



# **The Right to Education for Afghan Refugee Children in Iran: Barriers and Progress**

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# ABSTRACT

The crisis of displacement has resulted in a situation where numerous refugee children, including those, from Afghanistan residing in Iran are encountering obstacles when it comes to accessing education. Despite Iran's stance towards welcoming Afghan refugees, there are still significant challenges in ensuring that these children have fair and inclusive opportunities for education.

This qualitative mixed-methods study is grounded in the Human Rights-Based Approach and theories surrounding inequality and social inclusion. It delves into the legal frameworks, socioeconomic constraints, cultural factors, and institutional challenges that hinder refugee children's access to education in Iran. The study aims to explore the gap between Iranian policies and the lived realities of Afghan families.

Through documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews with Afghan parents, and an examination of the interplay of multidimensional factors this study uncovers intricate registration processes, economic exclusion, cultural biases and inconsistencies in policy implementation that contribute to systemic disparities.

The findings of this study offer recommendations for legal reforms, socio-economic inclusion initiatives, enhanced institutional capacity, strategies for community involvement alignment with international standards as well as ongoing monitoring efforts to uphold the fundamental right of Afghan refugee children to receive a quality education in Iran.

**Keywords:** Right to Education, Refugee, Children's Human Rights, Afghan Refugees, Marginalization, Educational inequality

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# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UDHR</b>	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>ICESCR</b>	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>CRC</b>	Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>CESCR</b>	Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>GPE</b>	Global Partnership for Education
<b>ECW</b>	Education Cannot Wait
<b>HRBA</b>	Human Rights-Based Approach
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>CRT</b>	Critical Race Theory
<b>IMO</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MOE</b>	Ministry of Education
<b>IRI</b>	Islamic Republic of Iran

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Research Background

The global displacement crisis has emerged as one of the most important humanitarian challenges of our time. The report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates that the world witnessed an unprecedented 108.4 million forced displacements, including 35.3 million refugees, by the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2022). In this regard, Afghan refugees constitute one of the largest displaced populations, with more than 2.6 million Afghans registered as refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2022). Iran, as a neighbouring country of Afghanistan, has become the fourth largest refugee host country in the world by hosting a significant number of Afghan refugees for decades (UNHCR, 2022).

The influx of Afghan refugees to Iran dates back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, subsequently the emergence of the Taliban regime in the 1990s and following military intervention led by the United States in 2001 (UNHCR, 2023a). These ongoing conflicts and instabilities have forced millions of Afghans to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, including Iran, where they face a complex web of challenges in accessing basic rights and services, including education. It is imperative to prioritize the needs of the children in this group of refugees, as they are among the most vulnerable. Access to quality education is not only vital for individual development and empowerment but also plays a fundamental role in strengthening social cohesion, economic prosperity and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2019).

Education is a fundamental human right enshrined in various international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 28 and 29). For refugee children, education serves as a lifeline, providing them with the knowledge, skills, and resilience necessary to navigate their challenging circumstances and build a better future (UNHCR, 2023b).

However, at the global level and despite international and legal obligations, realizing the right to education for refugee children remains a daunting challenge (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Refugee children face multiple barriers to accessing quality education, including legal and

policy barriers, cultural and linguistic differences, discrimination, socioeconomic constraints, and lack of educational infrastructure (Gladwell *et al.*, 2016).

In the context of Iran, the educational experiences and challenges faced by Afghan refugee children are influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including evolving legal and policy frameworks, socio-economic inequalities, cultural and linguistic barriers, and social attitudes towards refugees (Hervé, 2018). In the past decades, the Iranian government has implemented various policies and regulations aimed at governing the educational rights and access of Afghan refugees, with changing priorities and approaches influenced by domestic and international political perspectives (Abbasi Shawazi *et al.*, 2005). While the Iranian government has generally shown a positive approach towards accepting Afghan refugees, focusing on the shared language, culture, and religion between the two countries, there are still notable challenges in this area (Turton and Marsden, 2002).

While some policies have sought to facilitate access to primary and secondary education for Afghan refugee children, others have imposed limitations and restrictions, particularly concerning higher education and integration into the Iranian educational system (Gladwell *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, the practical implementation of these policies has been fraught with challenges, as Afghan refugee families navigate bureaucratic hurdles, financial constraints, and societal attitudes that may hinder their children's educational opportunities (Abbasi Shawazi *et al.*, 2005).

Moreover, the practical implementation of these policies has been fraught with challenges, as Afghan refugee families navigate bureaucratic barriers, social attitudes, and property constraints that may hinder their children's educational opportunities (Abbasi Shawazi *et al.*, 2005).

## **1.2 Significance of the Study and Relevance to Human Rights**

Recent crises in Afghanistan have led to the influx of more Afghan immigrants and refugees to Iran. This study has profound significance in enhancing our understanding of the educational experiences and challenges faced by Afghan refugee children in the host country. Ensuring the access of this vulnerable population to education is a pressing issue that the Iranian government must address through effective measures and policies.



The government's multifaceted response to this issue, combining both facilitative and restrictive rules and regulations, together with the absence of precise statistics on the situation and the number of Afghan children in Iran, further underscores the significance of examining this matter.

The importance of this research cannot be overstated, as education plays an important role in shaping the prospects and socio-cultural integration of Afghan refugee children, not only within the host country but also in their country of origin. Despite the critical nature of this issue, there is an alarming lack of comprehensive research on the educational experiences of Afghan refugee children in Iran, creating a significant gap in our understanding of this pressing issue.

This study aims to contribute to filling this gap by providing a holistic and multidimensional perspective on the factors that influence the educational situation for Afghan refugee children in Iran. By examining the legal and policy frameworks governing educational access for this population, as well as the lived experiences and perspectives of Afghan refugee families, the study seeks to shed light on the systemic barriers, legal complexities, and socio-cultural factors that impede educational access and attainment for these children.

The study's significance lies in its potential to inform policy interventions, advocacy efforts, and programmatic initiatives aimed at promoting educational equity and fulfilling the fundamental human rights of Afghan refugee children in Iran. By illuminating the challenges faced by this marginalized population, the research provides a solid foundation for stakeholders, policymakers, and civil society organizations to develop targeted strategies and interventions that uphold the human rights of Afghan refugee children.

Additionally, the findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on refugee education and underscore the critical importance of addressing the educational needs of marginalized and displaced populations. Access to equitable and inclusive quality education is a fundamental human right, and this research emphasizes the need to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) for Afghan refugee children in Iran and other refugee communities around the world.

This study has profound significance in advancing our understanding of the educational experiences of Afghan refugee children in Iran, an important yet understudied aspect of the

global refugee crisis. By clarifying the challenges facing this vulnerable population and their human rights implications, this research aims to inform and inspire efforts to promote educational equity and protect the fundamental rights of Afghan refugee children in Iran and beyond.

### **1.3 Research Questions and Aims**

This study aims to shed light on the educational environment for Afghan refugee children in Iran by examining the gaps between existing policy and legal frameworks and the real-life experiences of this population. It seeks to assess the alignment of these factors with human rights principles and international standards.

To achieve these aims, the research endeavours to address the following key questions:

- **Overarching question:** What are the primary obstacles that Afghan refugee children and their families encounter in accessing education in Iran?
- **Sub-question 1:** What are the key provisions of national and international laws and policies governing the right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran, and how do these legal frameworks and policy measures shape the educational opportunities and challenges faced by Afghan refugee children and their families?
- **Sub-question 2:** How do Afghan refugee families navigate socio-economic factors and practical barriers to access education in Iran? How do they experience obstacles in accessing education in Iran, and how do they navigate these challenges?
- **Sub-question 3:** How do socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors intersect to impact the educational opportunities and barriers for Afghan refugee children in Iran?

By addressing these research questions, the study will reveal the gaps between the policy and legal frameworks and the lived experiences of Afghan refugee children and their families in accessing education in Iran. Consequently, it will determine whether the educational environment and the challenges faced by this population align with human rights principles and international standards.

## 1.4 Dissertation Outline

This dissertation comprises seven chapters, followed by a bibliography and appendices:

**Chapter I: Introduction:** This chapter sets the context for the research, highlighting the relevance to the Human Rights and significance of the study, and clearly states the overarching research question and sub-questions guiding the investigation.

