

EXPLORING EDUCATIONAL DROPOUT AMONG AFGHAN REFUGEE STUDENTS IN BALOCHISTAN: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS THROUGH BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the underlying factors contributing to school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Quetta, Balochistan, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. It aims to highlight the intersecting socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers faced by this vulnerable population. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with ten Afghan refugee students who had dropped out of primary school and their parents. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences. Four central themes emerged: financial hardship, discrimination and social exclusion, restrictive cultural norms and gender roles, and inadequate institutional support. These factors were found to interact across multiple ecological levels—microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem—creating a compounded effect that hinders continued educational participation, particularly for girls. The absence of bilingual education, psychosocial services, and inclusive policies further deepens educational exclusion. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted, multi-level interventions such as financial assistance programs, teacher training in cultural competence, and the inclusion of refugee-sensitive educational services. These insights can guide educators, policymakers, and humanitarian organizations in designing context-specific strategies to improve educational access for displaced populations. Future research should examine variations across geographic regions and time to inform scalable, equitable education models for refugee communities.

Key Words: *Afghan Refugee Students, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Educational Barriers, Cultural Norms, Gender Roles*

1. INTRODUCTION

Access to quality education is widely recognized as both a fundamental human right and a foundational pillar of sustainable development, as articulated in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) (UNESCO, 2023; UN, 2015). Yet, for millions of refugee children worldwide, education remains a fragile and frequently interrupted aspiration (Abbasi-Shavazi, 2021; Shen, 2022). Nowhere is this more evident than in South and Central Asia, where long-standing conflict and displacement have produced chronic educational inequities among refugee populations.

Among the most protracted and demographically significant refugee populations are Afghan refugees, who have sought asylum in neighboring Pakistan since 1979 (Wyss & Fischer, 2021). With over 1.3 million registered refugees and an equal or greater number of unregistered individuals, Pakistan hosts one of the largest concentrations of displaced Afghans globally (Easton et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2025; UNHCR, 2022). Within Pakistan, the province of Balochistan and specifically its capital, Quetta serves as a key host region. However, the province's weak institutional capacity, socio-economic underdevelopment, and political instability render it particularly ill-equipped to meet the educational needs of displaced populations.

Despite repeated global commitments to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all children, Afghan refugee students in Balochistan remain among the most educationally marginalized (Crawley et al., 2022; Muzamil et al., 2024). Numerous structural, cultural, and institutional barriers converge to drive alarmingly high school dropout rates—especially after primary education—

among these students. Empirical reports underscore that Afghan refugee children face financial hardship, gender-based discrimination, language barriers, social exclusion, and systemic neglect within host education systems (UNHCR, 2021). These challenges are not only interdependent but mutually reinforcing, perpetuating a cycle of poverty, marginalization, and disempowerment.

Yet, despite decades of refugee presence and repeated donor investments in humanitarian education, scholarly attention to the *localized, context-specific* dynamics of refugee education in Balochistan remains limited. Much of the existing literature adopts a generalized approach, often overlooking how socio-cultural norms, economic vulnerability, and institutional fragility uniquely intersect in host regions like Quetta (Amna et al., 2024; Najam et al., 2024). There is a pressing need for research that not only documents these barriers but also unpacks the mechanisms through which they operate—particularly through a multi-level, systems-based lens.

This study addresses this gap by applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) to analyze the complex and layered factors contributing to school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Quetta. This theoretical framework is uniquely suited for examining the nested and dynamic interactions between individuals and their social environments—ranging from immediate familial and school settings (microsystem) to broader societal, cultural, and policy-level influences (macrosystem). In doing so, this study responds to recent calls for ecological and interdisciplinary perspectives in refugee education research (Hasan & Zeynep, 2024; Qazi et al., 2024).

Drawing on in-depth interviews with Afghan refugee students, their parents, and educators, the study explores the lived realities of navigating education within an environment marked by exclusion, precarity, and structural neglect. The findings aim not only to contribute empirical insight to the refugee education discourse in low-resource settings but also to inform the development of targeted, context-sensitive interventions at multiple ecological levels. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What economic and social factors most significantly contribute to school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Balochistan after they complete primary education?
2. Which cultural beliefs and community practices influence Afghan refugee children's access to schooling in Balochistan?
3. How do prevailing gender expectations shape educational participation and outcomes for Afghan refugee girls and boys?
4. What institutional and systemic support mechanisms exist for Afghan refugee students, and how do these resources facilitate or impede their continued education?

