

THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL IMPLICATION OF PAKISTAN'S REPATRIATION POLICY ON AFGHAN REFUGEES IN QUETTA

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ABSTRACT

This paper understands the fear, concerns, and their effects on the development of social cohesion of Afghan refugees holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards in Quetta, Pakistan, in the context of "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan." This paper argues that Pakistan's repatriation policies, although formally targeting undocumented refugees, have created widespread insecurity among documented PoR cardholder despite their legal status. These fears not only undermine refugee protection but also strain host refugee relations and weaken community cohesion in Quetta. The study utilized a qualitative method, drawn on 25 semi-structured interviews (13 Female and 12 Male) from Hazara Town, Mariabad, and Pashtunabad, along with secondary data from UNHCR reports, government documents, and scholarly sources. Based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the findings reveal the vulnerability of Afghan refugees residing in Quetta despite being documented, and highlight strained relations with host communities. Furthermore, to address these challenges, the study recommends long-term and short-term possible policies to terminate the fears related to the repatriation process and to safeguard the rights, safety, and dignity of Afghan refugees.

Key Words: *POR Holding Afghan Refugees, Forced Repatriation, Social Cohesion, Documented but Vulnerable, Resettlement Challenges In Afghanistan, Xenophobic Harassment from CNIC Holders*

1. INTRODUCTION

Refugees, particularly Afghan refugees in Pakistan, represent a marginalized group who have been subjected to deprivation, dispossession, and restricted mobility, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and empathetic approach. According to the UNHCR data, Pakistan is a major host country for Afghan refugees, accommodating approximately 1.33 million registered refugees with PoR cards, and asylum seekers, of whom 99% are Afghans. Additionally, around 840,000 Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders and an estimated 775,000 undocumented Afghan national resides in the country. Afghan refugees are concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as the leading host, sheltering 52% of refugees, while 24.1% are in Balochistan, 14.3% in Punjab, 5.4% in Sindh (mainly in Karachi), and 3.1% in Islamabad (Rehman, 2023).

Due to the significant refugee population, the government of Pakistan announced a repatriation plan for Afghan nationals. The process began on 26 September 2023, when the Ministry of Interior announced a three-phase plan to repatriate Afghan refugees, enabling the return of Afghan refugees to their home country (Yusufzai, 2022; Ajmal, 2023). Undocumented individuals, Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders, and Proof of Registration (PoR) cardholders. This was followed by a formal declaration on 3 October 2023 under the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, setting 1 November 2023 as the deadline for undocumented migrants to voluntarily leave or face deportation under the Foreigners Act of 1946 (Amnesty International, 2025; European Union Agency for Asylum (formerly: European Asylum Support Office, 2023). By 21 November 2023, IOM reported that nearly 90% of undocumented Afghan refugees had exited Pakistan via the Torkham and Spin Boldak/Chaman border crossings (UNHCR-IOM, 2024). The final stage, Phase III, is scheduled between 1 April and 30 June 2025, targeting PoR cardholders, raising critical humanitarian and legal concerns for registered Afghan refugees (Refugees International, 2024) (See "Fig 1").



Figure 1: Chronology of repatriation plan from 2023-2024: source drawn by the Author

In the light of this situation, Pakistan's recent repatriation actions have drawn criticism, with some suggesting that these policies contradict Article 13 of ICCPR, which prohibits arbitrary expulsion; their expulsion must be following the law (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Despite being home to approximately 4 million Afghan refugees, Pakistan has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, which limits the legal protections offered to refugees in the country (UNHCR, 2023). While UNHCR has assisted by providing Proof of Registration (PoR) cards to over 1.3 million refugees, recent policies have made access to these services increasingly precarious, with many PoR cards expiring and remaining unrenewed (UNHCR-IOM, 2024). In addition, organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have called on Pakistan to ensure that repatriation adheres to international standards, emphasizing the importance of voluntary, safe, and dignified returns (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023). Thus, Article 33 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) prevents states from deporting, returning, or extraditing individuals to nations where they might face torture, inhuman and degrading treatment. Therefore, Pakistan is internationally obligated to uphold the non-refoulement (a country cannot deport a refugee back to a war zone or a regime known for political persecution) principle.

In this context, under the 1993 agreement between UNHCR and Pakistan, registered Afghan refugees who hold (PoR) are granted a limited legal stay and freedom of movement (Hashimy, 2024). Despite this, Afghan refugees in Pakistan remain fraught with obstacles from limited livelihood opportunities to inadequate access to essential services, which hampers their well-being and prospects. For many Afghan families, escaping Pakistan meant sacrificing everything they owned. However, the relationship between Afghan refugees and Pakistani host communities remains strained despite their common Pashtun heritage; this antagonism often leads to discrimination and marginalization, overshadowing potential solidarity. Afghan refugees, both registered and unregistered, experience daily trauma, frequently being questioned with demands like "identify yourself", "Are you Afghan? And are you a refugee? Show your PoR card!" causing significant distress (Ali, 2023).

Amid forced repatriation policies, many Afghan refugees have sold their possessions to afford the trip to the Torkham border. Since the policy shift, thousands have opted to return to Afghanistan, only to encounter economic and social challenges. Both the UN and the Human Rights Organization have voiced concerns over the hardship awaiting these returnees. Even documented refugees have also faced police detentions and eviction orders, escalating the anxiety among Afghan families (Hafeez, 2023). Despite challenges, the Afghan diaspora in Pakistan has benefited from certain opportunities, particularly in urban centers of Balochistan like Quetta, where women and girls can access free schooling and vocational training. When refugees and locals share the same ethnic background, they often enjoy more support, as seen during the Yugoslav conflict, where ethnic nationalism led to the acceptance of about 400,000 refugees. In contrast, in Balochistan, Afghan refugees are seen as a threat to the local population's majority, prompting a call for their repatriation.

Given the urgency of the situation, focused research is needed to help mitigate the difficulties Afghan refugees face in Pakistan. Of the estimated 4 million Afghan refugees, 1.34 million are documented, while 317,366 in Balochistan lack legal protections and access to basic services (Operational Data Portal, 2024). From September to December 2023, 399,075 Afghan returnees were recorded, marking a 273% increase in just 4 months. The vast majority (97%) of returnees were undocumented, with 2% holding ACCs and 1% PoR cards. Fear of arrest was cited as the main reason for return (89%), with 39% of returnees coming from Balochistan. From January 2023 to August 2024, 119,565 Afghans returned, including 64,107 after the Illegal foreigner repatriation plan announcement, with 29,949 PoR cardholders under UNHCR's voluntary repatriation initiative (UNHCR-IOM, 2024).

To critically analyze the impacts of Pakistan's forced repatriation policy on Afghan refugees, this study employs a multidisciplinary conceptual framework combining structural violence theory, human security theory, and social integration theory. Structural violence helps to understand how state policies and institutional neglect deprive refugees of fundamental rights and dignity.

The human security theory broadens the concept of security beyond traditional boundaries (military threats) to include economic, health, and political challenges faced by individuals, particularly refugees, in this context (UNDP, 1994). Moreover, the social integration theory can help us understand the impact of the repatriation fears and anxiety on social coexistence between Afghan refugees and the host community in Quetta, particularly in areas like Hazara Town, Mariabad, and Pashtunabad. This conceptual framework guides the interpretation and analysis of the lived experiences of Afghan refugees holding a PoR card.

