



## Integration Challenges and Social Adaptation of Afghan Refugees Living in Pakistan

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### Abstract

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, shaped by their diverse backgrounds and Afghanistan's prolonged sociopolitical instability. The research aims to understand how the refugees adapt to life in Pakistan. Through interviews, we explore their thoughts on living conditions, social interactions, discrimination, language issues, job challenges, and social equality. The study explores social problems, educational obstacles, investigates financial struggles and language difficulties while analyzing how these factors affect the well-being and assimilation of Afghan refugees into Pakistani society. Data was collected through interviews and demographic questionnaires, while adhering to strict ethical guidelines. The results, found through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), highlight important themes about how Afghan refugees integrate and adapt in Pakistan. Despite challenges such as participant engagement and language issues, this study provides meaningful insights and emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive approach to refugee research. It highlights the immediate need to improve the living conditions for Afghan refugees and provides a solid foundation for future investigations in this significant area.

### Introduction

Afghanistan a sparkling jewel, a country with one of the finest cultures and natural resources of minerals, have been torn apart by the tussle between the superpowers of the world that have chosen Afghanistan as a hotspot to assert their dominance over each other. The invasion of the Soviet Union in 1979, the ethnic breakouts among different militant groups and proxies, the outrageous US war crimes after the 9/11 have forced millions of Afghans to flee their own country leaving behind their homes and valuables with a gloomy uncertainty hanging over their future. Afghans are the world's third-largest refugee population after Palestinians and Syrians since 2014 (Mielke et al., 2021). If we look at Pakistan, it has been a home to 3 million Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion (Ghufran, 2006), these refugees belong to diverse ethnicities, entry times into Pakistan, religion, living in or out of camp, and employment. The ethnicity comprises mostly of the Pashtuns that constitute more than 85% of the population while there are a small number of Hazara, Baloch and Tajik ethnicities as well (Chirani, 2022). The major reasons for opting to stay in Pakistan for the Afghan refugees include the unsafe and life threatening situation in Afghanistan, and the availability of health facilities along with education and employment opportunities in Pakistan (Mielke & Etzold, 2022). Settling into Pakistan has been quite difficult for these Afghan refugees as the authorities in Pakistan have implemented strict policies that hinder the travel

opportunities and accusation of visas for the Afghan nationals. Research reveals that numerous Afghans with low skills, low incomes, and limited education face challenges in advancing socially, leading to a noticeable decrease in social cohesion between Afghan refugees and the host Pakistani society (Mielke et al., 2021). Pakistan is already facing a dearth of natural resources and with its population booming around 230 million; the country is facing high rates of unemployment, electricity, fuel, and water shortage. A large number of unskilled workers pose a burden on the already fragile economy, the arrival of refugees from Afghanistan worsened the situation and they are in a direct competition with the local workers for the accusation of these limited resources and opportunities to earn a livelihood. This has resulted in a rift and created a distance between the locals and Afghan refugees especially in the Balochistan and KPK provinces that host a majority of the refugees and also feel the refugees pose a threat to their ethnic majority. According to Aslam (2001), refugees provide a cheap source of labor for the contractors that make them a preferable choice. The refugees face backlash from the authorities as they blame them for evading taxes, smuggling drugs into the territory, introducing the Kalashnikov culture and posing a threat to national security as the assistants to the terrorist activities that continue to pose a threat to the national security. Pakistan had blamed Afghanistan following the tragic attack on the Army School in Peshawar back in late 2014, which really affected the status and image of the Afghani refugees living in Pakistan (Mielke & Etzold, 2022). Especially after the implementation of the National Action Plan, the situation became extremely challenging for the illegal refugees. According to a report by Refugees International around 1.2 million refugees are registered while a massive 2.2 million people remain unregistered and without any legal status in the country particularly due to lack of official recognition, while more than 60 million refugees fled to Pakistan after the Taliban came to power back in 2021 (Khan & Cone, 2023). The state of human rights remains abysmal in Afghanistan especially for women and minorities who face the wrath of the Taliban that have blocked their work opportunities, rights for education and participation in Public activities. The refugees face a double edged sword while they see no imminent improvement in the situation in Afghanistan, the violation of human rights, dearth of opportunities, crackdown by the authorities and forced deportations add to the challenges they face living in a country that is tired of hosting refugees while it remains their only realistic hope for safety.