This study looks to fill important gaps in understanding why Afghan refugees in Balochistan leave school. Actionable insights for policymakers and educators can design targeted interventions, such as financial support programs, culturally sensitive teacher training and enhanced instruction and counselling services (Human Rights Watch 2021). In addition, the findings advance international discourse on equitable and inclusive education for refugee populations and offer evidence-based recommendations to overcome structural and systemic barriers that keep refugee children away from schools.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is an essential right of any human being and millions of displaced children (especially Afghan refugees) are jeopardized in access to education (UNHCR, 2024). Afghan refugees in Baluchistan Pakistan face high dropout rates because of their difficult socio-political conditions, economic hardships and inequity of education opportunities (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021). Although the UN SDG 4 has a goal for inclusive education (UN, 2015), little research has addressed the specific challenges of Afghan refugees in Balochistan (Ali, 2022; Fransen & Haas, 2021). This paper analyses these barriers in respect to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and highlights key education gaps among refugees.

2.1 Educating Refugees: Global and Regional Trends

Recognizing refugee education as a priority area for policymakers and researchers, with global reports showing that less than half of refugee children worldwide complete primary education and only 24% move on to secondary education (UNHCR, 2021), this study examines the education of refugees as a current human rights issue. When refugee populations cannot be included in available formal education systems, these statistics are even more alarming in host countries with limited resources (UNESCO, 2018). Common

challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, underfunded schools and discriminatory practices that have impacted refugee children have been documented (Ismail et al., 2025; Kananian et al., 2017; Maguire, 2024; Pakravan et al., 2021).

The educational crisis of Afghan refugees is severe in Pakistan, especially Balochistan, where more than 300,000 Afghan refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2021) are there. For refugee children in this region, the barriers include poor infrastructure, linguistic barriers and cultural barriers (Pakravan et al., 2021; Rehman et al., 2025; Sumra et al., 2025; Zehra & Usmani, 2021). Gender disparities are particularly strong in this regard: girls are far less likely to go to, or finish, school because of societal norms and for reasons of safety (Save the Children, 2020). Although national policies promote inclusive education, they are not always adequate, and so refugee children are regularly denied regular access to quality schooling (Hasan & Zeynep, 2024; Qazi et al., 2024; Pio & Sakina, 2023). However, region-specific studies on the 'lived experience' of Afghan Refugee students in Balochistan and the realities of their educational needs remain relatively unexplored, and the gap is critical (Saeedullah et al., 2021; Pakravan et al., 2021).

2.2 Barriers to Refugee Education

Refugee families are confronted by pervasive economic deprivation which, in many cases, compels children to choose work over attending school (Groessl, 2023; Kurt et al., 2022; Mahapatra, 2025; van, 2023). The effects are disproportionately borne by Afghan refugee families in Balochistan who do not have documentation of their stay nor access to formal employment. These families cannot afford school related expenses such as uniforms and transportation and supplies which creates **an** insurmountable financial burden and these children leave school ahead of time (Fransen & Haas, 2021; Hantoko et al., 2021; Kananian et al., 2017; Shen, 2022).

Refugee children are made to feel unwelcome and hostile in school, and this discrimination saps their self-esteem and willingness to continue their education. According to studies, refugee students are repeatedly verbally abused, excluded from activities, and face prejudiced attitudes from their peers and teachers, adding to their alienation (Alper & Dere, 2025; Borthakur, 2017; Kim & Lee, 2023; Malik et al., 2019). Exclusionary school practices in Balochistan contribute to making Afghan children feel even more 'other' as they are already marginalized in broader Balochistan society (Ayesha & Syed, 2025).

As is the case with cultural norms and gender roles deeply entrenched in Afghan cultural life, Afghan refugee girls are expected to put domestic responsibilities before their education (Fidler et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Sorenson & Milbrandt, 2022). They are also constrained by issues such as early marriage, parental concerns about safety, and societal pressures that prevent them from attending or finishing school (Save the Children, 2020). In a number of cases, systemic barriers compound these cultural constraints, resulting in a double whammy that has the most impact on female students (Amna et al., 2024; Matsangos et al., 2022; Smith & Beretta, 2020).

In addition, the inadequate institutional support further pushes refugee students to the cusp of marginalization, as schools in regions such as Balochistan are found lacking in resources and capacity to address the needs of such refugees. Many refugee children are simply overcrowded classrooms, access to untrained teachers and counseling services are limited (GEM Report, 2021). Systemic exclusion remains in lieu of policies directed at the educational realities of refugee children leading to dropout rates.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm and employs a qualitative case study design to examine the socio-economic, cultural, and systemic factors contributing to school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Balochistan. A qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to provide a deep understanding of the complex interactions among individual, familial, and institutional influences on educational outcomes (Braun et al, 2020; Robinson, 2021).

While phenomenological methods are typically suited to exploring lived experiences in depth, the case study design was chosen in this context due to its ability to investigate a contemporary, context-bound phenomenon within its real-life setting (Busetto et al., 2020; Byrne, 2021).

