

# **‘Dislocation’, shelter, and crisis:** Afghanistan's refugees and notions of home

Sue Emmott

*There has been war in Afghanistan for 17 years. During that time millions of people have become refugees or been displaced within the national borders. Conversations with women in a camp for the displaced reveal what it means for women to lose their home, particularly in a situation of persistent instability and conflict.*

At present, it is a fortunate Afghan who has a dwelling-place that he or she can really call home. The communist coup in 1978, followed by the invasion by forces of the Soviet Union in 1979, led to a resistance war during which five million people – one-third of the population – left the country, mostly as refugees to Pakistan and Iran. In 1992 the communist regime fell, but the anticipated peace turned into an even bloodier struggle, centred on the capital city, Kabul.

In Kabul, a city of a million people, it is said that all families are poor, but that one family in four lives in dire poverty (ICRC/Kabul Emergency Programme Research, 1995). If you ask Kabulis why the family were able to stay there throughout all the bombardment they will tell you that they could not afford to leave. In the last three years, hundreds of thousands of people have left Kabul, adding to the numbers displaced within the country. Peace seemed to triumph for a few brief months, before a battle for the city began again, this time on the part of the student militia Taliban, who are in control of about one-third of Afghanistan and are poised around Kabul, attacking with occasional guns and rockets. In areas they control, the

Taliban are imposing a radical regime, which greatly restricts women's rights.

Oxfam UK/I has worked with displaced people from Kabul since the first major destruction of the city in August 1992. The programme reconvened in Mazar i Sharif, where a programme of assistance to about 20,000 displaced was set up in Mazar and Pul i Khumri. Another fierce round of bombardment in January 1994 led to 100,000 leaving Kabul for the eastern city of Jalalabad.

Kabul was once a thriving and vibrant capital city, with an educated middle class used to a range of social services and civil institutions. Social justice was high on the early communist agenda, and women had improved their status considerably. Kindergartens were common, enabling women to work, and the public sector offered benefits which recognised the hidden costs and contributions of family life; for example, the widows of former public sector employees received a pension.

In the 1970s and 1980s, women wore sleeveless dresses or jeans and T-shirts. They covered their heads when and if they wanted to, rather than by decree. These same women, in the displaced camps, have lost these freedoms and must now be

careful where they move, and have to cover themselves fully.

## Homelessness in Kabul

Afghanistan is full of homeless people. The fortunate few are those who live in the house they have always known. They have suffered great privation, lost relatives, and their house may have been damaged during the regular bombardment but, one way or another, they have managed to stay. The rest have lost their homes for a variety of reasons; at worst their home was in the front line and was totally destroyed, at best they have fled from the bombardment but the house still stands and they may one day be able to return. Many hundreds of thousands live in tents, in camps for displaced people; and many millions live in neighbouring countries as refugees in camps which look like permanent settlements. The least fortunate do not 'live' anywhere. They are urban nomads, moving from place to place in search of a roof over their heads, and employment which will enable them to buy food.

For this article, Oxfam staff talked to women from Kabul, now living in camps in other areas, notably Jalalabad, in 1994, where I carried out a series of four focus group discussions, each with 8-10 widows. In the focus groups, I asked about loss – of husband, home, and city. The quotations used in this article are all from this source.

In the groups, most found it hard to talk about the notion of 'home'; they were clear about what home was not, but had great difficulty in articulating what it actually was. It was clearly not the tent. That was where they lived, but it was not home. It was where they slept, but where they slept all together without the kind of privacy they had known. It was where their children were, but where their children wandered aimlessly about in the day-time because there was no school to go to. It was the place where problems were continuous, but not the place where there was any

space to resolve them. It was the place where, for many women, the only way to cope was to take tranquillisers. It was the place to sit and wait for the future; to exist but not to live.

## Linking psycho-social and practical needs

Oxfam's programmes in the Afghan camps typically cover water, sanitation, and health education. The context is one of an emergency, in which a wide range of people suddenly find themselves together, in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions. Afghanistan has a climate of extremes; it may be 45-50°C in summer, and freezing or below in winter. In the camps, there is no shade from the summer sun or from winter blizzards. Most people have been in the camps since the 1992 or 1994 influxes, remaining because the camps offer a degree of security and the alternative is highly uncertain; and because factional fighting has blocked roads, restricting movement around the country.

The middle classes, who have been used to piped water in their homes, central heating in their apartments, and flushing lavatories, suddenly find themselves in a barren place with none of those facilities. Poorer people may not have had the benefit of such facilities, but they too face an environment which is totally unfamiliar to them.

Health education in this context is not about teaching basic hygiene, since many of the women understand that very well. Rather, it is about helping people to identify the new health risks they face in the potentially dangerous camp situation. Overcrowding and lack of water and sanitation can easily lead to epidemics. An 'empowering' model of health education should enable women to analyse their new environment, understand the health risks they face, and then, most importantly, to take action to counter the risks.

