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## Facilitators and Barriers toward Food Security of Afghan Refugees Residing in Karachi, Pakistan

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### ABSTRACT

The present study comparatively assesses how Afghan refugees in Pakistan understand both the factors and barriers affecting their food security status before and after refuge. Through qualitative in-depth interviews with 25 Afghan refugee families, we assess how quality of life, together with perceptions of a balanced meal, food environments both pre- and post-migration and push and pull factors of migration, impact food security and food choices for refugee families. Furthermore, our results reveal that regardless of the length of protracted status for Afghan refugees, food insecurity remains as a consistent condition for refugee families.

### KEYWORDS

Afghan refugees; Food Security; Refugee nutrition; Qualitative research; Pakistan

## Introduction

This study focuses on identifying the facilitators and barriers affecting the food security status of Afghan refugees residing in Karachi, Pakistan. A large majority of Afghan refugees have migrated to Pakistan beginning from the early 1970s. There are approximately 1.6 million refugees living in Pakistan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2016a). This includes approximately 26,716 families and 130,746 individuals living in Karachi (Ministry of States & Frontier Regions Government of Pakistan [MSFRGP] 2005).

Although the subject of this study is similar to some other notable studies on food security of refugees, it is relatively unique in exploring the food security of Afghan refugees from their own perspective, that is, food security as defined and described by refugee families. Our main objective is to comparatively assess how Afghan refugees in Pakistan understand both the

factors and barriers affecting their food security status before and after refuge. We identify the main characteristics of the quality of life that affect the food security of Afghan refugees in the host country. In doing so, we explore whether the length of stay in the host country facilitate or hinder food security among Afghan refugee households. The primary research questions addressed in this study are:

- (1) How do refugees compare their quality of life and food security situation in their home country (Afghanistan) with their present conditions in the host country (Pakistan)?
- (2) How do refugees perceive a balanced diet and food security?
- (3) What role does food security status play in refugees' decision to migrate from home to host country?

## Background

**2.1 Food insecurity and dietary compositions of Afghan refugees** The food security status of Afghans prior to migration has been shaped in part by civil war, climate-related issues (such as drought, flooding, and extreme weather), and lack of or deteriorating infrastructure (Advisory Committee for Consultations 2017; CIA 2017; Collins 2011). Additionally, economic limitations and socio-cultural barriers, including lack of access to education, healthcare and low literacy, influence the food security status of Afghans (Advisory Committee for Consultations 2017). Substantively these barriers combined shape physical and economic access to food, availability and stability of ones' food supply. Approximately 33% of Afghans are food insecure, and segments of the population most impacted by food insecurity include rural communities, women, children, internally displaced persons, returnees, economically poor and households comprised of large, low-wage or precarious workers, and/or family members with illnesses or disabilities (Advisory Committee for Consultations 2017).

The daily diet composition of Afghans generally include, but are not limited to, bread, halal meat (such as chicken, beef, goat and lamb), yogurt and dairy products, eggs, onions, peas, beans, tomatoes, dried fruit, nuts and rice. Tea sweetened with sugar is a common drink, water and buttermilk are also common beverages. While living in Afghanistan, access, availability and utilization of such foods are hindered by political, economic, environmental, and socio-cultural barriers. Though access and availability to such foods are comprised in Afghanistan, Afghan refugees in Pakistan face similar macro structures shaping the conditions of their food security status (Grare and Maley, 2011). Approximately 60% of the population in Pakistan is food insecure, a statistic which is shaped by high food costs, flooding and internal

displacement (World Food Programme, 2019). In Pakistan, poor communities, and women specifically, adversely experience food insecurity. Many households simply cannot afford staple foods (wheat and rice, for example) nor nutritious diets; poor physical access also impacts daily dietary consumption as well (World Food Programme, 2019).

