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Intercultural Communication Barriers of Afghan Refugees through the Lens of Stakeholders

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June 2024

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Sector H-12, Islamabad, Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex intercultural communication barriers faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan and explores this issue through the lens of various stakeholders which include legal experts, government officials, and humanitarian workers. The ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and the displacement that happens as a result of it cause various challenges for the refugees such as difficulty in integrating, legal uncertainties and sociocultural differences. Deep-seated issues like lack of trust and security concerns hinder refugee integration. The key findings of this study highlight the role that trust plays in the assimilation of refugees into Pakistani society. Refugees are left in an uncertain and vulnerable situation because of a lack of legal frameworks in the country. The study also examines the impact of media portrayals on public perceptions and policies regarding the Afghan refugees and notes that negative portrayal causes stigmatization and social exclusion of the refugees. This research suggests policy reforms after evaluating existing interventions and enhances the social integration and legal recognition of refugees. This thesis enriches academic discourse and is also a crucial resource for policymakers and practitioners who work to resolve this issue.

Keywords: Afghan Refugees, Intercultural Communication, Integration, Separation, Stakeholders, Pakistan.

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the intercultural adaptation of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, focusing on their strategies and communication challenges through the lens of stakeholders.

The ambiguous legal status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan fosters fear and uncertainty, restricting access to essential services. Media stereotypes further marginalize them by associating them with terrorism, while limited education and employment opportunities, language barriers, harsh weather, and inadequate camp services compound their difficulties, affecting their assimilation into Pakistani society.

Recent advances in anthropology and intercultural communication emphasize the importance of understanding the lives of Afghan refugees and their relationships with development stakeholders. By examining the perspectives of lawyers, journalists and public officials, this research aims to identify policy gaps and communication issues, offering recommendations for practices and policies that enhance the integration of Afghan refugees and promote intercultural understanding. The findings can inspire community-based initiatives by humanitarian and advocacy groups, addressing the unique challenges faced by Afghan refugees.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How do stakeholders perceive the intercultural journey of Afghan refugees in Pakistan?
2. What are the primary intercultural barriers encountered by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, particularly in terms of language, socio-cultural norms, and access to essential services?
3. What policy recommendations and community-based initiatives can be proposed to enhance the social cohesion and well-being of Afghan refugees in Pakistan?

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To explore development stakeholders' perceptions of the intercultural journey experienced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, focusing on their understanding of cultural differences, communication challenges, and integration processes.
2. To identify and analyze the intercultural barriers faced by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including language barriers, socio-cultural differences, and access to essential services and resources.

3. To investigate existing and potential solutions to intercultural barriers encountered by Afghan refugees in Pakistan, including strategies implemented by development stakeholders, policy recommendations, and community-based initiatives aimed at fostering cultural integration and social cohesion.

2. Literature Review

With nearly 1.6 million refugees, excluding around one million undocumented migrants, Pakistan is second on the list of major refugee-hosting countries (Ahmed, 2018) Proximity to Afghanistan has made Pakistan a primary destination for Afghan refugees, posing significant challenges for both the host nation and the displaced populations, particularly in social integration and cultural adaptation (Humayun, Saeed, Khan, Khan, & Naz, 2023)

The daily experiences and difficulties faced by Afghan refugees underscore the vital role of stakeholders in supporting these vulnerable groups and aiding their integration into the host society.

This section will highlight Afghan refugees' experiences and struggles in adapting to a new country. It will also address survival issues stemming from poor communication and marginalization, concluding with the impact of acculturation and assimilation on their survival in Pakistan.

2.1. Acculturation

Acculturation involves creating mutual norms and understanding in the host society while respecting regulations (Entzinger, 2011). The interaction quality between refugees and Pakistani society, including inter-group marriages and cultural contact, influences this process (Anaraki, 2017).

The Pakistani government and UNHCR support refugees with education and healthcare, as weak acculturation efforts can lead to increased crime rates. Afghans engage with locals and utilize opportunities to learn about Pakistani culture but prefer not to fully assimilate, retaining their own cultural identity (Judith N. Martin, 2009). Acculturation is vital for Afghan survival in Pakistan and neglecting it can cause issues for both refugees and the host country.

2.2. Intercultural Communication

In cultural anthropology, there is no consensus on the definition of culture. Some anthropologists see culture as learned behavior, others as an abstraction from behavior, and still others associate it with material objects. Opinions vary on whether culture exists in the mind or in observable external events, leading to confusion and diverse understandings within the field.

Interactions within a boundary differ from those across it, involving agreements on meaning and action, sometimes with a distinct language or jargon. Cultural boundaries often necessitate increased interaction and cooperation, sparking debates and controversies (Humayun, Saeed, Khan, Khan , & Naz, 2023).

Intercultural communication seeks biculturalism rather than assimilation and fosters intercultural sensitivity for empathic understanding and competent action across cultures (Language Learning: Why Is Intercultural Communication Important? 2023). This ambiguous status of Afghan Refugees, along with language barriers and distinct cultural norms, shapes their intercultural dynamics (Jones & Draper, 2001).

