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Gender, culture, and migration: A qualitative study of the socioeconomic challenges facing Afghan women refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

The research explores Afghan refugee women's challenges in accessing education, employment, and legal rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It seeks to inform policy changes to improve their socioeconomic circumstances and mitigate these hardships. The study employs qualitative methodologies, utilizing interviews, observation, and document analysis to capture rich, in-depth narratives from three Afghan refugee women. Each narrative provides unique insights into the women's struggles with education, employment, and securing legal rights. The research highlights challenges from forced migration, gender inequality, cultural norms, and socioeconomic marginalization, causing a holistic crisis for Afghan refugee women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. These issues hinder access to education, employment, financial vulnerabilities, and legal uncertainties. The study suggests a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach to policy changes, including education reform for refugee girls, gender-responsive recruitment practices, and legal reforms to secure refugees' rights. It emphasizes gender-responsive support services and involves Afghan refugee women in policy development processes, leveraging their experiences for more effective and inclusive policies. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [5]: 90-102).

Keywords: Gender and migration, Afghan women refugees, socioeconomic challenges, cultural integration, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Résumé

La recherche explore les difficultés rencontrées par les femmes réfugiées afghanes pour accéder à l'éducation, à l'emploi et aux droits légaux à Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, au Pakistan. Il cherche à éclairer les changements politiques pour améliorer leur situation socio-économique et atténuer ces difficultés. L'étude utilise des méthodologies qualitatives, utilisant des entretiens, des observations et des analyses de documents pour recueillir des récits riches et approfondis de trois femmes réfugiées afghanes. Chaque récit fournit un aperçu unique des luttes des femmes en matière d'éducation, d'emploi et d'obtention de leurs droits légaux. La recherche met en évidence les défis liés à la migration forcée, à l'inégalité entre les sexes, aux normes culturelles et à la marginalisation socio-économique, provoquant une crise holistique pour les femmes réfugiées afghanes à Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, au Pakistan. Ces problèmes entravent l'accès à l'éducation, à l'emploi, souffrent de vulnérabilités financières et d'incertitudes juridiques. L'étude suggère une approche globale et multidimensionnelle des changements politiques, y compris une réforme de l'éducation pour les filles réfugiées, des pratiques de recrutement sensibles au genre et des réformes juridiques pour garantir les droits des réfugiés. Il met l'accent sur les services de soutien sensibles au genre et implique les femmes réfugiées afghanes dans les processus d'élaboration des politiques, en tirant parti de leurs expériences pour des politiques plus efficaces et inclusives. (*Afr J Reprod Health* 2024; 28 [5]: 90-102).

Mots-clés: Genre et migration, femmes réfugiées afghanes, défis socio-économiques, intégration culturelle, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Introduction

This study explores the social and economic challenges experienced by Afghan women refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, as a result of gender, culture, and migration dynamics. The

region's history has resulted in notable population and cultural changes that have impacted women and marginalized communities. Refugee women from Afghanistan encounter distinct social and economic challenges as a result of their gender, cultural displacement, and the intricacies of being a foreign

national. The study sheds light on their situation within the broader political and social context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province undergoing significant economic and social transformations. This piece highlights the experiences of Afghan women in this location, shedding light on the challenges they face in obtaining education and employment and navigating legal procedures. I am a resident of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and this study is fascinating due to my firsthand experience with the diverse social, economic, and educational challenges that Afghan refugees encounter in my area. As Afghan refugees, particularly women, face psychological consequences due to these challenges, I am committed to conducting comprehensive research in this field to inform policy and fulfill my academic responsibilities. This research offers valuable insights for educational institutions, organizations, and researchers interested in conducting further studies in this field.

Research shows a significant increase in population mobility, with approximately 272 million individuals leaving their home countries and relocating to new ones¹. Europe and Asia were the preferred choices for most foreign migrants, with North America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania attracting many individuals². The United States remained the leading destination, with Germany, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, France, and Canada closely behind³. Immigrants and refugees make valuable sociocultural and economic contributions to the nations they settle in, although international migration has its share of positive and negative aspects⁴. Some benefits include job prospects, a place to work from home, and finding solace in a peaceful environment⁵. One challenge established immigrants and refugees face is feeling included as they adjust to their new home⁶. Social inclusion is a comprehensive process that promotes tolerance, appreciation of diversity, and recognition of individual distinctions⁷. Nevertheless, the interplay between systems of privilege and oppression, along with the convergence of particular social identities, can potentially expose international migrants to the threat of social exclusion⁸. Lower-income,

unemployment, legal rights barriers, and limited health literacy can compound specific populations' challenges⁹.

