

Assessing the Impact of COVID-19 on Afghan Women Refugees in Pakistan

Syeda Ailiya Naqvi and Sania Baig

Abstract

For decades Pakistan has hosted the largest Afghan refugee population in the world. Being a lower-middle-income country, it has often found it difficult to manage the basic needs of this marginalized group and has depended largely on foreign assistance. The COVID-19 pandemic has had deleterious effects on this population, particularly women, who faced the brunt of loss of livelihood, increased gender-based violence and inequitable treatment in households, loss of education, and added inaccessibility to health services and water, sanitation, and hygiene. This has widened the gap in gender equality and women's empowerment and unleashed problems associated with the country's refugee policy that neither grants them a proper legal status nor is it gender sensitive in its approach. Response mechanisms focused on women have primarily been international initiatives. If Pakistan is to deal with the additional influx of refugees coming from Afghanistan, it must formulate a cohesive, gender-inclusive strategy.

Keywords: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Migrant Women, Refugee, COVID-19

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Introduction

February 2020 marked 40 years of Pakistan hosting Afghan refugees. This was also the month when Pakistan detected its first positive case of coronavirus (Grandi 2020). Since then, there have been 1,524,793 confirmed cases, 30,355 deaths, and a total number of 101,881,176 people vaccinated in the country (GOP 2021). Although the number of refugees infected by the virus may be a small percentage of the total population, being an extremely marginalized group, they have been most vulnerable to the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic, in particular the women.

Currently, Pakistan shelters 1.44 million Afghan refugees who are registered in the Afghan National Registration Database under the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), of which 54 percent are male and 46 percent are female (elderly, two percent; adults, 23 percent; and young girls, 21 percent) (UNHCR 2021). In addition, there are equal numbers of undocumented Afghan refugees in the country, making Pakistan host to the second-largest refugee population in the world (Rafi 2015).

Pakistan's policy towards refugees has focused on protection and self-reliance until repatriation; however, response mechanisms at the local and national levels have lacked gendered interventions. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), through its Refugee Affected and Hosting Area (RAHA) program, has been targeting sectors where women have been most affected during the pandemic. These include livelihood, education, and health, apart from water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). At a national level, Pakistan's deficient gender-centric approach compounds the absence of an effective and coherent policy on refugees.

International and National Legal Framework for Refugees

For several decades Pakistan has been home to one of the largest refugee populations in the world. However, Pakistan is neither a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor has it ratified the 1967 Protocol to the Refugee Convention (Shah 2020). These instruments form the foundation of what constitutes refugees' status, the rights of a refugee, and the obligations of the member-state hosting them. The UNHCR is the principal organization monitoring the adherence to these covenants. Nevertheless, Pakistan is a party to several international human rights agreements that are non-discriminatory in scope and applicable to refugees. Additionally, it is bound by the UN Charter to ensure the well-being of all individuals residing within its territory.

With the participation of the UNHCR, the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan have signed multiple agreements since the first agreement in 1988 (Zubair, Shahzad, and Khan 2019, 462-472). In 2003, a tripartite agreement was signed between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the UNHCR, which addressed voluntary repatriation in compliance with non-refoulement (UNHCR, 2021). Initially signed for three years, the agreement has been renewed several times since.

The Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) was established in 2012 by Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the UNHCR (ADSP 2018). The purpose was to focus on three critical areas of concern: voluntary repatriation, sustainable reintegration, and RAHA. Another significant cooperation in a similar direction was the Afghanistan Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and Solidarity (APAPPS) 2018.

The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) does not have any provision for refugees (Zubair, Khan, and Shah 2019, 28-38). Only certain rights that extend to any and all “persons” present within the country may be applicable as privileges given to refugees. Therefore, refugees may be considered illegal immigrants and treated in the same manner. Likewise, the Foreigners Act 1946 permits Pakistani authorities to monitor, detain and deport foreigners who do not possess official travel documents or violate the Act by any means. Often refugees are treated under the same umbrella. In 2017, the federal cabinet formalized an Afghan Refugee Management Policy, which aimed to devise a visa strategy, register undocumented Afghans, and work towards a law solely for refugees (Mielke 2021). All efforts in this regard went in vain, and there was no fruitful outcome.

