

SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN: A SCOIO-LEGAL AND ECONOMIC DEBATE

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Abstract

The current study examines the multifaceted challenges and opportunities that are confronted and yet available to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, focusing on the legal, economic, social, security and humanitarian aspects. Afghanistan neighbouring Pakistan has a long and traditional, cultural as well as religious history along with sharing borders through trade for centuries. It is obvious that ancient civilizations and empires have shaped their enduring geo-strategic and geo-economic significance through several factors. Consequently, the country became a unique geographical settlement for many dynasties. However, since the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan has become a safe and more accessible host for millions of Afghan refugees seeking refuge from conflict, violence, and political instability. The study aims to explore the various factors associated with Afghan refugees, focusing on the socio-legal, humanitarian as well economic considerations in the integration process despite some security concerns. Similarly, despite making millions of sacrifices, there is a huge gap that has ultimately affected the policy measures for both countries in developing a conducive atmosphere for trust building. Further, hosting millions of refugees for the last fifty years, the government in collaboration with multiple national and international organizations had extended legal, economic, and humanitarian aid for the re-integration of the displaced individuals. The study thus is important to focus on the stability, essentially economic, legal and human development aspects to improve the living condition of the bordering communities under the umbrella of legal and humanitarian perspectives.

Keywords: *peace, refuges, conflict, stability, integration, repatriation etc.*

INTRODUCTION

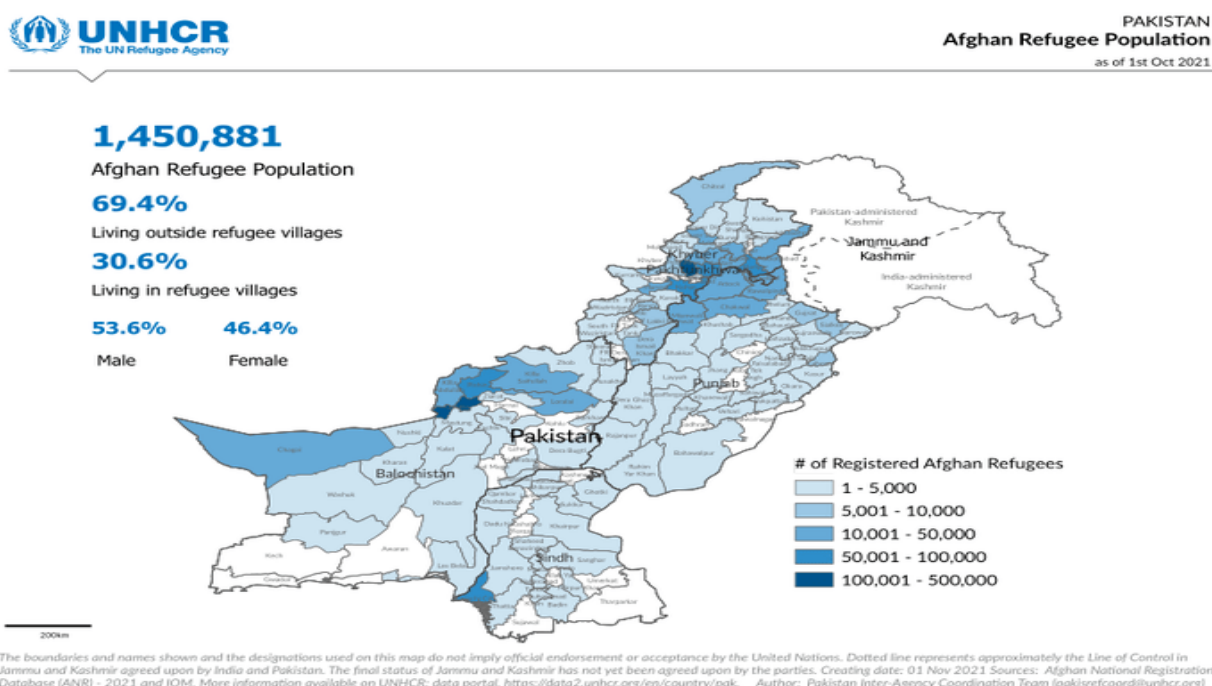
Afghanistan's history dates back thousands of years, with a rich tapestry of ancient civilizations, invasions, and cultural exchanges. Over the centuries, it has been a crossroads for various empires, including the Persians, Greeks, and Mongols. In the 19th century, it became a battleground for the British and Russian empires in the "Great Game." The 20th century saw independence, followed by periods of conflict, including the Soviet invasion and the rise of the Taliban. Today, Afghanistan faces new challenges in the post-US withdrawal, shaped by its enduring geo-strategic, and geo-economic significance in the region (Aljazeera, 2021, Khan, Yusoff and Khan, 2014). The prolonged conflict in Afghanistan has led to a substantial refugee crisis, with a large number of people seeking refuge in neighbouring countries due to the impact of war, violence, and political instability. Among these host nations, Pakistan has played a significant role by providing shelter, safety, and humanitarian assistance to numerous displaced individuals. The influx of Afghan refugees has posed both humanitarian and security challenges for Pakistan, necessitating the country to address complex issues with resilience and compassion. (Amnesty International, 2019, Yusoff, Khan, et al., 2013).