### ***Food security and refugee studies***

The current definition of food security is defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2002, 38). This definition highlights explicitly the physical, social, and economic dimensions of access to food required and preferred by people. According to the FAO (2002), this definition focuses on the three main pillars that build food security:

- Food availability: sufficient quantities of food available on a consistent basis.
- Food access: having sufficient resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet.
- Food utilization: appropriate use based on knowledge of basic nutrition and care, as well as adequate water and sanitation.

The ways in which food security is perceived and dealt with by refugee families, the host society, the country of origin and by aid organizations, can impact food choices and dietary habits, which in turn, could eventually increase the risk of health problems associated with food security (Davies 1996).

Given the history and prevalence of war and displacement in Afghanistan, Afghan refugees have been the subject of many human rights reports and academic studies. Some of these studies are specifically focused on food security status related to conflicts and famine in Afghanistan (Chabot and Dorosh 2007). Others have examined food security and its related challenges beyond the borders of Afghanistan (Omidvar et al. 2013). There are also studies on post-migration and resettlement work focused on behavioral responses of migration, which relate directly or indirectly to food security in resettlement countries (Dossa 2005; Nourpanah 2010). To our knowledge, this is the first study that explores the food security of Afghan refugee households in a host country that is also the first point of entry.<sup>1</sup> Our ongoing research on food insecurity of Afghan refugees in Pakistan revealed that more than

80% of Afghan households suffer from moderate to severe food insecurity (removed for review). This paper specifically explores factors that determine the food security status of Afghan refugees residing in a host country after a large influx and long residency period.

## Research methodology

### *Study design*

This study consists of a series of 25 in-depth interviews with Afghan refugee family members to understand how refugee families compare their quality of life and food security in home (Afghanistan) and host (Pakistan) countries. In this study, we consider the refugees' perceptions on what constitutes a balanced meal, as well as the food conditions or environments before and after migration. We asked participants how and by whom the food purchase decisions are made in the new environment. By exploring the reasons for migration from Afghanistan and the main reasons for choosing Pakistan as a destination, we investigated how migration pull and push factors may have an effect on food security and food choices of the refugee families. We also explored whether length of time, protracted status, affected the food security status of the family.

To effectively facilitate the project, we collaborated with [Removed for review] in Karachi, Pakistan. Local networks and partnerships were formed by the [removed for review] team directly which helped enable recruitment, data collection and address translation concerns.

The interview guide was designed based on the research questions and was sent to approximately 20 individuals, academics and community members combined, for feedback. Received suggestions were incorporated in the questionnaire to enhance the possibility of obtaining results that could answer academic, stakeholder and community members' concerns. To enhance the credibility of this research, the qualitative work was accompanied by some socioeconomic and food security scale questions which could help establish the scope of food insecurity in light of demographic variables.

A caveat is in order here regarding the potential limitations of interview data in some instances. The main limitation of this study is its exclusive reliance on in-depth interviews. Notably, descriptive field notes were included in the transcription process, when possible, in order to help contextualize the interviews, enrich data and interpretation, and to build an audit trail. While a powerful tool to understand the refugees' point of view, researchers were aware of the methodological limitations of qualitative interviews, including the potential issues related to the interviewer effect and recall bias. For example, during the interviews, it was made

clear to the respondents that their participation in this study will not affect their residency status as refugees. Nevertheless, we still sensed that interviewees were unsure whether they could trust interviewers and the interview process. They seemed somewhat anxious regarding possible voluntary repatriation or forced deportation, and this anxiety could have affected some of the responses. To help establish trust and confidence between the interviewer and participants in regards to concerns surrounding immigration status, issues of confidentiality, ethics, consent forms and right of withdrawal were fully explained to participants prior to each interview. A copy of the consent form was also shared with interviewees. Furthermore, there is a possibility that there was recall bias for more distant events related to income, dietary habits, and lifestyle. We attempted to correct for the recall bias as much as possible by rephrasing questions to probe responses as much as possible.

Another potential limitation lies in the transcription process. Transcriptions were written in Dari and Pashtu and were translated into English. We tried to correct for this bias through several random validations by fluent translators in both languages after translation. However, despite our efforts, discrepancies between transcripts in the original language and their translation are possible.