The study was conducted in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, which hosts a significant Afghan refugee population. This setting was selected due to the high concentration of refugees in the area and the specific educational barriers they face (UNHCR, 2020). The region's persistent socio-economic instability, combined with a fragmented and under-resourced educational infrastructure, makes Balochistan a critical context for investigating school dropout among refugee populations.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct and relevant experiences related to the research phenomenon (Leighton et al., 2021). The sample comprised ten Afghan refugee students who had dropped out of primary school, ten parents or guardians of these students, and two education professionals (teachers or school administrators) with direct experience working in refugee education contexts (Greenland & Moore, 2021).

Afghan refugee students and their parents residing in Quetta, who had direct experience with school dropout, were selected based on defined inclusion criteria. Educators working with refugee students were also included due to their professional insights into the educational challenges faced by this population. The final sample ($n = 22$) was sufficient to achieve data saturation while remaining small enough to allow for in-depth qualitative analysis of interview transcripts (Robinson, 2021).

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method that allows for both consistency across interviews and the flexibility to explore participants' experiences in depth while maintaining alignment with the research objectives (Byrne, 2021; Dahlin, 2021). The interview guide was developed based on four central thematic areas derived from the literature and theoretical framework.

Interviews with students and parents were conducted in Pashto and Dari, based on the participants' preference, with the assistance of a bilingual research assistant to ensure accurate communication and cultural sensitivity. Educator interviews were conducted in either English or Urdu. All interviews took place in locations selected by participants to ensure their comfort and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and each session was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis (Ketefian, 2020).

Thematic analysis was used to describe, analyze, and interpret patterns in the data in this study, conforming to Braun and Clarke's (2020, 2022) six-phase framework. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and for the deep insight it offers into participants lived experiences (Robinson, 2021).

Data were managed and analyzed using NVivo software, which enabled systematic coding and organization of interview transcripts. To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking was conducted with students, parents, and teachers (Ross, 2020). Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to ensure transparency and minimize researcher bias. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Board of Southwest University, and all procedures adhered to institutional ethical guidelines for research involving human participants (Ketefian, 2020; Ross, 2020).

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.1 Ecological Systems Theory of Bronfenbrenner for Refugee Education

This study employs Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as an analytical lens to examine the interrelated individual, familial, institutional, and societal forces that shape the educational outcomes of Afghan refugee students. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), human development takes place in nested systems: the micro-system, mesosystem, exo-system, macrosystem, and chronosystem that interact to produce individual experiences. For refugee education, the systems are composed of the micro system that consists of home and school environment, the meso-system that follows the interplay between families and educational institutions; the macro system that reflects societal norms and supports policies, and the chronic system that depicts historical and socio-political context (Tudge et al., 2009).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the multi-layered factors contributing to school dropout among Afghan refugee students. This framework illustrates how systemic influences such as national education policies and cultural expectations interact with individual and familial challenges to shape educational outcomes. For instance, while micro-system-level dynamics (e.g., family decisions) and macrosystem-level cultural norms may discourage female education, the absence of supportive exo-system-level policies (e.g., inclusive institutional practices) can reinforce these barriers and intensify exclusion. Although widely used in developmental psychology, Bronfenbrenner's framework has rarely been applied in refugee education research, particularly in low-resource and conflict-affected contexts. Given the broad scope of the model, it is essential to articulate a conceptual framework that identifies the specific ecological levels and factors against which data are analyzed. This will enhance clarity and ensure a structured application of the theory in the study. To operationalize Bronfenbrenner's model in this study, a conceptual framework was developed to link key dropout-related themes to the ecological systems influencing Afghan refugee students (see Figure 1).

