

Women's View on Women's Employment: The Case of Afghan Migrants in Mashad/Iran

INTRODUCTION

Women are an integral part of every society. Afghan women played historically a key role in family economics, but their economic roles were hidden within family. Their roles have changed over time due to both internal and external influences. As an overview, I will discuss from a historical perspective the cultural and legal aspects of the roles and status of Afghan women and how they have changed along with the country's political and social changes. In the second part, I will discuss the findings of the study of Afghan migrant women's view on being employed.

The Hidden History of Women's Role in Afghanistan

In 1979, 85 percent of Afghan people lived in the countryside. Women throughout rural Afghanistan have suffered intense domination and exploitation. Peasant women live with the burden of never ending work: carrying water, working crops, grinding grain to flour, turning milk to yogurt, embroidery, gathering fuel, washing, child rearing. Women are rarely paid for their work, and the tiny wages paid for jobs like carpet weaving are generally handed over to the men.

A way from village life, female roles in Afghanistan started to change after 1920, when king Amanullah tried to impose a western style "modernism". Although statistics indicate that by 1978 women were joining the workforce in increasing numbers, only about eight percent of the female population received an income. Most of these women lived in urban centers, and the majority was professionals, technicians and administrators employed by the government which continued its strong support. A majority worked in health and education, the two sectors considered most appropriate for women as they are extensions of traditional women's roles. Others worked in the police, the army, and with the airlines; in government textile, ceramic, food processing and prefab construction factories. A few worked in private industry; a few were self-employed.

In 1979 the troops of Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The bloody Soviet counterinsurgency caused tremendous suffering. Hundreds of thousand of women were widowed. Millions of people were crowded into desperate migrant camps. During more than 20 years of war, Afghan women were challenging with their new inconvenience situation. In absence of their husbands- because of participating in war or escaping from war- most of women had to carry double burden of job and home.

Breadwinner Women

Afghan society is consistent in its attitude towards the underlying principles of gender. In Afghanistan, as many other societies, the role of breadwinner is a source of masculine identity and status within the household (Hood far 2004).

In their new condition in Iran which male members of family are banned in having a job, they try to work illegally with much low wages. In such a situation women are assumed to be responsible for the family. This study indicates that 51 percent of women have paid work. Only 7 percent of them work out of home, and the rest place work inside their home. That is to say women play two parallel roles together, housekeeping and breadwinning.

Table 1. Women's Economic Position (%)

Work out of home	7
Work inside home	44
Don't have paid work	49
N	503

Setting

To explore the attitude of Afghan women towards women's employment this study was carried out in the city of Mashad. The city is in the east north of the country near to the Afghanistan's borders. This is a large urban center with a concentrated number of migrants counted by 239522 people (BAFIA, 2003). Mashad is the second concentrated migrant city in Iran after Tehran.

Sample

The survey was carried out in the month of March 2004. According to information derived from BAFIA report 2003 a total of 47904 Afghan households reside in Mashad. A representative sample of 503 women of all married was interviewed. For purpose of this project a certain sampling procedure was applied. Since Afghans are scattered in the city, in the first stage the seven most concentrated areas were recognized. In the second stage a list containing all Afghan families in the area was prepared by asking door by door. Regarding the proportion of each area the sample was selected through systematic random sampling. 30 samples were selected from non- concentrated areas.

Procedure

Data were collected through interview by 5 trained Afghan interviewers. A pilot study of 50 convenient cases was carried out to examine the questionnaire. Female interviewers visited homes and after explaining the general purpose of the survey, interviewed the sample women. Sampled women were reassured that the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous.

DISCUSSION

The need for women's paid work has changed the traditional roles of many Afghan women in Iran. Half of migrant women contribute to providing for their families. Regarding their low level of education, skill in handicrafts, responsibility for house, existence of supporting values, as well as state's restriction on carrying a formal job for migrants, women are compelled to place work into their home. Refer to more than 50 percent agreement with the second¹ and fourth² statements, it seems that by new condition, women are challenging with traditional view on their roles. However, majority of women believe that their main role is housekeeping, and if they cannot manage, it is better for them not to work out side home. By increasing in education, the attitude of women towards women's employment become more positive, but unexpectedly duration of migration does not influence it. That is to say, for Afghan women work is exclusively an economic requirement, neither the means for improvement of their social status nor the way to ease their traditional obligations.

¹ . Women should have paid job for economic self- reliance from their husbands.

² . Men usually prevent their wives to work out of home, while most of women like to do so.