This study delves into the various challenges faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with a specific emphasis on the humanitarian and security dimensions. The humanitarian dimension encompasses essential elements such as access to education, healthcare, and social integration. At the same

time, the security aspect entails concerns related to regional stability and the impact of hosting a large refugee population. Understanding and effectively addressing these challenges are vital not only for the well-being of the refugees but also for the host communities and the broader regional context (Naz et al., 2019, Khan et al., 2015).

Pakistan is the world's third-largest host of refugees and according to the latest statistics from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2022), it is within its borders are more than 1.4 million (Registered) Afghan refugees, 840,000 (estimated) Afghan Citizen Cardholders (ACC), while the non-documented number reach to 500,000. The total number of Afghan refugees, both registered and unregistered, is generally estimated by Pakistanis to be between three to four million, and they are dispersed across various regions in Pakistan (Amparado et al., 2021; Isa et al., 2018).

Despite having numerous security concerns, Pakistan's Afghan refugee policy is primarily driven by humanitarian as well legal considerations. Although Pakistan is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and has no national asylum system, has still strong and mutual collaborations with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and has successfully worked on the registration of individuals for the purpose of security, legal aid as well and other socio-economic developments (UNHCR, 2021). The propriety has been given to refugees seeking asylum based on severe security claims, and the vulnerability of various groups including women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and other minorities with special risk concerns. However, information received from various reports concluded that during such process, Pakistan remains cooperative in the provision of official documentation and accepted the UNHCR's policy of granting the status of refugee without any binding conditions (BBC News, 2021). The subsequent map highlights the widespread presence of Afghan refugees throughout Pakistan, illustrating their unrestricted movement and settlement across the country. The map showcases Afghan refugees' settlements and their extensive presence in Pakistan.



Source: UNHCR, October 2021. <https://reliefweb.int/map/pakistan/pakistan-afghan-refugee-population>.

However, since the issue has been of serious nature to both nations in terms of peacebuilding, political instability, and establishing legal and human development context, thus a high-level and more broad-based comprehensive policy is required to tackle Afghan refugees in the context of recent developments initiated by the Chinese in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Humanitarian Assistance, Aid and Afghan Refugees within Pakistan



