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Briefing Note

Forced to migrate: Afghan women waiting for protection in Iran and Pakistan

Introduction

Why this brief?

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), International Rescue Committee (IRC), and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) which works to contribute to the development of comprehensive solutions for displaced populations in Asia. Established in 2017, ADSP engages in research initiatives to support advocacy. This is done by building an evidence base for its members and other humanitarian actors to facilitate a common understanding around durable solutions.

Since 2022, Samuel Hall, a research organisation founded and based in Kabul, has been working with ADSP to create a space for research and advocacy on durable solutions, building on existing data. This briefing note presents information collected through desk review, key informant interviews and semi structured interviews and provides a synthesis of available data on the need for protection, solutions and international protection for Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan.

Context

Over the past 40 years, Afghanistan has gone through multiple phases of migration, with Pakistan and Iran being the primary destination for millions of Afghan refugees and other migrants. Initially, Iran and Pakistan both opened their borders to their neighbours and Muslim brothers and sisters. Afghans have crossed and continue to cross these two borders, despite tightening mobility rights (with parts of the territory in Iran and Pakistan forbidden to Afghans), loss of the right to work (Afghans can only work in certain sectors), large-scale returns (from the region and abroad following the 2001 American intervention), or the decline of asylum opportunities and erosion of refugee rights.

August 2021 marked a new phase for Afghans seeking international protection. Ex-government workers, security and law enforcement agents, women, girls and their families had to migrate to seek protection. Yet, legal, financial and social barriers as well as tightening borders and continuous deportations from Iran and Pakistan jeopardised their search for protection. Most recently, both Iran and especially Pakistan have increased their efforts to deport all undocumented Afghan nationals from their territory. Despite the official line being that only undocumented Afghans will be returned, many documented Afghans with Proof of Registration Card (PoR) or Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders have also been forcibly returned¹.

“If I summarise my life in one sentence, I would say that life in Pakistan is really painful, waiting and seeking for support is fatal. The Pakistani government is deporting Afghans and it is a big loss of hope for Afghans who are seeking safety.”

– Afghan woman in Pakistan, 25 years old, interviewed over the phone.

Limited Space for Protection for Afghan Women in Iran and Pakistan

The Afghan displacement crisis has continued given the deteriorating economic conditions, protection risks, loss of social support system, and the loss of rights for women in Afghanistan: whether mobility, employment or educational rights that have been banned for women. Within already acute displacement patterns, Afghan women whose only option may be to migrate through irregular pathways, are exposed to risks of sexual assault, kidnapping and torture.² Regular migration routes, as well as returns and deportations, also come with their own gendered protection risks. A private study³, written in September 2023, has shown that lack of access to gender-segregated shelters, harassment by men (both border officials and others crossing the border), deplorable detention conditions, and no access to gender-segregated toilets were among the protection risks women and girls face during regular migration, and return.

Fearing these protection risks, due to cultural norms and official restrictions on women's travel, Afghan women are not allowed to travel on their own. Yet, at times, they are left with no other choice. In the current context of deportations from Pakistan, available evidence shows that gender has been used as leverage to expedite returns. Police harassment focuses on arresting male heads of households, and threatening women of detention and arrest. To escape the shame of imprisonment, Afghan women are left with no other choice but to sell their assets and leave the country, with their children. Anecdotal evidence has shown similar techniques to have been used in Iran.

¹ UNHCR-IOM, Pakistan Flash Update #8: Arrest and Detention/Flow Monitoring, (15 September – 2 December 2023), 2023

² Samuel Hall/NRC, Self-Protection Study, 2021

³ Private Study, September 2023

“*I was scared, anxious, I sold everything we had, and took my children towards the border. Since October 15, I have had no contact with my husband. I just know he is in jail. I am waiting for him. Every time I am by myself, I just cry, I am sad and depressed. The children also ask about their father, and they fight all the time.*”⁴

– Hamida, interviewed in Jalalabad, after being forced to return from Pakistan, where she was born.