2.PROBLEM STATEMENT

The repatriation plan of Pakistan, which appears in three phases, i.e., Phase I: Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan, Phase II: Repatriation of Afghan Citizen Card (ACC Holders), Phase III: (Repatriation of PoR Holders). These phases I has amplified pressure on registered Afghan Refugees holding PoR Cards by targeting undocumented Afghan refugees in the first. Despite official reassurance of protection and exemption from repatriation, official data shows that 8% of PoR cardholders have been repatriated (UNHCR-IOM, 2024). Raising serious concerns about the credibility of such assurance. This resulted in increased fear and anxiety among PoR cardholders who feel vulnerable even though they have legal status.

A significant number of Afghan refugee's population has developed a long-term residency in Pakistan and become part of the socioeconomic life within host communities. However, the looming threat of forced repatriation have undermined their sense of security and belonging to a country they called home. Their distress has worsened due to constant fear of returned to a country where instability and humanitarian crisis continue. This situation demands deeper understanding and detailed insight related to the fear of forced repatriation among POR holders in Quetta, and its impacts on community dynamics to suggest practical policy implications.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To understand the specific fears, concerns, and perceptions related to forced repatriation of (POR) card-holding Afghan refugees.
- To analyze how forced repatriation shape social cohesion, tensions, or division between Afghan refugees and host communities in Quetta.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Legal Frameworks

Since the 1980s, the arrival of Afghan refugees has been very influential on the historical and socio-political structure of Pakistan because the country is ethnically and linguistically diverse. Initially, Pakistan responded to the influx of Afghan refugees with an open-door policy due to the historical and cultural ties, coupled with the concept of Muslim brotherhood. Eventually, over time, this refugee influx transformed into socio-economic burdens, along with other societal issues such as trafficking and mass migrations (Ayaz, 2023; Nisar et al., 2024). Today, there are an estimated 4.4 million Afghan refugees many of whom spent more years in Pakistan than in Afghanistan. Even after this long period of displacement, the Afghan refugees have a long way to go through legal procedures to stay in a place they consider Home (MSF, 2024). This absence of a formal legal framework for refugees has created persistent legal uncertainties. In Pakistan, Afghan refugees are managed through a framework like the PoR and ACC card system, which provides temporary residence but fails to grant official refugee status. These restrictions further worsen their challenges in securing basic rights and stability. To add, These legal uncertainties not only shape refugees' insecurity but also directly affect their relations with host communities, as legal precarity reinforces stereotypes of Afghan refugees as 'outsiders'.

The prolonged displacement crisis has raised significant legal and humanitarian issues. Pakistan, hosting one of the largest refugee populations globally, has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, which outlines the rights of refugees and the host state's responsibilities (Zakir et al., 2022). In October 2023, Pakistan launched phase I of the 'Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan, mandating undocumented Afghan refugees to leave within 30 days or face deportation. This policy impacted 1.4 million individuals, including women, children, and the elderly. Reports of raids, forced evictions, and confiscation of belongings, including PoR cards, have heightened distress among refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

4.2 Psychosocial Impacts

Building on this, Phase II, targeting ACC cardholders, is scheduled for mid-summer 2025. The Pakistani government officials have accelerated efforts to map the individuals (Amnesty International, 2023). Although the government granted 1.45 million registered refugees (PoR) permission to stay in the country until 30th June 2025, it leaves the fate of 80,000 ACC holders and thousands of undocumented refugees in limbo. Despite assurances of protection, even registered Afghan refugees report being pressured to return. Such psychosocial vulnerabilities extend beyond individual suffering; they undermine trust and social cohesion between refugees and host communities, reinforcing social divisions.

According to the IOM UNCHR Flash Update 14, the majority of returnees were 90% undocumented, 8% persons of concern (PoC) holders, and 2% asylum seekers (ACC) holders (UNHCR-IOM, 2024). This violated the principle of Non-Refoulement, as outlined in International Agreements such as the 1993 Tripartite Agreement between the Governments of Afghanistan and the Government of Pakistan and the UNHCR. This Agreement emphasizes voluntary repatriation as the core principle, requiring both sending and receiving states to ensure safe and dignified returns for Afghan refugees in Pakistan (Hashimy, 2024). However, the current repatriation plan exposes refugee to a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, further fueling their fear and insecurity due to the Taliban government (Sekandari, 2024). The authorities accuse Afghan refugees of being "illegal migrants." During raids, Pakistani police have sometimes confiscated or destroyed the PoR cards of Afghan refugees (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

4.3 Community Dynamics

These policies have also reshaped community dynamics, revealing growing sentiments of Pakistani citizens regarding phase I illegal foreigners' repatriation plan" initiative. The survey indicated that 84% of respondents showed their strong support

for the government's policy, almost 77% advocating for their return to Afghanistan (Foundation polls, 2023). Despite their long stay, Afghan refugees, regardless of their duration of stay, are often perceived as outsiders, facing exclusion and stigmatization that perpetuate an “us versus them” mentality. This antagonism overshadows the shared Pashtun heritage and has fostered discrimination and marginalization, particularly in regions like Balochistan, where Afghan refugees are seen as a demographic threat to the local population (Nisar et al., 2024).

The literature shows how fear, hatred, and repatriation, and their impact on social unity, are complex, but the perspectives of refugees provide a better understanding of the problem. The existing literature, although it offers significant information on the legal, psychological, and social dynamics of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. However, the key gap in current research is the lack of firsthand refugee experiences and fears of refugees facing forced repatriation in Quetta, Balochistan. While the literature documents community-level antagonism and discrimination, it rarely captures how current repatriation policies intensify these dynamics. This study addresses that gap by examining the fears of PoR holders in Quetta and how these fears shape refugee–host community relations.

This paper also highlights the struggles of Afghan refugees, facing marginalization, discrimination, and harassment in Quetta. This paper uses firsthand accounts to promote more inclusive and local-level support to refugees amidst the repatriation plan.

5. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study highlights the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty, and marginalization experienced by Afghan refugees in Quetta, despite many having lived in Pakistan for decades. These experiences are best understood through the lens of the study's conceptual framework, which incorporates a multidisciplinary perspective by the inclusion of multiple theories to enrich the analysis. Theories involve structural violence, human security, and social integration to explore the relationship between the fears and perceptions of forced repatriation among Afghan refugees holding PoR cards and the resulting social dynamics within host communities in Hazara Town, Mariabad, and Pashtunabad Quetta (See “Fig 2”).

