

Pakistan's Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Policy: Implications for Gender Security in the Context of SDG 5

Sobia Hanif^{*1}, Zeeshan Fida², Saman Sarfraz³, Noor ul Huda⁴

^{1*} Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

³ Independent Researchers, at the Department of International Relations, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

⁴ Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding author: sobiahnif@fjwu.edu.pk

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Pakistan has been hosted to an estimated four million Afghan refugees for over four decades. However, in the wake of rising terrorism in the country, Pakistan announced the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) to address its security challenges. This study, nevertheless argues that the IFRP lacks a gender-sensitive approach. The plan, which disproportionately affects Afghan women refugees, contradicts with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which advocates for gender equality and women's rights. This study critically examines the implications of IFRP on Afghan refugee women, who face increased vulnerabilities upon forced repatriation. It employs the Feminist Security Studies (FSS) framework, to highlight gendered experiences of conflict and displacement faced by Afghan women refugees. Using a qualitative case study methodology, the research draws on interviews with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Pak-Afghan Youth Forum, Afghan female refugees, and women's rights organizations. Secondary sources, including government reports, UNHCR data, and media publications, have also been utilized. The major findings arising from the study highlight the implications of IFRP for Afghan Women refugees who are likely to face gender-based violence, poverty, and social isolation upon return. Furthermore, access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for them remain severely limited under the repressive Taliban regime. As Pakistan seeks to adopt a balanced approach that preserves its national security while upholding humanitarian principles, it needs to reassess its repatriation plan by integrating gender-sensitive policies that protect vulnerable Afghan women and align with international human rights standards.

1. Introduction

At various points in history, women have been denied both freedom and security in Afghanistan. Constant warfare and power struggles among various factions in Afghanistan have led to severe human rights violations, with women bearing the brunt of the crisis. The Taliban's first rule which lasted through 1996 to 2001 was particularly unsafe for women. Strict laws were imposed that undermined their basic human rights including a ban on female education, employment, and freedom of movement without a male guardian. Violations resulted in strict punishments including public flogging, various forms of humiliation and even death. After the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001, some rights and freedoms were regained, however since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, restrictions have been reimposed, severely limiting their rights and endangering their security.

In search for safety, many of these women have crossed into neighbouring Pakistan in search of refuge from time to time. Notable are three phases including their massive influx after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan post 1979, followed by another wave of refugee arrival after the US military intervention in 2001 and more recently, in the wake of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021.

The Convention on Refugees convened in Geneva in 1951 established the legal status of refugees and stateless individuals, stipulating that an individual fleeing their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution, and unable to return, is considered a refugee (Tariq et al., 2024). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, Afghan refugees are present in more than 70 states, and 95 percent are hosted by Pakistan. and Iran (Mehmood, 2022). The United Nations estimated that approximately 3.7 million Afghan refugees are in Pakistan and 1.4 are formally registered (Pakistan must not carry out threat to deport Afghan refugees, 2023).

For over four decades Pakistan graciously hosted the world's largest number of refugees since 1979 estimated at 4 million on humanitarian grounds. However, the influx of Afghan refugees in Pakistan over the years created a host of challenges. Particularly, after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in August 2021, Pakistan faced a new set of difficult circumstances. In the first 21 months after the Taliban takeover Pakistan witnessed a massive surge of 73 percent increase in terrorist attacks with the number of casualties rising by an alarming 138 percent between August 2021 and April 2023 (Khan, 2024). Grappling with the resurgence of terrorism in the country that had previously witnessed a steady decline since the launch of Operation Zarb-e-Azb in 2014, Pakistan raised the issue with the Afghan government seeking their support in controlling the activities of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Frustrated that the Taliban government did not sufficiently address its concerns, Pakistan undertook a series of measures to arrest the deteriorating situation in the country, including efforts at border fencing, intelligence-based operations to root out terrorist hideouts, issuance of IFRP and imposition of tariffs on Afghan exports to Pakistan.