### ***Study sample and recruitment***

To assist with the development of data collection tools, data collection, and knowledge mobilization strategies, we formed an advisory committee consisting of research experts (n = 15) from various specialized disciplines, resettlement agency staff (n = 4) and, project field managers (n = 5). The working group together with the Pakistan team involved the lead investigators and the project manager from the [removed for review] in Pakistan and the [removed for review] in Canada. We hired four Afghan speaking (Dari and Pashtu) fieldworkers, two males and two females to assist with data collection. We collaborated closely with the team members at the [removed for review] and provided them the set of questions, a data collection protocol, and two web-based virtual training sessions. The in-depth interview questions were translated to Dari and Pashtu using the help of a local translator and were later validated by two Dari and Pashtu speakers in Canada and Pakistan.

The [removed for review], in conjunction with the Afghan Garden Council, recruited the refugee families for the interviews. After conducting sociodemographic questionnaire sessions, participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method. We made sure the sample included a variety of families types from single, female headed, male headed, as well as families composed of extended members. Most of the refugee

families interviewed had initially entered Pakistan from one of the bordered locations and later relocated to one of the four areas in Karachi: Camp Jaded, Metroville, Union Council 4 (including areas of Qayoum Abad and Jang Abad), and Jamali Goth. Although the word “camp” is a part of the name of the refugee settled neighborhood, and the majority of the residents in the area are refugees, it was confirmed by the local data collectors that the living conditions resembled a village-like neighborhood not a camp *per se*. Data was only collected from the residents of Camp Jaded and Metroville due to safety concerns raised by the Pakistan Police authority in other areas. The site specifications are included in Table 1.

The study was approved by the research ethics board at the [removed for review]. Participants were explained the risks and benefits of participating in

**Table 1.** General attributes of the refugee settlement neighborhoods under investigation in Karachi, Pakistani.

Attributes	Camp Jadeed	Metroville
Afghan Refugee population	160,000 individuals <sup>1</sup>	2,711 individuals <sup>2</sup>
Overall economic status	A very isolated community. A very strong Afghani cultural presence. Poor economic status. Most people were self-employed	Metroville is an urban locality; more people were employed there and had a reasonably well economic standard as compared to Camp Jaded. Very old houses.
Neighborhood	Dispersed neighborhood. Big houses with many families living in one house. Approximately 8 to 10 families live together, and each family size is about 6 to 8 people	Apartment style. Smaller family sizes approx. Four people per family
Education	Mostly uneducated, girls and boys are not encouraged to go to school. There are three schools in the vicinity and follow the curriculum in Afghanistan. One of the schools is until grade 12 while the other ones are following the Pakistani curriculum and are until Metric level and Grade 6	Most of them went to school, and children passed intermediate level (grade 5 to 9) Two schools but it cater to both refugees and Pakistani citizens. Pakistani school curriculum is followed. It is a coeducation system.
The material used in housing	Mud houses	Cement houses
Availability of foods	Two Bazaars which have fruit and vegetable stores. They are located within the camp. However, a wholesale fruit and vegetable market are about a 5km drive from where they live.	Lots of food stores outside, fruits and vegetable carts, fast food and local food stores were available within the vicinity of the apartment. Food is easily accessible
Healthcare access	The closest hospital is about 5 km away, but they do not treat Afghan refugees. Hence, they have to travel about 30km to get to another hospital	Many refugees from Metroville are from the Aga Khan community and hence do get much help regarding healthcare from the Aga Khan Development Network. Health center in the vicinity Private Hospital is right across their apartment

1. (Kamal and Khaan 1992).