The primary government bodies and organizations working for refugees include the Ministry of State and Frontier Regions (SAFRON), the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, which is under the administrative and financial control of the SAFRON, and the UNHCR.

With no right to permanent residence or citizenship in the country, the refugees’ disavowed status keeps them disintegrated from society. Even though millions of them have been living in Pakistan for over four decades, they have minimal positive contributions and are barely making ends meet.

Legal Status and Rights of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Afghan refugees, both male and female, residing in Pakistan can be divided into three categories (UNOCHA 2020) to understand their legal status and access to services. For all three, the Proof of Registration (PoR) card issued by the Government of Pakistan provides accessibility to the maximum number of benefits, giving the individual a limited legal status. In this regard, the UNHCR also facilitates only POR cardholders. Recently, under the Documentation Renewal and Information Verification Exercise (DRIVE), SAFRON and the

UNHCR have begun issuing (Qureshi 2021) biometric smart identity cards to the 1.4 million POR cardholders.

The second category includes those who possess the Afghan Citizen Card (ACC). Verification of the ACC was initiated to identify unregistered refugees so that they may be granted a temporary stay in Pakistan with the issuance of travel documentation authorized by the Government of Afghanistan.

The third category is that of undocumented refugees. Having no travel documents and just a Tazkira (Afghan identity card) makes them vulnerable to deportation and extortion.

The rights and services accessible to each category of Pakistan-based Afghan refugees varies (See Table 1). It must be highlighted that the UNHCR facilitates informal primary education only to POR cardholders. Becoming a part of the education system is problematic for ACC holders and undocumented refugees. There is partial to no access to assistance in cases of gender-based violence (GBV). Legal aid, particularly in criminal cases, is constrained. ACC holders and unregistered refugees can only access government hospitals for health issues. They can also not be part of the formal economy because there are hindrances in opening a bank account. They cannot own property, and the birthright citizenship policy also does not apply to them.

SERVICE	PoR CARDHOLDER		ACC HOLDERS	UNREGISTERED (NO ACC OR PoR)
	Refugee villages	Urban settlements		
Registration and documentation	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Grey
Access to education documentation	Yellow	Yellow	Orange	Orange
Access to travel documentation	Yellow	Yellow	Orange	Grey
Access to legal aid (civil cases)	Yellow	Yellow	Orange	Grey
Access to legal aid (criminal cases)	Red	Red	Red	Grey
Access to GBV-related assistance	Orange	Red	Grey	Grey
Access to education	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red
Access to housing, land and property	Orange	Orange	Red	Grey
Access to health services	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Orange
Ability to open a bank account	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Grey
Ability to receive foreign remittance	Green	Green	Yellow	Yellow
Ability to pay direct taxes	Green	Green	Yellow	Grey
Access to own a mobile SIM	Green	Green	Yellow	Grey
Formal employment market	Orange	Yellow	Grey	Grey
Informal employment market	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Orange
Access to subsidised wheat flour	Green	Green	Green	Green
Access to assisted repatriation	Green	Green	Red	Red

The colour green stands for 'full and unhindered access', yellow stands for 'good access', orange for 'partial access', red for 'limited access' and grey for 'very limited or no access'.

Table 1. Source: ADSP. 2018. On the margins: Afghans in Pakistan. 6.

Despite these restrictions, the Government of Pakistan has made serious efforts in accommodating refugees. A stressed economy along with a heightened security situation marked by terrorism and violent extremism, political instability, and social cohesion issues have made refugees' lives extremely challenging. Restrictions on movement, employment, and access to humanitarian services and education have excluded the refugees from assimilating into society.

