its fear appears to be pervasive as reflected by the IDP women. One 30-year old mother from Kapisa in the Nasaji camp said,

"With the Taliban we were scared for our lives only, but with Daesh we are scared for our honor as well."

Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Violations

Afghanistan is bound by several legal, national and international frameworks, including the Convention on Social and Economic Rights (ESCR, 1983), the Afghan Constitution (2004), and more importantly in this context, the National Policy on IDPs in which the government recognizes the different vulnerabilities that IDPs face. The Policy also makes government ministries responsible for providing an adequate standard of living and the right to livelihood — neither of which are ensured in the IDP settlements of Sheena and Nasaji.

The IDP community in these camps is desperately poor. There are no employment facilities. The living conditions are far from adequate. The men in desperation are taking refuge in drugs, and child labor is at its peak. There appears to be very little hope for the future of the young, exposed to the abusive environment of the streets.

Women in Sheena note with distress that they are unable to find work in homes and villas of the host community in Kabul, where there is a negative perception about the IDP camp residents. Helmandi women and men said that back home, selling their traditional bead work was considered a dignified income for their family. There is no market for it in Kabul.

The government's "default" solution as outlined in the IDP policy is to encourage people to return to their provinces and initiate land distribution programs in their places of origin.

It does not recognize or account for either the IDPs' needs, or the ground reality that most IDPs cannot return to their places of origin due to prolonged conflicts and elimination of livelihood opportunities. The government needs to identify more suitable solutions to help restore the lives of Afghan IDPs with dignity.

A man from Kodakhistani (a sub-section of the Nasaji camp) said,

"Even if the government gives me land in Baghlan, where I had no land before, I will not return."

The conflict continues in Baghlan province. The Malik of the camp asserts,

"There will be no peace any time soon."

Health and Hygiene

IDPs have the same rights to health services as other Afghan citizens — access to public hospitals and doctor consultation is free or with nominal fee; however, everyone has to pay for medicine. However, the number of public hospitals are limited, services are substandard and insufficient to fulfill the need of growing city population. In Kabul and perhaps in other similar urban centers, the cost of private medical care is prohibitive. There are more private clinics than government health facilities that in any case are not fully equipped. Government hospitals are also inadequate in terms of how many people they can serve — they were meant for a population that was a third of what it is now.²⁰ There are limited health clinics near or inside the camp, but the services and medicine available has been limited. IDP community members complained that the clinic prescribes the same painkillers regardless of the medical ailment, as they simply don't have access to other medicines.

A woman from Kapisa in her 40s explained the poor medical services provided at the Nasaji Camp clinic:

"There are two types of medicine in the clinic — green tablets and red tablets. No matter what sickness we have, they give everyone these pills."

²⁰ The Kabul Master Plan (2010/2011) catered for a city of 700,000 people rather than the estimated 3.5 million currently living in the city.

Mahjan in her 40s, also from Kapisa, works as a cleaner at a private clinic,

"I had to use a small container the other day to bathe in my room, because the toilet and bathroom were in use. Sometimes we line up or guard the door for each other when we take a bath or use the toilet."

Most IDP compounds in Nasaji and Pul-e Sheena have just one small latrine and one bathing space without a roof, each shared by three to four families. In Kodakhistani about 200 people from Baghlan province are housed in the old destroyed factory's kindergarten building where they share two latrines.

"God forbid if you get diarrhea here, it becomes a big dilemma as everyone wants to use the toilet — and you are rushed out," remarked one woman.

Khoray Gul from Tagab says that her family fled to Kabul, leaving behind

"our houses, lands and fields for the safety of my sons — only to see them fall prey to 'another curse' (drug addiction). They have been living here for the last six years here."

In Nasaji camp, a major issue is drinking water, supplied by water tankers. Camp residents buy big containers of water — five gallons for 50 Afghani. The IDP community women say that the "water is not very clean." There are no facilities to store water hygienically. Often the same water is used for washing, cleaning, and bathing. The women said that they save money from food in order "to wash and clean ourselves; how much we can do, when our priority is food..."