### **Research Aim**

The research aims to elicit the Afghan refugees' views about their integration challenges and social adaptations in Pakistan. The present study helps us understand their viewpoint about the problems they experience in living standards, social interactions, discrimination, language barrier, employment struggles, social equality, and adaptation challenges faced in Pakistan. The study findings will also help us understand the problems faced by Afghan refugees, which will give us a future direction for implementing strategies and reforms for to move towards improvement. The current research also helps in understanding the impact of these challenges on the mental health of Afghan refugees. It helps generate recommendations for the government for better support systems, opportunities, and community interventions for Afghan refugees to improve their overall living conditions. Moreover, this research gives a future direction for research on Afghan refugees.

### **Research Questions**

What are the multifaceted challenges faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan across social, Educational, financial, and linguistic dimensions, and how do these challenges impact their overall integration and well-being in Pakistan?

## **Objective**

- To examine the social challenges encountered by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including issues related to community integration, social acceptance, and cultural adaptation.
- To assess the educational barriers faced by Afghan refugee populations in Pakistan, focusing on access to education, language proficiency, and the impact on academic achievement.
- To investigate the financial challenges experienced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including economic opportunities, employment prospects, and financial stability within Pakistan.
- To explore the linguistic challenges faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including language acquisition difficulties, communication barriers, and the influence of language proficiency on social and educational aspects.
- To analyze the interrelation between social, educational, financial, and language challenges and their collective impact on the overall well-being and integration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

For the study, we've chosen to use a qualitative research method. Instead of casting a wide net for a bunch of participants, we're going for a smaller, close-knit group of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. This way, we can really dive into their personal stories and understand what makes their experiences unique. Now, why go with qualitative research? It's like our go-to tool. It's not just about figuring out what people are doing; it's also about digging into why they're doing it. We're aiming to go beyond the surface and uncover the detailed ins and outs of the lives of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. So, we want to take a closer look into their goals, and challenges of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. It's like zooming in with a magnifying glass to see all those little intricate details. By doing this, we hope to really understand the complexities of their lives in a foreign land. It's not just skimming the surface; it's about going deep into their world.

### **Why IPA?**

IPA was chosen to get a really detailed, personal account of the experiences of Afghan refugees their own terms transcending beyond the preconceptions and assumptions. IPA provides an idiographic account of the complex, ambiguous and potentially traumatic experiences by micro level reading of the participant's accounts that allows to get some valuable insight of their elusive experience. Furthermore, IPA's careful thematic analysis provides an illumination that is consistent with the participants' account of the events. (Smith& Osborn, 2014)

### **Sample**

The study aimed to explore the life experience of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and the social challenges they face.

We selected a sample of 3 Afghan males aged between 39 and 55 using purposive and convenient sampling. These three individuals belonged to different hierarchies of social status with one of

them as the factory owner, the other holding a managerial position and a skilled worker, so we were able to capture the nuances and in-depth descriptions of their subjective experiences in depth.

### **Research Instruments**

We used various tools to gather detailed information for our study:

Getting important demographic details from our participants was a big part of our research. We collected information like names, ages, genders, and educational backgrounds. This gave us a clear picture of the people we selected and helped us understand their unique characteristics. For our qualitative data collection, we chose semi-structured interviews as a crucial tool. This method allowed us to really explore the participants' experiences and focus on specific parts of their lives. Our interview protocol had a total of 20 questions, and we took inspiration from previous research, identified research gaps, and consulted relevant literature to develop them. To make sure our questions were good; we did mock interviews and got feedback from participants. We also refined the questions with insights from literature and our instructor. It's worth noting that our interview questions went through a careful process of development, ensuring they were not only comprehensive but also in line with the latest advancements. The final set of questions aimed to gather detailed and important information about what the living standards of participants and what problems are do they face while living in Pakistan. This approach not only strengthens our qualitative data collection but also highlights the validity of our methodology.

### **Procedure**

Before carrying out the research, approval will be taken from the respective university departments, ethics board, and participants. The demographic sheet will be made by the researcher to get information about participant's demographics such as age, gender, education, religion, etc. Before carrying out the research, participants will be briefed about the research purpose. They will be ensured of their privacy and confidentiality of the study. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the duration being 45 minutes per participant. Interviews will be audio recorded with the participant's permission and later on will be transcribed. Reading transcribed interviews will help the researcher in generating themes and conclusions.

