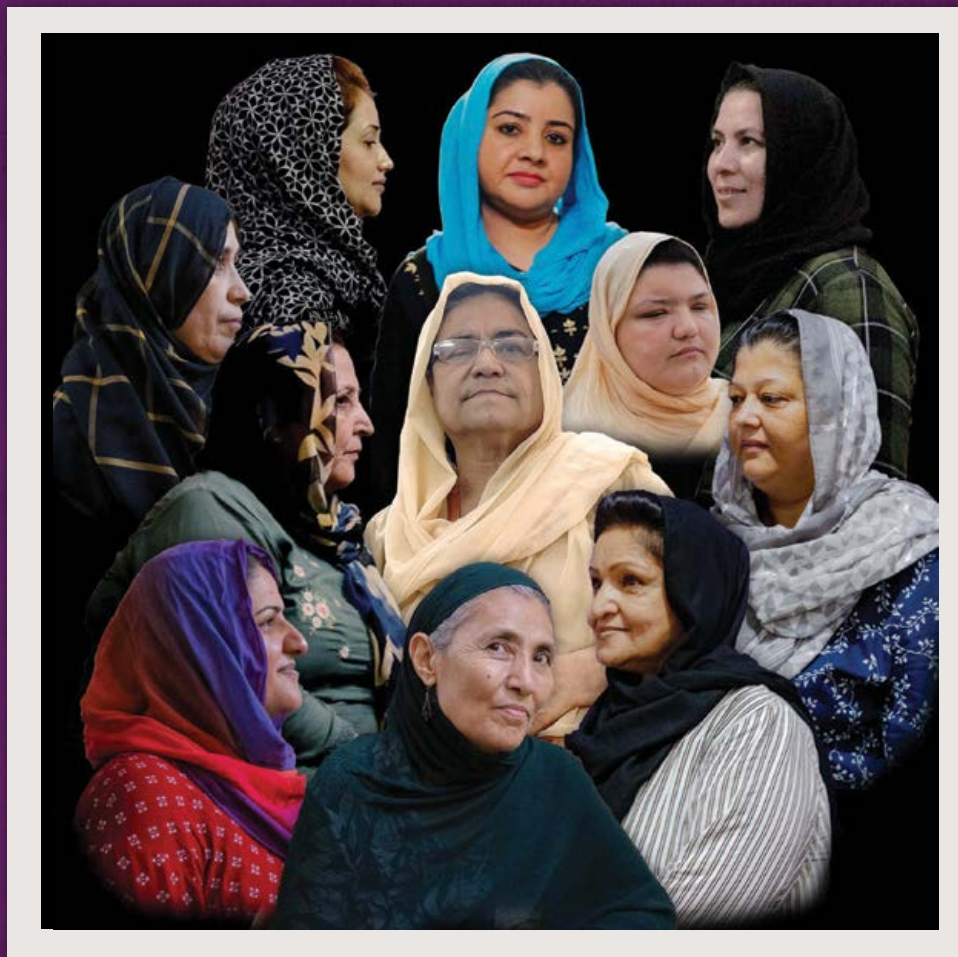


# WOMEN SEEKING SECURITY, ASSERTING AGENCY



## INDIA AFGHAN REFUGEE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

RITA MANCHANDA and ANANYA KUNDU  
Edited by Bhavini Pant



WOMEN'S REGIONAL NETWORK  
AFGHANISTAN • PAKISTAN • INDIA

## **Women's Regional Network's Community Conversations**

focus on amplifying the voices of conflict-affected women to address interlinked issues of peace and justice, governance and security within the context of growing securitisation in South Asia. Women's Regional Network values women as knowledge creators and agents.

## **About the Authors**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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### “Your Stories Matter! You Matter!”

It was the willingness of so many Afghan women and girls in Delhi to trust us and share their personal stories that made the writing of the *India Afghan Community Conversations* report possible. Our sincere thanks and appreciation of their warmth (and on occasion, even their hospitality) and their openness in sharing their laughter and sorrows with us.

A special mention of the support extended by the Afghan Refugee Community Coordinator in Delhi, Ahmad Zia Ghani, whose influence opened many doors for us. Also overwhelming was the generosity and encouragement of the managers of multipurpose media coaching centres, who provided the space for our conversations. In particular, we'd like to thank the Joyinda Centre and Centre for Association of Afghan Women in Delhi, Jesuit Refugee Service in Bhogal, and the New Vision Centre in Tilak Nagar. Zainularab, Siddiqa, Zakia and Khatera opened their homes to us for group conversations.

In our effort to reach out to Afghan religious minorities—Hindus, Sikhs and Christians—of note was a memorable Sunday morning prayer session at the Kabuli Gurdwara and an equally memorable evening service at the Afghan Church. A special word of thanks for the cooperation extended by the Guru Arjun Dev Ji Gurdwara (also known as Kabuli Gurdwara) elder, Pratap Singh, and the young Pastor Sikander Alex.

Invaluable was the effort and enthusiasm of our survey enumerators, facilitators and interpreters. Unforgettable were the multi-talented Mursal M—photographer, interpreter and facilitator all rolled into one, the gentle Zohra Y, the feisty Shazia Kohistani, the tenacious Marzia Y, the energetic Mastoora Y, the consistent Sadaf and the determined Woman Human Rights Defender, Tamana. Detailed and structured interviews with our

Key Informants (KIs)—especially legal researcher Hamsa Vijayraghavan, academics Bilquees Daud and Raghav Sharma, Afghan activists Shir Shah and Kubra T and UNHCR representatives Tomoko Fukumoro and Ragini Zutshi—contributed to a robust and better-informed analysis. Our reviewers Hamsa Vijayraghavan, Bilquees Daud, Jane Barry, Vahida Nainar, Huma Safi and Syeda Hameed provided important insights, necessary corrections, an objective perspective and quality control, making *India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* a persuasive report.

But it is the stories of Afghan girls and women which make this report important. Credits to our editor, Bhavini Pant and designer, Kirsten Ankers for turning *India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* into a striking, elegant and readable report.

Finally, we express a deep appreciation for the commitment, overall direction and editorial support of the Women's Regional Network (WRN), especially Senior Advisor Chelsea Soderholm, Communication and System analyst, Manoj Mathew and his GREG MATTERS team. Of course, without the financial support provided by WRN Research, the *Community Conversations* series would not have been possible. WRN's commitment to promoting the rights and well-being of Afghan women in Afghanistan and as refugees in neighbouring countries is invaluable.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“You are safe only if you hide!”

“No other option but to leave.”

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* uses a human rights and feminist lens to document evidence of widespread and systematic **gender-based persecution** and the punitive enforcement of the denial of fundamental freedoms of Afghan women and girls which drove them to seek haven in India. *India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* draws upon the experiences of Afghan women and girls who arrived in Delhi over the last decade, as conflict destabilised Afghanistan’s Republican government and a resurgent Taliban seized greater control of the country. In the two years since the Taliban’s takeover, the significant progress made in the area of women and girls’ rights has been reversed—Afghan women and girls have all but disappeared from public life. The heightened crisis of gender persecution is driving fresh flows of refugee arrivals to neighbouring countries. For Afghan women and girl asylum seekers who fled Afghanistan or were outside the country before 15 August 2021, the need for international protection has redoubled because of the increased risks they now face.

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* is part of the global campaign to establish that the Taliban’s discriminatory and misogynist policies and harsh enforcement practices constitute an institutionalised framework of **gender apartheid**. Gender subjugation is ideologically integral to the maintenance of the Taliban’s regime. *India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* provides evidence for the development of normative standards for international legitimation and action with regard to gender apartheid and its recognition as a crime against humanity. On 1 February, 2023, the UNHCR updated

its *Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan* to specify that “UNHCR considers Afghan women and girls are likely to be in need of international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention.” Recognising that 50% of Refugee Status Determination rejections revolved around cases of gender-related persecution—and taking cognisance of UNHCR’s updated *Guidance Note—India Afghan Refugee*

**The India Afghan refugee profiles are evidence of the continuum of gender-based discrimination and persecution.**

*Community Conversations* focuses on getting India and other states to consider all Afghan women and girls fleeing Afghanistan as *prima facie* refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century Afghanistan, socio-political contentions around women’s rights have been instrumentalised to destabilise and prop up regimes (Daud 2022; *EPRS Briefing* 2023). The Taliban leadership has politically mobilised a discourse based on centre–periphery, urban–rural, tradition–modernity and elite–non-elite fault lines to undermine the Karzai-Ghani

1 UNHCR, *Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan – Update I, February 2023*, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/63e0cb714.pdf>

governments and shore up the legitimacy of its own regime. However, as the India Afghan refugee profile foregrounds, more than a quarter of Afghan nationals seeking refuge in India are young, single women. They are first-generation literates from modest, middle-class families in provinces and rural settlements of Kabul who have struggled to gain diplomas and university degrees. Multiple women shared that despite being married off at a young age, saddled with domestic responsibilities and in-laws who disapproved, they secretly went back to school. One woman was eight months pregnant when she passed Grade 12, and became a university graduate on scholarship. She went on to become a women's rights professional with prestigious INGOs.

The ability of non-elite, middle-class, semi-urban Afghan women to leave—independent of male family relatives—is reflective of major social changes which have occurred across Afghanistan over the last two decades, since the US-led military intervention of 2001. According to WRN's random sample surveys of Afghan refugees, more than 28% of respondents were between 25 to 34 years old, including several 17 to 18-year-old girls. Practically a quarter of them had technical or university degrees. Brief exposure to the possibility of a world where girls could study, work, have agency and not have to "hide to stay safe" made the harm of deprivation more violent. There was "no other option but to leave."

The India Afghan refugee profiles are evidence of the continuum of gender-based discrimination and persecution. An overwhelming majority of cases involved "gender-related motivation"<sup>2</sup>—euphemistically expressed as "personal reasons"—as the driving factor for flight. Gender persecution manifests in the commonplace denial of the freedom to study, work or even

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2 'Gender Related Motivation as explained in the UN Special Rapporteur's report, *A-HRC 2023*, paragraph 78 refers to the "prevalence of an environment of "gender-related motivation" as reflected in the Taliban's edicts, recommendations and practices, which underlies the statistical definition of femicide adopted by the United Nations, which refers not to the subjective motive of an individual perpetrator of femicide but to the normative and societal prevalence of "root causes", such as stereotyped gender roles, discrimination against women and girls, and inequality and unequal power relations between women and men in society that characterize the specific context and serve as the triggers for such killings."

go out unaccompanied, as well as impunity in relation to stalking, brutal domestic violence, kidnappings and assault. Commonplace were forced and early marriages decreed by a powerful local Khan or mujahideen commandants, or as a transactional contract to settle debts and feuds. Divorce meant denial of the custody of children, dispossession and abandonment. As one of our respondents, a Woman Human Rights Defender said, escapees were targeted as rights activists, "bad women" or simply those "who dared to come out" in the public sphere. Punitive action was socially sanctioned as the victim was seen as transgressor.

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* reveal differences in Afghan women's perceptions of gender persecution before and after the Taliban II regime. Shabnam, a Woman Human Rights Defender observed, "oppression of women and violence used to happen earlier too. But now it is everywhere. Before, if you tried to get justice,

**Brief exposure to the possibility of a world where girls could study, work, have agency and not have to "hide to stay safe" made the harm of deprivation more violent. There was "no other option but to leave."**

you could face more violence. But now the injustice is more open. And there is no way of accessing justice. Some women, my former colleagues, are coming out on the streets speaking out... The Taliban can do anything to them. There is no media, no organisation to stand with them. Before, there were so many organisations to hear the voices of women... Now all that is finished."

Afghanistan's diverse ethnicities and religions are reflected in its urban refugee population in India. Of note are Afghan refugees fleeing intersectional vulnerabilities of discrimination and persecution on the basis of gender and other identities such as ethnicity, religion, disability and sexuality. These include non-Muslim minorities such as Afghan Hindus, Sikhs and some Christians, and Muslim minorities such as Hazaras. Afghan refugee coordinators claim that ethnic tensions prevalent in Afghanistan have not carried over to India. Here, their common identity as refugees is predominant.



Community Conversations in Tilak Nagar.

Until recurring conflicts, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus were considered to be socially and culturally integrated into Afghan society. Now, they have chosen to segregate themselves. Afghan Hindus and Sikhs account for 65% of Afghans-of-concern to UNHCR. Additional groups facing intersectional vulnerabilities include single and women-headed households, Women Human Rights Defenders and NGO workers, and those at risk of reprisals for collaborating with foreigners or the former Afghan government.

In India's hybrid refugee protection arrangement, Afghan asylum seekers or refugees come under the circumscribed mandate of UNHCR. India is not a signatory to the Status of Refugee Convention (1951) and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (1967). UNHCR's relations with successive governments has been fraught with tension over non-refoulement and refugee status determination. Additionally, India has no national law for refugee protection and care. The absence of a separate category for those in need of international protection means that all foreign nationals get clubbed under the draconian Foreigners Act (1948). India's refugee policy and practices are subject to the pulls and pressures of the country's shifting domestic and foreign policy and security considerations (Manchanda 2022). To be an Afghan asylum seeker or refugee in India is to lead a life

of economic uncertainty, deprivation and depressing prospects for one's children's futures. No surprise then that Afghans have been drawn by the country's earlier *gratis* visa regime to India, but essentially as a transit country.

As UNHCR acknowledges, Afghans in India are a favoured refugee community, more protected and less vulnerable to detention and deportation than other asylum seekers. Afghan refugees are the only ones getting long-stay visas, although such visas are now earmarked for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs in line with the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019).

In 2021, apprehension of a mass influx of refugees and security considerations saw an abrupt revocation of the visa regime, and introduction of a restricted emergency e-visa. However, India also intimated an advisory of 'No Return' for Afghan asylum seekers, streamlined Afghan refugees getting an exit permit and reduced overstay penalties required for third-country settlement.

Afghan refugees have been particularly impatient with UNHCR's presumption of integration as the preferred option and the diminishing possibilities of third-country settlement. However, with the recent option of a complementary bilateral pathway for third-country settlement, there has been a surge in third-country settlement offtakes by Canada and Australia. Also, UNHCR's 2023 *Guidance Note* update not only iterated a 'No-return' advisory, but also urged the reopening of appeals for certain rejected cases. Importantly, UNHCR recognised the presumptive need for the protection of Afghan women and girls. Indeed, the ambiguity surrounding recognition of 'gender-related motivation' as persecution—and thereby the grounds for refugee status determination—has contributed to UNHCR's rejection rate of 50% for Afghan asylum seekers. Recently, there has been action on a clutch of refugee status determination cases in contrast with UNHCR's normal dilatory processes, which produce extreme distress.



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS TO MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS

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## GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

1. Become a signatory to the Status of Refugee Convention (1951), adopt a corresponding national asylum and pass a National Refugee Law. This law should provide a predictable framework to register, host and integrate or resettle refugees. In the interim, recognise the legal category of ‘asylum seeker/refugee’.
2. Institute a visa regime for people-at-risk, and review the revocation of valid visas of thousands of refugees. Issue visas to Afghan students registered in higher education institutions and balance security considerations with humanitarian ones.
3. Extend equitable humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan, especially vulnerable groups.
4. Leverage geopolitical and economic power to pressure the Taliban to roll back gender apartheid. In the interim, hold back on recognition and normalisation of relations.
5. Keep the Afghanistan crisis on the agenda in multilateral forums. Iterate the international community’s concern on human rights—including those of women, children and minorities.

## UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

1. Promptly communicate the updated Guidance Note to the refugee community since it affects the status of Afghan asylum seekers. They have a right to know and not be disempowered.
2. Investigate delays in refugee status determination process and recognise gender-based persecution as grounds for status determination of refugees.
3. Mobilise more funds and address care needs of children to alleviate distress.

## THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

1. Recognise Gender Persecution and Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan as crimes against humanity.
2. Increase funding to UNHCR for Afghan refugees.
3. Step up third-country settlement options for Afghan refugees.
4. Effect equitable distribution of humanitarian aid, focusing on women in provinces and support for vulnerable minority communities.
5. States with feminist foreign policies should prioritise women’s rights in Afghanistan and offer scholarships and asylum to Afghan women affected by the Taliban’s actions.

## TO CIVIL SOCIETY & MEDIA

1. Publicise relevant and important changes in UNHCR Guidelines and the regulatory framework of GOI.
2. Critically monitor GOI’s shifting diplomatic stance towards the Taliban.
3. Promote adoption of a National Refugee Law or regulatory framework that recognises asylum seekers and refugees as a legal category.

# INTRODUCTION

“Your concern for girls’ education is justified. But if school girls go against the government it could destabilise Afghan society. The conflicts of the last 40 years showed us this (could happen). Now the Taliban leaders are afraid that if we don’t unite the (religious) scholars it could bring down the government. If we don’t agree with the solution the scholars advise for us, and if they think we’re going in the wrong direction, this could cause division.”

—The Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid to Mahboub Seraj, Al Jazeera, 20 August, 2023

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* uses a human rights lens to document evidence of widespread, systematic and institutionalised gender-based discrimination, and demonstrate how the persecution of Afghan women and girls is central to the Taliban ideology and for the maintenance of its rule. The field basis of documentation is sourced in the experiences and perspectives of ‘forcibly displaced’ Afghan women and girls who have fled insecurity and punitive deprivation of their fundamental freedoms. In the backdrop is a resurgent Taliban and affiliated forces taking control of Afghanistan, ousting the foreign-backed Republican regime and re-establishing an Islamic Emirate in 2021.

This report is part of several human rights-based interventions to produce evidence-based research on the specific targeting of Afghan women and girls for gender-based persecution, which—according to more and more authoritative legal and political assessments<sup>3</sup>—amounts to a “crime against humanity” under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 7(1)

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3 Several influential texts refer to gender persecution and gender apartheid in the context of Afghanistan. See *European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing 2023*; *International Commission of Jurists & Amnesty International Report (2023)*, Madre (2023) *Gender persecution in Afghanistan: A Crime Against Humanity*; Madre (2022) *Documenting and Reporting Gender Based Violence in Afghanistan*; A-HRC (2023) *UN Special Rapporteur Report on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan*

(h). A human rights-based approach to documenting gender violence helps empower advocacy efforts to reinforce the international community’s obligations to guarantee rights.