There is no concept of family planning in the communities we met; each woman had several children to take care of. A few NGOs have been working on legal rights awareness in the camps but during our Community Conversations we didn't come across any project on health education or reproductive health.

Child Labor

More than half the IDP populations are children — some 60 per cent, according to UNCHR data. Afghanistan is party to the International Convention on Child Rights (CRC) and



SPINA FROM HELMAND IS A WIDOW AT BARELY 24 YEARS OLD. SHE HAS FOUR DAUGHTERS AND THREE SONS. HER ELDEST SON, 12-YEARS OLD, IS THE MAIN BREADWINNER. HE WORKS ON THE STREETS. HER TWO DAUGHTERS AGED 4 AND 8 WERE PROMISED IN MARRIAGE IN ORDER TO GET A LOAN TO PAY HER FATHER'S MEDICAL BILLS. AFTER THE TREATMENT, A WALL FELL ON HIM AND HE DIED. HER 8 YEAR OLD DAUGHTER IS NOW TRAUMATIZED AND DOES NOT SPEAK.

there are several provisions on child rights in the Afghan Constitution (2004). The new IDP policy recognizes the vulnerability associated with the IDP condition, but the mitigating measures listed lack specific references to women and children who are grouped with the vulnerable category of the disabled and elderly, where solutions are described.

According to the CC findings, IDP children are at greater risk of exploitation, endangered by being forced to work on the streets and in homes, with very little or no protection. Afghanistan's national and international commitments on the rights and protection of children don't seem to apply to these children.

Most families we met had young mothers with seven or eight children, adding to their existing miseries of poor health and limited economic opportunity. One of the reasons for the economic decline of IDP families is that they have more mouths to feed, which increases their economic vulnerability when they have to flee their homes and livelihoods and relocate to unfamiliar surroundings. IDP children as young as 8-12 years old are doing adult jobs, taking care of fuel and food to support their families. Children roam the streets from morning until evening collecting plastic and wood from dustbins and sorting recyclable material from the garbage thrown out by better-off households. They are outside cleaning cars or begging and chanting on the streets. Some girls were reported to be working as domestic servants and housemaids in local residences.

"All day I worry until my son comes back. I don't know if he will return alive. When I hear explosions I think he is dead until I see him coming back home in the dark," said Zulikha, a mother of five children from Kapisa.

Spina from Helmand is a widow at barely 24 years old. She has four daughters and three sons. Her eldest son, 12-years old, is the main breadwinner. He works on the streets like other children selling plastics and washing cars. Her eldest daughter, eight-years old, is psychologically traumatized. She has stopped talking since the trauma of being caught under a collapsed shelter wall that fell on her and her family. She works in a neighborhood nearby as a housemaid.

"She wears clothes that 'madam' gives her and brings food home sometimes when she returns from work," said Spina.

Spina promised two of her daughters (ages seven and four) in marriage to another family in order to earn money in dower price for their father's medical treatment, where nobody was ready to give her a loan.

Malala in her 50s, the mother of five sons and six daughters, said she has "never seen good days," even as a young girl. She had just got married in 1978 when the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan took place.

"We migrated to Pakistan. After the fall of the Taliban (2001) we returned to Tagab. My husband and four sons died in a fight between the Taliban and the government. Now the sole breadwinner of the house is my ten-year old son who washes cars."

Personal tragedies notwithstanding, her main concern now is poverty.

"If I eat, what will I wear, and if I wear (clothes) then how will I get medical treatment? We go without food for days at a time. I can't even afford simple painkillers," she said, and added: "If I send my son to school, then who will feed us?"

Her sense of hopelessness is evident in her response to a question about what she sees as the solution to these problems:

"Only God helps us. I don't see any solution to our problems."

Gulmaki, 30, another widow from Helmand, lives in the Sheena camp.