The inflexibility of visa procedures at the peak of Afghan women’s crisis

Long visa waits and closure of visa sections in Iran

After August 15, 2021, Iran increased its visa distribution for Afghans in need of protection, such as ex-government workers, minorities, and women, to travel to and access temporary residence in Iran. Many Afghan nationals who moved to Iran following August 2021, have done so on tourist visas with a three-month validity and an option to extend for another three months while in-country. Those who wish to extend their visas longer must return to Afghanistan to reapply. This is a cause of anxiety for populations at risk. Ex-government workers, minorities and women often cannot return as they fear for their safety, pushing many to overstay their visas and remain, irregularly, in the country with the looming risk of deportation. Others were forced to return to Afghanistan as their Iranian visas expired while waiting for their visa to third countries or for regularisation of their status.

Given the closure of foreign embassies and consular presence in Afghanistan, many foreign governments relied on their diplomatic presence in Iran and Pakistan to process visas for Afghans’ journeys abroad. According to interviews conducted for this briefing note, foreign embassies in Tehran, such as France or Germany, have decreased the speed of their visa processing for Afghans, due to their incapacity to meet demands, or permanently redistributed them to their embassies in Islamabad, Pakistan for processing. This was a result, primarily, of the political instability and protests in Iran. Afghan women received letters telling them, days or weeks prior to their visa interview appointments, that the consulates would no longer be able to deliver them their visa and that they would be required to travel to Pakistan, resuming their process there, incurring additional expenses and risks of travel in the process. Families who had been waiting for months in Iran and had spent all their savings to find a more permanent solution in Iran, were forced to relocate to Pakistan, where conditions were even more uncertain.

“Transit Refugees” – A denial of responsibilities towards Afghan women in Pakistan

The Government of Pakistan has coined a new term for Afghan nationals who left their homes after August 15, 2021, in the hope of being resettled, or having been promised protection by foreign governments: they are referred to as “Transit Refugees”. The term recognises their right to protection as asylum seekers, recognises Pakistan’s presence as a temporary host, but denies the responsibility of Pakistan in ensuring their right for protection is met. This term covers both men and women.

While Pakistan has authorised transit to third countries via Pakistan, the Government of Pakistan has made clear that they would not be responsible for their protection in transit. For example, Germany has allowed over 14,000 people (including women and girls) to travel to Germany via “a special streamlined system for Afghan refugees” in Pakistan. Similarly, the High Commission for Canada allows for visa applications from Afghan nationals wishing to migrate to Canada via Pakistan. However, the process is time-consuming and costly. This increases risks as staying without a visa in Pakistan exposes women to crackdowns, risk of violence and exploitation from locals, including GBV risks without proper shelter and in unsafe accommodations.

In addition to Germany and Canada, the United States Refugee Admissions Programme (USRAP) allowed referrals for the resettlement of 20,000 following the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan through Priority-1 (P-1) and Priority-2 (P-2) for those known by the US Embassy in Kabul and referred for official resettlement. The P-2 programme, announced in the beginning of August 2021, was for Afghans working for a US-based NGO or media organisation, which aimed to include Afghan women. This was contingent upon the establishment of a Resettlement Support Center (RSC) in the country, which was a necessary requirement for cases of Afghans out of Pakistan. However, the Government of Pakistan is reported to have been reluctant in facilitating the process, fearing that this could encourage more Afghans to enter the country. Hence, the process remains on a “standstill” thus limiting women’s ability to avail the P-2 programme as a migration route to the US from Pakistan.

⁴ SSI 7 - Hamida, interviewed in Jalalabad, after being forced to return from Pakistan.

