

GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF DISPLACEMENT: HOW AFGHAN WOMEN AND MEN EXPERIENCE FORCED MIGRATION DIFFERENTLY

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This research employs secondary data ethnographies, interviews, and reports to examine the gendered realities of Afghan women and men who were displaced by the 2021 Taliban takeover. It examines how displacement reconfigures identity, threat perception, and enactments of agency. Although customary gender norms continue prior to flight, the asylum process subverts these norms. Women frequently take on unexpected leadership positions but are at increased risk for violence and control, while men face a crisis of masculinity associated with unemployment and status loss. Both make agency work under the exigencies of patriarchy, ethnic rankings, and host-nation regulations. The results necessitate intersectional, gender-aware strategies to displacement policy.

Keywords: *Gendered displacement, Afghan refugees, Identity transformation, Patriarchy, Intersectionality*

INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement continues to be one of the defining global challenges of our time, and Afghanistan is home to one of the world's largest and most protracted refugee situations. Decades of war, political turmoil, economic breakdown and abuse of human rights, in particular following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, have forced millions of Afghans to flee their country (UNHCR, 2023). While any form of displacement is disruptive, the effects of such forced mobility are greatly influenced by intersecting social identities, with gender as a key factor (Hyndman, 2010; Freedman, 2016). Afghan society is informed by deeply patriarchal structures and gendered social norms that prescribe differential roles, mobility, duties, and expectations for women and men (Monsutti, 2005; Omidian & Lipson, 2020). Forceful displacement and the resulting divide necessarily interact with, challenge, and also perhaps contribute to a reshaping of these norms, making new and different paths possible through exile for both women and men.

Scholarship on forced migration has recognized the need for a gendered perspective, instead of homogenizing refugees (Bhabha, 2018; Giles & Hyndman, 2004). Feminist research has brought to light how conflict and displacement can aggravate pre-existing gendered inequalities, subject women and men to different forms of violence and vulnerability, and have gendered effects on access to resources, decision-making powers and opportunities (Freedman, 2016; Grabska, 2014). For example, women often experience increased vulnerability to SGBV on the move and in host locations, with corresponding limitations on their access to humanitarian relief, legal protection, and sources of livelihood arising from gendered constraints on mobility and participation

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

(Freedman, 2016; Krause, 2021). Men, on the other hand, may suffer crises of masculinity that stem from the loss of provider roles, increased likelihood of detention, forced recruitment or exploitation, reduced capacity to be vulnerable or seek psycho-social assistance (Grabska, 2014; Turner, 2016).

Nonetheless, there are still notable gaps in our knowledge about gendered experiences of displacement among Afghans. Although the vast numbers of displaced persons in Afghanistan are documented elsewhere (UNHCR, 2023), less is known about how gender acts as a fundamental lens through which experiential aspects of exile – identity transformation, perceptions of security and agency in particular, can be explored. A substantial amount of research concentrates on the broader situation of Afghan refugees or on particular vulnerabilities (such as SGBV against women). Most studies, neglect comparative gendered analysis across various phases of the displacement experience (Hunt, 2008; Omidian & Lipson, 2020). Yet, the voices and viewpoints of displaced Afghans themselves, including how they make sense of changes in identity, their perceptions of safety, and their coping strategies, can be obscured or overlooked within larger, policy-driven or quasi-quantitative analyses (Monsutti, 2005; Omidian & Gallon, 2020). This is a significant gap; i-e., understanding the gendered subjective experience is indispensable to develop gender-sensitive humanitarian responses, protection frameworks and policies which recognize and reflect the accumulation of needs and competences of women and men (Bhabha, 2018; Freedman, 2016).

This paper fills the gap in research by conducting a thorough examination of the gendered dimensions of Afghan displacement. It does more, more than simply

tallying up vulnerabilities; it gets into the murky play of displacement, gender norms and feelings. More specifically, it inquires: In what ways do Afghan displaced women and men experience and express changes in their social roles, identity and family dynamics along the displacement continuum? What types of threats to safety, dignity, and health are unique in the lived experiences of those whom they documented? In what ways do narratives of displacement resilience embody different expressions of human agency and modes of coping and how are these influenced by gendered configurations of social practices? Through concentrating on these central issues, the research intends not only to chart the gendered distinctions, but also to discuss the shifting processes of adaptation, resistance and meaning-making in Afghan exile.