As a response to the deteriorating security situation, Pakistan's Ministry of Interior (MoI) enacted the "Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan" on September 26, 2023. According to the IFRP, all undocumented foreigners residing in Pakistan would be deported back to their home countries after November 1, 2023. Whereas the issue of the deportation of the

undocumented foreigners was directly linked with the issue of Afghan nationals and rising terrorism in the country, Pakistan still grappling with the devastating effects of the 2022 floods also sought to safeguard the socioeconomic fabric and demographic character of the state which was complicated by the presence of Afghan refugees in such large numbers. Nonetheless, security concerns remained paramount in the issuance of the IFRP. This was made evident in a statement issued by the Interior Minister Sarfraz Bugti on Oct 3, 2023 where he asserted that the government had verifiable reports about the involvement of Afghan nationals in 14 out of the 24 suicide attacks in the country (UNHCR, & International Organization for Migration, 2023). Therefore, it was imperative to deport undocumented foreigners in order to stabilize the security situation in the country. After the deadline, Law enforcement Agencies (LEAS) would forcibly deport all illegally residing foreigners.

It is noteworthy that although the IFRP refers to all illegal foreigners residing in the country, the majority of such foreigners are Afghan nationals, a large portion of whom are women and children. Interviews with Afghan refugee women reveal their experiences of being inappropriately handled by LEAS, destruction of refugee camps, confiscation of their belongings, fear of being detained and lack of financial resources even for return and resettlement. The haste in announcing the plan has been criticized for providing insufficient time for refugees to return, as well as lack of concern for the safety and wellbeing of the most vulnerable Afghan women who had already been displaced from their homes and had come to Pakistan to seek safety. Pakistan therefore is hard pressed to adopt a policy which prioritizes national security while balancing humanitarian principles with regards to the issue of Afghan refugees.

This paper argues that whereas Pakistan reserves the right to deport all illegal and undocumented foreigners residing in the country, it should adopt a gender sensitive approach to protect the most vulnerable communities including women. The study addresses this issue in context of the United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal 5 which advocates for gender equality, active participation in decision-making in economy, politics, and public life reiterating that the Taliban regime's repressive policies impinge upon women's access to basic human rights such as safety and wellbeing, access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities while, on the contrary promoting gender-based violence and discrimination. Pakistan should therefore review its IFRP in consideration of the gendered dimension of its repatriation plan.

2. Theoretical Framework

The lens of Feminist Security Studies (FSS) is used to analyse Pakistan's IFRP in the context of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5. The term "feminist security studies" was not coined until the mid-2000s and is still in a process of constant evolution making it a recent area of study (Sjoberg, 2017). FSS has broadened the definition of security beyond state-centric and military-focused frameworks and challenged older security paradigms by highlighting the role of gender in understanding security issues. The scope of analysis of feminist security studies ranges from the impact of armed conflict on gender relations, forced displacement and sexual violence to militarisation and its links with the social construct of hegemonic masculinity, to the everyday experience of insecurity as a

consequence of the global dynamics of inequality and exclusion in an international context of neoliberal expansion and neo-colonial and extractive political and economic projects.

This paper, therefore, employs the FSS to highlight how the forced deportation of Afghan refugees, especially women, have led to exacerbated vulnerabilities and increased gender-based violence and discrimination, thereby arguing for a more gender sensitive approach with regards to the IFRP.

3. Research Methodology

This study is a basic, qualitative, and analytical research study employing the case study research design. Interviews served as a primary source in this study, and a non-probability, convenience sampling technique was used to conduct online and face-to-face interviews with the representatives of MOFA, Pak-Afghan Youth Forum, Afghan female sufferers, and female workers working for women's development organizations to get access to primary data.

Additionally, the research utilizes relevant books, articles, government and United Nations reports, newspapers and magazines corresponding to Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan and its influence on the plight of Afghan female refugees. The acquired data is analysed and interpreted to present viable solutions for Afghan refugees in the context of SDG 5 arguing that the forced return of Afghan refugee women could lead to increased insecurity, gender-based violence and discrimination.

