

An aerial photograph of a large, ornate mosque with multiple blue domes and minarets. The building is surrounded by a paved courtyard with some people walking. In the background, there are residential buildings and trees. The text 'Serving Afghan Refugees' is overlaid in white serif font across the center of the image.

Serving Afghan Refugees

A QUICK GUIDE OF COMMON
QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Introduction:

This guide is written in short question and answer form by main categories. It is by no means comprehensive. Feel free to jump around to those most relevant to you. (We definitely suggest you read those you don't immediately know the answer to.)

Why this guide?

This guide is our attempt to build a simple toolbox that briefly brings you up to speed on some very practical things regarding how to respond to Afghan refugees, wherever you may find them. We're trying to focus on simplicity and brevity (knowing time for you to prepare yourself and your peers is short, as Afghans begin to arrive at your local airport). We're also trying to focus on the most practical tools, needed information and common mistakes we've made in the past, in hopes you can sidestep them.

Who are we?

This guide is being put together in collaboration between the RAP Network (pastunes.org) and Reflejo (reflejo.org). We're two Latin American organizations that together have been focused for the last several years on training and sending missionaries to serve Pashtuns (one of the largest unreached people groups in Afghanistan). This particular resource is receiving input from an Afghan believer, a missionary that lived in Afghanistan, and three missionaries who have been serving Afghan refugees in the United States.



Which are the different Afghan tribes/groups?



Afghanistan has several different people groups; most of these consist of several tribes. The Pashtuns comprise the largest group. They are more fundamentalist than other groups in their adherence to Sunni Islam. Only a very small portion of all Pashtuns are Taliban members, though many consider themselves Taliban sympathizers.

Other significant groups include Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks. Other smaller groups include Turkmen, Pashayi, and Nuristanis, among others. We don't recommend you initially ask an Afghan which ethnic group they belong to. In some cases their identity may be tied to their nationality more than to an ethnic group. They may want to present a unified Afghanistan to honor their country, so this question may be strange or uncomfortable for them. You could ask which language they speak at home if you'd like to narrow it down some.



What languages are spoken by which groups?

Dari and Pashto are the official languages of Afghanistan. Dari is the trade language (a form of Persian) and is spoken by about 78% of Afghans. Pashto is spoken by Pashtuns, but many Pashtuns (particularly men) also know Dari. Uzbek is spoken by about 10% of Afghans. Both Dari and Pashto have several dialects, which may be ethnic or regional.

What's the religious make-up of Afghans?

Afghans are almost exclusively Muslim. A very small underground Christian community comprises less than .03% of the population. Among Muslims, there is a Sunni majority (most ethnic groups) and a Shia minority (Hazaras and people from Herat) which creates tension between these groups.



Do different groups get along?

Not always. This varies significantly among groups and individuals. There is tension between Shia Hazaras and Sunni groups, particularly the Pashtuns. Most other ethnic groups consider Pashtuns to be more “hardcore” in their beliefs and zeal toward Islam. Historically, Afghan government leadership has been Pashtun, which fuels the ethnic tension as well.

How are their interactions affected by current events?

Currently, the country is divided politically between Taliban sympathizers (mostly Pashtuns, although not all Pashtuns fall into this category) and those opposed to the Taliban.

Relationships are strained, particularly between Taliban sympathizers and those from the Panjshir region or those supportive of the former Northern Alliance (an Afghan group currently in opposing the Taliban).

Many refugees are not supportive of the new Taliban regime. Furthermore, Afghan expatriates, who may have left previously but have family members back in Afghanistan, may be very emotionally invested in the state of their nation and relatives.



What's the current political climate in Afghanistan?



Should Americans avoid talking to refugees about politics?



The Taliban are trying to establish a legitimate government, but they are currently not recognized by the UN. The governments of Qatar and Turkey are actively assisting the new Taliban government, known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. With the current attention Afghanistan is getting, it's probably unrealistic to avoid political conversation with Afghans. But it's probably unwise to get into conversations about what the US did or didn't do in Afghanistan, how the pull-out was carried out, etc.