2.3. Locality

Factors like a country's economic situation, political stability, refugee population size, and the refugees' skill sets influence their treatment (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010). In Pakistan, refugees in cities like Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi are treated better due to cultural diversity and their perceived societal contributions (Verkuyten, Mepham, & Kros, 2017).

In terms of locality, security authorities in Peshawar, Quetta, and Karachi often detain Afghan refugees on suspicions of Taliban connections, while in Islamabad, refugees are mainly asked for identification documents (Afghan Refuggess in Pakistan: Push comes to Shove, 2009). Refugees in areas with doctors experience more empathy and easier access to medical care, whereas others are often ignored (Achakzai, 2023).

Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate that refugees prefer rural and less developed urban areas to avoid police harassment and local verbal abuse.

Figure 1. Registered Afghan Families in Islamabad Areas

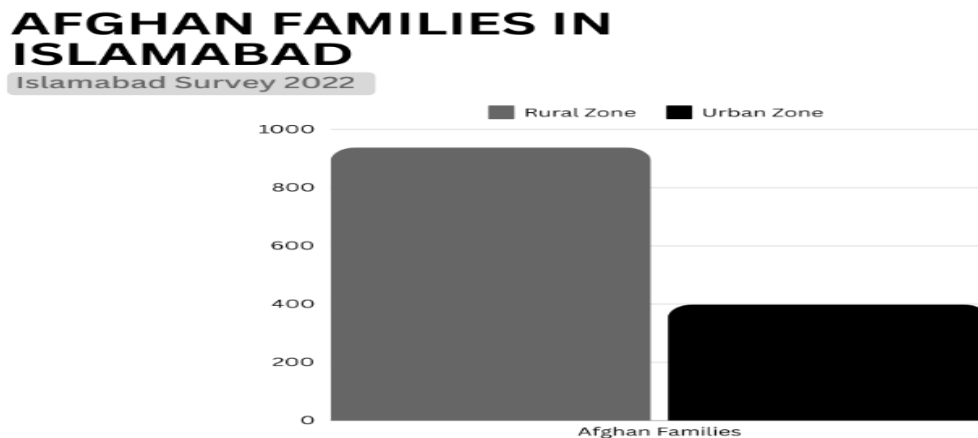


Figure 2. Registered Families in Islamabad in 2021 as per Police Station territories.

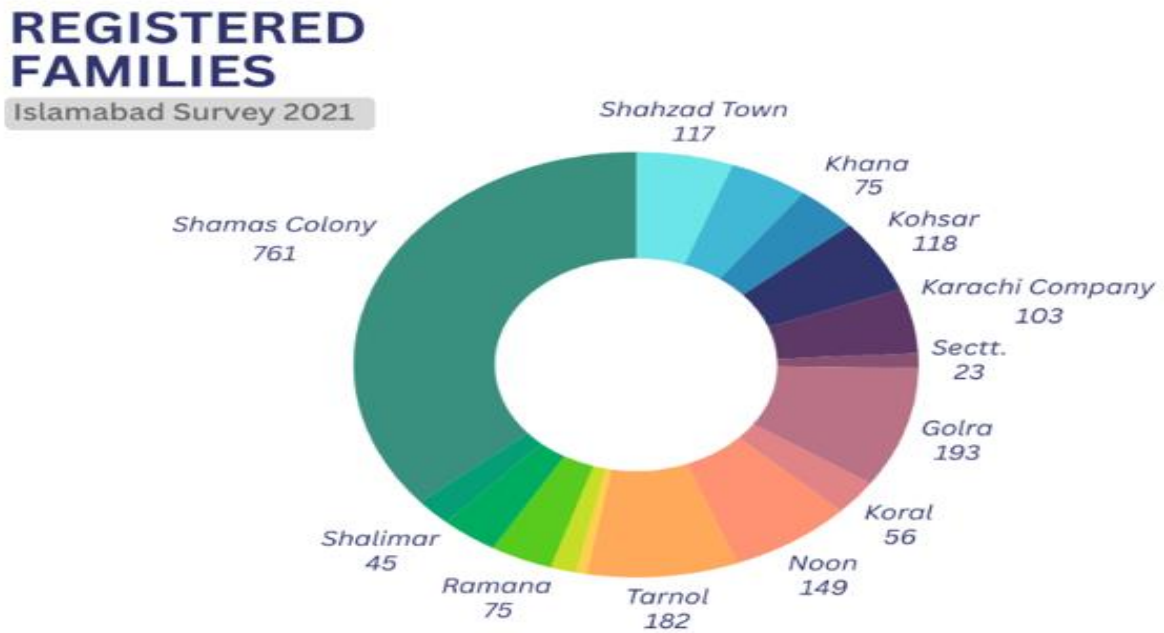
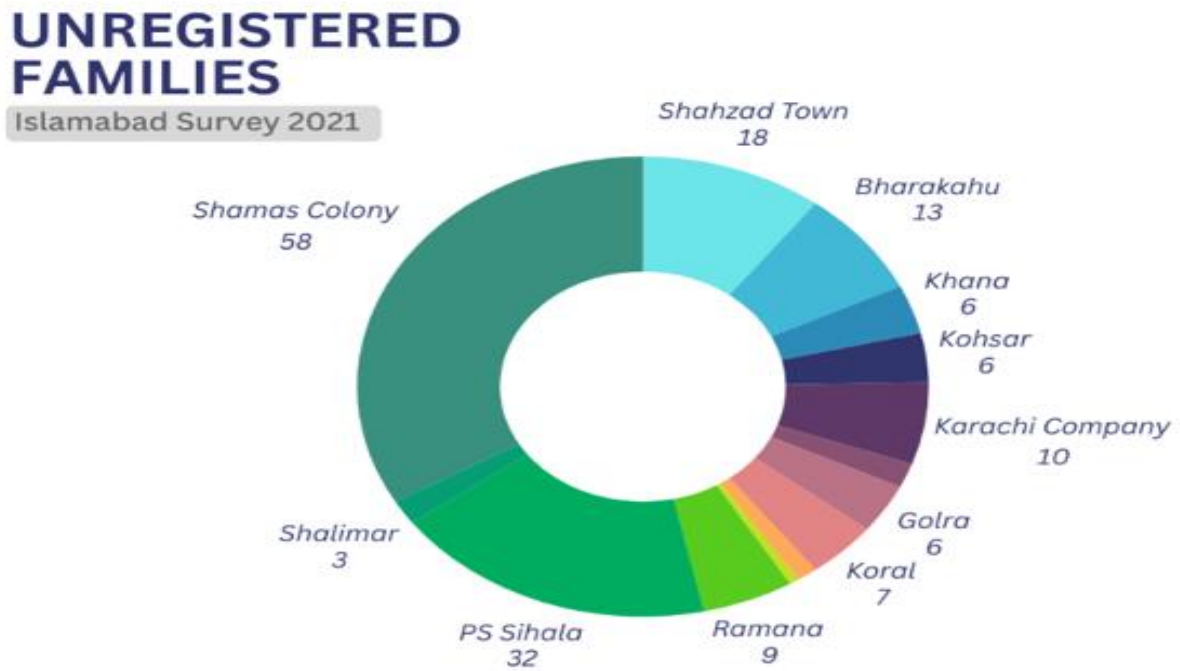


