

THE RESILIENCE OF THE MUTED VOICES OF AFGHAN REFUGEES: CONSENT AND CONSULTATION IN THE REPATRIATION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case study of the life experiences of Afghan refugees currently residing in Sweden, with a particular focus on their participation in the repatriation proceedings in Pakistan. The paper analyses the durable solution approach to their resettlement and the repatriation process. The preceding reintegration programme is beset with complexities; however, the specifics of their involvement in the resettlement process are subjected to rigorous examination. This study employed an ethnographic approach to examine the consultation and consent of Afghan refugees regarding resettlement and repatriation. The research was conducted within the Afghan community located in Stockholm, Sweden. The roles of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Pakistan (GOP) were analysed through a review of academic literature and the conduct of field studies with the Afghan community. It was determined that Afghan refugees are being overlooked with regard to their entitlement to participate in the resettlement process.

Keywords: *Repatriation, Afghan refugees, UNHCR, Pakistan, Resettlement.*

INTRODUCTION

The Afghan refugees, who are predominantly of Pashtun ethnicity, are housed by Pakistan in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, which has the distinction of being home to the largest protracted population of refugees globally. The refugees reside in camps and are primarily dependent on rehabilitation aid, community assistance, and self-employment (Christensen, 1989; Sadat, 2008; Kucher, 2005). This paper aims to discuss the repatriation of Afghan refugees back to their home country, Afghanistan, and to highlight the importance of their consultation and consent in this process. The international community considers voluntary repatriation to be the most viable and long-lasting solution. Consequently, it is acknowledged as a fundamental human right (Stigter, 2006). The UNHCR and the GOP have provided support for this process on multiple occasions. This was also considered to be a significant step towards achieving

a durable solution for the reintegration and rehabilitation of displaced Afghans.

The repatriation of refugees is a strategy designed to ensure their safe return to their country of origin. Nevertheless, the sustainable return of refugees and the implementation of repatriation strategies are more challenging in contexts where ongoing conflict and fragile infrastructure coexist. Agencies tend to devote less attention to the crucial task of analysing the concept of 'home' and the potential permanence or temporary nature of the return (Stigter, 2006). "Return may be understood as an expression of adherence to and reconfirmation of social networks that provide physical, social, and legal protection and give meaning to the individual's life" (ibid). It is also important to note that the consent of the returnees is often unclear or absent throughout the process. The repatriation of large numbers of people requires a certain degree of political and social stability, as well as the capacity to absorb the returnees. This

highlights the importance of consent and consultation in the discourse surrounding refugees, which this paper seeks to examine.

It is crucial that the voices of displaced people are given full voice and expression in order to facilitate returns based on consent and in accordance with their wills and preferences. This is particularly important given the profound impact that their lives have undergone. It is imperative that refugees are included and actively participate in the resolution of their problems in order to ensure the long-term resettlement of refugees (Tete, 2012). The representation of refugees through ownership and consent is a fundamental element in amplifying their voices on multiple forums. However, when refugees represent their community on multiple forums, their movements are often restricted and subject to legal limitations. These restrictions result in the deprivation of their right to travel and organise regional and international events (Salinas, 1989).

This article questions the involvement of refugees in the 'voluntary return' process and how the entire process progressed. This study employed a refugee-centred approach to analyse the experiences of victims and their social interactions with the host society and authorities responsible for resettlement. Additionally, the study explored the concerns associated with camp life. The importance of consent during the return process is a defining factor in determining ownership, rather than the process's impact on resettlement. Afghan social life has embedded the concepts of consent and consultation, and this paper emphasises their contextual significance.

Methodology:

This qualitative study (Turner, 2010; Bryman, 2012; Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Barczak, 2015; Silverman, 2005) employs field observation and open-ended interviews to examine the experiences of individuals residing in a Pakistani refugee camp. The research employs a combination of informal discussions and formal interviews (see Cahill, 1990; Al-Saggaf & Williamson, 2006) to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The study concentrated on the Afghan community in Stockholm, who had experienced life in a camp in Pakistan and the repatriation process. To ensure

representation of their families, only male members were interviewed. The snowball sampling method was employed to select the actual victims of camp life. The sample consisted of eighteen individuals, including a high-ranking official from Pakistan's embassy in Stockholm. The age range of participants was between 25 and 60 years. I participated in a range of formal and informal events whilst frequenting public areas where community members gather, such as enrolling in Quran and Hadith classes, establishing connections at the mosque, and travelling to different cities in Sweden to follow the local cricket team.