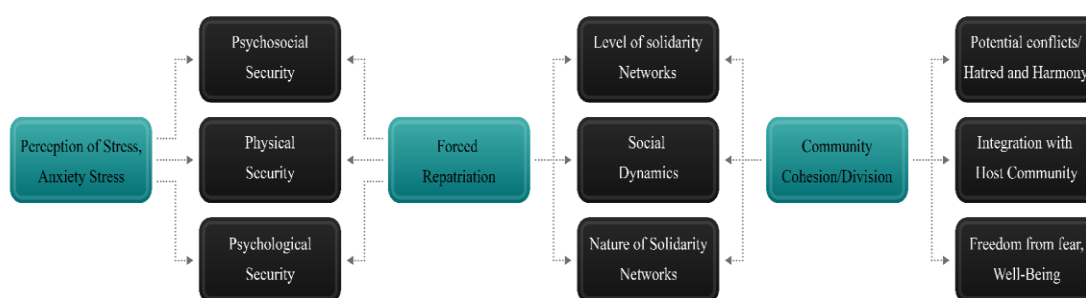


Figure 2. Interconnection between themes and theories. Source drawn by the author

5.1 Structural Violence Theory

Structural violence theory highlights human rights violations caused by systemic structures that limit individuals and make fundamental needs unattainable. Forced repatriation policy exemplifies structural violence, depriving refugees of their dignity, rights, and well-being, in psychological distress. Unlike Personal violence, which has a direct perpetrator, structural violence is embedded in societal norms and policies. i.e., deporting a few undocumented Afghan refugees is personal violence, but impacting 1.4 million Afghan refugees is structural violence. The enforcement of the repatriation process without legal or administrative structures further exposes refugees to detention and deportation in a hostile environment (ERCOŞKUN, B.,2021). Unfortunately, no refugees felt safe or believed they could rely on authorities for protection in times of danger. Almost all reported distressing encounters with military, paramilitary, or police forces, including unjust arrest or assaults, leading to a deep-seated fear (Wofford & Awad, 2018). Practices like forced repatriation, immigration detention, and denying refugees fundamental rights and services are manifestations of structural violence, undermining their well-being and security (Hillier-Smith, 2024). Structural violence manifests indirectly through social systems targeting entire groups and subjecting them to widespread oppression (Kent, 1993).

5.2 Human Security Approach

Security fundamentally means “absence of insecurity and threats,” including protection from various forms of violence (physical, sexual, social, psychological) and the fulfillment of basic needs such as employment, food, and healthcare. The 2016 New York Declaration adopted by the UN General Assembly signifies a global commitment to immigrants' and refugees' rights and

dignity. It emphasizes education for refugees' children, combating xenophobia, and ensuring access to basic services like healthcare. This aligns with the human security framework, which highlights political security, protection from violence, discrimination, and denial of rights (UNDP, 1994).

Human security, a people-centered framework, focuses on conditions that threaten survival, livelihood, and dignity, emphasizing the right to live free from fear and want, with equal opportunities to reach one's full potential (Human Security in Theory and Practice). The situation, however, reveals a different narrative, in which many refugees are facing harassment and detention by local authorities. An IOM update reports that 89% of returnees in the first phase of repatriation in October 2023 cited fear of arrest as their main reason for returning to Afghanistan (UNHCR-IOM, 2024). Refugees' highlights experiences of depression, sleep deprivation, and physiological symptoms like hypertension among women show the toll of constant insecurity. The looming threat of repatriation, particularly for those fleeing Taliban persecution or without a secure future in Afghanistan. These fears prove how the erosion of human security can lead to deep psychosocial distress and trauma. Ensuring 'freedom from want', which involves basic needs and fostering conditions for long-term sustainability (Tadjbakhsh, 2005).

5.3 Social Integration Theory

French sociologist and philosopher Emile Durkheim developed the theory of social integration, emphasizing how individuals interact through their belief systems (Kamruzzaman et al., 2024). Afghan refugees, however, often experience discrimination, harassment, exploitation, and exclusion, being viewed as a threat and burden on local resources. As a result of being marginalized, refugees frequently establish their isolated communities, where they cultivate their own cultural practices and social norms, and distance themselves from mainstream society (Malik, Lyndon, & Yew, 2020). Taken together, Afghan refugees in Pakistan face deep-seated social, economic, and psychological challenges shaped by systemic neglect. The fear of forced repatriation exacerbates their insecurity, disrupts community cohesion, and undermines their well-being.

6 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative approach, where combining 25 semi-structured interviews with PoR cardholders in Hazara Town, Mariabad, and Pashtoonabad with secondary data from UNHCR, IOM, Amnesty international, government reports, and scholarly sources. The data capture lived experiences of refugees that help to provide a detailed analysis of their fears, perspectives, and social integration. This approach seeks to understand social phenomena through subjective experiences, perspectives, and detailed interpretations through interviews and data analysis. In qualitative research, interaction between researchers and participants is key, where the individual characteristics and researchers' perspectives play a significant role (Sable, 2023; *UTA libraries*, 2006; Flick, 2018). While historical and contextual insights are drawn from secondary sources such as journals, news reports, government reports, and books. However, the primary data collection is central to achieving research objectives and was carried out through semi-structured interviews (See "Fig. 3").