**Chapter II: Literature Review:** The chapter conducts a comprehensive review of existing literature, organized into three key areas: the fundamental human right to education, the challenges surrounding the right to education for refugee children, and the specific context of Afghan refugees in Iran.

**Chapter III: Theoretical Framework:** Founded in the Human Rights-Based Approach as the overarching lens, this chapter outlines the theoretical foundations underlying the study, integrating theories of educational inequality, marginalization, and social inclusion perspectives.

**Chapter IV: Methodology:** Outlining a qualitative mixed-methods research design, this chapter describes the use of documentary analysis to examine legal and policy frameworks (addressing sub-question 1), and semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugee parents to explore practical barriers and socio-economic factors (sub-questions 2 and 3). It further outlines data collection, sampling, analysis approaches, and ethical considerations.

**Chapter V: Results:** Broken into two sections, this chapter presents the findings. The first section focuses on the national policy landscape and international frameworks (sub-question 1), while the second section amplifies the lived realities and obstacles faced by Afghan refugee families (sub-questions 2 and 3) through thematic analysis of interviews.

**Chapter VI: Findings and Analysis:** Employing a comparative analysis through the HRBA lens, this chapter compares Iranian policies and practices with human rights principles. It

addresses dimensions such as availability, accessibility, equality, and non-discrimination in realizing the educational rights of Afghan refugee children, addressing all questions.

**Chapter VII: Conclusions:** This final chapter gathers the main findings and formulates overarching conclusions that directly address the research questions. It offers insights and recommendations to promote educational equity and fulfilment of rights for Afghan refugee children in Iran while recognising potential areas for further research.

The bibliography and the interview guide used in the study are included in the appendices.

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, I will conduct a comprehensive review of existing literature, covering three essential domains. First, I will examine the fundamental human right to education, its legal underpinnings, and its transformative role in individual and societal development. Next, I will delve into the specific challenges and legal intricacies surrounding the right to education for refugee children. Finally, I will focus on the context of Afghan refugees in Iran. This literature review aims to critically examine the existing research, knowledge, and debates surrounding the right to education for refugee children, with a particular emphasis on the context of Afghan refugees in Iran.

### **2.1 The Fundamental Human Right to Education**

The acceptance of education as a fundamental human right is enshrined in various international legal instruments, reflecting the worldwide agreement on its profound power in advocating human dignity, empowerment, and sustainable development. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, expressed this right, stating that

"everyone has the right to education" (UN, 1948). Subsequent instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (UN, 1966) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN, 1989), have reinforced and expanded upon this foundation.

While these legal frameworks have played a significant role in promoting and advocating the right to education, their justiciability and implementation remain unclear, contributing to the enduring gap between policy and practice (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018). On one hand, scholars like Sheppard (2023) argue for expanding the scope of the right to include free pre-primary and secondary education, in accordance with the research that shows their long-term advantages for children's cognitive and social development, educational achievement, health, and employment prospects. This perspective resonates with the global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNHCR, 2015).

On the other hand, researchers such as Anderson *et al.* (2003) believe that education rights alone are not enough to achieve educational progress without considering other factors such as political support, sufficient resources and socioeconomic status (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018). They argue that elements such as displacement, poverty, cultural barriers and insufficient educational infrastructure deeply affect the ability to benefit from the right to education (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). This point of view highlights the complex and diverse nature of obstacles to the realization and access to the right to education and emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to realize this right.

The historical context of Nazism and World War II strongly influenced the formulation of the right to education in the UDHR and ICESCR and emphasized the role of education in promoting peace, human rights, democracy and combating intolerance, fascism and racism (Halvorsen, 1990). These discussions included issues such as non-discrimination in education based on gender, race, religion and language, as well as the rights of minorities to education in their language. Nevertheless, the literature shows that the implementation and enforcement of the right to education depends on the dedication and cooperation of nation-states, as well as the availability of resources and strong accountability mechanisms. (Dryden-Peterson, 2015)

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) through its General Comment No. 13 (CESCR, 1999) has played a crucial role in providing authoritative guidance on the normative content of the right to education. The CESCR emphasizes the principles of availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability as essential components and guarantees accessible, non-discriminatory, culturally appropriate and responsive educational opportunities to the diverse needs of learners (Tomaševski, 2006). However, Horsch Carsley and Russell (2020) consider the ICESCR as one of the least enforceable human rights treaties, further exacerbating the gap between policy and practice.

After considering evidence from several sources, it is clear that while international legal instruments have established the normative and legal foundations of the right to education, there are significant challenges in its realization, especially for marginalized and vulnerable groups. These multifaceted challenges include legal, cultural, socio-economic and institutional barriers that hinder access to quality education.

Sustained efforts, increased investment, and collaboration among stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, civil society groups, and education advocates, are critical to addressing these challenges. Initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2023), the Education Can't Wait Fund (ECW, 2023), and various advocacy campaigns have mobilized resources and raised awareness of the importance of equitable and inclusive educational opportunities. However, there is a lack of strong enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures, which hinders the full realization of the basic human right to education (Horsch Carsley and Russell, 2020).

## **2.2 The Right to Education for Refugee Children**

Despite legal provisions aimed at protecting the right to education, Refugee children, as a vulnerable group, encounter unique and multifaceted challenges in accessing and enjoying educational opportunities (Sheppard, 2023). Even though the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the foundation and Underlying the protection of refugee rights, including the right to education, their fairness and enforcement are uncertain, contributing to a persistent gap between policy and practice (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018).

On the one hand, Article 22 of the 1951 Refugee Convention stipulates that member states treat refugees in the same way as their nationals in terms of primary education and provide "as favourable as possible treatment" for other levels of education (UNHCR, 1951). However, Willems and Vernimmen (2018) argue that the material effects of such laws on promoting refugee access to education are limited due to the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms and diverse interpretations by states. Horsch Carsley and Russell (2020) provide additional evidence supporting this finding and show through a comprehensive content analysis that the 1951 Refugee Convention has the fewest enforcement mechanisms of the seven major human rights treaties examined, making it the least enforceable treaty regarding refugees' right to education.

Nevertheless, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasizes and strengthens the educational rights of refugee children. According to Article 28, every child's right to education is affirmed, and member states are obliged to guarantee free and compulsory primary education and promote equal access to secondary and higher education (UN, 1989). Accordingly, Article 22 requires governments to take appropriate measures to ensure that refugee children have access to education (UNICEF, 2007). However, Willems and Werniman (2018) emphasize that implementation of these provisions has been limited, while Horsch Carsley and Russell (2020) note that the CRC is also one of the other least enforceable human rights treaties, further exacerbating the policy-practice gap in refugee education.

The Convention against Discrimination in Education, adopted by UNESCO in 1960, emphasizes the principles of non-discrimination and equal access to education at all levels and discusses the legal barriers and socio-economic constraints that prevent and limit refugee children from accessing formal education (Willems and Wernman, 2018). However, as argued by Horsch Carsley and Russell (2020), the lack of strong enforcement mechanisms in these core treaties that grant refugees the right to education directly reinforces the policy-practice gap.

Socio-economic limitations, cultural and linguistic barriers, discrimination, and inadequate educational infrastructure are among the main practical obstacles against refugee children enjoying their rights (Gladwell *et al.*, 2016). Legal barriers, such as enrollment restrictions, non-recognition of educational qualifications, and policies that exclude refugee children from

national education systems, can severely limit their access to formal education (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Willems and Vernimmen (2018) emphasize the need to review international treaties, jurisprudence, and state-specific legal frameworks to ensure effective implementation and access to educational opportunities for refugee children.

Socio-economic factors, including poverty, the need for child labour, and the inability to pay for education, can prevent refugee children from accessing education (UNHCR, 2023b). Cultural and linguistic differences may lead to discrimination, social exclusion, and a lack of understanding or support for their unique needs (Gladwell *et al.*, 2016). Willems and Vernimmen (2018) highlight the potential for discrimination in higher school fees or lack of access to education in their mother tongue as additional legal and practical challenges facing refugee children.

Other factors that undermine the quality of education provided to refugee children, especially in refugee camps or settlements, include inadequate educational infrastructure such as overcrowded classrooms, shortages of qualified teachers, and limited learning resources and materials, which adversely impact the educational experience of refugees (UNHCR, 2023b). Furthermore, the displacement and trauma experienced by refugee children can have profound psychological and emotional effects, affecting their ability to learn and thrive in educational settings (Fazel and Stein, 2002).