This research is based on an ethnographic investigation conducted in Stockholm, Sweden, between 2021 and 2022, with the Afghan community. To ensure confidentiality, the participants have been anonymised. In order to safeguard the anonymity of the participants and to prevent any potential risks to them, fictitious names have been employed. The study employs a qualitative methodology, utilising semi-structured open-ended interviews to elicit candid response data from the respondents. A convenient and purposive snowball sampling method was employed to recruit informants who had remained in the camp in Pakistan and participated in the repatriation process.

Following a concise presentation of the role of refugees in the repatriation process, the discussion turns to an examination of the experiences, decisions and priorities of the informants within this context. This is followed by an analysis of how this process specifically positions them as individuals. The findings are then concluded with an emphasis on the significance of consultation and consent in the repatriation process.

Traditional Assistance

The consent of refugees regarding their relocation is frequently overlooked, resulting in a reduced likelihood of their engagement with matters pertaining to re-integration and relocation. Nevertheless, commentators on the refugee regime maintain that the absence of a specific regime for refugees makes it more challenging for South Asian states to fulfil all refugee entitlements. However, their performance is not inferior to that of states in the North (Chimni, 2009; 1993). In essence, the

prevailing traditional aid approach exemplifies the local community and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offering assistance to refugees. This method of implementation is not only utilised in South Asian countries but is also embraced by the developed world, with some unique features and nuances. In contemporary times, conventional aid has been broadened to integrate civil society organisations (ibid).

To exemplify, the National Refugee Network (NRN) in New Zealand offers a forum for refugees with a community background to advocate for themselves, thereby empowering them to make informed decisions and choices. Rather than relying solely on welfare and material assistance, refugees are now active agents of their own progress (Elliott, 2015). For example, the National Refugee Network (NRN) in New Zealand provides a platform for refugees with a community background to raise their voices, empowering them to make decisions and choices.

It can be posited that both religious and non-religious institutions and networks may have played a role in the resettlement of refugees. To illustrate, the American Committee for Christians furnished social and material assistance to refugees who had been subjected to persecution at the hands of the Nazis. This institutional assistance provided refugees with representation and social and material support, enabling them to escape detention (Brown and Forrest, 2014).

In addition to government assistance, Somali and Cambodian refugees in the United States of America (USA) received institutional support, as well as implicit support from the government. The resettlement of refugees was facilitated to a considerable extent by the involvement of communities and networks. Moreover, community organisations in Australia facilitated the employment and residency status of Greek and Cypriot immigrants through collaborative efforts. It must be acknowledged that there were certain shortcomings, including inadequate infrastructure and organisational vulnerabilities in the management of the considerable volume and persistence of the Greek migration, which reached epidemic proportions. Notwithstanding these issues, networks, organisations and governmental backing were collectively able to successfully surmount the

challenges posed by the influx and the huge numbers of refugees (Tamis, 2013).

The refugee regime in Pakistan has remained largely unchanged and continues to demonstrate a number of shortcomings. Notwithstanding the aforementioned shortcomings, Afghan refugees continue to receive traditional assistance from both the host community and humanitarian organisations. In the aftermath of natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes, charitable networks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) provide substantial assistance to those affected. Furthermore, the local Pashtun community provides shelter and assistance in accordance with their customs. (Ghufran, 2011). Nevertheless, relying exclusively on humanitarian assistance is an inadequate long-term solution for the protracted refugee crisis. It may therefore be necessary for international donors and policymakers to consider alternative approaches (Tyler, 2014). It is noteworthy that the regional Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) in Pakistan acknowledged the compartmentalisation of humanitarian issues. With regard to this, the durable solution framework – comprising repatriation, resettlement and local integration – has been shown to present a significant challenge. Nevertheless, it remains the sole sustainable solution (ibid). In order to achieve this durability, the following strategy was implemented.