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* seeks to contribute to the global campaign which posits that the Taliban’s discriminatory and misogynistic policies and harsh enforcement methods constitute an institutionalised framework of *gender apartheid* which is integral to the maintenance of its regime. In Afghanistan, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, socio-political contentions around women’s rights have been instrumentalised to destabilise and prop up regimes. Arguably, the ultra-conservative Taliban power elite—in its ideology and politics—has made gender inequality central to the political mobilisation of tensions between centre and periphery, urban and rural, tradition and modernity and local and foreign values, so as to shore up regime legitimacy.

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations’* structured analysis of Afghan women and girls fleeing gender persecution evidences the institutionalised system of their discrimination, segregation, humiliation, exclusion and subjugation. The intention is to provide evidence for the development of normative standards for international recognition and legitimisation of—and action against—gender apartheid. More specifically, for a study focused on Afghan women and girls refugees, the aim

The striking phenomenon of Afghan women, including young single girls—leaving family and country in order to take flight secretly and independent of male relatives of the family—reflects the substantive social churning which has taken place over the last two decades.

is to get States to consider all women and girls fleeing Afghanistan as *prima facie* refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention, due to the persecution they risk because of their sex and gender. The intention is to get Host States under as well as outside the Convention—including those having contractual arrangements with UNHCR (Pakistan and India) for the protection and care of Afghan asylum seekers—to accord Afghan women and girls presumptive refugee status and support. Importantly, *India Afghan Community Conversations* exhorts UNHCR and other refugee and migration

protection agencies to recognise that asylum seekers have the right to know about relevant and updated guidelines.

*India Afghan Community Conversations* is part of a regional overview of Afghan women and girls desperately seeking security of life and fundamental freedoms in Afghanistan, and as asylum seekers crossing international borders into Pakistan, Iran and India. Expectedly, India has been host to cycles of masses in flight as Afghanistan has been engulfed by five decades of violent conflict and socio-political upheavals. Invariably, the violence and extremism in Afghanistan has impacted South West Asian countries, especially Pakistan and India. Also, it is likely that the devastating consequences of decades of extra-regional foreign interventions has inclined Afghans to view the potential role of regional actors with greater attention and acceptability. This reorientation is reinforced by the withdrawal of the international community's involvement and interest in Afghanistan, and difficult entry regimes for Afghan refugees and migrants in the west.

Regional framing resonates with WRN's vision of cross-border interlinkages and interdependencies that shape country-specific as well as common conversations of women across Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. WRN's flagship *Community Conversations* focuses



Community Conversations in Bhogal.

on “amplifying the voices of conflict-affected women in order to address interlinked issues of peace and justice, governance and security within the context of growing militarisation in South Asia. WRN values women as knowledge creators and as agents, and works to enable women to have a voice in the decisions which shape their lives.”

## Afghan Refugees

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* is part of WRN’s ongoing engagement in foregrounding the voices of ‘forcibly displaced’ women, documenting egregious violations of their human rights and advocating for justice. The wider regional framing emphasises the value and significance of a regional perspective and overview, including the need for formulating national and regional refugee policy frameworks. None of the South Asian states (except Afghanistan) are signatories to the international refugee protection regime nor have they adopted a national refugee law. Moreover, the opportunity for comparative analysis provides insights into ethno-religious and gender motives of Afghan refugees—espe-

**Five decades of political turbulence and violent conflict in Afghanistan has seen five streams of refugee flows into India.**

cially educated, young, single Afghan women—to turn to India. As WRN’s random sample data survey indicates, significantly more than a quarter of Afghan nationals seeking refuge in India are single, often young women. According to UNHCR data, women make up 46% and children 36% of the vulnerable Afghan population in India. The striking phenomenon of Afghan women, including young single girls—leaving family and country in order to take flight secretly and independent of male relatives of the family—reflects the substantive social churning which has taken place over the last two decades since the Afghanistan Transition after the removal of the Taliban I regime in 2001 (Daud 2022). Admittedly, mothers, supportive fathers and even sisters play an important

role in facilitating travel documents, but equally crucial is their confidence in girls and women’s potential agency. The choice of India is guided by geographical proximity, familiarity and the perception of a relatively more liberal atmosphere for women and girls rights, as compared to Pakistan and Iran.

## Temporal, Spatial and Demographic Profile

*India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* has specific country particularities, especially in relation to the temporal, spatial and quantitative determinants that bound this research. Against the influx of the Afghan refugees into contiguous Pakistan, India hosts a modest case load of 19,338 Afghan nationals currently under UNHCR protection. These refugees comprise asylum seekers, refugees and include ‘stranded’ tourists, medical cases, students and former Afghan military personnel who were training at India’s defence institutions. Swelling this number is an expansive presence of undocumented Afghan nationals. According to Afghan community estimates, its diaspora is upwards of 21,000. This number is likely to be a gross underestimate as 13,000 Afghan students alone are currently enrolled in Indian universities, and of the estimated 35,000 Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, not all are registered with UNHCR (Sharma 2022). Since 2021, there has been a noticeable increase in the offtake of Afghan refugees in India for third-country resettlement.

Five decades of political turbulence and violent conflict in Afghanistan has seen five streams of refugee flows into India. It began in 1973 with the Saur Revolution, which displaced the monarchy and established Republican rule. It was followed by the communist takeover backed by Soviet intervention, which precipitated a proxy geopolitical war and mobilised the Afghan Mujahideen in the 1980s. The 1990s Civil War paved the way for the emergence of the extremist Taliban I regime and forced masses of Afghans to flee. Logically, the socio-political marker for the latest global surge of Afghan asylum seekers is placed at 2021, when Taliban II seized power. However, the Afghan refugee profile in India is an important reminder that the internationally enforced post-Taliban peace of 2001 was short-lived. From 2005-06, the American-backed Afghan republican democracy was besieged by destabilising violence,

**Gender persecution, as evidenced by our respondents, manifests as severe deprivation of freedom to study, work, escape brutal domestic violence, kidnappings, assault and 'forced marriage'.**

limiting its control to the country's capital, Kabul, and provincial city centres. A resurgent Taliban and affiliated forces clawed back power and control—especially in the south and southeast—giving rise to the popular dictum: the government is present by day, while the Taliban and affiliated forces with guns rule at night.

### Seeking Refuge in India

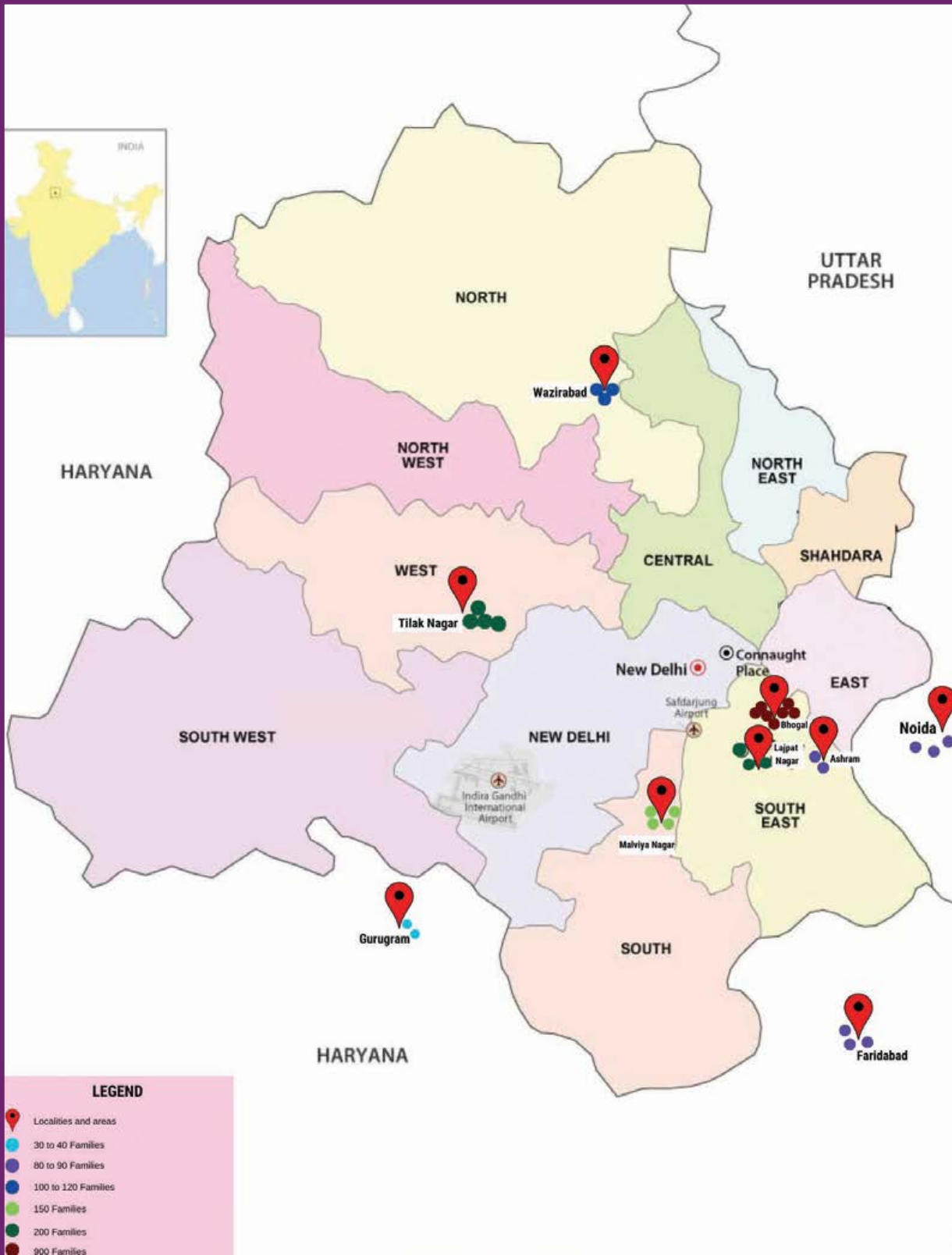
WRN's random sample survey shows that a renewed stream of asylum seekers and migrants from Afghanistan began arriving over the last decade. Asylum seekers and migrants substantially increased from 2014 onwards (when USA first announced it would quit Afghanistan) and peaked between the years 2016-2018. Also, there was a clustering of stranded, circumstantial asylum seekers in 2022-2023. The latest surge of asylum seekers since the establishment of the Islamic Emirate has been quite modest, with UNHCR registering only about 3,000 Afghan cases since August 2021. India's withdrawal of a generous *gratis* visa regime, its pre-emptory revocation of visas issued in 2021 and the introduction of a restrictive emergency exit visa system for Afghan nationals has reduced the expected flood to a trickle. The exception to this reality is emergency evacuation of Hindu and Sikh Afghan nationals. Also, COVID-induced travel restrictions and flight disruptions from Afghanistan made access difficult. Changes in the visa regime made the fate of Afghan arrivals via Iran, Dubai and Tajikistan uncertain, and they were at real risk of deportation. The Indian Ministry of Home Affairs data on arrivals of Afghan nationals shows a jump in 'visitors' from 11,212 (2020) to 36,451 (2021). Noticeably, 105 Afghans were deported in 2021 (MHA 2022).

The circumstantial, temporal reality of Afghan refugee communities in India emphasises decades-long generalised insecurity and impunity enjoyed by

powerful armed forces to persecute civilians, despite the presence of a governance infrastructure. Arguably, as a Woman Human Rights Defender explained, the difference between the rule of Taliban I and II and the rule of Ashraf Ghani was that during the latter, "the threats would come from all sides: it was difficult to identify the enemy. They could have been one's family, security agencies, the Taliban, politicians." In contrast, Shir Shah, founder of an Afghan refugee coaching centre in Bhogal, Delhi explained that today, "the threat comes from a single source, the Taliban government itself." Revisiting case histories of Afghan women and girls asylum seekers, refugees and migrants provides insights into the continuum of gender-based discrimination and persecution. For an overwhelming majority the driving factor for flight was 'gender-related motivation' as explained by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in Afghanistan in analysing the situation of gender discrimination in the country. This is apart from the specific, subjective circumstances which motivated family members to leave for security and safety reasons.

Rooted in local community cultures in Afghanistan are gender stereotypes, with inequality and humiliating domination justified by a peculiar interpretation of Islamic law. Gender persecution, as evidenced by our respondents, manifests as severe deprivation of freedom to study, work, escape brutal domestic violence, kidnappings, assault and 'forced marriage'. As Afghan academic Bilquees Daud explains, "religion, as practised in Afghanistan, has been heavily suffused with traditional sociocultural practices to an extent that people often perceive religious and cultural practices—which are at variance with Islamic jurisprudence—as being indistinguishable" (Daud 2022). Punishments are socially sanctioned since the victim is seen as a transgressor of social norms. 'Forced' and

## AFGHAN REFUGEE SETTLEMENTS IN AND AROUND DELHI



(Source: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/delhi/districts/>)

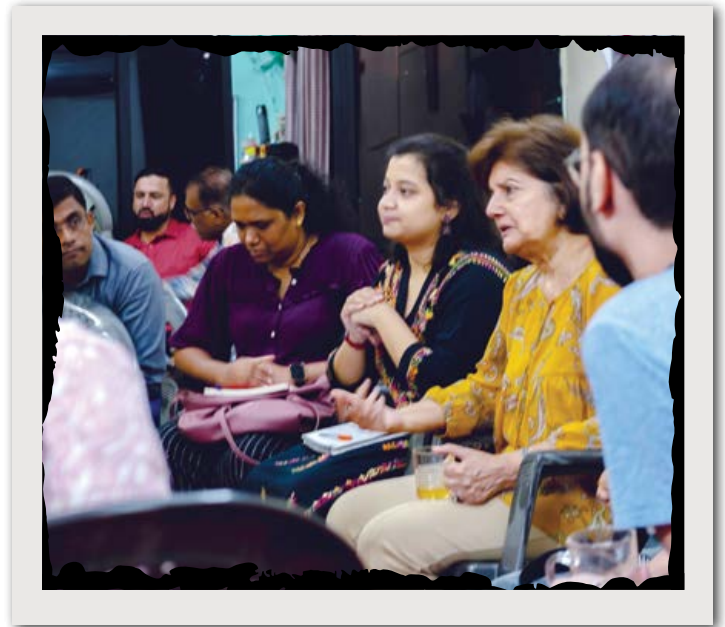
'child marriage' as transactional interventions to settle debts and feuds, denial of rights to divorcees' custody of children and their dispossession were found to be common drivers of flight. Many women escaped with their children, boys as well as girls.

## Urban refugees

Afghan refugee communities are clustered in specific pockets of Delhi's National Capital Region (NCR), drawing economic and sociocultural support from close-knit Afghan networks. Clustering has produced mini-Kabuls crowded with Afghan bakeries, restaurants, beauty parlours, boutiques, travel agents, coaching centres and dedicated Afghan welfare centres run by UNHCR's implementing partners, Jesuit Refugee Services and Bosco. Mapping urban Afghan asylum seeker/refugee communities, coordinator Ahmad Zia Ghani tabulates that in South Delhi, close to 900 families are concentrated in Bhogal, 200 families are in Lajpat Nagar, 80-90 families are in Ashram area, 150 families are in Malviya Nagar, 200 families are in Tilak Nagar, 120 families are in Wazirabad, 150 families are grouped in NCR environs of Noida and Greater Noida in the adjacent state of Uttar Pradesh and Faridabad in Haryana, and 40-50 families are in Gurgaon. A few Afghan nationals are living in Kerala, Maharashtra and Hyderabad.

While there are affluent Afghan refugee families, cluster settlements are largely in middle and lower-middle-class residential areas. Overwhelmingly, asylum seekers and refugee respondents spoke of a sharp deterioration in their living standards and future prospects in India, especially because of legal restrictions on work and difficulties in accessing higher education. Practically all Afghans have their hopes pinned on third-country settlement.

Afghanistan's diverse ethnicities and religions are reflected in their refugee population in India. Hindu and Sikh minorities make up 65% of 'forcibly displaced' Afghans in India, and they mark their ongoing arrivals from the 1970s. Also, a few hundred Afghan Christian refugees have found a safe haven in Delhi. The dominant Afghan ethnic communities in India are Tajik and Hazara. Although there is a Pashtun refugee cluster in



Community Conversations at an Afghan Church in Delhi.

Wazirabad dating back to the 1990s, they seem to have preferred finding refuge among co-ethnics in Pakistan. A handful of Uzbek families have also found refuge in India. Afghan refugees claim that the ethnic divisions which created conflict in Afghanistan have not carried over to India. "There are no mixing issues within the Afghan community in Delhi. They realise they have the same problems, and here in India they come under the same refugee identity as opposed to their ethnic identities in Afghanistan," explained Shir Shah.

Our field of study focused on the last decade of Afghan women refugee arrivals with particular attention to groups facing intersectional vulnerabilities, including single and women-headed households, ethno-religious Hazara minorities, Women Human Rights Defenders and NGO workers and those at risk of reprisals for collaborating with foreigners or the former Afghan government. In addition, there are particular interest groups such as Afghan Christians, and Hindus and Sikhs.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The perspective of WRN's *Community Conversations* on peace, security and justice is people-centric, non-statist and informed by feminist sensitivities. In centring women's stories, *Community Conversations* embody the feminist ethics of care and consciousness that considers emotions a crucial part of feminist research methodology. Deploying gender as a category of analysis, *Community Conversations* are particularly attentive to the intersectional play of power hierarchies and exclusions.

The structure of *India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* comprises quantitative analysis as its top hat, while its substantive body is based on a qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis derives from a random sample survey based on a questionnaire developed for *Community Conversations* of India, Pakistan and Afghanistan to facilitate a country-specific and regional analysis. In the case of India, the circumstances of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees made for a concentrated (but numerically limited) pool of 200 women and girl respondents. Concerns of insecurity and distrust were difficult to allay, despite the tactfulness of enumerators chosen from within the communities. Fears of stigmatisation within the close-knit Afghan communities may explain some distortions in the survey, especially regarding primary factors for fleeing Afghanistan. While the quantitative survey overwhelmingly cites 'generalised insecurity', the qualitative analysis revealed 'gender-related motivation' as integral to the reasons for the exit of a majority of respondents.

It is also to be noted that data gathered from the survey reflects the experiences and identities of less than 2% of the total Afghan refugee population in India. Diversity in the survey was further limited by the refusal of a section of women to participate due to fears of stigmatisation. These women feared that their participation in the survey could impact their UNHCR case outcome. Restrictions put in place by men also prevented women



from participating in the study. Inter-community power dynamics, response of community leaders and the ethnic identity of enumerators also played a big role in determining the sample composition.