The number of people fleeing their homes has significantly increased over the past few decades¹⁰. Various factors, such as War, violent conflict, and natural disasters, have contributed to this increase¹¹. As per the UN's estimation of the global population in 2019¹², many women and girls have left their residences in pursuit of safety. According to the data, there were 7.7 billion people, with approximately equal numbers of females and males. The displaced population was approximately 79.5 million, with 41.3 million females and 38.2 million males¹³. The vulnerability of women and girls to assault, exploitation, and abuse highlights the urgent need to address the gender gap¹⁴. The lack of proper documentation and legal safeguards increases their vulnerability to exploitation and financial hardship¹⁵. Despite the obstacles faced, migrant women have made significant contributions to global society by offering vital services and goods, thus fostering social and economic development¹⁶. Despite playing crucial roles in their families and communities, they occasionally face exploitation and forced relocation¹⁷. Their dedication and expertise contribute significantly to the global effort to enhance people's quality of life¹⁸.

In this regard, Afghan migrant women have played a crucial role in driving the progress of communities, economies, and societies, promoting a prosperous and inclusive society¹⁹. However, many Afghan migrant women have found refuge in Pakistan due to the severe War, ongoing turmoil, and widespread brutality²⁰. In this new environment, they face various economic and social challenges²¹. These factors encompass multiple aspects, such as labor markets, financial resources, legal rights, and education¹³. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Afghan migrant women face a range of social and economic obstacles, such as social exclusion, stigma, and difficulties in accessing justice²². These limitations hinder their ability to support their families, access resources, and improve their lives^{13,22}. This study investigates the socioeconomic challenges faced by Afghan migrant women in Pakistan's Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa province, as well as the impact of these challenges on their daily lives and overall well-being.

The historical backdrop of the Afghan conflict and migration

The alarming number of people forcibly displaced by the end of 2022, reaching a staggering 108.4 million, demonstrates the global importance of migration²³. In addition, it is deeply troubling to see the distressing effects of conflict and violence on children, as evidenced by the staggering number of approximately 43.3 million children displaced worldwide by the end of the same year²⁴. During times of crisis, neighboring countries often face the challenge of accommodating a large influx of refugees²⁵. This was evident during the Syrian Civil War when Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan experienced a significant rise in the number of Syrians seeking refuge within their borders²⁶. In addition, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan has led to a substantial number of individuals migrating to Pakistan and Iran²⁷. Likewise, a large number of Ukrainian refugees from the Russian War sought refuge in the countries bordering western Ukraine. Simultaneously, 3 million people traveled to European countries, such as Poland, Hungary, Moldova, and other destinations worldwide²⁸. Asylum seekers in Afghanistan encounter a range of difficulties, such as restricted economic prospects, access to healthcare and education, and legal safeguards²⁹. The ongoing conflict since 2001 has exacerbated pre-existing issues, such as infrastructure deterioration and compromised healthcare systems³⁰. The involuntary displacement of Afghan citizens has resulted in a humanitarian crisis, prompting many individuals to seek asylum in neighboring countries or global regions³¹. The Afghan War during the Cold War significantly impacted regional security and international politics³². Over the past forty years, approximately 1.4 million Afghan refugees have moved to Pakistan³³, as the ongoing conflict and power transition within the Taliban have worsened existing problems³⁴. Numerous obstacles confront women in Afghanistan, such as marginalization, prejudice,

limited access to healthcare and education, and increased susceptibility to violence and human rights violations³⁵.