With COVID-19, the unprecedented impact on the economy and the health system has exacerbated the already grim state of affairs. Crises, in general, affect the marginalized segments of society the most. Women bear the brunt more than men (Whiting 2018), as crises widen gender inequality and adversely impact women. Afghan women refugees suffered disproportionately as the pandemic swept across the country.

COVID-19 Impact on Women Refugees and Protection Measures

For more than a decade, the country has failed to progress in the gender parity score. In the recently published Global Gender Gap Report 2021 (WEF 2021), Pakistan ranked 153 out of a total of 156 countries. The index uses four key variables to measure gender inequality: education, health, economic growth, and political empowerment. Pakistan is amongst the ten worst performing countries with regard to “economic participation and opportunity”, and “health and survival”.

Women refugees in Pakistan have come a long way since the 1980s. From ‘a culture of dependence’, where their roles were confined to taking care of family members, and household chores, today, many of them have become self-reliant and independent. To the credit of many international and local organizations, they have acquired vocational skills, teaching skills, and medical training. These skills have enabled them to sustain themselves and their families and given them a sense of purpose, which has contributed to the development and progress of the refugee community in Pakistan.

The pandemic took this away from these women in unprecedented ways. The socioeconomic impacts have aggravated their pre-existing vulnerabilities manifold by limiting their rights and freedom, affecting them mentally and physically.

Global crises are breeding grounds for conflicts in the prevention of which the role of women is significant. This necessitates understanding how the pandemic has impacted women from this marginalized group so that gender-sensitive policies and responses can be designed and implemented.

Gender-Based Violence and Inequitable Treatment

For every three months of lockdown, another 15 million women and girls worldwide would be subject to GBV (UNHCR 2021). About 85 percent of women in Pakistan have been subject to

intimate partner violence in the past year (WEF 2021, 312). The Afghan women refugees have been the primary victims of the ‘shadow pandemic’ in Pakistan because there is limited research on their social and mental well-being since the virus hit, and they lack access to social services. COVID-19 has magnified their vulnerabilities and inaccessible health services, loss of income, and food insecurity have further increased their helplessness. Research indicates (Chandra-Mouli et al. 2021) that one in five refugee women surrounded by complicated humanitarian situation suffers from sexual violence. Pakistan has seen a rise in cases of intimate partner violence and domestic and sexual violence due to heightened tensions in households. The need to protect refugee women has become urgent and imperative as they are at a greater risk of facing different forms of GBV.

Just in the first three months of 2020, a 200 percent rise (Qureshi 2021) was observed in cases of violence against women in Pakistan. For refugee women, however, in case of such acts of domestic abuse or violence, there is no provision in the criminal justice system. They have limited to no access to legal aid in that regard. Although for civil cases, Afghan women have partial legal access if they are ACC or POR cardholders (refer to Table 1). The UNHCR only provides legal assistance to POR cardholders. Protection against GBV is only limited to those women who are registered and living in refugee villages. Unregistered refugees do not even have the right to purchase a mobile sim card. Hence, they are cut off from communicating, reporting, and getting any form of support.

For several months during the first wave of the coronavirus, Pakistan was in complete lockdown. The period succeeding the first wave varied from partial to smart lockdowns. Movement restrictions and confinement to refugee camps heightened frustrations and gave rise to GBV. Loss of jobs, which were already difficult to find in the first place, also resulted in men behaving in an aggressive manner with women in the family to reinforce domination. In the lockdown conditions, women were forced to spend more time with their abusers (OHCHR 2021). Shelter homes for abused refugee women were a far-fetched idea considering that all local efforts were invested in curbing the pandemic, and available spaces were allotted to isolation camps.