How should you behave with the opposite gender?

Male-female interactions are considerably different in Afghan culture than in the US. Modesty is extremely important. This is primarily maintained by avoiding most non-relative male-female interaction. This means men and women shouldn't be alone in a room together, seek out conversation with one another, or have any sort of physical contact.



Women are responsible for maintaining a modest demeanor. Deviating from established standards may be interpreted as seduction, sexual availability or lewdness. This modest demeanor includes not looking at men directly in the eyes, and no hugging or other physical contact at any time with men (including when greeting one another).



Modesty in clothing for women generally means loose-fitting clothing which covers as much skin as possible (long sleeves, no cleavage shown, long dresses, etc.). Women visiting an Afghan home should dress in a modest fashion without trying to appear Afghan.

How should you behave with the opposite gender?

(continued)

If a man has to interact with an Afghan woman, it's best to keep conversation light and polite, and to avoid all physical contact. This will make you seem safe and trustworthy to the community.

These rules don't apply as much to young children, but begin to become relevant as they hit puberty.

It may be helpful for you to show pictures of your relatives, particularly of your parents, siblings and children. (But as a man, you should not show an Afghan man pictures of your wife. A wife is someone a husband wants to protect--this is largely done by hiding her from other men as much as possible.) Showing pictures of your family will put Afghans at ease as they'll see you're a family man and not wanting to chase after one of their women.

As Afghans become Christians or as they become Westernized, some may relax these gender norms to varying degrees. You'll need to pay attention and ask a lot of cultural questions to find out what's appropriate.



What other cultural insights are important?



Afghans follow Islamic traditions regarding food. They can only consume “halal” or “permissible” foods. Ham, sausage, bacon, pork, or lard (any type of pork) is forbidden. Drinking alcohol is also not permissible. Fish can be eaten, but not shellfish such as crab, lobster, shrimp, oysters, etc.



Many processed foods in America are not considered halal food. Those that contain gelatin, emulsifiers, enzymes, or questionable flavors are not allowed because the ingredients may be prohibited.

As you collect food for your refugees, make sure it aligns with halal standards. Recommended foods with which they will have no problem include fresh produce, basmati rice, lentils, canned tomatoes, vegetable oil and dried fruits and nuts. This may also be important for cosmetics, skin products, vitamins and pharmaceuticals since some contain ingredients like pork gelatin.

What other cultural insights are important? (continued)

If you invite them to eat at your home, they will likely be hesitant. We recommend you let them know you're familiar with halal restrictions, and ask them if they eat halal food (note even if they don't they'll probably all say yes as they get to know you to present themselves as good Muslims). If so, adjust accordingly by purchasing meat at a halal retailer. You could show them the labels on packaged or processed foods so they can see what they contain. Another option is to ask them to bring the meat and you prepare sides. If they see you following these guidelines, they'll feel more at ease eating with you and thus will probably visit again. Keep halal restrictions in mind as well if you'd like to take your Afghan friends out to a restaurant. Christian Afghans may or may not follow halal restrictions.



What are meals in an Afghan home like?

As you arrive at an Afghan home, you should take your shoes off at the door unless they tell you not to. As a guest, you are a welcome gift from Allah to the family and thus they will try to respect and honor you with their generosity. The family will provide the best they have and make sure that you eat and drink plenty during your visit.

Always receive tea/food/gifts/etc. with your right hand. The left hand is considered unclean since it is used for unclean tasks (i.e. using the bathroom). The same goes for eating and drinking. Always use your right hand.

Meals are not normally done in a dining room setting but generally a tablecloth will be placed on the floor of the living room and people will sit around it. You may be directed to a specific spot on the floor, as Afghans consider different spots to convey varying degrees of status, and as a guest, you are king in their home. The most honorable spot is furthest from the door; you begin working your way down on both sides all the way to the door where the women or children may sit.