4. An Overview of Illegal Foreigner's Repatriation Plan

The Ministry of Interior (MoI) of Pakistan announced its internal plan to enact the Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan (IFRP) on 26 September 2023. According to this plan Afghan nationals residing in Pakistan would undergo 'repatriation' in three phases: starting with undocumented Afghan nationals, followed by Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders and Proof of Registration (PoR) holders (European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 2023). The MoI formally set the deadline of 1 November 2023 for unregistered migrants to leave the country. Thereafter, they would be deported to their countries of origin. On 10 October, the government issued a circular stating that PoR and ACC holders could be repatriated only on a voluntary basis, and on 10 November it was announced that the validity of PoR cards would be extended until 31 December 2023 (The decision by the Pakistani Government affected 1.7 million Afghan nationals, including around 600,000 Afghans who fled to Pakistan following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Since the implementation of IFRP on 1st November 2023, an estimated four lac Afghan refugees returned to Afghanistan, out of which approximately 80% comprised women and children (Hundreds of thousands of Afghans face harsh return after expulsion from Pakistan, 2023).

The MoI 'has issued instructions to all provinces to deport foreigners without documentation under the Foreign Act 1946 (Zaman, 2023). The IFRP also outlines the detailed responsibilities of different organs of the state for carrying out the repatriation process in a systematic way. The IFRP however has been shared only with the relevant stakeholders and is not a publically released document (United Nations, 2024).

4.1 Gender Dimensions of the IFRP in the Context of SDG 5

Sustainable Development Goal 5 emphasizes women's rights, and gender equality and empowers females by advocating for the eradication of all forms of discrimination, prejudices, and harmful acts against women worldwide. SDG-5 aims to promote equality in the promotion of education, employment, health, and policy-making power among women. SDG-5 also aims at ensuring female sexual rights, their reproductive health, and women-oriented decision-making.

The main targets of SDG-5 in the context of security are; ending prejudice against females, forbidding anti-women practices such as FGM (female genital mutilation) and early or forced marriages, providing infrastructure and social protection to females for their unpaid services, ensuring female participation in leadership positions in socio-political and economic sectors, ending sex trafficking or another form of violence against them, ensuring world-wide access to sexual rights and reproductive health to all females, making policy reforms that ensure women's economic well-being, right to own property, fiscal resources, and inheritance, promoting women empowerment by making IT more accessible to females, enforcing women benefiting legislations and adopting policies to strengthen the role of females.

Gender inequality has been part and parcel of Afghan society. Afghan refugee women are particularly vulnerable. Facing an uncertain future in Afghanistan, these women sought to take refuge in Pakistan to escape the harsh reality of armed conflict and coercive policies of the Taliban regime. Repatriation therefore has resulted in grave impacts, especially on refugee women, as a large number of female journalists, social workers, and human rights activists, fled to Pakistan to stay alive. Deporting them is not only a violation of their basic human rights but also amounts to the intentional endangerment of their lives. Most refugee women become the victim of psychological traumas, extreme poverty, sexual abuse, organ trafficking, harassment, or rape (Arif, 2023).

According to UNHCR data on Refugees in March 2024, in Pakistan, out of the over 3 million refugees, 822,400 are undocumented Afghan refugees, 803,200 ACC (Afghan Citizenship Card) holders, and 1.35 million are registered Afghan refugees. Among these 3.1 million refugees approximately 70% are women and young children (Afghanistan refugee crisis explained, 2024). Statistics indicate that 6.4 million i.e. 48% of the total Afghan population comprises women and girl's refugees (Afghanistan situation, 2024). The largest concentration of these women refugees around 52.6% is concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, comparable to other regions of Pakistan. UNHCR dividend Afghan women refugees into the following categories by age. 1.6% of female refugees are aged above 60 years, 20.3% are women between the age limit of 18 to 59 years, Girls from 12 to 17 years contribute 7.0%, young girls from 5 to 11 years are 10.6% and new born babies to girls aged 4 are 7.5% of the population in Pakistan.