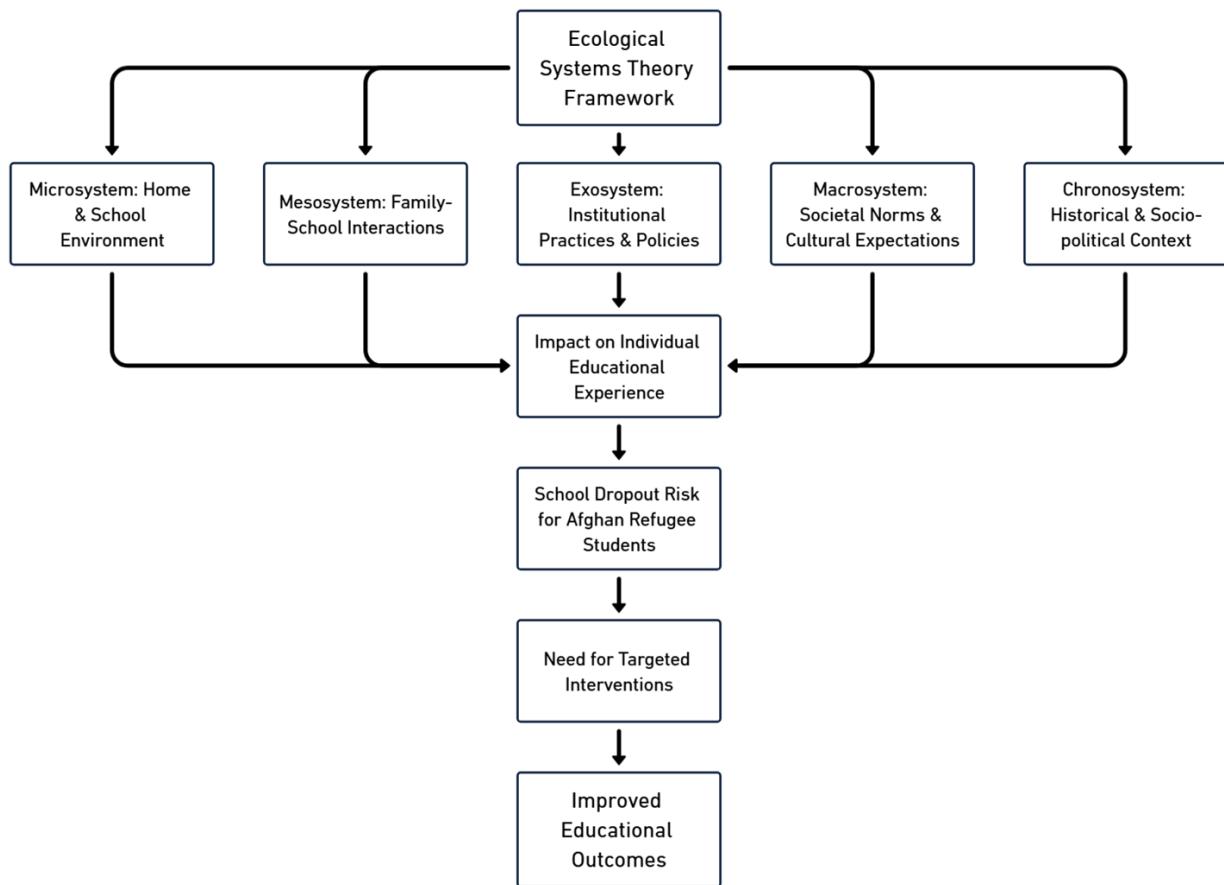


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Based on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as Applied to Afghan Refugee Students' Educational Dropout

Existing research on refugee education highlights broad challenges but often overlooks the specific socio-cultural and systemic barriers faced by Afghan refugee children in Balochistan. The lived experiences of these students and their families remain underexplored, especially in qualitative studies. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, while widely applied in education, is rarely used in refugee contexts, particularly in low-resource settings. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors contributing to dropout among Afghan refugee students, aiming to inform targeted interventions and contribute to the broader discourse on equitable education for marginalized populations.

4. FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal four interrelated themes that encapsulate the primary factors contributing to school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Balochistan: economic hardship, discrimination and social exclusion, cultural norms and gender roles, and lack of educational support. These themes were derived through a rigorous thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and educators, and collectively highlight the complex interplay of personal, social, and institutional barriers faced by refugee learners. While diverse challenges emerged from the data, these four themes consistently represented the most salient impediments to sustained educational participation. To enhance conceptual clarity, Figure 2 maps each theme onto Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, providing a layered interpretation of the findings. This theoretical framework illustrates how structural and contextual forces ranging from immediate interpersonal interactions to broader cultural and economic systems—converge to shape the educational experiences and vulnerabilities of displaced populations.

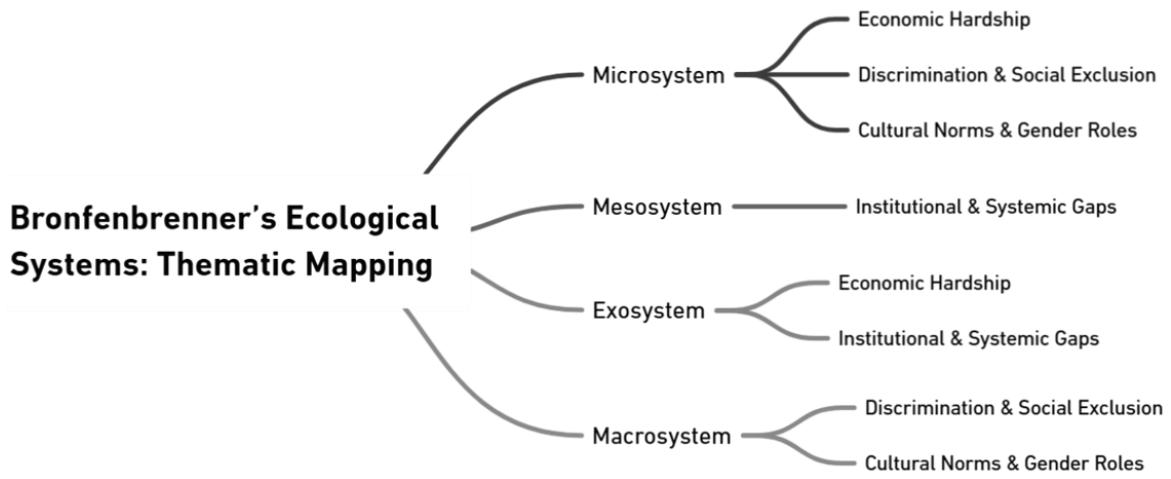


Figure 2: Mapping of Themes Across Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

