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# A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AND SOCIAL BELONGING AMONG AFGHAN REFUGEES

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## Abstract

*The political instability, inconsistent documentation processes, and fluctuating policies on documentation and return have created long-term displacement for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Afghan refugees in Pakistan have been displaced for long periods of time, affected by conflict, political instability, and shifting policies. These situations bring to the fore the sociological issues of identity negotiation, legal insecurity, social recognition and belonging. This research explores the process of negotiating national, cultural and social identity among Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the effect of their status. The study employed a qualitative research design and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a total of 22 male Afghan respondents aged 22 to 56 years in the District Mardan of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in Tehsil Takht Bhai and Jalala Afghan Camp. Due to ease of access and cultural sensitivity issues, a convenience sampling method was used. The interview data were analyzed in terms of the five interconnected themes of negotiating multiple identities, legal and future insecurity, discrimination and social exclusion, cultural continuity and social networks, and belonging and recognition. There were two major findings from this study. Firstly, it was the accounts of the participants themselves that highlighted the conflict between cultural and social bonds that had been established as a result of a long-term stay in Pakistan and the uncertainty surrounding the legal status and future residence of the participants. Secondly, experiences of social labelling and perceived social exclusion impacted the participants' recognition and sense of belonging, whereas family, common cultural practices and social networks were a key source of continuity and support. The study contributes to the sociological concept of identity negotiation and social belonging of Afghan refugees in*

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*Pakistan and highlights the necessity of clear documentation policies, protection from discrimination, cultural recognition, and meaningful opportunities for social participation.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement is not just a transfer of geographical location from one country to another but is a much deeper social phenomenon which can fundamentally change one's identity, social relations, access to institutions, and sense of belonging. Displacement is not only about not having a home, but it is also about rebuilding life, sustaining cultural continuity and negotiating social acceptance in a place where they do not belong. While people can form enduring attachments and bonds to the country they live in, there can also be lingering social barriers separating them from other people. Thus, refugee identity is not just related to one's country of origin, but also to one's experiences, culture, legal status and how one is perceived or ignored by others (Hall, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The Afghan refugees in Pakistan offer a rich sociological backdrop upon which to explore the link between identity, legal insecurity and social belonging. Conflict, political instability, insecurity and economic difficulties in Afghanistan have played a role in various waves of Afghans moving to Pakistan over the last many decades. These many generations of displacement have created a variety of experiences. Some refugees came to Pakistan as adults and some were born or grew up here, went to Pakistani schools and colleges, made friends, found jobs and built lasting family and community bonds. For many, Pakistan is more than just a place to live for a little while; it's the place where their daily lives, memories, dreams and identities have been shaped. However, permanent spending and cultural acclimatisation do not always ensure legal stability or social integration. Pakistan has always been hospitable towards Afghan refugees but has neither ratified the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 and Protocol thereof nor adopted a national refugee policy or a national asylum procedure. Administrative measures and working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025a) have therefore been key elements of the protection arrangements implemented for refugees. The status of Afghan citizens in Pakistan has also been determined by the various types of documentation, such as a Proof of Registration (PoR) card and an Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) (UNHCR, 2025b). Documentation and legal status play a critical role in these arrangements, as they can affect the security, services, freedom of movement and long-term planning for individuals. But the insecurity of the law is not just an administrative issue. It can be integrated into the everyday social life of displacement, affecting how people relate to the authorities, their approach to education, employment, housing, and how they envision their future. The lived reality and the formal position may conflict when those who have been resident in a country for many years are not sure of their right to stay. These tensions have intensified recently with policy changes around the repatriation of Afghan nationals. Pakistan continued to carry out the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) in 2025, and UNHCR reported on significant returns to Afghanistan, in addition to concerns about protection issues (UNHCR, 2025b). As such, it is crucial to explore the impact of policy changes on refugees' sense of security, bond to Pakistan and hope for the future. This investigation is a continuation of previous research. Wadood et al. (2020) studied the problem of identity and belonging of second-generation Afghan refugees in Balochistan and their struggles and challenges in negotiating their Afghan identity in Pakistan. Likewise, Ismail et al. (2024) explored discrimination and social exclusion faced by Afghan refugees in Quetta, noting issues with legal insecurity, as well as access to education, employment and healthcare. The studies show the importance of exploring

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refugee identity as a result of social interaction, institutional structures and inclusions/exclusions.