Three sisters - Afghan women “transit refugees” exposed to crackdown

Our father was worried about us, because we were young girls and there were some rumours that Taliban collect young girls and marry them. Taliban came to our house several times and talked to my father and brother. We all were worried about our safety. But living in Pakistan is not easy either. Here, we are three sisters with no male family member, we often face challenges when we go outside. We stay at home all the time. When we need something from outside, we ask our relatives to bring it to us, as we cannot communicate easily and as we fear the police. We don't feel comfortable communicating with anyone. One of the biggest challenges that we face now is receiving remittances from my brothers. We receive money in AFN and USD currencies but no one will exchange it for us to PKR. We have to first go to the police station and show our visa, and once we have their confirmation, we can then exchange the currencies. The system is corrupt and every time we have to pay a bribe.

Recently the Pakistani police entered our home to ask us questions – they asked “Why don't you have a male family member with you?”. Being women, alone, is a challenge for us too. Every time we explain that we have a visa but they still come to our house and conduct their search.

Yes, our visa is under the process with the Government of France. We want to go to France because neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan is a place for Afghan women to live in safety. We don't have access to our basic rights whether education or employment. We are young girls and we can't return back to Afghanistan either. We have requested for France to give us a humanitarian visa through one of our brother's colleagues. She is from France, she is the one helping us, guiding us on how to apply with the embassy of France in Islamabad.

We are now waiting.

Afghan woman in Pakistan, interviewed over the phone

Financial hardship limits the protection for Afghan refugee women in Iran and Pakistan

Gaps in employment and pay for Afghan women in Iran

Livelihoods for Afghan nationals in Iran and Pakistan is largely dependent on location (provinces, rural vs urban), education, documentation, employment, time since migration and income prior to migration. Among those, employment often plays a crucial point not only on the standard of living but also on migrants' integration.

According to Saba Ghadimi, a social researcher in the field of migration “the employment rate of Afghan women is lower than that of Iranian women; 10 per cent in Iranian women and 7 per cent in Afghan women. Data also indicates that among refugee populations “women were more likely to be unemployed than men across all provinces. Women's unemployment rate goes between 62 per cent in “Tehran,” and 93 per cent in “Sistan and Baluchestan” provinces.”⁵ Percentages are likely to be much lower when analysing both the documented and undocumented Afghan women present in Iran.

Moreover,

- Afghan women earn less compared to men. Among refugee populations, women reported earning less than men with the highest gap in income in “Sistan and Baluchestan”, “Kerman”, and “Hormozgan” provinces⁶.
- Afghan women are more likely to attend university in Iran, compared to Afghan men, but they are less likely than Afghan men to have formal jobs following their studies. This is particularly attributed to lower chances of obtaining work permits.⁷ *“At the end of their education, most of them are forced into manual labour and low-skilled work. In this situation, women are more likely to go sewing, farming, needlework, etc. Of course, they [Iranian authorities] hardly give work permits to women, because they believe that a man is the breadwinner and the duty of work is on him.”⁸*

⁵ Private Study, September 2023

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Diaran.ir, 2023, نسل خاموش- گزارش نشست وضعیت تفاوت نسلی زنان مهاجر افغانستانی در ایران

⁸ Ibid

- Financial barriers also prevent women from obtaining work permits. According to UNHCR, Amayesh card renewal fees constituted, in 2022, an average 8 per cent of a refugee's annual income.⁹ Given the limited job categories documented Afghans¹⁰ are allowed to work in, and cost that accompany Amayesh renewals, men were likely to be prioritised when deciding which household member can renew their Amayesh cards and consequently their work permits.¹¹ Women who did not renew their Amayesh cards "increased their risk of labour exploitation as they had to rely on unstable daily labour."¹² Not renewing their Amayesh cards could potentially push Afghan refugees to lose their status, as Iran has stopped issuing new Amayesh cards in 2007.