What are meals in an Afghan home like? (continued)

Make sure to honor your hosts. One way to do this is to eat and drink what was served to you. If you're given a full plate of food, you need to at least almost finish it. This shows the hostess that you enjoyed the food. If you completely finish the plate of food, your hosts WILL give you another large serving, even if you ask for "just a little."

If you are full and don't want any more food, put your hands over your plate when the host tries to serve you more food. These same principles apply to tea. Leave your tea almost gone to show your hostess that you enjoyed it. If you finish the tea and don't want more, cup your right hand over the teacup.

If you have allergies and your hostess serves you something you cannot eat, it is okay to say that you cannot eat/drink it. They are understanding of this, and because they value hospitality, they usually will find something else to serve you.

As Afghan guests visit your home for a meal, if you have the possibility of making a similar set up (on a living room floor for example), that may make them feel more at ease. Don't feel a need to assign seats but maybe make sure that if someone from your family needs to sit next to someone from theirs, that they are from the same gender.

How should you greet an Afghan?

If you're greeting someone from the opposite gender, simply put your right hand on top of your heart, and slightly nod as if bowing.

If you're a woman greeting another woman or a man greeting another man, greeting with three kisses is customary, beginning with the left side and alternating. If as a guy you're not comfortable with this, feel free to shake hands or hug the other man. It's important during greetings to ask a lot of questions about their relatives, health, work, etc. This is just etiquette (like when we say "how are you?" in passing) and doesn't require an answer during the greeting. As they ask you questions during a greeting, an answer is not expected. You can ask again during your visit at another point and then an answer will be given.



How are new refugees different from those who have been away from Afghanistan for a long time?

New refugees who have just fled their home are probably still very traumatized and insecure/uncomfortable as they sort out this new context. They feel very vulnerable and will be very open to friendly people. More established refugees may not feel as vulnerable and by the same token may not be as open to new relationships.

Generally, new refugees will more strictly adhere to Muslim traditions and mores, while more established refugees might be more adapted to local culture and customs. Newer refugees may not know your local language. (This depends on whether they were translators.)

How should you ask/answer about family members of Afghans stuck in Afghanistan?

Many are not only grieving their own journeys of fleeing their country and homes, but also have relatives and friends who haven't yet made it out, about whom they are very concerned. Don't feel like you have to avoid this topic if they bring it up. Try to be a safe person for them to communicate these emotions to.

Asking if they have families or friends back home and hearing their stories is a way of honoring them. Many Afghans are very appreciative when Christians say they're praying for their nation and relatives. If you want to take an extra step, which is extremely welcome by mostly all Afghans, offer to pray on the spot with them for their relatives. Feel free to pray in the name of Jesus, knowing that while they don't consider him to be the Son of God, they do believe Him to be a significant prophet and will treat Him with respect and high esteem. (Be aware that if you pray in the name of 'Jesus the Son of God' they may find this offensive. This may be a point of conflict early on in the relationship which may inhibit you going deeper.)



What do you recommend if they ask you for help getting someone else out?



Empathize with their plight. Be honest and frank about your capacity or lack thereof to help them. Do not agree to any illegal ventures but, if able, be willing to help those who have already arrived in your context. Feel free to say you're unable to help people leave Afghanistan, but if they arrive where you are, you will try to help within your capacity. Be specific as to what that means, so as to not create any misunderstanding or excessive expectations.

How soon and how should you start spiritual conversations?

Take your time and focus primarily on developing solid relationships. Even if Afghan refugees are simply passing through your location for a short period, having a positive impression of Christians may open doors for others in their permanent residence to build upon. Being confrontational or pushy about your beliefs will turn them away from you and other Christians.

Normally, they will ask about your beliefs relatively quickly. If they do so, feel free to share what you believe, and your testimony, without any expectation from them to believe the same or come to a conversion. Avoid speaking negatively of Islam, Muhammad, Muslims, the Qur'an, or anything else related, as they may take this as confrontational or a personal attack and become less open to going deeper with you down the road.