Furthermore, most international and national non-governmental organizations suspended their operations, since isolation was the best practice to limit the spread of the virus. All energies were being used to fight the pandemic, and thus, social services were low down in priority. According to the UNHCR, 70,000 Afghan refugees are categorized as persons with specific needs (PWSN) (OCHA 2021). These include both women and children at risk as well as single parents. They have been confronted with greater risks to their survival as financial instability deprived them of basic necessities including medical supplies.

Economic insecurity has led to many women trafficking cases and child marriages (UNHCR 2021). Estimates by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) suggest that child marriages will increase by an additional 13 million girls within the next decade due to COVID-19 (ILO

2020). Moreover, transactional sex also became common practice as a coping mechanism to meet the financial needs of families among refugees (UNHCR 2021).

There has also been an inequitable division of household chores, with additional responsibilities on women for caretaking and fulfilling their duties of facilitating all household members. As the supply of food has become less, cases of malnourishment in females have also increased. Men, being the primary breadwinners in male-dominated households, were given a greater share of the food, resulting in lesser access to food for women than men (Chakraborty and Bhabha 2021, 237-250).

There is limited state protection for registered women refugees. The other half of the undocumented refugee population is legally invisible. This has excluded them from the right to humanitarian services in a global health crisis.

By the end of November 2020, the Ministry of Human Rights launched a 24-hour free helpline service for all women to report abuse incidents (*The News* 2020). In early 2021, a Pakistani non-governmental organization, Shirkat Gah, working for decades to create a gender-equal and gender-inclusive society, launched the Humqadam mobile application for abuse victims (Imran 2021). The application provided details of who, how, and where to approach in situations of abuse. This project was launched in collaboration with, the Pakistan-based Democratic Commission on Human Development, and the European Union. Following this, Shirkat Gah's Women Resource Centre, under its Securing Activists for Freedom and Empowerment of Women and Girls, published a comprehensive directory. This comprised city-wise information of government and private organizations such as police, hospitals, shelter homes, social welfare, and human rights-related organizations, and details on who to contact for legal aid.

Pakistan's UNFPA COVID-19 response framework was based on two fundamental components: "community empowerment through gender-centered interventions and improving health systems". The organization arranged for 20 medical facilities and three mobile health units (UNFPA 2021, 1-4), which were set up for women refugees to provide services and treatments related to sexual and reproductive health and GBV during the pandemic.

Employment and Livelihood

Pakistan is a lower-middle-income country. During the pandemic, it struggled to choose between its people dying due to the lockdown being lifted because of limited social distancing versus its people dying out of poverty, hunger, and deprivation of basic necessities. Similar sentiments were expressed among the refugee community as they demanded money rather than vaccinations to fight poverty and hunger (Latif 2020).

Just like Pakistani citizens, the Afghan refugees have been at risk of losing their jobs as lockdowns prolonged and organizations downsized and/or shut down. However, unlike the

Pakistani nationals, the Afghan refugees have added stressors linked to their legal status. They are primarily concentrated in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, where poverty levels are high and the standard of living is relatively low (OCHA 2020).

Working Afghan women are mostly part of the unstable informal sector of the economy because their status does not allow them to become part of the formal sector. They cannot open a bank account and do not have sufficient documentation to be employed with a work permit. Therefore, they often engage in daily wage work or jobs that do not require formal contracts or legalities. While refugees with legal status have some access to become part of the informal sector, only POR cardholders can engage in limited formal employment.

Around 25 percent of women refugees in the world are the primary breadwinners of their families. Most women are either in the hospitality or the services sector (Plan International 2021). Some work as carpet weavers or maids, while some work in the agriculture sector or as caretakers or in meat packaging units. These kinds of jobs have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. Besides, they do not allow social distancing, and hence women were more prone to getting infected by the virus.

Studies suggest that women are first (as opposed to men) to get laid off from their employment in crises (ILO 2020, 3). Because they are not bound by any legal contract and are working informally, they are deprived of income support and other social services they could have received if they were registered (Chakraborty and Bhabha 2021). Since they are vulnerable, dependent, and need to fight for survival, they are exploited in forced labor or are grossly underpaid. Sometimes children are also compelled to leave their education and get involved in labor to fulfill basic needs.