Since the Russian Invasion of Afghanistan, the influx of Afghan refugees towards neighbouring countries, particularly into Pakistan remains a huge and drastic humanitarian challenge (Youssef, A. (2015). Since then, and over the last many years, Pakistan has been a shelter to millions of Afghans (Naderi, R. H., & Hoffman, S. (2018). However, addressing the humanitarian crises and fulfilling the needs of the millions of homeless, vulnerable, and deprived strata of the population required generosity to compensate for the basic needs of Pakistan, other international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (UNHCR, 2015). The Pakistani government has been at the forefront of efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to Afghan refugees. Initially, the Pakistani government implemented an open-door policy, allowing refugees to enter the country without strict documentation requirements. However, as the number of refugees increased, Pakistan encountered various challenges in managing the influx and ensuring the well-being of both refugees and host communities (Amnesty International, 2019, Isa et al., 2019). To address this, the government established refugee camps and settlements in different regions, providing Afghan refugees with vital necessities such as food, shelter, and healthcare services. Despite the financial burden, Pakistan has demonstrated resilience and compassion in accommodating its Afghan neighbours. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the primary international agency responsible for refugee protection and assistance, has actively supported Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Collaborating with the Pakistani government, the UNHCR has facilitated the provision of humanitarian aid, protection, and assistance to Afghan refugees (Stancati & Shah, 2014, Isa et al., 2020). Additionally, numerous local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in addressing the humanitarian needs of Afghan refugees. These organizations have been involved in initiatives related to healthcare, education, livelihood support, and social integration.

The Process of Social Integration

The long and expanded conflict in Afghanistan has led to one of the most significant refugee crises in the world, with millions seeking safety and asylum in neighbouring countries. Pakistan, situated geographically close to Afghanistan, has been a primary host for Afghan refugees for several decades. This influx of refugees has posed substantial challenges to both the host country and the displaced populations, particularly regarding social integration and cultural adaptation (Beiser & Hou, Mui & Kang, 2006). As obvious from various studies, social integration is a multifaceted process that goes beyond the mere coexistence of different communities and involves the active participation and meaningful inclusion of refugees into the host society, allowing them to access opportunities and resources while fostering mutual understanding and acceptance (Kelly & Freysinger, 2000; Mannell & Klieber, 1997). At the same time, cultural adaptation plays a crucial role in shaping the identity and well-being of refugees, as they negotiate between preserving elements of their own cultural heritage and assimilating aspects of the host country's culture (Aziz, Morioka-Douglas, Sacks, & Yeo, 2004).

The experiences of Afghan refugees in Pakistan provide a compelling context to explore the dynamics of social integration and cultural adaptation in a complex and dynamic environment. For decades, these refugees have navigated their way through a diverse range of challenges, including language barriers, legal and policy hurdles, socio-economic disparities, and prevailing prejudices. Understanding the factors that hinder or facilitate social integration is essential to develop effective strategies that enhance refugees' well-being and contribute to the overall cohesion and resilience of the host society (Bensing, Ruijter, and Boeije, 2007). In this context, the most important is Language Acquisition whereas Learning the language spoken in the host country is vital for effective communication and integration. For Afghan refugees in Pakistan, this means acquiring proficiency in Urdu or other regional languages to interact with locals, access services, and participate in various activities (Azimi, A., 2001). Similarly, it has been observed that social networks and support systems i.e., building social networks are essential for Afghan refugees to connect with locals, other refugees, and support organizations. Social networks provide access to resources, information, and emotional support, helping refugees navigate their new environment (Barnes, D. 2001). Additionally, interaction with local communities and as argued by



scholars and researchers, positive interactions with the local population contribute to social integration. This involves engaging in various social activities, participating in community events, and fostering cross-cultural understanding. (Blitz, B. K., R. Sales and L. Marzano, 2005).

Besides, access to healthcare, Education, and Social Services also poster the integration process and when refugees have equal access to essential services like healthcare, education, housing, and employment opportunities, these services ensure that Afghan refugees can lead productive lives and contribute to society. (Shireen S. Issa et al., 2009). Another important component is meaningful employment which is critical for social integration as it allows refugees to become self-sufficient and actively contribute to the host society. Overcoming barriers to employment, such as discrimination and limited recognition of foreign qualifications, is vital in promoting integration (Fisher, S., 2019).