Voluntary Repatriation Forms (VRF)

The Voluntary Repatriation Forms (VRF) issued by the UNHCR indicate the willingness of Afghan refugees to return to their country of origin. Consequently, an agreement was signed in Brussels on 17 March 2003 by three stakeholders, namely the GOP, the Afghan Government, and UNHCR. This agreement affirms the voluntary nature of repatriation and the 'freely expressed wish' of Afghan refugees who sought refuge in Pakistan (Lumpp et al., 2004). The agreement encompasses principles and commitments designed to guarantee the safe return of individuals to their country of origin. The agreement guarantees the freedom of choice of destination within the country in question. Furthermore, the agreement establishes a consultation process between the host country and the country of origin for the return of individuals deemed not to require international protection. However, concerns over land confiscation, unlawful

occupation, land disputes, forced recruitment, illicit taxation, extortion, and coerced labour were not duly considered. Nevertheless, occurrences such as persecution of ethnic minorities, sexual violence, gender discrimination and inadequate access to justice contributed to the Afghan refugee repatriation initiative (ibid).

One might posit that following a single return to one's country of origin, there is a necessity to prioritize repatriation as a transition between one cycle and the advent of a new one (Stigter, 2006). Moreover, for a considerable number of individuals, readjustment upon return is more challenging than the initial adjustment in the host country (Andreason & Kinneer, 2005). In such circumstances, it is conceivable that both 'choice and compulsion' may be present. Accordingly, a distinction between forced and voluntary migration can be made (Scalettaris, 2007). The concept of voluntariness is effectively nullified when malpractices such as the disconnection of basic services occur during the repatriation of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan. The denial of fundamental necessities such as water and electricity poses a significant threat and ultimately results in forced displacement rather than voluntary repatriation. Consequently, the concept of free will is rendered irrelevant throughout the repatriation process (Gerver, 2015). As Chimni (2009) suggests, the concept of voluntary repatriation was primarily imposed for political expediency rather than to address the valid concerns of victims of persecution or generalized violence.

The concept of voluntariness necessitates the absence of any form of coercion, whether psychological, physical, or mental. Consequently, voluntary repatriation cannot merely exclude coercion; it must also encompass consent or other genuine alternatives (Long, 2013). The effective resettlement and repatriation of refugees requires a focus on the voices and representation of those involved. Malkki (1996) posits that refugees are often regarded as unreliable and dishonest informants, given their tendency to exaggerate the difficulties they face. This stereotype results in the labelling of refugees as liars, hysterical, and storytellers without any basis. In order to gain insight into the experiences of Afghan refugees involved in the repatriation process, the subsequent section presents the life journeys of individuals who have

been directly affected by this process. For example, Agha, a 45-year-old male informant, revealed:

No one was consulted before; even my elders have been there for a long time, but no one informed them regarding any consultation. Some people were [forced] to return in one way or another but they came back. The registration cards (valid identification) for refugees have already expired. This is an intentional act and a prelude to ousting the refugees. The next legal repatriation program is impossible without registration cards. [T]he first thing is the renewal of registration cards, based on these cards Govt of Pakistan and UNHCR can go further.

Agha Stockholm, 2021

Failure to renew the registration card with the relevant authority deliberately renders refugees unlawful. It is of the utmost importance to highlight that this unlawful status hinders their freedom of movement, thereby preventing them from travelling to other regions within the country. This can be achieved by subjecting them to accusations of being in an illegal state. It is of paramount importance to emphasise that this unlawful status impedes their freedom of movement, thereby preventing them from travelling to other regions within the country. Limited movements have a multitude of adverse effects, such as enabling the host country's authorities to easily intimidate them during the return process.

The inability to access services and work-related matters can result in significant hardship for individuals. Such circumstances may result in individuals being compelled to participate in repatriation operations. It is crucial to acknowledge that, irrespective of legal or illegal status, forced repatriation without consent represents a tangible reality shaped by the negligence of the relevant authorities involved in the process. In light of the precarious nature of Afghanistan's social and political structure, it is probable that Afghan refugees will encounter displacement upon their return. The inadequately guarded and porous border serves to exacerbate the problem by enabling the displaced Afghans' movement, thus rendering the return process impractical. It is possible that the

Government of Pakistan's efforts may prove fruitless due to the refugees' uncertainty, which often leads to back-and-forth migration.