In the present study, it was decided to investigate the issues of identity and social belonging of Afghan refugees in the context of extended stay, cultural adaptation and legal precarity in Pakistan. More specifically, it deals with the potential discrepancy between lived and formal belonging. Refugees may speak the same language, have the same culture as the host community and may consider Pakistan as their country of origin, but they are still foreigners. These experiences prompt reflections on the relationship between cultural similarity, social acceptance and legal membership. The central research question is: Does long-term residency and integration of culture and traditions mean secure legal status and a definite sense of belonging? While some researchers have explored the concept of identity crisis and social exclusion among Afghan refugees, there is a need for more qualitative research to investigate the intersectionality between legal insecurity, social labeling, cultural continuity and aspirations of the refugees in their everyday lives and how these dimensions contribute to the construction of their identity and their sense of belonging in Pakistani society (UNHCR, 2024). The study aims at integrating these dimensions and to advance sociological thinking on forced displacement, social boundaries, recognition and belonging, but also to highlight the experiences of the Afghan refugees.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Refugee Identity as a Social Process

Identity is not a personal quality that is known from nationality, ethnic group, or birthplace. Instead, it is an artefact of social interactions, collective memory, culture, social institutions, and relationality with others. Forced displacement may change pre-existing social roles and lead to new types of classification by governmental authorities, host communities and other social actors. Refugee identity thus needs to be perceived as a process, defined by personal experiences as well as social and political factors. In his work, Hall (1996) conceptualizes cultural identity as a process which includes shared historical experiences and a process of continuing transformation. As such, identity is not already there and is not simply a matter of personal choice, but something that emerges from the historical context, the social world, and varying perceptions of self. Refugees can thus hold on to some of the cultural practices, relationships and affiliations of their home country and build new ones in their country of asylum. This does not necessarily mean that they have lost their original identity. Rather, they might be evidence of the multiple identities that exist in different social contexts. Instead, they might be markers of multiple identities that exist in shifting social contexts. The lens is especially useful for Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, where the extended stay and cultural familiarity can be combined with persisting differences in nationality and legal status. People can have the same language as the host community's people, the same religion, the same culture, and the same social activities, and still be foreign nationals, or refugees. In this context, identity negotiation is thus closely linked to the connection between the concept of self-identification and external social recognition.

### 2.2. Afghan refugees' identity negotiation

It is an important question how cultural inheritance, socialization and national identification are related and the experiences of second-generation refugees give important answers to that question. People born or raised in a foreign country can feel attached to the society in which they grew up, as well as to the country of their parents' ancestors and ancestors' societies through history or collective memory. Their identities can thus be inherited or lived. Using a phenomenological approach, Wadood et al. (2020) studied the experience of second-generation Afghan refugees in Balochistan. They studied the issue of identity uncertainty and the struggles of developing a clear sense of identity.

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This research provides a relevant ground for an analysis of the understanding of identity and social positions of individuals who have lived for a considerable period of their lives in Pakistan. However, its exclusive focus on second-generation refugees in Balochistan does not allow the generalization of its findings to Afghan refugees of all generations in other regions. The results presented indicate that language, education, religion and socialization could affect the perception of refugees of their national identities in Afghanistan. This study should not be cited as an official academic source; however, the full bibliographic information and original publication should be confirmed. The combination of these perspectives indicates that refugee identity is not limited to one's nationality. Age, generation, length of time lived in a country, language, education, family relationships, and daily social interactions can all play a role in the formation of identity.