4.2 From Refuge to Uncertainty: Dilemmas of Afghan Women Refugees Returning from Pakistan

Islamabad's 'Repatriation Plan' of deporting illegal foreigners in Pakistan places the Afghan women refugees in a very precarious position. These women had fled from war-torn

Afghanistan to seek access to basic fundamental human rights such as the right to life, liberty, education, and the pursuit of happiness (Women in Afghanistan have not stopped striving for their rights, and neither should we, 2024). With the growing authority and control of Afghan Taliban, the future of Afghan women seems uncertain and grim. Moreover, Afghan women returnees are at a great risk of being trapped in a cycle of oppression, poverty, and insecurity. Following are some of the challenges that Afghan Women are likely to face if they are deported from Pakistan under the repatriation plan.

4.3 Afghan Women and their Right to Life

First, as the Taliban government strictly applies and misconstrues the Sharia laws, the Afghan women cannot imagine having reproductive rights where women can decide about prioritizing their health over procreation. Besides, Afghan women lack basic access to maternal health as Afghanistan struggles with one of the world's highest infant mortality rates (Qamar, Khan, Rehman, Ullah, Ahmad, & Shah, 2024). More so, approximately 2.3 million children are at risk of acute malnutrition. According to the Population Reference Bureau, the average life span of Afghan girl born today is just 45 years (Ahmadi, 2022). An interview given by an Afghan medical trainer claimed that “we were rarely given a professional Midwife Training Course. Additionally, an unknown woman reported that every moment we feel like we are in prison, even not able to breath properly, we feel like moving dead bodies, we can talk and cannot do anything. Even the basic health care system is crumbling in Afghanistan with few female health experts, health resources, and infrastructure (BBC, 2024).

Moreover, women's rights activists and women in the police and military are at extreme risk of attacks from the Afghan Taliban (Mehrab, 2023). To suppress and shame women, the Taliban conducts virginity tests in maternity hospitals of girls of age fifteen to twenty-five every week (Afghan women and men far apart in literacy, 2000). On the bases of results of these virginity tests, girls are flogged publicly, imprisoned, or punished. The Taliban regime has decreed that women should be dressed in a way that only reveals their eyes, authorizing the Ministry of Vice and Virtue to enforce women's dress code. If a woman is found guilty, she is punished by acts of humiliation, torture, and arbitrary imprisonment (Cone, 2021). Social isolation is another psychological trauma faced by the Afghan Women during the Taliban's rule which is accentuated by restrictions on their exposure to public places without their male counterpart. There is no community support as women are isolated within four walls of their homes with no social connections or support (Ahmadi, 2022). Despite fears to their lives, the Afghan women have not surrendered and continue to challenge the regressive Taliban's policies concerning women. Along with the struggle to live healthy and happy life, Afghan women have very limited economic opportunities.

4.4 Restricted Opportunities: Afghan Women's Economic Struggles

After the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Afghan economic conditions have been deteriorating. Afghanistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) shrank to 20 percent with widespread poverty, displacement, and food insecurity under the Afghan Taliban rule (Barr, 2024). Severe malnutrition is growing across the Afghanistan and 95 percent of households have been facing food insecurity and inadequate food consumption. According to the United Nations (UN), over half of the population was estimated to be in crisis

levels of food insecurity in March 2022 (Afghanistan: The economic roots of a humanitarian crisis, 2022). According to the survey conducted by the World Food Program (WFP) in February 2022, approximately 100 percent of female-led households were experiencing food shortages. In addition, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); an estimated 23.7 million Afghans need humanitarian aid as of February 2024 (Mehran, 2023).

Despite initial promises to respect women rights, the Taliban has gradually imposed its strict interpretation of the Sharia-law and transitioned to the epitome of conservatism and patriarchy. Afghan women are denied access to public places without their male relatives. Women are not allowed to visit public places such as parks, gymnasiums, and markets. Since 2021, women are confined to the four walls of their houses. Besides, detentions of women have been carried out when they do not wear a proper hijab. The women who spoke against the Taliban had their houses damaged and they were punished through arbitrary detention, forced disappearance, and torture.