The exclusion of refugees from the consultation process is analogous to the concept of 'otherness'. Their social status exerts an influence on their interactions with Pakistani society. This connection is tenuous, resulting in refugees being perceived as inconsequential and untrustworthy, despite their shared experience of all aspects of life with the local community. Despite sharing similar cultural, traditional, and religious ties, Afghan refugees are differentiated by the attribute of "otherness." It is not clear whether refugees can be included in the repatriation procedure. Furthermore, contemporary humanitarianism confines refugees to solely receive aid, categorising them as the 'tragic mass' of humanity who require only material assistance (Malkki, 1996). In this case, a respondent, Daulat, a 48-year-old male, described his circumstances while residing in the camp.

Nasirbagh (KachaGarai) was a significant refugee camp that was dismantled by the Pakistani government. Our stay there was prolonged. However, when we sought housing in nearby towns and cities, we faced difficulties finding suitable lodgings. Despite the poverty of the refugees in the camp, they were of high moral character and closely tied to their community. As long as we remained together, local individuals refrained from leering at our women. Some individuals were able to afford their rent, however, a large portion of the populace could not. As a result, they have decided to return to their home country. Returning would be a better option than facing daily humiliations. The question then arises, how to survive when the home country has been destroyed?

The refugees residing in the camp opted to maintain a communal lifestyle, relying on collective assistance to address the majority of their daily challenges. The shared difficulties encountered within the camp foster a collective identity. The uniformity of their social status serves to reinforce the bonds of solidarity between them, enabling a unified response to misfortune. As long as they reside together, the

same community with the same social status is perceived to embody moral integrity. The removal of access to essential resources and the destruction of refugee camps give rise to a new set of ethical concerns. The situation is further exacerbated when the moral integrity of an individual is at risk. The morale of Afghan refugees is frequently perceived as intricate and challenging, giving rise to significant ramifications for the maintenance of law and order. A significant number of refugees have been subjected to accusations, arrests and harassment as a result of the unstable legal and security environment in the country of migration. Moreover, refugees residing in developing countries are frequently marginalised, lacking access to social justice and the court system. Daulat chose community life in the camp to prevent any potential conflicts with authorities or locals.

It is regrettable that the authorities were unable to achieve the desired outcome of the return process, resulting in the prolongation of the challenges faced by refugees. As a result, the influx of refugees was mishandled. The unsatisfactory strategy of the resettlement process caused problems for all stakeholders involved. The weakened absorption capacity of Afghanistan became apparent at an early stage. For example, the financial resources assigned by donor agencies and organisations were allocated towards humanitarian relief while the wider reconstruction efforts were largely neglected. Furthermore, the agricultural sector, which has a significant impact on the subsistence of the Afghan population, was not appropriately addressed. Similarly, the progress made in the healthcare industry was inadequate, although some positive measures were implemented to address the population's needs, such as the provision of primary education and water supply. Nevertheless, the level of demand exceeded the basic assistance capacity on numerous occasions. It proved difficult for UNHCR and the GOP to locate the refugees. In an interview, Agha (2016) elucidated that registration cards are indispensable legal instruments for the identification of refugees. The aforementioned cards confer upon the bearers the right to receive basic assistance, including food rations and other essential supplies. Furthermore, registration cards serve as legal identification, enabling refugees to move freely and access hospitals and other services. The failure to

consider these factors results in the refugees being rendered anonymous, with many expressing a desire to remain invisible (to be discussed further in the next section). Sangar, a 38-year-old male residing in Stockholm, stated:

A homeless person can sail in every situation as we have taken any risk for the survival of our families. But we do not have any potential voice or someone to speak actively for us... We have been displaced many times. UNHCR did nothing for us and we cannot decide by ourselves. UNHCR is no longer neutral, it is more political than a humanitarian organization. Refugees are weak entities therefore no one consulted us before, and it will not happen in the future as well.

The tenets of participation, equity, empowerment and consultation may facilitate a more straightforward, structured and appealing return process. It is regrettable that these principles are not currently integrated into the repatriation process. The discourse surrounding refugees places significant emphasis on the premise that a displaced person, like any other social actor, is a capable agent who is able to assess their circumstances. When refugees are provided with a sense of ownership over the process, the programme implemented on their behalf is more likely to be effective and sustainable. The mass treatment of refugees as sub-citizens has resulted in their dehumanisation. Consequently, the portrayal of their suffering and needs in images may be perceived as a means of portraying them as weak and unable to communicate their requirements (Khan, 2016). Furthermore, the primary motivation for returning home is the desire for a familiar environment. The desire to return to one's country of origin is driven by a complex array of factors, including prolonged suffering, degradation, and a disrupted way of life. Haji, a 55-year-old male who resided in a refugee camp for an extended period, articulated his reservations.