Studies on the educational experiences and outcomes of refugee children emphasize the urgency of addressing these challenges. Piper *et al.* (2020) found very low at-risk test scores among refugee children in a Kenyan refugee camp, much lower than disadvantaged children in the host community, highlighting the need to prioritize improving learning outcomes rather than focusing solely on access to education.

Addressing these Complex and diverse challenges requires a coordinated and comprehensive approach including governments, international organizations, civil society and local communities (Piper *et al.*, 2020). Efforts should focus on removing legal and administrative barriers, promoting inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices, securing adequate funding and resources, and addressing the unique psychological and social needs of refugee children (UNHCR, 2023b). Willems and Vernimmen (2018) emphasize the importance of effective enforcement mechanisms and a subtle understanding of the legal



complexities surrounding the right to education for refugees, including the potential for segregated classes or schools, to ensure meaningful access and protect against discrimination. While progress has been made in recognizing and addressing the educational needs of refugee children, significant challenges remain. Continuous commitment, collaboration and innovative solutions are needed to ensure that every refugee child can enjoy their fundamental human right to education, unlock their full potential and enable them to grow as individuals and contributing members of their communities (Willems and Vernimmen, 2018)

The UNHCR has actively promoted and supported the enforcement of the right to education for refugee children. This has been achieved through various initiatives, including the UNHCR Education Strategy and the Refugee Education 2030 Program. The primary goals of these initiatives are to enhance the availability of high-quality education for refugees at all educational levels, encourage gender equality in higher education enrollment, and offer technical and vocational training opportunities (UNHCR, 2023b).

However, the effectiveness of these efforts depends on the commitment and cooperation of host countries, as well as the availability of resources and robust accountability mechanisms.

Ensuring access to quality education for refugee children is not only a moral obligation but also a strategic investment in their future and the future of their communities. Education empowers refugee children with knowledge, skills and resilience, enabling them to overcome adversity, contribute to society and break the cycle of poverty and marginalization (UNHCR, 2023b). In addition, education plays an important role in strengthening social cohesion, promoting intercultural understanding and creating sustainable and peaceful societies (UNESCO, 2023).

### **2.3 Educational Challenges for Afghan Refugees in Iran**

The influx of Afghan refugees into neighbouring countries, including Iran, has been a prolonged humanitarian crisis caused by decades of conflict, insecurity and political instability in Afghanistan. Iran has hosted a significant number of Afghan refugees, with more than 3.6 million refugees and asylum seekers by 2023 (UNHCR, 2023a). Despite the efforts of the Iranian government and international organizations, Afghan refugee children in Iran face many challenges in accessing educational opportunities.

The complex and evolving legal and policy framework governing their rights and educational access is one of the primary challenges identified in the literature (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.*).

On the one hand, some policies have been aimed at facilitating access to primary and secondary education for Afghan refugee children. On the other hand, some other restrictions have been imposed, especially on higher education and integration into Iran's educational system (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024). Bureaucratic obstacles and documentation requirements, along with inconsistencies and contradictions in these legal frameworks, have created significant obstacles for Afghan refugee families in navigating the education system (Hervé, 2018).

These families in Iran are facing socio-economic challenges that directly affect their children's educational opportunities. Lack of financial resources, poverty and children's need to contribute to family income through informal work can severely hinder their ability to attend school regularly (Hervé, 2018). In addition, education-related costs, such as transportation, school supplies, and clothing, can be expensive for many Afghan refugee families who are struggling financially. These challenges have been exacerbated by the conditions of the Iranian economy and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, further limiting the financial capacity of Afghan households to pay for education (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

In addition, the literature suggests that Afghan refugee children may experience social exclusion, discrimination, and negative social attitudes in educational settings associated with Afghan children, resulting from cultural biases and xenophobia (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Negative attitudes and stereotypes about Afghan refugees can result in instances of discrimination, bullying, and marginalization, leading to an unpleasant educational environment for these children (Hervé, 2018).

In areas with a high concentration of Afghan refugees, infrastructure and educational resources may be insufficient to meet the needs of this population. Factors such as lack of qualified teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and limited learning materials can affect the quality of education provided to them and hinder their academic progress and overall learning experience (UNHCR, 2023b).

Many Afghan refugee children have experienced trauma, disruption and displacement in their education, which can have profound psychological and emotional effects (Fazel and Stein, 2002). Addressing these mental health and psychosocial needs is very important not only to

create a supportive and conducive learning environment that promotes their well-being, resilience and academic success but also to maintain safety and prevent subsequent social problems. However, challenges exist in providing adequate teacher training and support to effectively respond to the unique needs of refugee students who have experienced trauma, as proved in the context of Syrian refugee children in Jordan (Dryden-Peterson, 2022).

Although Iranian policies have focused on enabling Afghan refugee children to have easier access to primary and secondary education (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024), the availability of higher education possibilities is still restricted (Dryden-Peterson, 2022). Documentation requirements, restrictive policies, and financial barriers in many cases lead to limited access of Afghan refugees to universities and higher education and hinder their prospects for advancement in the host society (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

Through an extensive analysis of many sources, it is evident that there exists an enduring disparity between the theoretical frameworks outlined in legal documents and policies, and the actual experiences and practical challenges encountered by Afghan refugee children in Iran. The lack of strong enforcement mechanisms in the main treaties that give refugees the right to education, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, exacerbates this gap (Horsch Carsley and Russell, 2020).

The literature emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and collaborative approach with the participation of the Iranian government, international organizations, civil society and local communities to address these multifaceted challenges (Hervé, 2018). Efforts should focus on promoting inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices, harmonizing legal and policy frameworks, addressing socio-economic barriers, providing adequate resources and support structures to meet the unique needs of Afghan refugee children in Iran, and raising awareness to combat discrimination against Afghans should be concentrated (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

Critically, as emphasized by Seddighi *et al.* (2024), a key policy for policymakers in Iran should be equitable access to higher education. Sustained national and international policies and efforts are needed to ensure sustainable access to quality education at all levels, including higher education, for Afghan refugee children in Iran. This aligns with the international

commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNHCR, 2015).

In addition, as another crucial case, we can mention the participation of Afghan refugee communities and empowering their participation in the decision-making processes related to the education of their children (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024). By addressing the identified challenges, stakeholders can support the fundamental right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran, and this will enable them to develop the knowledge, skills, and resilience necessary to overcome adversity and contribute positively to their communities and society (Hervé, 2018). This study uses a mixed-methods approach to bridge the gap between theory and practice by examining the intersection of legal, cultural, socioeconomic and institutional factors affecting educational opportunities and barriers for Afghan refugee children in Iran. The purpose of this research, through a critical analysis of the alignment between international legal frameworks, national policies and the lived experiences of Afghan refugee families, is to provide valuable insights for policy formulation and advocacy efforts to realize their basic human rights to education.

While the literature provides insights into the educational challenges facing this population, there is a need for dedicated studies that comprehensively examine the right to education for Afghan refugee children in the Iranian context. Existing research tends to focus on broader groups of refugees or to address the situation broadly. This study by using a mixed-methods approach helps fill this gap and serves as an outline for future research in this area, providing a nuanced and contextual analysis of the diverse barriers and opportunities of this vulnerable population in accessing quality education.

## CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To frame the theoretical underpinnings of this study, I will employ a multifaceted approach in this chapter. The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) will serve as the overarching theoretical lens, grounding the analysis in fundamental human rights principles. Complementing this, I will integrate theories of educational inequality and marginalization to elucidate the systemic barriers facing refugee students. Additionally, I will incorporate social inclusion perspectives to underscore the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and active participation for refugee children within the host society's educational system.

### 3.1 Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA)

The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) provides a comprehensive normative framework for addressing the rights and needs of marginalized populations, including refugees and asylum seekers (Gauri and Gloppen 2012). This approach places fundamental human rights principles, such as dignity, equality, non-discrimination, participation, and accountability, at the forefront of all interventions and policies (Gauri and Gloppen, 2012). By adopting an HRBA, this research critically examines the systemic barriers, discriminatory practices, and power imbalances that impede the realization of the right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran (Thomas, 2016).

