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Briefing Note

Afghan Children's Access to Education in Iran and Pakistan

Introduction

Why this brief?

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the 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 focuses on research initiatives to build an evidence base for its members and other humanitarian actors to facilitate a common understanding and to support advocacy 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. The aim of this research brief is to focus on the sub-regional protection needs of Afghan refugees, inform, and raise awareness on the specific needs of demographic groups. This briefing note focuses on access to education for girls in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, especially after August 2021. This briefing note will also serve as a call for the viability of education as a pathway for durable solutions and protection for Afghan girls and women.

Context

The De facto Authorities (DfA) imposed restrictions on women and girls' education in 2022¹, banning secondary schooling for girls throughout Afghanistan and suspending tertiary education for women. The decreased access of girls to secondary and tertiary education will not only impact girls and women but the Afghan economy as a whole. Restrictions on female education, alongside over 20 other bans on women's rights, are an added reason why Afghan women, often along with their families, have to migrate. According to a private report, written in March 2023, although access to education for girls and women is often not the sole reason for migration, it is and was "a key consideration for many" that have recently migrated to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan.² This was particularly the case for families with daughters and sisters in secondary and tertiary years.

“What makes me so worried about returning to Afghanistan is that I will no longer be able to continue my education, I won't be able to work, I will have no future inside Afghanistan. One of my sisters is in the 7th grade in Kabul. She suffers from a mental health problem as she sits at home all day. We studied and gained knowledge for years, and we can't now just be waiting to see what decisions others will make for us. We have the right to live as we want and that is not possible in Afghanistan.”³

- Afghan female youth interviewed in Pakistan

Education for girls

Afghans have historically migrated to Iran and Pakistan in the hope of accessing safety. Yet Afghan girls and women migrants, including refugees, face obstacles accessing services in their host country. This section reviews girls' access to education in Iran and Pakistan.

Iran

Iran's policies towards the inclusion of Afghan refugees within the national education system have shifted throughout the years. It was not until 2015, through an initial decree by the Supreme Leader and its consequent ratification by the cabinet of ministers⁴, that Iran allowed all foreign children, including documented and undocumented migrants to access primary and secondary education, mostly free of charge.⁵ Although this decree greatly improved access for Afghan children, many challenges still remain, especially for girls.

¹ International Crisis Group, Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis, 2023

² Private Study, March 2023

³ SSI 1 - Afghan female youth interviewed in Pakistan

⁴ Seddighi, H., Naseh, M., Rafieifar, M., & Ilea, P., Education of Afghan refugee children in Iran: A structured review of policies. Children & Society, 00, 1-15, 2022

⁵ Subsequent to the Supreme leader's decree to allow undocumented Afghans to attend school in Iran, tuition and registration fees were waived for migrant children. Yet, according to a recent communique by the Ministry of Education, registration fees will be demanded by schools from migrant children starting from the 2023-2024 school year. Afghan families had previously reported being charged school uniform and textbook fees. While host community children are also charged these fees, due to arbitrary application of rules by the different schools when it comes to school registration and additional fees, undocumented families can be charged more than official prices. These fees can amount to more than what many families can afford. Accessed December 2023 - Diaran.ir, 2023 , ثبت نام دانش‌آموزان اتباع در سال تحصیلی ۱۴۰۳-۱۴۰۲, ۲۰۲۳

The same is true for Afghans' attitude towards education, especially for girls. Through the use of awareness raising campaigns by the Iranian government and international organisations from the 1980s, "Afghan refugees – initially hostile towards modern education and girls' education - began to change their attitudes."⁶ While Afghan refugees and other migrants grew more prone to send their children, especially daughters, to school, they were not always able to do so, especially if they were undocumented.

Afghans in Iran also have access to a series of non-formal educational opportunities through Afghan self-run schools, charity schools, or catch-up classes for out of school children provided by the Literacy Movement Organization. Despite these efforts "among refugee households with school aged children, 25 per cent reported that their children did not go to school (ranging from 16 per cent for Amayesh card holding households, to 38 per cent for those who arrived after August 2021."⁷ Such numbers could partially be explained for girls because of logistical, cultural, financial and legal obstacles - all of which are closely intertwined.