Statement of the Problem

Although displacement from Afghanistan is well documented, there is a lack of evidence on how entrenched existing patriarchal structures and gender norms affect the experiences of women and men at all stages of displacement. There are two main flaws in current academic research; firstly, it tends to generalize Afghan refugees as a homogeneous category, and secondly, it ignores the comparative gendered analysis of identity transformation, security perceptions and agency of women on the move and displaced people's voice. It can be traced to a lack of comparative understanding of lived experiences, which undermines the process of shaping effective humanitarian action and protection frameworks that are capable of adequately addressing the specific vulnerabilities and capacities of women and men, thus potentially reinforcing inequalities and curtailing pathways to recovery (Drawing from Freedman, 2016; Monsutti, 2005; Omidian & Lipson, 2020; Bhabha, 2018)

Significance of the Study

The contribution of this study is threefold: (1) It centers around the voices and stories of displaced Afghans as the central source of knowledge surrounding their experiences; (2) It uses a comparative gendered lens to uncover the specific and often divergent effects of displacement on women and men, thereby complicating homogenizing discourses, and (3) It explores the interaction between agency and constraint, examining how the displaced negotiate and reconfigure their realities within prevailing structural forces. And also, this paper explore life under the Taliban rule through the eyes of ordinary citizens as they struggle to lead a normal life amidst a climate of fear. In the final analysis, it aims to understand better and document more equitable and efficient humanitarian responses and policy measures, which are tailored to meet the specific needs of Afghan women and men, while on the road to confronting the deep challenges of forced migration.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are

1. To examine the extent to which the reported narratives of displacement amongst Afghan refugees reflect gender-specific identity and role change processes (e.g., provider, career, community member), identifying areas of overlap and difference in women's and men's experiences during pre-flight, journey and asylum phases.
2. To explore the gendered construction of safety security and well-being in refugees' narratives, in particular comparing how Afghan women and men express threats (of physical, psychological, social, existential) and how pre-migration gendered norms shape these forms of fear in process of being displaced.

3. To analyze and compare various expressions of agency, resilience and coping strategies apparent in the lives of displaced Afghan women and men, examining analytically how these strategies intersect with (and are shaped by) gendered social structures and power relations in host contexts.

Research Questions

1. How do displaced Afghan women and men describe how their social roles, identities and family dynamics undergo change along the displacement continuum (pre-flight, journey, asylum) and what are the key gendered differences that materialize in the identity-reconstruction narratives of this group?
2. What are the particular patterns of perceived threats to safety, dignity and well-being in lived experiences of displaced Afghan women, in comparison with men and what role do pre-existing culturally-related norms of the gender divide play in shaping such variations throughout displacement phases?
3. How representation of displacement resilience and adaptation reflect divergent forms of agency and coping in lives of Afghan women and men, and how are these constrained and enabled by gendered social structures in exiled spaces?

Scope of the Research

This study explores the gendered aspects of forced displacement for Afghan refugees who fled during Taliban's takeover in August 2021 and are currently living in neighboring host countries (i.e., Pakistan, Iran), examining the ways in which preexisting gender norms shape their lived experiences in three core domains: (a) identity transformation (changes in roles, household dynamics), (b) security perceptions (physical safety, dignity, access to protection), and (c) agency/resilience

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

manifestations (coping, decision-making). The research uses only secondary qualitative data (written narratives, memoirs, verified testimonies, qualitative research interviews) from 2021-24 to specifically contrast the impacts between adult women and men in Afghanistan; - IDPs; refugees in the west; children; the elderly; LGBTQ+ individuals as a primary focus and primary data collection.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The displacement of Afghan refugees, in the wake of the Taliban takeover in 2021, has triggered seismic shifts in gender roles, identities and family relations. Academic research has increasingly explored ways in which displacement disturb conventional Afghan social hierarchies, although notable lacunae exist in terms of the manner in which men and women articulate these transitions along the displacement continuum (pre-flight, journey, asylum) and the site where significant gendered differences become apparent. This review integrates existing academic and policy literature to help answer three key questions about the experiences of displacement in Afghanistan. Critically approaching these themes from an intersectional perspective, this review underscores the intricate tension between cultural expectations, structural limitations, and individual strengths that characterizes the experiences of Afghan refugees.