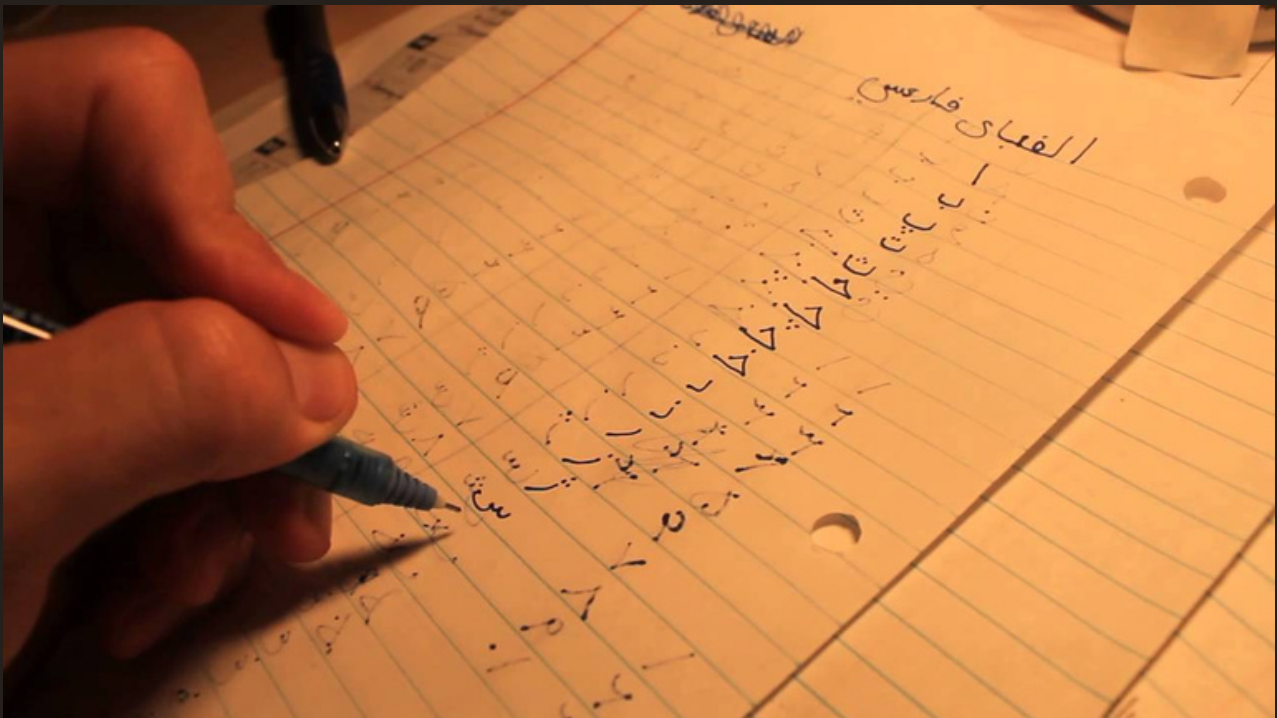
How should you respond to spiritual openness?



If someone shows signs of being spiritually open, they will be most open in private conversations. They will rarely show openness to Christianity in front of other Muslims. If you begin studying the Word with someone, make sure you keep this private from the rest of the Afghan community, and put them at ease that they can determine if and when they share their newfound interest with others. Furthermore, don't try to bring strangers, particularly from different ethnic groups, together into a Bible study with them since they will very quickly shut down out of lack of trust. If you make this mistake, you will lose credibility as a safe person.

Should you attempt to learn their language?

Yes, even if it's simply a few words, greetings or phrases. This will be VERY welcome, endear you to them, and give them much needed comfort in a very stressful season. The best way to do so as you begin relationships, asking them names of things or basic phrases like 'please,' 'thank you' or other greetings. You may get different answers from Dari and Pashto speakers as well as distinctives by dialect.



How should you respond to gossip in conversations?