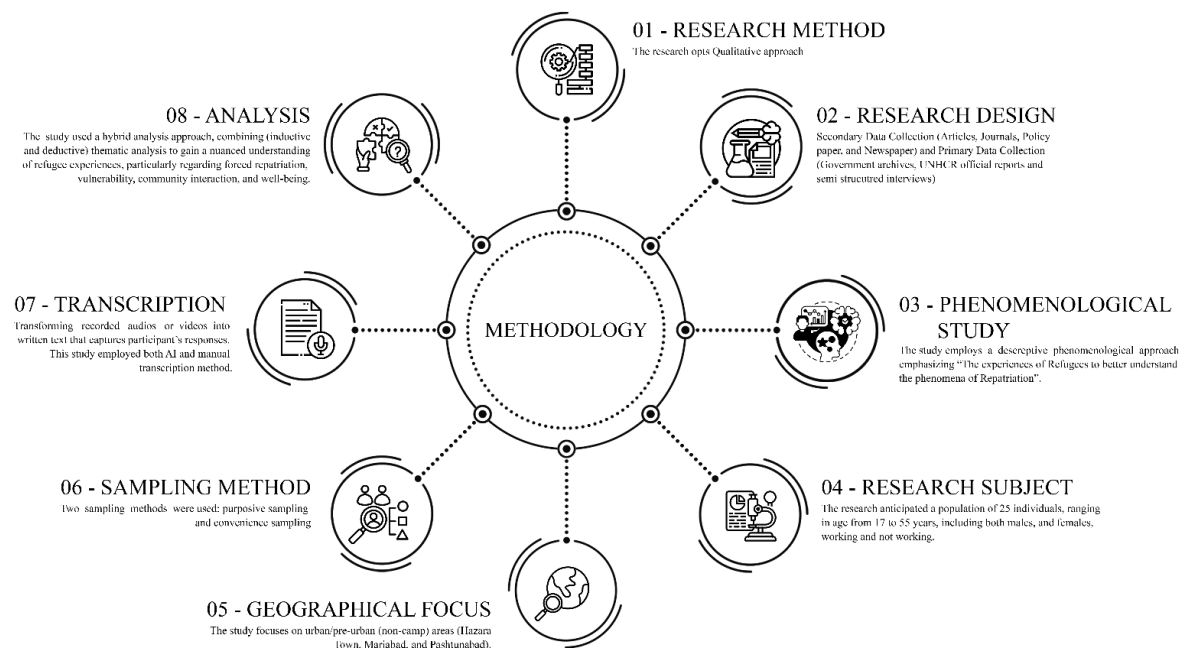


Figure 3 Methodology design: source drawn by the Author

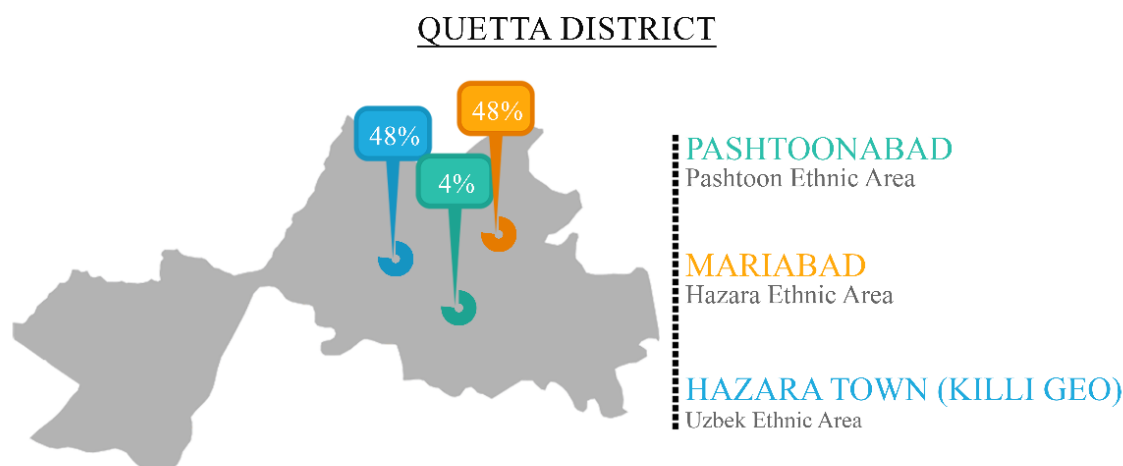
6.1 Research Approach

This paper utilized a diverse methodological approach, which consisted of semi-structured interviews and openly available information, including government archives. These methods have been chosen to suit the location and duration, to allow an in-depth examination of the views and experiences of respondents, ensuring the validity and quality of the obtained data. A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 13 with women and 12 with men ("See, Table 1"). As the study focused on gender dynamics as one of its key components. This methodological approach provides a comprehensive view of individual personal experience and social interaction within communities.

Traumatic experiences profoundly impact the psychological well-being and quality of life of individuals, often disturbing daily interactions and routines. Therefore, to study such lived experiences, researchers utilized phenomenological interviews to explore the experiences and meanings that participants attribute to events. Through open-ended questions about participants' feelings, perceptions, and understandings, detailed insights into their experiences are obtained. This study employs a descriptive phenomenological approach, emphasizing the conscious experiences of individuals to better understand the phenomenon under investigation.

6.2 Geographical Focus

The study focuses on urban/pre-urban (non-camp) settings in Balochistan, where a substantial population of migrated individuals resides. Data was collected from refugee resettlement areas in Quetta, generally, and Hazara Town, Mariabad, and Pashtoonabad, particularly, to thoroughly investigate the Uzbek, Hazara, and Pashtun Ethnic Groups (See "Fig 4 and Table 2").



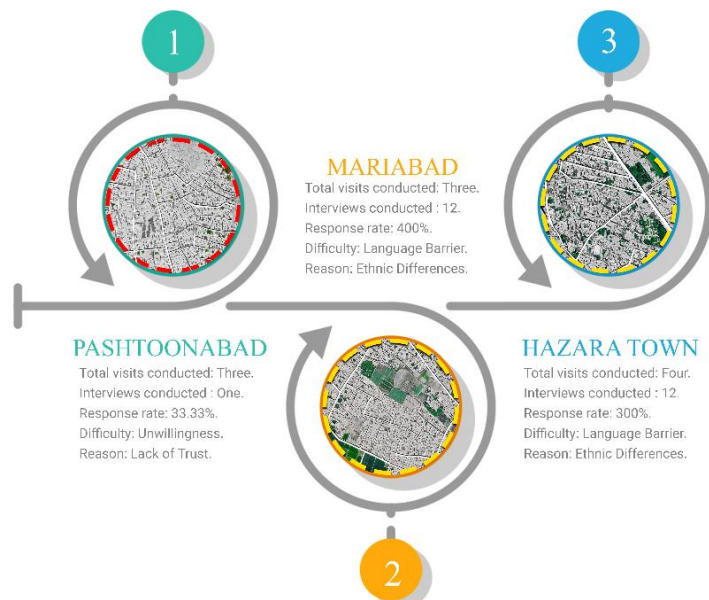


Figure 4 Geographical focus of Quetta district: source drawn by author

6.3 Sampling Method

In qualitative research, sample size is not predetermined, and data collection continues until data saturation is reached. Two sampling methods were used: Purposive sampling, where participants are selected based on specific characteristics related to study objectives. Convenience sampling, which involves selecting willing participants without specific criteria, allows flexibility in participant selection (Qualtrics, 2023).

Table 1: Years of residence in Pakistan of respondents: source drawn by the author

Years of residence	No of participants
Over 50 Years	1
Between 41-50 Years	8
Between 31-40 Years	3
Between 21-30 Years	6
Below 20 Years	5
Born in Pakistan	5

In the initial stage of data collection, convenience sampling was used to gather a preliminary group of willing and easily accessible participants. Following the collection of initial data, purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with specific characteristics such as gender, age, area, duration of stay in the country, PoR status, and specific experiences related to trauma, fears, or challenges associated with the recent repatriation plan. The aim was to create a sample that reflects the diversity of perspectives within the refugee communities. The study utilizes a purposive sample of 25 participants to explore the research objectives. As outlined in R. Kumar's *Research Methodology*, larger samples generally enhance the accuracy of results (Kumar, 2011). However, due to time and resource constraints, a minimum of 25 interviews was conducted, achieving data saturation. Some authors suggest that 20-30 participants are sufficient for a thematic study. It is also suggested that phenomenological studies involve 5-25 interviews (Bekele, W. B. & Ago, F. Y., 2022). This study aimed to explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of refugees, which was accomplished with the 25 interviews, rather than generalizing to the entire refugee population.

Table 2 Demographic details of the participants: source drawn by the author

Demographic variables	Category	Number of participants (N=25)
Gender	Male	13
	Female	12
Age Group	Over 50 Years	1
	Between 41-50 Years	8
	Between 31-40 Years	3
	Between 21-30 Years	6
	Below 20 Years	5

	Born in Pakistan	2
Occupation	Employed	8
	Unemployed	10
	Housewives	7
	Uzbek	12
Ethnicity	Hazara	12
	Pashtun	1

The interview guide was structured into two main areas of inquiry aligned with the research objectives. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of key themes. The schedules include 39 questions: 13 main questions, 3 introductory questions, and 26 sub-questions.

6.4 Data analysis

In qualitative social sciences research, thematic analysis is widely used method, it process of identifying and analyzing themes to enhance understanding of a particular phenomenon. The codes were not predetermined but emerged directly from the data, ensuring that the theme accurately represented participants' voices and perspectives. This data-centric method allows researchers to organize and analyse large datasets into smaller, coherent, analysable segments (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Researchers using a deductive approach usually follow a positive view, which sees data as existing already and being objective. In this case, they describe their work as "collecting data." Conversely, the inductive approach is based on which data hasn't been fully discovered yet. Researchers using this approach talk about "generating data" from scratch. Inductive researchers play an active role, shaping the data and influencing how the findings are presented (Swain, J., 2018).