Economic factors frequently influence conflicts and security concerns, which are the main drivers of Afghan migration³⁶. Many individuals from rural areas choose to relocate to urban areas or foreign countries to improve their financial situation^{35,36}. Some Afghans with higher incomes opt to move to more developed nations, resulting in impoverished individuals becoming internally displaced people (IDPs)³⁷. Young Afghans migrate for improved economic opportunities, significantly impacting women³⁸. The Soviet Union's invasion from 1979 to 1989 forced many Afghans to seek refuge in neighboring countries. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 led to unrest and internal conflict among different groups³⁹. The country's economic situation significantly deteriorated after the Kabul administration's collapse and the cessation of external assistance to Afghanistan^{38,39}. Many Afghans sought refuge in neighboring countries to improve their living conditions³⁹. Various factors, including domestic conflicts, security concerns, environmental challenges, and foreign involvement, have influenced migration in Afghanistan over the past five decades⁴⁰. Afghanistan has been instrumental in linking South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia on the historic Silk Road⁴¹. Throughout history, countless leaders and empires have embarked on expeditions, culminating in the notorious "Graveyard of Empires." The "Great Game," a power struggle between Russia and Britain in the nineteenth century, unfolded in Afghanistan, ultimately resulting in the Soviet Union gaining control after almost six decades^{41,42}. Following the Soviet Union's exit, a civil war broke out, resulting in extensive damage to infrastructure and widespread turmoil. In 2001, the United States initiated military action to remove the Taliban government⁴³.

After the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, a considerable number of Afghans, around 1.2 million, returned to Afghanistan⁴⁴. However, a civil war broke out between the Mujahideen and the Soviet-backed Najibullah government, leading to ethnic conflicts,

extensive infrastructure damage, and a severe economic decline⁴⁵. Some human rights violations led to Kabul becoming stateless. Following 1989, a substantial migration wave occurred in Afghanistan due to the escalating poverty rates, prompting numerous Afghans to search for improved opportunities elsewhere⁴⁶. Following the conclusion of the Soviet occupation, around 1.5 million refugees returned to Afghanistan. In 1997, approximately 2.5 million Afghans had returned from Pakistan and Iran⁴⁷. The rise of the Taliban in 1994 exacerbated the situation, leading to economic decline and dependence on international assistance. The Taliban era had a profound impact on Afghanistan, especially on the Shia sect, leading to a state of isolation. The country's arid climate and ongoing climate change challenges have caused significant drought and famine, resulting in increased poverty levels and the displacement of numerous individuals⁴⁸. In the 2000s, Afghanistan encountered various difficulties, including drought, famine, armed conflict, and security issues. These challenges prompted many Afghans to seek shelter elsewhere⁴⁹.

After the Taliban regime fell in 2001, the Afghan government's Voluntary Return Program successfully facilitated the return of 4.3 million Afghan immigrants to Afghanistan between 2002 and 2008. A significant number of individuals originated from Pakistan and Iran⁵⁰. Nevertheless, the Taliban's resurgence in 2005 and security concerns hindered the progress of repatriation, resulting in a decrease in UNHCR's assistance to refugee families. Several Western states, including Australia and England, have started the process of relocating refugees to Afghanistan⁵¹. The 2001 administration needed help in enacting policies to tackle the rising concerns surrounding unemployment and poverty rates. Years of conflict and underdevelopment have led to a significant increase in emigration⁵². In 2014, the transfer of security responsibility from the USA and NATO to Afghan security forces resulted in a substantial migration wave. In 2021, a significant number of undocumented Afghans decided to return to Afghanistan, with the majority of them coming back from Iran and Pakistan⁵³. The Afghan Ministry of

Refugees and Repatriations (MoRR) has encountered difficulties addressing initial needs, such as housing⁵⁴.

The Taliban's Second Era began on July 22, 2021, following the collapse of the Kabul government in Afghanistan. The start of the Taliban's Second Era led to a notable increase in the Afghan migration crisis⁵⁰. More than half of the country's 40 million residents face significant challenges in meeting their basic needs, with 22.8 million people experiencing severe food insecurity since 2021. There has been a substantial increase in malnutrition prevalence, with a worrying number of 2 million children currently suffering from undernourishment⁵⁵. Based on data from the International Organization for Migration, many displaced individuals, with a particular focus on women and children⁵⁶, have fled their homes. Since July 2021, over 550,000 Afghan citizens have had to flee their homes⁵⁰. The rapid progress and increased violence in Afghanistan have led to another mass migration crisis, with many people seeking refuge in neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran⁵⁰. According to UNHCR guidelines, individuals must possess a valid entry document to enter both countries⁵⁷. A large number of Afghan refugees are entering Pakistan and Iran without the necessary paperwork, with a significant proportion of them being children and women⁵⁸. Neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Europe, have expressed reservations about accepting Afghan immigrants, mainly due to the existing issues of poverty and security⁵⁰.