### 2.3. Legal Status, Institutional Recognition, and Insecurity

Legal status is one institutional aspect of refugees' status that has the potential to affect many aspects of refugee life, including where they live, how they can move, what services they have access to, and how they can engage in social and economic activities. Documentation is thus not just administrative; it can help to influence how people think about their security, how they relate to the public authorities and how they decide on their education, employment, housing and future with family. The Pakistani policy of Afghan displacement has been largely based on the administrative arrangements and participation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025). There is no comprehensive national refugee statute and no formal national asylum procedure, like those in many states, as well as the absence of adherence to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Various documentation types, such as Proof of Registration (PoR) cards and Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC), occupied different administrative roles and had various implications for Afghan nationals (UNHCR, 2024). One key point is the difference between legal recognition and social belonging. Afghan nationals may have been residing in Pakistan for decades, have developed local relationships, families and community life, but are unsure about their longer-term stay in the country. At the same time, having evidence does not guarantee that people will not be discriminated against or socially excluded. Legal status and social acceptance are thus interrelated but separate aspects of inclusion.

### 2.4. Social Exclusion and Discrimination

Social exclusion is the process whereby people or groups are denied access to resources, institutions, opportunities and participation in society. It can be related to obstacles to education, employment, health care, housing and social relations. These barriers can manifest in discriminatory relationships between people, institutional processes, economic disparities and attitudes in the wider society. Ismail et al. (2024) studied discrimination and social exclusion of Afghan refugees in Quetta and highlighted issues regarding access to services, economic opportunities and social participation. Their study is relevant to the present research as it relates the day-to-day experiences of the refugees to broader social and institutional contexts. It also provides a basis for examining exclusion as more than an isolated interpersonal encounter. Social exclusion in the context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan can manifest itself as felt unequal treatment, limited opportunities, or assumptions about Afghan nationality and documentation. However, such experiences need to be analysed on a case-by-case basis rather than assumed to be the same for all refugees or host communities.

### 2.5. Stigma and Construction of Outsiders

The theory of stigma by Goffman (1963) is useful to help understand how certain characteristics can become socially discrediting and affect

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interpersonal relationships. Stigma is the process that happens when the way a person is seen by others is affected by a socially significant attribute that decreases awareness of other attributes. A refugee situation can entail that the person's social identity can be lost in a label linked to nationality, displacement, or legal status. Designation as a refugee or foreigner can have an administrative function, but also have social implications which can differ from one context to another. In situations where such labels are linked to dependency, difference, or restricted membership notions, these can affect social interactions and notions of legitimacy. People can react to stereotypes in various ways: they might argue against stereotypes, focus on what they and their culture have in common, or not reveal specific parts of their identity. Some may also depend more on the supportive elements of family and community. These should not be taken for granted. Members of the host society can also provide solidarity, friendship, acceptance and recognition for refugees. Analysing exclusionary and supportive interactions can offer a more balanced picture of how social boundaries are sustained, negotiated and, at times, challenged.

**2.6. Social inclusion and the recognition of difference**

Belonging encompasses more than legal residence or physical presence in a particular location. It can include emotional attachment, recognition by others, involvement in normal life, and feeling like an appropriate member in a community. Belonging could be defined differently for populations who are displaced, such as through family connections, friendships, education, work, culture, and relationships with institutions. Yuval-Davis (2006) separates belonging from the politics of belonging. Emotional attachments and a sense of home are the focus of the politics of belonging, while the boundaries are where the politics of belonging relates to the definition, contestation, and regulation of membership. It is important to consider this difference when thinking about the way people may feel attached to a society, but still come up against barriers or stigmas within the institution or society in which they live. These dimensions might not always match for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. People who were born in Pakistan might be very close to the language, culture, neighbourhoods, and social relations as they were born and raised there, while having Afghanistan as their homeland. They are also likely to be asked questions about their citizenship, legal status, and/or their sense of belonging that can become challenging. In such a situation, it is to be hoped that a sense of culture and social engagement does not equate with legal membership and social recognition. Support and belonging can come from family networks, education settings, and work, religious, and neighborhood relationships. The extent to which these relationships promote inclusion, however, may differ based on the individual and social contexts.