Qualitative analysis is based upon a desk-based review which included publicly available international human rights reports, news, audio-visual reports and government statements. Field work comprised of several Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in cluster settlements, which invariably dovetailed into multiple, one-to-one structured conversations detailing 'personal' circumstances for seeking asylum. In addition, there were detailed interviews with UNHCR and some operational partners, including the Ara Trust's Migration and Asylum Project and Jesuit Refugee Services. Regrettably, the Afghan desk of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs declined to respond to repeated requests for an interview. Finally, the authors' experience of research and advocacy on the refugee situation in India provided in-depth understanding of the situation of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in India.



# HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTION OF AFGHAN WOMEN REFUGEES

## Gender Persecution

The Taliban's restrictions on Afghan women and girls amount to gender persecution—a recognised crime against humanity—given the severe deprivation of their human rights combined with imprisonment, torture and enforced disappearance.

Gender persecution refers to the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law—specifically directed against individuals based on their gender—which is universally recognised as impermissible under international law. This persecution arises from the identity of the gender group targeted and is in connection with acts or crimes that fall within the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

## Gender Apartheid

Since 15 August, 2021, the Taliban has released over 50 decrees that intensely discriminate against and control women's lives in Afghanistan. A study evaluating these decrees against Article II of the Apartheid Convention—which states that "Inhuman Acts" signify apartheid when they are systematically committed to uphold one group's dominance over another—shows that in this context, the Taliban's actions against women potentially align with an institutionalised system of segregation and male dominance, as described in the Apartheid Convention.

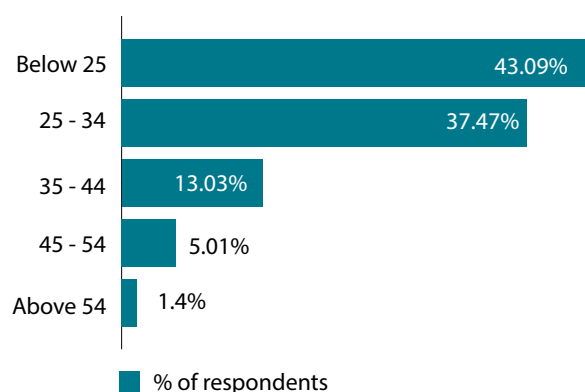
Gender Apartheid is a system of governance that enforces systematic segregation between women and men based on laws and/or policies, often resulting in excluding women from public spaces and spheres. This system infringes upon the fundamental principles of international law by codifying the subordination of women and denying them equal access to enjoy all human rights as recognised by international statutes. Similar to racial apartheid's violation of principles prohibiting race discrimination, gender apartheid opposes the foundational norms of international law.

In Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, the term 'gender apartheid' emphasises that discrimination is not an anomaly but integral to their system of governance. This means that discrimination isn't a by-product but the primary objective of the Taliban's public policy. Consequently, the state or governing body becomes the main driver of such discrimination.

**Since 15 August, 2021, the Taliban has released over 50 decrees that intensely discriminate against and control women's lives in Afghanistan.**

# AFGHAN REFUGEE PROFILE: RANDOM SAMPLE SURVEY AND ANALYSIS

**TABLE 1: AGE PROFILE**



A random sample survey was conducted with a concentrated pool of 207 Afghan women and girls. These women and girls came to India over the past decade and were living in different parts of Delhi, especially in clusters such as Tilak Nagar, Malviya Nagar, Lajpat Nagar, Ashram and Bhogal. Close to 28% of respondents fell in the age bracket of 25-34, and almost 27% respondents were aged between 35 and 44.

In the qualitative research done through FGDs and personal interviews, the research team found that an overwhelmingly large number of young women (with families or often alone) had arrived in India in their late teenage years for two broad reasons—either to escape violence, ‘forced marriage’ or insecurity in their home country, or in search of educational and employment opportunities. A majority of young women in this group fell in the age bracket of 23-25, but many women reported that they were 17 or 18 years of age when they had first arrived in India.

What is notable about this observation is that they were newly-educated women, the first generation in their families who had received higher education and who felt that India was safe enough to go to independently. In most cases, they had received some support from their family members, siblings or community members who helped them undertake this journey. This is reflective of a major shift in culture, attitude and perception of women’s rights in Afghanistan that has taken place in the last two decades.

In terms of ethnicity, 42.13% respondents were Tajik followed by 36.55% Hazaras. Pashtuns formed 12.6% of the total respondents and the remaining consisted of Uzbeks and other ethnic minorities.

## Religion

- 95.41% of respondents were Muslim while a small percentage were Sikh, Hindu, Christian and from other religions.
- Some distortion in this data may be present since many Afghan Christians hesitate to reveal their religious identity and select ‘Islam’ as the default to avoid ostracisation.
- Although a large percentage of Afghan refugees in India are Hindu and Sikh, for purposes of our study we focused on Muslim Afghan refugees, particularly from Tajik and Hazara communities.

**TABLE 2: RELIGION PROFILE**

Religion	% of Respondents
Islam	95.41%
Hindu and Sikh	3.57%
Christianity	0.51%
Others	0.51%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

### Disabled Identity

- 8% of respondents were women with disabilities.
- Through personal interviews and group discussions, it was found that many women had children who had various physical, mental and trauma-induced disabilities.
- In some cases, children’s disability was caused by injuries sustained during blasts or attacks when they were in Afghanistan.
- Most disabled women suffered from problems in their muscles and bones which prevented them from undertaking gainful employment.

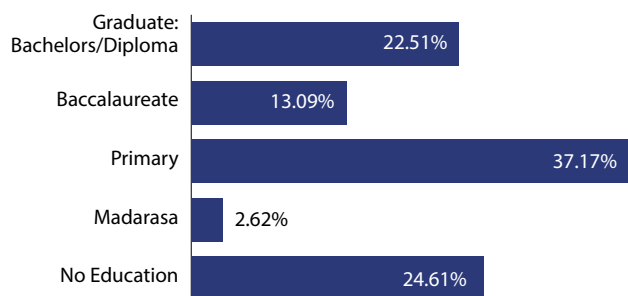
### Marital Status

- 55.10% of respondents were married while 26.02% were single women who had either arrived in India alone or with parents and siblings.
- 9.18% of respondents were widows, 4.08% were divorced.
- 5.61% of respondents were unaware if their husbands were dead or alive.

### Education

- 75.39% of respondents had received some form of education with 22.51% having university education.
- While most of those surveyed had completed primary level education, it is striking to note that women respondents in FGDs and personal interviews from modest backgrounds—including those who had lived in the provinces—said they had earned Bachelor degrees or diplomas in various fields including architecture, business administration, law, economics and finance.

**TABLE 3: EDUCATION STATUS**

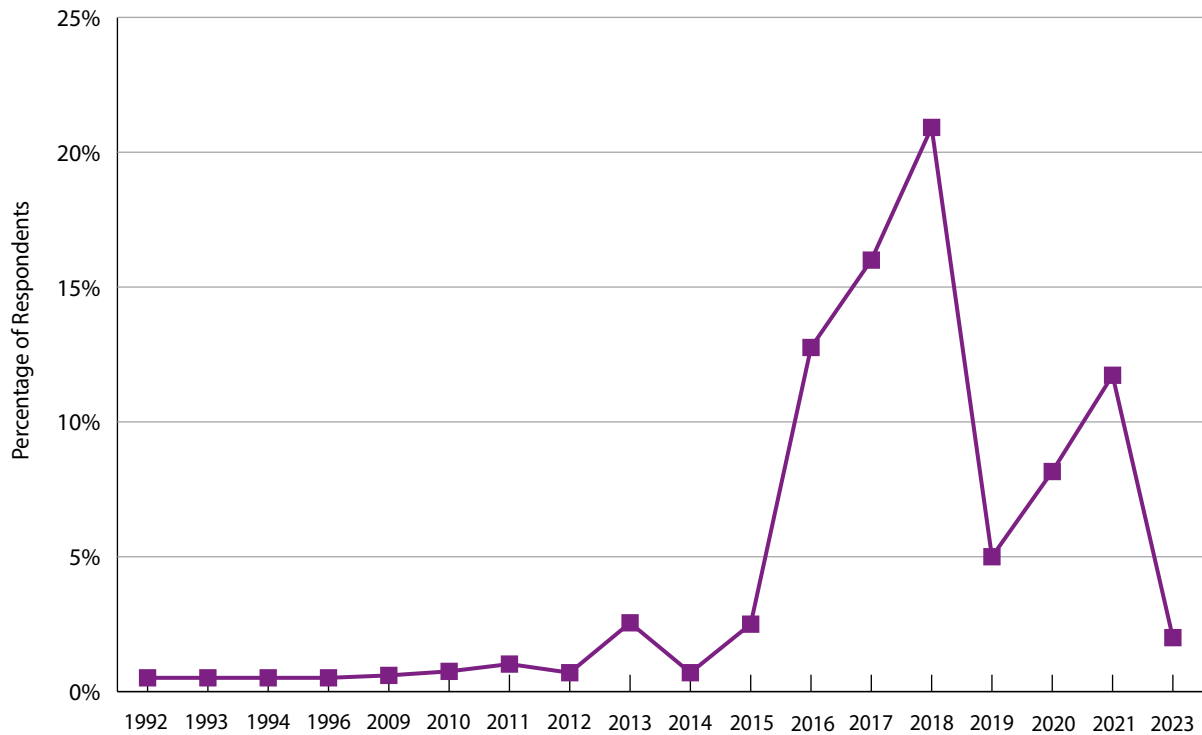


- Multiple women shared that despite being married off at a young age and being saddled with domestic responsibilities and in-laws who disapproved of them continuing their education, they had actively fought back and pursued higher education and university education.
- Many women reported that authorities at educational institutions had provided them consistent support and encouragement to complete their degrees, often going out of their way to ensure that these women were able to sit for exams and access study material.

### Employment Position (Before and After Coming to India)

- Numbers show that Afghan women haven’t gained much economically after coming to India.
- While it was anecdotally evident that there were many women—especially in Female-Headed Households (FHH)—who were obliged to do paid work outside their home for the first time because of the absence of a male provider, the survey was unable to grab this data.
- For most, access to employment remains a challenge due to various constraints placed on them as refugees, including lack of access to bank accounts and national identification documents like Aadhar, Voter ID which are considered mandatory by employers.
- As a result, there has been a sharp deterioration in income levels and living standards in India as compared to their situation in Afghanistan.
- Some women also reported facing discrimination from employers who believed that as Afghans, they were connected to the Taliban.
- Out of those employed in Afghanistan, only close to 9% could continue to be employed after coming to India. 80% of them are currently unemployed.
- Out of those unemployed in Afghanistan, only 20.45% could find employment in India. 69% of them continue to be unemployed.
- Of those who were studying in Afghanistan, 70% were reported to be unemployed and only 23% were found to be engaged in some economic activity in India.

**TABLE 4: AFGHANISTAN – INDIA MIGRATION TREND**



**Family members (living in India or Afghanistan)**

- Around 60% respondents have family members living in Afghanistan.

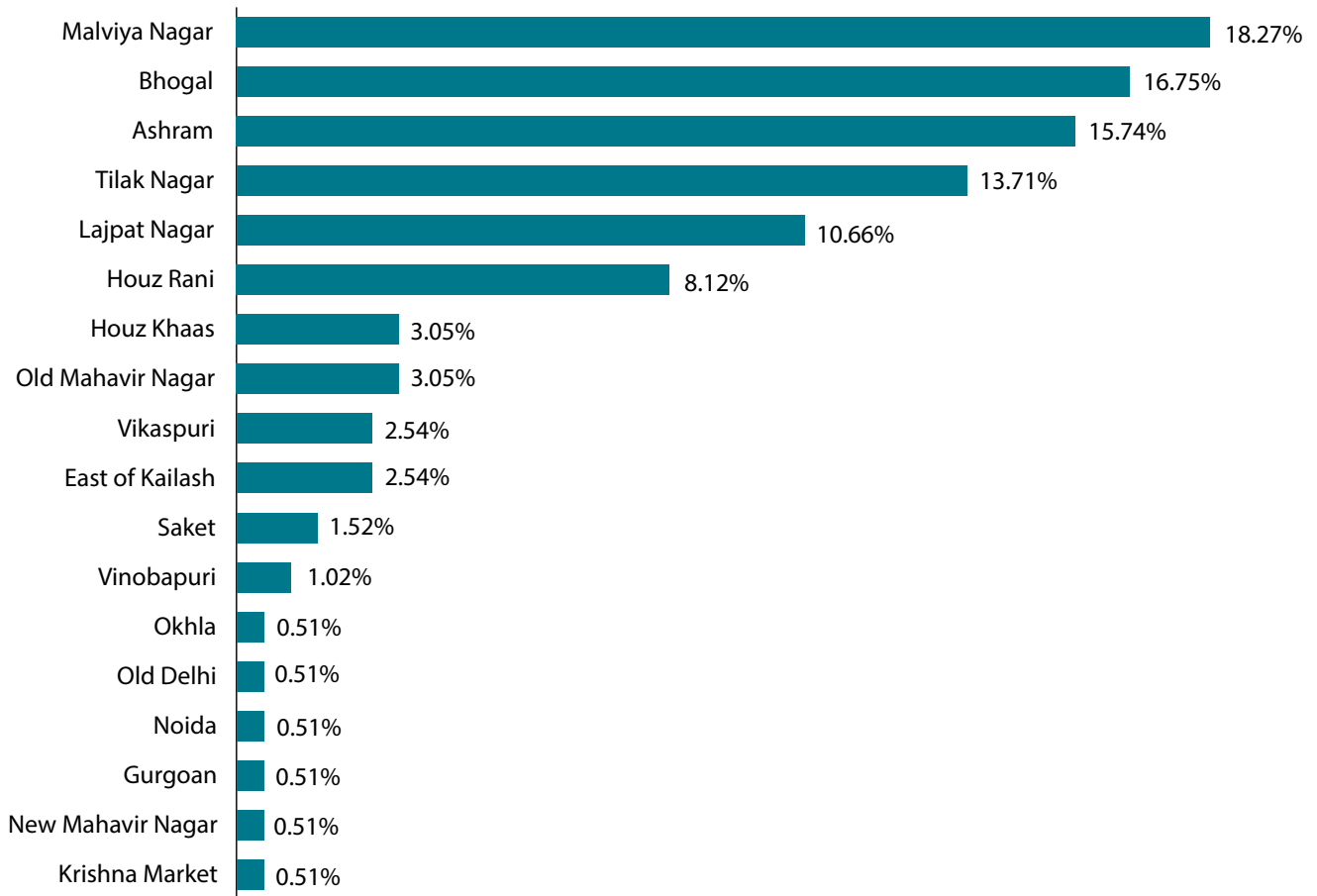
**Year and Place of Arrival**

- Around 78% respondents reported New Delhi as their place of arrival.
- Migration from Afghanistan saw a major increase since 2016, peaking in 2018.
- Data from India’s Ministry of Home Affairs yearly reports show that 11,212 Afghans had come to India in 2020 and that number had risen to 36,451 in 2021.
- Although these numbers are inclusive of Afghan tourists visiting India, some part of this rise can be

attributed to the influx of Afghan refugees who came to India in 2021 before the Taliban takeover, due to deteriorating security issues and rapid progress of the Taliban as they started taking over several provinces.

- 2005-06 onwards Afghans started to move out of their country due to the resurgence of the Taliban insurgency in provinces and border areas.
- During in-depth personal interviews and group discussions, women reported that the presence of an elected government could not stop the Taliban and other militias from attacking citizens and creating an environment of terror in many provinces.

**TABLE 5: LIVING AREA OF RESPONDENTS**



**Location and unit of stay**

- 36.73% respondents belonged to Female-Headed Households in Delhi.
- The rest either lived alone in rented accommodations or with their family members in shared households.
- Majority of the respondents lived in Malviya Nagar followed by Bhogal, Ashram, Tilak Nagar, Lajpat Nagar.
- Majority of the Afghan community in Delhi is concentrated in South Delhi.

**Native place in Afghanistan**

- The highest proportion of respondents reported that they were from Kabul (33%), followed by Ghazni (13.4%), Mazar-e-Sharif and Samangan (6.2%), Maidan Wardak and Baghlan (5.2%).
- Many others came from Kunduz, Herat, Logar and Kandahar.

### Mapping the Journey of Displacement and Place of Arrival

- Most respondents reported to have been displaced from Kabul to arrive at New Delhi.
- A few reached New Delhi via places like Pakistan or Tajikistan.

### Reasons for leaving Afghanistan

- Out of 207 refugees, close to 64% reported 'Generalised Insecurity' as the major reason for leaving Afghanistan. It is to be noted that this remained a common cause for most respondents who selected this option in addition to other specific problems or experiences.

- The second major reason is 'Personal/Family Insecurity' which was felt by close to 59% respondents. Personal interviews and group discussions further revealed that targeted threats against women and their families were often based on the premise of women's rights, i.e., threats were often a result of one's refusal to a 'forced marriage' proposal, or due to the family's decision to get their girls educated, or the nature of work that women were engaged in. These issues attracted violence not only towards women but also their families.
- Close to 50% respondents cited experiences of 'Gender-based Violence' as the reason for leaving Afghanistan. This included targeted violence and

**NATIVE PLACE OF AFGHAN REFUGEES**



(Original map from: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-map-of-Afghanistan-and-the-surrounding-countries\\_fig1\\_341071301](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-map-of-Afghanistan-and-the-surrounding-countries_fig1_341071301))

attacks for transgressing gender norms, 'forced marriage', sexual violence, harassment, discrimination and cultural practices subjugating women.

