



Refugee Women

Ms. Homayara Etemadi, a Muslim and Afghan refugee herself, is an advocate on women's issues and an effective lobbyist and spokesperson for issues affecting refugee women. Her work is carried via the International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women where she serves as Chair. She shared her experience and insights with other women at the conference held in Tehran, Iran on The Role of the Woman and Family in Human Development, from May 22-25, 1995.



Here are excerpts of what she had to say.

❖ Who are the refugee women?

It is the one face of a refugee woman staggering to a refugee camp in Malawi, carrying a baby she has just given birth, her legs still blood stained from having delivered among the bushes. It is the hopeless stare of an 80 year old Bosnian woman who was raped after witnessing the rape and murder of her daughter, granddaughter and 4 year old great-granddaughter. Alongside these faces of suffering I see faces of courage and resilience. That of a Cambodian woman returning who after some training and financial help set up a business and is now able to provide economically for her handicapped husband and her children. It is the face of Somali female doctor who has won the struggle for her health clinic for women. It is the face of the Afghan woman who against all odds singlehandedly established a school for girls.

The Working Group is part of the sub-committee on the Status of Women of the conference of NGO's that has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. This position that we have enables us to attend UN foras. We are

able to make interventions in UN conferences, and we are listened to by governments when they want to listen to us.

❖ How can we influence it, can we have an impact on the UN, can we change this world? How can we do it?

I don't say that our Working Group has been fantastically successful, but I think in this, in the challenges women and even refugee women, we have made some progress. I say 'some' because I do not want to praise ourselves too much. Through its advocacy and lobbying efforts the group has been able to bring about changes not only in the attitude of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) but also in its policies. Through the pressures of the UNHCR headquarters and ferocious lobbying with governments, we were able to encourage the UNHCR to introduce in 1989 the policy on refugee women. The following year we worked with UNHCR to produce guidelines for the protection of refugee women. Moreover, UNHCR, through a lot of encouragement from the Working Group, on the Working Group's part, appointed a special coordinator for refugee women. In more recent years, in fact this year, UNHCR has drafted guidelines for the protection and assistance of refugee women victims of violence and trauma.

UNHCR, has introduced policies that are being implemented in the field. In fact, this year, going through an assessment we found, to an extent, there is a change within the UNHCR's method of work, real changes, giving refugee women access to employment, giving refugee women the appropriate health services, involving refugee women this time in implementing programs that are implemented by UNHCR.

Most Refugees are from Muslim Countries

...What is little known is that 80% of today's refugee population, are Muslims. It is very strange, that no one really did the statistics or counting what is the refugee population? where do they come from? and the findings

are that they are Muslims. Our group identified this. We felt that there was a need to sensitize Muslim governments, the international community, as well as NGOs, to the particular needs, resources and aspirations of Muslim women.

No Business as Usual

NGOs and others working with refugee women became aware of the lack of attention to the special needs and resources of refugee women. At the end of the decade, concern grew among some NGOs based in Geneva, Switzerland that the momentum of attention on refugee women's issues needed to be maintained. We did not want that after the Nairobi Conference, UNHCR and other organizations active in issues of refugees resume their 'business as usual', [approach] especially if 'business as usual' is men de-emphasizing or even ignoring refugee women's issues. The International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women, in order to focus on refugee women issues, began sharing information among NGOs and are monitoring and advocating for refugee women with UNHCR and the United Nations system as well as with governments.

Therefore, in collaboration with the Islamic Relief Organization in Saudi Arabia in November, 1994, we convened a conference on uprooted Muslim women. That conference had a wide outreach to Muslim refugee women themselves and it was amazing to see the faces of the refugee women from the Islamic world. We had refugee women from Cambodia, we had refugee women from Vietnam, we had refugee women from Azerbaijan, we had refugee women from Africa, from Somalia, from Kenya, and this brought home to us the extent the Muslim areas are affected by these wars and post-migration.

The recommendations that came out of the conference were due to the contribution of refugee women themselves, so they do reflect the actual needs and the actual aspirations of refugee women.

The other aspect of the recommendations is that they addressed the misconceptions that

have reigned for many years among the international humanitarian agencies, on the type of assistance that should be given to Muslim women.

