

Struggling for Survival: Understanding the Economic and Social Constraints Faced by Afghan Refugee Female-Headed Households in Balochistan, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the social and economic constraints Afghan refugee female-headed households face in Balochistan, Pakistan. Afghan women comprise a significant portion of the refugee population, with many becoming widowed due to conflict and war in their home country. Consequently, these households are primarily led by women in the host countries. Qualitative research was carried out with 20 Widowed Afghan refugee female-headed households in Quetta, Balochistan. The findings shed light on several key challenges faced by these women. Firstly, there need to be more resources available to Afghan women, hindering their ability to sustain their households. Limited access to business opportunities and financial benefits further exacerbates their economic struggles. Additionally, these women encounter barriers in accessing social services and security, impeding their overall well-being. Gender discrimination remains prevalent, affecting their daily lives and prospects for improvement. Given this refugee group's marginalized status, Pakistan's government and international organizations must devise coping strategies. Adequate resources must be allocated to address the specific needs of Afghan refugee women in Pakistan.

Keywords: Economic, Social, Constraints.

To cite this article: Kakar, M, M., Ullah H, & Salam, S, A (2022). Struggling for Survival: Understanding the Economic and Social Constraints Faced by Afghan Refugee Female-Headed

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are the lifeblood of every society, as culture, organization, and communities all rely on the relationships between individuals and their environment. Men and women are integral in the upkeep and advancement of human society (Wilson, 2012). As a class, women comprise half of humanity and are integral to every community (England, 2010). In modern-day societies, women participate in various activities, from the smallest neighbourhood groups to the largest global organizations. Women contribute to all aspects of life, from the economy and politics to the arts and sciences (Paxton et al., 2020). They are an essential part of the human experience, and their presence and influence are seen in all parts of the world. Women are an invaluable and vital part of humanity, and they have a tremendous impact on the development of our societies (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

The past few decades have seen an unprecedented surge in the number of people forced to flee their homes due to various circumstances, including conflict, violence, and natural disasters (Brück, 2019). Women and girls, in particular, are particularly vulnerable in these situations, and many have had to leave their homes and seek safety and shelter elsewhere (Calderón, 2011). According to the United Nations (UN), the global population in 2019 was estimated to be 7.7 billion people, of which 3.9 billion were women and 3.8 billion were men. Of this population, approximately 79.5 million were refugees; of those 79.5 million, 41.3 million were women and 38.2 million were men (UN, 2019). This gender disparity is due to various factors, including women and girls being more likely to experience violence and at greater risk of exploitation and abuse.

Additionally, women are more likely to be denied access to secure documentation and legal protection, meaning they are more likely to become refugees (Maher & Segrave, 2018). It has led to a dramatic increase in the number of women and girls seeking refuge worldwide, with many facing significant risks to their safety and lives during their journeys. Furthermore, women and girls often face heightened discrimination and gender-based violence in displacement, putting them at greater risk and more vulnerable to exploitation. As a result, women refugees are more likely to experience poverty and marginalization and face greater risks of exploitation and abuse (Grabska, 2011).

Even though refugee women are prone to violence, abuse and exploitation, they have also played an indispensable role in advancing the quality of life worldwide. They are essential to home and community health, providing necessary services and goods that contribute to social and economic development (Shishehgar et al., 2017). Beyond the sociological implications, it is simply only possible to sustain life with the participation of both men and women. Refugee women are often the backbone of their families and communities, providing essential goods and services and a sense of stability and security. In many cases, they are the most affected by displacement and vulnerable to exploitation. Despite their challenges, refugee women are often the most resilient, determined to solve their problems and improve their lives. They are a key part of the global effort to advance the quality of life, and as such, their powerful presence needs to be celebrated and supported (Apeadu, 2019; Habib et al., 2019).

Recognizing and valuing the contribution and impact of Afghan refugee women is crucial for maintaining and re-establishing the prosperity of the Afghan refugee society. With the presence of these women, many accomplishments and progress in the past were possible (Borthakur, 2017). The presence of Afghan refugee women has enabled the advancement of communities, economies, and societies. Their involvement in fields such as the labour market, financial activities, and other areas of society has enabled the growth of a strong and vibrant society. They also provide a strong social infrastructure for a prosperous and equitable society. They have helped create a more prosperous and equitable society and provided a platform for other women to access opportunities (Howard-Merriam, 2019).

