

Refugees Have Rights Too



Pakistan

Born and raised in Afghanistan, Partawmina Hashemee fled the conflict in her country more than twenty years ago. After struggling to build a new life for herself and her family in neighbouring Pakistan, Ms. Hashemee is now working for the empowerment of other Afghan women.

When she fled to Pakistan in 1983, Ms. Hashemee was a first-year medical student at Kabul University. As refugees in Islamabad, she and her four sisters managed to support their family by knitting and teaching. Ms. Hashemee then moved with her family to Peshawar, where she began teaching office management and computer classes at the International Rescue

Committee in 1989. It was here that her concern for the desperate situation of Afghan refugees led her to become a founding member of the Afghan Women's Resource Center.

While she has seen some progress in terms of women's enjoyment of basic rights in Afghanistan in recent years, Ms. Hashemee acknowledges that much more needs to be done. "After twenty years of war and displacement, the whole nation is traumatized, and I feel it, too," she commented.



Ms. Partawmina Hashemee (left).

Her own experience and her years of toiling have taught her that women's freedom goes "beyond the burqa". "The burqa is not the whole issue," said Ms. Hashemee. "We need security, we need education, but it has to be quality education. We have to teach men, too. These efforts have to come from the community in order to be accepted. We earn villagers' trust, and therefore we are successful in our work."

Ms. Hashemee has been the Director of the Afghan Women's Resource Center since 1996, and a member of its advisory board since it was founded in 1989. The Center provides literacy classes, health care and computer

training, poultry farming projects and other skills-building programmes for Afghan refugee and returnee women in Pakistan and Afghanistan. These programmes directly improve the livelihood and health of displaced women and their families. At the same time they empower women to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, within their families, their communities and beyond.

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Although Ms. Hashemee believes that her country deserves world attention, she argues that the international community must not forget the Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries. Many have chosen not to return to Afghanistan because of insecurity and a lack of access to social services, shelter or jobs. “We should continue working for their empowerment and equip them with some skills here in Pakistan, so that when they return to Afghanistan, they will be ready to sustain their lives,” she suggested.

As an Afghan woman heading a local non-governmental organization, Ms. Hashemee continues to show courage in the face of grave danger in order to help other Afghan refugee women. “We are careful. We don’t raise our voices. We are keeping a low profile. When I travel now, I fear. It’s a risk, but what can I do? Women are taking great risks to work for women, but they are still working. They should be encouraged more,” said a determined Ms. Hashemee.

The Center continues to press for inclusion of women in voting campaigns. It is urging the United Nations and governments to include refugees in their registration programmes, and their resource centre outside Kabul has mobilized more than 500 women from remote villages to register to vote in federal elections. By working in partnership with groups such as the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, the Center lobbies policy makers for



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better protection mechanisms for refugee, returnee and internally displaced women and girls. They aim to investigate, document and bring attention to the problem areas, such as child labour, lack of access to education, and gender-based violence, including forced marriage.

There are many ways in which the work of the Center and the Women’s Commission dovetail with UN Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. The resolution recommends measures that ensure protection and respect for the rights of women and girls during post-conflict repatriation, resettlement and reintegration. It calls for special attention to women’s rights and needs in relation to the design of electoral systems and humanitarian operations, and for special measures to protect women from gender-based violence.

As one who deeply understands the fear and insecurity of life as a refugee, and the discrimination and rights abuse that women and girls have suffered, Ms. Hashemee is building on her own experiences to improve the lives of Afghan women.