### **Data Analysis, Theme Generation, and Verification Checks**

After the completion of all the interviews, the answers of each participant were transcribed word to word. These were then read carefully, again and again; to gain a proper understanding of the viewpoints shared by the Afghani refugees and know more about their experiences living in Pakistan and the impact it has had on various domains of their lives. The transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which was created by Jonathan Smith, Michael Larkin, and Paul Flowers in the 1990s. It was essentially developed to study the complexity of people's experiences and transform them into what researchers call "phenomena" (Politz, 2023). After the interviews had been transcribed, the transcriptions were then read thoroughly to drive various themes out of them. Once the themes were driven, the data was rechecked to verify the existing themes and to see whether any new themes could be generated. After the themes were finalized, to avoid researcher bias, these were then checked by professionals and further changes were made. Other individuals were also invited to check the generated themes which included peers who were also working on their research work and had written many qualitative researches themselves. Then the research was submitted to the course instructor for the final evaluation. The major themes were characterized into sub-themes and were compiled in a table. These were interpreted and analyzed in the results and discussion section keeping in mind

the verbatim of the Afghani refugees and these interpretations led to a deeper understanding of the integration challenges and social adaptation faced by them living in Pakistan.

### Ethical Considerations

The following ethical considerations will be taken while conducting the present research.

- The research will be approved by the respective department and ethical board.
- Participants will be informed about their role in the study and the purpose of the study.
- Confidentiality of data will be maintained. They will be assured that their details will not be used for other purposes.
- Participants' voluntary withdrawal from the study at any time will be respected.
- Consent will be taken before audio/video recording. They will be informed that no one other than researchers will have access to their audio/video recordings.
- In order to make to make sure we get an in-depth account of the refugee experiences, we carefully drafted the questionnaire and selected the participants from three different social statuses
- Asked them to elaborate the critical aspects by asking follow up questions,
- We also shared the analysis of our data with the research participants to check the validity of our findings and got a validating response in return.

### Results

#### Master table

**Table-1: shows major and sub-themes of all cases.**

Super ordinate themes	Subordinate themes
1. Forced migration	Taliban Brutality Security threats. Education challenges Restrictions on woman
2. Legal status of refugees	UN Migrant Card, Not given Issuance of id card Stay token issued by UN Unfair treatment by authority
3. Advantages of living in Pakistan	Similar ethnic background More opportunities
4. Financial challenges	Problems in banking transaction Payment issues Bribery for visa Financial extortion demands
5. Family and House related issues	Desire to go back home Travelling limitations Not given visa Restrictions on daughters' education
6. Feelings of gratitude	Feeling welcomed in Pakistan
7. Coping Styles	Accepted by people of Pakistan Being helped by the locals Mutual corporation Integrating into the host society

**Table of Recurrent Themes**  
**Table-2: shows the percentages of major themes in all cases.**

Themes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Total percentage
1. Forced migration	Yes	yes	yes	100%
4. Financial challenges	Yes	Yes	Yes	100%
6. Feelings of gratitude	Yes	No	Yes	75%

## Discussion

### Forced migration

Many Afghanis have chosen to seek refuge in Pakistan. It is not because they had a choice in the matter but because of the horrific situations they were facing in Afghanistan. Like one Afghan refugees stated “The Taliban’s took over the country and they were brutal, they were killing people for fun and forcing themselves on them”. Such were the conditions of people of Afghanistan, they were blasts going on everywhere, and there were numerous rules and policies being set. The state itself was a victim of huge economic collapse. According to the world report (2023) Taliban security forces throughout the year carried out arbitrary detentions, torture, and summary executions of former security officers and perceived enemies. This was not all, there was a lot of discrimination when it comes to woman as they weren’t allowed to receive secondary education, woman’s faces had to be covered in public as well as they weren’t allowed to participate in government sector jobs and were prohibited from travelling or going out of their houses. Any public protests against them resulted on arbitrary detainment. Thus these conditions led to Afghanis fleeing their homes to settle in Pakistan. The UNHCR has shown concerns regarding the wellbeing of refugees forced to leave Pakistan, "Mass arrivals back to Afghanistan are adding to the ongoing humanitarian crisis as winter temperatures start to dip – in some locations the minimum already reaching -4°C".