Challenges faced by Afghan migrant women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa:

Due to the ongoing political instability and armed conflict in Afghanistan, there has been a significant rise in the number of Afghan refugees seeking shelter in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan⁵⁹. The conflicts in the Soviet Union during the 1980s and 1970s, the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the recent Taliban takeover in August 2021 have intensified the migration crisis⁶⁰. Armed conflicts leave the refugee population, primarily women and children, extremely vulnerable to negative

consequences such as forced displacement and exposure to violence. The situation of Afghan refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is multifaceted and poses significant social and economic challenges, particularly for women. Refugees face difficulties in adapting to their new communities due to limited access to necessary resources, differences in language and culture, and feelings of isolation⁶¹. Incidents of assault, discrimination, and gender-based violence are unfortunately common for Afghan women who have become refugees and have had to resettle in a foreign country⁶². Gender roles greatly influence women's access to healthcare services, education, and economic opportunities, ultimately leaving them more vulnerable in terms of their socioeconomic status^{63,64}.

There is a pressing demand for tailored support systems for Afghan refugee women, considering the impact of migration, gender-based discrimination, and the limited availability of healthcare, education, and employment opportunities^{65,66}. Afghan women have challenges in making autonomous health choices due to regional sociocultural variables, such as cultural conventions and conventional gender roles. Socioeconomic challenges, such as gender-based discrimination, mistreatment, and hostility, exacerbate these problems⁶⁷. Emphasizing the importance of improving healthcare access and addressing gender-based discrimination is critical to ensuring people's well-being and meeting their unique health needs^{68,69}. Numerous organizations, both local and international, such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Society for Human Rights and Prisoner's Aid (SHARP), provide a diverse array of services to Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with a specific emphasis on the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region. These organizations collaborate closely with the Pakistani government and various groups to offer vital services, safeguard the rights of refugees, and promote practical solutions such as voluntary repatriation, shelter, community engagement, and global resettlement⁷⁰.

Key challenges

Educational challenges: Education offers women many advantages, including enhanced employment prospects, improved health outcomes, and greater gender equality. Women refugees from Afghanistan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, encounter various challenges in accessing education, which impede their journey toward social and economic progress^{71,72}. Cultural and social norms often hinder women's education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa⁷³. There is a prevalent issue where certain cultural norms tend to prioritize patriarchal societies and assign women mainly to domestic roles. Regrettably, this frequently results in the marginalization of women's education⁷⁴. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, there is a predominant focus on women's involvement in domestic duties rather than educational pursuits. This societal expectation frequently results in hesitation and resistance towards education for women and girls⁷³. These cultural expectations contribute to a societal mindset that devalues female education, perpetuating a cycle of neglecting education and missing out on opportunities for acquiring skills, personal growth, and economic empowerment⁷⁴. Despite these challenges, women who have achieved a high level of education can discover rewarding careers, command higher salaries, contribute significantly to economic development, make informed decisions about their health, and champion gender equality by challenging established norms⁷². The UNHCR and the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Program provide educational assistance to Afghan refugees in Pakistan. This ensures access to necessary resources such as facilities, textbooks, uniforms, and scholarships⁷⁵. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of ongoing support and creative solutions to ensure women have access to education⁷⁶.

Economic limitations: Refugee families, particularly women, often face financial obstacles that can significantly impede their progress⁷⁷. The economic development of Afghan migrant women

in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa faces several obstacles. The financial challenges caused by the ongoing migration following the Soviet Union invasion and the recent Taliban takeover have had a significant impact on Afghan women⁷⁸. Afghan families face challenging circumstances that force them to prioritize their immediate survival needs, exacerbating their already difficult situations. Moreover, it is essential to consider indirect cost factors, such as the effects on employment or the challenges of meeting familial obligations in Afghanistan. It is important to note that Afghan families with limited resources often face difficult financial decisions⁷⁹. Usually, these families prioritize immediate needs such as education, food, housing, and healthcare more than long-term investments. In addition, the financial barriers present a significant hurdle to Afghan women's skill development, limiting their chances for future economic success⁸⁰. However, it is critical to consider the impact of financial challenges on refugees' education, as they have a dual effect. One of the results is restricted access to educational opportunities, particularly for women. It also increases the likelihood of women dropping out of school before finishing their education. This contributes to the gender disparity in education among refugees⁷⁹.