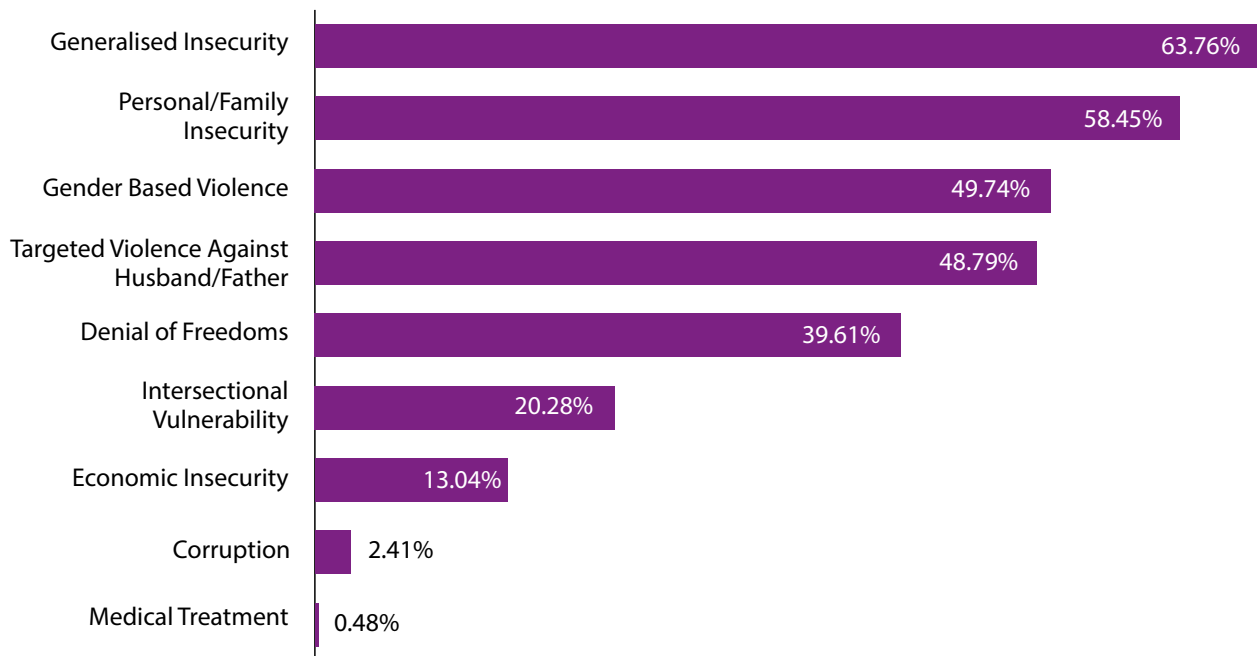
- Around 49% refugees cited 'Targeted Violence against husband/father' as the reason for leaving Afghanistan. Most of the targeted violence was either due to affiliation with the government, army, media channels or working in offices/organisations which had foreign connections. Land disputes and property issues also led to men receiving threats. A few were abducted and kept under custody for many hours, to be released later on. Attacks also included bombings, threats, physical violence and assault.
- The next most reported reason (by 39.6% refugees) is 'Denial of Freedoms' which include freedom to work, education, mobility and expression. Not being allowed to work or get higher education forced many Afghan women to leave the country. Threats from the Taliban and other militant groups, ostracisation and harassment from community members and family members forced many women to leave their jobs, schools and colleges.

- A couple of respondents had come to India to pursue higher studies on scholarships, many of them from the Afghan Government. Since they couldn't return because of the Taliban takeover, they registered with UNHCR as refugees. Few others had arrived for medical treatment and were stranded after the Taliban takeover and subsequent closure of borders.

### Reasons for Choosing India

- 80% respondents chose India as their destination country because they perceived it as a secure place for refuge. Interviews and group discussions revealed that easy and affordable visa procedures and prior familiarity with the country were other factors that led them to come to India.
- Compared to Iran and Pakistan, Afghan women perceived India as a safer option. Those who had lived as refugees in the other two countries during the first Taliban regime had faced violence and police harassment there, so they chose India as the destination during their second experience of displacement.
- Afghan Christians also chose India due to its proximity and the prospect of enjoying religious freedom.

**TABLE 6: REASONS FOR LEAVING AFGHANISTAN**



### Violence from family/community members and year

- 63.45% reported to have faced violence from their family or community members. In more than half of the cases (55%), respondents could not remember the year. In some cases, violence continued over periods of time. The graph below captures data from respondents who remembered the year of violence.
- 2015-2019 has seen the highest proportion of violence by family/community members.

### Violence from the Taliban/other non-state actors and year

- Around 71.5% reported to have faced violence or threats from the Taliban or other non-state actors including warlords, militias and insurgent groups. Half of them weren't able to recollect or mention the year and out of the remaining, a higher proportion of violence is seen to have taken place during 2015-2019, peaking in 2018. This period also saw the highest proportion of respondents migrating to India.

### Currently facing threat or harassment (Taliban/non-state actors/local authorities)

- Around 28.5% respondents reported facing threats and harassment (from the Taliban, other non-state

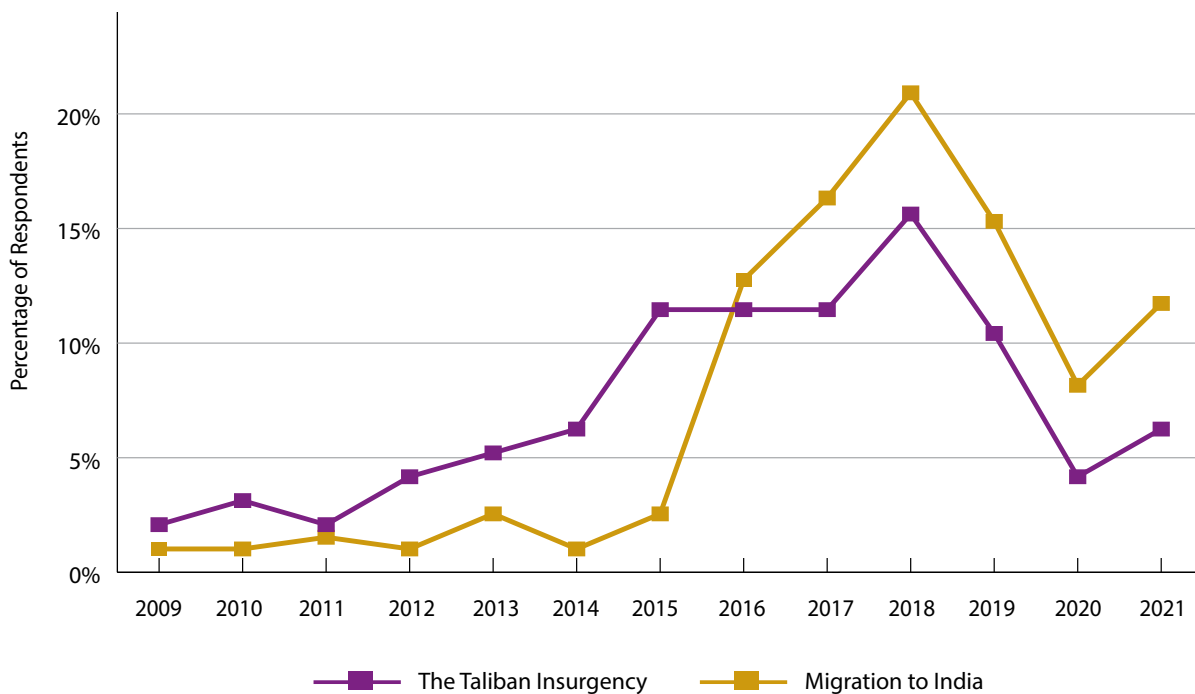
actors and local authorities). Information received from personal interviews and group meetings suggest that the Taliban and non-state actors have continued to threaten these women by inflicting violence on their family members and friends who have stayed back in Afghanistan, and by relaying threatening messages to them through their relatives.

- Research participants also shared that they felt more scared now than prior to 2021, when Afghans could easily visit India for tourism, education, medical and other purposes. They were afraid that the very people they had tried to get away from could easily find them in India. However, the closure of international borders and suspension of flights and visas after the Taliban takeover have provided many women refugees with a sense of security because they know that their perpetrators cannot reach them now.

### Discrimination

- 72% respondents reported that they faced discrimination in Afghanistan for being women. Research participants further shared that they felt they were not given the same rights and access to opportunities as men. Gendered societal expectations curtailed their right to make choices for themselves.

**TABLE 7: TALIBAN INSURGENCY VS. AFGHAN MIGRATION TO INDIA**





- 54% reported facing discrimination on the basis of other identities (disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity). Religion and ethnicity came out as the most common factors for targeted violence and persecution of women in Afghanistan.
- Most importantly, around 45% respondents reported facing dual discrimination due to their gender identity, ethnicity/religion, or both.

### Violation of basic human rights

- Basic human rights of close to 70% respondents was found to be violated in Afghanistan.

### Accessibility to courts/police

- 69% respondents could not access the police or legal remedies.
- 33% of those who faced basic human rights violations could access the police or legal remedies.
- A similar percentage of women (33%) who faced discrimination due to other identities could also access the police or legal remedies. However, in many cases, support or response received from courts or the police was largely inadequate and did not help them to feel secure. Specially in cases of domestic violence, women found courts and police officers to be unsympathetic and uphold patriarchal ideas and values.

### Mental Health condition and support

- 78% respondents said that they have been suffering from mental health conditions.
- Of those suffering from mental health problems, 76% reported to have received some mental health support.

### Humanitarian Support: Accessibility, Adequacy and Providers

- Close to 74% respondents reported to have received humanitarian support.
- Close to 66% of those who received humanitarian support reported to have faced difficulty in accessing that support.
- A similar percentage (66%) found the support to be inadequate.

- Partner organisations were found to be the biggest provider of humanitarian support followed by UNHCR.
- The majority of respondents, i.e., 86% reported having UNHCR Refugee Cards, with a small percentage having Asylum seeker cards or blue cards.
- There were only three respondents with valid visas and one respondent with 'No Status' in India. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) 2022 report, 112 long-term visas were granted to minority communities from Afghanistan between April and September 2022. Between April and December 2021, the MHA had granted 237 long-term visas to minorities from Afghanistan, who predominantly consisted of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.
- Owing to the drastically changed political context of Afghanistan where the option of returning became invalid, UNHCR updated its *Guidance Note* in February 2023 to call for presumptive refugee status determination for specific categories. Several Afghan asylum seekers (whose cases were long pending) mentioned that in the last few weeks, they had got their white refugee cards. They also reported that appeals and closed cases were being reviewed and revisited on a case-by-case basis.

### Resettlement Programs and Status

- India is viewed as a transit country by Afghan refugees.
- 45% respondents reported to have applied for resettlement programs.
- Around 19% of applications were rejected, 22% were kept on hold and 54% are under process.

These figures related to UNHCR's operating protocol before their updated guidelines in India were issued. It is possible that some of these cases will be reviewed more positively for refugee status determination.

Prospects for third-country resettlement for Afghan refugees had shown an uptick with a couple of complementary pathways opening up. Recently, Afghan refugees have been the biggest beneficiary of these schemes.

## STATISTICS: AFGHANISTAN BEFORE AND AFTER THE TALIBAN



Community Conversations in Tilak Nagar.

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 set the country's progress on women's and girls rights back by two decades, removing them from most aspects of public life. To truly understand what the Taliban took away, the gains of the past 20 years need to be carefully assessed.

Adult female literacy rate was 4.99% in Afghanistan in 1979. It remained almost stagnant over the next 20 years. Although official data was not available, Save the Children estimated that by 2001, the adult female literacy rate (for 15-24-year-olds) in Afghanistan had only risen to 5.6% (*The New Humanitarian*, 2001). However, overall literacy rates—and female literacy rates in particular—showed a sharp rise after 2001 when the transitional government took over. A democratic government was elected in 2004. Seven years later, the adult female literacy rate was recorded at 17.2%. Despite continued generalised insecurity issues, proxy wars in Afghanistan

and the Taliban's consistent presence in provinces, data shows that women did get access to education—and later on to employment opportunities—during this period. The literacy rate for women reached its peak at 29.81% in 2018. Three years later, it had dipped to 22.60% (Countryeconomy.com, 2022). Looking over the past two decades, the literacy rate for women in all age groups grew from 17% in 2001 to almost 30% in 2021 (UNESCO, 2023).

During the first regime of the Taliban (1996-2001), girls were banned from school education.

In 2001, only 5,000 girls were enrolled in schools while many others had to resort to attending secret schools (Kelly, 2011). From 2002 onwards, the international community invested billions in Afghanistan to rebuild its education system. As a result, the enrolment of girls in schools rapidly increased. UN data estimates that by 2021, there were 2.5 million girls enrolled in primary schools. According to UNESCO, Afghan women's enrolment in higher education institutions also increased from 5,000 in 2001 to over 100,000 in 2021.

The increase in literacy rates and school enrolment also translated into a rise in female labour force participation in Afghanistan throughout these two decades. World Bank data shows that during the first Taliban regime in 2000, percentage of females in the total labour force was 16.543%. It rose consistently in the next two decades, reaching its peak at 23.099% in 2019 then falling to 19.732% in 2020 (World Bank, 2023). The total

percentage of female population engaged in employment increased from 15.27% in 2000 to reach its peak at 21.94% in 2019, subsequently declining to 16.46% in 2020.

Due to the reservation policy under the new Constitution of Afghanistan, women took up 27% seats in the Afghan Parliament. Before the Taliban's takeover in 2021, there were 63 women in the parliament. Not only that, 21% of all defense counsel were women and there were 265 female judges among a total of 1,951 judges in the country (Medica Mondiale, 2022). There were over 500 female prosecutors in the country. According to the 2020-21 report<sup>4</sup> of the Afghan Ministry of Education, there were 80,554 women working as teachers in 18,765 schools spread across Afghanistan (Ahmadi, 2023). Till 2019, there were 2,439 Afghan women working as lecturers in higher education institutions. Prior to the Taliban's takeover, more than 2,000 small and medium businesses were owned and operated by women.

Following decades of brutal conflict, in the early 2000s, Afghanistan had the second-highest maternal mortality rate globally owing to lack of healthcare services. Women had to give birth without the assistance of doctors or midwives. From 2001 onwards, the Afghanistan government and international agencies prioritised building effective healthcare systems and making primary healthcare accessible for all. Within two decades, maternal mortality ratio in Afghanistan had shrunk by more than 50% from 1,273 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2001 to 620 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2020 (World Bank, 2023). Between 2003 and 2010, the percentage of Afghans using modern family planning services also rose from 10% to 22% (UNFPA, 2012).

It is evident that women were playing a key role in Afghanistan's society and the government had invested resources in improving their quality of life. The Taliban's takeover effectively erased this progress and brought Afghanistan back to its pre-2001 state.

During peace negotiations, the Taliban spoke of respecting women's rights and freedoms under the ambit of Sharia law (Latifi, 2021), although this did not translate into the text of the Peace Agreement. Once in control,

**Following decades of brutal conflict, in the early 2000s, Afghanistan had the second-highest maternal mortality rate globally owing to lack of healthcare services.**

the Taliban quickly went back on its words and started issuing decrees that denied women and girls their fundamental human rights. Until November 2023 the Taliban leadership has issued 100 edicts that place severe restrictions on the lives and futures of Afghan women. When the Taliban assumed power in August 2021, they immediately ordered women to stay at home and banned them from working outside, except in specific sectors such as healthcare. They prohibited girls beyond Grade 6 from attending school. The edicts that followed put a ban on women-owned businesses, prohibited women from working with nongovernmental organisations and UN, which severely impacted the delivery of humanitarian aid.

These edicts put in mandatory requirements for a male chaperone in public spaces at all times and prohibited women from visiting parks or historical places in the country (*Human Rights Watch*, 2023). As a result, Afghanistan ranks last among 177 countries on the Women, Peace and Security Index 2023.<sup>5</sup> Afghan women who protested for their rights have faced threats, arrests and torture. There have been reports of detentions, child marriages, forced marriages and rapes (Medica Mondiale, 2022).

Through their policies and laws, the Taliban systematically treated women as second-class citizens, depriving them of all rights and liberties they are entitled to. The International Community has thus claimed that the Taliban's treatment of women and girls qualifies as "gender apartheid".

4 [https://moe.gov.af/sites/default/files/2021-07/Analytical\\_Report\\_1398\\_Dari.pdf](https://moe.gov.af/sites/default/files/2021-07/Analytical_Report_1398_Dari.pdf)

5 Women Peace and Security Index 2023, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/>

## A timeline of some crucial edicts and directives of the Taliban that have directly impacted women

### JULY 2021

As the Taliban continued to capture provinces and districts, including near the border areas of Afghanistan, they issued a letter, under the name of the Taliban Cultural Commission, asking local religious leaders to provide them a list of girls above the age of 15 and widows under the age of 45, so they can be married off to Taliban fighters (Ray, 2021).

### SEPTEMBER 2021

The Taliban reopened secondary schools only for boys and not girls. They also started revising the education curriculum (Fadel et al., 2021).

The Taliban replaced the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice which was to act as a morality police. This ministry assumed the position of an important office under the Taliban regime (BBC, 2021).

Shortly after inviting women to join the government, the Taliban on September 20th instructed all women workers in the Kabul city government to stay at home until further notice (The Observer, Afghanistan, 2021).

Women were also banned from teaching and attending the Kabul University (Constable, 2021).

### MAY 2022

The Taliban dissolved the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and four other important departments of the former government, citing them as unnecessary (Yunus, 2022).

### SEPTEMBER 2022

The Taliban removed the only position held by a woman at the Commission of media violations (Eqbal, 2022).

2021

### AUGUST 2021

The Taliban leadership announced a general amnesty for Afghan citizens including previous government officers and pro-republic individuals. This amnesty did not go into effect. In the same announcement, the Taliban asked women to join its government. The announcement was made by the senior Taliban member, Enamullah Samangani (Muzaffar, 2021).

The Taliban officials in Herat province banned co-ed education in public and private educational institutions (PTI, 2021).

### NOVEMBER 2021

As part of eight directives launched by the Taliban Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, women were banned from appearing in television shows or movies (Popalzai, 2021).

2022

### MARCH 2022

The Taliban announced that girls' schools would be reopened, but only a few hours later directed the schools to shut down again, continuing the ban on secondary education for girls (Barr, 2022).

The Taliban issued a directive preventing women from traveling or entering healthcare centers without a 'Mahram,' a male chaperone (Nader & Amini, 2022).

### JULY 2022

The Taliban officials called and notified women working at the Ministry of Finance to send male relatives as their replacement, irrespective of their skills or qualifications (Kumar, 2022).

## NOVEMBER 2022

The Taliban closed public baths for women in Northern provinces Balkh and Herat. The announcement was made by Sardar Mohammad Heydari from the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Glinski, 2022).

The Taliban banned women from visiting the Band-e-Amir national park in Bamiyan province. The announcement was made by Mohammed Khaled Hanafi, Afghanistan's acting Minister of Virtue and Vice (Radford, 2023).