The reconfiguration of societal roles and the creation of new identities starts prior to the flight among Afghan families, organizing and carrying out a gendered preparation based on a patriarchal model. It has been found that for many women it is also in their interest to keep details of their movements secret to avoid ISIS's (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) suspicion, and that men often spearhead the planning of escape routes and

procuring funds (Husseini, 2022). These pre-departure dynamics draw on deeply rooted cultural scripts that link masculinity to protection and breadwinning, and femininity to domesticity and familial honor (Ibrahimi, 2021). On the migration, those old habits often break down, causing identity crises for male and female alike. Men describe intense feelings of emasculation resulting when they cannot keep their families safe from smugglers or violence at the border (Majidi, 2022), and women can find themselves unexpectedly in leadership roles, such as managing checkpoints and dealing with traffickers (Farhoumand-Sims, 2023).

This stage highlights a major contradiction; while women may experience a temporary increase in self-reliance in moments of crisis, their exposure to sexual assault intensifies, as well (UNHCR, 2023). Additional changes emerge during the period of asylum, as uprooted families reconstitute their identities with their new cultural environment. The majority of men who cannot access formal work in host countries suffer extreme psychological distress, which exacerbates domestic tension and drug use (Turner, 2023). Women, meanwhile, may find liberation in work or education, but this is likely to be met with opposition from male family members keen to uphold traditional hegemonic structures (Sajjad, 2023). These gendered experiences of identity reformation differ across ethnicities and settlement contexts, as Hazara women in Iran, for example, are often even more mobile than their Pashtun counterparts, who in exile frequently face tighter kinship controls (Monsutti, 2022).

Constructions of danger and modes of protection for safety and dignity differ, in gendered ways, across the displacement. Sexual violence appears as a constant and primary concern for Afghan displaced women throughout

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

all phases of displacement (Rasmussen et al., 2022). In transit, there is frequent sexual exploitation by smugglers and border guards. Domestic violence also increase as men's frustration at unemployment is turned into aggression in asylum situations (Miller et al., 2021). Moreover, honor related constraints are reinforced in diaspora, with parents keeping daughters out of contact to avoid moral debauchery in host countries (Farhoumand-Sims, 2023). For Afghan men, threats primarily include fears of expulsion and social disgrace (Chimni, 2022). In Iran, "[Afghan] men workers are subjected to structural labor exploitation and stigmatization as criminals" (Hoodfar, 2021, p.46) but being unable to provide for their family causes them severe mental health problems (Turner, 2023). These contrasting perceptions of threat are grounded in cultural idioms that connect women's safety to family reputation and men's honour to economic autonomy (Abu-Lughod, 2023; Bhabha, 2003). What you won't find in the literature are reports focusing on exclusive risks against LGBTQ+ Afghan refugees, in particular against the threat of Taliban executions combined with host country discrimination. This presents a clear gap in the current landscape.

The coping mechanisms and agency of displaced Afghans suggest equally stark gendered variations. Challenged by formidable structures, Afghan women deploy more subtle forms of agency from engagement in commerce and education to social networks. For others, they are doing secretly working and making handicrafts or working in people's houses and studying online, against the Taliban's ban (Majidi, 2022; Sajjad, 2023). Female kinship networks also frequently function as critical support networks for both childcare and employment opportunities (Monsutti, 2022). Yet such resilience

strategies collide with the many structural barriers the women must contend with, especially in host countries such as Pakistan, where employment of Afghan women is officially not permitted (UNHCR, 2023). Afghan men, meanwhile, seek recapture of the macho through for example other types of masculinity, such as caregiving or as servant to the community (Turner, 2023; Hussein, 2022), though these attempts are often dampened by xenophobia or legal precariousness (Chimni, 2022). Agency constraints are deeply gendered: patriarchal host-country policies (such as Iran's male guardianship laws; Hoodfar, 2021) limit women's development, whereas lack of work permits and systemic discrimination limit men's (Bakewell, 2020).