This is quite impossible that refugees will take on board for consultation. Additionally, consultation is possible if there is a strong will of the three parties, UNHCR, Govt of Pakistan, and Govt of Afghanistan, but the experience shows the opposite. This consultation process is not the game of the weak party and refugees are on the receiving end. Therefore, the consultation process is not so simple; it needs high-profile sincere officials from both countries including UNHCR representatives. I am pretty sure that Afghan refugees will accept this move.

Haji, Stockholm 2022

The preceding criticism by Haji is of considerable historical importance in the context of Afghan social life and the significance of consultation. The Loya Jirga, comprising non-elected elders, has long been regarded as a highly esteemed institution within Afghan society. The Bonn Agreement of 2001, which addressed the social and political landscape of Afghanistan, resulted in the formation of a transitional government. A proposal was put forth for the establishment of a commission with the objective of convening an emergency Loya Jirga, the purpose of which would be to determine the number of individuals who would participate in the electoral process. The allocation of seats for refugees residing in Pakistan and other regions through broad consultation was also discussed. Supposedly, over two million refugees were eligible to participate in the election program. The Bonn Agreement resulted in the establishment of a transitional government aimed at expediting Afghanistan's democratic process. It outlined a framework for impartial elections and a wholly inclusive administration; however, it largely disregarded the participation of refugees. The return of refugees and their challenges were not directly addressed in this agreement (Khan, 2016).

Bradley (2009) asserts that the decision-making process should view refugees as active participants before, during, and after their return. Governments and agencies, such as UNHCR, should involve

refugees in the decision-making process and pay heed to the needs and values of distinct communities. Furthermore, Bradley highlights that the United Nations and other organizations tend to treat refugees as recipients of humanitarian and development assistance. The refugee crisis requires global assistance, and it is a challenging task for underdeveloped countries to address without aid from the international community. It is crucial to note that developed nations and international organizations offer limited financial and material support to help alleviate this crisis. However, the provision of relief notwithstanding, the prospect of returning refugees to areas that are ill-prepared and unable to accommodate them is unsustainable and impractical. We assert emphatically that little effort has been made by the international community or the three potential stakeholders to reintegrate and assist returnees. Consequently, the vulnerable inevitably consider alternative options. As such Haji's statement is significant to mention here again.

There is no option to be resettled in any third country – because [India and Iran] will not accept it. Pakistan and India have their problems so why should they be worried about our problems? India will not accept refugees from Pakistan, nor Pakistan would prefer to do so. Every Afghan will prefer to return home including me, and I believe that Afghan refugees will return from Europe as well because some of them are very loyal to their homeland. Additionally, many of them left rich cultivated land in their home country.

Haji, Stockholm 2022

Haji's statement is a multifaceted account as he actively engages with the challenges and complexities that arise from the plight of Afghans. His insights demonstrate his genuine commitment to the issues at hand while maintaining objectivity throughout. He evaluates his circumstances within the context of the social and political landscape of the region with consideration to the ongoing regional conflicts - an important factor that must be taken into account when exploring the third resettlement option. As Haji stated, Pakistan is unlikely to send Afghan refugees to India due to tensions between the two countries. Moreover, third-world countries are

unable to provide substantial assistance to the refugees. Additionally, Afghans are hesitant to relocate to third-world countries as they have had negative experiences seeking refuge there over the past few decades. As a result, refugees desire a safe and dignified return to their homes to reclaim their land and belongings and reintegrate into their community. Moreover, they expressed discontent due to the persistent failure of agreements and commitments with them. Following the downfall of the Taliban regime, an exceptional number of Pashtun ethnic Afghans were repatriated to Afghanistan. This repatriation was assisted and spontaneous with the assistance of UNHCR.