2. This number refers to registered refugees. The number was given in communication with a local UNHCR office based on the 2010 UNHCR census.

the study, and all participants provided written consent. Twenty-five interviews were conducted (a figure beyond the point of saturation, but completed in order to guarantee a variety of family types in the sample) with family members, from which 13 respondents were women, and 12 were men. The length of their stay in Pakistan varied from eight to thirty six years. The interview time lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The study sample comprised of different types of families: single-parent, a couple with children, and families with extended members. The education level was divided into illiterate, madrassa (school of Islamic instruction), elementary, middle school, high school diploma, and university degree. However, the sample showed that the majority of respondents acquired a lower level of education and reflected low socio-economic levels based on their responses to the income level question, both before and after migration. Most respondents were employed (76%), and most come from a farming background in Afghanistan. Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

**Table 2.** Demographic characteristics of the participants of family interviews.

Continuous variables	Mean (Minimum-Maximum)
<b>Age in years</b>	39.4 (27–61)
<b>Number of Individuals in Household</b>	7 (1–16)
<b>Number of children in Household</b>	4 (0–10)
<b>Participants' Years of Stay in Pakistan</b>	23.2 (8–36)
<b>Categorical Variables</b>	<b>Frequency (Percentage)</b>
<b>Respondent Gender</b>	12 (47)
Male	13 (53)
Female	
<b>Family type</b>	11 (44)
Married couple with children	10 (40)
Extended families	3 (12)
Single parent	1 (4)
Single	
<b>Current Residency Status</b>	24 (96)
Nadra Card <sup>1</sup>	1 (4)
Other <sup>2</sup>	
<b>Education Level of Respondent</b>	8 (32)
Illiterate	12 (48)
Primary School <sup>3</sup>	5(20)
Other <sup>4</sup>	
<b>Employment Status</b>	19 (76)
Full-time	4 (16)
Part-time	2 (8)
Unemployed	

1. Proof of registration with the government of Pakistan as refugees

2. Pakistani Citizen/Refugees with no official status

3. Collapsed category including Madrassa and elementary education

4. Collapsed category including all post-primary school education levels



## **Data analysis**

In order to analyze the qualitative data, we transcribed the audio files from interviews verbatim to the original language and then translated non-English transcripts into English, these interviews were then validated by native speakers. All files were shared and transferred to a secure university server. All names were coded for the data analysis. We randomly listened to and read the translated files in order to maintain validity and reliability. We then read the translations multiple times and coded them using NVivo. We made analytical and procedural notes during the data analysis. By applying thematic analysis, themes and concepts were identified inductively (Ezzy 2002). After reviewing the translated transcripts, recurring concepts became evident, and key concepts began to emerge. The results of the open-ended coding were shared with the research committee members. Random coding was also conducted by other team members to assure validity and credibility of the procedure. For the second-round of validation, emerging themes were discussed between the research team until a consensus was reached, which formed the resulting themes summarized in this study.

## **Major findings**

### ***Quality of life pre- and post-migration***

The quality of life for Afghan families prior to migration was generally described as relatively poor, both economically but also politically and socially. As one respondent noted:

My life was not good in Afghanistan either, my father and my grandfather were poor, and they were working for other people. When the Russians came during the revolution, they destroyed our houses. (Participant 3)

Most refugee families living in the targeted neighborhoods were residents of Kunduz in the Baghlan province. Baghlan is located in northern Afghanistan with a population of less than one million. During the Soviet invasion, the Soviet Kapan military zone was established in southern Baghlan and caused numerous Mujahidin and Soviet battles. Baghlan later became a war zone between Ismaili and Shia Hazaras who fought against the Taliban. The majority of the population in Baghlan consists of Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras, followed by Uzbek and Tatars. This means that the languages spoken in the area are Farsi (Dari), Pashtun and Uzbek. Some Ismailis and Shias fled the area during the war and Taliban invasion (Collins 2011; Human Rights Watch 2009).

While most families were living in rural Afghanistan with limited access to services, the main reason for fleeing was lack of safety and war, rather than drought, poor economic status, or access to education and health services.