Lack of rights – including the right to work – for Afghan women in Pakistan

The lack of a robust legal framework governing the rights of Afghan women results in the lack of focused laws and policies addressing their specific needs. Pakistan acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 1996. However, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has raised concerns over the lack of gender-sensitive approaches to addressing the needs and risks of registered and unregistered refugee women and girls.¹³ For instance, Section 14 of the Foreigners Act (FA), 1946¹⁴ criminalises the intentional illegal entry of foreigners into Pakistan, and Afghan migrants, including refugees and many Afghan women, fall victim to this provision. In 2022, a fact-finding mission in Karachi Central Prison by the National Commission of Human Rights revealed that a "combing operation" by the Sindh Government led to the detention of many Afghan women and children.¹⁵

This included a total of 139 Afghan women, out of which 56 were convicted for illegal entry, while 83 were under trial.¹⁶ This included a total of 165 children detained with Afghan mothers.¹⁷ According to Human Rights Watch, amongst these was a 65-year old woman, who had come to Pakistan for medical treatment and planned to return to Afghanistan following her treatment, but was confined within prison and at a greater risk of illness.¹⁸ Moniza Kakar, a refugee rights activist, further revealed that many of the detained women were pregnant and in need of medical attention.¹⁹ In addition, she raised concerns about Afghan women and girls being exposed to the risk of "rape, human trafficking, and other abuses" in detention facilities before their deportation to Afghanistan.²⁰

Due to the lack of legal right to work in Pakistan, Afghan refugees engage in low-paying, unskilled labour in Pakistan.²¹ Challenges for Afghan women are magnified due to factors, such as limited opportunities for formal education, restrictions on mobility, and gender-discriminatory norms in their communities.²² This results in further marginalisation of women and girls, who are restricted within the confines of their homes. Despite efforts to achieve gender equality and increase self-reliance among women initiatives by UNHCR with Secours Islamique France (SIF), Iqra University and The National Vocational and Technical Training Commission,²³ Afghan women are unable to fully pursue business opportunities. They may have the relevant skills, but lack seed money, access to financial services and market linkages.²⁴ This not only creates a greater dependence on men, but also gives rise to issues such as child marriage and child labour as they are seen as a burden to their families.²⁵ Where women and girls are able to work informally, they often do so in unfavourable and unsafe conditions, where they are at a high risk of exploitation and abuse.²⁶ Moreover, other efforts aimed to support Afghan women have included the IOM's initiative to provide households with cash assistance, including 3,533 female-headed households.²⁷ However, as noted above similar initiatives target registered refugees, and it is unlikely that these efforts are extended to unregistered Afghan women.

⁹ It is estimated that the cost of the new "Smart Cards", provided to harmonise documentation among migrant populations in Iran, has/will considerably increase expenses. They cost almost three (3) times more than Amayesh cards.

¹⁰ Undocumented Afghan nationals are barred from employment within the formal sector. As such, undocumented Afghans often work within the informal sector.

¹¹ UNHCR, Afghanistan Situation Regional Response Plan January – December 2022, 2022

¹² EUAA, Iran - Situation of Afghan Refugees, Country of Origin Information, 2022

¹³ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Pakistan adopted by the committee at its fifty fourth session (11 February – 1 March 2013)

¹⁴ The Foreigners Act (FA), 1946 (amended by Foreigners Amendment Ordinance, 2000 and Foreigners (Amendment) Act, 2016), which regulates the entry, stay and movement of foreigners, applies to refugees, does not explicitly mention the word 'refugee' and the determination of whether a refugee would be a legal or illegal entrant, but applies to refugees.

¹⁵ UNHCR, The Plight of Afghan Refugees Incarcerated in Central Prison, Karachi, 2022

¹⁶ UNHCR, The Plight of Afghan Refugees Incarcerated in Central Prison, Karachi, 2022

¹⁷ UNHCR, The Plight of Afghan Refugees Incarcerated in Central Prison, Karachi, 2022

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, A Nightmare for Everyone, The Health Crisis in Pakistan's Prison, 2023

¹⁹ Info Migrants, 300 Afghan Children and Women Held in Pakistani Prisons for Illegal Entry, 2023

²⁰ The Diplomat, Documented or Not, Afghan Refugees in Pakistan Face Humiliation and Abuse, 2023

²¹ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

²² Arab News, Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan: A Vulnerable and Displaced Population, 2023