Contemporary literature on prolonged displacement and refugeehood has placed greater accent on the significance of grasping intersecting axes of marginalization—gender, ethnicity, class, and legal status—within understanding refugee agency and vulnerability as a core aspect of examining refugee agency and exposure. Intersectional disadvantage in exile compounds in the Afghan experience, particularly for Hazara women, who are subjected to ethnically driven exclusion and increased risk of exploitation along migration routes and in host nations (Boone, 2022; Abbas, 2023). Legal insecurity—especially for illegal Afghan women in Pakistan and Iran—entrenches gendered exclusion from work, education, and health (Kazemi & Ahmadi, 2023; Mielke, 2022). International law formally offers protection to asylum seekers, but gender-neutral asylum decisions tend to ignore the unique modes of persecution women encounter, including forced marriage, honor crimes, or reproductive violence (Edwards, 2010; Freedman & Valluy, 2020).

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

Feminist humanitarian critiques have contended that dominant refugee aid systems tend to function within donor-led, patriarchal structures that deny women autonomy and view women as mainly passive victims (Ticktin, 2011; Olivius, 2016). In addition, well-intentioned gender-mainstreamed policies can actually support stereotypes and hierarchies if they are not contextualized within local cultures (Martin & Tirman, 2009). New empirical research from Afghanistan's border states demonstrates that certain women navigate informal economies, kinship orders, and digital technologies to regain sites of agency, albeit always within structural limits (Nadery, 2023; Yusufzai, 2023). Therefore, a more intersectional and decolonial analysis of refugee resilience is required—one that neither idealizes subaltern resistance nor deletes structural domination.

This review finds a number of key findings on the Afghan displacement experience. First, identity reconstruction is gendered, in that men and women experience displacement (and its disruptions) through specific gendered paradigms. Second, responses to threats are culturally gendered, such that women are more likely to be afraid of sexual assault whereas men are more likely to be of afraid economic ruin and social shame. Third, despite both sexes displaying impressive resilience, their agency is limited by intersecting situational barriers in the host countries. Future research should also highlight intersectional analyses that factor in LGBTQ+ experiences, compare diaspora communities between host countries, and the long-term psychosocial implications of gendered role changes. Studies exploring strategies for digital resilience and their potential to bypass traditional barriers may also offer insight for policy and intervention development.

Theoretical Framework

This article uses theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and postcolonial feminism (Mohanty, 1984) to reflect upon the gendered dimensions of the Afghan refugee experience. These perspectives show how intersecting identities including gender, ethnicity, class, and legal status shape displacement experiences. Intersectionality underscores the multiple dimensions of marginalization experienced by Afghan women, such as being house-bound, economic dependence, and sexual abuse, and for men, feelings of emasculation from being displaced as breadwinner (Husseini, 2022; Turner, 2023). These experiences are also stratified by ethnicity, for example, while Hazara women experience both gender and ethnic-based persecution, Pashtun women may encounter more rigid patriarchal strictures in exile (Ibrahimi, 2021). Those that are illegal, particularly women, face greater risk of exploitation in the informal labor market (Majidi, 2022).

Postcolonial feminism challenges the Western narratives on humanitarianism that label Afghan women as passive victims (Abu-Lughod, 2013). It challenges the notion that dis-empowers one generation of women to suggest how they travel to host countries for education or work, in spite of conservative family members (Famoudh-Sims, 2023). Host countries such as Iran and Pakistan also put their own gendered restrictions in place, challenging any notion of ‘liberation’ (UNHCR 2023). This framework challenges the notion of homogenized Afghan refugees by foregrounding resistance and situational empowerment. Together, these theories help us to answer pivotal questions: How do Afghan women and men reconfigure their identities in exile? Why do security concerns vary from women and their fears of gender-based violence, to

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

men fearing deportation? How does agency manifest itself in "veiled resistance" or accommodation? Taking intersectionality and post coloniality as informed approaches, this study also refuted facile binary gender stereotypes, and showed complexity of Afghan displacement.

Hypothesis

Since Afghan society is built on severe patriarchal lines, means different gendered trajectories of identity change, security perception, and agency expression will be displayed by women and men in the course of their post-2021 period of exile in the host neighboring countries.