**2.7. Recent Policy and Changing Context of Afghan Displacement**

Legal insecurity and belonging need to be understood in the evolving policy landscape of Afghan displacement. Pakistan's repatriation policies and related administrative processes have affected the environment in which Afghan nationals can choose their place of residence, education, employment, family life and housing. In 2025, UNHCR reported high returns from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and expressed concern about the protection of Afghans with international protection needs (UNHCR, 2025a, 2025b). Given these developments, the effects of uncertainty over residence and return on refugees' expectations of the future need to be looked at. For the thousands of years that have passed, though, for those who have lived here, the thought of leaving might be more than just crossing a border. It may also relate to the disconnection from known social networks, the switch in educational and occupational trajectories, and the breakup of relationships that have been developed over a long time of

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residence in a location. But policy development is not enough to set the meaning of refugees' situation. It is important to understand their experiences in the context of what it means for them in day-to-day life, social relations and personal aspirations. Interviews can also be employed to determine whether those taking part see the prospect of policy change as related to feelings of insecurity, to identity change, to concerns about family futures, or to concerns about social acceptance.

## 3. Methodology

The study took a qualitative research design based on an interpretive approach to examine the negotiation of identity, legal insecurity, and social belonging of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The study was done in a selected area of District Mardan (Jalala Afghan Camp) to have a considerable population of Afghan people, which was selected due to relevance to the study objective, participants' availability and ethical issues. The target groups included adults (22 to 62 years) who have had experiences of displacement or long stay in Pakistan. Using convenience sampling, 22 participants were recruited. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews that explored displacement experiences, national/cultural identity, documentation status, social relations, discrimination and sense of belonging. The information obtained from the interviews was transcribed and, if required, translated and analysed using thematic analysis. It involved repeated reading, systematic coding and deductive and inductive theme development. The analysis was centred on identity negotiation, legal insecurity, social recognition and experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity and protection from harm were followed throughout the research process.

## 4. Results and thematic analysis

### Theme 1: Negotiating Multiple Identities

The issue of identity negotiation appeared as a key analytical issue in the understanding of the Afghan refugee's social trajectory in Pakistan. Determining identities is not necessarily an unambiguous and singular process, but can be shaped by family life and traditions, cultural norms and routines, language, a sense of belonging and belongingness, and by experiences of acceptance and rejection. The Afghan refugees born or raised in Pakistan may have a complex attitude towards national identity because they have been residing in Pakistan for several years. They may feel a sense of belonging to Afghanistan due to their parents and through their culture, but in their daily life, what they learn, who they play with, and who they interact with may just be associated with Pakistani society. Some people consider Afghanistan their home while others consider it to be their country, and for some others Pakistan is the country of their birth or residence. This may lead to a difference between cultural identity and social belonging. One can feel attached to the Afghan culture as well as a sense of attachment to the Pakistani society. However, these identities may clash when confronted by others with queries about their nationality; when encountering treatment as an outsider.

As in Afghanistan's case, the sense of Afghan identity and belonging to Pakistan is a multifaceted one, as one participant put it:

Well, I also recall that I have an Afghan heritage and would feel a sense of place and belonging to Afghanistan as well as feeling emotionally attached to it, but at the same time I was born in Pakistan, my education was in Pakistan and my personal experiences are in Pakistan, so I ask myself where I am? Where do I fit in? In which province of Pakistan do I belong? In what is now Afghanistan, where do I fit in? Where do I belong? So who am I?

Another one shared that:

I don't want to leave behind my Afghan culture, language, or traditions. Also, I want to state to

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people that I have lived here for a long period of years, and therefore have some connection with this society. I spent my childhood, education and relationship-building days in Pakistan. I have been here and my thoughts and values have been influenced by my experience here. I wish to retain my Afghan identity and at the same time be known as someone having a strong social and emotional relationship with Pakistan. At times, my Afghan identity seems to be the basis for judging me