The HRBA recognizes the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights, emphasizing that the fulfilment of the right to education is intrinsically linked to the enjoyment of other fundamental rights, such as the rights to health, protection, and freedom from discrimination (Tomaševski, 2001). This holistic approach is particularly relevant in the context of refugee education, where children's educational experiences are shaped by complex intersections of social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors (Block *et al.*, 2014).

The HRBA framework is built on four essential principles: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability (UN, 1999). These principles serve as guiding criteria for assessing the realization of the right to education and identifying potential gaps or violations. This study aims to critically examine the extent to which the educational opportunities and

experiences of Afghan refugee children in Iran align with these principles, contributing to the broader discourse on refugee rights, educational equity, and social justice.

Furthermore, the HRBA emphasizes the importance of empowering refugee communities through active participation and engagement in decision-making processes related to educational policies and programs (Gauri and Gloppen, 2012). It also highlights the need for accountability mechanisms, ensuring that duty-bearers, such as governments and educational institutions, are held responsible for upholding their obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil the right to education for all children, regardless of their legal status or nationality (Tomaševski, 2001).

Moreover, the HRBA recognizes the intersectionality of various factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, that can exacerbate the vulnerability and marginalization of certain groups (Gauri and Gloppen, 2012). This intersectional lens is crucial in the context of refugee education, where children's experiences are shaped by the complex interplay of various social identities and structural barriers (Block *et al.*, 2014).

### **3.2 Theories of Educational Inequality and Marginalization**

The educational challenges faced by Afghan refugee children in Iran can be further understood through contemporary theories of educational inequality and marginalization. These theories shed light on the systemic and structural factors that contribute to the marginalization of certain groups within educational systems, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and social exclusion (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The theory of cultural reproduction, as proposed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990), offers a critical perspective on how educational institutions can reinforce existing societal inequalities and power structures by privileging the dominant cultural capital. This theory suggests that students from marginalized backgrounds, such as refugees, may lack access to the cultural capital valued within mainstream educational systems, leading to their disadvantage and disengagement (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Furthermore, critical race theory (CRT) provides a powerful lens for examining the intersections of race, ethnicity, and power within educational contexts (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). CRT scholars argue that racism and racial inequalities are deeply embedded

within the structures and practices of educational institutions, contributing to the marginalization and exclusion of minority and refugee students (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

Additionally, the theory of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a framework for understanding how various forms of oppression and marginalization, such as race, class, gender, and legal status, intersect and interact to create unique experiences of disadvantage and exclusion (Collins and Bilge, 2020). This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of refugee education, where students' experiences are shaped by the intersections of their refugee status, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and other social identities (Block *et al.*, 2014).

These theories underscore the need for educational systems to critically examine and dismantle the underlying structural inequalities, cultural biases, and systemic barriers that contribute to the marginalization of refugee students (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, educational institutions can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments that value and respect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all students, including refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

### **3.3 Social Inclusion Perspectives on Refugee Education**

Integral to the human rights-based approach in refugee education is the social inclusion perspective, which underscores the imperative to create a sense of belonging and active participation for displaced children within the host society's educational system (Thomas, 2016). This perspective challenges the marginalization and exclusion of refugee students, often stemming from cultural and linguistic barriers, and calls for a concerted effort by schools to embrace and integrate all aspects of the refugee experience, including the involvement of families and communities (Thomas, 2016).

Central to the social inclusion discourse is the recognition that education serves as a critical determinant in the successful resettlement and integration of refugee youth (De Wal Pastoor, 2015). When schools cultivate an inclusive environment, they provide refugee children with a safe space to rebuild their lives, fostering a sense of stability and hope amidst the chaos of displacement (Anderson *et al.*, 2011). As such, social inclusion in education is inextricably

linked to the broader human rights agenda, empowering refugee students to actively participate and contribute as engaged citizens within the host society (Ferfolja and Vickers, 2010).

Social workers are uniquely positioned to champion the social inclusion of refugee children in educational settings (Thomas, 2016). By adopting a trauma-informed approach, they can support refugee families in navigating the multifaceted challenges of resettlement, including addressing the psychosocial impacts of trauma, facilitating cross-cultural transitions, and advocating for access to appropriate resources and services (Sullivan and Simonson, 2016).

Critically, the social inclusion perspective acknowledges the genuine aspirations of refugee families for their children's academic advancement, while also recognizing the potential barriers they face in navigating unfamiliar educational systems (Thomas, 2016). It calls for a holistic, collaborative effort involving policymakers, school administrators, teachers, social workers, students, refugee families, and community stakeholders to co-create an inclusive learning environment that respects diversity and empowers refugee children to reach their full potential (De Wal Pastoor, 2015).

This approach aligns with the principles of inclusive education, which prioritizes the unique needs and strengths of marginalized student populations, such as refugees, and advocates for the provision of tailored support and resources to ensure their successful integration and academic achievement (Sidhu and Taylor, 2009). Inclusive pedagogies, incorporating elements of refugee students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, can foster a sense of belonging and validation, ultimately enhancing their learning experiences and outcomes (Ferfolja and Vickers, 2010).

By embracing the social inclusion perspective, educational institutions can play a transformative role in the lives of refugee children, serving as catalysts for their empowerment, resilience, and active participation in the host society (Kaukko and Wilkinson, 2018).



## **CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I will outline a qualitative mixed-methods research design to explore the educational experiences of Afghan refugee children and their families in Iran. I will conduct a rigorous documentary analysis to examine legal and policy frameworks, addressing the first sub-question. Additionally, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugee parents to illuminate practical barriers and socio-economic factors impacting their children's education (sub-questions 2 and 3). The methodology will also describe the data collection processes, sampling strategies, thematic analysis approach, comparative analysis, and ethical considerations underpinning the study.

### **4.1 Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the educational experiences and challenges faced by Afghan refugee children and their families in Iran. Qualitative methods are well-suited for this inquiry as they enable an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, allowing for the examination of subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making processes (Patton, 2002)

The mixed-methods approach adopted in this research is driven by the scarcity of prior comprehensive studies on this specific topic, both in English and Farsi literature. This decision stems from a desire to address potential gaps in the existing body of knowledge during the dissertation process comprehensively.

The research design incorporates two complementary methods: documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. The utilization of rigorous documentary analysis serves to scrutinize the legal and policy frameworks governing the right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran, directly addressing the first sub-question. Through a systematic review of relevant national laws, policies, and international conventions, this method aims to identify key provisions, gaps, and implications for educational access and rights.

Concurrently, semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugee parents aim to shed light on the practical barriers and socio-economic factors influencing their children's education, aligning with sub-questions 2 and 3. This method offers rich, contextual insights into the lived

experiences, challenges, and coping strategies employed by families navigating the educational landscape in Iran. By allowing participants to share personal narratives and perspectives, semi-structured interviews provide valuable first-hand accounts of the realities they face.

While each method serves specific sub-questions, the overarching goal is to tackle the primary research question: "What are the primary obstacles that Afghan refugee children and their families encounter in accessing education in Iran?" The mixed-methods approach enables a comprehensive exploration of this central inquiry by capturing both the legal frameworks and the lived experiences, highlighting the potential disparity between policy intentions and real-world implementation in Iran.

The integration of documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews through comparative analysis enhances the validity and reliability of the findings. Comparative analysis involves cross-validating data from multiple sources and perspectives, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Dawadi, Shrestha and Giri, 2021). This approach enables the identification of convergences, divergences, and interrelationships between the legal frameworks and the lived experiences of participants, thereby contributing to a holistic comprehension of the research objectives.

## **4.2 Documentary Analysis**

I undertake the documentary analysis component as a critical examination of the intricate legal and policy frameworks governing the educational rights and opportunities for Afghan refugee children in Iran. Through a systematic and rigorous review of national laws, policies, government regulations, and relevant international conventions, I aim to unravel the complex landscape within which the educational experiences of Afghan refugee families are situated.

This comprehensive analysis goes beyond merely identifying explicit provisions and directives related to educational access for refugees. Instead, I delve deeper into uncovering the underlying assumptions, priorities, and ideological underpinnings embedded within these legal and policy frameworks. By doing so, the research seeks to shed light on implicit barriers, challenges, and potential areas of improvement that may hinder the full realization of the right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran.