In addition, Afghan women cannot work alongside the males in public sphere. They have been forbidden to establish small businesses, such as; running a shop, working on farms, joining local industries employment, and learning import/export. A Vice and Virtue Ministry of Taliban government has shut down hair and beauty salons in Afghanistan. The beauty salons in Afghanistan have been closed down as they have been declared places of indecency. Moreover, the Taliban government has imposed restrictive employment policies concerning women. They are not allowed to work in beauty salons, military, and the police. On 24th December 2021, the Taliban's Ministry of Economy went ahead by issuing a letter banning Afghan women from working for national and international non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Women have also been barred from working with the United Nations. Subsequently under the Taliban rule, the economic prospects of Afghan women have been severely hampered. Such restrictive economic policies of the Taliban concerning women's role in the economic affairs have pushed women into extreme poverty (Barr, 2024). As the Afghan women's economic rights are steadily infringed in Afghanistan, the economic plight of Afghan women has also worsened. The situation has deteriorated to the extent that it has become difficult for women to seek support from foreign donors (Momand, & Khan, 2022). Even the international donors and aid agencies are not allowed to support women rights, drawing in severe condemnation by the Taliban regime deeming it an interference in the state's internal affairs.

Moreover, the plight of Afghan women who have lost their male family members; husbands, fathers, and brothers during the Afghan wars since 1979 has been appalling. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 32 lac Afghans are displaced within Afghanistan (Jafari et al., 2025). The women who are left as widows or orphans have been provided with no rights and no protection as they are abducted, extorted, or forcefully married by Taliban or other family members.

Women have been systematically excluded women from public life. Taliban believe that women do not have any role and capacity to deal with political and administrative issues. Thus, in the newly formed Taliban government, no woman has been included in any cabinet

position. Even the Ministry of Women's affairs was abolished. Along with the economic struggles of Afghan women, the right to get education, a basic fundamental human right has become a distant dream.

4.5 The Right to Education: A Distant Dream for Afghan Girls

While there are significant disparities in terms of access to education within South Asia as a whole, the circumstances in Afghanistan are particularly alarming. The number of men who can read and write is 1.75 times that of women within South Asia (Afghan women endure harsh restrictions under Taliban rule, 2024). However, in Afghanistan, the literacy rate among women is three times less than that of men. According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), only 15 percent of Afghan women can read and write as compared to the 47 percent Afghan men. Over forty years of war and poverty have severely impacted Afghanistan's educational system and deprived millions of Afghans, especially women and girls from literacy. Notwithstanding, there is some progress in the overall literacy in the world, still 781 million adults are out of school, 63% of whom are girls (Afghan women and men far apart in literacy, 2025). Afghanistan contributes significantly to these numbers, having one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. In the last ten years, the overall all literacy rate in the world increased from 32 percent in 2011 to 43 percent in 2018, (female 29.81 % and male: 55.48%), yet there is a long way to go to (UNESCO, 2025). Out of a total population of 39.6 million people, Afghanistan's illiterate population above fifteen years' age has been assessed at 12 million with 7.2 million females and 4.8 million males. Statistics indicate that since 2011, the female literacy rate almost doubled in Afghanistan from 17 percent to 30 percent, but with the rise of Taliban in Kabul, any further progress in terms of educating girls and women seem very unlikely and bleak with projections pointing towards the contrary (Abbas, 2023).

Afghanistan is the only country in the world which prevented girls over the age of twelve from receiving education (BBC News, 2022). The Taliban have prohibited girls from attending school past the sixth grade. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1.4 million Afghan girls have been intentionally deprived of schooling (Taliban reportedly stop 100 Afghan female students from flying to UAE for studies, 2023). Access to primary education has also fallen sharply, with 1.1 million fewer girls going to school. In addition, secondary and higher education is strictly banned for Afghan girls and women. Taliban abolished the secondary and tertiary school systems. Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader of Afghanistan, stated that the study of natural sciences subjects beyond the matriculation is unnecessary.