## JANUARY 2023

The Taliban in Kandahar ordered female healthcare professionals not to go to work without a Mahram. The order was communicated verbally to the Public Health Department in Kandahar (Khalid, 2023).

The Taliban ordered travel agencies not to sell tickets to any woman who is not accompanied by a Mahram (Hakim, 2023).

## MAY 2023

Through an audio message, the Taliban leader and the head of Kandahar Department of Vice and Virtue, Mawlawi Abdulhai Omar ordered all departments to prevent women and girls from going to healthcare centers and to graveyards (Hakim, 2023).

2022

## DECEMBER 2022

The Taliban suspended women from higher education institutions and religious educational centers, besides tutoring classes that they took in private residences. The announcement was shared by the spokesperson for the Ministry of Higher Education Ziaullah Hashmi (Hadid, 2022).

The Taliban issued a decree banning women from working in national and international non-governmental organizations. The Ministry of Economy sent a letter to NGOs and INGOs threatening them with license cancellation in case of non-compliance (Farzan et al., 2022).

Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada directed the judges in Afghanistan to impose Sharia Law punishments for specific crimes, including public amputations, stoning to death and executions (BBC, 2022).

2023

## APRIL 2023

The Taliban banned women from working with the United Nations. UN female staff members were stopped from reporting to work in Nangarhar province (Wintour, 2023).

## JULY 2023

The Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Propagation of Virtue issued a notice ordering the closure of all beauty parlors and salons for women in the country within a month (Reuters, 2023).

## POLITICS AND HUMANITARIANISM IN INDIA'S AD-HOC REFUGEE REGIME

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Since independence, India has had a relatively hospitable track-record of hosting mass influxes of refugees from several neighbouring countries. This has included Partition migrants, 'forcibly displaced' people from Tibet, East Pakistan, Chakma, Sri Lanka, previous waves of Burmese, Rohingya and Afghan populations and some Iraqi and Somali refugees. However, in the absence of a national law or regulatory framework for their rights, the legal precarity of their situation has made asylum seekers and refugees vulnerable to a host of violations.

To a limited extent, the judiciary has compensated for this legal ambiguity by invoking constitutional provisions and the country's obligations under international law (Dhavan 2004; Manchanda 2022). Refugee rights activist, Tapan Bose asserts that "if refugees have received any legal protection, it has happened essentially because

**Since there is no recognition of those in need of international protection as a separate legal category, asylum seekers and refugees are dangerously conflated with illegal migrants and other 'aliens'.**

of the committed intervention of human rights NGOs and the Indian judiciary." (Personal Interview, Delhi, 2 November, 2021). Fortunately, Afghan refugees have faced comparatively fewer vulnerabilities arising from detention and deportation.

Currently, India has a refugee population which is close to 2,44,000 (Singh, 2022). Increasingly, however, security

concerns are used to justify a much more restrictive policy, including overturning of the general practice of upholding non-refoulement or no pushback of persons/communities at risk. Moreover, a rising populist, ethno-religious nationalism in the country has turned the issue of refugee protection into an issue of selective religious preference.

India has resisted acceding to the Status of Refugees Convention (1951) and the 1967 Protocol. This has resulted in an ambiguous regulatory regime for asylum seekers and refugees which tends to be arbitrary, ad hoc and discriminatory. As refugee studies expert, B S Chimni observed, "refugees are dependent on the benevolence of the state, rather than a regime of rights to reconstruct their lives in dignity." (2003). India's refugee policy and practices are subject to the pulls and pressures of the country's shifting domestic and foreign policy considerations.

In India, asylum seekers, refugees and the stateless legally fall within the omnibus category of 'foreigners' (non-citizens) and come under the Foreigners Act (1946). This Act gives the Executive the absolute right to deport foreigners and imposes an onerous regime of entry, registration and restricted work permits. Since there is no recognition of those in need of international protection as a separate legal category, asylum seekers and refugees are dangerously conflated with illegal migrants and other 'aliens' (Dhavan 2004).

Moreover, laws like the Citizen Amendment Act, 2019 reinforce religious identity as a discriminatory marker in India's refugee protection framework (Burra 2022).

The Act stops short of expressly defining a category of refugees, and restricts itself to providing a fast-track procedure for non-Muslim minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Rohingya Muslim refugees from Myanmar have borne the brunt of the Indian government's ideologically driven and securitised refugee policy. The most recent mass influx of co-ethnic Chin-Zomi refugees from Myanmar have confronted a hostile Indian government, although they have been welcomed by their co-ethnics in border states of Mizoram and Manipur.

Administratively, the country has adopted a hybrid refugee management regime. India directly provides for the protection and welfare of mass influxes including Tibetan, Sri Lankan and Chakma refugees. UNHCR has been permitted to look after the status determination and welfare of 'urban' refugees from neighbouring South Asia. UNHCR's mandate covers Burmese, Afghan, Somali and Middle-Eastern refugees. However, UNHCR's mandate and budget in India is restricted largely to facilitating limited humanitarian assistance through its eight NGO partners and limited legal protection interventions (UNHCR Fact Sheet)<sup>6</sup>. The establishment of UNHCR's office in Delhi is made possible via the agency of UNDP. Strategic ambivalence increasingly drives India's relationship with UNHCR. The government's current equivocation on non-refoulement is reflected in its shifting stand on UNHCR's work in India, especially regarding recognition of UNHCR's refugee status determination process. This is particularly evidenced in the recent comments of a government Minister who dismissed the work of UNHCR in India, especially with regard to its protective role in relation to the Rohingya refugees (Manchanda, 2022).



### UNHCR and Afghans in India

In India, Afghans make up the second-largest number of asylum seekers and refugees (37%), next to the Burmese (57%). Afghan refugees are resentful of UNHCR India's alleged preference of pursuing integration as a solution rather than third-country settlement. UNHCR pursues integration on the presumption of religious and cultural similarities between Afghanistan and India, giving rise to possibilities of assimilation. This has been a major cause of Afghan refugee discontent as most of them view India as a transit country. Matters came to a head in August 2021, when masses of Afghan refugees laid a week-long siege of the UNHCR office in panic and frustration at the thought of Afghans in Afghanistan escaping by planes to the USA, while they were stuck in India.

"Muslim Afghans are rarely encouraged to assimilate, only Afghan Hindus and Sikhs," explained Tomoko Fukumoro, UNHCR's acting India representative in Delhi. "Unlike Refugee Status Determination, UNHCR does not have full control [over the third-country resettlement process, since] it is a two-way process. Barely one percent get a chance. Till recently, 300 was the total quota for all refugees in India," she explained.

There is the option of a complementary pathway negotiated by the third country itself, as had happened earlier with USA. After 2021, Canada used this option to

<sup>6</sup> <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/India%20fact-sheet%20June%202021.pdf>



Afghan Refugees Protest outside UNHCR office in New Delhi, 2021. Photo source : <https://thewire.in/rights/asking-for-our-rights-afghans-in-india-protest-outside-unhcr-office-demand-refugee-status>

The profile of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in India is strikingly gendered, with an overwhelming number of women and girls' cases involving gender-based persecution within the context of generalised insecurity.

resettle a substantive number of Afghans Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Kabuli Gurdwara elder Pratap Singh, Canada evacuated 272 Sikh Afghan families from Afghanistan via India's airborne and transit facilitation in 2021. The requisite permit to exit India is not a major hurdle for Afghan nationals as it is for Muslim Rohingya refugees—the punitive overstay penalty has been reduced to a token amount for Afghans.

The profile of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers in India is strikingly gendered, with an overwhelming number of women and girls' cases involving gender-based persecution within the context of generalised insecurity. WRN's random sample survey indicated that over 50% respondents specifically cited a 'Gender-related Motivation' for exit. If the option of 'Denial of Freedoms' is included, this figure might swell to 89% of asylum seekers and refugees.

Arguably, ambiguity surrounding the recognition of 'Gender-related Motivation' as persecution—and thereby the grounds for refugee status determination—contributed to UNHCR rejecting 50% of Afghan asylum seeker cases. According to Hamsa Vijay Raghavan, formerly a legal protection officer with UNHCR and now with the Ara Trust, "70 percent of the clientele from Afghanistan are women." For refugee status determination, a case has to be made about why and how gender-based violence or sexual and gender-based violence qualifies as torture. By themselves, domestic violence and intimate partner



violence do not qualify as torture (UNVFVT 2011, 15-16). Also, UNHCR India's practice of using translators from within the community complicates the interview process. Women and girls hold back crucial situation details that put them at risk of stigmatisation in the close-knit Afghan refugee settlements (Daud 2022).

In the international refugee protection regime, the refugee prototype remains a male, despite women and girls making up the majority of 'forcibly displaced' populations. Human rights and humanitarian agencies have sought to mainstream gender in refugee protection by bridging the absent category of 'woman' in the 1951 Refugee Convention and accommodating gender-specific human rights abuses— especially sexual violence in conflict (Buckley-Zistel, Krause, 2017). UNHCR's inter-agency forum, IASC has periodically issued *Gender-based Violence Guidelines* which state, "all humanitarian personnel ought to assume gender-based violence is occurring and threatening affected populations" and that they should take action "regardless of the presence or absence of concrete evidence" (2015).

However, the experience of 'rejected' Afghan women asylum seekers with UNHCR's India office indicates the difficulty in translating legal awareness about gender-based persecution into operational protocols for filtering asylum requests (Manchanda 2023). UNHCR staff denies being influenced by presumed Afghan cultural norms which give consent for women's subjugation and humiliation.

***"UNHCR does not look at cultural practices but at international human rights paradigms to assess traditional harmful practices such as forced and child marriage. Forced marriage to settle property or other disputes qualifies as GBV"*** stated Ragini Zutshi, Associate Protection Officer, UNHCR India.

However, many appeals of Afghan women and girls for protection against life-threatening vulnerability and violations were rejected by UNHCR and their cases closed. Was the claim of 'persecution' overturned because of the perception of a country where the socio-cultural milieu appears to sanction the sale of women and girls or 'forced marriages' and views them as expendable commodities? Alternatively, were male Afghan refugees justified in asserting that women were faking cases of

domestic violence to appear as victims and therefore, get faster assistance and resettlement? Were fears of the long arm of the Taliban and affiliated forces reaching across the border and terrorising them in India exaggerated?

These painful uncertainties and quibbles over 'persecution' claims should now be a thing of the past for Afghan asylum seekers. On 1 February, 2023, the UNHCR updated its *Guidance Note* to include that "UNHCR considers Afghan women and girls are likely to be in need of international protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention."<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to state whether this update contributed to a clutch of refugee status determination white cards being issued to long-suffering women asylum seekers who were placed on appeal after UNHCR's rejection. This uncertainty is particularly because white refugee cards were issued "in the same proportion" to men as well. Previous gender eligibility guidelines were quite conclusive, but this reiteration may have made a difference.

None of the Afghans we spoke to—nor much of the staff of UNHCR's implementing or operational partners—seemed aware of the protection agency's updated guidelines for reopening closed cases. In consonance with the updated guidelines and the changed situation in Afghanistan, the government of India issued a 'No Return' advisory for all Afghan asylum seekers. However, the policy of neglecting to inform refugees of their rights and entitlement further reinforces an international policy discourse that depoliticises the refugee subject. In particular, this approach takes away the agency of women refugees and infantilises them (Johnson 2011, Manchanda 2023).

The *India Afghan Refugee Community Conversations* report posits the need to recover women's political agency within the patriarchal structure of Afghan society and as Afghan refugees, by considering their experiences not as those of passive victims but of people looking to carve a new identity.

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7 UNHCR, *Guidance Note on the International Protection Needs of People Fleeing Afghanistan – Update I, February 2023*, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/63e0cb714.pdf>

## Afghans in India—a favoured refugee community

Any casual visitor to Afghan settlement clusters in Delhi's densely populated colonies will be struck by the ease of relations between Afghan refugees and host communities, and the bold display of Afghan bakeries, restaurants, chemists, beauty parlours, tailoring establishments, travel agents and guesthouses. The presence of Afghan girls, women, children and men in these bustling little Kabul warrens is accepted and normal. Afghanistan and the Pashtun/Afghan people have been memorialised in Rabindranath Tagore's story and the subsequent film, *Kabuliwala*. Sociocultural practices in India have changed but traditional annual visits of Afghan traders bringing precious condiments such as *hing* (asafoetida), dry fruit, Kandahari *anar* (pomegranate), shawls and carpets are long-remembered. Today, Bollywood has created a cultural bridge between people.

The centuries-old histories of cross-border movements of people, cultures and conquerors provide a dense and intricate backdrop to the contemporary relations between independent India and Afghanistan. Afghanistan as the theatre of the Great Game of imperial powers has long held strategic significance for the subcontinent, including in its later manifestations—the Cold War theatre of the 1980s and the global 'war on terror' in early 2000. Afghanistan's location, straddling Iran and Pakistan and abutting Central Asia makes it significant in India's geopolitics, especially in the Pak-India

**Dominant among India's concerns has been to ensure that the volatility in Afghan territories not become a source of radicalisation and terrorism.**

conflict axis. India has maintained close relations with Afghanistan's successor regimes, except during the Taliban I interregnum. During the decades of the Islamic Republic, India focused on deepening its footprint in Afghanistan and was involved in over 500 development projects. Dominant among India's concerns has been to ensure that the volatility in Afghan territories not become a source of radicalisation and terrorism. However, India was not part of the inner circle of foreign countries involved in multilateral negotiations with the Taliban's power structure. Pakistan's proximity to the Afghan Taliban has made India wary and contributed to its exclusion from discussions on political and security arrangements.

## Refugee Flows

During Afghanistan's five turbulent decades, India encountered Afghan refugee flows drawn by geographical proximity and ease of access. However, neighbouring Iran and Pakistan have borne the weight of mass refugee influxes from Afghanistan. India has been a favoured transit destination for middle-class Afghan refugees from semi-urban settlements in Kabul and the provinces. At the time of the first wave of Afghan refugees precipitated by the Soviet invasion in 1979, foreign policy considerations complicated India's humanitarian response, even inhibiting the protection it extended to Afghan Sikh and Hindu minorities at risk (Sharma 2022). The mujahideen Civil War and Taliban rule of the 1990s saw a steady influx of largely Afghan Hindus and Sikhs as well as Afghan Muslims, with some of them entering India through Pakistan without any travel documents.

Post 2001, the relative stability which followed the establishment of the internationally supported, constitutional Republic of Afghanistan, refugee flows abated. Afghans continued to travel to India but now as tourists, medical tourists and students drawn by the Indian government's policy of providing generous scholarships. But the revival of the Taliban and conflict from 2005-06 saw a steady resumption of refugee flows of Hindu and Sikh minorities, Tajiks and Hazaras. This peaked in 2017-2019. Pakistan's forced repatriation policy (and expulsion directives) and restrictive entry policies of the Global North encouraged many Afghan refugees to look to India.

What is particular in the India Afghan refugee profile is the large and striking presence of young and single Afghan girls and women-headed households. This is evidence not only of the gains made by Afghan women and girls in the last two decades, but also their confidence in India's more liberal and emancipatory environment for girls and women. Several Afghan women fleeing domestic violence or the 'forced marriage' of their minor daughters—but with access to very modest resources and under constant hostile surveillance—recalled the relative ease with which they managed to get Indian travel documents for themselves and their children. Young, single Afghan girls as young as 17 spoke of their family elders being reassured by India's geographic proximity and protective but liberal cultural environment to let them go on their own. This is notwithstanding the many economic hardships which refugees face in India, making it difficult for them to sustain their lives once they arrive. (See Box 1, page 27)

### August 15, 2023: The Taliban takes over

Like the rest of the world, India appeared to be taken aback at the suddenness of the complete collapse of Afghanistan's constitutional republic. However, the fact that in the months leading to the coup, the Indian government had issued over 4,000 exit visas seems to suggest the government's awareness of the denouement. After the Taliban takeover, the government scrambled to evacuate those most at risk. From August 16-25, 2021, special Indian Air Force and Air India flights were mobilised to evacuate stranded Indian and Afghan nationals from Afghanistan. An Afghanistan Cell was set up in the Ministry of External Affairs which operated 24 hours a day, seven days a week to facilitate repatriation and other requests from Afghanistan (Mohan, 2021). Indian repatriation flights brought back 669 people, including 448 Indians and 206 Afghan nationals. The last such repatriation flight on December 10, 2021 brought back 10 Indians and 94 Afghans, primarily those belonging to Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021).



However, when the government revoked visas issued for travel to India on August 25, 2021, there was panic among Afghan nationals. The Ministry of Home officials action to invalidate all previously issued visas was taken following "reports that certain passports of Afghan nationals have been misplaced" (PTI, 2021). Evidently, security concerns and anxiety over a rush of Afghan asylum seekers motivated a revocation of the earlier visa policy. A system of issuing e-Emergency X-Misc visa was instituted. This electronic visa was available only for Afghan citizens and valid for 6 months.<sup>8</sup>

According to an informed Afghan source, the confusion proved deeply costly for many Afghans who lost the time to be evacuated to other countries. Application forms for exit visas were filled out, but no information was communicated to them on whether any action would follow.

As part of India's outreach to non-Muslim minorities from neighbouring countries, the Ministry of Home Affairs granted long-term visas to 2,439 Afghans

<sup>8</sup> In 2022, exit visas were given to only 300 Afghan citizens. [<https://thewire.in/diplomacy/afghanistan-ambassador-india-emergency-visa-taliban> The Wire, December 2022.]



Personal interview with an Afghan woman refugee in Malviya Nagar.

including 237 minorities in 2021. In 2022, between April and September, 112 long-term visas were granted to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs.

UNHCR acknowledges that in India, Afghan refugees “are more protected than other refugees” (Personal interview with UNHCR representative, Delhi 2023). Afghan refugees are the only ones getting long-stay visas. Overall, there have been fewer cases of Afghan refugees being apprehended for violation of the Foreigners Act and far fewer in detention. UNHCR seemed unaware of reports of deportation, or more appropriately, pushback at the airport of Afghan nationals arriving via Iran and Uzbekistan. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 105 Afghans were deported by Foreign Regional Registration Offices (FRRO) in 2021 and 33 in 2020. However, after 2021, FRRO’s power to provide exit permits and deport Afghan nationals was taken away by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Getting the requisite exit permit for Afghan refugees is no longer an issue, especially as the overstay penalty has been reduced to INR 500. Canada has taken the highest number of refugees for resettlement. 1,800 people were resettled in 2022 of which 90% were Afghans, the majority being Afghan Muslims. In 2023, Canada took in a further 800 Afghan refugees, including Afghan Sikhs.