²³ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, Mid Year Report, 2023

²⁴ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, Mid Year Report, 2023

Following the government's deportation drive of 2023, women's livelihoods are at risk of being severely impacted. For instance, an Afghan woman, who worked as a chef at an all-women cafe in Karachi, reported that she is the sole breadwinner of her family, like other women working at the cafe. She, along with others, fears not only the risk of closure, but also the impossibility of her being able to pursue her career as a chef once deported to Afghanistan.²⁸

Protection risks on the rise

Rise in discontent and abuse towards Afghans in Iran

The months since August 2021 have recorded a rise in popular discontent and abuse towards Afghans population in Iran. Setareh Jafari, a second year Afghan university student born and raised in Iran, stated in a meeting, on the situation of generational difference of Afghan migrant women in Iran, with Diaran organisation that: "Until last year, if they asked me where is your homeland and where are you from, I would have said Iran. But the events that happened in recent months changed everything. We are witnessing physical and verbal attacks on a number of Afghans. A very simple example happens in bakeries. Even when we are at the front, they push us aside because we are Afghans, and we have to go to the end of the queue again. We have to face all of this despite legally living in Iran and paying money. I will never consider myself Iranian again and I will try to migrate from here."²⁹

Setareh's story is not an isolated one. Despite decades of "one-directional policy approach" to integration which has led to assimilation³⁰, second and third generation Afghan refugees and other migrants still face discrimination once their Afghan origin is discovered. Lack of documentation exacerbates these conditions, as it also increases the chances of being arrested and potentially deported. Most recently, the Afghan embassy in Iran released a statement in response to the increases in xenophobic actions and deportations of undocumented (but also in some cases documented) Afghans. The statement called for all Afghans residing in Iran to "refrain from wearing traditional clothing in public spaces, decrease movements as a group, and limit heated discussions on social media"³¹, in order to be less visible.

While Iran initially offered Afghan women increased rights and mobility, given the recent rise in discontent and return schemes by the Iranian government, undocumented and documented Afghan women have been forced to resort to old coping mechanisms. Interviews have suggested that Afghan women are now more cautious when leaving their home and avoid unnecessary trips.

Calculated informality – referring to measures that maintain Afghans in situations of irregularity and informality - along with the aforementioned contradictions make women more likely to face legal protection barriers. Samuel Hall's interviews have shown that when conducting administrative procedures, staff are more likely to discriminate when the requester has a more pronounced Afghan accent, is uneducated, and thus consequently cannot fully express themselves or adopt Iranian Persian lingo. Afghan women are more likely to face these administrative barriers and discrimination. Interviews have highlighted that such structural problems could jeopardise any bureaucratic task such as visa renewal procedures, or even decrease access to basic services.

Negative coping strategies and the lack of psychosocial support for Afghan women

Many Afghan women in Pakistan and Iran remain exposed to discrimination, on the basis of race, ethnicity and gender. Unregistered Afghan women bear an additional risk of deportation, in addition to the denial of basic rights, including shelter, access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.³² In the face of such power imbalances as the result of patriarchal norms, ethnic and gender related discrimination, women and girls are at risk of exploitation, mental health and psychosocial complications. Some are forced to run away from their homes, withdraw from educational opportunities, and adopt other negative coping mechanisms.

Iran

Although mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) exists for refugees, and the 2023 Refugee Response Plan along with partner agencies have included MHPSS, prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) and gender-based violence (GBV) risk mitigation assistance as part of their agenda (to be conducted in schools, in trainings, in guest towns³³...) - these remain limited. For example, UNHCR Iran provides counselling services, but these are limited to only the most vulnerable given low capacities of the organisation. To reach these services and get appointments, refugees need to contact the UNHCR hotline number and will potentially then get referred.³⁴

²⁸ Arab News, Uncertain Future for Karachi's All-women-Run Afghan Cafe Amid Deportation Drive, 2023

²⁹ Diaran.iR, 2023, نسل خاموش-گزارش نشست وضعیت تفاوت نسلی زنان مهاجر افغانستانی در ایران