Core Variables

Independent Variable

Gender (as social construct): Gender is the main construct used to classify, and compare experiences. This is not just biological sex but it stands for the socially constructed roles, expectations, identities and power relations with being a woman or a man within pre-existing Afghan patriarchal norms and structures. This variable indicates the comparison between two groups respondents i-e., (adult Afghan women vs adult Afghan men).

Dependent Variables

Manifestations of Experience: These are fundamental dimensions, in which the effects of the independent variable i-e., gender is examined. They are the posited "divergent paths". These include:

Identity loss: How people who were displaced were forced to adapt to their sense of self, roles (e.g., breadwinner, caregiver, student), family dynamics (e.g., decision-making, authority), and standing in the community. How are these changes gendered?

Implicit Sense of Security: It includes:

Physical Security: Instances of and fears of violence, harassment and exploitation (both in the course of flight and in asylum), and availability of safe shelter.

Psychological Well-being: Sense of fear, anxiety, stress, hopelessness and stability.

Dignity: Receiving respect, humiliation and empowerment of mind and body.

Access to Protection, access to seeking and receiving assistance from formal (UNHCR, host govt. or traditional (community, family) protective models. What is the influence of gender on these perceptions and access?

Actions and Resilience: How people are taking coping, adapting or resisting actions, and forming decisions under conditions of displacement. This includes:

Coping Mechanisms: How they cope with stress, loss and the daily struggle to survive (e.g. social support, religious practices, income generation).

The power to make decisions: Being able to shape decisions that affect one's life (e-g., where one can go and cannot go, how one may and may not use resources, and one's family).

Resourcefulness: Seeking opportunities to satisfy basic needs or realize goals (such as gaining support, engaging in informal work or education).

Resistance: Big or small acts to stand up to oppression or claim, autonomy in displacement. In what ways do patriarchal systems facilitate and/or limit agency for women versus men?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative secondary data analysis (SDA) approach which we have considered to be a non-interventionist, retrospective comparative qualitative analysis. The primary aim is to undertake a systematic examination of the gendered experiences amongst Afghan refugees by analyzing qualitative data of individuals who have been forcibly displaced as a result of the Taliban's assumption of power in August, 2021 as a basis for forced displacement journeys of adult Afghan women and men residing in the host countries and territories including Pakistan and Iran. This method was chosen in light of tons of information in public domain contained in ethically-obtained qualitative data (in-depth interviews, personal narratives, memoirs, verified testimonies, and relevant parts of NGO/IGO reports that cover the time period from September 2021 till- 2024) to answer the research question.

Data for this study are selected, extracted and synthesized from a systematic search of secondary qualitative material. Data is collected from academic databases, reputable NGO/IGO archives, online digital repository of refugee narratives, and published memoirs. Our narrow inclusion criteria reflect that data must concern Afghan refugees who fled after August 15, 2021 and are currently live in neighboring host countries. This research has meaningful focus on themes i-e., identity transformation, security perceptions or agency/resilience with specific focus on the participant's gender (woman/man) and age. Data on internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees in Western countries, children, elderly, LGBTQ+, and data without adequate descriptions of the core dimensions was excluded. The selection is guided by purposive sampling in order to maximize data richness and relevance to research questions, and to

present significant proportions of women's and men's life experiences, with an ambition of reaching conceptual saturation in the available secondary data landscape for the resourced groups and themes.

To analyze data and a modified framework analysis approach is used for data analysis on the grounds of its systematic procedures and its capacity to support a clear comparison across groups. The general procedure begins with immersion of the corpus of data. A preliminary thematic framework is created using a deductive approach informed by the core dependent variables (identity transformation, security perceptions, agency/resilience) and salient contextual factors (pre-existing Afghan patriarchal norms, recipient community context), and is then revised inductively with the set of initial codes by capturing new themes as they emerge. This model is used consistently throughout indexing. Importantly, analytic matrices are generated for each core dependent variable and data is mapped into these matrices separately for women and men. This pairing is essential for facilitating a direct comparison. The last stage is mapping and interpretation of data patterned to determine convergences and divergences between the experiences of women and those of men within each dimension, through a direct exploration of the role of patriarchal norms in the definition of these differences, the links between dimensions, and the identification of analytical themes that verify the hypothesis.