Logistical Obstacles

Decreased space in Iranian schools and a lack of capacity within Iran's educational system may lead to an overall reduction in educational access for Afghan nationals. For the past two years, Iran's already overstretched education system has been welcoming new students within its public schools. Between 2021 and 2022, at least 200,000 new Afghan students moved to Iran.⁸ The government of Iran estimates that another 100,000 may have moved to Iran since then.⁹ At the start of the 2023 school year, 574,189 Afghans were registered, for the 2022-2023 school year, in public schools, of whom 48.6 per cent were girls.¹⁰ This represents a rise of over 100,000 children since the 2020-2021 school year (472,389 Afghan children were enrolled then)¹¹. It is also estimated that close to 380,000 children registered in 2022 - 2023 school year, were undocumented or only had headcount slips.¹² It can be inferred that with the decreasing protection space for girls in Afghanistan, more families are migrating to Iran to access such services. Yet, because of the decreased capacity of Iranian schools to welcome new children, some girls risk remain deprived of education. Many schools have begun working double shifts – with morning and afternoon shifts - to meet the rising demand¹³. The government of Iran speaks of needing close to 20,000 new schools and close to 14,000 new teachers to meet new demands. Moreover, "increasing the numbers of female teachers is a vital component in reducing the overall deficit. For girls, a lack of female teachers can spell the end of their secondary education, as parents in some conservative Afghan communities will not allow their daughters to be taught by a male teacher. Most importantly, a female role model can inspire and support girls to complete their studies – and even motivate them to become teachers themselves."¹⁴

Financial Obstacles

The recent enrolment fees introduced by the government for Afghan students, in both primary and secondary school, are likely to increase financial obstacles for all migrant children, but with most consequences and impact upon girls. In situations whereby families cannot afford the education of all their children, boys' education is often prioritised over that of girls.

According to a private study, written in September 2023, "the average school enrolment of female children, among refugee families is about 5 per cent lower than male enrolment."¹⁵ However, this number varies by province, and in fact, female enrolment is higher than male enrolment in certain provinces such as "Tehran", "Alborz" or "Yazd". While boys are more likely to drop-out in all provinces, girls are more likely to drop out in "Hormozgan", and "Sistan and Baluchistan" provinces. Both of these provinces given their demographic composition, religious and cultural attributes are more likely to hold patriarchal values and thus retain girls from accessing education. These two provinces also have among the highest unemployment rates for female Afghan refugees¹⁶. Lack of education among female children can fuel "a vicious cycle where a lack of education for girls perpetuates poverty, further entrenching inequalities"¹⁷ even when they reach adulthood. Moreover, "in part due to their marginalisation from education, girls are also likely to face an increased risk of exploitation

⁶ Hoodfar 2007, cited in Hervé Nicolle, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls - Inclusion Of Afghan Refugees In The National Education Systems Of Iran And Pakistan, 2019

⁷ Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghan Situation, Education Away from Home, Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in Iran, Education Brief, November 2023

⁸ UNHCR Iran, Education Update, 2022

⁹ Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghan Situation, Education Away from Home, Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in Iran, Education Brief, November 2023

¹⁰ Diaran, 2023, ۱۴۰۱-۱۴۰۲ (سال تحصیلی) در ایران (آمار تحصیل کودکان اتباع در ایران)

¹¹ Diaran, 2022, ثبت نام دانش آموزان اتباع در سال ۱۴۰۱ در ایران

¹² UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, 2023

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghan Situation, Education Away from Home, Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in Iran, Education Brief, November 2023

¹⁵ Private Report, September 2023

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghan Situation, Education Away from Home, Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in Iran, Education Brief, November 2023

and abuse, including as a result of forced and child marriage, gender-based violence and other forms of abuse and sexual exploitation.”¹⁸

Such trends are likely to be bolder among undocumented populations given decreased access to basic services, and rights within Iranian society. Humanitarian organisations can only direct their help to refugees and those with documentation thus perpetuating differences among girls and boys within Afghan undocumented populations.