Figure 3. Unregistered Families in Islamabad in 2021 as per Police Station territories.



2.4. Refugees

Classifying Afghans in Pakistan is complex due to the unclear reasons for their entry. Many seek work and better living conditions rather than fleeing conflict, yet they are still treated as asylum seekers (Grare & Maley, 2011).

Pakistani media's portrayal of Afghan refugees has led to negative stereotypes, associating them with terrorism. Discrimination and prejudice, fueled by media portrayal, hinder integration (Jones & Draper, 2001). Conflict-escalatory framing predominates in Pakistani media reportage of Afghan refugees and their continuing forcible deportation to Afghanistan (Batoool, 2019).

Participating in cultural activities, feeling a part of the community, and keeping cultural ties all contribute to the maintenance of stronger connections (Berry, 2019). Moreover, as a means of building bridges between their own cultural backgrounds and the host society, refugees actively seek to foster intercultural friendships (Humayun, Saeed, Khan, Khan , & Naz, 2023).

2.4.1. Challenges

The aggressive coverage of Afghan refugees in Pakistani media has fostered negative stereotypes, linking them to terrorism. Refugee camps, built from mud and brick, are poorly insulated, leading to harsh living conditions exacerbated by inadequate roads and electricity. Limited healthcare access results in widespread malnutrition, maternal health issues, and infectious diseases, particularly among children (Humayun, Saeed, Khan, Khan , & Naz, 2023).

Afghan refugees face language barriers and lack marketable skills due to insufficient formal education, pushing many towards informal or illegal work, which perpetuates negative stereotypes (Javed, Khan , Syed, & Ahmad, 2020). Despite the significant refugee population, Pakistani authorities have not established a welfare framework (Khan et al., 2023).

Integration and assimilation are crucial challenges for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, involving overcoming linguistic and cultural differences and accessing services. Establishing support networks can foster inclusion and active participation. Furthermore, refugees may modify their cultural customs, habits, and practices to fit the standards and ideals of the host community (Melnyk, 2017).

Addressing legal, socioeconomic, and mental health issues is essential for successful integration and community resilience. However, media-fuelled prejudice and economic pressures have led to increased hostility and marginalization (Jones & Draper, 2001).

2.4.2. Strategies

Key elements in fostering intercultural relations include adaptation, cultural sensitivity, accommodation, and convergence. Social media, community organizations, and unofficial networks help refugees connect with both the host community and other refugees (Martin & Nakayama, 2009).

Refugees use media to maintain ties with their homeland, access information, and interact with the host community, emphasizing the importance of media in overcoming intercultural barriers (Batool, 2019).

Preserving religious practices is crucial for maintaining identity and continuity, offering solace and community support (Ager & Strang, 2008). Refugees also seek to foster intercultural friendships to bridge their cultural backgrounds with the host society (Humayun, Saeed, Khan, Khan , & Naz, 2023).