However, it has been reported that identity crises may emerge due to a lack of acceptance of the refugees in the local communities. In this regard, balancing Afghan identity with the host society's culture can be a significant challenge for refugees. Integration involves the process of forming a new identity that incorporates aspects of both their home culture and the culture of the host country which is an essential component in the process of social adjustment (UNHCR, 2019)

The Process of Cultural Adaptation in Social integration:

Cultural adaptation refers to the process by which individuals or groups modify their cultural practices, behaviours, and beliefs to fit into a new cultural environment or context (Cangiano, A., & Shutes, I., 2018)). For Afghan refugees in Pakistani society, cultural adaptation is a significant aspect of their integration journey, as they strive to balance their Afghan identity with the norms and values of the host society. Issues have been observed in the cultural adaptation of Afghan refugees to be similar to that of Pakistani culture. Refugees may adapt their cultural practices, traditions, and behaviours to align with the norms and values of the host society. At the same time, they may also retain and share elements of their own cultural heritage (Samad, Y., Ehsan, S., & MacLachlan, M. 2018). This can also reduce discrimination and prejudice against refugees, which is the most essential part of fostering social integration. However, as argued, this part requires building awareness, promoting intercultural dialogue, and challenging negative stereotypes (de Anstiss, H., Ziaian, T., Procter, N., Warland, J., & Baghurst, P. (2009). Researchers i.e., Naderi, R. H., & Hoffman, S., 2018) are of the opinion that many times, integration in the host society may affect family dynamics as younger generations may assimilate faster than older generations. Maintaining strong family ties and support is crucial for the well-being of Afghan refugee families in the host society, otherwise, they may have consequences for losing family ties. The assimilation process and the integration of the refugees increase with the participation of refugees in civil society and community organizations which allows refugees to actively engage in the host society, contribute their skills and experiences, and address common challenges collectively (Cherney, A., KhosraviNik, M., Leahy, D., & Sinnerbrink, I., 2017). Further, successful social integration of Afghan refugees into Pakistani society can lead to positive outcomes, such as increased well-being, improved community relations, and enriched cultural diversity. However, challenges, including legal and policy barriers, socio-economic disparities, and mental health issues, must be addressed to promote meaningful integration and enhance the overall resilience of refugee populations.

The Need for a Legal Framework

Refugee Status Determination (RSD): Afghan refugees in Pakistan fall under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR, in coordination with the Government of Pakistan, is responsible for determining the refugee status of individuals who have fled Afghanistan due to conflict, persecution, or other threats to their safety (UNHCR, 2015).

Proof of Registration (POR) Card: Upon recognition as refugees, Afghan refugees in Pakistan are issued Proof of Registration (POR) cards by the Government of Pakistan and the UNHCR. These cards provide official identification and documentation, indicating their legal status as refugees in the country (Amiri, R., & Razavy, M., 2017).



Legal Protections: Afghan refugees with valid POR cards are entitled to certain legal protections in Pakistan including protection against forced return to Afghanistan as well as to work within Pakistan (Nourmamode, A., 2017).

Renewal of Proof of Registration (POR) Cards: POR cards have expiration dates, and Afghan refugees need to renew them periodically to maintain their legal status in Pakistan. The renewal process is often facilitated by the UNHCR (Ahmad, I. (2017).

Access to Services: Afghan refugees with valid POR cards have access to basic services in Pakistan, such as education, healthcare, and other social services. They can also open bank accounts and engage in legal economic activities.

Movement Restrictions: Afghan refugees in Pakistan may face some movement restrictions, particularly outside designated refugee camps or areas. However, the specifics of these restrictions may vary depending on local policies and security conditions (Amiri, R., & Razavy, M., 2017).

Voluntary Repatriation: Afghan refugees in Pakistan have the option of voluntary repatriation to Afghanistan when conditions in their home country improve. The UNHCR provides support and assistance to those who choose to return voluntarily (UNHCR, 2016).