The return program began in Iran in the same year. However, Afghanistan was facing a complex and prolonged recovery from the repercussions of war, and additional hardship due to severe drought. As compared to other countries, the number of Afghan returnees benefiting from UNHCR assistance has almost doubled. The abandoning of the Taliban regime was the primary reason commonly stated for Afghan refugees to decide to return, according to UNHCR (Khan 2016). One could argue that Haji is a knowledgeable individual and therefore his experiences are reflective of these developments, and he forms his judgments accordingly. It is worth noting that Afghans place significant value on their cultivated lands and personal belongings. Following the fall of the Taliban regime, there was a large influx of returnees to the country. Nevertheless, the return process was not adequately managed or supported. To some, the experience of returning to their homeland has proven to be intricate and challenging. Shah, a 45-year-old elucidated:

No one will move to Afghanistan until and unless there is peace. The preferred option is Europe rather than any third-world country like India and Iran. Our land and other property are taken away, we are left with nothing. Iran repatriates Afghans and Pakistan will not send them to India and any other third-world country cannot help refugees. Pakistan is a good option for the time being as refugees have no problem with the common people, but it is difficult for refugees to go to Islamabad (.) and other big cities (...) The only problem is Daulat

(GOP). Homeland is like a paradise for everyone, and every Afghan must go back to participate in the nation-building process but there is a life risk in the current situation. After all, 80% of people are willing to return to Afghanistan.

The concept of return is not an entirely independent event; rather it encompasses specific constituents that can aid in rebuilding one's life. Even though Afghans, predominantly the Pashtun, accord immense value to their property and territory, peace and security hold utmost significance concerning resettlement. Therefore, refugees are willing to come back to Afghanistan from Pakistan, but their return is contingent upon several factors. Shah and other returnees are cognizant of the illegal occupation and confiscation of land by local warlords and commanders, land disputes, illegal power wielded by authorities, persecution of ethnic communities, sexual violence, and gender-based bias. The fragile state capacity and economy of Afghanistan cannot adequately meet the fundamental requirements of the returnees. Afghanistan lacked the rule of law, had weak traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and limited control from government authorities.

However, certain steps are taken to address these challenges, for instance, the Afghan Ministry of Repatriation and Refugees (MORR) discusses the principles and operational modalities to accelerate a new voluntary repatriation framework. In this regard, a draft was submitted to both the governments of Iran and Pakistan. The first agreement was signed between Iran, Afghanistan, and UNHCR in 2002. The programs entail the principles of voluntary repatriation; these principles were the voluntary nature of the return, access to information, assurance of safety, and reintegration in Afghanistan. Under these agreed principles many refugees returned from Iran (Lumpp et al., 2004). Whilst, implementing the same principles upon the refugees housed in Pakistan remained challenging and almost difficult. I argue here that the lack of systematic procedures for the registration of Afghan refugees and the changing policies and strict rules of the GOP regarding new refugees could not pave the way for implementing the above-mentioned principles. Further, the tripartite agreement signed by non-neighbouring countries followed the same principles. For instance,

freedom of access to information, choice of destination, in Afghanistan, juridical status, equivalency, and family reunification are the agreed principles.

Shah and other victims were apprehended based on prior experiences and consequently established priorities. One of these is avoiding resettlement in any disadvantaged country to avoid repeating past traumatic experiences. A lack of issues with the local community indicates a lower priority and a preference to live in Pakistan, despite the dominance of fear. Shah has reservations regarding the authorities' potential ill-treatment, checkpoints, and stringent security measures. Additionally, restrictions on refugee movement are a concern. Shah specifically complains that refugees cannot freely travel to other parts of Pakistan, such as Islamabad, the country's capital. Refugees frequently relocate from their place of resettlement, particularly those who lack cohorts and do not reside in culturally comfortable areas or near others from their community. This type of movement encompasses various factors such as job availability, cultural community, family migration chains, and public support. Faced with such situations, refugees tend to prefer remaining inconspicuous, which will be explored in the subsequent section.

Invisibility, The Alternative Strategy

Deny taking refugees on board by not consulting them further complicates their peaceful return. Hosting a large population of refugees is challenging for a developing country like Pakistan. Refugees may prefer to be invisible in traditional society, especially in a country where they share common values, beliefs, and traditions. The informal economy in this sense is best suited for them to be invisible. To comprehend the concept of invisibility among refugees and their displacement, it must be noted that invisibility serves as a weapon for marginalised groups, therefore, the vulnerable choose to remain unseen to evade subjugation. Subsequently, vulnerable individuals conceal their identities and activities. To comprehend the concept of invisibility among refugees and their displacement, it is imperative to note that invisibility serves as a weapon for the marginalized and less empowered. Hence, Afghan refugees utilise invisibility as a strategy for survival and a path towards finding a better