As a result of wars, conflicts, and violence, many Afghan refugee women fled to Pakistan to play the head of their families because of the missing and death of their husbands and other male counterparts (Khakpour et al., 2019). Afghan refugee female-headed households in Balochistan face various economic and social constraints that significantly impact their daily lives and well-being. These households' most pressing economic constraints include limited access to labour markets, financial resources, and education. This lack of access to opportunities and resources means that refugee women often struggle to provide for their families and cannot build better lives for themselves and their children (Bashir, 2016). In addition to the economic constraints, refugee women in Balochistan also face various social constraints that impact their lives and well-being. These include limited access to social networks, discrimination and stigma, and unequal access to justice (Khan, 2017).

These social pressures make it difficult for refugee women to access the financial resources they need to support themselves and their families and to access opportunities and resources to help them build better lives. The economic and social constraints Afghan refugee female-headed households face in Balochistan impact their daily lives and well-being. These constraints limit their ability to provide for their families, access opportunities and resources, and build better lives. As a result, refugee women often struggle to meet their basic needs and cannot access the social and economic resources they need to improve their quality of life. Therefore, this study focuses on the key economic and social constraints faced by Afghan refugee female-headed households in Balochistan and the challenges that impact their daily lives and well-being (Saleem et al., 2019).

Review of the Literature

Research has long been conducted on the role of women in household economies, both domestically and on a global scale. Women have been found to play a vital role in household production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. Additionally, women have been found to significantly impact the sustainability of household economies and the welfare of their families (Van-Schalkwyk, 2021). Throughout history, women have played key roles in producing societies' material needs, contributing to the economic well-being of their families and communities. Women have traditionally been responsible for child-rearing, food preparation, and other domestic labour, as well as providing emotional support and financial resources. It has enabled them to significantly contribute to their communities social and economic development and provide a foundation for their families' long-term economic success (Biswas & Nautiyal, 2021).

The patriarchal social order is a male-dominated society in which men are given full control and authority over women in every aspect of life, from the family unit to the greater society. This system of governance is often seen as a form of oppression and a violation of women's rights to take part in decision-making and to be treated as equals. Patriarchal societies view women as second-class citizens and deny them access to education, the right to work, the right to vote, and the right to make life decisions. In such societies, men are usually seen as the head of the family and are given the power to make decisions that affect everyone. This form of social order often results in women being subjected to violence, abuse, and discrimination (Sultana et al., 2018).

Recent times have seen social change due to power politics, violence, conflicts, displacement, and environmental factors that challenged and transformed the social role and order (Fernández, 2013). Research into the economic roles of refugee women has revealed valuable insights into their contributions to the economic well-being of their societies. Refugee women often engage in economic activities such as microenterprise, informal labour, and waged work. The study shows that they are an important source of income for their families, helping to reduce poverty and improve the economic stability of their communities. For instance, refugee women have been credited with helping to improve agricultural productivity and making significant contributions to the manufacturing and service sectors in their new countries. These activities often give refugee women more autonomy and the ability to contribute to their families' economic well-being (Knappert., 2018).

Additionally, they provide an important source of social capital, allowing refugee women to build networks of support and access resources to help them in their new countries. These contributions have driven economic growth, particularly in countries with high refugee populations. These activities also allow refugee women to build skills related to the local job market, increasing their employability. Additionally, they allow refugees to interact with members of their host communities, which helps break down cultural barriers and improve integration (Yoosefi-Lebni et al., 2020).

In addition, refugee women have also proven invaluable in the informal economy and informal jobs, providing a much-needed and often overlooked source of labour. Refugee women have been found to have a wide range of skills and abilities, from traditional vocations such as farming to more specialized roles such as engineering or information technology (Knappert., 2018). These skills have enabled them to provide valuable services in the local economies, often creating jobs and helping to generate income. By tapping into the skills and abilities of refugee women, local economies benefit from their contributions, which often take time to find in the local labour force. It is especially beneficial for economies struggling to find skilled labour, as refugee women often provide a much-needed boost to productivity (Lamichhane & Dhakal, 2020).

The range of contributions made by refugee women to their host countries' economies has been wide-reaching and extensive. From helping to increase agricultural productivity to providing important services in the informal economy, refugee women have been driving economic growth and providing critical support to their host countries. Their contributions have been invaluable in helping to improve economic conditions (Betts et al., 2017). Refugee women often work in sectors typically unavailable to other female migrants, such as agricultural work or informal services. It allows them to increase their income and

contribute to the local economy by providing valuable labour, goods and services. It has been especially beneficial in rural areas where their labour help to increase agricultural productivity and in urban areas where their services provide important economic support (Erel, 2011).