### Legal status of refugees

The legal status of Afghan refugees within Pakistan is uncertain, particularly for internally displaced persons. They are not given issuance of ID cards. They are not allowed nationality of Pakistan. They cannot buy properties or sell them. They cannot have any assets in their names. They face issues in accessing quality healthcare. They face discrimination and potential deportation challenges. They only possess UN migrant cards. Like participant 1 said, ‘I have the Migrant card; it’s a document that makes my stay legal here’. Efforts are underway to improve their rights and access to services, but the situation remains complex. Changes in government policies and international policies impact the legal landscape of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

### Advantages of living in Pakistan

There are limited but considerable advantages for Afghan refugees living in Pakistan. There is an ethnic similarity between Afghans and Pakistanis. Both share the same cultural values and religious ideas, which create a sense of brotherhood among them. As participant 1 said ‘the event of mehendi, the day of engagement, the day of walima is here as well as there’. Pakistanis treat

Aghans as their brothers; therefore, due to this reason, they do not face any ethnic discrimination in Pakistan. Many Afghans have been granted refugee status in Pakistan, providing them with a degree of legal protection and access to essential services. International organizations and NGOs often provide humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, offering support for food, shelter, and healthcare. Despite challenges, some Afghans in Pakistan have access to education, including formal and informal learning opportunities, although the quality and availability can vary. Some Afghans find employment in Pakistan, contributing to the local economy and sustaining themselves and their families.

### **Financial Challenges**

One of the most prominent themes was the financial challenges that the refugees face, they aren't allowed to open bank accounts and they have to get their money through a Pakistani friend's bank account or keep the savings in the form of cash. Two of the participants reported about the demands of bribes by the authorities for getting a visa and by the local Police as well. While one participant also reported about the extortion money demands from the Taliban while living in Peshawar. The difficulties in business activities can be well understood by this quote from one of our participants who is also a member of Chamber of Commerce in Lahore "Chinese people they can get their license in two to three hours. Whereas we have to get different forms filled and still don't get license."

### **Family and Education related issues**

The participants reported that they are facing several difficulties related to their family issues. Finding a way to visit the homeland and meet their loved ones is one hard task that the participants reported to be a major concern for them .One participant shared that the borders are sealed and even if one gets back home it's impossible to return to Pakistan without paying a around 4 to 5 lacs to get a visa. One of the participants shared grievance concerns about the halt in the educational career of his daughter as she isn't able to continue her Textile designing degree due to Taliban's restrictions, as he reported "Her college closed when the Taliban came, if she had completed her study she could have become a designer by now" According to a survey by DRC on Afghan refugees in KPK 46% of the survey respondents were illiterate, poverty was reported a major reason for male children not attending school while Children, who were engaged in work, mostly did not go to school.

### **Feelings of gratitude**

The participants showed gratitude towards the locals who according to them have made them feel at home and accepted them as a member of their community. One the participants showed gratitude to the country for hosting the refugees, he quoted "They kept us this long, that's already a lot. That also they kept us with pleasure. Any other country would kick us out after keeping us for so long". Another participant showed a sigh of relief that he can live safely and earn for his children while living in a very cooperative environment here, he quoted "'I am happy with the way I save and keep some of the money that I earn. I just feel thankful to God that I am able to feed myself and my kids". All the participants expressed a feeling of safety and no worries regarding security while living in Pakistan that for them is such a big relief.

### **Coping Styles**

The difficulties faced by the refugees are dealt by them with a great amount of patience and support from the local community especially their friend's circle. The participants reported a sense of cooperation among the refugees and also seeking help from the locals for getting through the challenges. One participant reported “My car is on my friend’s name right now, if he wants he could take away my car but we have trust”. Another participant reported that the he keeps himself motivated by the fact that he is able to generate money and provide for the family, "I can’t earn how will I spend my life. Over here this is the thing that gives me relief. Like month to month the salary I get, I send it to my home, over there my kids make ends meet, over here I make ends meet. In order to cope with their life in transit and exile, refugees have to learn not only how to reduce the stress which results from disruption in their way of life, but also how to come to terms with relief programs set up to help them (Knudsen,1991).