"My children are small, my husband is dead. When I go to seek employment in the houses around us they don't give us work. Perhaps they think we are thieves."

Women often repeated variations on the following quote:

"Our men find no work here and nor do we, so we are forced to send our children out to at least collect wood or plastic for fuel for the house."

Impact on Women's Bodies, Honor and Discrimination

Unemployment, poverty and high living costs in the urban centers create desperation in these IDP families. Our Community Conversations revealed that early marriage is common, as is using bride price as a coping mechanism for extremely poor families.

Women from Kapisa talked about the pain of giving their young daughters in marriage. One of the women referred to a recent case,

"Last week two girls aged eight and ten got engaged. If there was no war in our home, and we were living in our own houses, our daughters would be going to school now and we would not have married them off this young. Life is tough here; we cannot feed ourselves, how can we feed and clothe our children?"

Ziagul, another widow from Kapisa, is in her 50s.

"More than our life, we care for our honor," she says. "We feel disgraced when the government and international forces come to search our houses while there are no men at home — they had to escape from the Taliban who were forcefully recruiting them. The women and children were left behind in the houses. It is not acceptable and it is against our culture that men search our homes when there is no male family member in the house. We consider this a form of dishonor."

This issue, of feeling dishonored and having their cultural and traditional values flouted by all sides — militants, government, and international forces — emerged as one of the reasons these women and their families felt forced to flee their homes and become IDPs.

Afghanistan is a highly male-dominated society with strictly gender-segregated spaces, particularly in the rural areas. While changes are inevitably coming to the IDP camps due to displacement and proximity to urban areas, the affected communities do not readily accept these changes. Secondly, even as they struggle to survive, women face discrimination at home and within the community. From decisions about family planning to working outside the home, it is the men who are in charge.

A youth from Kandahar who is a member of the football team in the Nasaji camp said,

"Before, our women worked at home and we would sell the beadwork they made. Now they are going to work outside the home, and people do not respect us."

Another youth from the same team told us that his wife must ask his permission every morning before going work. He believes that this is her religious duty as a wife — "she will be an infidel if she doesn't take my permission," he explained, clearly ignorant about religion.

Sonzala in her 30s from Helmand now at Pul-Sheena

complained about the harsh situation she lives in, complaining of her children being hungry she is sick and there is no work for her when she said

“when I go begging, the Malik stops me from doing it. My whole body hurts. I cannot work and even if I go and try to work, nobody gives me a job. My children need food — what am I supposed to do? The Malik says it is not good for our honor if you beg on the streets.”

2.2. CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Traditional patriarchal attitudes continue to hinder women's full participation in the community and home, but the current situation presents important openings with the possibility of breakthroughs and new learning that both government and NGOs concerned with women's empowerment can capitalize and build upon.

Women who learned stitching and tailoring through NGO training programs in the IDP camps are working outside the camps in factories to meet their families' economic needs. Some work as female guards in nearby government buildings or as cleaners at a clinic. Out of pure necessity, these women have opened up opportunities for themselves, resisting restrictive traditions and values in a community that demeans their work and courage.

The prolonged conflict in southern Afghanistan has affected public services and living conditions. People have got used to living in an emergency situation under frequent bombardment. Women from the South who spoke to us described the benefits of living in Kabul. Nasima from Helmand lives in the Nasaji camp.

“In Helmand we were living under constant fear of death and being killed. The men could not leave their homes after 5 or 6 pm. We go out here. Girls go to school here. We could not even think about girls in Helmand going to school.”

From Victimhood to Resilience

Listening to women in the IDP camps, it is clear that they have undergone phenomenal levels of hardship, enduring and being exposed to traumatic experiences. Each story demonstrates the greater resilience these women developed

to survive the impossible, despite multiple barriers. They are coping with all kinds of problems. They have survived and supported their families in the worst possible conflict situations, and are now struggling financially to meet household expenses and support their children and husbands.