Legal and Administrative Obstacles

While legal, and administrative obstacles as well as lack of awareness about enrolment procedures affect both girls and boys, girls are most at risk. In theory, identification documents are not required for registration purposes, however the new online system put in place by the National Organization for Migration undermines this notion. Foreign students were required to obtain a unique “Yekta” code, through the SAHMA system to be able to register in the education system. However, in order to obtain that code, they would have needed to have participated in the 2022 headcount exercise. As such, Afghan migrants fleeing Afghanistan following the end of the headcount, would not have been able to register.

According to Saba Ghadimi, a social researcher in the field of migration “The SAHMA system has an option for children without identity documents. However, it seems that this option was only built to calculate the population of migrant children of school age. This option was not intended to give a unique code for these children.”¹⁹ Moreover, others were unable to register due to the lack of, and possibly contradictory information²⁰.

In theory, enrolling undocumented Afghan children in school offers protection from deportation to their family and themselves. However, the bureaucratic obstacles within the new registration system have undermined the access of undocumented Afghans to education. Moreover, in a context where Iranian authorities persist with deportations of undocumented Afghans, and with an Afghan migrant population which has grown to distrust government declarations, such as the extension of the stay of headcount participants till September 2024, many families do not see it as necessary to enrol their children in school as they might be forced to return at any time.

“**Our visa has only been extended for 2.5 months [after an initial 3 month visa]. We didn't think it was worth enrolling our 8 year-old niece because we have to go back.**”²¹

– Afghan woman in Iran interviewed over the phone

In the case of returns, depending on their age and the dominant culture in areas of return, girls may no longer be able to attend school in Afghanistan. A recent Samuel Hall / UNICEF Innocenti report has found that migrant and displaced children often miss months, or even years of school following displacement.²² Even though families might be prone to enrol their daughters into school, by the time they are able to do so, some of these girls would have grown too old.

“There is a considerable psychological impact for those at risk of missing out or being marginalised from education, with those in such situations more likely to experience anxiety, depression and a sense of hopelessness. This impact is particularly profound for women and girls who, having already seen their access to education in Afghanistan curtailed and, against prevailing patriarchal attitudes, are likely to be the most marginalised in community and household level decisions around enrolment.”²³

Tertiary Education

Even before the ban on higher education, “Afghanistan was already grappling with the issue of brain drain, the emigration of skilled individuals.”²⁴ For decades, many educated professionals and young Afghans, searching to continue their tertiary education, migrated to Iran and Pakistan. Between 2022-2023, according to estimates by the Iranian government, 40,000 Afghan students attended university in Iran.²⁵ This represents over a twofold increase, when compared to the number of Afghan university students present in Iran in March 2021, according to the Ministry of Education²⁶. With the ban on tertiary education for women in Afghanistan, Iranian universities that allow Afghan students to register, have witnessed an increase in university applications by Afghan women.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Diaran, 2023, بیوزستی: نهاد میانجی در ثبت نام کودکان بازمانده از تحصیل

²⁰ While certain UNHCR, and government websites advertise some of the guidelines, most Afghans do not know where to find this information. Word of mouth, social media, and coffee-nets are often the most used information medium and mediums for Afghans in Iran.

²¹ SSI 5 - Afghan woman in Iran interviewed over the phone

²² Samuel Hall/UNICEF, Generating Evidence on Afghan Child Migrants and IDP children in Pakistan, 2023

²³ Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghan Situation, Education Away from Home, Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in Iran, Education Brief, November 2023

²⁴ Samuel Hall/UNESCO, The Cost Of The Gender Ban: The Impact of the Secondary and Higher Education Ban in Afghanistan, 2023

²⁵ ISNA, 2023, تحصیل ۰۴ هزار دانشجوی افغان در ایران/اعلام آمادگی سه دانشگاه برای پذیرش دانشجویان دختر افغان

²⁶ Virgoool.io, 2021, آمار تعداد دانشجویان بین‌المللی در ایران به تفکیک کشور

Certain universities declared their readiness to welcome female Afghan students and promised to welcome more if their infrastructural capacity was expanded.²⁷ Among them, three single-sex universities (Al-Zahra, Kausar and Hazrat Masoumeh) stand out, as they only cater to female students, and thus address any cultural concerns held by families. In addition to opportunities offered to in person students, Hazrat Masoumeh University also opened 1000 virtual seats for women still in Afghanistan.²⁸ In August 2023, the UN Population Fund signed an agreement with Iran's government and health authorities to provide midwifery and nursing skill-based education to Afghan women and girls who are currently in Iran.²⁹ Midwifery and nursing are among the only jobs women are still allowed to hold in Afghanistan.