Gender-based violence: Gender-based violence is a significant challenge for transit and host communities, particularly Afghan women residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa⁸¹. It harms their physical and mental health, limits their participation in society, and hinders their access to education. Gender inequality and violence significantly impede their ability to fully engage in productive work, education, and community involvement⁸². In addition, it is essential to acknowledge that individuals who have undergone specific experiences often encounter feelings of shame and societal judgment. These negative perceptions can harm their economic prospects, leading to a cycle of poverty and dependence. The high incidence of gender-based violence intensifies existing circumstances, creating a feeling of fear and insecurity among those impacted⁸³.

Research questions

This study aims to analyze the challenges faced by Afghan migrant women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. We pursued the following research questions: (1) What barriers do Afghan migrant women face to accessing education and employment opportunities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa? (2). What legal barriers do Afghan migrant women face, and how do they affect their social integration and access to essential services in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa? (3) How can we develop strategies and reforms to improve Afghan migrant women's educational and employment opportunities and legal rights in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan?

Methods

We collected data via three in-depth qualitative interviews between February and December 2023 at the Azakhel refugee camp in Noshwera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

The interview method

The interviews consisted of a precise sequence of semi-directed, open-ended, and in-depth questions. They reflected on migrant women's current challenges and experiences, allowing the researcher to discuss the issue of forced migration as perceived by the subjects.

The interview protocols

We obtained the necessary approvals from local authorities and the focal person of the refugee camp in the city, following a thorough ethical review process that placed great importance on the sensitivity of the data and the sample size. We then used the purposive sampling technique to contact those individuals who met the study's data collection criteria. After thoroughly explaining the research project, we conducted interviews with potential participants.

The interview samples

Women made up the entire sample of three participants available for interviews, consistent with

the subjects' perceptions and the study's objectives. The participants ranged in age from 22 years to 35 years. Throughout the interviews, the participants were predominantly Afghan citizens living in the refugee camp. All participants were single and held high school diplomas. One of the three participants was a student, another was currently unemployed, and both were responsible for various household activities within the refugee camp. All the participants were Afghan citizens who migrated to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan and resided in the refugee camp.

The interview processes

The interviews occurred at the Azakhel refugee camp in Noshwera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. We asked pertinent questions in specific areas of interest. We encouraged participants to discuss their overall migration experience, daily activities before and after migration, challenges faced in the foreign country, and potential solutions during the interview process. We conducted the interviews in Pashto and later translated them into English. The initial part of the interview focused on gathering biographic information, including gender, age, marital status, employment status, and educational background. The second set of questions focused on the interviewees' background, culture, and motivations for migrating to a different country. The third set of questions focused on participants' aspirations, motivations, and outlook on changing their lives. The main themes that emerged, such as the educational challenges faced by immigrant women, unemployment, and legal rights following migration to a foreign country, guided the coding of the interview data.

We conducted the interviews for about two hours, recorded them, transcribed them word for word, and carefully reviewed them for precision. We developed straightforward questions and expanded upon them as necessary. We often posed additional questions to elicit the required information. All participants received a consent form to read alongside the interviewer following the ethical review. The interviewer inquired about their understanding of the consent form and their comfort

level with continuing the interview. All participants willingly signed the consent form; there were no dropouts during the interview. We assured all respondents of the confidentiality of the information they provided.

Approach to analysis

A qualitative data study recommends using a descriptive or content analysis technique to analyze data gathered through qualitative research methods⁸⁴. These approaches demonstrate factors that shape individuals' perspectives. This investigation utilized a content analysis technique, which guarantees a thorough explanation. We have developed a framework utilizing codes and categories to represent all the data accurately⁸⁵. First, use the research questions, research framework, and field study findings to establish a thematic framework for the data. The next step involved coding the interview transcripts according to the predetermined themes. We then attempted to describe, explain, and make sense of the structured data by marking variables such as age, gender, and profession. Ultimately, we thoroughly analyzed the categories' contents, including insightful quotes from respondents, to validate the story's authenticity. Key themes that emerged include:

- The participants' personal histories.
- The starting points of their migration journeys.
- The reasons behind their decision to migrate.
- The challenges they faced upon arriving in their host countries.