Moreover, the documentary analysis endeavours to contextualize the educational circumstances of Afghan refugee children within the broader socio-political, economic, and cultural milieu of Iran. By examining the legal and policy frameworks through a multidimensional lens, I aim to elucidate the intricate interplay of factors that shape and influence the educational opportunities and outcomes for this vulnerable population.

Importantly, I engage with international human rights conventions and instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. These international frameworks serve as benchmarks for evaluating Iran's compliance with global standards and obligations concerning the education of refugee children, further informing my analysis and recommendations.

To conduct a comprehensive documentary analysis, I employ a purposive sampling approach to select relevant documents. At the national level, I identify and collect key sources such as the Iranian Constitution, education laws and regulations, and government policies related to the education of refugee children through extensive searches of governmental databases, official websites, and the Islamic Parliament Research Center of Iran. A thorough review of past documents and archival records is crucial for defining how Iranian government policies towards refugees have changed over time and understanding the challenges that lie ahead. This allows for gathering primary sources that illuminate the evolution of Iran's approach to refugee education.

Additionally, I examine international conventions and instruments about the right to education for refugees, including the UDHR, CRC, 1951 Refugee Convention, and its 1967 Protocol. I also review reports and publications from reputable international organizations like the UNHCR, UNESCO, and relevant NGOs to gain insights into practical implementation, challenges, and recommendations related to educational access for Afghan refugee children in Iran.

While the document selection process primarily relies on extensive searches of official sources, I also draw guidance from the study by Seddighi *et al.* (2024) in identifying relevant policies and legal frameworks. However, I conduct an independent analysis and interpretation

of these documents, considering their relevance, credibility, and recency to ensure the analysis is based on up-to-date and authoritative information.

The selected documents undergo a rigorous content analysis process where I extract relevant information and identify key themes, patterns, and implications related to the research objectives. This process involves a careful and detailed examination of the document content, guided by the research questions and theoretical framework. Particular attention is paid to legal provisions, policy directives, educational rights and challenges, and recommendations outlined in the documents.

In addition to direct content analysis, I employ a comparative analysis approach to systematically examine and contrast different sources, highlighting policy evolution over time, inconsistencies across entities, varying priorities and underlying assumptions, and alignment with international conventions. By cross-validating data from multiple sources through this comparative analysis, I contribute to a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Upon completing the content analysis, I analyze the extracted information to identify patterns, themes, and relationships within and across the different documents, uncovering salient themes and insights relevant to the research questions.

### **4.3 Semi-structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews serve as a pivotal methodological tool in this study, allowing for the exploration of the educational experiences and challenges faced by Afghan refugee children and their families in Iran. The selection of this approach is driven by its flexibility in capturing rich, detailed narratives while guiding through a pre-defined set of open-ended questions.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews enables the exploration of emergent themes and the flexibility to probe deeper into specific topics as they arise during the conversations. This responsiveness ensures that the research remains attuned to the unique perspectives and experiences of participants, while also maintaining a degree of structure to facilitate systematic data analysis and interpretation (Joffe, 2011).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews offer the opportunity for rapport-building and trust-building between the researcher and participants (Joffe, 2011). This aspect is particularly important when exploring sensitive topics such as educational access and discrimination experienced by Afghan refugee children in Iran, as it fosters an environment conducive to open and honest dialogue.

Through these interviews, I aim to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives from Afghan refugee parents residing in Iran, providing valuable insights into the complex dynamics shaping educational opportunities for their children. By engaging directly with participants and eliciting their narratives, this methodological approach ensures that the voices of Afghan refugee families are central to the research process, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their educational experiences and needs.

Importantly, the use of semi-structured interviews complements the documentary analysis component by providing first-hand accounts of the lived realities and practical challenges faced by Afghan refugee families in accessing education for their children. While the documentary analysis examines the legal and policy frameworks governing educational rights, the interviews offer a grounded perspective on the implementation and impact of these frameworks, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives.

### **4.3.1 Sampling and Data Collection**

For this study, the participants for the semi-structured interviews were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The target population is Afghan refugee parents residing in Iran with school-aged children.

The initial participants were identified through a referral from an Afghan friend of the researcher on social media. This approach, known as snowball sampling, allowed me to leverage existing connections within the Afghan refugee community to gain access to potential participants (Parker, 2019).

The sample consists of four participants, including two mothers and two fathers, residing in four different cities in Iran that are known to have significant Afghan refugee populations: Tehran, Esfahan, Mashhad, and Qom. This geographical diversity ensures that the study captures a range of experiences and perspectives from various urban centres within Iran. The

participants were selected to represent families with children across different educational levels, including primary, secondary, and high school.

By utilizing this sampling approach, I was able to identify and recruit participants who possess specific characteristics and experiences relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion of both male and female participants, as well as families with children of different age groups and educational levels, will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the educational challenges faced by Afghan refugee children in Iran.

The potential participants were directly contacted by me and provided with detailed information about the study's purpose and the nature of their involvement. After expressing interest, the participants gave their informed consent before participating in the semi-structured interviews conducted via WhatsApp video calls.

Due to my geographic location outside of Iran, the semi-structured interviews were conducted through video calls using WhatsApp. This approach allowed me to engage directly with the selected participants and facilitate in-depth, face-to-face discussions despite the physical distance.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, which outlined key themes and open-ended questions. This format provided flexibility for probing and exploring emerging topics and narratives throughout the conversations.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' perspectives and experiences related to educational access and barriers for Afghan refugee children in Iran. Key topics included socio-economic factors, cultural challenges, legal and policy frameworks, discrimination and societal attitudes, and coping strategies employed by families.

The interviews were conducted in a manner that was comfortable and convenient for the participants. The interviews were conducted in Farsi, the participants' language, facilitating effective communication and ensuring accurate capture of participants' narratives. I translated the transcripts into English for research purposes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded, enabling accurate transcription and comprehensive data analysis. Detailed field notes were taken during the interviews to capture non-verbal cues, contextual information, and any additional observations relevant to the research.

### **4.3.2 Thematic Analysis**

I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data gathered through semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugee parents in Iran. Thematic analysis, which I selected as the method for analyzing the interviews, involved identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data (Joffe, 2011).

I began the analysis process by manually transcribing the audio-recorded interviews. Then, I carefully reviewed the transcripts and assigned initial codes to segments capturing meaningful ideas, experiences, or concepts relevant to the research questions.

I further organized and refined these initial codes through an iterative process of code comparison, consolidation, and categorization. Similar codes were grouped to form broader themes reflecting overarching patterns or narratives within the data. Forty codes emerged from the four interview transcripts, which were then categorized into four overarching themes consistently observed across all interviews, revealing distinct patterns and occasional divergences in perspectives.

Throughout the analysis process, I employed constant comparison and cross-referencing between the data, codes, and emerging themes to ensure consistency and accuracy in interpretation. I analyzed and interpreted the themes within the broader context of the research objectives and theoretical framework, with a particular focus on addressing the research questions and exploring the gap between the documentary analysis findings and the lived experiences shared by participants.

My choice of thematic analysis was driven by its flexibility and effectiveness in uncovering patterns, themes, and insights within qualitative data. Unlike more rigid analytical approaches, thematic analysis allowed me to deeply explore the richness and complexity of participants' narratives, enabling the identification of recurring themes, variations, and nuances in their experiences (Joffe, 2011). This methodological choice aligned well with my aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the educational challenges faced by Afghan refugee children and their families in Iran and examining the alignment between theory (documentary analysis) and practice (lived experiences) through a human rights-based approach.

Through thematic analysis, I systematically organized and interpreted the interview data, elucidating the diverse perspectives and contextual factors shaping progress and barriers.

Additionally, thematic analysis provided a structured yet adaptable framework for analyzing qualitative data, allowing for iterative refinement and validation of emerging themes (Joffe, 2011).

#### **4.4 Comparative Analysis**

To strengthen the validity and reliability of the research findings, a comparative analysis approach will be employed, synthesizing data and insights from semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. Comparative analysis is a robust technique in qualitative research that involves triangulating multiple data sources, methods, or theoretical perspectives to corroborate and cross-validate findings, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 2002).

The comparative analysis will systematically integrate and cross-validate findings from these two methods, identifying convergences, divergences, and interrelationships between the lived experiences of Afghan refugee families and the formal legal and policy frameworks. Where interview data reveals barriers or challenges inadequately addressed in the documented policies, these discrepancies will be highlighted and further explored. Conversely, if the documentary analysis uncovers provisions or directives misaligned with the reported experiences, such inconsistencies will be contextualized and analyzed.