2.5. Stakeholders

The primary problem in stakeholder analysis is developing a definition for the word “stake” that is accepted by everybody. Starik (1994) points out that while the stakeholder framework has been widely used the term “stakeholder” has not always been used the same way. The essence of a stake is still defined as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives (Ahmed, 2018).

2.6. Barriers to Intercultural Communication

2.6.1 Ethnocentrism

The indication that one's own culture is fundamental is known as ethnocentrism. It often involves comparing features of one culture to those of another. According to Bennett, ethnocentrism is the idea that ‘one's own cultural worldview is central to all reality’. The first three stages, denial, defence, and minimising are referred to by Bennett as the ethnocentric stages (Bennett, 2004).

2.6.2. Stereotypes

Stereotypes are based on formerly created thoughts or attitudes and are defined as ‘the perceptions or beliefs we hold about groups or individuals’ (Bennett, 1993).

First of all, using stereotypes often can lead us to believe that a generally believed impression applies to every participant of the faction. Secondly, by reinforcing adverse presumptions when

interpreting the actions of people within a community, we further block cross-cultural dialogue (Bennett, 1993).

2.6.3. Prejudice

Prejudice refers to the preconceptions of people or organisations that are based on erroneous beliefs, attitudes, or opinions. Although it is often defined as ‘the unfair, biased, or intolerant attitudes or opinions towards another person or group simply because they belong to a specific religion, race, nationality, or another group’, prejudice can be either good or negative (Coleman, King, & Turner).

2.6.4. Assumption of Similarities

One should assume that there are no cultural distinctions between the two civilizations just to be on the safe side. The best way is to present oneself in a manner that they would do daily and carry out activities in an orderly fashion. Such a strategy may occasionally be successful for a single person, but in other circumstances, making such an assumption may cause further misunderstandings (6 Barriers of Intercultural Communication Essay, 2024). It is empirical to refrain from applying your own cultural interpretations to another individual’s behaviour (Ry, 2023).

2.6.5. Language

Although it may not be the most essential, language is one of the unmistakable obstacles to cross-cultural communication (Nickerson, 2023). Persons who do not speak the same language or who trust their grasp of another person's language is flawed may have certain interaction issues. There is also the chance of misinterpretations happening between individuals when they do not speak a similar language (Bennett, 1993).

2.6.6. Anxiety

Generally speaking, anxiety is defined as a human condition where an individual experiences feeling of uneasiness and trepidation. Anxiety usually occurs when an individual encounters his or her first cross-cultural interaction (Marneros, 2023). People typically experience a great deal of worry when they don't know how to communicate with their counterparts or what to expect from them (6 Barriers of Intercultural Communication Essay, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Berry's Acculturation Framework (Berry, 2019)

John W. Berry's Acculturation Framework looks into how individuals and communities adapt to and function in unfamiliar cultural contexts. Giving up one's own unique individuality and favouring the standards and values of the prevailing culture is referred to as assimilation. Following are the five acculturation stages included in the framework.

- Adaptation: refers to the ways in which they settle and adjust to the host country while preserving their cultural identity.
- Assimilation: is the process when refugees embrace the cultural norms of the host community.
- Integration: is where refugees engage with both their native and the host cultures.
- Separation: is the limitation of refugee interaction with host culture causes separation.
- Marginalization: occurs when refugees feel alienated from both their native and host cultures.

3.2. Kim's Intercultural Communication Theory (Kim, 2001)

Young Yun Kim used this theory to examine the difficulties of communicating across cultural divides. Kim's theory examines how cultural background, communication methods, and cultural values shape interactions and emphasises the dynamic aspect of cross-cultural communication.

- Cultural Norms and Communication Patterns
- Communication Strategies
- Cultural Sensitivity and Adaptability

3.3. Relevance

Combining these theoretical frameworks suggests that Afghan refugees go through different stages of adjustment, which affect how they communicate.

More importantly, applying these theories together provides a basis for understanding which stakeholders influenced the experience of refugees more. This theoretical synthesis underpins our research question, which explores the process of Afghan refugees' negotiation on culture shock, communication barriers, and integration processes with development actors and the host communities.

4. Methodology

We implemented a qualitative research method that granted a detailed study of personal learning and expert insights. The participants were first pinned down through direct contacts and later through snowball sampling

Interviews were carried out until data saturation was achieved. This data was analysed using thematic analysis to examine the scope and depth of intercultural barriers as experienced and observed by stakeholders¹. The analysis proceeded through the coding of data for preliminary themes until distinct patterns began to emerge consistently across the dataset.

Considering the vulnerability of the population involved and the sensitivity of the topic, ethical considerations were cardinal. All the participants were furnished with the affirmation of confidentiality and anonymity. The potential emotional influence of discussing sensitive issues was given utmost attention and handled with paramount discretion.

5. Findings

Our analysis of the conducted interviews helps us gain a deeper understanding of the barriers that impede Afghan refugees' full integration into Pakistani society.