Until August 2021, access to tertiary education was restricted to only student visa holders. Amayesh card holders, as well as undocumented Afghans were not allowed to attend university in Iran. Starting in 2016, Amayesh card holders were asked to renounce their refugee status and apply for a passport and a visa by going back to Afghanistan.³⁰ Afghan female students, "had the alternative option to go to the Iranian Kish Island to obtain a student visa."³¹ However, after 15 August 2021 and the pause on passport distributions in Afghanistan and abroad this rule was waived for all Amayesh card holders. Afghan students, even for the 2023-2024 academic year, were allowed to access tertiary education with their Amayesh Cards with the sole condition that they would acquire a visa and electronic passport once their issuance had been resumed. At the time of writing, the Afghan embassy has resumed passport distribution, yet it does so sparsely. We are yet to see if Afghan university students with Amayesh cards will be asked to apply for a visa for the 2023-2024 year.

Pakistan

Pakistan has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which confers the right to education under Article 28. Moreover, the Constitution of Pakistan under Article 25-A, provides that "the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such a manner as may be determined by law."³² The right is extended to "all" children and does not discriminate between citizens and those residing within Pakistan without citizenship status.³³ Therefore, Afghan migrant children fall within the protection of this right.³⁴ A review of existing literature shows a focus on education for registered refugees, with little information on the right to education for Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders or undocumented Afghans.

The exact number of Afghan girls in Pakistan receiving education is not known as statistics are mostly based on estimated populations or those who have been surveyed. As per UNHCR data, 70 per cent of Afghan refugees live in urban and rural areas, out of which 500,000 are school aged children. Most of the in-school children have been accessing the national education system³⁵ with others being able to access non-formal education within refugee communities³⁶ (self-funded or externally funded), UNHCR-funded education facilities,³⁷ or *madrassas* (centres for religious education).³⁸

Yet, a large majority of Afghan children in Pakistan remain out of school. As per the ADSP report, "Barriers to Access Education for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan", a significant majority of Afghan refugees - around 80 per cent - are out of school, with significant variations between the gross enrolment rates of boys (87 per cent) and girls (34 per cent)³⁹. UNHCR reaches around 10 per cent of the enrolled Afghan children, with around 40 per cent enrolment for girls.⁴⁰ Data is not disaggregated by protection status, so while data collected by UNHCR is largely available for Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders, the numbers may also include ACC holders and undocumented migrants. Similarly, interventions - unless specially stated otherwise - may also provide access to ACC holders and undocumented migrant children, although in lesser numbers.

Afghan children's access to education in Pakistan must be understood within the broader context of a weak education system in Pakistan. Despite the existence of laws making education compulsory, Pakistan has the world's second highest population of out-of-school children.⁴¹ Access to education for Afghan girls is a challenge from a supply and

²⁷ YJC, 2022, آمادگی دانشگاه‌های ایران برای پذیرش دانشجویان دختر افغانستانی

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ United Nations, Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, August 2023

³⁰ EUAA, Iran - Situation of Afghan Refugees, Country of Origin Information, 2022

³¹ EUAA, Iran - Situation of Afghan Refugees, Country of Origin Information, 2022

³² Article 25A, Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973

³³ To protect the right to education in the Constitution, legislation has been enacted at the national and provincial level. These include the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2012, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Free Compulsory Primary and Secondary Education Act of 2017; the Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2014; the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2013; the Balochistan Compulsory Education Act of 2014.

³⁴ UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report, Migration (2019), Displacement and education: Building Bridges, Not Walls.