³⁰ According to the IOM Glossary: "Integration policies formulated primarily on the principle of assimilation have been undergoing considerable criticism both within academia and among policy makers, given their one-sidedness and failure to incorporate important relevant policy areas such as social cohesion, transnationalism, diversity and tolerance. For those reasons, integration policies are no longer considered a desirable approach in integrating immigrants in countries of destination or transit"

³¹ Afghan Embassy Iran, Instagram, Accessed December 2023

³² Arab News, Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan: A Vulnerable and Displaced Population, 2023

³³ This term is a translation of mehmanshahr. A term used to mean refugee camp

³⁴ UNHCR, Iran Help, Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Iran, Accessed 2023

While in theory health facilities and services are open to all regardless of documentation status, many Afghan women remain deprived of medical services. Undocumented Afghan women and girls face limitations accessing national services out of fear of deportation, lack of documentation and financial barriers. While Afghan refugees are allowed to enlist in insurance schemes to access secondary healthcare, undocumented Afghans have very limited, and only ad-hoc opportunities for the most vulnerable. Female-headed households, with lower social and economic capital, face comparatively greater difficulties in addressing basic needs, aggravating protection risks. "Further [...] Afghan women are observed to face serious challenges and barriers within their communities that prevent them from accessing specialised support services, including reproductive health."³⁵

Pakistan

Limited livelihood opportunities lead to negative coping strategies, including domestic violence, which women suffer from, and survival sex.³⁶ Afghan women and girls are at a disproportionately high risk of harm, exploitation and abuse, including early and forced marriages, domestic violence, public harassment, and denial of inheritance rights.³⁷ According to UNHCR, child marriage and intimate partner violence are the most prominent concerns when it comes to GBV in Pakistan for Afghan women and girls³⁸. 80 per cent of women living in refugee villages have experienced some form of violence within their homes.³⁹ 50 per cent of women in Afghanistan and 24.5 per cent of women in Pakistan have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime⁴⁰.

There have been efforts to raise awareness on GBV, by international organisations and donors, among documented Afghan populations. According to UNHCR, in the first half of 2023, 102,681 individuals were provided with GBV awareness, and 26,565 women and girls were able to access safe spaces; child protection interventions, such as family tracing, case management, MHPSS for caregivers and children, training of social workers, reached around 31,000 people; UNHCR facilitated the provision of legal aid assistance to over 22,584 individuals and around 393 outreach workers were trained on community engagement.⁴¹ A vast majority of those targeted were women across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Islamabad, and Punjab provinces (around 69 per cent).⁴² Moreover, efforts by IOM, including data collection on basic community needs and movement have focused on targeting ACC holders, as well as Afghans of other status.⁴³

Despite these efforts, Afghan women in participatory assessments have revealed little awareness of their rights and services available to protect them of violence.⁴⁴ With significant barriers to speaking up about these issues⁴⁵, they are left with little to no mechanisms to file complaints or seek avenues for formal or informal support.⁴⁶ Any formal complaint with law enforcement creates risks of deportation. Moreover, given the patriarchal norms and practices prevalent within Afghan communities, they live in a state of social and cultural isolation,⁴⁷ limiting their ability to seek support and assistance from outside the community. Options to seek informal support are also curtailed, as violence may stem from within communities, leaving women feeling helpless.

“**There are many challenges for some women and girls to report and seek help, because if the men of the family or members of the community find out that these women have spoken up, they risk being killed**”⁴⁸

- Key informant interview #4 (International Organisation Officer).