Since women are mostly responsible for

maintaining family hygiene, it is crucial that they are fully involved in the provision of services which affect family health. Work with women should, therefore, be at the heart of programmes in such a situation. What is needed in an emergency is for a communication mechanism to feed information about safeguarding health quickly and effectively to women and to receive back their views and opinions.

In my experience of emergencies in East and Central Africa as well as in Afghanistan, networks of women, set up to meet health objectives, very quickly become supportive social gatherings, and provide a forum for them to share their experiences. The fact that health issues are seen generally as women's responsibility means that there tends to be little opposition to women meeting in this way. It is hard to say whether trauma leads people to be intimate with each other sooner than they would be normally; I would say that if women have shared the same experience this is certainly true, but distinctions such as class still affect relations.

In the grieving process people need to talk through their experience over and over again, often without coherence, because somehow and after some time it starts to make more sense and become more bearable. Nowadays it is popular to refer to such programmes as 'psycho-social', and to see that as the main purpose. In my experience this is not really accurate; women will cry and laugh when they feel ready to do so, and not because an agency starts a programme! In a sense, all an agency can do is to set up women's networks to meet practical aims of ensuring the physical health and well-being of refugees, in which the promotion of health goes hand in hand with interventions such as clean water and sanitation. The strength of the women's networks in terms of supporting the members through trauma – and they undoubtedly do have a strong positive impact on mental health – comes from the women themselves. This mutual support is

natural and heartfelt. It is theirs, and they own it. The role of relief programmes such as Oxfam's is not to try to create it artificially, but rather to recognise it and facilitate it.

## Coping with 'dislocation'

Through these women's groups we have had the privilege of sharing the concerns of women. They have lost homes, husbands, and loved ones, their community, and their city. They are struggling to cope with the mental and physical 'dislocation' that they have suffered, and preparing themselves to come to terms with what may effectively be new lives. Fahima, a young widow whose husband was killed during a rocket attack the year before, voices the dilemma:

*I lost my husband and that was the most difficult time. Now we have lost our home and we are like crazy people. I cannot live in this desert. Even if they make me governor of Jalalabad, I cannot stay here.*

Fahima was not alone in her desperation. During the long years of war widowhood has become common. Accurate statistics are not available, either nationally or within the camps. (In part, this is due to the fact that widows are a target group for many aid agencies and donors, and therefore claiming to be widowed is a rational tactic for women to resort to if they are in need of assistance or supplies.) So many men have been killed and so many more are missing, presumed dead by those who can accept it. Some widows are fortunate to be cared for by their husband's family and retain a degree of security; others find themselves alone. Shazia was a teacher whose husband was killed by a rocket which partially destroyed their house. She and her in-laws left for Mazar, and for a while she retained a measure of security:

*My mother-in-law was very kind. She helped me with the children, and I felt okay, even though I had lost all my nice things. Then her*



*Collecting water in a camp for the displaced, Afghanistan.*

*other son came because their house was also destroyed, and his wife did not like me being there. She always accused me of trying to steal her husband. After some time I had to go, and now I am in this camp alone. My children don't understand what is happening.*

In times of war, there is a limit to how much families can help each other, and how long they can maintain good relations when they are so stressed. Sharing can soon become a burden which can lead to great tension. Alongside the physical destruction of Kabul, there has also been destruction of the social fabric, within the private sphere of the family and friends, and, additionally, in the public sphere. This last problem hits middle-class families in particular, since many of them have been accustomed to legal protection – for example, where a husband had a government job his wife received a pension, and if she worked herself there were kindergartens for the children. Now, family and friends must take responsibility for replacing the social provisions, and legal

protection, formerly afforded by the state. Shazia had great difficulty in accepting these losses:

*We are all widow ladies here now. All Afghan women are widows and there is no law to protect us. There is no law for women in Afghanistan now. They destroyed it all.*

All the women quoted here had once had comfortable homes and valuable possessions. They worked hard, and were proud of their achievements. They were secure in their family lives, and most played an active role in their community. Their children went to school. They had not appreciated what they had until they had lost it:

*My house was completely destroyed and I came with only these clothes. I was born in Kabul, and I always lived there. When my children saw this desert they said, "oh, what kind of place is this, what kind of life is this? Even the teachers are living in tents". But I told them we should be happy to be alive. We saw such terrible things, but at least we are alive.*

## Stability and land ownership

It seems that whether a family owned their own home or rented it made a difference to what they considered to be home. For those who owned their home, there was a sense of real belonging because they owned land. Those who still had a house standing, but had had to leave home because bombardment was fierce, felt that they would be able to return one day. But those whose house had been destroyed felt that, although they might be able to return to the land, their hope of rebuilding their house was slim because they had lost their ability to earn a living. Women in this position reported a sense of desolation and emptiness to parallel the empty space where their home had once stood. They had a 'place' and were heartbroken at losing it.