The initial interview data were analyzed through a systematic coding process (See "Table 3"). First, open coding, like "Fear of Forced Repatriation, Insecurity, Difficulties," was used to identify basic concepts and ideas from the transcripts without preconceptions. Next, during axial coding, "Discrimination, Resettlement difficulties in Afghanistan, Forced Repatriation Concerns," these codes were grouped into related categories by exploring connections and patterns within the data. Finally, selective coding like "Documented but Vulnerable, Xenophobic Harassment, Uncertainty and Insecurity" refined and integrated these categories into overarching deductive and inductive themes that accurately reflected participants' experiences. This iterative process ensured that simple raw data were developed into meaningful and nuanced themes aligned with the research objectives.

Table 3: Themes extracted from deductive and inductive approaches (extracted by the Author)

Deductive Themes	Inductive Themes
Forced Repatriation Concern	Resettlement Challenges in Afghanistan
Unjust/discriminatory repatriation	Uncertainty and Insecurity
Afghanistan Humanitarian Situation	Taliban Government Concerns
Exploitation concerns from Pakistani authorities	Anti-Shia discrimination concerns in Afghanistan
Vulnerable Refugee	Documented but Vulnerable
Limited Host Community Interaction	Xenophobic harassment from CNIC holders, locals/limited Host community interaction
Financial Strain	Concern for Medical Treatment and education, rent houses

The study used a hybrid analysis approach, combining inductive and deductive. Thematic analysis to gain a nuanced understanding of refugee experiences, particularly regarding forced repatriation, vulnerability, community interaction, and well-being. The analysis was guided by a conceptual framework, centered on structural violence, human security, and social integration theories. The research began by generating themes directly from the interview data, allowing participants' voices and experiences to guide the themes. i.e., the theme *Forced Repatriation Concerns*: aligned with "uncertainty and insecurity," and "Taliban government concerns." Also, the study incorporated pre-set themes derived from conceptual frameworks, i.e., *Community Interaction*; "limited host interaction" and "xenophobic harassment" allow for a focused look at refugee-host community dynamics. To ensure rigor, the themes were validated through peer critique and data triangulation, using interviews, reports, journals, and newspapers to improve the reliability and validity of findings by reducing bias (See "Fig. 5").

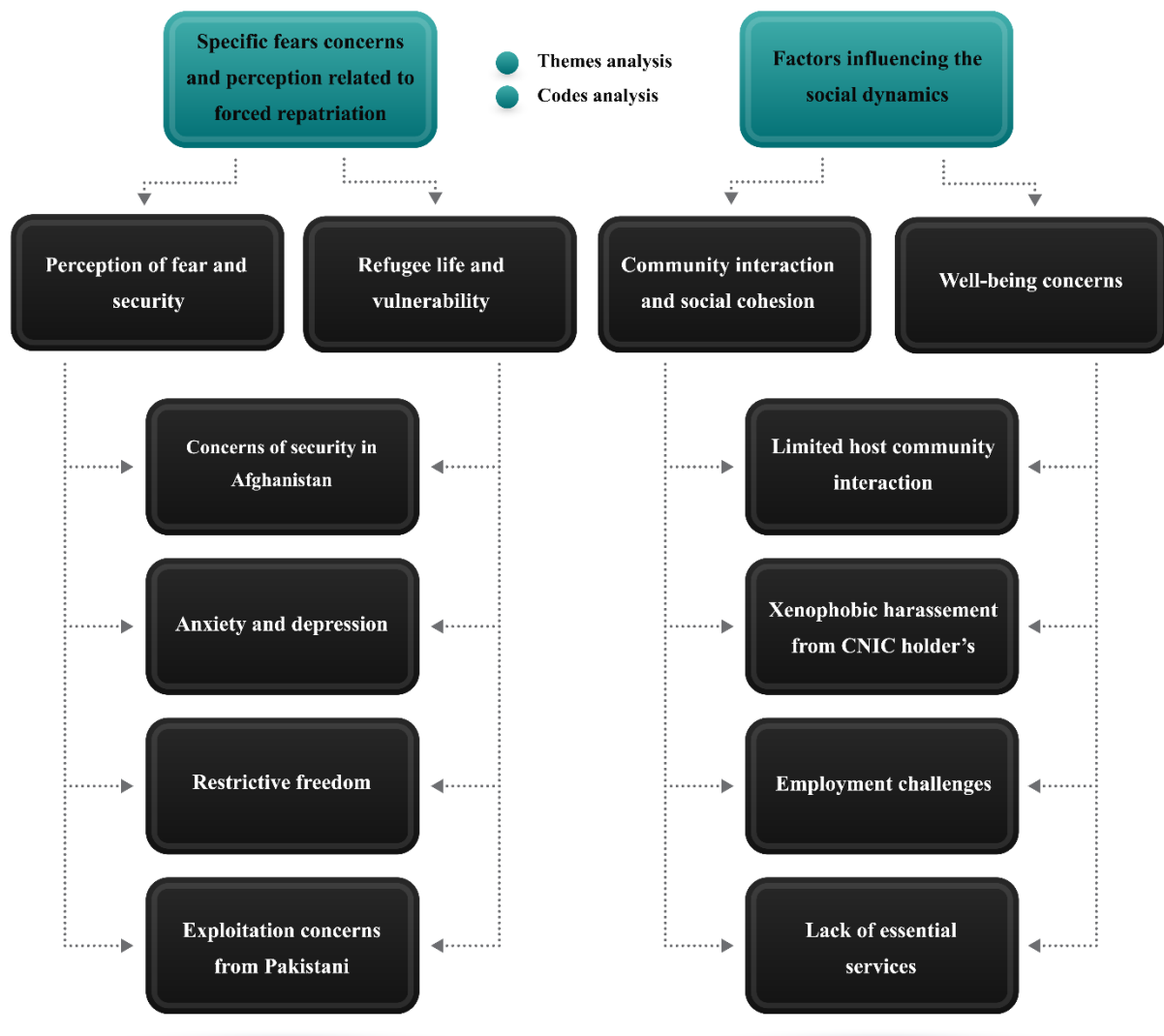


Figure 5: codes and themes relevant to research objectives: source, drawn by the author

6.5 Data Collection

The data collection process primarily involves semi-structured interviews with PoR cardholders. Subsequently, insights from key community members further guide research question refinement. This comprehensive approach allowed the researcher to have a more thorough exploration of the research topic.

6.5.1 During Data Collection

During one-on-one interviews, during interviews, the researcher made an effort to encourage participants to participate openly, ensuring they spoke freely without feeling burdened.