To analyze the data, we thoroughly examined the participants' narratives, the factors that led to migration, and the challenges they encountered during their time in the host nation. After extensive research, literature, assumptions, and premises, we analyze the experiences of migrant women in a foreign country using theoretical frameworks to understand their stories. Every code (F1, F2, and F3) ensures strict confidentiality, safeguarding the respondent's data and personal information.

Case study highlights

This section presents three distinct case studies that center on Afghan migrant women. The first case

studies explore the diverse obstacles encountered by a migrant woman in the field of education; the second case study presents the experiences of migrant women and sheds light on the challenges they face in their professional roles; and the third case study examines the efforts of migrant women that primarily focus on advocating for legal rights.

Case Study 1: Struggle for education

(F1), a 22-year-old Afghan girl, moved to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with her family during childhood. The violence and upheaval in Afghanistan drove her to seek safety and a new beginning. Since infancy, the respondent has desired to enhance her education, broaden her horizons, and accomplish her dream. The respondent experienced considerable educational challenges due to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and her family's financial difficulties. Furthermore, the respondent's cultural expectations of women and girls in her society have severely constrained her choices. The respondent performs household activities, leaving her little time and energy for academics. Her family's financial difficulties and refugee status in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa jeopardize her educational ambitions. This circumstance had two nasty consequences: it hampered her personal development, reduced her chances of future work, and increased her dependency on others for financial assistance. The response case study emphasizes the need to fight for education opportunities for all refugee girls, regardless of their refugee status.

Case Study 2: The battle for employment opportunities

(F2), a 28-year-old female from Afghanistan, migrated from Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. The respondent and her family members have relocated to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Despite having a primary education, the respondent encountered difficulties securing employment due to gender bias in the workplace. In addition, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, social norms, cultural practices, and traditions, particularly the Pashtunwali (Pashtun code of

conduct), prevent her from seeking employment outside the home, which discriminates against women and stereotypes women negatively who pursue careers outside the house. As a result, the lack of economic opportunities increased her dependency on male family members for financial support, which caused financial instability and reduced her self-confidence. The respondent's experiences emphasize the significance of incorporating gender-inclusive recruitment procedures and encouraging women's economic involvement.

Case Study 3: Fight for legal rights and social inclusion

(F3), a 35-year-old woman from Afghanistan, has relocated to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, to seek refuge from the ongoing situation in her home country. Due to insufficient legal documentation, the respondent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has faced difficulties accessing essential services, employment opportunities, and the freedom to move around. In addition, her refugee status and gender contribute to her experience of marginalization and discrimination, which pose challenges to her integration into Pakistani society. The respondent's experience underscores the importance of legal reforms to guarantee that refugee women can access essential services and rights, enabling smooth integration into their host country.

The case study interpretation

The narratives of (F1, F2, and F3) provide valuable perspectives on the socioeconomic challenges Afghan women residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa encounter. These narratives are essential for providing a contextual understanding of broader issues.

The story of (F1) highlights the various challenges faced by refugee women, especially those migrating from areas of political and social instability and rigid cultural traditions. (F1) faces educational obstacles due to her Afghan background, migration to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, gender expectations, war-induced poverty, and refugee marginalization, all of which affect her

academic pursuits. Despite her strong aspirations, the responsibilities imposed on her by conventional expectations severely curtail her time and energy for education, further adding to her family's financial vulnerabilities. The current scenario hinders her personal growth and her ability to make a meaningful impact on society. Furthermore, her situation reinforces patterns of dependency and limits her financial opportunities. The (F1) case highlights the importance of implementing policy changes and advocacy efforts that prioritize education for migrant girls, regardless of gender or refugee status. These are very important to promote their economic independence and social empowerment in the future.

The case study of (F2) provides a compelling example of the widespread gender norms and discrimination that women face around the globe, especially in societies characterized by rigid patriarchy. The migration of F2 from Afghanistan to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, illustrates the complex process of homelessness, economic insecurity, and gender inequality. Gender bias and social norms, which limit women's professional opportunities in the domestic sphere, explain (F2)'s problems finding work despite her primary education. As a result of the described situation, (F2) is financially dependent on male family members, which has negatively affected her self-esteem and independence. The context underscores the importance of a gender-inclusive recruitment policy, particularly in societies and sectors where male dominance is prevalent. These practices have the potential to lead to women's economic empowerment. Also, it will create better opportunities for women and contribute to overall economic growth and stability. In addition, the (F2) story highlights the importance of promoting women's participation in the economy to address the intertwined issues of gender inequality, poverty, and dependency.