In the last couple of years, Afghan Taliban's government has issued and implemented over 20 written and verbal decrees on girls' education- with each verdict adding more restrictions. These edicts banned the study of journalism, agriculture, veterinary science, law, economics, and natural sciences for women. The Taliban government has announced that Afghan women can no longer pursue higher education in universities especially in co-educational institutions. Male teachers are also forbidden to teach in girls' schools, colleges, and universities. The Afghan Taliban has discontinued women education abroad for higher education and availing of scholarships offered by Khalaf Ahmad Al Habtoor, a prominent businessman and philanthropist from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Such radical measures

are blatant violation of human rights and condemned by various human rights organizations including Amnesty International.

4.6 Pakistan's Legal and Moral Justifications for the IFRP

Pakistan adheres to the Dualist Legal Doctrine which determines refugee-status as a balance between state sovereignty and international humanitarian principles. Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol hence lacks a consolidated framework for refugee-related governance. The country is still practicing Foreigners Act of 1946 along with Islamic Principles. More so, there is only a tri-party Agreement between Pakistan, Afghanistan and UNHCR. This agreement guides and regulates the voluntary and gradual return of registered Afghan refugees from Pakistan. However, there are many deficiencies in the document as it is silent on the unregistered return of refugees and those who want to stay in Pakistan (Mehmood, 2022).

The significant issues that the Government of Pakistan has been facing are lack of legal clarity in refugee status, no up-to-mark capacity for registration, increasing threat of terrorism, strained Pak-Afghan relations, lack of international aid and a clash between state sovereignty and the international humanitarian principles. It would be fair to say that the repatriation plan was announced as a “Domestic Legal Framework” influenced by customary international laws. For those Afghans who moved to Pakistan before and after August 5, 2021, without legal permission, the Government of Pakistan announced the Illegal Foreigner’s Repatriation Plan by declaring them Illegal Immigrants. As the Government of Afghanistan declared Afghanistan a war-free country, hence, Pakistani officials say that migrating Afghans without authentic documentation are not refugees.

Pakistan justifies the IFRP legally by stating that even though it is not a signatory of the Refugee Conventions 1951 or its 1967 Protocol for the last 40 years but despite this, it has been facilitating Afghan refugees on humanitarian grounds. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) also protects the right of a person other than its own citizen through provisions, such as; Article 4 (refers to the right to equality to all individuals residing in Pakistan including refugees and asylum seekers). Article 9 (ensures the protection of everyone’s life in the state of Pakistan), Articles 10 and 10A guarantee just trial and protection against unlawful detention and Article 24 prevents snatching someone’s property except by law. Pakistan is also a signatory, of Convention Against Torture and has been respecting the Principle of Non-refoulement by helping voluntary return of Afghan refugees.

Secondly, it is the sovereign right of Pakistan to deport all undocumented or Illegal foreigners, that could threaten the socio-political and economic stability of Pakistan. The Foreigners Act of 1946 is used to assist repatriation, aimed at deporting international visitors, who lack proper documentation. Meanwhile, Article 11 of the Foreigners Order of 1951 sets terms and conditions for residence, movement, and possessions of belongings by Illegal Immigrants.

Thirdly, the presence of Afghan refugees poses significant economic challenges for the hosting state, which is already trying to recuperate from economic hardship. Pakistan’s financial resources have been overstretched while providing for such a large number of

refugees for over four decades. Its fragile economic situation has been strained due to the influx of more Afghan refugees after 2021 with implications for revenue collection systems, employment opportunities, and provision of public goods. Shortages of international funding, diversion of resources from developmental initiatives to refugee management, especially in KPK and Baluchistan, competition for scarce resources contributing towards resentment among locals, tax evasion, and heightened social tensions have all contributed towards a decline in economic productivity (Anwar, 2021).

Fourthly, the Government of Pakistan found the involvement of Illegal Afghans in terrorist activities, illegal drug-dealing, or facilitation of such acts. Their deliberate attempts to stay away from the radar through proper registration reflect that they are involved in tax evasion, criminal acts, smuggling, drug trafficking, and running illegal businesses. The interim government also claimed that they had also found Afghan citizens involvement in terror attacks in the country. Hence, the threat to Pakistan's security and stability served as the basis of the announcement of IFRP.