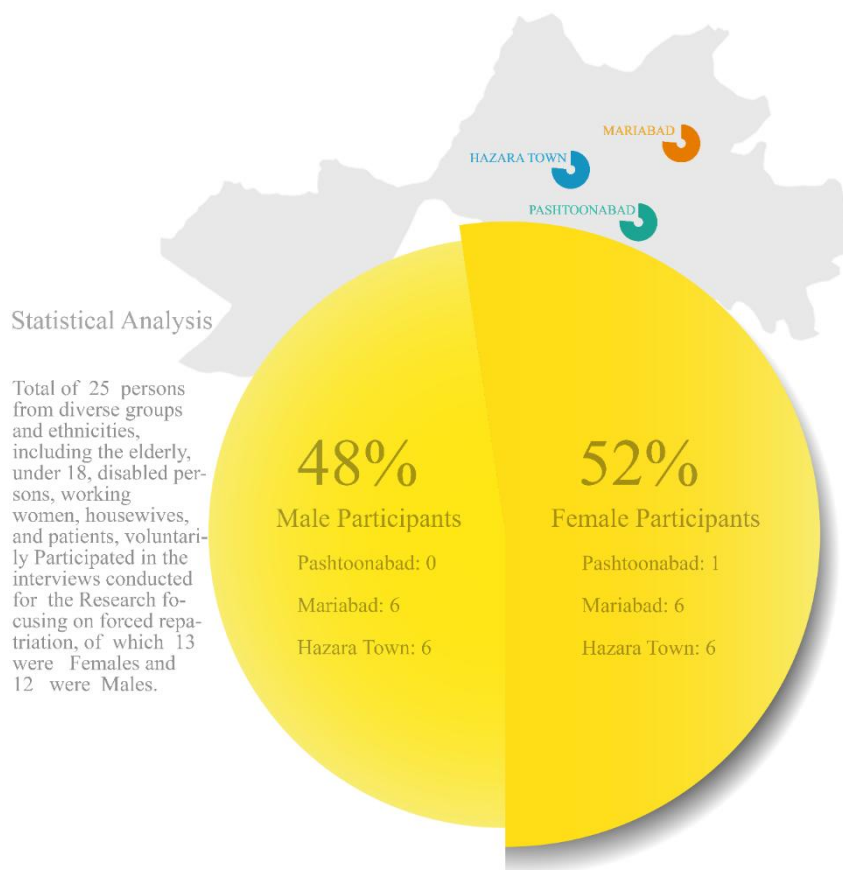


Figure 6: Statistical Analysis of sample size: source drawn by the Author

6.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher prioritized understanding each participant's distinct narrative and perspective. Therefore, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts freely and openly, resulting in a rich and in-depth analysis of their experiences. An interview guide was used flexibly, enabling deeper exploration.

6.5.3 Secondary Data Collection Method

In addition to primary interview data, the study incorporated secondary sources, including UNHCR report, IOM monitoring data, government documents, and peer-reviewed literature. To ensure rigor, secondary data was triangulated with primary interview data to contextualize participants narratives and to identify areas of convergence or divergence between official statistics and lived experiences for instance, the UNHCR-IOM flash update #14 report that by 21 November 2023, nearly 90% of undocumented Afghan refugees had left Pakistan. All statistical claims are drawn from official sources (UNHCR-IOM 2024). Secondary data were triangulated with interviews to strengthen validity.

The study was grounded in the conceptual foundations of face-to-face interactions, to capture the informants' views on their life experiences, and situation in their own words. 25 individuals, aged 17 -55 years, with diverse demographics, including both males and females were interviewed (See "Fig. 3 and Table 1").

7 Ethical Consideration and Data Validation

Data saturation in qualitative research is reached when additional interviews or data sources no longer produce new themes or insight, indicating the research question has been thoroughly explored. Achieving saturation is fundamental for ensuring the rigor and validity of qualitative research. Empirical findings suggest that saturation generally occurs between 12-20 interviews for homogeneous groups (Guest et al., 2006) (See "Table 2").

Ethical standards in research emphasize informed consent and confidentiality to protect participants' rights (Kumar, 2011). The study adhered to these principles by obtaining consent in languages accessible to participants in Pashto, Dari, and Urdu, clarifying its purpose and voluntary nature while allowing participants to withdraw at any stage without consequences. The study prioritized confidentiality by anonymizing data, securely storing it, and restricting access to authorized personnel.

Interviews were conducted with cultural and linguistic sensitivity, aided by a female translator for women and a co-research investigator for men to establish a sense of trust and understanding. The comfort and cultural respect were taken into account by utilizing gender sensitive measures, which included separate arrangements to ensure a comfortable environment. This approach enhanced transparency between the interviewer and participant, allowing participants to seek clarification by asking questions before consent.

To enhance the validity of the study, data triangulation was employed using multiple sources, methodological tools and perspective. Refugees (in terms of age, gender and socio-economic status, area, status) provided extensive data. The data was collected through in-depth interview, translator-assisted discussions, and document validation. Furthermore, the researcher's triangulation further minimized bias, where researcher, and translators reviewed and verified data interpretation.

8 Transcription

Interview transcription is one of the essential steps in qualitative research. A fundamental step involves converting recorded audio or video material into a written text format. Transcription also serves as a permanent record which can be referred to at a later date by other researchers or reviewers to verify the findings of the study (Halcomb, E. I., & Davidson, P. M., 2006). This method ensures the validity of responses given by participants. In addition to offering the researchers a concrete form of data to analyze that represents the captured responses of the participants. After conducting the interviews, the researcher used AI and Manual transcription method. Each separate set of five new interviewees was transcribed with the AI tool “Voice Transcriber” in order to recall the emotions of the interviewees. Additionally, the manual transcription was done by playing very small parts of the audio (10-30 seconds), pausing, and writing down what was said in order to check the text later and make sure it was corrected and included all important information.

9 FINDINGS

The findings section discusses several interrelated themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of Afghan refugees lived experiences in Quetta. These include *fear and insecurity* shaped by threats of forced repatriation, *refugees’ vulnerability* due to expired PoR cards and systemic harassment, and the severe *resettlement challenges* they would face in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and amidst *anti-Shia discrimination*. *Education and well-being* emerge as key concerns, with children denied formal schooling and families excluded from public health programs, further deepening inequality. *Community interactions* reflect mixed dynamics ranging from neutral or harmonious to discriminatory, depending on ethnic affiliation while *xenophobic harassment* by local authorities and citizens continues to undermine refugees’ sense of belonging. Together, these themes highlight how legal precarity, social exclusion, and systemic neglect combine to threaten both the security of Afghan refugees and the cohesion of host-refugee relations (See “Fig 7”).