5.1. Trust and Security in Refugee Integration: Balancing Stakeholder Concerns and Afghan Experiences

Trust is especially important to populations of refugees because of the difficult, drawn-out, and transitory nature of the refugee experience. This group may have quite different ideas about what trust is, therefore it's important to understand how this journey affects and changes their perspective of trust. When fleeing, assurance, safety, and security are all at risk. Refugees who are resettled then have to navigate a new language and culture as well as new institutions and processes. Many will continue to experience discrimination from society at large, from inside their own community, and from government policies.

Alongside trust, distrust is also frequently employed; however, distrust is more than just a lack of trust. After all, if we don't know enough about someone, we can't decide whether to trust or distrust them. When we are distrustful, we have to assume that people won't keep their word. This is where security plays a crucial role.

¹ The interview transcriptions are in custody of the researchers and will be provided upon request.

Security is a key component of the refugee protection scenario, regardless of whether they are perceived as potential threats to national or international security or as victims of security deficiencies. Thus, when talking about refugee protection, one cannot avoid taking part in security discussions. To sum it up, it is impossible to overestimate the value of trust, both generally and specifically for communities of refugees and asylum seekers.

Integrating refugees can be seen as an especially difficult act of cross-cultural cooperation requiring work on the part of both the host community and the refugees themselves. While substantial cultural differences may, on the other hand, increase the perceived risk of misunderstanding and defection, common values tend to boost the inclination to collaborate. For example, in a nation that has welcomed immigrants from many other nations, mutual expectations of each other's reliability are essential to promoting cohesiveness in a varied community. Consequently, trust is frequently cited as being essential to refugees' success in their new society.

Where in the case of Afghan refugees seeking asylum in Pakistan, cultural differences were not a major issue, several other factors hindered the development of trust and natural integration of the Afghan community in Pakistan.

This theme integrates the challenges of establishing trust and security problems, investigating how enhanced security measures affect trust-building efforts between stakeholders and refugees, and exploring the implications for social integration and intercultural communication.

Where the cultures of both countries are quite similar the refugees did not feel safe and welcomed into the community due to a lack of a proper regulatory framework. Several respondents agreed to the fact that they are living their lives in uncertainty and constant fear of deportation; not being able to go back to their home country and also being unsure of their living status in Pakistan. A participant also stated that there are not enough opportunities for the refugees back in their home country, the life they had there is completely gone, they don't have enough opportunities they did in Afghanistan as before and they are still in the same boat in Pakistan. Furthermore, a lack of policies and regulatory frameworks directed towards the livelihood of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan has made the security situation bleak making it one of the major concerns for the authorities in Pakistan. It makes the livelihood of the refugees uncertain and insecure.

“They are not protected, and they can be deported anytime without any restriction so their lives are not protected... their whole life is in an uncertain state,” said a journalist who volunteers with the Afghan refugees.

Similar cultures in some regions of Pakistan do not always play in the favour of Afghan refugees. They are often considered to be very anti-Pakistan. A participant stated that they only live here for a short while in hopes of getting a visa to move abroad. Pakistan only seems to be a transitory point for the refugees and they don't want the locals to become a hindrance in this entire process, which is why they refuse to integrate into the host community.

“They are more interested in going abroad and are least bothered about staying here and they didn't like the things here in Pakistan. They do not want us to become a hindrance, in their process of going abroad even though we were only giving them residence and food”.

Moreover, they are more often than not, in a defensive mode which is only natural coming from a place of war to a strange land. Their unwillingness to learn the national language and their refusal to build a life for themselves and their family in Pakistan emphasises the extent of the trust issues that have been deep-rooted for a long time. A participant volunteering with an organisation working for Afghan refugees stated that they pretend; they pretend that they do not know English language or the Urdu language.

“Although I am Pashto speaking, the language Afghans also know, they don't show as if they know the language. Even if they understand English, they sit all blank in front of us.”

She claims that the long war they have faced, stretching over many decades, has put them in defensive mode. She later added that classifying them as selfish and calling them ungrateful might be unfair considering the crisis they have suffered.

Furthermore, contradictory to what most participants said, she also emphasized the cultural differences that do exist.

“... there is a lot of Indian influence in Afghanistan, they watch Indian movies and copy Indian fashion. They also participate in Indian celebrations... their thoughts are anti-Pakistani.”

This statement was reiterated by another participant who stated the 'why' of the anti-Pakistani ideas of the Afghan refugees. He vehemently stated that the Afghans have been betrayed by Pakistanis. Addressing the Indian influence, he describes how the Indians help the Afghans with their education and invest money in their wellbeing.

“Pakistanis conduct bombings in Afghanistan and give base in Pakistan to the American military... this should not have been done by Pakistanis and this is wrong on their part.”

When we talk about trust and security in the context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, the role of the police cannot be ignored. How they treat the refugees, how they exploit them, and how they harass them. The participants have emphasized how the Afghan refugees are arrested, their houses are destroyed, and they are criminalized.

Another interview with a very experienced and well-informed worker in the government sector stated that building trust with Afghan refugees is not something that is very demanding, in fact, it is very simple. He emphasized that this community is extremely vulnerable and is not in any position to make demands for themselves, therefore building trust simply requires the material assistance that they desperately need.

“Afghan refugees need material assistance so building trust with them is easy if a realistic approach is adopted.”