Even more unlucky were those who had also lost their land because the area was occupied by hostile forces, and they felt that situation would be permanent. Many more would only be able to reclaim their land when the landmines which were laid everywhere in Afghanistan were cleared. Vast areas of Kabul are uninhabitable for this reason.

When we talked with widows about their various losses, it was clear that the loss of a husband and the loss of a home were devastating to them. However, it was also evident that the loss of hope and loss of belief in a better future is the most difficult thing with which to come to terms. For many, the loss of houses and land was linked to feelings that this homelessness spelt the end of life itself. Fatima told us:

*I lost my home. This tent is not my home and I feel like a nomad. Home is home, but the tent is like the place for a deadperson. I feel dead. If God brings peace to Kabul, I will be the first to walk there. I will walk without eating or drinking, and I will be the first there. But God will not bring peace now. We wanted an Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but not this kind.*

*What did this Islamic Republic bring? Eight days and nights without a blanket and my children nearly freezing to death. God has deserted us.*

The sense of futility and loss of hope is a phase of grief which has to be gone through before anyone can begin to want to live again and find meaning in existence. There seems to be no end to the pain and no possibility of change. Children feel this very acutely, and understand even less the reasons for such disruption to their lives. Jamila's children were bewildered and constantly asked her things she could not answer:

*Why can't we go back to Kabul? I would rather live in the trees. What is this tent? I never saw a house like this before which blows in the wind. This is not a house, it is a piece of cloth to sit under.*

Another woman's children told her every night to put some poison in the food and let them die together. They really thought it would be for the best.

## Mobility and security

In Afghanistan, there used to be many ways of getting a roof over one's head, most commonly by working for a landowner or working in a large house. Such jobs, while poorly paid, brought shelter and security. This way of life meant that many families did not live in one place but moved regularly for seasonal or temporary work. They were nomadic, but not homeless.

This was also the case for true nomads, who moved in summer and winter to new pastures for their animals. Many of those people have now also become homeless, in the sense that their preferred destinations have become closed to them by war. Many have crossed national boundaries, never to return. These days, after so many years of relentless war and pointless in-fighting, there are so many people who have become

nomads that the expression 'homeless' has come to be accepted as a concept by women in the focus groups.

The homeless now are those who have lost security. Not only have they lost a home, they have also lost family, social relationships, jobs, education and a sense of 'life' and 'place'. Pashtuns, a tribal group who make up 40 per cent of Afghanistan's population, talk about being homeless and 'fireless'. The fireside is the place where the family sit together to stay warm and to feel secure. Women I spoke to often equated security with the fire. A typical statement is that they can cope without the home, but when the fire is also gone life feels cold and empty.

## Family breakdown

The profound stress that results from homelessness is felt by both men and women. In terms of holding on to the social identity ascribed to women and men, it can actually be worse for men. While women, wherever they are, are typically busy preparing food and caring for their children, men can lose their sense of identity when they have no means of supporting their family in economic terms.

One major difference, however, is that men can leave the home and find comfort in life outside in the public sphere, finding entertainment or company with peers, outside the family. For women this is not possible, not only for practical reasons like caring for children, but also because of tension over religious differences and the enforcement of seclusion. In the Jalalabad camps, many women from Kabul, who had lived free from veiling and seclusion, have begun to observe these practices as a result of pressure from the local Pashtun community. One widow, Humeira, was experiencing great problems with her 14-year-old son. In Kabul she had worked and walked freely, and was in control of her own life. In the camp, with so many strangers and so much resentment against

these so-called 'communist' women, her son was beginning to see her as a source of embarrassment rather than the tower of strength that she really was. When she went to the bazaar to get food or out to collect wood, he became angry, saying to her:

*Why do you walk around like this so everyone can see you? Have you no shame? You are going around like the bad ladies!*

Because of seclusion, the home is the only space women have available to them. In the camps, they live side by side with other families, and any noise can be heard through the thin walls of the tent. One woman, Faiza, had begun to despise her husband:

*He is not a good man and I am afraid of him. Before, if he was behaving badly, I would go to my mother's house and stay there. After some time she would tell me to go back and I did. It was okay like that. Now I cannot go anywhere and I think I will go mad. The neighbours can hear everything, and I am so ashamed, but what can I do?*

## Considering 'temporary' and 'permanent' settlements

To the women in the camps, a profound sense of loss of an ideal of 'home' is allied to the practical problems of life in a refugee camp. While marital and family problems may become worse for women who have their husband with them, many more women face isolation as heads of households, with a resulting lack of family support of all kinds. Practical problems relating to health may be addressed effectively by relief programmes, and networks of women can offer support to each other. More permanent solutions, however, are elusive.