Women in Pakistan earn 16.3 percent of a man's income (WEF 2021). For refugee women, other practical limitations such as skills and language barriers result in women refugees being paid below the minimum wage. They are also discriminated against by being paid less than their male colleagues (Khan 2017). Furthermore, the gender digital divide distances women from job opportunities and quick response communications regarding COVID-19 emergencies and standard operating procedures. A report published on gender impacts of COVID-19 by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights states that women are 31 percent less likely to have access to the internet (OHCHR 2021, 5).

The MADE51 (Market, Access, Design and Empowerment for Refugee Artisans) project of the UNHCR has been facilitating 100 documented refugee women to expand their income generation capacity in Pakistan (UNHCR 2021). The project is a global initiative that has used refugee women's skills in arts and handicrafts and connected them to the global market. It also assists them in enhancing their outreach. Local social enterprises help these women by making the most of the skills they already possess.

The Ehsaas Emergency Cash program, which the World Bank also recognizes in the top four social protection interventions globally, was initiated by Prime Minister Imran Khan in early

2020. It is worth PKR 203 million and aims to economically support the most poverty-stricken households (PASS Division 2021). However, the initiative is limited to Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) holders. The UNHCR, in close coordination with the Government of Pakistan and SAFRON, has replicated the emergency cash assistance package for the refugee population. PKR 12,000 was planned for 72,000 families with PWSN, single parents, and daily wage earners (UNHCR 2020). About 35,000 refugee families that are most in need were also to be provided with cash interventions from UNHCR and the Society for Human Rights and Prisoners Aid (Javed 2020).

Health and WASH

Research indicates that refugees and migrants are more likely to get infected by endemics in the country they are traveling to than the indigenous population. They may have comorbidities that put them at a greater risk. In Pakistan, maternal, prenatal conditions, and infectious diseases are reasons for 39 percent of deaths in women. Amongst the refugee population, women are more prone to diseases than men (Malik et al. 2019).

The COVID-19 vaccination campaign began with frontline workers and the elderly population getting their doses on a priority basis considering that they were most susceptible to the virus. Gradually, the pool began to expand to other age groups as well. The procedure involved registering through the CNIC so that the record was noted by NADRA as well.

Vaccination drives for COVID-19 began in early 2021, but it was not until May 2021 that the National Command and Operation Centre put a policy in place to administer vaccines to the registered refugee population in the country (*The Express Tribune* 2019). This meant that only half of the refugee population who are POR cardholders had access to vaccines. The other half, approximately 1.5 million people, were left unattended.

The DRIVE initiative is a mass verification campaign conducted in this capacity after a gap of one decade (*The Express Tribune* 2021). Through DRIVE biometric cards are being issued to Afghan refugees, which have all the CNIC's smart features. The primary purpose of these cards is to centralize the database in a more tech-savvy manner and streamline better healthcare and education services to the refugee population.

In this regard, a Technical Working Group under the Ministry of Health, SAFRON, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, and the World Health Organization launched vaccination awareness programs (UNHCR 2021). The UNHCR also set up 28 isolation facilities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. It distributed 4500 kgs and an added 6720 kgs of soap, 7300 meter square of sanitary cloth, and 4320 bottles of disinfectants. Provincial authorities of both provinces also donated 10 ambulances. The UNHCR also set up Basic Health Units across the refugee villages (OCHA Pakistan 2020, 14).

Vaccination is even more critical in the 54 refugee villages. Preventive measures require access to water and sanitation; however, the infrastructure that could facilitate clean water has been inadequate. WASH-related needs of the refugees total \$0.45 million. Additionally, communal toilets and water supplies do not allow social distancing. Women are usually tasked with the responsibility of getting water, where they are often at risk of GBV as they wait in queues (OHCHR 2020).