Rigour and trustworthiness are maintained through a number of processes. Triangulation of data source (interviews, memoirs, and reports) adds to the credibility. A comprehensive audit trail documents the search strategies, inclusion/exclusion criteria, changes to the coding framework and stages of analysis. Peer debriefing

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

by gender or migration experts allows for testing models and interpretations. The results are illustrated with thick description enriched with contextualized quotes. The approach recognizes its intrinsic constraints, most notably the extent, profundity and possible bias of the data available from secondary sources, thus limiting the range of questions that can be asked.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The forced migration of Afghan refugees after the Taliban's overthrow in 2021 has caused significant gendered shifts in social identity, social roles, and family types. This study helps to illustrate how Afghan men and women encounter displacement in different ways in relation to three key dimensions; identity transformation, threat perceptions and agency. Before fleeing, rigid gendered division of roles is intensified as men become responsible for planning escape routes establishing money, demonstrating the breadwinner gender stereotype, and having women responsible for protecting the children and the family honor, partially by hiding any plans to move. These pre-flight dynamics illustrate the ways in which patriarchal norms structure strategies of flight, men's power associated with protection and women's roles defined by domesticity. These entrenched roles fall violently apart in the phases of the dangerous journey. Men say they feel emasculated when they cannot protect their families from smugglers or border violence; women sometimes find themselves thrust into unexpected leadership roles, haggling with traffickers or bartering their way through checkpoints. This temporary sidelining of the roles gives women some agency in a time of crisis, but also leads to their increased chances of being sexually victimized, illustrating vividly how displacement

upsets gender relations without getting rid of power structures.

At asylum, identity repairing products are gendered. When men are unable to find work they are often prone to depression and domestic tension and may resort to alcohol or drugs, while many women begin to assert their independence through work or study but encounter family opposition. And these dynamics are further confounded by ethnicity—although Hazara women in Iran report more mobility than their Pashtun counterparts who are under stricter kinship watch. These conclusions suggest that identity adjustments are non-linear and shaped by pre-existing cultural norms, host-country legislation, and intersecting factors such as ethnicity and class. The crisis of masculinity confronting Afghan men chips away at the Western notion that displacement always equals liberation for women, and that women's fleeting autonomy in flight is somehow a proxy for long-term liberation when structural constraints in destination countries all too often reconstitute patriarchal domination. The impact of ethnic hierarchies on post-displacement subjectivities is an overlooked domain that merits further attention.

Threat perceptions are gender-specific at each phase of displacement. Afghan women consistently identify sexual violence as their greatest fear – during the journey from smugglers and border guards, and in safe-haven situations from their own intimate partners and families. Honor is still used to refrain women in exile from moving around by families that have locked up daughters, worried about moral turpitude, mirroring how their bodies are battlegrounds where armed groups and their families exert control. For men, their concerns revolve around the ability to earn a living and fears of being repatriated, with

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

Afghan men in Iran experiencing labor abuses and criminal markers, and the shame of being unable to provide leading to substance abuse. These results echo theories that masculinities are associated with financial independence, yet reveal how xenophobia in host-countries compounds the precarity of male refugees. Deportation securitizes migration in ways that negatively affect men while gender-neutral humanitarian aid fails to afford women due consideration for their specific vulnerabilities. These threat perceptions are cultural in nature, grounded in the idea that women's safety affects family honour and men's sense of honour is associated with the ability to maintain employment. Such a gap in research with regard to LGBTQ+ Afghan refugees is important, with the distinct threats they face, such as Taliban executions, omitted from academic literature as well as current policy discourse.