Take the moving and devastating — but inspiring — story of Anargula from Helmand who within minutes lost her entire family, home and children to a bombing and yet stands strong in protecting her remaining five-year son. Finding her way by exploring her network of family and friends, a process that took many months, Anargula is now one of the leaders of the women's Shura, representing women's voices in a society where voice and decision making has traditionally been strictly been a male domain.

The story of women from Kapisa working in clinics and as guards may appear insignificant, but they show how these women fight the odds of circumstance and culture to survive. They take pride in their work — as one woman said in a FDG group meeting, this is ‘Halal’ in order to get food for her children; her husband, a drug addict, does not work.

Drug abuse emerges as a common problem they have to deal with. Zarmina, 30, from Kapisa, told us that when her husband went to Iran for work,

“he got addicted to drugs. When we came to Kabul I got him treated for his addiction.”

Each woman talked of falling down several times and getting up again, experiencing multiple displacements, migration and return. Women try to fill the financial gaps in order to run their meager households to the best of their abilities, and even physically rebuild their huts when a landlord demolishes them.

Frishta is a mother in her 40s from Nijrab, Pachaghan District. She is now supporting her family, her daughters go to school, and she has built good relations in a community where she didn't previously belong. She helped her husband to build a shelter in the Nasaji camp. She and her family have been evacuated from five different temporary shelters they took refuge at, after leaving their village in eastern Kabul along with other families fleeing war. She said they were forced to leave each place by landlords. They are now in Nasaji.

She spoke of how desperate she felt when she first arrived, along with a group of other IDPs, at the Bagrami district with its ruined shops. It was raining and she and her children got wet. She wanted to scream in despair but realized that the



THE FACT THAT CHILDREN ARE NOT BEING EDUCATED IN THE CAMPS, THE PRESENCE OF A HIGH BIRTH RATE DUE TO LACK OF ACCESS TO FAMILY PLANNING, AND LACK OF SUPPORT TO WOMEN WHO ARE FIGHTING ON MULTIPLE FRONTS JUST TO SURVIVE AND EMERGE RESILIENT, ARE FACTORS THAT FURTHER ENHANCE POVERTY.

others were no better off. The noise of the rain and thunder drowned out her muffled sobs.

The IDP women's most significant contribution has been to ensure the survival of their children and their families. We saw no cases of IDP women succumbing to drugs and addiction or even despair. Most are fighting on, even when they feel the situation is hopeless.

2.3. ANALYSIS AND EMERGENT PATTERNS

The Government of Afghanistan approved the National Policy on IDPs in November 2013, and launched it in February 2014 as the national instrument to safeguard displaced citizens. The launch was aimed at bringing the national government and all stakeholders on board and familiarizing them with the policy's content and guiding principles. Besides identifying line ministries for coordinated implementation, the President designated the First Lady's office to oversee the IDPs' issues.

Although there is certainly a will and commitment that can be positively explored for the benefit of IDP families and women in particular, WRN consultations with the First Lady's advisor revealed that until that point, there was no strategic plan in place, except for a few ad hoc relief activities.

The vulnerability associated with life as an IDP brings IDPs below the poverty line, according to the Samuel Hall

(2015) study on implementation of Afghanistan's IDP policy. One reason for the higher vulnerability of IDPs and their low incomes is that their skills are often unfit for the changed environment they are forced into. The IDPs' typical lack of appropriate skills leads to their low employment and irregular income. The jobs they do manage to find tend to be temporary and erratic.

Research on IDPs in Afghanistan shows that they resort to widespread borrowing to fulfill their basic needs. According to a study on IDPs in Urban Settings (World Bank and UNHCR, 2011) loans from relatives and friends account for an estimated 20 per cent of the source of an IDP's income. Credit from shopkeepers accounts for another 20 per cent. According to the study, other vulnerability factors include lack of land tenure and lack of access to healthcare and protection. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to multiple protection concerns.

There are also various gender specific issues, such as child marriage, and reduced mobility of women in the initial period of displacement. Women often lose their traditional support and protection mechanisms when they relocate to a new and unfamiliar area, exposing them to risky situations such as forced marriage.