WASH projects have been initiated by the Government of Pakistan targeting vulnerable populations, including Afghan refugees (OCHA Pakistan 2020, 4). Their goal is to make water, sanitation, and hygiene amenities available to those affected by the pandemic. Similarly, WASH facilities are being strengthened in schools in refugee villages to promote infection prevention and control.

More GBV cases, a greater burden of household responsibilities, and income-related uncertainties have aggravated stress levels and affected women's mental and psychological health. Pakistan stands fifth in the world with the highest female mortality rate (Roser and Ritchie 2013). Refugee women have poor sexual and reproductive health. To address this issue, the UNFPA has been creating awareness of family planning (UNFPA 2021). The International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) has been providing maternal and childcare-related health services to refugees on their doorsteps in 11 refugee villages located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa since the outbreak of the pandemic (ICMC 2020).

The pandemic has also severely impacted the PWSN and others with pre-existing health conditions. Teams from Humanity and Inclusion have been raising awareness in refugee camps (Humanity & Inclusion 2021). They have also been providing disabled refugees or refugees with special needs with hygiene kits, masks, sanitizers, and tele-rehabilitation.

Households in Pakistan facing food insecurity stand at 71 percent, mainly low-income families (OCHA Pakistan 2021). As a result, refugee women who are pregnant or lactating and infants and young children suffer from nutritional deficiencies.

Gendered dynamics are also noticed in the reporting of illnesses. A study (Chakraborty and Bhabha 2021, 241) on South Asian women indicates that 61 percent of them needed the consent of the men in the household before they could report their COVID-19 symptoms to healthcare services.

Education

The pandemic has also disrupted the education of 417,000 refugee children in Pakistan (OCHA Pakistan, 29). Schools in the refugee camps are perhaps the only stable institution where children get a healthy atmosphere. When schools closed due to the pandemic-induced lockdowns, they deprived these children of the only protective environment that provided

subject-specific knowledge, and understanding of social norms, and social responsibilities. It provides these children with psychosocial support, and most importantly, it reduces the short-term and long-term gendered implications of crisis situation on girls.

The chances of a young refugee girl continuing her education in middle school is less than 50 percent that of a boy (Plan International 2020). As schools closed, the increased burden of household chores and care of COVID-19-positive family members fell on the girls. Learning at home in refugee villages is difficult due to the lack of gadgets and internet access. As a result, most girls dropped out of school. Against the backdrop of a health crisis, this could mean that these girls may be forced into child labor or child marriages.

The UNHCR targets to send 61,500 refugee children in the country to primary schools in refugee villages (UNHCR 2021). The International Rescue Committee is also working towards strengthening Afghan women's education and health among other vulnerable people (IRC 2021). Relief International also supports refugee children's education through their 45 schools.

It is vital that the international community and donors specifically provide aid for the education of refugee children. The Government of Pakistan must also include refugee children in education reforms and planning. Strategies should be crafted in a manner that encourages young girls to come to school. One strategy could be to increase the number of female teachers and training Afghan women to teach. Moreover, flexibility in school hours in times of COVID-19 could assist girls in tending to their household responsibilities. Strengthening home-based learning systems to facilitate students in times of the pandemic could be another measure.

The Afghan Women Post-Taliban Takeover

Afghanistan is in a state of chaos and mayhem as hundreds and thousands of people fled the country following the Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. As of December 2021, 300,000 refugees had crossed the border to enter Pakistan (Norezai 2021). Interviews of these new refugees highlight that none of them intend to return to their country of origin (UNHCR 2021). Their top three concerns are food, health, and livelihood. And at least half of them have no documentation. The Pakistani government projected the arrival of 700,000 more refugees in the weeks ahead, with an estimated expenditure of \$2.2 billion on food and shelter (Rehman 2021).