On the foreign policy front, India has been active in the UN and multilateral forums in support of an “inclusive,

negotiated political settlement, with the full, equal and meaningful participation of women.”<sup>9</sup> Earlier, in multilateral platforms such as G20 and BRICS (2021 and 2022), India articulated support for an “inclusive intra-Afghan dialogue” and the need “to uphold human rights, including those of women, children and minorities.” However, in 2023, Afghanistan is no longer on the agenda of Summit Declarations under BRICS or G20.<sup>10</sup>

Academics specialising in South Asian studies such as Avinash Paliwal have commented on New Delhi’s pragmatic acceptance of the inevitability of dealing with the Taliban, even to the extent of going ahead with the Strategic Partnership focusing on an Afghan-led and owned process (*My Enemy’s Enemy* cited in ORF Brief, 2023). So far, India has extended humanitarian assistance via UN agencies to Afghanistan. The Indian government has sent 47,500 metric tonnes of wheat to UNWFP (World Food Programme) centres in Afghanistan and medical assistance. In June 2022, India stationed a Technical Team in Kabul to manage its humanitarian assistance. Since then, the Special Technical Mission’s presence has been expanded, a move welcomed by the Taliban leadership as the country’s first step in engaging with authorities in control of Afghanistan (Shekhawat, 2023).

9 [UNSC 2593]

10 <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/afghan-women-taliban-regime-brics-summit-2023-india-g20-russia-china-afghanistan/31/08/2023>

## DESPERATELY SEEKING SECURITY

**“All Imams and mullahs in captured areas should provide the Taliban with a list of girls above 15 and widows under 45 to be married to Taliban fighters”<sup>11</sup>**

*The Taliban Cultural Commission*

**“You are safe only if you hide. You must stay at home all the time, not go to school, not go to weddings, not go to Friday bazaar, not go to hospital, not speak loudly. It is like prison.”**

*Afghan WHRD refugee, worrying about two young sisters in Kabul*

**“No one wants to be uprooted from their home and families. No one wants to become a refugee.”** It was a refrain that would sound in our ears as we listened to the pained voices of Afghan women survivors, the young and middle-aged, asylum seekers, refugees, stranded medical tourists and students who shared their difficult but courageous stories of escape, and shared their circumstantial powerlessness at the finality of ‘no return’. For a great majority, it was a slide back to a familiar cycle of long years of ‘forcible displacement’, this time not in Pakistan and Iran but in India. Memories were revived of brothers killed, husbands disappeared, sisters or mothers flogged—personal tragedies which had transformed their lives during Taliban I in 1990s. **“It could not be allowed to happen to us again,”** vowed a young Afghan refugee from a minority community, whose family had painstakingly rebuilt a life of dignity and transnational future for themselves over five years in exile.

Families with young, educated, unmarried, professional daughters, in a panic over the notices decreeing ‘forced marriage’ to Taliban fighters, had fled the country in July–August 2021—barely five days before the Taliban took over. Medical tourists who had return tickets found that

following the Taliban takeover, NGOs and international employers advised them to stay back—especially those working for women’s rights. Apparently, many Afghans had refused to believe that the Americans would actually pull out, and none of them had expected the Ashraf Ghani regime to collapse on its own. **“The Taliban had taken over some provinces but when they took Kabul, it was not through fighting and battle. It was like the state was handed over to the Taliban. We were not expecting it to happen that soon,”** explained a young medical trainee, who held back registering with UNHCR until the situation deteriorated in Afghanistan to the point of no return.

Meanwhile we, the researchers, while empathetic, needed to shed some of our own ill-informed presumptions. We were surprised at the stream of Afghan asylum seekers who had come to India back in 2011, when Afghanistan supposedly was at ‘peace’. In 2014, USA announced its decision to withdraw American troops from Afghanistan. The specific subjective context apart, women’s stories spoke of generalised insecurity, targeted violence and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators to commit gender-motivated crimes. **“From 2014, every day or the other, there was an explosion happening. Lots of people were targeted, whether you were working with the government or any foreign agencies or you simply had a good life,”** a young Afghan asylum seeker noted.

<sup>11</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 16 July 2021: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/taliban-asks-for-list-of-girls-widows-to-be-married-to-their-fighters-reports-101626413987086.html>

Even in the sprawling urban environs of Kabul as well as the more remote provinces, the Taliban's influence and its affiliated forces was palpable. *"You assume that it was safe back then, but it was not. Even before the Taliban takeover, they (powerful men with guns, commanders or warlords, the Taliban) were kidnapping someone's wife or someone's daughter, stopping people on the road and slitting their throats. It was not safe,"* an asylum seeker from Bamiyan emphatically said.

Women spoke of targeted attacks because their family members worked in the Afghanistan army or the government in any capacity. A brother or husband could be a painter or security guard for a foreign embassy or transnational company to become a target. Several women were government employees. In the two-decade interregnum between Taliban I and II, girls and women from non-elite, modest and rural backgrounds had enthusiastically embraced school and university. They graduated with diplomas and degrees and were working for the government as teachers, doctors, midwives, accountants, lawyers and clerks. They worked in international humanitarian and human rights organisations and NGOs, the corporate sector and the media. Socially, however, they were still viewed as 'transgressors' for embodying gender equality. Their families were taunted because they worked with foreigners. They were deemed 'corrupt', 'immoral' and targeted for 'destabilising' society. As a resurgent Taliban took over more provinces, female activists were tracked down and attacked with impunity.<sup>12</sup> Appeals to the police, political influentials in the Ashraf Ghani government, Afghan Human Rights Commission, UNAMA and INGOs proved ineffective, often leaving them with flight as their only option.

Zeenat, an established women's rights and social activist, had set up a cluster of women's empowerment centres in the provinces supported by international agencies. However, she alienated conservative elders in Ghazni province who eyed the spread of her complementary business enterprises with jealousy and greed. Zeenat had a daughter (24) whom she was under pressure to marry off to a powerful, notable man to buy peace. As the Taliban forces gained upon the province in 2015,

the Governor and Police Chief warned her of a possible attack. The same night, her house was attacked and looted. Her dog was killed. Fortunately her daughter was away, and Zeenat and her husband managed to escape in time. In all likelihood it was her hostile neighbours rather than Taliban forces who were implicated in the attack. The Taliban was busy attacking government representatives that night. The Governor and Police Chief who had warned her were also killed that night. Zeenat's neighbours were quick to take over all her property.

### **Women spoke of targeted attacks because their family members worked in the Afghanistan army or the government in any capacity.**

As indicated in the narrative of the attack on Zeenat, a Woman Human Rights Defender, local conservative forces were able to leverage the fact that a large proportion of Afghan men were opposed to women's progress. Such ominous trends were dismayingly revealed in a 2017 survey carried out by the UN.<sup>13</sup> According to socio-political commentators—familiar with the significance of the contested 'women's question' in the history of Afghanistan's politics—conservative groups in Afghanistan had adopted a persuasive discourse emphasising the divisions between urban and rural women and educated and uneducated classes. They also criticised activists for their dependence on the international community.

Predominantly, gender-motivated persecution was foregrounded in the narratives of women refugees who detailed the terrible harms resulting from brutal cases of domestic violence, their abject humiliation and powerlessness to claim children's custody or property rights, the existence of a social and institutional milieu that exhorted the 'good wife' to be tolerant and patient, while their resistance was dealt with punitive abuse. Notwithstanding subjective variations, constant in

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/11938891/We-cant-go-back-say-women-activists-on-Taliban-Kunduz-hit-list.html> [Accessed 18/12/15]

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<sup>13</sup> EPRS Briefing 2023

their stories was the vulnerability of young, school-going daughters (and sons) to kidnapping, sexual assault and the constant threat of transactional ‘child marriage’ or ‘forced marriage’—a commonplace phenomenon. It foregrounded a social context where girls and women are considered tradeable and expendable commodities to settle debts or to seize an orphan’s property. Women and girls were only valued for reproductive and bonded labour.

For girls from modest provincial or village backgrounds, schools held the exhilarating prospect of being able to study, of becoming an aware person and all kinds of possibilities for agency. But the route to school could lay you open to risk, especially if the protective presence of a father was absent. Desperate threats of a ‘forced marriage’ and a life of violent subjugation made the 17-year-old Safina make the difficult decision to flee the country.

She described her situation. *“He slapped me many times when I was coming from school with my friends. He would come in my way and threaten to abduct me and rape me. He wanted to force me to marry him. The son of the powerful wealthy ‘Khan’ of the village, he was 33 years-old, rich, uneducated and violent and we were from a lower class.”*

The tragic irony is that her older sister, Sana, was an asylum seeker from a ‘child marriage’ a couple of years before in 2015. A powerful family of the village had earmarked Sana for marriage to their son. At the time, she was five years old. But when she was older, she realised she could not marry him. *“He was totally uneducated like the rest of his family. They had a private army and were always warring with Pashtuns of the adjacent village. The person who might have become my father-in-law was married to four women and in the end, to a total of six women.”* At that time, Sana was studying Computer Science at a University in Kabul. With her father’s support, she left for India as a 23-year-old on a student visa. A year later, the long arm of her would-be husband’s powerful family found her in Delhi and pressured her to



return to Afghanistan. She managed to run back to India and sought the protection of UNHCR.

In another case, two young orphan sisters became prey to the greed of an uncle who wanted to grab their property, located in an exclusive area in Kabul. Leena’s father was feared to have been poisoned by his wealthy cousin. Their 55-year-old uncle lost no time in pressuring her to become his wife. At the time, Leena was 24 years old. *“He would come to our home when my brother was away and sexually assault me, and openly say that after marrying me, he would take over the property. I didn’t tell anyone. But bad things happened. After I rejected his proposal, he deliberately hit my car and injured me. I could not take it any more when he told me that my younger sister, then 17 years old, was now ready to get married and he could use her to get the property.”*

The humiliation, cruelty and violence of a ‘forced marriage’ was revealed in Shoista’s case of domestic violence. Married at the age of 14 and giving birth to four children back-to-back, Shoista was widowed soon after the birth of her fourth child. A militia commander kidnapped her from her husband’s house and kept her locked up, separated from her children and isolated from everyone. *“The General already had two wives and 18 children. For*

*11 years, I faced violence. The General had eight brothers, all young and unmarried. They were jealous of the General and took it out on me. They beat me over trivial things. The other two wives were sisters and belonged to an Uzbek sect. I am Uzbek too, but of a different sect. I felt like an outsider. Meanwhile, after eight years I gave birth to two more children. Regularly he threatened to throw me out, but I stuck it out for the sake of the children. Already, I had lost my four children."*

When Shoista's daughter was 11 years old, a relative from the General's family wanted to marry Shoista off to an old man, using the excuse that it would give her

**"I went to the police with my broken arm hanging on my body. I complained to the police. But was told, 'this is not an important matter. It is not part of our culture to go and arrest your husband.**

a better life. Relations with the General had become more abusive and he kicked her out. With the help of some women on the street who came to her rescue, she sneaked out her two children and sought refuge in a woman's shelter. She went from one shelter to another, eluding the General who kept looking for her. In 2019, she escaped to India. She heard that the General is still looking for her and feels unsafe in India. She is on appeal for refugee status determination after rejection.

Noticeably, several asylum seekers and refugees sought protection from institutional networks of shelters, the police and courts against domestic violence while in Afghanistan. According to survey data, 33% of those who faced human rights violations could access law and order machinery. However, the experience of Shabnam, a women's rights activist—a victim of domestic violence—is not encouraging. *"I went to the police with my broken arm hanging on my body. I complained to the police. But was told, 'this is not an important matter. It is not part of our culture to go and arrest your husband.*

*You have to deal with it'. I did. I quietly fled with my children. But being a refugee is not easy. Before, my kids were going to school. They had their activities, they had their friends. Now, my youngest daughter is suffering from depression. It is not an easy thing for a mother."*

In Afghanistan today, there is systematic institutionalisation of the hardliner Taliban leadership's misogynist ideology in law, policy decrees and harsh punitive action. What did Shabnam—an Afghan WHRD-turned-refugee—perceive as the real difference in the nature and scope of gender persecution when Afghanistan was an elected republic and now, under the Taliban?

*"Oppression of women and violence used to happen earlier too. But now it is everywhere. Before if you tried to get justice, you could face more violence. But now the injustice is more open. And there is no way of accessing justice."*

Shabnam herself tried to access justice for gender violence and humiliation. *"At that time there were so many organisations to hear the voice of women. We had a Women's Ministry, Human Rights Commission and many NGOs. Also, Human Rights*

*Defenders were very active. Social media was active. Afghan women's voices were heard by national and international organisations at that time. But now all that is finished. Some women in Afghanistan—many are my former colleagues—are coming out on the streets and voicing the need of girls and women. They want education—not to go to university, not to work, just to go to school. But the Taliban and its goons attack them and arrest them. There is no media, no organisation to stand with them. Before there were lots of people to stand with them."*

Justice remained elusive even when Afghanistan was an elected republic. Why else would this medical professional with a promising career in public health pull up her roots and escape with her young daughter to India in 2013? *"My daughter was yet to turn 14. She was in Grade 7. She was tall and beautiful. A Commandant's son took to stalking her. He would threaten us, saying, 'give her to me in marriage or I will throw acid on her face and kill all of you'. His mother knew that he was mentally*



## AFGHANISTAN'S NEW GENERATION OF WOMEN: SINGLE WOMEN

Single women comprised of 26% of respondents who had sought refuge in India over the last decade. While some came with their family members like parents, grandparents, brothers or aunts, several young women—as young as 17 or 18—undertook this journey alone, in search of safety (and before that, education). In a deeply patriarchal society like Afghanistan, the decision to quit one's home and family and travel to another country for safety is no small feat. However, the fact that many of these women were able to undertake this journey at young ages—and were able to come to India in search of safety, freedom and opportunities—reflects the deep societal changes that were taking place in Afghanistan over the last two decades of the Republic's existence. Despite threats, women were able to access resources and build capabilities, and with the support of their parents, friends or employers, were able to make the bold decision to leave for an uncertain future.

The threat of an oppressive 'forced marriage', the violation of fundamental freedoms of education, mobility and job prospects, direct harassment, risk of abduction and violence appear as the main drivers for single women to quit Afghanistan. Whereas conditions were relatively safe in Kabul and provincial city centres where the government's presence existed, violence by the Taliban, warlords and other militant groups was rampant in the provinces—especially rural districts. Here, traditional cultural practices fused with religious sanction heightened violence against women with impunity.

The threat of an oppressive 'forced marriage', the violation of fundamental freedoms of education, mobility and job prospects, direct harassment, risk of abduction and violence appear as the main drivers for single women to quit Afghanistan.



Three young Afghan women in Delhi.

Despite these problems, Afghan women could seek the support of some national and international institutions and INGOs. Young women reported receiving help from educational institutions, employers and in some cases, friends and community members. Young women were able to access educational scholarships which paved the way for them to leave the country. In other cases, support from siblings or parents helped them to escape. Being first-generation learners and graduates in their families, and having experienced a certain level of freedom, young Afghan women were no longer prepared to put up with gendered subjugation. Instead, they gave up their homes to seek freedom.



A group of young Afghan women chatting during Community Conversations in Vikaspuri.

*unstable. He once put a gun to his mother's head."*

Despite all her connections, despite 16 referrals including those by the national government, UNAMA and HRC, she could not get the police to arrest him.

### Sister Groups

Of particular note was the empowering solidarity of several sister groups among Afghan asylum seekers and refugees. Striking is the case of the Shafi sisters, who have made Tilak Nagar their temporary place of refuge during these past five years.<sup>14</sup> Originally, the Shafi sisters are from a village in Ghazni province and ethnically they are Hazara Ismailis. The three sisters arrived one by one to India between 2015-18 to escape different forms of gender-motivated persecution back home. A close examination of their experiences reveals the continuum of gender-related persecution that Afghan women have suffered over the last ten years, as well as the agency of these young women and family support that has enabled them to claim their freedom and escape violence.

Sana Shafi was in her fourth semester in Computer Science at a university in Kabul when she decided

to leave Afghanistan and come to India. Promised in marriage as a child to the son of a rich, powerful man in Jaghori village, an adult Sana balked at the prospect of marrying a man who was uneducated, violent and abusive. The father of this man had a private army and was locked in wars with the neighbouring Pashtun village, Rasna. As she was from a family of modest means, she was unable to refuse the marriage arrangement without putting her personal safety and that of her family at risk. But Sana was a first-generation graduate and had access to opportunities which enabled her to arrive in India under a student visa and continue her studies. Forced to return by her would-be in-laws, she ran away back to India and eventually got UNHCR refugee status protection. Sana completed her studies, married a fellow Afghan student and now awaits resettlement in Australia.

Safina was the next to escape. She came to India in 2016, fleeing a 'forced marriage'. After her father's death, a powerful man of the village proposed that she marry his son, a man twice her age. She was only 17 at the time and still in school. On her way to school the son would accost her, slap her, threaten to abduct and kill her if she refused to marry him. It was known he was mentally unstable. Fearing the escalation of these attacks, she left the country with help from her mother and friends to

<sup>14</sup> In an effort to ensure anonymity in a close-knit community, pseudonyms and first names have been used except where the person has herself gone public.

join her sister in Delhi. Her family assisted her in getting documentation and leaving safely. Now in India, Safina works with UNHCR's implementing partner, Bosco. She dreams of being a writer and completing her education.

*"He had slapped me many times on my way to school. Fortunately my mother was there with me... He had threatened to kidnap me, to rape me and all these things... Then my mother arranged for me to leave the country. I moved from Ghazni to Kabul. I did my passport things and all. There was a friend who helped me and I left the country. So it was basically a 'forced marriage'. You don't want to [leave] but you have to... but I still had dreams, so I was writing. I am a writer. I write poems."*

Muneera was the last of the Shafi sisters to leave Afghanistan. As the eldest, she was married off at the age of 14. Muneera, however, managed to continue her studies, completing schooling and earning a university degree despite strong opposition from her husband's family and the responsibility of taking care of her two children. The cruel humiliation of her husband's blatant affair and his plans to marry another woman led to problems in their marital life, domestic violence and ultimately culminated in their divorce. Within the religious and cultural norms of her community, Muneera was unable to secure custody of her two young children during the divorce process. She did not have the money to approach the courts and file a civil suit. Her sisters—who were by that time living in India—persuaded her to join them, giving her hope that she might be able to fight for custody outside Afghanistan once she escaped from the societal structures that had oppressed her.