Most of the respondents remembered a better life condition in Afghanistan prior to the war. Socio-economic status was often defined by the ownership of farming land and cattle. If the farmer was also the owner, they mentioned having a better socio-economic status than others who worked as laborers on farms. Some of the responses that reflected the quality of life and living conditions prior to migration from the families' perspective include:

Kunduz before and after war... Some people were working, those who had no land were not working and could not cook (eat) and were starving. (Participant 14)

Very good at that time. When the war started, we could not live there because it was not safe at all. We left for Pakistan for our safety. (Participant 19)

Precarious migration status came up as the most significant characteristic defining their after migration life conditions. In addition to the common challenges such as language barriers, poverty, lack of employment, and acceptance in the host community, residency status remained the primary concern for most respondents. Approximately 90% of the respondents were Nadra PoR (Proof of Registration as refugees with Pakistan Government, hereby called as Nadra) card holders. Refugees reported physical and emotional police harassment regardless of the validity of their card, frustrations around annual expiration, difficulties renewing, lower pay by employers due to expired residency, being forced to bribe the police even with a valid Nadra card, as the main reasons in which precarious states shaped their quality of life in Pakistan. Almost all participants were anxious about their precarious status and their future in Pakistan:

We have no freedom; we have no house or property and have no clear future here. The police always make excuses to arrest us. They force us to go to the police station and take away our money even 100 Rupees from our pockets. (Participant 5)

While a Nadra card is recognized by the UNHCR, it is still an independent Pakistani official document, issued and renewed only in some governmental centers. The Nadra card is not issued to all applicants. As stated in the Nadra official information pamphlet, Afghans who have never held a PoR card, including family members of PoR card holders, and who were never registered with Nadra are not entitled to the issuance of a PoR card.

Another notable observation from the interviews is the recognizable gap in understanding the rights and responsibilities that come with a Nadra card. Most of the families with a Nadra card are not aware of their exact legal status, their legal rights, and whether they are allowed to integrate economically and socially. Moreover, based on the respondents' recollection, public sector officials, private sector businesses, and private sector employers are all unclear about what rights, benefits, and responsibilities come with a Nadra

card and status. Most of them do not understand the difference between a refugee without status and a Nadra card holder when interacting with or hiring them. This lack of knowledge of Nadra status exacerbates the problem of the lack of trust in, and justified fear of, government officials, including the police, as well as private sector businesses and employers. This is evident in some quotes from the daily experiences of respondents:

We are not allowed to work; I cannot do anything in my name. I do not think I can get a car or open a bank account with this card. (Participant 19)

We went a few times for an ID card. We cannot work and can't get financial help without an ID card. To get it, I went to the office two to three times, but it did not help. (Participant 23)

### ***Afghan families' perceptions of balanced diet & food security***

Most of the family member's perceptions of a healthy meal included the consumption of sufficient amounts of rice, bread, meat, dairy, and vegetables, with the emphasis on meat and dairy products. Refugee families in Pakistan consume mostly potatoes, lentils, and a very limited amount of vegetable items. They also mentioned that their daily diet lacks meat and dairy products due to affordability. When asked whether or not they eat a balanced meal, participants often answered in economic terms, often stating food consumption was shaped by what foods they could afford. Lack of affordability resulted in participants eliminating food items from their diets, most noting at least one food item disappearing from their regular meals or as having to temporarily eliminate meal items:

We mostly cook okra, cauliflower, eggplant. We may not see or cook meat on the table for ten days. (Participant 21)

The male breadwinner in this study usually made decisions regarding food purchasing. However, specific decisions regarding what to cook with these purchased items are usually made by woman, including mothers, wives or older daughters in some cases. Particularly, our study captured how changes to gender role expectations in Pakistan, especially as it relates to the employment status of women, did not necessarily result in improving the affordability of food for refugees. Afghan families in Pakistan were also not very receptive to promotional material or food advertisements as sources determining food choices, instead affordability shaped what food items were purchased. Some parents indicated that their children might see things on TV or in pictures on mobile phones, or hear about some foods from their friends at school, but parents tended to prioritize food affordability over their children's requests.