For Afghans, particularly women, gossip is a main form of entertainment. This however, leads them to mistrust each other. In many cases they may ask you not to share things (ranging from not keeping halal restrictions to spiritual openness) with others in the Afghan community. For you to be considered a safe person in the community, you must take a very intentional stance to avoid participating in any gossip within the community. If someone tries to share gossip with you, it's important to find a response that's not directly shameful to the speaker while communicating that you're not interested in talking about others in the community.



What are some good practices in opening up relationships?

Be a learner of their culture and a safe place for them to grieve, process, and learn about their new context. Initially the goal will be to serve them and meet practical needs. As these are met, a very significant remaining need will be for friends. If you have limited time to serve Afghans in your community, we recommend you “adopt” one or two families and go deep with them (visiting frequently, which for them may mean multiple times a week as your schedule allows) rather than spread yourself too thin.



Is it a good idea to take an Afghan to an American church?

Certain aspects of church life may seem shocking to an Afghan (believer or otherwise). Things like men and women sitting together, the way people may dress as church (too casual or not modest enough) or casual treatment to a physical Bible. Muslims will always carry their holy books with great care, sometimes wrapped in cloth or a container, and keep them higher than their heart's level as they carry them.

Seeing a Bible placed on the floor, written on or highlighted, worn out, or not treated as delicately as they are accustomed will lead them to believe we don't hold the Bible in high regard. Other issues like pork or beer at a church potluck, etc. may make welcoming Afghans into a church community complex.

If culturally adjusting to accommodate Afghans for your church is complicated (as it is for most), we recommend inviting Afghans into small groups or private Discovery Bible Studies.



More on Afghanistan's history and context

Afghanistan was established as a country in 1919, once the "Durand Line" (the British imposed border between Afghanistan and Pakistan) was established. This separation of Afghanistan and Pakistan was created so that Afghanistan, as an independent nation, would be a buffer in the colonization from Russia at the North and Britain in the South (India-Pakistan).

Afghanistan remained a kingdom until 1973 when the last king, who had ruled for 43 years, was deposed by his cousin. It then became a republic. The king's cousin ruled for six years as the first president. Then the communist regime took over, with the help of the Russian army. This began a long period of civil war where the mujahedeen (with the help of America) began to push Russian forces out of the nation. Once successful, the mujahedeen pushed for a theocracy (while the American forces wanted a democracy). This led to further conflict. Eventually the mujahedeen were replaced by the Taliban. There has been military conflict with American forces for the last twenty years.

EVANGELISTIC RESOURCES

- **Pashto Radio (pashtoradio.org)** - Afghan stations, music, programs, and family teachings.
- **Afghan Media Centre (afghanmediacentre.org)** - Shop to order Pashto books and Christian materials in Afghan languages.
- **Hope 4 Afghans (hope4afghans.com)** - TV channels, Radios, music, Afghan writing, testimonials and much more material.
- **Juwandun (juwandun.com)** - Site to find short videos of Pashtun stories.
- **Afghan Bibles (afghanbibles.org)** - Web site to read, listen and download scriptures in Afghan languages.
- **Pashto TV (pashtotv.com)** - Christian Videos of different types of Pashtuns.
- **Pashto Zeray (pashtozeray.org)** - Pastun writing, classic radio programs, music and testimonials.
- **Afghan Radio (afghanradio.org)** - Afghan and Pashtun Radio Programs.



APPENDIX

I. WORK

II. SCHOOL

III. HEALTHCARE

IV. SAFETY

V. ROLES OF WOMEN AND MEN

VI. YOUTH

The following additional information was not written by us but was considered relevant to some contexts.



I. WORK

The types of job opportunities available to refugees, especially those with limited English language skills, often mean that families need the income from two working adults in order to meet basic needs. Some Afghan family members, especially husbands or fathers, may be resistant to having women work outside the home in an unfamiliar environment. Islam stresses the role of the husband as the provider for the family, and Muslim men may regard the need for the wife to work as an embarrassment, although this is not always the case.