The scale of need, after such a long and unfinished war, is enormous. Even if there were peace the reconstruction needs are far beyond the capacity of NGOs. But it is not



War damage, Kabul. Thousands of homes have been totally destroyed, and landmines have been laid in many parts of the city.

only that people need assistance to repair their homes; rather, hundreds of thousands of people have no home to go to and it will be decades before all the issues of land ownership can be addressed. For many it is not a question of when or how they can go home, for they will need to make a completely new start. It is little wonder that the displaced persons' camps linger on.

The sense of frustration and inability to control the situation affects aid workers too. There are too many people in need of help, and too few means of providing any. Discussions about targeting the vulnerable take place, but the reality is that almost everyone in Kabul is vulnerable. This makes assistance highly problematic. But vulnerability is not synonymous with helplessness. Whilst the aid agencies struggle with ways to respond which are meaningful, women and men in the camps

are resourceful and resilient, and are beginning to reconstruct their lives.

## Meeting needs and creating dependency

A critical aid worker cannot but notice that people actually seem to rebuild their lives sooner and more successfully where there is not a great deal of aid available. I believe that this is because they retain the self-sufficiency and self-reliance which relief agencies often struggle to promote after hand-outs have been given. In many camps, a dependency syndrome develops rapidly and people become reluctant to leave. A camp soon becomes a settlement and a village grows up where none was before.

Ironically, the very strength and solidarity fostered through the women's networks means that women may be less anxious to leave the camps and move onwards to a more sustainable way of life. When we asked Gulgotai, who had been a teacher in Kabul, how she would decide when to go back to Kabul, she replied

*You know, I like it here now. When I first came I thought I could never live in a desert but it's not so bad. I get all my food and I have lots of friends here now. What will I have if I go back? I will be alone and everything will be so difficult. I will rest here for a while!*

This is a dilemma. Oxfam's programmes in camps are no more sustainable than those of any other agency, and, in the same way that a massive initial input in water and sanitation soon becomes an ongoing day-to-day commitment to maintenance, which cannot be borne indefinitely, so an input in health education cannot continue long beyond a crisis. In a Muslim country, where it may be difficult to work with women directly, it is easy for relief agencies to see any work as an achievement in itself, and not to look critically at the intended and unintended effects. If our aim is to help people to stand

on their own feet, however, we need to be much more rigorous. So-called 'empowering' programmes can soon become disempowering and paternalistic.

Networks of women, once so crucial, may become lack-lustre and purposeless gatherings, since the potential to make a living is not present in the camps. If this stage is reached, agency support seems to be critical in maintaining the purpose of the group; without it, the group may wither away. Scaling down water and sanitation activities is rather easier than reducing support for women's groups. However, people have to move on emotionally as well as physically, and agencies need to help them to do so. The most effective way to help is far less clear. We in Oxfam UK/I intend to monitor our work much more rigorously; when we learn lessons, which happens all the time, we need to change our practice. Asking refugees what they want at the beginning of work with them results in a degree of confusion since their practical needs are so great; and anything that is offered to desperate people may be eagerly accepted. Asking them later on to assess how we could have done better or differently is likely to yield much more critical responses. One lesson we have learnt is that working in emergency situations with a gender perspective – which encourages questioning – is very different from implementing the paternalistic 'women's programmes', which many aid workers accept so uncritically.

## Conclusion

In a country so long at war and where displacement from home is a phenomenon which affects almost everyone, there are no easy solutions. What is very clear is that people's homes – both as they exist physically and in people's hearts and minds – are inseparable from people's lives. When the 'home' is lost, the 'fire' must kept burning, if life is to be worth living and hope retained. To develop this

metaphor further, it could be said that the role of relief agencies in this context is to keep providing some forms of fuel, to enable individuals and their families to keep the fire burning. It is inappropriate to provide so much fuel that people stop looking for it themselves, or to dump so much fuel on the fire at once that it roars for a while, and then dies later.

Oxfam has been working beyond the camps, in a return to the city of Kabul, since July 1995. Finding a role has not been easy because the needs are enormous and our ability, as an NGO, limited. Furthermore, the patterns of human settlement in Kabul are very complex, and people move for many reasons. Unlike a camp there is no obvious entry point for an agency intervention, and the danger of acting inappropriately is high. At the time of writing we are part of a joint venture to restore the piped water supply which, like the electricity supply, was looted and damaged. We also plan to distribute plastic sheeting for use as roofs and floor covering during the bitter winter.

Oxfam's current plans are for discrete activities rather than an integrated approach. In theory, we know that our interventions must address the rebuilding of lives alongside the rebuilding of homes. In practice, we all have a great deal to learn.

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