alternative. The authorities provide a platform for refugees without undertaking any process of consent or consultation in relation to the return process. Nevertheless, regardless of the developing countries like Pakistan, failed asylum seekers in Europe also seek survival by obscuring their identities and effectively becoming invisible entities (Polzar & Hammond, 2008). It has been observed that refugees often opt to remain unnoticed in countries where entry is relatively straightforward but potentially dangerous and where a significant proportion of the workforce is employed in the informal economy. In such circumstances, refugees rely on charitable networks as local practices exert greater influence than official policies (Khan, 2016).

In a landlocked country such as Afghanistan, limited options exist for reaching developed countries through informal and unlawful means. As a result, these individuals opt for sea routes as well as other possibilities to access Western countries like Europe. They may view it as a one-time risk compared to the daily harassment and humiliation they may face otherwise. The aspect of invisibility in question pertains primarily to the self-help mechanisms established within a given community. This support system is informal and reliant on the assistance of relatives, friends, and other members of the community. Different cultures demonstrate different responses to similar situations. In Italy, for example, as opposed to other northern countries, individuals can maintain a state of invisibility due to the inclusive nature of the private sphere encompassing traditional assistance like charity organizations and local community support (ibid). The lack of community links for refugees results in highly precarious situations, characterised by a hand-to-mouth existence devoid of access to both community links and refugee camps. The situation of Burmese refugees residing in remote regions of Thailand since 1990 serves to exemplify this phenomenon. Due to the paucity of viable alternatives within the confines of the camps, refugees effectively become invisible while searching for more promising avenues to gain access to the labour market. However, life outside of refugee camps can be arduous and uncertain in certain instances (Joliffe, 2015).

Afghan refugees are dispersed throughout localities, mainly in KP and Baluchistan province. Having lived in both urban and rural surroundings for an extended

duration, Afghan refugees are well-acquainted with the intricacies of survival. Nevertheless, their well-being is jeopardised when they opt to pursue informal avenues through human traffickers. While some may emerge triumphant, others may meet an untimely demise. It is important to note that the majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan rely on informal businesses for their survival, which makes the registration process even more difficult due to factors such as invisibility. Consequently, refugees are driven to avoid being identified as such, thereby reducing their vulnerability to displacement. Moreover, both Pakistani and Afghan government officials persistently deny the existence of push and pull factors. In November 2001, Human Rights Watch published a report which highlighted deficiencies in the adherence of both UNHCR and the GOP to standards of voluntariness. These included the provision of impartial information and the avoidance of 'push factors' (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Conclusion

The issues encountered by Afghan refugees have been compounded by the lack of consent and consultation. These refugees have been displaced on numerous occasions and are left with a limited range of options, often resorting to illicit means to reach Western nations such as Europe. It is a tragic fact that many have lost their lives in the attempt to reach safety. Furthermore, they have been deprived of the properties they left behind in Afghanistan, with their lands being seized by warlords. The refugees have been separated from their families and left behind due to the lack of inclusion in the repatriation process. Their strong familial bonds necessitate reconnection to their stay-behinds, a view supported by the study conducted by Muller (2008). The preceding repatriation programme was unsuccessful due to the failure to consult with the refugees and incorporate their consent into the implementation process. The refugees who returned to Afghanistan during the initial phase were unable to maintain their livelihoods, which suggests that the programme was not implemented effectively. The refugees who were stranded have been repatriated without receiving any form of compensation or assurance of safety. Given their multiple displacements, these refugees are reluctant to return to their homeland without

substantial assistance and guarantees of security. Their dire circumstances serve as a poignant reminder that no government in Pakistan or Afghanistan has taken resolute action to address this urgent humanitarian issue.

The findings further suggest that refugees want a dignified return to their homeland, but international and national support has been dwindling. It is evident that refugees desire to return to the land and property they had to leave behind. However, consultation and information-sharing have been unsatisfactory. In addition, refugees have expressed deep worry about their cultural ties to their homeland. The study and findings indicate a lack of political will from both governments in terms of providing a stable foundation for successful and voluntary repatriation. Future research is required to determine the mechanisms that can be used to ensure consent and consultation during the return process.

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