Local Integration and Durable Solutions: In addition to voluntary repatriation, local integration and other durable solutions are considered for Afghan refugees who have been in Pakistan for an extended period. Local integration involves providing long-term legal residency and opportunities for integration into the host society (Bahar, P., 2019).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The presence of Afghan refugees in Pakistan presents a multifaceted challenge with significant humanitarian, security, and social implications. The review has indicated the historical and geographical ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan that have led to Pakistan becoming a safe place for millions of Afghan refugees (who have been seeking refuge from conflict, violence, and political instability. Despite not being a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, Pakistan has demonstrated compassion and resilience in accommodating Afghan refugees, working in collaboration with international organizations like the UNHCR. AID has been provided by both the Pakistani government and various national and international organizations to address the basic needs of Afghan refugees, including food, shelter, healthcare, and education. Besides, the process of social integration is a complex journey, with challenges such as language barriers, cultural adaptation, and access to services has been promoted. The integration process involves balancing Afghan identity with the host society's culture, building social networks, fostering positive interactions with locals, and promoting meaningful employment opportunities.

Similarly, a robust legal framework, spearheaded by the UNHCR, governs the refugee status determination, registration, and protection of Afghan refugees in Pakistan is mandatory. In this context, measures including The Proof of Registration (POR) cards provide essential legal documentation, ensuring the non-refoulement principle and granting the right to reside and work in Pakistan. Voluntary repatriation and local integration options are considered for refugees who have been in Pakistan for an extended period, aiming to find durable solutions for their displacement. Despite the challenges, successful social integration of Afghan refugees can lead to positive outcomes, including improved well-being, enriched cultural diversity, and stronger community relations. However, addressing issues such as legal and policy barriers, socioeconomic disparities, and mental health concerns is vital to foster meaningful integration and enhance the overall resilience of refugee populations.

In view of recent developments and peace-building efforts in the region, it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive and inclusive policy to address the Afghan refugee situation effectively. This policy should focus on building trust between both countries and creating a favourable environment for stability, economic development, and protection of human rights for the bordering communities. A robust legal and humanitarian framework will be instrumental in shaping the future of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and fostering regional stability and cooperation.

Recommendations

Strengthening Social Integration Programs

To enhance the social integration of Afghan refugees in Pakistani society, it is important to prioritize the development and expansion of social integration programs. These programs should concentrate on promoting cross-cultural understanding, facilitating positive interactions between refugees and locals, and ensuring access to crucial services such as education, healthcare, and employment. Language acquisition should be a significant aspect of these programs, as proficiency in the local language will facilitate better communication and integration. Additionally, efforts to establish social networks and support systems for refugees, along with community engagement activities, can contribute to their sense of belonging and active participation in the host society.

Addressing Legal and Policy Barriers

To promote the social integration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, it is necessary to address legal and policy barriers. The current legal and policy framework for Afghan refugees in Pakistan should be carefully evaluated and strengthened to provide comprehensive protection and support. As Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it is important for the country to work towards establishing a national asylum system that ensures the legal recognition and rights of refugees. Efforts should also be made to improve the renewal process for Proof of Registration (POR) cards, making it more accessible and efficient to avoid unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. Providing access to legal aid for refugees is crucial in helping them navigate complex legal procedures and safeguard their rights.


Empowering Economic Opportunities


Enhancing economic opportunities for Afghan refugees is crucial for their self-sufficiency and integration. This can be achieved through vocational training programs, skills development initiatives, and support for entrepreneurship. Recognizing foreign qualifications and credentials can help remove employment barriers and enable refugees to actively contribute to the host society's economic development. Collaborations with private sector entities and employers can create job placement opportunities and foster economic inclusion. Targeted financial assistance and microcredit schemes can empower refugees to start small businesses and support their economic independence.

By implementing these recommendations, Pakistan can work towards promoting the social integration and well-being of Afghan refugees, leading to positive outcomes for both the refugees and the host communities. These efforts can contribute to building stronger community relations, enriching cultural diversity, and fostering a more inclusive and resilient society in Pakistan.

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