The Karimova Sisters had come as a unit with their parents and disabled brother. Shogufa was 29 years old when she arrived with her family in India in August 2021, a few days before the Taliban takeover. As an Uzbek family living in Jawzjan province under the powerful Uzbek warlord, General Dostum, Shogufa said that she lived a life of considerable freedom. She and her three sisters were studying and working as teachers without facing any threat or problems. Her parents were both government employees working in the oil industry. However, the Taliban's July notification to provide a list of unmarried girls and widows alarmed them. Only one of Shogufa's sisters was married at the time. Shogufa feared

for her own future and that of her siblings, being aware that they would lose their right to study and work if the Taliban came to power. She convinced her father to leave Afghanistan. Using her brother's illness as a pretext, they arrived in India on a medical visa just a few days before Taliban took over Afghanistan.

In adjacent Vikaspuri is the extended Hussaini family of nine siblings, parents, a cousin, an aunt and her son. Noori (25) and the family had arrived from Kabul in 2017. The generalised insecurity of repeated bomb blasts around Kabul from 2014 onwards—when the American troops decided to withdraw—had already made their family feel insecure. Noori had lost her uncle in the first Taliban regime. He had been 'forcibly disappeared'. With the Taliban forces gaining back control, the family was extremely scared at the prospect of losing another family member. Their Hazara identity made for greater vulnerability. Her father—who had slaved to build his ironmonger workshop—was being threatened to pay protection money. They had a scare when a Taliban-like figure walked into the workshop one day with the intention of abducting him. Even more was the sense of gender vulnerability. Having a large family with six unmarried, young daughters who were working and studying in school and university made Noori's parents deeply anxious. Noori's elder sister had faced threats from someone in her office, undermining her security. When one of Noori's brothers and sister got injured in a bomb blast around Kabul, the family decided to leave.

*"A lot of explosions were happening everyday when I was going to college. We would hear of threats that an explosion would happen. And we know many cases, involving Hazaras and non-Hazaras when such explosions happened and a lot of people were killed. These were covered by the media. We lost a huge number of journalists and activists after 2014,"* Noori shared.

What is notably common in all three sets of sisters is that the young women were motivated to leave by their desire to study, work freely and not be oppressed and treated as inferior human beings without dignity. The women and girls left Afghanistan not just out of fear of losing their lives, but also out of the fear of losing their fundamental freedoms.

## INTERSECTIONAL VULNERABILITY

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In the axis of vulnerability, there is an intersectional layering of the risk of discrimination and persecution depending upon a person's ethno-religious identity, region, class, gender, sexuality and disability. The representative sample of WRN's survey indicates that nearly 75% respondents faced discrimination on account of their gender identity. Over 50% confronted discrimination on the basis of other identities such as their ethnicity, religion, disability and sexuality. Nearly half registered on an axis of vulnerability at the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Particularly at risk were those who advocated for women's rights and were viewed as transgressing social norms by taking on non-traditional roles such as women in public life, women working with men, especially foreigners.

**Over 50% confronted discrimination on the basis of other identities such as their ethnicity, religion, disability and sexuality. Nearly half registered on an axis of vulnerability at the intersection of ethnicity and gender.**

### Ethnicity

Hazaras, a Muslim minority, perceived themselves as particularly vulnerable to persecution especially because they were so distinctly recognisable. Within the context of generalised insecurity during the Islamic Republic, it was believed that Hazara-majority localities, schools and mosques were targeted more often. A middle-aged professional who had been working in the government felt it was her Hazara identity—rather than her being a Christian convert—which placed both her and her husband (also a government employee) at risk. They were subjected to threatening phone calls and hostile inquiries from government security agencies. *"We weren't friendly with any foreigners, yet we were suspected because we are Hazaras."*

Others, too, protested against this unfounded distrust against Hazaras by Pashtuns when in Afghanistan, especially exercised by those sympathetic to Taliban ideology. In one asylum seeker's case, her husband's Hazara identity placed them in a life-threatening situation. In 2013, he was working as a driver with Americans in Herat province. Once, while at a mosque for namaz a Pashtun colleague picked a fight with him, calling him out for not praying like Pashtuns. (Pashtuns, supposedly, pray differently from Hazaras.) Subsequently, it was found that this Pashtun colleague was working for the Taliban and he was fired. The fired colleague blamed her husband for his loss and even shot at him while he was riding a bike. Unable or unwilling to provide protection, his company advised him to leave so he resigned.

Khadija, a Hazara refugee added a twist to the presumed ethno-religious tension and discrimination against minority Hazaras. *"Having a minority Hazara identity is not in itself the source of vulnerability,"* she explained.

The difference between Hazara and Pashtun girls was that *“Pashtuns do not allow their women to study. They believe that women and girls must be made to sit at home. But Hazaras do believe that men and women are equal. They are more likely to send their girls to school, to university and to work. So Taliban-like forces target Hazara mosques and schools.”*

The tendency to conflate Pashtuns with Taliban forces further reinforced the Hazaras’ sense of vulnerability. Nuzhgan—an asylum seeker who arrived recently on an e-Emergency X-Misc Indian visa—emphasised the location of her joint family’s home in a politically-influential Pashtun part of Kabul when explaining the multiple vulnerabilities that she was at risk of.

*“The area is a political area, and this area belongs to political Pashtuns. Our [Pashtun] neighbours have already joined the Taliban. We knew it would be too risky to go on staying there. We left everything. Just with one hand bag, we escaped. After that the Taliban captured the house. Now they’re looking for us.”*

She was a teacher of Theology, English and Pashto. She had drawn the hostile attention of families of some of her Pashtun girl students, who she was trying to persuade to not to drop out of school after Grade 6. She was threatened at gunpoint to stop. Her husband was at risk too, because he had been a subcontractor with a foreign embassy. In 2022, the family managed to flee to Bengaluru via Dubai.

In some stories of gender persecution, the stereotype of a violent, predatory Pashtun was invoked to establish the reality of risk. Zakia, a widow had fled with her four daughters for fear of their possible abduction and ‘forced marriages’. *“In the village where we were living in the Kabul area, we, Tajiks, were surrounded by Pashtuns. Those Pashtuns were difficult to identify during the day but at night they were Taliban. My [light-eyed] daughters were very beautiful. That’s why they were threatening*



Woman Human Rights Defender Khatera Hashmi at her residence in Delhi

*us. They wanted to forcefully take away my daughters. In the neighbourhood there had been incidents of girls being abducted in cars on the way to school and ‘given’ to their members. My girls were threatened on their way to school. That is why I used to escort them to keep them safe.”*

## Women’s Rights Advocates

The conflict in Afghanistan between different visions of modernity and tradition, between traditional, self-governing forces in the periphery and state-driven centralising reforms has often been focalised around the contested and highly politicised area of women’s rights. As averred in an insightful EU Parliamentary Briefing in 2023, the pendulum swing in Afghanistan between regressive and liberal perspectives explains “why top-down reforms have not become embedded across the country and why they have arguably failed to

One day, on her way to work, three Talibs attacked her. Khatera was two months pregnant then. "I was hit on the head and stabbed 10 times. I was lying for dead. As if that was not enough, they gouged out both my eyes."

foreground the concerns of Afghan women themselves.' (Atatürk, 2023) Women's rights advocates—whether working for INGOs, media, government or in public life—were targeted for pursuing a foreign agenda, and threatened with punishment for 'transgressing'.

A young, idealistic and married Pashtun woman, Khatera, (33) had ignored the warnings of her father and taken up a job 'unsuitable' for a woman. Khatera was in the Afghan police force in a district in Ghazni province. She was driven by the prospect of helping young widows who were badly mistreated in the community. Often, during the three months that she served with the force, her father warned her that she must quit, or she would be responsible for whatever happened to her.

Her colleagues insinuated that Khatera's father had Taliban connections. One day, on her way to work, three Talibs attacked her. Khatera was two months pregnant then. *"I was hit on the head and stabbed 10 times. I was lying for dead. As if that was not enough, they gouged out both my eyes."* In 2020, she came to India in the hope of regaining some sight. Left behind were her two children. Now, the children are repeatedly harassed by the Taliban. The Taliban wants to know when their mother will return."

To discredit the work of women's rights advocates, conservative groups persuasively spread a discourse which emphasises the divisions between urban and rural women, and educated and uneducated classes. However, we came across several courageous women's rights activists (who had sought safe haven in India) who questioned this discourse as a likely manipulation of social fault lines. Qumar Gul, a Woman Human Rights Defender had to drop out after Grade 6, but managed to teach herself through her long association with several NGOs working on women and children's rights in Ghazni's rural districts. So proficient had Qumar Gul become in legal matters that on one occasion, she defended the rights of a local woman in court and won. Seeing her ability, her husband's family—who was embroiled in a property dispute—urged her to fight their case. She won, much to the outrage of their powerful opponents. Reportedly, they conspired with local Taliban forces in Kunduz, misrepresenting the middle-aged Qumar Gul as a beautiful, 25-year-old, urban, educated Woman Human Rights Defender. She was abducted and brutally tortured, as a result of which she became disabled.



Screengrab from Khatera Hashmi's Interview with India Today. Original video : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ho2RzybRQk&t=229s>

After six weeks, when she was being transferred to a notorious prison in Guantanamo Bay, she was fortuitously rescued. The Talib escorting Qumar Gul turned out to be her nephew who had run away at the age of 12 and joined the Taliban. Her body badly broken, she needed urgent medical care. Unable to let her go, a deal was struck. Her husband would be held as 'hostage' in his nephew's armed compound. Meanwhile, Qumar Gul came to India.

Many women's rights advocates come from modest rural or semi-rural homes and are first-generation literates. They are 'child brides' who acquired higher education against tremendous odds. Shabnam was 'forced' into a 'marriage' when she was in Grade 9. She found herself living with a family *"where women have no value except to cook, clean, provide men relief and children. There was no one to care for you if you died. It was your responsibility. It made me think differently. I, as an adult woman, couldn't accept this. I didn't want my infant daughter to live like this."* So began Shabnam's difficult journey to go back to high school in secret. She was eight months pregnant when she cleared Grade 12. She registered at a university in Kabul on a scholarship and secretly commuted to her classes. All this was done in hiding and with the tremendous support of her teachers. However, when she got a job in an American agency as cultural advisor, it was no longer possible to hide. *"Yes, I was beaten, often badly, but I didn't care. What I wanted was more important."* When she would not quit, her 'husband' threw her out, but not before he had married again.

**Shabnam was 'forced' into a 'marriage' when she was in Grade 9. She found herself living with a family "where women have no value except to cook, clean, provide men relief and children.**



Woman Human Rights Defender Qumar Gul during interview in Bhogal.

Other women's rights advocates had grown up as refugees in Iran and Pakistan, and once back in Afghanistan were committed to the struggle for women's rights and pro-democracy advocacy. Shazia even entered the fray as an independent candidate in parliamentary elections during Karzai's time. A radio broadcaster in a district in Kapisa, Shazia's popular programme inspired hundreds of local girls and women to dream of freedoms. Threatening letters and calls warned her to conform. When her appeals for protection to the broadcasting network, police and even to the United Nation's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan had little impact, she stopped working in 2015. Three years after Shazia found refuge in India, her younger relative, Ferishta—who was also a well-known activist—was gunned down in public.

## Religious Minorities

### Afghan Christians

Christian Afghans are a small, persecuted minority in Afghanistan, a country where over 99% of the population follows Islam. Almost all Afghan Christians are converts. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's Afghanistan report from 2021 established that there were 10,000 to 12,000 Christian converts in Afghanistan, although this data is not fully conclusive because Afghan Christians routinely hide their religious identity (Mohammad & Udin, 2021). Afghan Christians had faced targeted violence and persecution during the Taliban I regime between 1996 and 2001. Taliban's rule is based on the interpretation of Sharia Law, where the act of converting to any other religion is considered as apostasy, and is punishable by death (Rand, 2021). Christians discovered during the first Taliban regime were sentenced to death. Following USA's invasion in 2001 and the deployment of foreign troops, the Christian population grew.

However, the new 2004 Constitution failed to provide sufficient protection for Afghan Christians and did not embed ideas of religious liberty into the legal system

(Rand, 2021). Apostasy continued to be a punishable offence. Videos of secret churches were in circulation and fundamentalist parliamentarians in the Afghan National Assembly called for the execution of Christian converts (*Baptist Press*, 2010). Taliban and other jihadi groups were present in many provinces in the country and attacks on discovered house churches were common. If exposed, Afghan Christian converts faced harassment and targeted violence from their family and community members.

Muslim women discovered to have married Christian men were under pressure from families to divorce. Ayesha, a Muslim Tajik married a prosperous Christian Tajik who was a cross-border trader. Soon after her marriage she converted to Christianity and became an ardent believer. She was an English language teacher. Her parents were most displeased and the marriage was not celebrated. *"My father was angry and hit me with a tarmuz (tea kettle)."* Ayesha and her husband hid their religious identity but rumours spread that they were Christian. *"My mama (uncle) tried to defuse the situation by saying that I would divorce my husband—as if it was my husband who had forced me to convert."* It became a huge problem for her family and for Ayesha, leaving



Community Conversations at an Afghan Church in Delhi.



became the only solution. Ayesha's husband was already in Delhi. She left in 2020.

From 2005 onwards, Afghan Christians had started seeking refuge in other countries including India. Persecution owing to religious identity remains the main reason for the 'forced displacement' of this small Afghan community. Delhi hosts two Afghan churches. One is located in a South Delhi residential colony, host to a cluster settlement of Afghan refugees (Sharma 2022). The young Pastor Sikander Alex came from a family of Pashtun Syeds, who claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet and thereby protectors of the faith. Immersed in theological inquiry, Sikander was drawn to Christianity and converted.

He was forced to leave when there was an attack on a secret church in Kabul. There was a video grab of him leaving the building. Discovered as a Christian, he was vulnerable to opposition and likely violence from his family and community. He fled to India in search of refuge, familiar with the country as a student and drawn by the prospect of being able to freely practice his faith. He became a pastor at the Lajpat Nagar church after the previous pastor, Abid, had managed to resettle in Canada. Pastor Abid had founded the Canada Afghan Church and helped to get 15-20 Christian Afghans resettled in Canada. According to Pastor Sikander, there are close to 175 Afghan Christians living in Delhi. Following the 2021 Taliban takeover, Canada took in a substantive number of Hazaras for resettlement via the complementary pathway—especially Christians.

Hazaras and Tajiks have the highest representation in India's Afghan Christian community. They were drawn to India as a destination country because of its 'secular' principles and the freedom to practice their faith, Pastor Sikander said. Like him, many also chose India because they had visited the country before for educational purposes.

From observations gained during attendance of Afghan Church's evening service in Lajpat Nagar, Church attendees consisted of girls, boys, women and men who came over to India in the last 10 to 17 years, from 2006 to 2013. Afghan Christian children who had grown up in Delhi had assimilated with local Indian communities. In the Focus Group Discussions, they claimed to face

fewer issues of bullying and harassment in Delhi schools as opposed to Muslim Afghan children. They felt more comfortable with the host community than with Afghan Muslims. They had Indian friends. The fear of encountering the kind of hostility from Afghan Muslims that they had faced back home made them hesitate from openly socialising with the Afghan Muslim locals. Raghav Sharma—in a field-based study of Afghan non-Muslim minority refugees in India—quoted an Afghan Christian mother, *"Afghan Muslim children—if they know of their faith—will mock them and say bad things"* (Sharma, 2022). Afghan Christians voiced their hesitation about sharing their religious identity with other Afghan refugees in India. Women in particular admitted that they preferred to remain discreet about their religious identity when among the Afghan community and would wear a headscarf to blend in.

**Women in particular admitted that they preferred to remain discreet about their religious identity when among the Afghan community and would wear a headscarf to blend in.**

Evidently, Afghan Christian women have reasons to be apprehensive—at least newer arrivals do. Massoma (31) came to India as a single woman in 2019. In Afghanistan, she had been working with foreigners as a kindergarten teacher. She was also teaching the foreigners Dari so that they could teach the Bible to the children. In the process, Massoma secretly converted to Christianity when she was 17 or 18 years old. A neighbour with powerful contacts began to suspect her of being a Christian. The neighbour tried to blackmail her and spread gossip among the locals about her. Once, she was even attacked with a knife. Her parents sent her to India for temporary refuge, but returning to Afghanistan became impossible. Meanwhile, refuge in Delhi among Afghan Muslims remained elusive. Two Afghan Muslim men noticed that she was a single woman living alone and began following her. *"They noticed my cross and tried talking me into giving up Christianity. One day I saw*



Inside one the Gurdwaras in Tilak Nagar, frequented by Afghan Sikhs.

*them breaking into my house, trying to break the lock.”*  
Massoma has now shifted to a more anonymous locality.

Sana, a young Afghan woman, decided to flee to India when a video of her conversion was leaked and widely circulated on Afghanistan’s social media platforms. She used to work as a kindergarten teacher at a private school in Kabul, where she found out about Christianity through the people who were running the institution. Her family was unaware of her leaving the country. She moved to India with her Christian employers and neighbours.

Most Afghan Christians are looking to for third-country settlement because the option of applying for naturalised Indian citizenship would draw undesirable publicity to their vulnerable Afghan Christian minority identity. *“We as Afghan Christians have to be very careful, because everyone knows us [in the community]. If we apply for [Indian] citizenship, it would be as an Afghan Christian. Even when we have not applied, so many of the Afghan community are suspicious that we are converting people. But we are not converting people.”*

## Afghan Sikhs and Hindus: Caught in a Limbo, Belonging Nowhere

*“Whenever we go to Afghanistan they ask us, ‘Oh, have you returned from your country?’ And when we are in India, we are asked, ‘When are you returning back to your country?’ We neither belong to India nor Afghanistan—what can be more pathetic than this?” – Narinder Singh, Khalsa Diwan<sup>15</sup>*

In a congested locality in Tilak Nagar, the Kabuli Gurdwara appears squeezed for space, as it tries to accommodate the traditional structure of a Sikh house of worship. But the portal impressively opens to a ubiquitous chandelier, the ornate dressage of the holy book, *Guru Granth Sahib* and is decorated with a red carpet and bright draperies. Well-to-do Afghan Sikh businessmen who had come for trade and stayed on in India for refuge in 1980s and early 1990s had been able to impressively rebuild a familiar sacred place of worship for successive waves of Afghan Sikhs. Here, the *sangat*

15 Quoted by Anvesha Ghosh (2020) in ‘Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019: What does it mean for Afghan Sikhs and Hindus in India?’, ICWA, Delhi. [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls\\_id=4830&lid=3422](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=4830&lid=3422)

Too many generations of embattled Afghan Sikh families have been waiting decades for Indian citizenship or third-country resettlement. From running successful businesses, their sons are now eking out a living selling t-shirts on the pavement.