Refugee women are increasingly becoming entrepreneurs, making their mark in the global economy and taking their success into their own hands. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in refugee women starting their businesses and taking control of their economic destiny. This trend is especially strong in countries where refugee women have had to flee their homes due to war and persecution, such as in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Turner, 2020). Through these innovative ventures, refugee women can secure financial stability for themselves and their families and gain skills, networks and connections that help them build a better future for themselves. By taking control of their economic future, these women create employment opportunities for themselves and others in their communities and contribute to the overall economic development of their home countries (McRobbie, 2011).

Afghan refugee women have made significant contributions to socio-economic development in Pakistan. It is especially true in health, education, and labour. These women have significantly impacted the growth and development of the Pakistani economy. The labour market has benefitted from the presence of Afghan refugee women in Pakistan (Balsara et al., 2010). They have provided a stable and reliable source of employment to the local population, creating new jobs and helping to boost the economy. They have been able to increase the wages of their fellow workers, as well as improve their working conditions. The influx of Afghan refugee women into the labour market has helped to reduce the cost of labour while also helping to ensure that jobs are available. It has created more jobs and higher wages for local citizens.

Additionally, the presence of female workers has improved the working conditions of many businesses, providing a safe and secure working environment for both men and women. The presence of female workers has also helped to reduce gender discrimination in the workplace, as well as increased diversity and productivity. In turn, it has helped increase the overall economic output of businesses and provided greater economic security for the local citizens (Howard-Merriam, 2019).

Afghan refugee female-headed households in Pakistan face various socio-economic constraints that limit their access to health, education, employment, and other basic needs. Due to their refugee status, these households face difficulties obtaining legal documentation, which restricts their access to public services and their ability to participate in the labour market. The lack of income and employment opportunities often leads to poverty and poor living conditions (Khakpour et al., 2019). It results in poor Nutrition and health problems, especially among children and vulnerable individuals. In addition, the lack of access to education and vocational training further exacerbates their socio-economic situation. Gender-based discrimination and traditional gender roles further restrict Afghan refugee female-headed households' access to resources and decision-making power. This further limits their economic autonomy and their ability to access basic services. The socio-economic constraints experienced by Afghan refugee female-headed households in Pakistan are further compounded by the lack of access to social protection, including social security benefits and emergency assistance (Schmidt & Maley, 2016).

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore and understand the economic and social constraints Afghan refugee female-headed households face in Quetta, Balochistan, Pakistan. The study focuses on Afghan refugee female-headed households residing in Quetta, Balochistan. The target population comprises Afghan refugee widows facing economic and social challenges. A total of 20 participants were selected for this study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants. This sampling method allowed for the deliberate selection of participants with the desired characteristics and provided rich and relevant information for the research topic. In this case, the participants were selected based on their status as Afghan refugee widows residing in Quetta. Data collection was conducted through an interview guide. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the participants in a comfortable and confidential setting. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to analyze the collected data. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded. The themes and patterns within the data were identified and organized into meaningful categories. The data obtained from the thematic analysis were interpreted and reported descriptively and narratively. The findings were organized according to the identified themes and supplemented with relevant participant quotes. The interpretation aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by Afghan refugee female-headed households in Quetta, Balochistan.

Results and Discussions

Afghan refugee female-headed households face many social and economic challenges. It is due to their displacement, the lack of access to basic services and resources, and the difficult conditions in which they live. The displacement of Afghan refugee women has resulted in a lack of access to basic services and resources, such as education, healthcare, and employment, which has led to further economic and social challenges. In addition, due to gender inequality in many parts of the world, including Pakistan, Afghan refugee women are often unable to access the same rights and resources as their male counterparts. It includes access to credit, land, and other forms of capital, which can lead to further economic insecurity for these households. The lack of access to educational and health opportunities and employment also are major challenges for these households.

In most cases, Afghan women who became household heads followed a similar pattern. Despite many of them being young and having only a few children when their husbands passed away, they did not think of remarrying or returning to their parent's home. Afghan refugee widows have reported receiving assistance from local business community members and charity organizations. This aid is often seen in cash, food, medical aid, or other forms of support. However, this support usually diminishes over time, becoming occasional help or Zakat during Eid festivals. This trend could be better for the widows and their families, as their needs remain despite the reduced level of support.