This method will facilitate a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Convergent findings across methods will reinforce the validity and credibility of the results. Divergences or contradictions will prompt deeper examination, uncovering underlying complexities, contextual factors, or blind spots that may contribute to these discrepancies.

Moreover, the comparative approach will mitigate the limitations inherent in relying on a single method or data source. By integrating complementary perspectives, the research will generate a holistic and robust understanding of the study, accounting for the intricate interplay between lived realities and formal policies (Patton, 2002).

Through this rigorous comparative analysis, the study will yield comprehensive, well-substantiated findings that inform policy recommendations and practical strategies to address the educational needs and rights of this vulnerable population effectively.



## **4.5 Ethical Considerations**

In conducting research involving human participants, I adhered to rigorous ethical standards to ensure the protection of participants' rights, well-being, and confidentiality.

Prior to their involvement, I provided potential participants with comprehensive information about the research objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights, communicated in an accessible manner. I encouraged questions and ensured voluntary and informed consent, which was carefully documented. Participants were empowered to withdraw consent at any point without consequence.

To safeguard confidentiality and privacy, I removed or coded personal identifiers during data collection and analysis. Throughout the analysis, all names and identifying information were deliberately fabricated to ensure the safety and confidentiality of participants. All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and notes, were securely stored and accessible only to me, with electronic data encrypted and password-protected.

While physical risks were minimal, I acknowledged the potential for emotional or psychological discomfort, especially when discussing sensitive topics. To address this, I adopted a culturally sensitive and respectful approach, reassuring participants of their right to decline questions or withdraw without repercussions. I deeply respected the cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values of the Afghan refugee community in Iran.

In adhering to ethical standards, I applied for data processing approval on the SIKT website, ensuring compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. This approval affirmed the lawful processing of personal data, emphasizing accuracy, integrity, confidentiality, and security.

Any dissemination of findings will uphold confidentiality and anonymity, with no identifiable information disclosed without explicit consent. Through these ethical considerations, I upheld principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, prioritizing the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants throughout the research process.

## **4.6 Limitations**

Some limitations were encountered during the research process, particularly concerning the interview phase and data accessibility.

Initially, the sample design aimed to include a larger number of participants; however, concerns about potential repercussions led several individuals to withdraw. This reduction in sample size was addressed by conducting more in-depth interviews with the remaining participants, resulting in rich and detailed data that enhanced the quality of the analysis. Moreover, accessing data from outside Iran posed significant challenges due to restrictions on governmental websites. While this extended the process, I employed alternative methods to ensure comprehensive data collection, demonstrating the resilience and thoroughness of the research.

The chosen mixed-methodology approach effectively bridged gaps in existing literature, providing a holistic understanding of the topic. These limitations, rather than detracting from the study, highlight its innovative approach and dedication to overcoming obstacles, thereby enhancing the overall contribution and value of the research.

## **CHAPTER V: RESULTS**

This chapter presents the core results of the study, divided into two interconnected sections. The first section, "National Policy Landscape and International Frameworks," unveils the results of the documentary analysis, including the evolution of policies over time, inconsistencies across entities, varying priorities, and the alignment with international conventions. This section primarily addresses sub-question 1, although it occasionally touches upon aspects relevant to sub-questions 2 and 3.

The second section, "Lived Realities: Obstacles for Afghan Refugees," amplifies the voices of Afghan refugee families through a thematic analysis of interviews, shedding light on the barriers, legal challenges, educational system issues, and socio-economic factors impacting

their children's access to education. This section mainly addresses sub-questions 2 and 3, while also incorporating insights related to sub-question 1, due to the interconnected nature of the topics.

This chapter presents the results of the documentary analysis and interviews, organized thematically around the key themes that emerged from the data and aligned with the research questions. The presentation of results aims to be accurate and reliable, avoiding personal interpretations to facilitate a comparative analysis in the subsequent chapter. Throughout the data collection process, efforts were made to maintain a human rights perspective by incorporating the theoretical framework of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and complementary theories of social inclusion and marginalization. This approach ensured that the collected data aligned with the research questions and aims, while the application of these theories, analysis and interpretation of the data will be conducted in the subsequent chapter.

*\*Note: The names of interviewees in this chapter have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.*

## **5.1 National Policy Landscape and International Frameworks**

The education of Afghan refugee children in Iran has been governed by a complex web of policies, regulations, and legal frameworks issued by various entities over several decades (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024). This section analyzes the evolution of these policies over time, highlighting inconsistencies across different government bodies, varying priorities and underlying assumptions, as well as their alignment with international conventions on refugee education.

### **5.1.1 Evolution of Policies Over Time**

The policies examined span a period from 1980 to 2023, reflecting the changing political landscape and ideological changes that have shaped Iran's approach to Afghan refugees. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, we saw early policies with a relatively open stance towards

refugee education, such as the 1980 resolution that allowed Afghan children to enrol in Iranian schools (MOE of the IRI, 1980) and the 1981 regulation permitting diplomatic missions regarding the establishment of schools for refugees (MOE of IRI, 1981).

However, this relative openness was short-lived as the 1990s saw a significant shift towards restrictive policies that coincided with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the deterioration of Iran-Afghanistan relations. Notably, the policy of 1998 that limited the access of Afghans to the Iranian labour market by determining punishments for employers (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024) indicated that the integration of refugees into Iranian society and institutions became more difficult. This policy change reflected Iran's growing concerns about the economic and social consequences of hosting a large population of refugees, as well as the perceived security threats posed by the emergence of the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan (Rajai, 2000).

In addition, the 1999 regulations allowing private schools for foreign nationals, including Afghans (120/2653/81999), along with the closure of self-governing Afghan schools in the early 2000s, led to a shift toward greater government restrictions and control over He suggested training refugees. This move was driven by concerns about the quality of education and safety standards in Afghan-run schools (Hervé, 2018), but it also reflected an underlying assumption that education for refugees should be promoted within the Iranian curriculum and under government supervision cultural assimilation should be done (Rajai, 2000).

The early 2000s saw further restrictions and controls, with the 2003 structured code of conduct (423/T/29982/H, 2003) allowing schools to enrol only Afghans with qualifications and imposing restrictions on their access to higher education, such as banning enrollment in pre-university courses. This period also witnessed Iran's signing of a tripartite repatriation agreement with UNHCR and the Afghan government in 1992 (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.*, 2005), facilitating the return of nearly one million Afghan refugees to Afghanistan between 1990 and 1993 (Turton and Marsden, 2002). These policies reflected the desire of Iranian policies to manage the refugee population and encourage their repatriation instead of promoting their long-term integration into Iran's society and educational system (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.*, 2005). A notable shift occurred in the late 2010s, influenced by the Supreme Leader's decree emphasizing the importance of providing education to Afghan children (Norwegian Refugee

Council, 2017). The 2015 directive superseding the restrictive 2003 code of conduct and allowing the registration of undocumented Afghan children in primary and secondary schools marked a positive development in expanding access to education for this vulnerable population. This policy shift was driven by a combination of domestic and international pressure to address the educational needs of Afghan refugees, as well as concerns over the long-term implications of denying education to a significant portion of the refugee population (Hervé, 2018).

However, this progress was tempered by the continued limitations on access to higher education, as showed by the 2012 regulation requiring Afghans to renounce their refugee status and obtain temporary education visas to study at Iranian universities (Hervé, 2018). This policy not only restricted educational opportunities but also undermined the fundamental rights and protections afforded to refugees under international law (UNHCR, 2023b). Moreover, the deportation of nearly 860,000 undocumented Afghan immigrants in 2020, including children studying in Iran (IMO, 2021), further undermined the educational opportunities for Afghan refugees, highlighting the vulnerability of the gains made and the impact of shifting political priorities on this population (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

Although after the leadership's decree, the general situation and conditions progressed towards facilitating access to education for this group, in recent years from 2021 to 2023, there were still numerous strictures with the issuance of numerous and diverse instructions, which were not included in this review explicitly due to the detail of these instructions, as they did not take the form of laws but rather comprised mostly orders from executive bodies to schools and other agencies.