(congregation) could relate to invocations of their former lives spent in Kandahar, Jalalabad and Kabul. For over five decades, Afghan Sikhs have fled generalised insecurity caused by targeted bomb blasts of their gurdwaras, kidnappings and extortion, forced takeovers of Sikh girls and commercial establishments and physical assaults and killings. So large has the Afghan Sikh congregation grown in India that another Afghan Gurdwara has come up. This Gurdwara—more modest than the older one—reflects the reduced economic circumstances of Afghan Sikhs who have taken flight over the last couple of decades.

In the early 70s—before the whirligig of successive governments and Afghanistan's violent destabilisation began—the number of Hindu nationals residing in Afghanistan was conservatively estimated to be 20,000-30,000 and that of Sikh nationals at 15,000 (Ghosh 2020). Five decades later, by the time Taliban II took over, there were estimated to be less than 300 Sikhs. Currently, there are said to be around 150 Sikhs and the number is fast dwindling.

Guru Nanak—the founder of the faith—had visited Kandahar and brought Sikhism to Afghanistan (SikhiWiki, 2009). The community grew to become an important part of the socio-economic life of Afghanistan, prosperous in business and trade. Dari and Pashto-speaking Afghan Hindus and Sikhs came to be accepted as an integral part of Afghanistan, and spread across the south and east. They assimilated into Afghan society, adopting traditional cultural practices and dressing. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Amanullah Khan (1919-1929) granted Hindus and Sikhs full citizenship status. They joined the military and civil services and became public

representatives, though Anwasha Ghosh—an authority on the Afghan Sikhs—alludes to harassment and discrimination (Ghosh, 2020).

According to Pratap Singh, a Gurdwara elder, violence started with changing regimes. The Soviet-Mujahideen conflict found Afghan Hindu and Sikh minorities caught in the middle, triggering the first flow of refugees to India in the 1980s. *“Hindus and Sikhs are viewed as the same in Muslim nations, all are kafirs. There was faith-based bullying and violence.”* Appeals to the Indian government for asylum was met with some reservation in view of Indo-Soviet foreign policy considerations (Sharma, 2022). From 1992 onwards when the Civil War broke out and the conflict became increasingly ethnicised, people started counting who was Hindu or Muslim, who was Tajik, Uzbek or Hazara. Writer H Emadi describes the situation. “Warlords associated with Islamic parties brutalised [minorities], looted their belongings, molested their women and after ‘forcing’ them to embrace their faith, ‘forced’ them against their will to ‘marry’ them. Because many of them were affluent traders and businessmen, they became prey for kidnapping for ransom.” (H Emadi as quoted by A Ghosh, 2020)

In an impromptu group discussion at the Kabuli Gurdwara, Amarjeet Kaur told us she came to India in 1992. Her brother was left behind to look after their trans-border pharmaceutical business in Kunduz. He followed in 1994. Later, she describes that *“my brother went back to check on the business. He was executed. My sister was to join us. She was washing clothes and a bomb blast happened. She died.”* Lal Kaur recalled with nostalgia their bustling shoe shop in Kunduz. Their Muslim neighbours were always nice and helpful.



A Gurdwara in Tilak Nagar, frequented by Afghan Sikhs.

*“Muslims never bothered the Hindu-Sikh women. It was fear of the militant groups and Taliban that drove us out. After we left, Muslims took over our shops and homes.”*

The number of fleeing Afghans surged in the 1990s with some entering India through Pakistan without any travel documents and settling down in Amritsar. National security considerations would soon intervene to restrict the free entry of Afghans, Sikhs and Hindus. Refugee flows swelled further under the Taliban regime. The expectation of stability under the Karzai Government saw a trickle-back of refugees. But with conflict breaking out from 2005-06 onwards, there was a steady emptying out of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus from Afghanistan. According to the Canadian Immigration Board (2004), of the total number of Afghan refugees in India, an estimated 65% were Hindus and Sikhs (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2004).

Those who remained were repeatedly targeted by the local branch of the militant group, Islamic State. With every attack, there was a rush for exit. In the 2018 Kabul attack, 13 Sikhs were killed. They were on their way to meet President Ghani. Meanwhile, a suicide bomber struck a Gurdwara in the eastern city of Jalalabad. There were around 1,500 Sikhs there. In 2020 the Gurdwara Shor Bazar in Kabul was attacked, and 22 Sikhs were killed—including women and children. In June 2022, another Gurdwara in Kabul was attacked.

The Taliban’s second takeover triggered panic among minority communities. At the eleventh hour, the Indian government evacuated 669 stranded people—including 448 Indians and 206 Afghan nationals—primarily those belonging to Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities. Surprisingly, the Indian government’s active foreign policy engagement with people of Indian origin and the Citizenship Amendment Act’s fast-tracking of citizenship for persecuted non-Muslim minorities did not appear reassuring to Afghan Sikhs. Too many generations of embattled Afghan Sikh families have been waiting decades for Indian citizenship or third-country resettlement. From running successful businesses, their sons are now eking out a living selling t-shirts on the pavement.

Gurdwara elders could not hold back their frustration. In a fit of pique they wondered whether they would have been better off staying on in Afghanistan. *“What has the Indian government done? They chartered planes and brought 1,200-1,300 people. But they provided nothing else. It was the Gurdwaras that mobilised food and a place to stay. Citizenship? Many have not got citizenship even after staying in India for 20-30 years. It took me 18 years to get citizenship. Extortion is the only problem in Afghanistan. Nothing else. Violence is targeted at Muslims. Children born in India are being called ‘Afghans’. There is a problem of assimilation [here]. Long-term visas are promised but not issued. The bureaucracy [FRRO] is the problem,”* said Pratap Singh.

Others complained not only of the inordinate delay in getting Indian citizenship, but the anomaly of children born in India not getting citizenship status by default. They spoke of the unreasonableness of authorities requiring that the Afghan embassy issue an Afghan Tazkira or national identity card to a child born in India.

In the case of girls and women, there is a strong internalisation among Afghan Sikhs and Hindus of the conservative cultural practices of Afghan society, especially the denial of autonomy, mobility and education. Most women have had no opportunity to study.

The ordeal of running from pillar to post to secure documents, the arbitrary nature of refugee status determination and the risk of deportation if rejected has made many Afghan Sikhs and Hindus not register with UNHCR. *“When we apply to UNHCR, it takes a long time to know whether we have been accepted as a refugee or not. We have to wait for months to know about our rejection or acceptance. If we get rejected and decide to leave the country, we have to pay the FRRO lots of money as fine. It is around 1800 Indian rupees per year, per family member. It becomes extremely difficult to pay,”* an Afghan Sikh refugee said in an interview with Raghav Sharma (Sharma, 2022).

The regulation has changed since 2017. The fine has been reduced to INR 500 and Afghan Hindus and Sikhs have been earmarked for grant of long-term visas. But these changes were either unknown to most Afghan Sikhs, or if known, were of no matter.

The lack of material support, access to education, health, accommodation and jobs in India for refugees has made Afghan Hindus and Sikhs particularly impatient and discontented with UNHCR’s presumption that integration is better suited for them rather than third-country settlement. Most Afghan Sikhs and Hindus are keen on third-country settlement and enviously referred to the 272 Afghan Sikhs who were evacuated via India and resettled in Canada.

Strained economic conditions of many Sikh families has resulted in children not going to school and working odd jobs. Many families left Afghanistan when their children were in Grade 6 or 7. They have not been able to continue their schooling in India. In the case of girls and women, there is a strong internalisation among Afghan Sikhs and Hindus of the conservative cultural practices

of Afghan society, especially the denial of autonomy, mobility and education. Most women have had no opportunity to study.

Like most Afghan Sikh women of the locality, Mandeep (29), too, has never gone to school. But that has not held her back from running a busy tailoring boutique necessary for her parents and her to survive. She came to India in 2009. Her family is from Jalalabad but had migrated to Kabul for safety. Her brother-in-law was killed in a bomb explosion. Mandeep’s story is one of severe domestic violence. Her husband’s family would constantly harass her for dowry. *“I brought so much dowry but they always wanted more. My in-laws, his mother and sister would beat me. They broke my finger once.”* Mandeep’s parents wanted her to leave and join them in Delhi but she did not want to give up her two boys. After her mother-in-law attacked her with a pair of scissors, she agreed to divorce him. He promptly remarried and today, the family—including her two kids—are resettled in Delhi. She has no contact with the boys.

*“Nobody listens to women in Afghanistan. The Gurdwara Panchayat sat in Kabul to adjudicate on the divorce and settlement. They promised to give me my children. But I was made to sign a paper and tricked into losing my kids. I am sure the Gurdwara Panchayat was bribed to make me sign away my rights to the boys. The Gurdwara Panchayat was the only ‘judicial’ body available. Even when I came to India, nobody from the Gurdwara asked me about my situation. Nobody offered to help.”*

Afghan Hindus and Sikhs—who were once well-integrated into Afghan society—now remain aloof from their co-nationals in India. The Citizenship Amendment Act has increased intra-community resentment.

## BEING A REFUGEE

### Why India is seen as a transit country

India's proximity, cultural familiarity, a relatively easy visa regime, educational infrastructure, an expanding economy, socio-political stability and a liberal environment makes it an attractive option for middle-class families. This includes families from the provinces, women-headed households and young, single, unaccompanied girls.

However, being an asylum seeker or refugee in India is to lead a life of legal precarity, economic uncertainty, deprivation and to be left with depressing prospects for children's futures.

India does not have a national refugee law or a recognised regulatory framework. All foreign nationals come under the disciplinary framework of the Foreigners Act (1946), and thereby, are vulnerable to deportation. Practices towards refugees are ad hoc and subject to

foreign policy, national security and increasingly ideological considerations. Recent trends towards derogation from non-refoulement has undermined the country's historical record of humanitarian care and protection of mass refugee influxes. However, there is a tradition of courts and rights-based NGOs reading constitutionally guaranteed fundamental freedoms and the country's international law obligations with a view to protect the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

Also, the country is not signatory to the international refugee protection regime, such as the 1951 Status of Refugees Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. UNHCR has an ambivalent status in India. It is involved in the protection, refugee status determination and care of urban refugee communities. But its limited geographical presence, restrictive budget and ambivalent mandate makes for a greatly frustrating relationship with refugees. This is not in the

... being an asylum seeker or refugee in India is to lead a life of legal precarity, economic uncertainty, deprivation and to be left with depressing prospects for children's futures.





Community Conversations in Lajpat Nagar.

least because of refugee impatience with UNHCR's presumption of integration as the preferred option and the diminishing possibilities of third-country settlement.

Afghan refugees as discussed above are a favoured refugee community in India. The Ministry of Home Affairs issued a notification in July 2017 for grant of extension of stay visas, residential permits and long-term visas for a certain category of Afghan nationals owing to disturbed conditions in Afghanistan. Children of Afghan nationals with long-term visas are allowed to take admission in universities and technical professional institutions. Free movement, opening a bank account, taking up self-employment and opening businesses is permitted. The Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 also fast-tracks citizenship for Afghan Hindus, Sikhs and Christians who came into the country before 2014.

UNHCR has also updated its guidelines on Afghan nationals. The February 2023 Update iterated a 'No-return' advisory. It also included revisions in the appeal process for rejected cases. It stated that the guidelines have been revised "to ensure that Afghans whose claim for international protection was rejected prior to 15 August, 2021 are able to lodge a fresh or subsequent claim." The protection needs of former employees associated with the Karzai government and international community, journalists, Human Rights

Defenders and persons belonging to minority communities have been considered. Importantly, the revised guideline states that Afghan women and girls are likely to be in need of international refugee protection outlined under the 1951 Refugee Convention.

With a sense of complete powerlessness at the opacity of UNHCR's refugee status determination process, Najiba wailed, *"for 15 days, back-to-back, I went to the UNHCR door. Every month we write an email to UNHCR. Every week my husband also goes to UNHCR. [There is not a year] that we [don't] follow up, but we don't know why UNHCR isn't giving us refugee status."*

Najiba's husband was in the Afghan National Army, engaged in the specialised task of mine clearance. An explosion disabled him. Her area was infiltrated by Taliban, and through their proxy—the mullah of the local mosque—the family was told, 'give us your son (22) to fight with us or give us your daughter in marriage.' The family came to India in 2017 on a medical visa to get her husband's infected leg treated, and stayed on.

Parveena Kakar was working in the Ministry of Economy. *"There were bomb blasts and rockets fired everyday but that did not bother us because we were used to it by then. The village we live in is under the control of a General [warlord]. When our daughter (18) started going to university, the General noticed her and began stalking her."*



*We had no choice but to leave.*” In India, UNHCR rejected their case.

Parveena, like most women refugees complains about mental health issues. She has gone for therapy and taken medicines but the depression comes back. Tension about their future, their economic security and refugee status remains. However, it is the children she worries about.

*“We came for my daughter, but she is in deep depression. My daughter doesn’t go anywhere, doesn’t do anything at home and is always angry. This mental problem and tension is with everyone. Even my young child says to me all the time, ‘when will we get refugee cards?’ All my savings are also finished. All night I crochet because no one else is working in my home. I went to UNHCR several times, I called them. But there are no ears to listen. They just say, you have to wait.”*

In India, refugees have the right to access education in local government schools. But the refugee card is not always recognised and many schools insist on Aadhar, India’s digital identity card. Bosco, UNHCR’s implementing partner provides a bridge school for younger children. As is the case of many refugee families, young

children are in school but children above 16 are working. Humaira’s son is an extra in films, the daughter works in a beauty salon. She makes INR 8,000 a month. It is not enough to pay the rent.

India does not allow refugees to work in formal employment and the conditions of casual and part-time work are deeply exploitative. Many refugee families were well-off when in Afghanistan, with white collar jobs in government offices, schools, hospitals and NGOs. Today, their sons are working in restaurants, ice-cream parlours and bakeries.

Laila Azmi worked at Kabul International Airport in Human Resources. She came to India in 2018 after the traumatic experience of being held hostage at the airport for four hours and facing bomb blasts at work. In her Afghan neighbourhood, her family would

face abusive taunts about her character because she worked with foreign men. Socially she was stigmatised so much that her cousin considered it a family obligation to make her his second wife. Her brother was bullied and one day, stabbed. She left for India, thinking to return to her family later. In India, she looked for a job in a travel agency. *“In two different places, I was asked to prove that I was not associated with the Taliban.”*

Another refugee, Leena used to work in a private bank in Kabul. She got stumped looking for a job in Delhi because she cannot produce an Aadhar card and does not have a bank account. They refused to pay her in cash.

Muneera was a practicing gynaecologist in a district clinic in Balkh which was overrun by the Taliban. The Taliban was opposed to the clinic’s vaccination and family planning programme. As the doctor, she was targeted. She needs to care for her four children, including two disabled sons. As a qualified medical professional she should have been able to find a job in India. *“I can’t get a good salary here. There was a place in Lajpat Nagar which offered me a job with 20,000 salary and worked me from 11 am to 8 pm. How can I pay someone to babysit my children with that amount?”*



Tamana (33), was a rising women's rights professional with international agencies. Domestic violence forced her to uproot her kids from a settled, comfortable life of plenty to start a new, uncertain life as a refugee single mother.

*"Right now, my youngest daughter (9) is suffering from depression. It is not an easy thing for a mother. I told UNHCR and they said, 'don't bring your children into these things.' I said, 'I cannot provide for them. Then how can I not bring them in between? Why are you saying this? That 'you too, work'? You know that we are not allowed to work in India. I am a single mother trying to provide for my kids, don't compare yourself with me. I'm living here as a refugee.' Why do they [UNHCR] show their worst behaviour? I don't know whom they are working for. They rejected me."*

Practically everyone mentioned the strain, stress and desperate condition of being a refugee. Depressed, angry children—who once had bright prospects—now take out their frustration and anger at their mothers. Fathers—frustrated and depressed at not being able to find proper jobs and provide for families—are turning abusive and violent at home. Sufiya married for love and spent her married life seeking a safe refuge. First, the couple went to Turkey. When discovered, her father made it clear that she should come back so that he could kill her. In Denmark, asylum was denied. Resisting deportation, her husband was detained for 3-4 years. Deported back to Afghanistan, it was risky for them to stay on. They left for India in 2021. Sufiya managed to find a job but her husband is still jobless. Depressed and traumatised from the long period of detention, he has turned violent. Domestic violence is one of the most common complaints of Afghan refugee women. UNHCR has set up safe houses in Delhi and provides protection, especially against errant and violent husbands who come looking for runaway wives.

An enterprising woman who was able to overcome her depression and even counsel others is Mehr Afzun (55), a former social science teacher in Afghanistan. The family came to India in 2018 to escape the 'forced marriage' of her daughter. Mentally depressed at her situation here, she decided to study the subject on the internet. She was able to help herself and wrote a book in Dari to help others.

The close-knit Afghan community provides a vital lifeline for those in economic distress but it also functions as an oppressive social watch, especially on women-headed households and single women. Several such families preferred to live outside Afghan residential clusters.

Several women mentioned policing from Indian Muslims too, about their clothes, the proper wearing of hijab and burqa. Asked whether the rising tide of communalism impacted their lives as Afghan Muslims, several women seemed to echo Shazia. *"The communal issue is only between Indian Muslims and Hindus. Afghans are not involved. Refugee and police relations are much better here."*

Most Afghan refugees have pinned their hopes on third-country settlement where the government assists refugees to get back on their feet. Tense relations between India and UNHCR inhibit the possibility of a more expansive humanitarian regime of protection and care for refugees. Most importantly, India needs a national refugee law or regulatory policy framework which legally recognises the category of asylum seekers and refugees and their rights.

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