4.1 Theme 1: Economic Hardship

Economic hardship emerged as a pervasive and cross-cutting factor contributing to school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Balochistan. All participant groups—students, parents, and educators—consistently reported that financial insecurity deeply constrained families' ability to support their children's education. Most families lacked the means to cover basic educational expenses such as school fees, uniforms, stationery, and transportation.

One parent emphasized the stark trade-offs faced daily:

"We can't even afford to send our children to school—no money for books, uniforms, or transportation" (PAR6).

Another parent reflected similarly:

"If we have to choose between food and education, we choose food. Hunger comes first" (PAR3).

These economic pressures forced many children to abandon their education prematurely to contribute to the household income. Several students shared how they were compelled to work instead of studying:

"I had to leave school because my family needed me to work at the market" (STU3).

"My father is sick, so I work to help my family survive. But I didn't want to leave school" (STU8).

Educators affirmed the severity of these economic constraints, noting that parents' focus on immediate survival often left no room for educational priorities. One teacher observed:

"Parents are so worried about feeding the family that they can't think about school fees or sending their children to school" (EDU1).

Even when education was technically "free," indirect costs remained prohibitive. A parent explained:

"We can't afford it if he goes to school. My son helps me at the shop and earns some money. That's more valuable to us right now" (PAR7).

In some cases, families prioritized boys' education over girls', believing that investing in sons had a greater economic return. A mother commented:

“If we have money to send only one child to school, we send the boy. The girls can learn what they need at home” (PAR4).

Beyond affordability, quality of education was also impacted. Overcrowded classrooms, lack of materials, and insufficient support diminished the perceived value of education. One student remarked:

“There were no books, and the teachers didn’t have time to help us. It felt pointless to go” (STU2).

Overall, economic hardship was not only a direct barrier to school attendance but also indirectly shaped attitudes toward the value and feasibility of education. The lack of stable income, employment restrictions for refugees, and the absence of social support systems entrenched this issue, leaving many children unable to pursue or complete their schooling.

4.2 Theme 2: Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Discrimination and social exclusion emerged as significant deterrents to educational participation among Afghan refugee students in Balochistan. Participants across all groups—students, parents, and educators—described experiences of marginalization within the school environment, ranging from peer bullying and stereotyping to unequal treatment by teachers. These discriminatory experiences contributed to diminished self-esteem, a reduced sense of belonging, and ultimately, school disengagement.

Refugee students frequently reported being verbally harassed and socially isolated by their peers. One student shared,

“Other children called me names and told me I didn’t belong here because I’m from Afghanistan. The teachers never said anything to stop them” (STU5).

Another student echoed this sentiment:

“The local students got help in class, but when I asked for help, the teacher ignored me. It made me feel invisible” (STU1).

Parents reinforced these concerns, describing unequal treatment that their children faced from both students and educators. A father remarked,

“Our children don’t get the same attention as local students. Even if they need help, teachers don’t encourage them” (PAR2).

A mother added,

“It’s like the school has already decided that our children don’t belong. They’ve been left out before they’ve even started” (PAR8).

These experiences of exclusion led many students to internalize negative beliefs about their place in school, which contributed to their eventual withdrawal. As one student reflected,

“I didn’t enjoy school, I didn’t have friends, and I wasn’t getting good grades. I just didn’t see the point of going anymore” (STU6).

Educators also acknowledged these issues, noting the lack of institutional mechanisms to address discrimination or promote inclusive practices. One teacher admitted,

“Afghan students are often left out of class activities or not considered for leadership roles. Some staff don’t think they’re capable” (EDU2).

Parents shared similar stories, noting the emotional toll this had on their children:

“My son was never picked for anything. He started believing he wasn’t good enough. That broke him” (PAR9).

Participants emphasized that this social exclusion was not just interpersonal, but also systemic. Schools lacked anti-discrimination policies and did not offer staff adequate training in handling cultural diversity or preventing bias. The result was an environment where exclusion became normalized, rather than challenged.

Overall, the findings suggest that Afghan refugee students often experience school as a hostile and alienating space, where subtle and overt forms of discrimination discourage long-term engagement. This theme highlights the urgent need for school-wide inclusivity efforts, strengthened teacher training, and zero-tolerance approaches to bullying and bias.