❖ *How can we draw attention to the suffering caused by ongoing injustices?*

... war, ethnic and religious conflict, tribal custom and peace, mass deprivation of human rights are the apparent causes of post-migration. But the undeniable and root causes are the non-functioning of the world's political, economic and social structures. When we help refugee women, we're just aiding refugees. We are not attacking the real causes so that refugee populations do not exist. How can we bring about change? And how can we draw attention to the suffering caused by occurring injustices. Our group, I mean, many NGOs, those around this table, use every opportunity that is there. UN conferences provide this (opportunity). For example, during the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights, our Working Group was there. We were also present in the Conference on Population and Development and the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development and in each of these occasions we lobbied with government on refugee women issues and drew attention to the economic and social causes of refugee populations. We are the victims of today's injustices.

We have prepared for Beijing. We were lucky to be able to give our draft recommendations to the UN Secretary General so that they could include them in the draft program of action. This is an achievement when we have so many challenges before us. To have these recommendations translated into commitment and concrete action and allocate sufficient funding.

Our network represents 30 private, and public NGOs and individuals concerned with refugee issues, and we will work towards having the objectives and actions recommended in the platform implemented. We invite you to join us, not only to support refugee women but to work with us in order to create ways on how to achieve peace in which social justice and mutual respect has meaning. The culture of peace should replace the day-to-day culture of violence which is causing so much suffering to humanity.▲

Ms. Etemadi and the Working Group are based in Geneva, Switzerland.



"I am Fatima Patarawanabe, a university lecturer in Baghdad. My husband was martyred by the Iraq regime. They threw him in an acid pool. I have a daughter and a son. I've been in Iran now eleven years and I've been teaching at the Supreme School, a school of higher education of law in Tehran, and I am continuing my studies at the university.

I would like to express my thanks to the organizers of this symposium for giving me this opportunity to talk about the situation of the Iraqi women and also to talk about my own situation as a refugee woman who has settled in some republican ground. The first thing that I want to say is that the important thing when we talk about the Iraqi woman, is that she is not a woman born in a particular juncture of time. Rather she was born in history carrying with her various opinions and aspirations that helped, now I would like to say that the Iraqi regime has destroyed these aspirations of hers.

What I'm about to say to you is the Iraqi women's situation today. Women whose voices cannot be heard anywhere and there are no supporters for them, speaking out for them. I wish to say my own story in this speak-out so that it will serve as an example.

I was taken into prison twice in Iraq by the Iraqi regime. The first time my first child was a baby and the second time when I was pregnant with my second child. A lot of pressure was put on me. As a result, for example, my right shoulder was broken. What I wish to say is what happened to my sisters? I met one sister whose left breast had been cut off. First I thought she had some disease but when I questioned her I found that the Iraqi regime had cut off her left breast because she was breastfeeding her child, that child might grow up to be a rebel, that's why they cut it off. Now the point that I wish to say is I find it my duty to say anywhere and everywhere that these are living example. A lady called Swali, she's been imprisoned for years, the reason for that was she rented a house for one of our brothers, Mujarebi, and she's been put in prison for years for this, and there she has suffered grave, various violations. One example is they took her clothes off and the interrogators used her body as ash tray and there were various other tortures the kind I would not mention them. All I like to say is the Iraqi women have suffered greatly but no one has heard their voices.

There are about fifty thousand Iraqi women in Iraqi prison, and most of them are educated. The lady that I mentioned, Ms. Swali, is an engineer. The other lady that I mentioned whose left breast was cut off is a doctor and there are many all over the place.

Anyway, I walked for fifteen days to mountains with my two children and reached here. Now I've been living here in peace and following my educational activities. Fortunately I was able to attend the university and study English. My children were sent to school by a foundation here and I wish to say there was no discriminations against my children and the children of other martyrs. There's no differentiation between Arabs, Iranians, etc. here... I have a very good life here and glad to say I've been to the heart of God and I live in peace here. I would like to end here."

TESTIMONY FROM AN IRAQI REFUGEE WOMAN LIVING NOW IN IRAN.