During the interviews with Afghan refugees, we sought to investigate key concepts from the respondents' point of view: the food security challenges before and after migration; and how they relate to the food security pillars of availability, accessibility, and utilization. The responses to the interview questions suggest that the majority of respondents had difficulty accessing sufficient and nutritious food at all times. In the home country, the accessibility and availability of food were affected by the length of the war, drought, road accessibility in remote areas, and poverty in the area of residence prior to migration. Most of the respondents have been in Pakistan for a long time (the average duration of stay is 23 years), yet they managed to recall some of their food security challenges in Afghanistan. For example:

Enough food? There were times that we were not eating for two days in a row because of war or were in the middle of nowhere. We had lots of problems during the war. (Participant 25)

Such challenges were particularly evident in Afghanistan's rural areas where food accessibility and availability were compromised primarily due to transportation and road conditions, and where the closest markets were significantly far from residential areas. However, since most of the residents in rural areas were farmers and cattle breeders, they were using what was available in their own farm products instead of consuming foods they really wanted to eat. Respondents who were eating enough described three main meals in their daily diet: breakfast consisting of milk, tea, bread, and dairy products; lunch consisting of bread, rice, meat, and some vegetables; and dinner consisting of the same items as lunch. Some of the respondents mentioned occasionally missing a meal or eating whatever they could afford or find.

After taking refuge in the host country, Pakistan, respondents pointed to facilitators and challenges associated with accessing food in markets or grocery stores, navigating a new and different food system, or problems finding affordable ingredients. In comparing accessibility to food markets, the respondents indicated that the food markets in Pakistan were more accessible. There was a local food market that families in both neighborhoods reported going to within walking distance. However, the main challenges mentioned by almost all the interviewees were that food is less affordable and that their financial capacity to purchase food is low in Pakistan. As one respondent noted comparing affordability in both home and host country:

We were cooking meat, rice and everything if not every day at least two, three times a week. We cannot afford to eat whatever we were eating in Afghanistan. (Participant 4)

The findings reveal that severe food insecurity is a chronic condition among Afghan refugee families. Approximately 96% of the sample ( $n = 25$ ) claims to be food insecure, a figure which is inclusive of households which claim to

experience serve food insecurity (48%), moderate food insecurity (32%) and marginal food insecurity (16%). High household food security was claimed by only 4% of the sample. Respondents did, however, discuss different strategies to cope with such situations. It should be noted that the interview questions for this study were not designed to explicitly capture coping strategies refugees use to overcome food insecurity. Nonetheless, such strategies may help with short-term and episodic food shortages, but are not always sufficient to deal with chronic food insecurity. It was indicated that most of the families were simplifying their diet, reducing the number of meals during the day, replacing higher cost items with lower cost items, and prioritizing children where parents and older members avoid eating some meals to ensure that they are feeding their children. Some refugees also indicated that they borrowed meal items or money if they were able to.

### ***Migration factors and host county selection***

Participants cited war, invasion, loss and death of family members as some of the main reasons for leaving Afghanistan. Most shared a sense of fear and uncertainty for their safety in Afghanistan. For example, they often referred to the mandatory military recruitment of male family members during the war, and the banning of women in education, health care, and social interactions as reasons shaping such sentiments. All respondents, both males and females, were concern about the future and basic rights of women because of the restrictions imposed by the Taliban. Leaving Afghanistan was one way in which participants envisioned building a better and safer future for their children and entire family. As one interviewee poignantly captures:

There was a war in Afghanistan. We could not work or go to school. It was not safe there. We came here to save our lives. (Participant 24)

Poverty, unemployment, economic instability, draught and the lack of food availability were also mentioned as reasons for leaving Afghanistan.

The most evident reasons expressed by our respondents for choosing Pakistan as the country for resettlement included finding a safer location in relative proximity to Afghanistan, religious and cultural continuity, the existence of a supportive community and open border policy, and the ability to receive support from the Aga Khan Development Network in Pakistan. Similarly, The Ismaili background of many arriving families was an important reason for choosing Pakistan due to the likelihood of settlement support from Ismaili organizations, mostly the aforementioned Agha Khan Development Network.