4.3 Theme 3: Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

Cultural norms and entrenched gender roles were found to play a pivotal role in shaping educational access among Afghan refugee children, particularly girls, in Balochistan. Participants frequently cited deep-rooted beliefs that prioritized domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and family honor over formal education for girls.

Several parents viewed education for girls as unnecessary or secondary to their traditional roles. One father explained,

“Girls should learn household chores. A little education is enough. After all, they’ll get married and leave anyway” (PAR3).

Another mother echoed this sentiment:

“If we only have money to send one child to school, we send the boy. The girls can learn everything they need at home” (PAR7).

These gendered expectations had direct implications for school enrollment and retention. Female students expressed disappointment and frustration with these constraints. One girl stated,

“I wanted to stay in school, but my parents said it was my time to help at home” (STU2).

Another shared,

“My parents said it wasn’t safe for me to go to school anymore. They were worried something might happen on the way” (STU4).

Educators also highlighted how traditional gender expectations limited their ability to keep girls in school. A teacher explained,

“Even when a girl is doing well in school, parents often pull her out. They say it’s none of our business—it’s their tradition” (EDU1).

Another added,

“It’s heartbreaking to see bright girls leave because their parents believe it’s safer or more appropriate for them to stay at home” (EDU2).

Early marriage emerged as a major factor contributing to school dropout among refugee girls. Parents cited concerns about safety, social reputation, and cultural pressure. One father noted,

“If a girl stays in school too long, people will gossip. It’s better to marry her early and protect her honor” (PAR1).

Girls themselves described these expectations as unfair. One student said,

“They care more about what people say than about my future. I wanted to study, but they said marriage was more important” (STU8).

These findings reveal how cultural beliefs about gender roles systematically disadvantage girls and limit their educational opportunities. The convergence of economic hardship with gender expectations exacerbates inequalities. In households with limited financial resources, boys' education was prioritized, while girls were expected to support the family at home.

Despite these barriers, educators expressed a desire for change but felt constrained by community norms and a lack of institutional support.

"We try to convince parents, but without tools or training, it's difficult. They just tell us to mind our own business" (EDU1).

The theme underscores the importance of addressing cultural and gendered norms as a central component of refugee education policy. Participants agreed that without community engagement, safe environments, and culturally appropriate incentives, girls' education would continue to be deprioritized in Afghan refugee communities.

4.4 Theme 4: Institutional and Systemic Gaps in Educational Support

A recurring concern across all participant groups was the severe lack of institutional support available to Afghan refugee students. Both parents and educators described schools as structurally under-resourced and ill-equipped to meet the unique learning, emotional, and linguistic needs of displaced children.

Parents voiced frustration over the schools' inability to support struggling students. One mother explained,

"If a child falls behind, there's no one to help. They're just left to fail" (PAR5)

Another added,

"We send them to school hoping they'll learn, but there are no materials or support. It's like they've already given up on our children" (PAR10).

Teachers shared similar concerns, highlighting how overcrowded classrooms, insufficient training, and a lack of specialized support services undermined educational outcomes. One educator observed,

"These children come in with serious learning gaps, but we don't have the time or tools to help them catch up" (EDU1).

Another commented,

"Many of these students need remedial classes or even basic counseling, but nothing like that exists in our schools" (EDU2).

Language barriers presented a significant obstacle. Students from Pashto- and Dari-speaking households often lacked proficiency in the language of instruction usually Urdu or English yet schools offered no bilingual support. One teacher explained,

"Many refugee children don't fully understand Urdu or English, and we don't have resources to teach them in their own language" (EDU1).

Students echoed this issue. One participant shared,

"I didn't understand most of the lessons. No one explained anything in Pashto, so I stopped going" (STU5).

The absence of psychological and emotional support was also highlighted. Many students had experienced displacement, trauma, and marginalization, yet none of the schools involved in the study had access to counselors or trained mental health professionals. One student admitted,

"I felt so sad and alone at school. I wanted to stay home, but there was no one to talk to" (STU9).

Teachers acknowledged the emotional burden their students carried but noted a lack of training and resources to respond appropriately.

“We know these kids need more than just books, but we’re not trained for that. And there’s no one else here to help them” (EDU2).

Parents believed that proper support services could have helped prevent dropout.

“If there was someone to guide my child in our own language, maybe he wouldn’t have quit” (PAR6).

The study also revealed weak school–family engagement. Teachers reported that efforts to communicate with refugee parents were often hampered by language differences and logistical constraints.

“We rarely have parent–teacher meetings, and when we do, few refugee parents come. I don’t think they even know what’s happening in school” (EDU1).