Female-Headed Households and the Struggle against Poverty

Female poverty is a growing problem among refugee female household heads. Women are the poorest of the poor in society, and numerous issues face these women. Through this research, It has identified several problems that refugee women face. These include a lack

of access to necessities like food, water, and shelter; inadequate healthcare; limited educational opportunities; and limited job prospects. Additionally, they face gender-based discrimination, which can limit their access to services and resources, further exacerbating their poverty. These issues can impact refugee women's and their families health and well-being. All the participants of this study reported that they experienced financial difficulties and poor living conditions in the host communities. As:

One widow, in particular, shared her story of having eight children and needing loans from local individuals to ensure their survival. She mentioned that she currently has a loan of Rs 80,000, which she acquired due to her children's poor health. Despite working in a private school and earning a monthly income of Rs 6000, she lives hand to mouth in a dilapidated house, enduring harsh living conditions. She acknowledges the overwhelming task of providing for her large family and works tirelessly, even taking on extra work, but still struggles to meet her children's needs.

This study indicates that widowhood and refugee status, as life disruptions, have long-lasting and negative effects on women's economic well-being. Widowhood specifically leads to detrimental economic consequences for women. By examining the economic trajectory over time and comparing the economic status of women before and after migration, there is a clear consensus among the findings that migration and widowhood are associated with an economic decline for women. Furthermore, there are significant disparities, as men generally experience better economic outcomes following displacement and widowhood than women and their pre-disruption standard of living. Unless women choose to remarry, the economic decline they experience is likely to persist for an extended period.

Women experience enduring economic effects that persist throughout their lives, alongside short-term economic challenges that primarily manifest in poverty rates, family income, per capita income, and the income-to-needs ratio. Widowhood or displacement has a causal relationship with the economic status of women. Females are significantly grappling with economic problems, often struggling to meet the needs of their households throughout the month. They work tirelessly to attain a better standard of living but face difficulties due to inflation, family size, mobility constraints, and educational and health concerns related to their children. One of the individuals I interviewed expressed the following:

I am constantly occupied with household chores and my paid job as a childcare provider from morning until evening. Even after that, I have to take care of my children. My routine is so disrupted that I have no time for leisure or rest. The lack of job security adds to my worries, as the fear of losing my job looms over me. I carry numerous responsibilities on my shoulders. With six children, I aspire to ensure their success, which puts constant pressure on me to meet their educational needs and other demands.

The Impacts of Inflation on Female-Headed Households

The rise in inflation is detrimental to the economic welfare of poor refugee women, who cannot adequately provide for their households' needs and save for the future. This loss of income has far-reaching consequences for the well-being of the households, particularly because of the vital contributions refugee women make to the current income and their tendency to prioritize their children's well-being with whatever scarce resources they have, thereby investing in their future development. This rise in inflation has caused significant

hardship for vulnerable refugee women, particularly those with families to support. With less income to rely on, these women cannot provide for their families in the same way that they once were, leaving them struggling to make ends meet. Furthermore, a lack of savings leaves them unable to plan for the future, with no security to fall back on if their financial situation worsens.

The implications of this rise in inflation on refugee women's income are particularly concerning when considering the importance of their contributions to their households. Women are often the main breadwinners for refugee families, so the loss of their income can have a huge impact on the economic stability of the household. Furthermore, it is also important to note that women tend to invest their scarce resources in their children's well-being, ensuring they have the best chance of success. The rise in inflation is having a significant impact on the economic welfare of poor refugee women, and this is having long-term implications for the future of their households. Measures must be taken to help alleviate these women's pressure, allowing them to continue to provide for their families and invest in their children's future. As:

One of the participants shared that her earnings from work are entirely dedicated to covering the household expenses and fulfilling the needs of their children. She highlighted the challenge of rising monthly expenses due to inflation while her earnings remain constant or sometimes even decrease. During challenging times, when additional funds are required, they resort to borrowing from neighbours or individuals at their workplace. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, they have been unable to save any amount for their future.

The rise in the prices of daily items has a serious and gender-specific impact on the lives of refugee women and their children in refugee-hosting countries such as Pakistan. These women often cannot access the financial resources and employment opportunities necessary to support their families, leaving them vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. As a result, the children of refugee women are at higher risk of malnutrition and disease and receive a lower quality education than their male counterparts. It has drastic implications for their prospects, leaving them without the necessary tools and resources to build a better future for themselves and their families. Refugee-hosting countries must provide the support and resources needed to empower these women and their children so that they may have the opportunity to realize their full potential.