The evolution of policies towards Afghan refugee education in Iran has been defined by shifts between relative openness and restrictive measures, often influenced by domestic political considerations, regional dynamics, and security concerns (Hervé, 2018). While some progress has been made in expanding access to primary and secondary education, the continued limitations on high schools and higher education, the closure of Afghan-run schools, and the deportation of undocumented refugees underscore the need for a more consistent and rights-based approach that aligns with international conventions and prioritizes the educational needs of this vulnerable population (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

### **5.1.2 Inconsistencies and Contradictions Across Entities**

The analysis revealed striking inconsistencies and contradictions in the policies and legal frameworks issued by different entities within the Iranian government regarding the education of Afghan refugees. While the MOE and the Cabinet of Ministers introduced policies aimed at facilitating refugee education, such as the 1980 resolution (MOE of IRI, 1980) and the 2000 resolution allocating literacy training budgets, the High Council of Education and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution often imposed restrictive measures (49181/T/25595/H 2000).

For instance, the 1990 resolution passed by the President and the High Council of Education (336/DSH, 1990), allowing a higher number of documented Afghans to register at Iranian universities, directly contradicted the 2003 code of conduct (423/T/29982/H, 2003) issued by the Cabinet of Ministers, which limited educational opportunities for undocumented Afghans. This contradiction not only created confusion for Afghan refugee families but also reflected the lack of a coordinated and unified approach within the Iranian government towards addressing their educational needs (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007).

Furthermore, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution's 2009 policy (45245/88/DSH 2009) introducing short-term educational programs for undocumented Afghan children reinforced the divergent priorities among different policymaking bodies. While the MOE aimed to expand access to formal education, the Supreme Council's policy suggested a preference for temporary and segregated programs, potentially undermining the integration of Afghan refugees into the mainstream education system (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024)

These inconsistencies across entities were further exacerbated by the gaps between the leadership's decree emphasizing access to education for Afghan children and the practical implementation challenges faced by refugees. Despite the Supreme Leader's directive, the continued deportations of undocumented immigrants, including children studying in Iran, in 2020 (IMO, 2021) and the limitations imposed on their educational access in the 2021-2023 academic years undermined the stated commitments and highlighted the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation.

Such contradictions and inconsistencies not only created confusion and uncertainty for Afghan refugee families but also reflected the lack of a coherent and unified approach

towards addressing their educational needs within the Iranian government (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007). The divergent priorities and underlying assumptions among different policymaking bodies, coupled with the disconnect between policy formulation and implementation, posed significant obstacles to ensuring equitable access to education for this vulnerable population (UNHCR 2023b).

Moreover, these inconsistencies highlighted the complex interplay between domestic politics, security concerns, and international obligations in shaping Iran's policies towards Afghan refugees. While some entities prioritized national security and cultural preservation, others aimed to align with international human rights conventions and address the educational needs of refugees (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007). This tension between competing priorities and underlying assumptions contributed to the contradictory and often restrictive policies observed in the analysis.

The findings underscore the need for improved coordination and coherence among different government entities, as well as a stronger commitment to upholding the right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran, in line with international conventions and human rights principles. Addressing these inconsistencies and contradictions is crucial for ensuring equitable access to education and promoting the integration and well-being of this vulnerable population.

### **5.1.3 Varying Priorities and Underlying Assumptions**

The varying priorities and underlying assumptions regarding the education of Afghan refugee children across different policymaking entities within the Iranian government became evident. While some policies, such as the 2000 literacy training initiative (49181/T/25595/H 2000) and the 2015 directive recognizing undocumented children's right to education, demonstrated a commitment to providing educational opportunities for refugees, others prioritized national security concerns and the preservation of Iranian cultural identity (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

The 1981 regulation allowing diplomatic missions to establish schools (MOE of IRI, 1981), coupled with the subsequent closure of self-governed Afghan schools in the early 2000s, suggests an underlying assumption that education for refugees should be conducted within the confines of the Iranian curriculum and under state supervision, potentially aimed at promoting

cultural assimilation (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024). This assumption reflects concerns over the perceived threat of Afghan cultural influences on Iranian society and a desire to maintain control over the educational content and environment for refugee children (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007).

Moreover, the 2012 regulation required Afghans to renounce their refugee status to pursue higher education (Hervé, 2018). This reflects an assumption that their presence in Iran is temporary, and their integration into the Iranian education system should be limited, prioritizing the interests of Iranian nationals over the educational needs of refugees. This policy not only restricted educational opportunities but also undermined the fundamental rights and protections afforded to refugees under international law, reflecting a prioritization of domestic concerns over international obligations (UNHCR, 2023b).

The fluctuations in policies, from the 1990s emphasis on repatriation agreements with the Afghan government and UNHCR to the 2015 directive expanding access, also suggest shifting priorities influenced by domestic and international political considerations, rather than a consistent commitment to upholding the right to education for Afghan refugee children. (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.*, 2005). These shifts often coincided with changes in the regional political landscape, such as the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan or deteriorating Iran-Afghanistan relations, highlighting the vulnerability of refugee education policies to geopolitical dynamics (Rajaei, 2000).

Furthermore, the analysis revealed a tension between different entities prioritizing either the provision of educational opportunities for refugees or the preservation of national security and cultural identity. For instance, while the MOE aimed to expand access to formal education through initiatives like the 2000 literacy training program, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution's 2009 policy (45245/88/DSH 2009) introducing short-term educational programs for undocumented Afghan children suggested a preference for temporary and segregated programs, potentially undermining the integration of refugees into the mainstream education system (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

These varying priorities and underlying assumptions not only contributed to the inconsistencies and contradictions observed in the policies but also reflected the complex interplay between domestic politics, security concerns, and international obligations in



shaping Iran's approach towards Afghan refugee education. While some entities prioritized national security and cultural preservation, others aimed to align with international human rights conventions and address the educational needs of refugees (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007).

The findings underscore the need for a more coherent and consistent approach that balances domestic concerns with international human rights principles and prioritizes the educational needs of Afghan refugee children in Iran. Addressing these varying priorities and underlying assumptions is crucial for promoting equitable access to education, fostering social inclusion, and upholding the fundamental rights of this vulnerable population (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.*, 2005).

#### **5.1.4 Alignment with International Conventions**

Comparing the Iranian policies and legal frameworks with international conventions and instruments related to the right to education for refugees revealed areas of both alignment and significant divergence. This comparison is crucial as it highlights the extent to which Iran's approach adheres to established human rights principles and global commitments to ensuring the right to education for all, including refugee children.

Several policies, such as the 1980 resolution allowing documented Afghan children to register in Iranian schools (MOE of IRI, 1980) and the 2015 directive recognizing undocumented children's right to primary and secondary education, aligned with the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (UN, 1966). These international instruments affirm the right to free and compulsory primary education for all children, including refugees, without discrimination.

However, other policies, such as the 2003 code of conduct (423/T/29982/H, 2003) restricting access to higher education for Afghan refugees and the 2012 regulation requiring the renunciation of refugee status, directly contradicted the principles of equal access and non-discrimination enshrined in these international instruments (Hervé, 2018). These conventions call for accessible secondary and higher education without discrimination, highlighting the

divergence between Iran's policies and its obligations under international law (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, while Iran's policies have sought to provide primary and secondary education to Afghan refugees, the limitations on access to higher education and the deportation of undocumented immigrants, including children studying in Iran (Amnesty International, 2023), contradict the global commitment to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, including vulnerable groups like refugees, as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UN, 2015). This divergence also conflicts with the UNHCR Refugee Education Strategy 2022-2025, which aims to enable refugee children and youth to access quality education from early childhood to higher education (UNHCR, 2023a).

Moreover, the restrictions on Afghan refugees' access to education, particularly higher education, are at odds with the principles outlined in the 1950 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which calls for equal treatment with nationals in respect of elementary education, the best possible treatment in non-primary education, and the recognition of qualifications and diplomas obtained abroad (UN, 1950). These restrictions not only limit educational opportunities but also undermine the integration and self-reliance of refugees, contradicting the core principles of international refugee law (UNHCR, 2023b).

By comparing the Iranian policies and legal frameworks with these international conventions and instruments, the analysis highlights areas where Iran's approach diverges from the established human rights principles and global commitments to ensuring the right to education for all, including refugee children (Hervé, 2018). While some policies align with international standards, others fall short, particularly in the areas of higher education access, non-discrimination, and the recognition of refugee rights (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007).