Pakistan also has moral explanations for issuing the IFRP. It is the world's largest refugee-hosting country, which has accommodated Afghan refugees for more than 40 years. In 2023 the UN estimated 3.7 million Afghans residing in Pakistan but the Government of Pakistan believes this number to be more than 4.4 million. Since 2001 Pakistan has faced massive losses due to the scourge of terrorism in the form of 150 billion dollars in economic loss, a decrease of 3% in GDP, and more than 70,000 deaths (Ahmed, 2021). Since 1979, Pakistan has been providing facilities both outside and inside the refugee camps including the opportunity to get registered as a POR (Proof of Registration Card), avail refugee camps/shelter, access vocational training, skill development initiatives, education, acquire healthcare services including child health or reproductive health services, ensure economic well-being (providing cash prizes or residence to live) and initiating RAHA (Refugees Affected and Hosting Areas for community development). Abdul Qadir Baloch in 2013 stated that Pakistan has spent more than \$200 billion for the improvement in living standards of Afghan refugees for the past 30 years (Burdened economy: Pakistan has spent \$200B on Afghan refugees, 2013). Despite announcing the IFRP, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif announced a one-year extension for those 14 lac POR cardholders whose cards expired by June 30th, 2024 (Greenfield, 2024).

Pakistan's stance on IFPR is reflected in Ambassador Mumtaz Zahra Baloch's response which states that the Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP) doesn't target nationals of any particular state, it is against all illegal foreigners indiscriminately (Transcript of the weekly media briefing by spokesperson, 2023). It is the sovereign right of Pakistan to deport illegal immigrants, and none of the legal foreigners have been deported from Pakistan. IFRP is pre-planned and will be followed stepwise. Counter to UNHCR Mumtaz Zahra also said that Pakistan has not committed anything relevant to not implementing IFRP to Filippo Grandi, the Chief of the UN Agency of Refugees (Taliban accused of torturing journalists, silencing dissent, 2023).

4.7 Responses by the International Community

Following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, no state officially recognized the Taliban regime, however China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran and some Central Asian states established diplomatic linkages to maintain engagement. Criticisms especially from the West stem from the Taliban government's record of non-democratic, exclusive rule, and violation of human rights particularly restrictions and harsh punishments on women and young girls. However, after the IFRP was issued, the US expressed its grave concern over the plan to deport roughly 3 million refugees to Afghanistan. Resultantly, it urged Pakistan to halt the process for thousands of Afghans awaiting U.S. visas under programs designed to relocate at-risk refugees. In October 2023, the U.S. shared a list of over 25,000 Afghans eligible for relocation and resettlement in the United States (Gul, 2023). These individuals had worked for the U.S. or its contractors during its military presence in Afghanistan and are at risk of retribution from the Taliban. The U.S. requested Pakistan to refrain from deporting these individuals and to establish protective screening mechanisms to ensure their safety. In a letter issued by 80 leading personnel from resettlement organizations and former US Diplomats in October 2024, Pakistan's then Caretaker PM Anwaarul Haq Kakar was urged to protect those individuals who worked closely with the US, especially former interpreters, journalists, and women leaders, who would face considerable threats if returned to Afghanistan. However, in a latest turn of events, US President Donald Trump issued an order suspending the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), effectively locking out refugees worldwide who had been on a pathway to US resettlement. Thereafter Pakistan also called on foreign missions to coordinate the relocation of Afghan nationals out of the capital Islamabad and its twin garrison city of Rawalpindi by March 31, 2025 otherwise they would be deported to Afghanistan (Saifi, 2025).

Concerning the European Union, an official unified response has not been issued regarding the IFRP, however, individual member states and EU-affiliated organizations have expressed concerns. The EUAA's report of September 2024 highlighted that millions of Afghan nationals have faced insurmountable challenges after the announcement of the IFRP including arrests, detention and forced return. While urging Pakistan to pursue a more humanitarian approach towards Afghan refugees, it has also criticized the Taliban regime in Afghanistan due to its failure to comply with the EU's desired conditions such as securing girls' rights, minority rights, inclusive government, and linked its performance to accessing humanitarian aid.