The narrative of F3 serves as a poignant representation of the challenges numerous female refugees face, highlighting the complex dynamics between gender, legal standing, and societal inclusion. As F3 sought refuge from the devastating effects of the conflict in Afghanistan, she anticipated

finding solace upon resettling in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. However, her experience was a complex web of societal and legal limitations. Refugees frequently lack adequate documentation, which exacerbates the marginalization and discrimination they face due to their gender and refugee status. In turn, it restricts their ability to avail themselves of essential services, employment prospects, and freedom of movement. In addition, the challenges she faced highlight a broader deficiency in effectively integrating refugee women into their host communities, requiring immediate attention and focused consideration. The case study of (F3) highlights the critical need for comprehensive legal reforms in host countries to ensure the fundamental rights of refugees, with a particular focus on women. These reforms would facilitate their integration into social, economic, and cultural aspects, ultimately fostering more inclusive societies.

The following case studies exemplify the resilience of refugee women as they confront formidable socioeconomic barriers within host communities. The intersection of gender, refugee status, and cultural norms significantly affects the lives of refugee women. However, it also presents opportunities to address and enhance their circumstances.

Discussion and Implications

According to research, refugee women have unique educational hurdles, primarily due to financial constraints, cultural norms, and displacement-related disruptions⁸⁶. In this regard, consider the situation of respondent F1, who moved to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in pursuit of security and stability. Her educational challenges, including disputes, financial issues, and social expectations, hampered her personal development, access to school, and future potential. Furthermore, her experience is consistent with studies that emphasize the influence of cultural expectations and financial constraints on refugee women's educational opportunities^{87,88}. In places like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such as the F1 case, women prioritize their household obligations over their academic endeavors. This is consistent with

studies that demonstrate the influence of cultural variables on women's education in refugee situations⁸⁹.

Research has also shown that cultural norms and gender prejudices have a significant impact on women's participation in the workforce, especially in more traditional nations^{90,91}. Regarding this matter, consider the case of respondent F2, who migrated from Afghanistan following the rise of the Taliban in 2021 and faced challenges in securing employment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Considering the influence of Pashtunwali, gender bias, and societal expectations, her decision not to pursue a career outside the home could potentially lead to financial instability and a decrease in self-assurance⁹². Her experience is consistent with significant studies on migratory women's obstacles while looking for jobs⁹³. Furthermore, Pashtunwali's impact on female job chances in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrates how cultural traditions might hinder women's economic participation. Her expertise highlights the relationship between cultural norms and gender in refugee work⁹⁴.

Due to a lack of legal documents, F2 seeking sanctuary in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, needs assistance obtaining essential services, economic opportunities, and personal freedom. Her refugee status and gender provide substantial barriers to integration into the host society, perhaps leading to marginalization and discrimination. The literature extensively underlines the difficulties migrant women have in obtaining vital services and legal rights, with legal restrictions often worsening their vulnerabilities^{95,96}. The gendered aspect of these difficulties is an important research topic. Furthermore, her experiences reflect refugees' particular hurdles in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the existing law and order situation makes acquiring legal paperwork and integrating into local communities difficult⁹⁷. Research has shown that there are specific obstacles in legal systems that affect refugees in a variety of ways⁹⁸.

The F1, F2, and F3 case studies have more profound implications beyond their experiences. This article sheds light on broader patterns of displacement, gender, and social norms, as well as their effects on vulnerable populations. By

highlighting these personal experiences, we better understand the complex relationship between various elements. This will help us establish and implement more complete and comprehensive policies. A thorough review of F1's history may provide valuable insights regarding the need to give females educational opportunities while also reevaluating cultural norms and expectations around their roles. (F2) Recognizing the need to address gender prejudice in professional settings and cultural expectations that restrict women's economic empowerment is critical. The respondent's condition (F3) emphasizes the crucial need for legislative change and inclusive policies that enable refugees to access fundamental rights and services. The case studies show the need to adopt individual and comprehensive methods to address refugee women's issues successfully. They emphasize the need to include these women in creating solutions that affect them directly.

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