

A Refugee's Point of View: Sharing the Stories of Pakistan

by Caroline Brennan

The information that reaches the American public to describe the people and happenings in Pakistan is often far removed from the reality. In villages and towns — where a majority of the population lives — people are usually not involved in conflict, but are working collaboratively and innovatively to rebuild their country. More than 3 million of them, a population about the size of Chicago, are refugees from Afghanistan and have lived across the border from their homeland in desperate conditions for decades.

In March 2007, as Americans across the country support Operation Rice Bowl — CRS' Lenten program to foster understanding between American communities and those who struggle with hunger and poverty around the world — four CRS staff will visit from Pakistan to meet with Americans and share their stories.



Quhramaan is a former Afghan refugee living in Pakistan and working with CRS to help others.

One of these speakers, Quhramaan (pronounced *Ka-ra-mahn*), is a former Afghan refugee who has been living in Pakistan since the age of 8. Today, Quhramaan works with CRS Pakistan supporting women in education, business and leadership development. Following are excerpts from a conversation about her experiences and what she hopes to accomplish during her trip to the United States.

When did you first arrive in Pakistan, and how was your life different then?

Quhramaan: We arrived in Pakistan in December 1990. I was 8 years old then. Life was very different in Pakistan; there had been war in Afghanistan. I never knew that we would be leaving Afghanistan — we did it suddenly. I didn't know until the day of our coming to Pakistan. It was like my school, my friends and everything I was attached to were snatched from me.

I continued to go regularly to school for eight more months in Pakistan. After that, I had to study at home — for four years I didn't go to school, but studied at home and appeared at school only for exams. I returned

for high-school classes, but felt the environment was very different, and difficult for adjusting to the language and methods.

Life in Afghanistan was not peaceful at all: people had a fear of losing their lives and property all the time. [In Pakistan at the time], there was no definite fear or reason to lose lives or property. Our countries are quite similar culturally, so there had been no problem of living in our own culture or practicing our religion.

Conditions for my parents were not the same as for me. I took little time to get adjusted, as did my other brothers and sisters, but my parents were separated from their social and professional lives. They could not find work in Pakistan.

In your experience as an Afghan refugee in Pakistan, what most would you like people around the world to understand?

Quhramaan: Refugees live as an isolated community all around the world. People need to understand the circumstances a refugee has been through — being in a country of war, finding refuge and then living as a refugee in another country. They always need special care and attention, which is difficult to get. More concentration to improve their economic condition is needed so they have equal rights to education and health facilities. They need regular counseling. And, this should not be the responsibility only of international organizations, but also of

governments all over the world. The world should consider refugees as normal human beings and realize the change in personality one goes through being in that situation.

What events inspired you to take the career and scholarly path you have chosen?



Photo by Jim Stipe for CRS

Afghan refugee Shahzaro came to a CRS Community Development Center in Pakistan to learn weaving and business skills.

Quhramaan: Refugees always endure more than a person who lives in his own place. I had experienced watching and sensing terror and war since my childhood, and I always wanted to do something which can decrease the effect of war on people, though I cannot stop that at all.

[I wanted] to get as high an education as possible and serve my country and people. I was a natural sciences student initially, but was not feeling that I could do as much with this profession as I wanted to. The events of 2001 forced me to help Afghan refugees in Pakistan in whatever capacity I could. I didn't have any experience, but I had deep feelings for my country and people and thus started working as a humanitarian worker.

Along with my career, I wanted to continue my higher studies, so I completed my graduation the same year and joined the MBA program (with human resources and economics as a main focus) at university. The reason for joining the MBA program was that I could see myself someday in a bigger position to serve a country and people on a large scale. Every step of my own experiences motivated me to do more.

I knew I could help people, but I wanted to bring a sustainable change in lives for which I had to be more qualified professionally. I presently am earning my PhD in management and economics — I chose the field, again, based on my experiences. I hope I can perform better for the development of societies as a PhD scholar and will be able to make decisions to hopefully eliminate the root causes of problems.

What are you most looking forward to about your visit to the United States?

Quhramaan: I am really keen to hear directly from people in the United States [regarding] what they think about women in Pakistan and Afghanistan and what they think about refugees living in Pakistan. I am really interested to talk with them about how refugees living in Pakistan are not terrorists — they are normal human beings in need of help — and that communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan don't have bad feelings toward American citizens. They are always thankful for assistance and support in hard times. I want to deliver thanks on behalf of refugee communities in Pakistan for their support.

Do you have any other thoughts you would like to share with those who support programs for the people of both Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Quhramaan: I really consider all those people to be blessed by God, as they have the opportunity to decide somewhat the fate of poor and needy people in this part of the world. I would like to request them to have special consideration for refugees living in Pakistan. They really need our help.

Caroline Brennan is South Asia regional information officer for Catholic Relief Services. She has reported on CRS activities for the Pakistan earthquake, the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Darfur crisis, and post-war development in Democratic Republic of the Congo and Afghanistan, among others. Caroline is based in New Delhi, India.