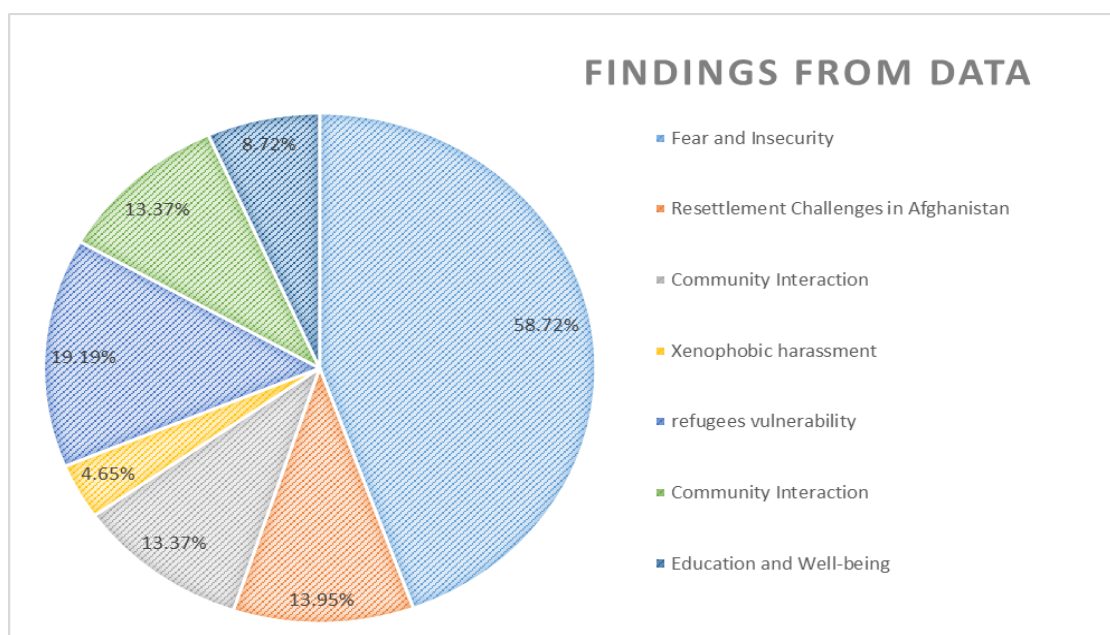


Figure 7. Findings drawn from the Data source: drawn by the author

9.1 Fear and Insecurity

One respondent noted, *“Every day we hear rumors... It’s like we are waiting for authorities to come to our door and tell us to leave, either forcefully or voluntarily.”* Such uncertainty is especially distressing for long-term residents, who view Pakistan as their only home. This aligns with Galtung’s theory of structural violence, highlighting how state policies can marginalize vulnerable populations. Increased police harassment and the failure to recognize PoR cards as valid legal protection reflect this systemic neglect.

Human security theory is also relevant, as it broadens the concept of safety to include freedom from fear and want. The constant fear of repatriation threatens Afghan refugees’ rights, particularly affecting women dealing with financial and health-related challenges. The anxiety and trauma experienced by these individuals may deepen divisions and conflicts within the community, challenging the solidarity networks between the refugee population and the local community.

9.2 Refugee’s Vulnerability

A male PoR cardholder participant from Hazara Town, born and raised in Pakistan and holding a PoR card, expressed strong reluctance to return to Afghanistan due to significant barriers such as lack of housing, limited job opportunities, inadequate medical care, and overall uncertainty about their future. He fears losing access to life-saving treatment if forcibly repatriated. Other participants reported being harassed over expired cards and often compelled to pay bribes to resolve these issues. Advocating for the renewal of PoR cards with extended validity to ensure continued protection and stability for refugees.

The experience of undocumented refugees forced to repatriate, under miserable conditions, has created considerable fear. A community leader representing 200-300 households in Hazara Town has voiced opposition to the repatriation policy, asserting that Pakistan is home to many Afghan refugees. However, on the other hand, he is afraid that there is a possibility of PoR cardholders being forcibly removed, like the undocumented refugees in November 2023. The expired PoR often leads to job loss and increased vulnerability.

Many participants criticized disparities in refugees’ treatment in Pakistan, compared to Western countries. Long-term refugees often have the opportunity to attain citizenship and access to basic services. Afghan refugees in Pakistan received limited support, with UNHCR aid perceived as unfairly distributed. Several accused institutions of corruption and demanding bribes at borders and checkpoints during the first phase of the repatriation process. Combined with an uncertain social climate, these challenges heighten tensions and threaten social cohesion. Many refugees report xenophobic harassment from CNIC holders, although some describe neutral or normal relations with host communities.

9.3 Resettlement Challenges in Afghanistan

The fear of repatriation creates a deep-seated emotional and psychological stress which goes further than just fear for one’s physical wellbeing. It is the feeling of the lack of mobility that makes female participants develop stress-related bodily traces like hypertension, frustration due to loss of sleep, and other bodily changes. A female participant shared the trauma of departure from Afghanistan after a Taliban-led fire destroyed her home, revealing the vulnerabilities that women face within conflict situations. The fear under Taliban rule left an indelible psychological impact on her. Then, add the Taliban’s influence there, and fear of anti-Shia discrimination in Afghanistan, heightens her trauma. Without CNIC’s female refugees’ mobility is severely restricted. One participant shared that she cannot visit other parts of Quetta or learn to drive. She expressed feelings of being stigmatized by CNIC holders, who perceive refugees as having lower social status.

One of the participants, who is 25 years old, completed his boarding in Pakistan and is now concerned about his family, as he does not have a permanent base or any opportunities in Afghanistan. He is particularly concerned for his wife CNIC holder, and their five-month-old baby son, whom he fears may be repatriated and left exposed in insalubrious and unpredictable surroundings.

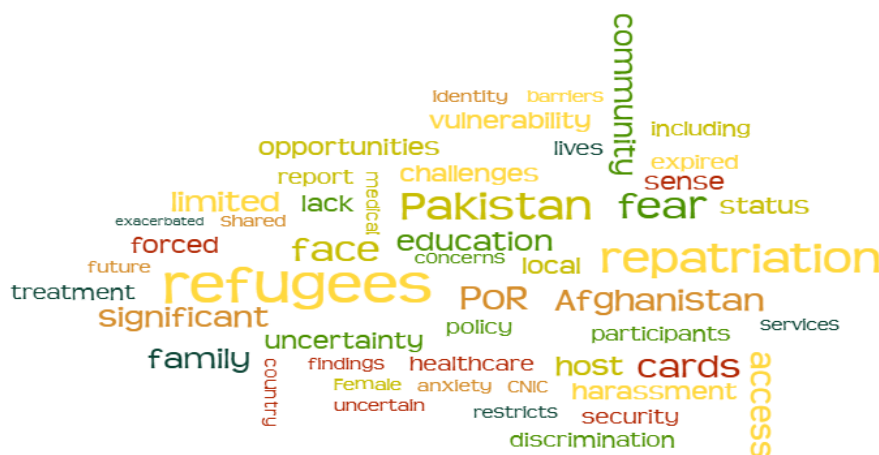


Figure 9. Words repeated by participants: source extracted by the author

9.4 Education and Well-Being

Furthermore, the uncertain legal status of refugee parents directly curtails their children's access to education. One female participant explained that her expired PoR card and CNIC prevented her daughter from enrolling in school, leaving the child to attend a Farsi madrasah, with limited prospects for the future. Similarly, a nine-year-old boy, living in a family without proper documentation, has only been able to receive religious education. Refugees are particularly concerned that repatriation would further jeopardize their children's educational opportunities and security in Afghanistan, where the educational system remains fragile and discriminatory.

To add, Afghan refugees are excluded from the Sehat Insaf Card, a health insurance program under the Sehat Sahulat Program designed for Pakistani citizens having a CNIC. Nevertheless, PoR cards grant certain benefits, but they do not include access to free healthcare. Many struggle to afford treatment, often forced to seek costly private care.