Forced Displacement, Limited Employment, and Scarce Income-Generating Opportunities

Forced displacement, limited employment, and scarce income-generating opportunities are challenges that Afghan refugee female-headed households face daily. Forced displacement is a direct result of the unstable political climate in Afghanistan, with many families forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in other countries. It often leaves them with few to no resources, making it difficult to find employment and support their families.

In addition to limited employment opportunities, many Afghan refugee female-headed households have limited access to income-generating activities. It may include limited access to credit, savings, or other financial resources that could help the household cover its basic needs. Access to these resources is necessary for these households to take advantage of economic opportunities or even access the necessary goods and services.

These challenges can create a cycle of poverty and hardship for Afghan refugee female-headed households. Access to financial resources and employment opportunities is necessary for these households to cover basic needs or provide for their children. This lack of access to resources can also prevent these households from participating in their community and accessing the available educational, health, and other services.

Development programs such as loans and microfinance are undoubtedly positive steps for the welfare of the poor and vulnerable communities, such as refugee women. Unfortunately, refugees in Pakistan do not have any opportunity for such services. It can significantly negatively impact refugees' ability to survive and maintain a standard of living. Access to these services is necessary for refugees to be in a more vulnerable position, struggling to make ends meet and able to access the resources they need to sustain themselves. Various organizations have been working to provide loan and microfinance services to refugees in Pakistan. However, the lack of support from the government and the limited resources of these organizations means that the number of refugees with access to these services remains small. The government of Pakistan needs to take the necessary steps to provide adequate resources and funding for loans and microfinance services for refugees. Furthermore, organizations in this field need more resources and cannot provide these services to many refugees. As:

One of the participants highlighted that the government tends to provide loans to individuals who possess the land, political references, and proper documentation. She has been unable to access any loans due to her vulnerable circumstances, feeling helpless. She questioned who could be more in need than themselves, especially considering she has eight children who require clothing, proper Nutrition, education, and shelter. She relies mostly on collecting charity from the public to meet these needs.

Governments, aid organizations, and other stakeholders must recognize the Afghan refugee female-headed households' challenges. This recognition should be accompanied by a commitment to providing resources and financial support to help these households meet their basic needs, employment opportunities, and access to economic opportunities. It is the only way to help Afghan refugee female-headed households break the cycle of poverty and hardship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research on understanding the economic and social constraints faced by Afghan refugee female-headed households in Balochistan, Pakistan, highlights the immense importance of recognizing and valuing their role in economic and social development. Despite facing numerous challenges and constraints, these women have contributed significantly to their host countries' economies by participating in various sectors and entrepreneurial endeavours. They have helped drive economic growth, create employment opportunities, and provide valuable goods and services. The research has shown that refugee women are active agents of change, not passive victims. They have demonstrated resilience, determination, and resourcefulness in adversity. They have utilized their skills, knowledge, and abilities to improve their own lives and the lives of their families and communities. The findings underscore the need for addressing the socio-economic constraints faced by Afghan refugee female-headed households. These constraints, such as limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities,

perpetuate a cycle of poverty and hinder their ability to improve their living conditions. Providing support and resources that empower these women, enable their economic independence, and enhance their overall well-being is crucial.

Furthermore, the research highlights the significance of gender equality and the importance of challenging patriarchal social norms and structures. Patriarchal societies limit women's access to education, decision-making power, and resources, perpetuating gender-based discrimination and inequality. Promoting gender equality and empowering refugee women to participate fully in economic and social spheres will benefit them individually and contribute to more equitable and prosperous societies. The research on Afghan refugee women highlights their invaluable contributions to economic and social development and the challenges they face. Recognizing their agency, addressing the socio-economic constraints they encounter, and promoting gender equality are essential steps toward harnessing the full potential of Afghan refugee women and ensuring a more just and prosperous future for all. It ensures that the female voice is present and heard in all areas of life. It also strives to create a world where women are valued, respected, and empowered to reach their full potential. It can be achieved through mentorship, support networks, and resource access. Women must be allowed to contribute their ideas, skills, and perspectives to the greater good. Only through the collective effort of all genders can we create a better future for everyone.

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