³⁵ UNHCR, RAHA Factsheet-Education, 2021(Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2021/04/RAHA-Factsheet-Education.pdf>)

³⁶ UNHCR, Refugee Education Strategy-Pakistan

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ M Usman, Afghan Diaspora in Pakistan: Health and Education Policy Recommendations for Rural and Urban Areas. University of Richmond, Virginia, USA Jepson School of Leadership Studies, 2020

³⁹ ADSP, Barriers to Access Education for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, 2022

⁴⁰ KII 2 - International Organisation Officer

⁴¹ World Bank Blogs, In Pakistan, Quality Education Requires A Different Approach—and More Investment, 2023 (Available at:<https://blogs.worldbank.org/endovertyinsouthasia/pakistan-quality-education-requires-different-approach-and-more-investment>)

demand perspective, which becomes more prominent at the secondary level.⁴² Access is even limited for PoR card holders due to funds for refugee education being protracted from emergency funds, allowing for only short-term solutions for education of Afghan refugees.⁴³ This results in a lack of facilities and services within the education system.

In addition, gender discrimination intersects with poverty, restrictions in girls' freedom of movement, unsafe journeys to and from school, high cost of private education and a lack of female teachers. All are factors that likely decrease the demand for education of Afghan girls, which in turn put Afghan migrant girls at significantly higher risk of being out of school compared to their male counterparts.⁴⁴ Other factors that impact the right to education (albeit equally for boys and girls) include lack of documentation, language barriers, and insufficient schools for girls.⁴⁵

A low level of secondary-level enrolment feeds into the tertiary level, with only small numbers of Afghan girls attending universities.⁴⁶ Some Afghan students have faced issues with universities rejecting applications, despite them holding ACC / PoR cards.⁴⁷ Students have subsequently reached out to UNHCR to clarify their ability to enrol with universities, with UNHCR seeking further clarification on these issues and confirmation from the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees on covering all students in applications, including Afghan students. Often, issues are due to a lack of centralised policy for education that uniformly applies across the country, which creates uncertainty on the status of enrolment for Afghan students in Pakistan.⁴⁸

Logistical/Institutional Obstacles

Within the broader context of barriers to education for girls in Pakistan, **families often fear for their daughters' safety to and from school** as they may experience sexual harassment and hesitate to lodge a complaint. This is due to the fear of being blamed or being forced to drop out of school.⁴⁹ These challenges are exacerbated for Afghan girls residing in informal settlements and RVs in urban and peri-urban areas with few schools, as they are at a higher risk than boys to be denied access to education. This is notably due to distance between schools and places of residence, as parents are often reluctant to allow their daughters to walk / travel long distances alone.⁵⁰ Those who do make the journey are, moreover, exposed to potential harassment to and from school.⁵¹

Coupled with this, the restriction of movement of Afghan girls and limitations on their interactions with men (including class fellows, teachers) prevent girls' access to education. For reasons of safety, as well as harmful social norms, many girls are not allowed to travel to school without a male family member accompanying them.⁵² As such, accompanying their daughters or sisters to school becomes an additional responsibility for male family members during the day.

Generally, **refugee schools lack inclusiveness for girls, including a lack of female teachers**⁵³, and as a result, families may decide not to send girls to school. Moreover, there is a severe lack of specific schools for Afghan girls and schools mostly offer co-education. For instance, a recent study revealed that there was not a single higher secondary school for girls in Haripur refugee village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) with a population of around 100,000 refugees.⁵⁴ Similarly, UNHCR operated schools in certain districts of KP with refugee villages have opted for co-education schools. However, parents are often reluctant to send their daughters to co-ed institutions.⁵⁵ Some interventions have been made to address this. Some UNHCR operated schools in certain districts of KP operate by setting different timings for boys and girls, with classes taking place for boys in the morning and later for girls. Gender-friendly schools that offer female bathrooms and viable transport options for girls are also limited. The absence of gender appropriate WASH facilities (in particular latrines / bathroom stalls) separated by gender is another factor which places female students at a higher risk of educational exclusion.⁵⁶

⁴² KII 2 - International Organisation Officer

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Education in times of restriction: an examination of refugee girls' and young women's access to learning during COVID-19 school closures in Pakistan, Educational Research for Policy and Practice <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-023-09353-4> (2023)

⁴⁵ ADSP, Barriers to Access Education for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, 2022

⁴⁶ KII 2 - International Organisation Officer

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Shall I feed my daughter, or educate her?": Barriers to girls' education in Pakistan, 2018