In sum, institutional and systemic deficiencies ranging from infrastructure and staffing to communication and mental health services collectively undermine refugee students’ ability to succeed. Without targeted investments, inclusive training, and localized support services, the educational system continues to fail Afghan refugee students, making dropout an almost inevitable outcome for many.

5. DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Restate Purpose & Key Findings

The present study employed Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory to examine the multifactorial reasons underlying school dropout among Afghan refugee students in Balochistan. Guided by three research questions (1) Which economic and social factors precipitate discontinuation of education after primary school? (2) How do cultural norms and gender roles influence educational participation and outcomes? (3) What systemic support or deficiencies impact these students’ schooling experiences? The analysis identified four interrelated themes: economic hardship, social exclusion, cultural and gender norms, and institutional and systemic gaps. Collectively, these themes illuminate the complex interplay of household survival strategies, societal attitudes, and educational infrastructures that shape refugee students’ pathways.

5.2 Interpretation

The findings illustrate how economic hardship, manifesting as an inability to cover both direct costs (fees, uniforms, supplies) and indirect costs (transportation, lost household income), functions as a primary barrier at the micro-system level. When families face existential choices between feeding their children and paying school fees, immediate survival invariably takes precedence, resulting in premature withdrawal from education. This dynamic is compounded by exo-systemic constraints such as lack of governmental or non-governmental financial support programs that leave families without alternatives.

Social exclusion within the school environment further undermines educational persistence. Reports of peer harassment, teacher bias, and institutional insensitivity reflect the translation of macro-system level prejudices into day-to-day interactions at the micro-system. The resultant alienation fosters disengagement, reducing students’ intrinsic motivation to remain enrolled. Crucially, this form of exclusion not only deters attendance but also exacerbates familial perceptions that schooling is neither welcoming nor beneficial.

Embedded within these pressures are deeply entrenched cultural and gender norms that prioritize domestic responsibilities and early marriage over formal education for girls. At the macro-system level, patriarchal values devalue girls’ schooling, shaping micro-system decisions that curtail female educational trajectories. The emphasis on family honor and safety concerns reinforces early withdrawal, creating a gendered disparity in access that is more pronounced than in some other refugee contexts.

Finally, institutional and systemic educational gaps characterized by under-resourced schools, overcrowded classrooms, lack of trained teachers, and absence of psycho-social and bilingual support services constitute exo-system and meso-system failures that directly impact the quality and accessibility of education. Without targeted interventions to bolster institutional capacity, refugee students encounter structural obstacles that make sustained engagement untenable.

5.3 Comparison with Literature

The centrality of economic hardship as a driver of dropout aligns closely with Anwar et al., (2021) work on Syrian refugees in Lebanon, where poverty compelled families to de-prioritize education in favor of survival. Similarly, Muzamil et al. (2024) documented that across multiple displaced populations, financial strain is the most consistent predictor of educational exclusion. However, our study extends this literature by emphasizing the cumulative effect of indirect costs and opportunity costs in Balochistan, a dimension less explored in other contexts.

In contrast with Jordan, where conditional cash-transfer programs have demonstrably increased refugee enrollment and retention (Arnold et al., 2023; Dashti, 2022; Khan et al., 2023), no such fiscal relief exists for Afghan refugees in Balochistan. This contrast underscores significant contextual variability and highlights the need for programmatic adaptation rather than wholesale transplantation of models (Ayaz, 2023).

Social exclusion findings corroborate Betancourt's (2008) observations that discrimination—both overt and subtle—erodes refugee students' self-esteem and belonging. Human Rights Watch (2021) similarly reported that host-country students and educators frequently perpetuate exclusionary practices. Our data add nuance by showing that these biases become internalized by families, who subsequently question the value and safety of schooling, thereby reinforcing dropout.

Cultural and gender norm constraints mirror results from Dixie et al. (2023) and Iqbal, Sheng, et al. (2025), who found that patriarchal expectations limit girls' educational opportunities in conflict-affected contexts, and Mahmoodi et al. (2023) study of Vietnamese refugee girls, which highlighted early marriage as a barrier. Yet our research foregrounds the primacy of safety concerns in parental decision-making, a factor less emphasized in previous scholarship on Afghan refugees. Rehman et al. (2025) and UNESCO (2018) have shown that community engagement and advocacy can shift norms, suggesting a pathway for intervention.

Institutional gaps align with Ismail et al. (2025) and UNESCO (2023), both of which documented under-resourced schools in refugee-hosting regions of South Asia. De Coninck (2022) argued for the indispensability of psychosocial and bilingual support, which our study confirms is critically lacking. Unlike contexts where such services are integrated, Balochistan's educational system provides neither remedial language instruction nor mental health counseling for refugee learners.

5.4 Implication

The ecological analysis indicates that multi-level interventions are essential. At the micro-system level, teacher development programs must include training in trauma-informed pedagogy and cultural responsiveness. Schools should establish on-site counseling units staffed by professionals trained in refugee mental health. Gender-sensitive pedagogical strategies, such as segregated learning sessions or support groups for girls, can address cultural hesitations while maintaining educational access.