Muslim women may be uncomfortable with the idea of interacting on a regular basis with strangers, particularly with men who are not family members. These women may be ill at ease with jobs that require frequent contact with the public and may express the desire to stay at home. These feelings aren't necessarily from religious considerations; they also grow out of a complex blend of cultural traditions, the desire to be protective of women in the family, and the insecurities that remain from being refugees who have faced serious dangers.

Some families may be willing to accept the idea of the wife or daughters working outside the home, as long as they do not have to travel too far alone to go to work or interact with the public a great deal.

One solution may be to secure jobs on two different shifts so that a husband and wife can both care for their children at home. Employment that allows women to work from home may be another option. Some women may want to work but may initially find it very difficult to leave their children in day care with strangers. If these women worked in Afghanistan, family members probably helped to take care of the children. In such cases, finding a day care provider of the same religion and/or ethnicity may make the transition easier for the woman.

There will be some Afghan women who are accustomed to working outside the home and are comfortable doing so. These women do not face the same challenges as women who have little experience in the public sector when it comes to employment.



Some Afghan men may have difficulty with the fact that, in many workplaces, women are supervisors or hold other positions of authority. This isn't an issue for all Muslim men. The question can be raised with each refugee individually, in order to determine whether it's a consideration in helping the person find employment.

One solution if a man isn't comfortable working under a woman is to find him a job where he'll report to another man, but women are also present in supervisory positions. This gives the man an opportunity to observe and become more comfortable with the types of male-female interactions that characterize the American workplace before a situation arises in which he must handle such interactions directly himself.

Muslims have the right to reasonable religious accommodation in the workplace. This may include wearing hijab (head covering for women), having a beard, being able to pray on the job, and attending Friday prayers. Reasonable accommodation varies from job to job. You can help to ensure a good match between refugee and job opportunity by interviewing each refugee to determine which observances are essential to that person, which the refugee is willing to adapt, and which the refugee is willing to forgo. You can help these Afghans to understand the limits of reasonable accommodation and the ways in which they may need to adjust their own expectations in order to succeed in the American workplace.

When it comes to finding appropriate job settings, the presence of pork and alcohol is a consideration. Some Muslims may not be comfortable working in a restaurant that also has a bar. An observant Muslim working in food service may feel uncomfortable having to serve or touch pork products. For some, the option to wear rubber gloves while preparing the food (for example, putting pork toppings on a pizza) is acceptable. For others, any contact with pork is unacceptable.

Muslims who observe the practice of praying five times each day will need to take brief breaks from work at the proper times and have a private space where they can go to pray. In a regular 9-to-5 workday, this will only be necessary for the noon and late afternoon prayers. Not all Muslims pray five times a day; some Muslims who observe the practice of praying five times each day will need to take brief breaks from work at the proper times and have a private space where they can go to pray.



Ritual cleansing with water is performed before each prayer time. You can help make the refugees aware that they need to perform this cleansing without leaving a great deal of water around the sink in the restroom, and to help them understand that the practice of washing feet in the sink may be offensive to members of other cultural groups. You can encourage them to bring a small pitcher, a bowl, and a towel to work to use in ritual cleansing.

Friday is the holy day for Muslims. Some employers allow flexible time so that Muslim employees can leave early on Friday or leave for an extended period on Friday in order to participate in communal prayers at the mosque. Another accommodation is for a Muslim employee to work on Saturday or Sunday and have Friday off for prayers.

It can be difficult for Muslims to be able to celebrate the yearly holy days when working because these days fall at different times each year and rarely coincide with the holy days of other religions or with secular holidays. With enough notice and flexibility, employers have been known to work out schedules where Muslim employees have their holy days off and then cover for other employees on the holy days of other religions.



II. SCHOOL

Work with the local school system to inform them when Islamic holy days take place. Many teachers acknowledge holy days observed by children in their classes and use them as opportunities to teach about religion and culture.

Teachers are generally willing to accommodate the legitimate needs of children in their classes. As far ahead of time as possible, ask the school to avoid scheduling major exams on holy days, or to allow observant Muslim children to take them at an alternate time. Call the school to let teachers and administrators know that the child will be absent in order to celebrate these holy days.