During another very insightful interview with a lawyer volunteering with the Afghan refugees, it was revealed that the media plays a vital role in building trust with the refugees and one of the major discriminatory issues that Afghan refugees face is due to the media portrayal or the lack thereof.

This brings the question of how the vulnerable community of Afghan refugees is supposed to trust the locals when we treat them in an inhumane manner. He further stated that they don't feel secure and deem the locals untrustworthy because they are a neglected community that is rebuffed constantly by utilizing the power of media.

5.2. The Role of Legal Frameworks and Media in Shaping Societal Attitudes Toward Afghan Refugees

Print media analysis of Afghan refugee issues has taken into account the circumstances and challenges faced by these refugees in Pakistan. It is crucial to talk about how immigrants and refugees are portrayed in the media because it helps them negotiate and create identities that the public will eventually find acceptable. People can observe the world from a variety of perspectives thanks to the media, whose coverage also helps to understand what happens during times of peace and conflict. It has the power to sway public opinion in its own direction.

The media in Pakistan today is more sensational, competitive, aggressive, and critical and exaggerates them. Occasionally, instead of serving as a buffer against the assault of Western and local

media, it collaborates with them to exacerbate the already existing or perceived rifts in the community. In today's world people are more reliant on their phones, they watch TV dramas; which are a huge part of Pakistani culture, and they watch documentaries and news as well that have a very strong impact and can be very influential and persuasive for the Pakistani community. A lot of our media has played the role of villain with respect to Afghan refugees.

This theme combines the impacts of legal problems and the role of media, examining how legislation influences public perception and attitudes and the narrative constructed by media about Afghan refugees. It also explores how these legal and media frameworks contribute to stigma, marginalization, and discrimination.

When a government official was asked about the role of media in an interview, he stated that there is no accountability or check and balance of media. The power of media is used against the refugees and portrayed in a negative light; incorrect stereotypes are associated with the refugees i.e. Terrorism, criminal activity, smuggling, illegal weapons etc.

“Media portrayal might have some other meaning... this is a humanitarian issue and should be dealt with a protection framework and should not be politicised... there is no accountability or checks and balances of media. If I say anything about Afghans in media, they can't really do anything about it.”

A journalist, in her interview, stated that there are hundreds of thousands of instances available where the news has portrayed Afghan refugees in a negative light and have been blamed for any terror attacks and wars. This belief and fear are now so deeply rooted in Pakistani society, that they refuse to accept any other perception. She further stated that:

“If there is a case where an Afghan refugee is involved, the whole of the Afghan refugee community is targeted. So, I feel like most of our attitude towards Afghan refugees is because of these narratives that are built through the media.”

The role of media was further emphasized in another insightful interview with a participant. She stated that there are layers of discrimination.

“Media has a discriminatory role that they don't calculate things, they just generate stereotypes which has been going for decades...”

This discredited approach towards Afghan refugees in Pakistan has changed the narrative and has made the locals very skeptical of the refugees. It creates a cultural divide, separating one from the other even further. Legal frameworks are supposed to bind the locals and the refugees to follow certain rules and regulations and are a crucial element for both communities to strive together. But the lack

of regulations and frameworks prevent this from happening. People resort to other ways to shun Afghans because there are no legalities that stop them.

Afghan refugees are portrayed as criminals, as people who are a burden on the Pakistani society. When there are no proper policies to regulate the ‘burden’ then people will not care since the people who are supposed to care i.e. the Government and policymakers, are inactive and negligent to the crisis Pakistan is facing.

An interview with a very experienced and well-informed worker in the government sector stated that media portrayal might have some other meaning and this is a humanitarian issue and should be dealt with protection framework and should not be politicized. Adding onto this he also said:

“We have initiated the RAHA program for the peaceful coexistence as the local community does have some problems, mainly about their jobs as transport business and cheap labour is being provided to Afghan refugees.”

There is no official legal framework in Pakistan that specifically caters to the needs of Afghan refugees as of today. It should be a priority as the influx of Afghan refugees continues to increase and the locals do not have enough resources to cater to their needs. Policymakers must keep in mind the vulnerability of the Afghan community and the animosity and resentment they have to face on a daily basis.

“... a lot of our media has played the role of villain with respect to Afghan refugees for reasons not known to me.”

The discrimination and marginalisation stem from the stereotypes the media has created without realizing the impact it has on the perceptions of consumers and the effects it will have on the community in the long run. The next theme delves into the issues Afghan refugees face, courtesy of the censored Pakistani media and the naïve viewers. This discrimination and marginalization prevent the effective integration of Afghan refugees into Pakistani society and further enhances the issue of separation.

5.3. Marginalization Through Multiple Lenses: Gender, Legal Status, and Socio-cultural Identity

By examining the interplay of legal status, gender dynamics, and socio-cultural identities, we uncover the distinct and profound experiences of marginalization that shape the lives of refugees. Our analysis is underpinned by extensive qualitative data, collected through interviews with stakeholders including legal professionals, NGO workers, and the refugees themselves.