At the meso-system level, structured parent-teacher engagement models are vital. Home-visits conducted by bilingual community liaisons can overcome language barriers, foster trust, and ensure that families understand school policies and resources. Regular community workshops, co-hosted by school and local leaders, can create a collaborative environment for problem-solving and reinforce the value of education.

Exo-system level actions must include the introduction of targeted financial aid for refugee families, modeled on Jordan's conditional cash-transfer schemes or Bangladesh's scholarship programs. Donors and local agencies should prioritize grants for classroom expansion, learning materials, and hiring bilingual teaching assistants. Establishing partnerships with NGOs to fund and manage these programs can ensure sustainability and local ownership.

At the macro-system level, public awareness campaigns leveraging radio, social media, and community gatherings must challenge discriminatory and patriarchal norms. Engaging religious and tribal leaders as champions of inclusive education can shift societal attitudes. Legal reforms are also necessary to guarantee Afghan refugees' right to enroll in national schools, accompanied by policy mandates requiring inclusive training for all educators.

Implementing these recommendations requires cross-sector collaboration between government agencies, UN bodies, non-profits, and local communities. Evaluative frameworks should be built into intervention designs to track enrollment, retention, and psychosocial outcomes over time.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study and grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, a multi-level strategy is essential to address the educational challenges faced by Afghan refugee students in Balochistan. At the microsystem level, it is recommended that teachers receive training in trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogy to support the specific needs of refugee learners. Schools should also integrate on-site psychosocial counseling services and establish mentoring programs, particularly for girls, to enhance emotional well-being and educational resilience.

At the meso-system level, efforts should focus on strengthening the relationship between refugee families and schools. This can be achieved through structured parent-teacher engagement mechanisms such as community liaisons and regular home visits, which foster trust and improve communication. Bilingual orientation sessions and community-based learning initiatives can further ensure that refugee parents are well-informed and actively involved in their children's education.

At the exosystem level, there is a pressing need for institutional support. Introducing conditional cash transfer programs or school stipends can alleviate the financial burden on refugee families and improve school attendance. Increased investment in refugee-hosting schools including hiring additional teachers, bilingual support staff, and improving learning materials—is also critical. Partnerships with NGOs can help fund remedial education, language support programs, and inclusive infrastructure.

At the macrosystem level, public awareness campaigns are vital to challenge gender norms and discriminatory attitudes that hinder refugee education. Engaging religious and tribal leaders in advocacy can shift societal perceptions and promote community-level support for inclusive education. Finally, it is imperative that national policies formally recognize Afghan refugee children and guarantee their right to education through legal protections and curriculum adaptations that address their linguistic and psychosocial needs. Together, these recommendations offer a coordinated roadmap to improve educational access and equity for Afghan refugee students and can serve as a model for similar low-resource, displacement-affected settings globally.

7. CONCLUSION

This study employed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to illuminate the interconnected influence of economic deprivation, social exclusion, patriarchal cultural norms, and systemic institutional neglect on school dropout among Afghan refugee children in Balochistan. By situating these barriers within the nested ecological levels – micro, meso, exo, and macro – the research offers a nuanced theoretical interpretation of the multifaceted challenges confronting refugee education. The findings underscore the necessity for integrated and context-sensitive interventions, with particular promise shown by the synergy between targeted financial support mechanisms and community-led initiatives aimed at challenging gendered constraints and empowering girls.

While grounded in the specific socio-political context of Balochistan, the implications of this study extend to other resource-constrained and conflict-affected settings. Future research should prioritize the evaluation of multi-level interventions through longitudinal, mixed-methods approaches and pursue comparative analyses across diverse refugee-hosting contexts to enhance external validity. Ultimately, ensuring equitable access to education for Afghan refugee children transcends academic inquiry; it constitutes a pressing human rights obligation—demanding coordinated and sustained action from policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders globally.

8. LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study's qualitative design yields rich, context-specific insights but is limited by its single-region focus and reliance on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to recall bias and social desirability. Future research should adopt mixed-methods

approaches that combine longitudinal quantitative tracking with qualitative follow-up to assess the sustained impact of interventions. Comparative studies across different provinces or host countries would illuminate structural and cultural variables influencing dropout, enabling refinement of ecological strategies.

Further investigation into the effectiveness of specific interventions—such as cash-transfer programs, bilingual curriculum models, and trauma-informed teacher training—will be essential. Participatory action research involving refugee communities in co-designing and evaluating programs could enhance cultural relevance and efficacy. By advancing mixed-methods and comparative frameworks, future scholarship can build a robust evidence base to guide policy and practice in refugee education globally.

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