Compared to the US and the EU, China's response to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has been strategic and pragmatic, emphasizing engagement, economic cooperation and counter-terrorism. Beijing has not officially recognized the Taliban government but has actively engaged with them through diplomacy and trade initiatives. China which has strategic interests in the region has not issued an official response regarding the IFRP; however, according to the South China Sea Post, it is concerned about Pakistan's decision to deport millions of Afghan refugees as it may exacerbate Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis and adversely affect regional stability (Fitzgerald, 2023). China's engagement with the Taliban regime has centered on preventing Uyghur militant groups like ETIM from carrying out attacks

against China, accessing its resources and promoting infrastructure to expand the Belt and Road Initiative. (Rehman, 2022).

Likewise, Russia also did not officially recognize the Taliban regime. However, it opened diplomatic channels planning to remove the Taliban from its list of terrorist groups, and wanted to promote economic and diplomatic engagement by sending invitations to the representatives of the Taliban Government at St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. Russia's interests in Afghanistan include efforts to eradicate instability by suppressing ETIM, support Russia's economic interests in the form of the Lapis-Lazuli trade corridor or the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway, and to make Russia influential in Afghanistan (Belarus opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on the run, 2021). It has not offered any official stance on the status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan nor criticized the repatriation plan, choosing instead to focus on strategic areas of cooperation with both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The responses of the international community have been a mixed bag towards the IFRP, with some western states and international organizations such as UNHCR and Amnesty International expressing concern over the repatriation plan. It is however noteworthy that the US, UK and EU states have also initiated plans to deport illegal immigrants and asylum seekers with record deportations of rejected asylum seekers in 2023–24, particularly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

5. Conclusion

The study highlights the implications of the IFRP for Afghan women refugees who had fled armed conflict and uncertainty in Afghanistan in search for safety in Pakistan. The forced return of these women to Taliban controlled Afghanistan would not only amount to the violation of their human rights but also endangerment of their lives. This study highlights the critical need for a gender-sensitive approach in Pakistan's repatriation policies, particularly concerning vulnerable communities, including women. The Taliban regime's repressive policies have severely restricted Afghan women's access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and fundamental human rights, while simultaneously exacerbating gender-based violence and discrimination. While Pakistan holds the sovereign right to deport illegal and undocumented foreigners, the study argues that its policies must align with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which emphasizes gender security and equality. Given these challenges, Pakistan should reassess its Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan (IFRP), ensuring that it incorporates gendered considerations to protect those most at risk.

5.1 Policy Suggestions and Recommendations

Pakistan may consider the following set of recommendations with regards to the IFRP.

- As Pakistan has remained host to Afghan refugees for over four decades, it should facilitate the return of Afghan refugees in an amicable way by revisiting the IFRP and making it gender sensitive in the context of SDG 5.
- Pakistan should protect vulnerable refugee groups especially endangered women such as widows, single mothers, human rights activists, academics, healthcare experts, women in sports, working women, orphans and senior citizens.

- The Government of Pakistan should coordinate with the UNHCR and related organizations for the provision of special funds for women and children offering them vocational training, education, healthcare, and psycho-social therapies.
- Border management systems should be installed along Pak-Afghan borders including; biometric scanners, integrated databases, fencing, creation of joint border patrols for intelligence sharing, and awareness campaigns for the smooth return of Afghan refugees to their country.
- Researchers and human rights organizations' access to refugee camps and holding areas should be facilitated to conduct unbiased studies regarding viable solutions to the issues faced by Afghan refugees, especially vulnerable groups including women. These findings could thereby inform government policies with regards to the repatriation process.
- Afghan refugees that are willing to repatriate should be facilitated by providing them with financial assistance and vocational training for a smooth settlement in the Afghan society.
- One of the sustainable solutions is the granting of citizenship under the constitution of Pakistan especially the Pakistan Citizenship Act 1951 Section 4, Pakistan's Naturalization Act, 1924 Section 3, and Pakistan's Citizenship Act Section 10 whereby Afghan legal residents who have been residing in Pakistan for several decades peacefully could be offered citizenship.

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