⁵⁰ ADSP, Samuel Hall, Afghan Refugees in Pakistan - Protracted Displacement or Protracted Settlement?, 2023

⁵¹ UNHCR, Participatory Assessment Report - Pakistan, 2022

⁵² M Usman, Afghan Diaspora in Pakistan: Health and Education Policy Recommendations for Rural and Urban Areas. University of Richmond, Virginia, USA Jepson School of Leadership Studies, 2020

⁵³ ADSP, Barriers to Access Education for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, 2022

⁵⁴ Dawn, Study calls for setting up higher secondary schools for Afghan girls in KP, 2023 (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1771528>)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ ADSP, Barriers to Access Education for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, 2022

Financial Obstacles

For many Pakistani families, the most significant barrier to education is financial.⁵⁷ Afghan refugees and other migrant families also face financial barriers when trying to access education. Government schools require specific documentation, including computerised national ID cards and the children's B-forms (or child registration certificate) that serve as a proof of identity for those under 18, which are difficult for Afghan refugees to obtain.⁵⁸ ACC holders and unregistered migrants face additional barriers in providing these documents, and hence, pursuing education at a government school.

Private schools, and Afghan schools (education centres that offer the Afghan curriculum for migrant children) can be more flexible in terms of these requirements, and are options that ACC holders and unregistered migrants may also avail. However, they are expensive compared to the average income that Afghan nationals receive.⁵⁹ In addition to tuition fees, other costs include prices of buying uniforms, books, and transport to and from school.⁶⁰

Moreover, following the announcement of the deportation deadline for Afghan migrants by the Government of Pakistan (GoP), multiple Afghan schools were closed down, either by the government or due to the loss of students, returned to Afghanistan or hiding in Pakistan.⁶¹ Among others, five schools in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, that catered to around 2,000 Afghan students, were closed down as a result of the caretaker government's deportation policy.⁶² School teachers reported that both undocumented and those with legal status were being targeted by the police, creating fear amongst students, who are hesitant to leave their homes, resulting in a two-thirds dropout rate, forcing these closures.⁶³

“I know that Afghan children were enrolled at schools and sometimes there were schools led by Afghans for Afghans but recently due to the announcements on the forced returns of Afghans, the government of Pakistan has closed the schools and do not allow Afghan children at Pakistani schools. Afghan children with legal documentations might be able to go to school but I don't have a reliable information to provide.”⁶⁴

- Afghan female youth interviewed in Pakistan

Interventions to Support Girls' Education

Over the years, various interventions have supported the education of Afghan migrant and refugee girls in Pakistan, with a focus on registered Afghan refugees. Until mid-2023, 60,000 girls were provided education through various initiatives, including home-based girls' schools, Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) centres, rehabilitation of schools, and scholarships⁶⁵ According to ADSP, as of August 2021, a total of 18 ALP centres provided literacy and numeracy skills training along with some key technical skills, such as embroidery and tailoring. Each centre has 25 girls enrolled and is run by one female teacher⁶⁶. This makes ALP centres more acceptable due to the prevalent socio-cultural norms in the community. However, teachers are not state-licensed as these centres are not mainstreamed within the formal education system.

In line with the UNHCR Education Strategy, 51 Home Based Girls Schools have been set up in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan for out-of-school girls who would otherwise not be allowed to attend regular school because of cultural reasons.⁶⁷ UNHCR also introduced a cash program in 2022, which provides a transportation allowance for Afghan girls (contingent upon 80 per cent attendance) in RVs to attend the nearest secondary school. UNHCR has also introduced campaigns specifically targeting the education of girls, including Parent-Teacher Committees, Women's Education Committees, and Mother Committees in KP and Balochistan, with the aim to encourage and promote not just enrolment but also continuation of education of girls.⁶⁸ Moreover, through the UNHCR funded programmes, the capacity of teaching staff was strengthened to improve overall quality of education. UNHCR funding contributed to improving educational facilities in refugee villages through their Refugee Affected and Hosting Areas (RAHA) programme. UNHCR has also developed tertiary-level scholarships to Afghan refugee youth through the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI). These are also extended to Afghan refugee girls.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Shall I feed my daughter, or educate her?": Barriers to girls' education in Pakistan, 2018