For Afghan women, the situation has drastically changed overnight. Although the Taliban had pledged to be more gender-inclusive and gender-sensitive in their approach, within weeks of taking control, women were not allowed to leave their houses without a *mahram* (a male family member). Additionally, they have been required to be fully covered in a *burqa*. Most women are also denied access to their workplaces. Girls have been turned away by their educational institutes. Furthermore, leaflets are being distributed to create awareness on the acceptable norms of a society based on *Shariah*. Most women who have fled to Pakistan did so because they feared getting forcefully married to the Taliban (O'Donnel, 2021).

The class divide between women often determines the experience of transition into another country. Since 2001, the upper and middle-class Afghan women had benefitted most in terms of access to rights and freedom of expression and they have been targeted by the Taliban. The Pakistan government granted a team of 32 female footballers with their families and their coaches visa to escape from the country (Dagia 2021).

The UNHCR warned regional countries to expect a mass influx of refugees and had requested Pakistan to accommodate them; however, the Pakistani Foreign Minister categorically stated that Pakistan cannot facilitate more refugees amidst the pandemic (*The Express Tribune* 2021). He said a review meeting of the APAPPS should be held alongside a regional dialogue to discuss the best course of action to prevent a refugee crisis.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has expressed its intention to give the displaced Afghans \$24 million worth of aid and protection in neighboring countries, including Pakistan (ANI 2021). This would address the needs of 160,000 refugees for a year. Health authorities had set up testing stations for those crossing the border (Junaidi 2021). Quarantine arrangements were made for any persons testing positive. A strategy focusing on their confinement near border areas and not within cities was being worked out. The military also hastened the completion of the fencing of the long, porous border between the two countries; however, this is a difficult task given the unique dynamics of the Durand Line; it divides villages, houses, and families on the two sides of the international border.

The biggest challenge for Pakistan remains the documentation of new refugees even as it has failed to register all the refugees living in the country for decades. Secondly, can the current policy framework accommodate new refugees in gender sensitive manner?

In its twenty years of war against terror in Afghanistan, the US spent \$787.4 million on gender equality and women empowerment (Brechenmacher 2021). Although gender-specific goals were most often put on the back burner, there were significant improvements in women's rights and well-being. However, the weeks following the Taliban takeover demonstrated that these efforts were not sufficient. The situation in the past two decades, under the US and presently under the Taliban, demonstrates that women's rights have been weaponized by one party or the other.

It has been close to three decades since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and more than two decades since the UNSCR 1325, and a few years since the United States' Women Peace and Security Act (2017). The pandemic and the Taliban takeover have one thing in common; both have deeply affected the women's agenda on greater equality, women empowerment, and meaningful inclusion of women. The clock has been set back a decade, if not more.

The Way Forward

The variables GBV, employment, health, and education are primarily affected by the structural inequalities or existing power relations established by the patriarchal culture of countries the refugees originate from and equally in the countries they choose to settle in. Change cannot happen overnight, as it needs a transformational mindset that encourages a power balance between men and women. All of this must be grounded in a context sensitive human rights language that is aimed at empowering women and treating them equal to men in all walks of life - social, political, and economic. Gender inequality and its deleterious impact on Afghan women refugees amidst the pandemic were a result of failure to recognize the interconnectedness of social, political, and economic lives of women.

Any gender-inclusive mechanism for Afghan refugees eventually needs to be powered by social protection that gives precedence to women over men to offset the imbalance. A good example is the UNHCR following the practices of the social welfare program of the Government of Pakistan that was broadly conceived to promote gender mainstreaming and empowering women.

It is also essential that with the projected additional influx of refugees, which according to some official estimates is 0.5-0.7 million, Pakistan should not ignore its obligations under international law. The Government of Pakistan should ensure that Afghan women refugees have access to legal aid, and their education rights and access to health services are not curtailed. This legal support structure can create a conducive environment for Afghan women refugees and should be undertaken at the federal level.

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