Women in IDP camps identified economic factors as the main reason for early marriage. The second was security —

the fear that their daughters are in danger drives them to get the girls married young. While nobody specifically talked about rape or sexual abuse, that is clearly an underlying major concern, considered the ultimate shame for a family.

Women narrated that their mobility is quite restricted in the neighborhoods they have been displaced to, with younger women largely confined to their compounds. Children and older women, however, find more space and freedom in the new area. The restrictions on older women, in these areas considered elderly after age 40, become more relaxed as the families grow better acquainted with their new environment.

IDP women in both Sheena and Nasaji camps who spoke to WRN researchers for this study widely reported all these concerns. They were unaware of any governmental support, except some occasional help during the winter with no clear link to broader governmental support agenda as per IDP policy. Although some NGOs do offer services such as health clinics and limited education activities, the basic needs identified in the National Policy were nowhere close to being fulfilled.

Some positive aspects were observed with regards to girls'

education and work outside the home for women IDPs. IDP families from Helmand were sending girls to school, and women who have been trained by NGOs in lower Nasaji and Kodakistani in sewing classes were going to work at a factory near Nasaji. Other women were able to obtain jobs outside the camps, as noted earlier. Although limited, it is important to acknowledge these cases as they have the potential to offer a positive alternative for other IDP women.

The Afghan people and government are going through a great test of self-reliance and transition from international support. This challenge is all the more severe due to the long drawn out, ongoing conflict, and a situation that is highly influenced by regional politics, often not in Afghanistan's control. Also, the IDPs' situation cannot be divorced from larger concerns about the country's security and economic stability. The fact that children are not being educated in the camps, the presence of a high birth rate due to lack of access to family planning, and lack of support to women who are fighting on multiple fronts just to survive and emerge resilient, are factors that further enhance poverty.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 TO THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

President's Office:

- **Take** full responsibility for civilian casualties and hardships inflicted upon the lives of IDPs, irrespective of political considerations or political strings attached;
- **Ensure** support and reparations are rights-based with particular attention to the needs of women and woman at further risk such as female headed households, widows and disabled women.
- **Create** through systematic distribution packages that allow for easy and equitable claims disbursements;
- **Prioritize** the health, education, and protection needs of IDP children in government planning, budgeting and implementation.
- **Implement** the existing IDP policy with further resource allocation and strengthened coordination and planning.

To the First Lady:

- **Ensure** commitments made by the government are being followed through;
- **Coordinate** with civil society and women's organizations to ensure strategic monitoring and implementation of the national IDP policy.
- **Support** resource building for women IDPs;
- **Promote** capacity building and gender sensitivity amongst the line ministries.

To MoRR

- **Clarify** the division of responsibilities between MoRR and ANDMA to improve policy implementation;
- **Prioritize** land distribution for those without access to land and based on livelihood options and social service availability.

Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs & Disabled (MoLSAMD)

- **Institute** job training and placement schemes for women and men in IDP settlements.
- **Create** a social protection system for the poorest of the poor.

3.2 TO CIVIL SOCIETY:

- **Increase** advocacy platforms for IDP issues particularly for women;
- **Prioritize** women IDP issues in their strategies;
- **Focus** on reproductive health issues and family planning with sensitivity for Islamic values and including men;
- **Promote** the child spacing model within the Islamic concept;
- **Couple** Relief programs with psycho-social counseling;
- **Prioritize** employment and job referrals based on market demands.

3.3 TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND UNHCR

- As long as international forces are deployed and operating in Afghanistan, they must ensure the protection of civilians and adhere to international human rights laws and humanitarian laws and norms;
- **Ensure** reparations are prioritized as they have been ignored in the past;
- **Continue** to support the National Unity government through capacity building and resource mobilization, particularly for IDPs and women IDPs;
- **Refrain** from handing over all responsibilities to the government without ensuring full preparedness.

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