These are examples of how identity can be negotiated, not inherited. Individuals can opt to attend to their multiple identifications in multiple settings. In the family setting, the cultural norms may be more important, and in other settings such as the educational context or place of employment, or even among friends from Pakistan, common experiences and connections may be more important. From a social perspective, this theme could be summarized using the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner 1979). It is proposed that individuals derive a certain identity from the groups of which they are a member. Group boundaries are salient, which can cause conflict between people's own identity and people's assigned identity. Afghan refugees may also find themselves in between their self-definition and being defined by the broader society. We might also see the findings in the light of Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of identity as a process which is formed by history, representation and social relationships. When viewed from this perspective, identity is not only related to the place of birth; it is also the place where one feels connected, recognised and acknowledged. Thus, a negotiation over identity with Afghan refugees does not necessarily indicate an opposition to Afghan identity, or a swift shift towards Pakistani identity. Alternatively, it could be the expression of a search for cultural continuity, in an attempt to gain recognition, dignity and inclusion in the society in which life is lived.

**Theme 2: Legal and future insecurity**

Other factors related to documentation and legal status, including how they impact refugees' access to services, mobility, employment, education and opportunities, are also pertinent to the refugee experience. The absence of documentation, residency and repatriation prospects can have detrimental effects on practical aspects like employment, education, health care, and also on psychological aspects like security and identity of Afghan refugees. Without the ability to plan for the future, they do not know if they will have their own homes. Fear of changing legal conditions can affect issues of higher education, professional development, or home ownership, marriage and family life. The impacts of insecurity can then manifest themselves in informal and non-formal aspects of daily living, such as the psychological and social aspects. One of the participants' statements is:

This is difficult to plan for our children's future when we don't know whether we can continue their education without interruptions, or we are forced to leave the place we have called home for so many years, even if we would like to save money or make plans for better employment opportunities, we cannot do so with confidence due to our uncertainty about our legal status.

Another lens to look through is:

Even after many years here, we are worried about our documentation and whether we will be able to continue living here; we worry about our daily lives, about our employment, about our children's education, about the future – whenever the subject of documentation is broached or whether or not we will be allowed to stay here, we become anxious about what might happen to our families; we want to live peacefully, work honestly, and be able to give our children a better future, but we don't feel secure because our place here is uncertain.

This kind of view implies that the legal insecurity can be a continuous situation instead of a singular administrative issue. People can plan their day around avoiding risk, documentation, family membership, and preparation for

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uncertainty. These concerns can lead to interactions with institutions and comfort in seeking assistance. To sum up, legally speaking, a legal status can be an instrument of institutional recognition. In the course of doing so, documentation can either allow or prevent a person from having certain rights and services, and secure status can also increase a person's reliance on family networks, community services and employers or on intermediaries. This can, therefore, reinforce social inequality, limiting the opportunities for the socially and economically disadvantaged. One of the issues that is of special concern is social exclusion. Refugees may face more than one challenge if there is no clarity on which legal channels they are entitled to receive protection, and if they are also living in a situation of poverty. Other challenges may present themselves alongside legal uncertainty, including poverty, discrimination and restricted institutional access, which may collectively impact upon a refugee's situation. Staying in a country for a certain period of time does not make one feel secure, known and able to plan his future there. It can feel very socially and emotionally connected to a site, and at the same time the person may feel unsure of their place in that site.

**Theme 3: Discrimination and Exclusion**

Social labelling and discrimination may lead to different relationships between Afghan refugees and the rest of the population of Pakistan. Refugee status, nationality, ethnicity and perceived foreignness can impact upon the public arena, the school environment, employment or when in contact with officials. These events can help to maintain the distinction between insiders and outsiders of society. Discrimination may not be obvious in the form of overt opposition. It might also be questions about nationality, the assumption of a legal status, the prohibition against socializing, unequal treatment and/or comments in day-to-day conversation on difference. Though the experience may not be a large one, this sense of being an "other" can affect an individual's self-confidence and desire to participate in public discourse.

A participant statement is:

We have different experiences and backgrounds, and we are all equal human beings; we are not all refugees. We want people to understand our individuality and not our nationality; we want to be treated with dignity and respect. We have a decent relationship with our Pakistani neighbors and our colleagues, but it hurts when people make judgements on our nationalities.