9.5 Community Interaction

Women participants generally noted neutral interactions with host communities, marked by limited engagement or cooperation. While some women encounter discrimination and marginalization. Male refugees reported harmonious relations with the host community. However, ethnic identity plays a role in shaping the community's attitude toward refugees. Refugees with similar ethnic backgrounds to the host community report more positive interactions, whereas those from differing ethnic identities often face frequent discrimination and hostility. Many refugees report incidents of discrimination, such as landlords demanding a CNIC card from refugees despite knowing their refugee status, which worsens their hardships.

9.6 Xenophobic Harassment

To add, for many Afghan refugees, language barriers and restricted social interaction increased marginalization. Many refugees report harassment by local authorities, such as confiscation of documentation like their POR card, and demand bribes. Hostile remarks from local authorities, such as *"you don't belong here"* and *"we have given you a place to live,"* further erode their sense of belonging and alienate them in a country they call HOME. The findings further reveal that refugees are caught in a state of dilemma: while they are unwilling to return to Afghanistan due to insecurity and instability, they continue to face substantial livelihood challenges in Pakistan.

10 DISCUSSION

The findings of the interview reveal a deep sense of fear among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan, many of whom have lived in the country for decades (See "Fig 7 and 9"). Despite holding Proof of Registration (PoR) cards, female participants in particular expressed profound concerns about the potential for repatriation to a war-torn country. The policy announcement has intensified their psychological distress, contributing to anxiety, depression, and insecurity. Refugees' families face daily challenges such as restricted movement, limited employment opportunities, and frequent harassment during residency checks, which deepen their vulnerability.

11 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research findings address both primary questions, illustrating how Afghan refugees' fears surrounding forced repatriation shape their sense of security, well-being, and mental health. These fears are exacerbated by barriers to accessing basic services, particularly medical care and education. These challenges may foster hatred between host communities and refugees. Furthermore, the research identifies key areas that demand attention for comprehensive policy formulation and implementation (See "Table 4").

Table 4. Long-term and short-term possible policy recommendations: source drawn by the Author

Phase	Action	Timeline	Stakeholders
Phase 1: immediate (short-term measures)	Establish legal support centers for documentation and advocacy against forced repatriation.	0-6 months	NGOs, UNHCR, UNICEF, Local authorities
Phase 2: (short-term measure)	Launch Media awareness campaigns in Dari, Pashto, and Hazargi to eliminate fear and misconceptions	6-12 months	Media outlets, UNHCR, Refugee local leaders, and volunteers
Phase 3: medium term (long-term measure)	Train local Afghan leaders as mediators	1-2 years	NGOs, local authorities, and community leaders
Phase 4: Long-term	Facilitate state-level dialogue and draft a legally binding MoU for structured repatriation	2-5 years	Governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, UNHCR (mediator)

11.1 Short-Term measures

11.1.1 Community Training

To facilitate a successful repatriation process, local Afghan leaders require training as mediators between authorities and refugees, which can improve an effective communication and repatriation process by focusing on refugees' rights. These training sessions must respect cultural sensitivity, which will foster trust and facilitate a more effective repatriation process.

11.1.2 Media Awareness Platforms

Effective communication of the repatriation process requires a multi-faceted approach including a media campaign via radio, Television, and social media in languages commonly spoken within refugee communities, such as Dari, Pashto, and Hazargi. These campaigns should provide accurate information about legal rights, the timeline, and available support.

11.1.3 Involvement of Refugee Volunteers

Encourage the active participants of refugee volunteers in camping's enabling them to inform and support their communities. These volunteers will be acting as a trusted source by fostering communication and community support within their networks.

11.1.4 Community-Oriented Campaign

Launch community-oriented campaign's town hall meetings and workshops in refugee-populated areas, to address concerns and clarify misconceptions.

11.1.5 Extending the Validity of PoR Cards

Extending PoR card validity and providing accessible renewal options (online renewal method) would ease Afghan refugees in Pakistan. This would effectively mitigate fears of forced repatriations and ensure refugees can continue living in Pakistan till the repatriation phase III without unnecessary anxiety.

11.1.6 Anti-harassment Measures

To protect Afghan refugees from harassment, the government and civil society must collaborate to establish strong anti-harassment laws and ensure their effective enforcement. To educate the law enforcement agencies and provide grievances mechanism such as hotline support centers where the refugees can feel safe and secure to report any cases of harassment, exploitation or forced repatriation. Also, preserving the dignity, as presented in human security approach and in New York Declaration for Refugee and

Migrants, freedom from fear and freedom from want, equal opportunities and rights of refugees. This approach is focused on the political commitment to protect the fundamental rights of all Afghan refugees regardless of their legal status (UNODC).

11.1.7 Independent Refugee Protection Body

Establish an independent body within Pakistan to address complaints from PoR holders regarding harassment or discrimination. This body should include representatives from both the Pakistani government and UNHCR.

11.1.8 Dedicated Helpline and Legal Support

Set up a hotline for reporting harassment and provide free legal services to PoR holders facing unlawful actions, ensuring complaints are registered and followed up.

11.1.9 Ensuring Education for Refugee Children

Participants revealed that the lack of PoR cards prevents refugee children from attending formal schools. The government should establish temporary education opportunities, ensuring refugee children can access formal education by implementing measures that permit non-CNIC holding children to enroll in schools. The human security approach also emphasizes that all refugee and migrant children should have access to education within a few months of arrival.

11.2 Long-Term Measures

11.2.1 State-Level Dialogue

Ensuring the smooth and humane repatriation of Afghan refugees from Pakistan to Afghanistan requires a formal national-level dialogue between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both nations must collaborate to safeguard refugees' safety and dignity, ensuring a secure and supportive environment for their return.

11.2.2 Bilateral Coordination

Pakistan and Afghanistan should engage in consistent, high-level talks to ensure a coordinated repatriation process. This cordial collaboration will help both countries manage refugee movements smoothly, minimizing uncertainty for refugees.

11.2.3 Legally Binding MoU

Both governments should sign a formal MoU or legal agreement to establish a structured and transparent repatriation process. The MoU should specify;

- Safe and organized transportation
- Collaborative efforts with UNHCR, ensuring access to housing, healthcare, and job opportunities in Afghanistan.
- Regular monitoring and reporting on the status and well-being of repatriated refugees.

12 CONCLUSION

This paper presents firsthand accounts of the challenges, fears, and perspectives of Afghan refugees and their implications for social cohesion amidst the looming threat of repatriation in Quetta, Balochistan. This study offers meaningful insights into the refugees lived experience, despite constraints including time limitation, difficulties in accessing reliable data, and trust building within the refugee community. This paper explores the vulnerability of documented (PoR) Afghan refugees, especially women, including widows, single mothers, in the repatriation process. Also, it acknowledges the absence of host community insight, suggesting the need for more diverse research.

Ultimately, the findings offer valuable insights that lead to evidence-based possible policy implications formulated to strengthen social cohesion among community groups. Also, addressing the vulnerabilities of Afghan refugees across Pakistan. A gender sensitive approach is necessary to highlight the specific challenges women face, particularly related to security, healthcare, education, and access to basic resources. By addressing these limitations, research in future will be able to provide a more comprehensive view of what refugees go through. And will assist in the development of policies that safeguard the rights and dignity of refugees while promoting peaceful coexistence and integration.

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