⁵⁸ The News, Statelessness keeps young Afghan refugees away from education, 2022 (Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/940987-statelessness-keeps-young-afghan-refugees-away-from-education>)

⁵⁹ Relief Web, School Dropout Rate Soars for Afghan Refugees, 2014 (Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/school-dropout-rate-soars-afghan-refugees>)

⁶⁰ NRC, Breaking the Cycle: Education and the Future of Afghan Refugee Children, 2015

⁶¹ Poorva Joshi, "Pakistani Schools for Afghans Close as Deportations Loom, 2023 (Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/pakistani-schools-for-afghans-close-as-deportations-loom-2455850-2023-10-30>)

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Arab News, Pakistani schools for Afghans close as deportations loom, 2023 (Available at: <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2400211/pakistan>)

⁶⁴ SSI 1

⁶⁵ UNHCR, Regional Refugee Response Plan for Afghanistan Situation, Mid Year Report, 2023

⁶⁶ ADSP, Barriers to Access Education for Afghan Refugees in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, 2022

⁶⁷ UNHCR, Refugee Education Strategy-Pakistan, 2022

⁶⁸ KII 2 - International Organisation Officer

Other interventions, such as those by Relief International, include enhancing equitable access to and enrollment in primary education, with a specific focus on the education of Afghan girls. Introduced in Swabi, Nowshera, and Peshawar, the program has increased enrolment and retention in public schools by introducing various measures, including enrolment campaigns within Afghan communities to create awareness on enrolment processes; a school readiness program, where children can go to “catch-up” to their peers already enrolled in schools with no costs to be borne by families; and a mainstreaming process for Afghan children to join Pakistani schools. As per Relief International data, between 2019 and 2021, 1341 boys and 1690 girls have taken part in the program in 70 schools across Pakistan.⁶⁹

TVET

A significant support to the learning and education of Afghan refugee girls is through vocational schools. These schools are initiated by individuals aiming at the empowerment of Afghan refugee children. For instance, in 2022, the Skills Academy for Needy Aspirants (SANA) was established to create opportunities for the economic empowerment of Afghan women.⁷⁰ Despite limited resources, the Academy was able to support hundreds of women in teaching them skills, such as sewing and stitching, digital skills, as well as beauty treatments.⁷¹ These are also introduced by UNHCR in partnership with others, including Women's Technical Training Centre (WTTTC) in Quetta, and the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC), among others. UNHCR initiatives have included the provision of technical skills training on the development of cooking and tailoring/fashion designing skills, amongst others, to support young Afghan refugees in Pakistan.⁷² However, these are only available to those with PoR cards/UNHCR mandate refugees.⁷³

The state of education for Afghan nationals, with a focus on girls and women

While Afghan girls are likely to face obstacles to access educational opportunities in both Iran and Pakistan, they appear to fare worse in Pakistan. According to a 2019 report⁷⁴, four reasons stand behind such differences:

- **Political context:** Country laws and policies play a significant role in girl's attendance. Iran has national legislation for the protection of the rights of Afghan refugees, whereas Pakistan does not. As a result, “the Iranian government has become more pragmatic with regards to the presence of Afghan refugees on its soil and sees education as the cornerstone of its policy towards refugee integration and support.”⁷⁵ For example, while Iran allows everyone to access education regardless of documentation, given the tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan - and a generally weaker educational system - the Government of Pakistan does not wish to develop a “long-term and ambitious educational roadmap for Afghans.”
- **Sociocultural context:** The different attitudes towards education and socio-cultural barriers displayed by migrants in both Iran and Pakistan are significant contributors to the lack of access to education for Afghan migrant girls. Migrants and refugees in Iran “display more progressive attitudes towards education, including education for girls.”⁷⁶ In Pakistan, on the other hand, refugees and other migrants hold more conservative beliefs and attitudes towards the education of girls. Across the sub-region, Pashtun communities are among ethnicities with the lowest rate of enrolment for girls.⁷⁷
- **Geographic distribution:** The majority of Afghans in Iran are settled in (peri-)urban areas where they are more likely to have access to public schools. In Pakistan, many Afghan migrants live in urban and peri-urban areas, with limited access to public schools, due to a high demand of an overall number of out-of-school children with lesser schools. However, refugees and migrants in Pakistan also reside in UNHCR recognised refugee villages with schools established for the education of refugee children. Conservative sociocultural norms in rural areas are more likely to hinder education in rural areas.
- **Quality of education:** While both countries have a lack of educational infrastructure, teaching workforce and logistical support, the quality of schools Afghans have access to in Iran are better, especially for the undocumented. While the programmes in refugee village schools have recently been replaced by the Pakistani curriculum, some of the in-school children attend non-formal education facilities and madrassas, which do “little to prepare girls and boys for the realities of the labour market.”⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Relief International, Improving Access to Primary Education in Pakistan, One Family at a Time, 2021