**Limitations**

Working with Afghan refugees for our research was a real challenge, and it involved a lot of effort and patience. At first, finding people willing to talk about their experiences was tough and took a long time. It showed us how complex the research work could be. Getting them open up and to share their stories was a tricky process, and it was crucial to build trust from the start. After we got valuable information, a new challenge popped up – making sure the data was accurate. Language differences, cultural nuances, and some people being hesitant added more complexity to checking if the information was correct. Dealing with these challenges taught us the importance of understanding the cultural context and how language and culture play a role in research. Understanding became tough at times due to differences in language and various accents. The language variations and diverse accents occasionally posed difficulties in grasping the information completely. This highlighted the importance of navigating language differences in ensuring effective communication during the research process. It was hard to stay focused during the interviews. The interviews were quite long, and it became challenging to keep people interested and involved. As a result, getting the information we needed became more difficult over time. It showed the importance of considering how long interviews are and finding ways to keep people engaged. Dealing with these issues showed us the need for a well-rounded approach to research, especially when studying diverse and ever-changing communities.

**Appendix**

**Case 1**

**Table-3: shows initial, sub-themes and major themes emerged from the case 1 of the data**

Initial Themes	Line/page	Sub-Themes	Major Themes
They were out of control and killing people for fun,fights started between groups in Afghanistan	Page 1, line 5 Page 2, line 45	Security threats Ethnic conflicts	Challenges in Afghanistan
10,15 years back UNHCR issued them migrant card refugees have taken token from UN,	Page 1, Line 16 Page 1, line 21	The UN migrant card  Stay token issued by UN	Legal Status of refugees



we are doing business here since 1992 there is an Afridi on that side also there isn't much of a problem regarding language	Page 1, line 27 Page 5, line 132 page 5, line 139	Economic opportunities  Similar ethnic backgrounds No significant language barrier	Advantages of living in Pakistan
it's impossible to get it without a bribe of 1000-1500 \$, got calls from Taliban for money If I go to the bank my signature doesn't get accepted	Page 1, line 23  Page 1, line 23 Page 3, line 70	Bribery for visa  Demands for extortion money Difficulties in banking transactions	Financial Challenges
there needs to be ease for those conducting business as there is for the Chinese	Page 8, line 204	Business restrictions on Afghan refugees	Discriminatory feelings
his kids have a Pakistani card but not the poor father		not getting the ID card	
Usually through friends we have in business	Page 8, 210	Assistance from friends	Coping strategies employed

## Case 2

**Table-4: shows initial, sub-themes and major themes emerged from the case 2 of the data.**

Initial Themes	Line/page	Sub-Themes	Major Themes
Taliban were brutal killing people for fun we had to leave everything	Page 1, line 5-6	Taliban Brutality	Forced migration
never make me felt that I am a refugee I wish for once a year I could go back	Page 1, line 10-11 Page 2, line 23	Feeling accepted Home sickness	Feelings of gratitude helplessness
borders are sealed no restrictions no tension		Feelings of liberty	freedom
daughters they are currently staying at home not allowed not studying we are poor people Not very well off hope that I can obtain a visa easier for me to travel	Page 4, line 78,84  Page 4, line 74-75	Stripping away rights of education  Not very well off	discriminatory behavior towards woman in Afghanistan

	Financial struggles
Page 5, line 104,110	Restrictions to
Page 6, line 127, 128	travelling abroad      Traveling limitations

### Case 3

**Table-5: shows initial, sub-themes and major themes emerged from the case 3 of the data**

Initial Themes	Line/page	Sub-Themes	Major Themes
When media says anything negative 99% is a lie	Page 1, line 11	feeling misunderstood	Distorted media Perception
Problems in work and earning payment Issues	Page 2, line 29-30,36	Financial problems	Negatively affected Living Standards
Problem of id card Don't give nationality	Page 3, line 52	Unfair treatment by authority	Discrimination
Admissions in university Very difficult they don't accept Migrant card	Page 6, line 120-121	Difficulties in receiving education	Education Challenges
Situation in Afghanistan not great so came here Blasts going on	Page 1, line 6,9	Need for safety	Seeking refuges in Pakistan

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