Another shared perspective is:

We hope that people will not consider us Afghan and make judgments about us based on our nationality and family background, but on the basis of our actions and ability. We hope we have as much chance as others to prove ourselves, not because of our families. But we also hope that we are treated fairly and respectfully and that we are accepted as individuals with our own experiences, aspirations, and challenges.

The above few descriptive statements highlight the relevance of an examination of social categorization in the process of daily transactions. When the refugee identity dominates the person's life, other identities are not as well known, e.g., occupation, education, friends, skills, personal achievements. Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma offers a helpful lens with which to think our way through these processes. A social discrediting attribute or characteristic becomes a social perception of another person about stigma. A stereotype or social distancing could be based on the fact that the person is an Afghan refugee, but the degree and type of stereotype/social distancing would be assessed during the face-to-face interviews. The effects of labeling can have long-lasting implications. There may be some people who will be wary of revealing their history, attending public events or approaching institutions. Others may do so by emphasizing their educational qualifications, their contribution to society, their proficiency in language, or their long association with Pakistan. The different reactions may be a reflection of the fight to maintain dignity and deal with negative

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assumptions. There can also be a lack of confidence in each other between groups at a community level as a result of discrimination. The more people are rejected and treated inequitably, the more they turn to community networks they know, and the less they turn to institutions they don't. The following reactions are not indicative of 'not wanting to integrate. These are, however, also coping mechanisms to tackle a threatening/dangerous situation, emotionally and/or practically.

**Theme 4: Cultural and Social Networks**

Cultural continuity and social networks can be significant aspects of stability for Afghan refugees in Pakistan. They may be connected to their culture in the family, in language, food, religious observance, celebrations, community, or remembrance. These practices may be especially important if individuals are not sure about their legal status, discriminated against, or concerned about the future. For those who have been in exile for several years in Afghanistan, family memory and identity can be passed on from generation to generation through cultural practices. Older members of the family/parents can encourage children to learn the Afghan language, their family stories, customs, and culture, and keep in touch with extended family and community members. These are some of the common activities that could be a cultural transmission vehicle from one generation to the next.

A participant statement:

It is about remembrance for us, but it is also about passing our traditions, culture, language and identity on to our children and grandchildren. Our family traditions are a means for us to remember our heritage and our traditions. We want our children to learn from and appreciate their Afghan heritage, although they have lived and spent most of their lives in Pakistan, but we also want them to respect Pakistani culture since they are living in Pakistan, learning in Pakistan and making friends in Pakistan. We sometimes fear that our children will forget about their culture of Afghanistan, but we don't want them to feel they need to be a part of one and not the other.

Yet another participant expressed:

For us, these relationships are not only about emotional support, but it's also about we are not discriminated against, we are not feeling like we don't belong to that community. We need these relationships to have emotional ease, to keep us in our dignity and our hope.

The opinions voiced in these perspectives point to the possibilities and potential of social networks to provide emotional support, instrumental support, and continuity. Information on employment, education, housing, paperwork and services may be gathered from families and community members. They might also provide child care services, money, shelter, or comfort in times of need. From a sociological point of view, they can be considered to be social capital networks. Social capital is the sum of the resources that individuals access when they need them in the future and through social connections, mutual support and association with groups, largely as a result of trust and norms of reciprocity. Refugees may benefit from coping with uncertainty and dealing with practical issues through strong intra-community relationships. Out-of-community linkages can also provide possibilities for educational, employment, institutional and wider social engagement. But the advantages of community networks cannot be overemphasized. There are times when access to information and opportunities outside of the community may be restricted due to reliance on a small group of relatives/friend. Very poor households may not have the resources to allocate to household members. Community support may also manifest differently for women, young people, or individuals whose families are less supportive. Cultural continuity can therefore serve both as a resource for resilience and as a site of negotiation. The young may cherish their Afghan identity and they may acquire the Pakistani language, embrace the Pakistani values and traditions, and have the Pakistani dream.

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The generation gap may be in terms of marriage, education, employment, attitudes towards gender and the importance of cultural traditions.