In the face of systemic oppression, Afghan refugees display incredible resilience, in the shape of agentic acts. Women have "agency through subterfuge" (Wolf 1992:54) through invisible labour like handicrafts and domestic work or illegal education activities, and through female networks who offer personal and economic support for childcare or for employment. But restrictive host-country policies, like Pakistan's ban on Afghanistan women's employment, force many into exploitative informal economies. Away from their families, men assume alternate masculinities through caring or community leadership, however, (West 1994), they have very limited opportunities as xenophobic work policies and absence of work permits limit said opportunities. These results complicate the image of refugees from upwards of the stereotype of passive victim-man to one in which refugees themselves are active agents, and their

strategies for meeting needs are often hidden from policy makers. Agency is always bound by structural factors; women are only as robust as the patriarchy-permissive host laws (Iran's male guardianship system, for instance), and men are only as empowered as systemic discrimination allows them to be. New forms of digital resistance, such as online activism and remote work, while providing women with another form of agency, have yet to be substantially studied in the context of Afghanistan. Existing humanitarian programmes often uphold binary gendered relations and rarely consider multiple vulnerabilities such as those experienced by single mothers or unemployed men.

This study emphasizes that Afghan displacement is not a singular experience, but is highly gendered, staged, and entwined with culture. Identity changes are non-linear, contingent on pre-flight hierarchies, migrant journey disruptions and host-country limitations. Perceptions of threat land along gendered cultural scripts: whereas women fear sexual violence, men fear financial ruin. Agency is not absent, but is differentially mediated by structural obstacles in destination societies. Future research should adopt more intersectional analyses to investigate LGBTQ+, ethnic minority and disabled refugees, while more longitudinal studies are needed to understand how gendered identities change over decades in exile, and policy-related work also is needed evaluating how humanitarian programmes may better address disparate gendered needs. Future inquiries can transcend apologetics for complacency by centering refugee voices and structural critiques of the refugee regime, casting aside reductionist narratives of the 'victimized' refugee and revealing instead the conflicted experiences and multiple strategies for resisting displacement. The findings

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

underscore the importance of culturally sensitive humanitarian interventions that take into account the gendered nature of the refugee experience and that tackle structural obstacles that restrict women's and men's capacities to develop a living for themselves in exile.

This research investigated gendered experiences of Afghan displacement after the Taliban took power in 2021, examining how men and women's experiences of identity transformation, perceptions of threat, and expressions of agency vary. The results show that displacement is not a homogeneous phenomenon, and that it has different implications for men and women. It is not, but informed by strict patriarchal normatism, cross-cultural idiosyncrasies, and the space defined within host nations. Far from being static, gender dynamics change dramatically throughout the stages of displacement—pre-flight, in transit, in asylum—yet these shifts take place within enduring power relationships that constrain transformative transformation.

Before displacement, Afghan men and women are assigned roles that derive from patriarchal norms: men manage logistics and finance, performing the idealized figure of the breadwinner and protector, while women protect family honour, often by remaining silent or hidden. Such trends resonate with hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal gendered labour divisions that men are associated with authority and women with domesticity. But during the flight stage, the roles switch around. Men describe feeling emasculated without the ability to shield their families from violence or exploitation, prompting a stark disruption to gender norms in a time of crisis. Women, meanwhile, are at times thrust into unexpected leadership positions, negotiating with traffickers, say, or finding ways past roadblocks — crisis-activated forms of

agency that subvert stereotypes of passivity. But this temporary agency comes at a price: increased vulnerability, including to men's sexual violence. This contradiction, in which uprooting contradicts as well as sustains gender hierarchies, indicates the compulsion to motion within gender identity.

Changes do not merely halt after arrival in host countries, but rather take place along heavily gendered and unequal lines. Afghan men continually face structural barriers to employment and integration, which can lead to depression, loss of status and, at times, substance abuse – these negative outcomes are associated with their perceived inability to fulfill the roles set out for them as ‘men’. Nevertheless, some women find avenues for partial independence, through employment in the informal sector or education, but such gains are often resisted by the family, or circumscribed by host-state laws and practices. Ethnic identity intersects with these experiences: Hazara women in Iran, for instance, are more likely to claim more freedom to move around than their Pashtun counterparts, who fall under harsher kinship surveillance. The findings confirm that identity reconstruction in exile follows a nonlinear path, influenced by pre-existing social norms, host-country regulations and intersecting elements including class, ethnicity, and legal status.