The fear of being detained and deported removes women and girls' ability to report violence to the police.⁴⁹ Norms also limit their representation within their communities. Afghan women's participation in decision-making at a personal, household or community level is low.⁵⁰ Participatory assessments have revealed that Afghan women and girls believe that their participation in community structures depends on male relatives or community member's permission.⁵¹ Community decisions led by *jirgas*, which comprise all-male members⁵², may not only fail to address women's issues, but reproduce violence and discriminatory practices, such as *walwar* or bride price⁵³, and *wanni* or exchange marriage to resolve disputes.⁵⁴

³⁵ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, 2023

³⁶ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, 2023

³⁷ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

³⁸ KII 4 - International Organisation Officer

³⁹ ICMC, ICMC Pakistan Celebrates the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence Campaign, 2019

⁴⁰ UNFPA, Measuring the prevalence of violence against women in Asia-Pacific

⁴¹ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, Mid Year Report, 2023

⁴² UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, Mid Year Report, 2023

⁴³ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, Mid Year Report, 2023

⁴⁴ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, Pakistan: Government Must Stop Harassing and Arbitrarily Arresting Afghans Seeking Refuge, 2023

⁴⁶ Arab News, Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan: A Vulnerable and Displaced Population, 2023

⁴⁷ Arab News, Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan: A Vulnerable and Displaced Population, 2023

⁴⁸ KII 4 - International Organisation Officer

⁴⁹ Arab News, Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan: A Vulnerable and Displaced Population, 2023

⁵⁰ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

⁵¹ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

⁵² UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

⁵³ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

⁵⁴ RSIL, Jirga System in Pakistan: A Transgression of Human Rights, 2022

Recommendations

- **To All Governments:**
 - Recognise the right to *prima facie refugee recognition* for Afghan women given the situation of widespread gender apartheid in their home country and UNHCR's non-return advisory.
 - Allow data collection fit for policies and for enhanced protection. One of the obstacles to protection is the lack of systematic data on the situation of Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan.
- **To the Governments of Iran and Pakistan:**
 - Protect the asylum space for asylum seekers and refugees, facilitate their status recognition and their access to services – including shelter, food, water – during their wait. This includes specialised services for women and additional investments to combat gender-based violence.
- **To Donor Governments:**
 - Uphold feminist foreign policies and expedite visas and evacuation plans for Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan. Countries with feminist foreign policies should support Afghan refugee women hosted in Iran and Pakistan by expediting visa application procedures for women who have specific protection concerns because of their past activities in Afghanistan and further expanding evacuation operations.
 - Advocate for a Regional Protection and Mobility Framework. Understanding the history of sub-regional migration, with the current limitations of visa and refugee regimes to recognise the need for protection of Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, a key to durable solutions will be to facilitate a cross-border mobility framework that allows the safe movements of Afghans. A regional mobility framework is needed that accepts the need for Afghans to move freely in search of protection.
 - Fund financing measures for interventions to support Afghan women's livelihoods and access to services in host countries.
- **To Aid Organisations:**
 - Ensure proper knowledge generation and learning for global advocacy for Afghan women's rights to international protection and *prima facie* refugee status is a key to their protection.
 - Establish mechanisms in displacement to provide Afghan women with reliable information on potential risks, gender-specific assistance related to physical and mental health, and options for seeking asylum or protection.
 - Address women's financial barriers which limit their access to protection and reinforce community-based awareness raising especially on the risks of GBV and other protection risks.



About the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, and the Norwegian Refugee Council, which aims to contribute to the development of solutions for populations affected by displacement in the region.

Drawing upon its members' operational presence throughout Asia, and its extensive advocacy networks, ADSP engages in evidence-based advocacy initiatives to support improved outcomes for displacement-affected communities. As implementing agencies, ADSP members work closely with displaced populations and the communities that host them and are therefore able to contribute a distinctive, field-led, perspective to policy and advocacy processes which can sometimes be removed from on-the-ground realities, and, the concerns of those living with and in displacement.

By coming together under the aegis of the ADSP the three member agencies – global leaders in innovative policy and programming – commit to collaboration to achieve improved outcomes for displacement affected communities in the region.

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About Samuel Hall

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research, evaluates programmes, and designs policies in contexts of migration and displacement. Our approach is ethical, academically rigorous, and based on first-hand experience of complex and fragile settings.

Our research  connects  the voice  of communities to changemakers for more inclusive societies. With offices in Afghanistan, Germany, Kenya, and Tunisia and a presence in Somalia, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates, we are based in the regions we study.

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