Notably, since most participants in the study were of a low economic status, all respondents referred to the lower costs of travel to Pakistan as a determinant for choosing it as their destination. Thus Pakistan was the

most viable and affordable destination for many. As indicated by many respondents, if given the choice and enough financial resources, they would have gone to Iran instead or would have picked a secondary destination in Europe.

## Discussion

Our findings indicate that despite the improvement in some facilitators of food security after migration (including: improved safety; employment status, especially for women; cultural proximity/competency; and increased food accessibility), low income, precarious immigration status and conditions of living, and the vicious cycle of poverty are still considered some substantial barriers to food security for the Afghan population in Karachi. More importantly, the length of stay in Pakistan has not contributed to resolving this issue.

The results suggest that the length of stay and the level of integration do not have a substantial impact on the food security status of Afghan refugee families in Karachi. While the length of stay in Pakistan was able to gradually resolve some challenges such as language barriers for some refugees, the precarious immigration status and conditions still pose some significant challenges for many. For some Afghan families, including those living in a protracted refugee situation, some for more than thirty years, and whose children were born and raised in Pakistan, their precarious status, food insecurity and a significant shortage in basic living needs continue to exist. The latter, in particular, has subsequently influenced many of the respondents' food habits and intensified a vicious cycle of low mental and physical health, reduced income, and reduced food security.

This study also confirms that Afghan refugees in Pakistan suffered from poor living conditions prior to migration. Food availability and accessibility were compromised prior to their migration due to the war, drought, and unemployment (Chabot and Dorosh 2007; Collins 2011; Nourpanah 2010). This situation continued even after more than two decades of residency in Pakistan, perhaps as a result of migration shock, their precarious residency status and language and employment barriers (Ahmadi and Lakhani 2017; UNHCR 2016b). These factors contributed to the increased risk of food insecurity, and its prolonged and chronic nature (Davies 1996).

For Afghan refugees, forced migration ruptured the stability of the three food security pillars, availability, accessibility and utilization of food in Pakistan. Although due to long-term war, drought, and inadequate transportation in many areas, these pillars were not stable in the home country either. Availability and accessibility remained the central reason behind family food insecurity in the host country. In comparison to the war-affected areas from

which they came, some elements of the food system in the host country such as accessibility of food markets and safety in accessing food have improved after migration. However, neither one of these improvements resulted in long-term stability of food security pillars.

Access to food stores and exposure to food-related messages were also improved in the host country. However, among Afghan refugee families, food is not prioritized based on its nutritional value or public service information campaigns; rather they are more concerned about food prices and consuming food to satisfy their hunger. Socio-economic status affected food security levels mainly through rendering food inaccessible (Green et al. 2013). The high prevalence of illiteracy among refugees and their inability to learn the local language was reported as a barrier to food security. Difficulty reading and understanding Urdu was consistently reported regardless of the length of stay. Both these findings lend additional support to previous research suggesting that food accessibility may be a common problem for refugees with language barriers and lower levels of education (Burns 2004; Green et al. 2013; Hadley and Sellen 2006).

While the change in the food security status due to relocation is often regarded as temporary food insecurity, the results of this study suggest that food insecurity and hunger among Afghan refugee families have become a chronic situation, especially given the length of stay and the protracted refugee status of many of our respondents (Maxwell and Frankenberger 1992). Additionally, the respondents' coping strategies reflected patterns of behavioral change in response to such food insecurity (Davies 1996). In chronic hunger and food insecurity situations, constant reduction of basic meal items will cause irreversible food deficiency-related health problems (Maxwell et al. 1999). Yet, whatever the reason for the distress in food security conditions, households facing the risk of food insecurity plan strategically to minimize the impact of the shock. This usually includes a two-phase reaction: (1) an immediate and short-term alteration of the consumption patterns, and (2) a longer-term alteration of income earnings or food production patterns. The latter is often accompanied by responses such as asset sales when food insecurity lasts longer (Corbett 1988; Maxwell et al. 1999).