There are also quite gendered threat perceptions. Sex violence is something Afghan women always mention smugglers, guards at the border, even in their own families. Honour-based confinement in exile demonstrates that the regulation of women's bodies continues to function in the service of family respectability even in displaced circumstances. Men, meanwhile, face the threat of deportation and financial ruin, with many also subject to exploitation, surveillance,

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

and stigma in host countries. This is in accordance with cultural scripts: women's safety continues to be bound to ideas of honor, men's dignity to economic provision. The men's own experience, commonly one of shame and helplessness, undermines the narrative that displacement inevitably empowers women or leaves men by default empowered. In addition, the virtually complete lack of Afghan LGBTQ+ perspectives represented in policy and academic literature also suggests a serious research vacuum. All of which points to the limitations of a binary gender analysis and the need for a more holistic and intersectional understanding of gender.

Afghan refugees operate under constraints, yet undertake a variety of acts of agency. Women are frequently employed in the informal economy or underground network of private educational services, exploiting family networks to generate income and support. These forms of unrecognized relational agency contest dominant illustrations of refugee women as passive and evoke a contextually contingent resilience. Men make do, including by assuming a caregiving role or involving themselves in community leadership, even in rights and xenophobic policies. These findings complicate one-dimensional portraits of refugee men as either perpetrators or victims, and instead show how all genders establish roles and identities for themselves. Still, such agency is constrained by host-country regulations, patriarchal legislations, and structural forms of violence in general. For instance, Iran's male guardianship law in combination with employment bans for Afghan women in Pakistan severely limits refugee autonomy. New types of digital resistance online activism; remote work — hold potential for greater agency, but they are still largely unexplored in the context of Afghan refugees.

Cumulative findings taken together, different observations are consistent with the interpretation that Afghan men and women have fundamentally different experiences of displacement, as is evident by differentiation in terms of identity, perceived threat and agency.

Table 1: Concise summary of the study’s inclusion / exclusion criteria

Dimension	Include	Exclude
Time Frame	Qualitative material produced between 15 Aug 2021 – 2024	Data created before Aug 2021 or after 2024
Population & flight date	Afghan refugees who fled after 15 Aug 2021	Internally displaced Afghans (IDPs), refugees outside Afghanistan’s borders whose flight predates Aug 2021 or who are no longer refugees
Host setting	Currently living in neighbouring host states (Pakistan, Iran)	Refugees settled in Western or other non-neighbouring countries
Participant profile	Adult (18+) women and men with gender explicitly identified	Children, elderly, LGBTQ+ persons, or cases where gender/age is not specified
Data type and source	Secondary qualitative evidence (interviews, testimonies, memoirs, NGO/IGO reports) collected ethically	Primary data, purely quantitative studies, or sources lacking ethical provenance

Gendered Experiences of Displacement

Thematic relevance	Focus on identity transformation, perceptions, agency / resilience or security	Material that does not address at least one of the three core themes
Descriptive depth	Narratives that provide rich detail on the above themes so they can be coded in the analytical matrix	Accounts without sufficient detail to map onto identity, security or agency dimensions

CONCLUSION

This research underscores the deeply gendered, complex, and interwoven nature of Afghan refugees' experience of displacement. Afghan men and women follow similar yet distinct paths of identity change, threat perception, and agency-building vis-à-vis both deep-rooted patriarchal norms in addition to new demands in the host countries. Neither are liberated or dis-empowered in absolute terms; both sexes adaptively engage in behaviors demonstrating resilience under duress. The agency of women, expressed with reference to informal labour, kinship networks and informal leadership, challenges the notion of powerless victims but also resist the dominant narrative of men as sexually violent tormentors of refugees whose male gender identities have been shattered; indeed, men's renegotiated roles – impoverished, embarrassed, powerless and ashamed – render the men in question far less 'powerful' as 'subversions' of an imagined norm of masculinity-in-exile and thus provide the necessary complexity to challenge myths of refugee masculinity. These findings point to the need for an intersectional and culturally informed research and relief effort that makes

room for a phased, shifting refugee identity countering the binary# framework. To address the gendered effects of displacement, policies and programs need to be structured to both recognize and also confront systemic inequalities so that the displacement-affected specific needs and capacities of all are genuinely served—including of individuals across gender, how it intersects with issues of ethnicity, sexuality and class.

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