One particularly poignant example emerges from an interview with a lawyer who shared the experience of an Afghan child in the Pakistani educational system. The lawyer described a significant incident involving an Afghan student who, after years of uninterrupted schooling, was suddenly barred from matriculation due to an abrupt shift in government policy.

“Recently some Afghan kids contacted us, and they told us that Matriculation forms are being submitted and every year there was no problem with the nationality when submitting the papers, however this year the board isn't accepting the application of the Afghan students.”

This incident serves as a stark illustration of how changes in legal recognition and administrative decrees can directly obstruct the educational paths open to Afghan refugees, emphasizing the pivotal role that legal status plays in their daily lives and long-term prospects.

A similar incident was also mentioned in another interview with a worker with a government agency. He shared an incident where a university student was forced to leave mid-semester.

“They don't have different rights like they can't register businesses and face issues in education as well. A university in Faisalabad issued a notice that since you are an Afghan refugee you need to leave the university even though you are in the middle of getting your degree.”

This narrative of legal marginalization is closely linked to broader patterns of discrimination that Afghan refugees face. A harrowing account was provided concerning Afghan women and children detained in a centre in Quetta. These individuals, already vulnerable from the loss of male family members to terrorist attacks, found their situation exacerbated by their detention.

This particular situation highlights the intersection of gender and legal status, where the absence of a male family member—a significant 'intimidation factor' as one interviewee noted—intensifies their vulnerability to discrimination and harsh treatment.

“Once there was an Afghan woman whose husband was a cancer patient who passed away in jail, and when he passed away, we tried in the court that when the dead body is sent to Afghanistan along with that the woman is also deported back to Afghanistan however the court didn't agree saying that the challan hasn't been submitted yet and we can't do this right now.”

“... certain names that are given to these refugees like one of them is 'Kocha' (gypsies) or something which is not used in a good way.”

Further exploring the socio-cultural identity of Afghan refugees, we observe how their experiences of discrimination vary significantly across different Pakistani localities. For instance, in regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), where cultural and linguistic similarities between local Pathans and Afghan refugees facilitate some degree of social integration, the level of discrimination is comparatively lower.

“... they don’t feel it (discrimination) when they are in KP because they have similar culture and language and all those things, but I do see it in other provinces.”

However, in Sindh, the situation is markedly different. Here, the visible identity of Afghan refugees as 'outsiders,' coupled with cultural dissimilarities, makes them prime targets for government crackdowns and social ostracism. These regional disparities underscore how locality crucially shapes the social dynamics and the nature of discrimination that refugees endure.

The combination of these legal, gender, and sociocultural hurdles with the pervasiveness of marginalisation creates a challenging environment. However, it also highlights more serious problems with language and cultural estrangement that Afghan refugees deal with. This alienation severely obstructs any genuine integration and serves to further solidify their estrangement from the host society. These realisations prepared the ground for our next investigation on the enormous effects that language and cultural barriers have on their separation experiences.

The discussion of deeper forms of cultural and linguistic isolation shifts from overt forms of marginalisation to underlying variables that influence the actual realities of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Their fear of incarceration or worse motivates their unwillingness to interact with the host community, which exacerbates their marginalisation and furthers their isolation.

5.4. Cultural and Linguistic Barriers: Understanding Separation in the Afghan Refugee Experience

This theme delves into the significant obstacles that sustain and exacerbate the physical and psychological gaps that exist between refugees and the community they are residing in. These obstacles are largely seen in the social behaviours and choices that refugees make; these choices are frequently influenced by a complex web of factors including fear, cultural identification, and survival tactics that are supported by the acculturation theory of John Berry.

John Berry's model, which makes a distinction between the stages of integration, serves as the theoretical foundation for our methodology. Our empirical findings specifically illustrate the way of

separation by illuminating instances where Afghan refugees have made the conscious decision to preserve their cultural identity as opposed to assimilating into the host society.

During discussions with NGO workers, a striking example was observed: Afghan migrants showed a marked unwillingness to learn Urdu. This was not only a matter of language; it was a calculated move influenced by their temporary status and the ensuing concerns that any contact with the local population would result in their imprisonment because of their ambiguous legal situation.

This dread of facing legal consequences stems from actual experiences. After speaking with the media to explain their situation, Afghan refugees were singled out and taken into custody by the local authorities.

“Secondly, when we visit their areas the police of those areas suddenly become very active... we can see that the police become a lot more active than usual in the streets of those Afghan areas”

To reduce the possibility of disagreements and legal concerns, they select low-visibility tasks requiring little engagement with society at large. Although these employments give the required revenue, they don't do much to promote social and cultural integration, which keeps the gap between the host society and the refugees intact.

“They are involved in the transportation business, but they can't get driving licenses. They can't move freely and can't travel inter-provincially.”

The skepticism with which refugees view the motives of those attempting to assist them further compounds their isolation. This deep-seated mistrust is exacerbated by the absence of a clear legal framework in Pakistan that adequately recognizes or supports the rights and status of refugees. Consequently, many Afghan refugees view their stay in Pakistan not as an opportunity for permanent resettlement but merely as a temporary stopover en route to more accommodating countries.