**Theme 5: Belonging and Recognition**

Belonging does not just mean living in a specific location. It also involves emotional attachment, social acceptance and recognition, security and a sense of belonging to collective life. Afghan refugee belonging could be understood in terms of the length of time spent in Pakistan, the nature of the interactions with neighbours, educational experiences, employment, family history, cultural identity and experiences of legal security that may affect the lived experiences of Afghan refugees.

For others, Pakistan can be "home" since they were born there, raised there, educated there, or had a long-term relationship with Pakistan. For others, the more significant link they have to Afghanistan could be that of family history, cultural traditions or memories from their country of birth. Others may feel ambivalent about belonging because neither country really represents their history or aspirations.

A participant's statement said:

Home" for me is a place where I can feel safe, where my cultural identity is respected, valued, and accepted, and where I can participate and be a part of the society without the fear of being rejected. I want to be in a place where I can feel at home, feel secure and feel wanted, accepted and respected.

A participant talks about that:

I want my children to get the best education, have the opportunity to follow their dreams, and be able to make a plan for themselves that is based on their abilities and hard work and that they will feel accepted by the society they are growing up in, not be judged because of their Afghan background, and that they will be able to keep their culture alive and have equal opportunities and freedom in the society that they live in, and that they will be able to make their own choices.

This indicates that belonging can be relational in nature, a space beyond just territory. People can feel attached to a space and not feel a part of the larger social or institutional context. But in the absence of discrimination and social isolation, recognition will not produce a sense of belonging.

In this sense, Yuval-Davis (2006) views belonging as an emotional attachment, and not the politics of belonging, which is about the boundaries that surround the boundaries of belonging. It will be beneficial to understand the potential emotion of Afghan refugees; they may feel a part of the society of Pakistan, but at the same time, they may be questioned about their status as a part of the society. These wishes reveal a connection between belonging and the possibility of a life beyond the constant uncertainty. The future they wish for may be to remain in Pakistan and be more secure and accepted in the society. Some may wish to return to Afghanistan (if possible) and others may wish to relocate to another country. These are not mutually exclusive nor assumed to be constant and unchanging, but rather participants' narratives show that aspirations change over time depending on both family and legal settings and opportunities.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the Afghan refugees in District Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, regarding their national, cultural and social identities during long stays in Pakistan with legal insecurity and uncertainty about their future in Pakistan. Through an analysis of the interviews conducted with 22 male Afghan participants, it was found that there was a conflict between their cultural affiliation with Afghanistan and their social and emotional affiliation with Pakistan from extended stay and regular contact. The lack of certainty regarding the documentation process, worries about future housing status, discrimination and social exclusion negatively affected participants' sense of security and belonging. Family relationships, cultural traditions, common language and

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community networks, however, served as key sources of support and cultural continuity. The study underscores that, in addition to legal status, social recognition, lived experiences and opportunities for inclusion play a role in shaping belonging. It highlights the importance of well-defined documentation policies, protection from discrimination, cultural recognition and meaningful social participation. Although small in terms of sample size and geographic reach, the study adds to the understanding of how complex the relationship is between identity, legal insecurity, and belonging of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

**6. Policy implications and recommendations**

The study could hold policy and practice implications in a number of areas.

**1. Framework and Secure Legal Status:** The Government of Pakistan should provide clear and consistent procedures for Afghan refugees' legal status, registration and documentation and safeguard them from discrimination and arbitrary treatment through the enactment of comprehensive refugee law.

**2. Transparent documentation procedure:** Transparency regarding documentation mandates, residences and available protection mechanisms can aid in informed decision-making.

**3. Education and employment:** Minimizing unnecessary barriers to participation and long-term social involvement may enhance opportunity.

**4. Community-level inclusion.** Programs that facilitate contact between Afghan residents and communities can contribute to an understanding and overcoming of discriminatory assumptions.

**5. Protection-sensitive policy implementation:** Individual protection needs and risks of displacement should be taken into account when making decisions on residence and return, in line with relevant legal obligations and protection standards.

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