Concerns about modesty may extend to gym class. If a Muslim girl feels uncomfortable in gym uniforms with short sleeves and short pants, ask if she may wear a long sleeved t-shirt and long sweatpants instead of or under the required uniform.



III. HEALTHCARE

When it comes to health care, Afghan women may prefer female health care providers. Female interpreters would be best. If a female interpreter is not available, and if there is concern that the female patient is not responsive because she is uncomfortable with a male interpreter, an alternative would be for the interpreter not to be visible to the patient or to interpret by telephone or speaker phone.

Some Afghans may not feel comfortable disclosing detailed information about themselves and their families to strangers. They may try to give as little information as possible, and this may make proper initial diagnosis difficult. Try to find culturally sensitive physicians in these situations. Muslim physicians are widely available in most US cities.



IV. SAFETY

Refugees' language constraints and lack of knowledge of American culture—especially in low-rent neighborhoods—may limit their ability to assess and mitigate risks. They may be exposed to physical and social dangers, depending on where they live. If they've had negative experiences with the authorities in Afghanistan, they may refuse to avail themselves of the services of the police. They may be poor advocates for themselves and their children and be unable to seek help from school officials or other authorities to resolve dangerous situations. Be on the lookout for this and don't assume that there are not problems if they tell you there aren't.



V. ROLES OF WOMEN AND MEN

Some Islamic countries have laws that limit active roles for women in the public sector. Most Muslim families are patriarchal, with males in the households holding positions of authority. Some Muslims interpret their religion as requiring the submission of women.

Refugee women often lack the traditional supports they have relied on from their family of origin, in-laws, or friends and neighbors. Reluctance to rely on non-relatives or professional counselors and social workers can be a barrier to be overcome during the first few years of resettlement.

Whether they have jobs or not, and even when their husbands are not employed, women are expected to be the homemakers, to take responsibility for the children's behavior, and to develop the children's religious and cultural knowledge. They also have to learn about parental responsibilities such as participating in PTA, advocating for children who may be underachieving at school, and guiding children as they face social risks quite different from those the parents knew in their home countries. This combination of responsibilities can be daunting and exhausting for Muslim women refugees. Be sensitive to this and provide emotional support as you can.

Some Muslim men are active participants in the education of their children and in certain household responsibilities, such as grocery shopping, while others may not have been socialized to take a share of the burdens of household chores and the responsibilities for day-to-day care of children.



VI. YOUTH

Refugee young people have three significant non-material needs: identity, language, and religion. A Muslim refugee child must negotiate at least four sets of values: 1) his or her family's culture, 2) U.S. cultural norms as learned within the context of the education system, 3) the culture communicated by peers and the mass media, and 4) the teachings of Islam.

Parents are often not in the best situation to help their children through this bewildering process, because they may be busy focusing on survival issues and may have their own losses to deal with and adjustments to make.

It's important that you avoid undermining family cohesion—and the family's trust in you—by never suggesting to the youth that the family adults are wrong about constraints on women or other customs.

Refugee children may experience prejudice or hostility at school, largely because they're foreign-born, are refugees, have a different appearance, and may have language constraints. For Muslim minors, the negative public stereotypes about Muslims exacerbate these causes. The prejudice or hostility can be manifested as cruel humor, as shunning, as hazing, or in outright physical abuse. Afghan children who experience prejudice and hostility may come to feel inferior and ashamed or may become angry and defensive. Be on the lookout for this and support parents in responding to such incidents as they arise. Encourage family members to acknowledge the hurt and the social wrongness, while helping the child feel worthwhile and important.

Afghan children need time to heal as they try to cope with the traumas they've experienced in their home country, during their perilous journeys, and in the strange US. They need to overcome the effects of these traumas in order to develop a bicultural identity and a positive sense of who they are. All of this takes time, negotiation, and guidance.





REFLEJO

WWW.REFLEJO.ORG