A volunteer working with an NGO stated that “they just wanted to get their visa as soon as possible so that they could leave Pakistan... they were more interested in going abroad.”

Language is an issue that remains prevalent and is of paramount importance in understanding the problems the Afghan refugees face. A very useful example was quoted by a government official where he highlighted the issue of language barriers and the importance of addressing it

“In b-17 an afghani girl committed suicide, her mother visited our office and she spoke Dari and I really couldn't understand what she was trying to say. I could

only understand through signs and body language. She then took the help of her neighbor to write an application and call us.”

The overarching narrative of separation and isolation is further complicated by Pakistan's lack of comprehensive refugee policies. The absence of policies that facilitate integration, or at least acknowledge the presence and rights of refugees, provides little incentive for Afghan refugees to engage with Pakistani society.

Through our detailed observations and interviews, it becomes clear that the cultural and linguistic barriers faced by Afghan refugees are not mere inconveniences but significant obstacles that actively shape their experience and perception of life in Pakistan.

6. Discussion

The exploration of trust and security issues is related to the objectives of the study as it highlights how stakeholder perceptions influence the integration and experience of refugees in Pakistan.

The discussion of legal frameworks and the role of media aligns with identifying intercultural barriers as they shape societal attitudes and directly impact the access of refugees to essential services, it explores the development of stakeholder’s perception of the intercultural journey.

The findings provide a comprehensive view of the complex landscape that Afghan refugees navigate through on a daily basis in Pakistan and also illustrates the interconnectedness of cultural, legal and social dynamics that shape their experiences in their host country; Pakistan, which aligns with the second research objective that states the need to identify and analyse the language barriers and socio-cultural differences and the marginalisation that is faced by Afghan refugees through the lens of gender and legal status that they have in Pakistan.

6.1. Policy Interventions

Our research proposes that multiple amendments to the prevailing legal frameworks and policies in Pakistan are essential to better address the needs and rights of Afghan refugees. These recommendations are expressed with the intention of informing policymakers and stakeholders involved in refugee management and integration.

- The research underscores the need for decolonizing and revolutionizing the Foreigners Act, suggesting amendments that remove any outdated provisions and integrate modern human rights standards to ensure fair and impartial handling of all non-citizens.

- Findings indicate the importance of developing new and inclusive frameworks that include inputs from both the host communities and the refugees themselves. Such inclusive policymaking ensures that the developed policies are well-rounded and contextually relevant.
- Prioritization should be given to the adoption of the principle of non-refoulement and the establishment of a law that protects refugees. The adoption would help secure refugees from being forcibly returned to a country where there is a constant state of war, or the refugee is at threat by local militant groups. Threats can be defined by the Governments of the Refugee's country with proof of attacks or reports.
- It is advised to include refugees in the tax net and is solely dependent if they are given legal rights to work. This will reduce the refugees' dependency on aid and would also legitimize their economic contributions to the host country.
- The local economy can benefit by leveraging the skills of Afghan refugees and can in turn provide them with free professional visas. Work visas can be provided with the work permit so that they can be allowed to participate in the economy through a legal status. A work permit should be provided for people who choose to stay and work in the host country with job letters backed by registered companies and organisations.
- It is crucial to sensitize and train law enforcement agencies about the rights and needs of refugees. This can be done through training programs which would aim at reducing instances of harassment. A check and balance policy should be implemented to ensure the practical implication and integration of those training programs among Law Enforcement Agencies. Moreover, a separate entity should be formed which will administer the complaints of refugees regarding desensitization done by Law Enforcement Agencies and upon evidence and proof of such matters, the entity will be authorized to take actions to ensure the strict compliance of Sensitization among refugees.
- Pakistan should take inspiration from developed countries like the United States and Canada and redefine Pakistan's Citizenship Act to enable long-term refugees to apply for citizenship of Pakistan under specific conditions which may include being born in Pakistan or living within Pakistan for 10-20 years (decided by government eligibility criteria).
- Specific refugee laws and policies should be established that provide clear guidelines on the legal status, rights and integration processes of the refugees living in Pakistan. Focus should also be put on those refugees who have been residing in Pakistan for extended periods.

- Media laws and regulations should be strengthened to ensure responsible reporting about refugees and topics related to them. PEMRA should adhere to strict policies regarding the spread of hate speech. If any media chooses to generalize a whole community with reference to any stereotypes such as terrorists, thieves or other common stereotypes should face legal actions to ensure stability among communities.

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Researchers

The most significant limitation was the inability to interact directly with and interview Afghan refugees because of their vulnerable status. As a result of this limitation, the study relied on interviews with the stakeholders who interact with the refugees and this approach may affect the comprehensiveness of the findings.

Future researchers should thoroughly address the ethical considerations and protection of the refugees and should engage directly with the Afghan refugees as this could enrich the data and highlight unique experiences. The pool of interviews should be expanded to include a broader spectrum of organizations and stakeholders for a more holistic view of the challenges of current support structures.

Future studies should aim to develop and suggest policies that are informed by deeper engagement with the affected community and should also have a comparative analysis of different localities and cultural contexts within Pakistan as this could lead to more effective and sustainable solutions for the refugees.

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