⁷⁰ VOA, Pakistani Vocational School Helps Afghan Women Refugees Build Businesses, 2023

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Relief Web, UNHCR Supports Technical Training for 2,500 Pakistanis and Afghan Refugees, 2020 (Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/unhcr-supports-technical-training-2500-pakistanis-and-afghan-refugees>)

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hervé Nicolle, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls - Inclusion Of Afghan Refugees In The National Education Systems Of Iran And Pakistan, UNESCO, 2019

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ A Jamal, Why He Won't Send His Daughter to School—Barriers to Girls' Education in Northwest Pakistan: A Qualitative Delphi Study of Pashtun Men, SAGE Open July-September 2016, 2016

⁷⁸ Hervé Nicolle, Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls - Inclusion Of Afghan Refugees In The National Education Systems Of Iran And Pakistan, UNESCO, 2019

Recommendations

Inclusion in the host country's national educational system can not only be seen as a durable solution for individuals but can also benefit their host societies and Afghanistan's future. Educated migrant populations are more likely to integrate, within their host society. They often benefit from increased physical, material and legal safety.

This brief concludes with recommendations to expand inclusion within national education systems to undocumented Afghan nationals, and to enhance awareness raising among communities on the value of education as key out of poverty and towards resilience and self-reliance.

- **To Governments of Iran and Pakistan:**
 - Respect existing national laws and international norms: The rights of children supersede their legal status. The Pakistani Constitution guarantees education for all and this should be clearly communicated within the respective line ministries and District Education Authorities with guidance that this is extended to Afghan children residing in Pakistan. The context in Iran has always supported the need for the Afghan population to be literate and educated, this should continue framing support to the country and reinforcing national structures for Afghans' inclusion in the education system – both documented and undocumented.
- **To Host Governments and Aid Organisations:**
 - Awareness campaigns to be continued: Campaigns, by host governments and international organisations, promoting girl's education have been shown to be effective in changing attitudes towards education for Afghans. Such endeavours should be increased. This will need to be coupled with interventions to ensure girls' adequate school and learning environments that meet basic security needs and facilities, and can obtain the approval of their families and communities. These includes protection walls, appropriate toilets and handwashing stations, and sufficient presence of female teachers.
 - Provide guidance to parents to navigate enrolment issues: This is in line with UNHCR's inclusion strategy targeting refugees will and host communities within the responsibility sharing commitments made under the Global Compact for Refugees. Increasing coordination and information sharing with coffee-nets are among the solutions to inform the Afghan migrant population.
 - Data on migrant education: increase the collection and sharing of data regarding access to education for migrants in both Pakistan and Iran. The collected data should be disaggregated by status to allow for targeted advocacy and support. Data protection will need to be upheld to avoid the data being used for targeting and discrimination against specific groups.
- **To Donor Governments:**
 - International support to address limitations in the school systems (e.g. classroom construction): according to recent statistics announced by the head of the organisation for Development, Renovation and Equipping Schools in Iran (DRES), there are 8987 unfinished schools in Iran, in which 2524 semi-constructed by private donors and community contribution. Funding is required to cover education expenses for Afghan nationals and host communities in Iran and Pakistan.



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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.

www.adsp.ngo
info@adsp.ngo
✕ AsiaDSP

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 voices 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.

www.samuelhall.org
development@samuelhall.org
✕ Samuel_Hall_

Designed by
info@arasd.com