For Afghan refugees' food security and a balanced and nutritious diet meant consuming a variety of foods from different food groups. They were aware of the importance of meat, dairy, and vegetables, in their daily diet. However, in this research, we did not collect any data to display the amount of each food group in their daily diet. Considering the respondents' responses that they were not able to afford meat and dairy products for several days, and replacing these items with rice, potatoes, and beans, it was evident that meat and dairy products were frequently replaced by

more affordable items. Therefore, lack of a balanced and a healthy diet amongst the Afghan refugee community could not be attributed to their insufficient nutrition knowledge.

Rather, many have indicated eating only what they could afford and that their eating habits were not influenced by promotional materials and marketing messages. Previous literature often referred to relying on low-cost fast food by low-income families in developed countries, however fast food items are not necessarily among affordable choices in developing countries. Although known brands in the fast food industry, like McDonald and Kentucky Fried Chicken are popular in Pakistan, they mostly cater to high-income segments of the population.

Plans made by the household decision maker are critical in determining the household's economic well-being, their food supply and consumptions, and ultimately their health. This can be more severe in cases where there is an absence of relief and aid programs to protected refugees against risks they cannot cope with (Corbett 1988). That said, the findings of this study show that food insecurity conditions of Afghan refugees were way past the short-term coping solutions and strategies of the Coping Strategies Index (CSI). Constant reduction of family members' food portions associates to chronic hunger and irreversible health problems (Black et al. 2008; Victora et al. 2008). Long-term food insecurity has irreversible physical and mental health effects on both adults and children (Black et al. 2008; Victora et al. 2008).

Refugee families identified some factors that explained why they left home and what motivated them to move to Pakistan (push and pull factors). War, lack of safety and security was the primary push factor. The decline in economic conditions that led to higher unemployment and poverty was also mentioned among reasons for leaving home. Several women and men mentioned oppression of women back home as a motivating reason to leave Afghanistan (Chabot and Dorosh 2007; Collins 2011; Dossa 2005). On the other hand, during the war period, Pakistan was one of the main refugee-accepting hosts. Pakistan national refugee accepting policy and geographical distance made it a viable destination for Afghan refugees. Household strategies and community structure also affected the refugees' decision. These factors along with cultural and religious proximity were pulling factors that encouraged migration waves toward Pakistan (Massey 1990). Findings confirmed an interconnectedness between push and pull factors. Moreover, improved safety, employment status, and cultural proximity/competency have served as facilitators of food security in the post-migration context (Kittler, Sucher, and Nelms 2011).



## Conclusions

This study focused on the food security status of refugee households. Understanding the food security in the host country will provide further evidence to understand the capacity of the host country to assist refugees. To do so, it would be beneficial to look at the food security status of Pakistani families. This way, we could gain insights into the conditions of the refugee household in comparison to the host household of similar socioeconomic status. Likewise, a comparison of the perceptions of food security and a balanced diet between Afghan and Pakistani families could also reveal, whether these perceptions are shared, reflecting certain common cultural norms, or different. Quantitative data, with a larger sample size, could also provide the relationship between food security status and socioeconomic status among Afghan refugees.

Afghan refugee families suffer from long-term food insecurity. Chronic food insecurity widely affects physical and mental health. Whether the Government of Pakistan is considering repatriation or reintegration of refugee families, policy reviews regarding food security improvement, and addressing the chronic food security situation and associated health-related issues are required to address the situation and prevent prolonged harms.

Findings from this study also highlight the need for aid organizations involved in the process of repatriation of Afghan refugees to be aware of the challenges of chronic food insecurity and the health complications associated with it. Positive change will require additional strategic planning designed to improve, among other things, food supply systems, health service systems, and support systems for refugees. In the case of repatriation, the coordination among the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and world aid organizations, e.g., UNHCR, WHO, and UNICEF, is important to build effective food security-related policies. Need for strategic repatriation plans that involve food security related policies to address both the acute food security condition associated with displacement for prolonged refugees during repatriation, as well as preventing further continuity of the chronic condition seems necessary.

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## Note

1. The first point of entry refers to the first country receiving the influx of refugees.

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