This divergence is concerning as it not only undermines the educational opportunities and rights of Afghan refugee children but also reflects a broader disconnect between Iran's domestic policies and its obligations under international human rights and refugee law. Addressing this gap and ensuring greater alignment with international conventions is crucial for promoting equitable access to education, fostering social inclusion, and upholding the fundamental rights of this vulnerable population (UNHCR, 2023b).

## **5.2 Lived Realities: Obstacles for Afghan Refugees**

The interviews with Afghan refugee families in Iran provided invaluable first-hand accounts, shedding light on the multifaceted obstacles that impede their children's access to education. These barriers span structural, cultural, administrative, legal, and socio-economic domains, highlighting the complex and intertwined challenges faced by this vulnerable population. The narratives amplify the lived realities of Afghan refugees, exposing systemic inequities, bureaucratic hurdles, and socioeconomic disparities that hinder their children's fundamental right to education.

Despite efforts to expand educational access through policy reforms, the interviews revealed a disconnect between rhetoric and reality, with Afghan refugee families continuing to grapple with a myriad of obstacles that undermine their children's educational opportunities. The narratives exposed the complexities of navigating a system fraught with bureaucratic labyrinths, discriminatory practices, and resource constraints, exacerbated by the precarious legal status and socio-economic marginalization of this population.

The division of these subsections is based on the main topics and issues asked during the interview. The topics of the questions in the interview were carefully designed to be aligned with the issues raised in the document review so that a better analysis can be provided in the next chapter. The interviews not only documented the tangible barriers but also shed light on the psychological toll and uncertainty faced by Afghan refugee families. Concerns over prospects, fears of deportation, and the constant struggle to secure basic educational rights for their children permeated the accounts, underscoring the urgency of addressing these multifaceted challenges through comprehensive policy interventions and targeted support mechanisms.

### **5.2.1 Barriers to Education Access**

Notable barriers included complicated bureaucratic procedures, instances of favouritism, complex registration requirements, challenges with online systems, limited school availability, missed enrollment opportunities, instances of educational deprivation, and disenrollment despite academic excellence. The convoluted and often ambiguous registration procedure

emerged as a persistent hurdle, recognized as the primary barrier to timely school enrollment. Zahra, a mother of two, described her arduous experience:

*"After being forced to leave Afghanistan because of the Taliban's takeover, I faced significant challenges when it came to enrolling my children in school. The abrupt relocation resulted in the absence of their educational records from Kabul, which has made their registration procedure in Iran more intricate. Furthermore, upon our arrival, we failed to meet the registration deadline, resulting in multiple refusals from schools."*

Zahra ultimately secured unofficial registration for her daughter, albeit without exam privileges, through an Iranian relative's assistance. However, her son remained out of school for a year due to these bureaucratic obstacles, highlighting the severe consequences of such barriers. The timing of regulation announcements, typically near the academic year's start, exacerbated difficulties by causing administrative congestion and intensifying competition for limited school spots reserved for Afghan children. Fatemeh's daughter, despite exceptional academic achievements, was denied admission to her desired high school field due to capacity constraints, underscoring the structural obstacles within the education system. Furthermore, instances of unequal treatment were prevalent, with some children denied enrollment due to lacking specific documents typically issued to Afghans following a census. Ahmad recounted the school demanding a census form while enrolling his daughter, despite their arrival with passports after the census:

*"Unfortunately, our passports were deemed invalid, and we were thereafter compelled to await the next census, the exact timing of which remains undetermined."*

These accounts illustrate the multifaceted barriers Afghan families encounter, ranging from complex bureaucracy and documentation requirements to limited educational resources and instances of discrimination.

### **5.2.2 Legal and Policy Frameworks**

Participants revealed complexities and contradictions within the legal and policy frameworks regulating the registration procedure. An ongoing difficulty was the extensive range of

documents required, including different forms and identities introduced due to periodic policy changes. As Naseer, a father, expressed:

*"I visited the sponsorship office multiple times, only to receive conflicting information from different departments, leaving me confused and unsure of the next steps."*

The progression of document necessities, from "Carte Sabz" cards to the 12-digit "Code Yekta" and the recent "Barge Hemayate Tahsili" papers associated with census participation, added layers of complexity, contributing to the challenges faced by Afghan families. Another highlighted policy issue was the mandatory entrance exam aimed at assessing students' academic proficiency. The lack of transparency regarding associated costs and the arbitrary implementation of this requirement by schools imposed an additional financial burden on families, as one Afghan mother stated:

*"The entrance exam fees were never clearly communicated, and some schools demanded payment while others did not, leaving us confused and financially strained."*

These insights underscore the need for greater clarity, consistency, and transparency within legal and policy frameworks governing education access for Afghan refugee children in Iran.

### **5.2.3 Challenges within the Educational System**

Participants identified multiple systemic challenges embedded in the educational system, including difficulties transitioning between schools, lack of inter-departmental coordination, curriculum disparities, obstacles to integration, the influence of private schools, expensive tuition, and issues of accountability related to entrance tests.

While interviewees generally reported positive classroom experiences with equitable treatment from teachers, instances of racial discrimination from Iranian classmates' families were perceived as more prevalent in areas with smaller Afghan populations. As one Afghan mother stated:

*"In localities with larger Afghan populations, there seems to be greater acceptance and less discrimination, but in other areas, we've encountered instances of prejudice from the families of some Iranian students."*

The existence of "*Madarese Khodgardan*" schools, originally run by Afghans but later closed due to concerns over educational quality and safety standards, further emphasized the difficulties within the system.

Considerable hurdles arose during educational transitions, such as the shift from secondary school to high school. Families faced the combined challenges of locating appropriate institutions with available capacity and ensuring their children's enrollment in preferred areas of study, as one father described:

*"Securing a spot in a top high school for my son was a challenge. Spaces were not only restricted, but the procedure of registering for his selected subject of study was also complex."*

Moreover, disparities between the subjects taught to Afghan students in Iranian schools and those they studied in Afghanistan, such as the compulsory teaching of Arabic, exacerbated the cultural challenges faced by this population. *"My daughter faced difficulties with Arabic, a subject she had not previously encountered in Afghanistan,"* expressed a concerned parent.

These insights highlight the need for reforms aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment, enhancing inter-departmental coordination, mitigating curriculum disparities, promoting cultural sensitivity, and ensuring affordable access to education.

#### **5.2.4 Socio-Economic Factors**

Socio-economic determinants emerged as pivotal factors influencing educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children in Iran. Participants emphasized the significant impact of financial constraints, nationality-based limitations, future uncertainty, discrimination from educational staff, limited job and higher education prospects, cultural barriers, and residency status on access to and attainment of education. The intricate interplay between socioeconomic conditions and prejudice based on nationality underscores the nuanced dynamics influencing educational opportunities for this marginalized group, as one participant articulated:

*"We struggle with an uncertain future compounded by the socio-economic constraints preventing our children's access to quality education."*

Many Afghan families, particularly recent arrivals fleeing the Taliban's resurgence, opted to settle in suburban or rural areas due to unstable legal residency status. As one mother shared:

*"Fearful of potential arrest and deportation, we chose to live in a suburban area, which unfortunately limited our access to educational resources and made it more challenging to procure the necessary documentation for our children's school registration."*

Moreover, financial hardship and reliance on unstable daily wage labour forced many Afghan children to contribute to their family's financial stability through employment, compromising their educational opportunities. Nasser expressed:

*"Accessing essential documents poses a significant challenge, but the broader issue for our children's education lies in the constraints imposed by their employment. Many of our children are engaged in work and lack the time to dedicate to their studies. Additionally, some parents often lack the means to facilitate their transportation to and from school."*

These narratives highlight the pressing need for interventions and policy reforms that address the systemic barriers, legal complexities, challenges within the education system, and socio-economic factors hindering educational access for Afghan refugee children in Iran.

## **CHAPTER VI: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This chapter aims to provide a critical comparative analysis of the findings from the documentary analysis and interview data, juxtaposing the Iranian government's policies and practices with the principles of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) to education. Specifically, each section will analyze data that addresses all three sub-questions. The HRBA serves as the overarching theoretical framework, complemented by theories of educational inequality, marginalization, and social inclusion perspectives on refugee education. This multidimensional analytical approach enables a robust examination of the extent to which the educational rights of Afghan refugee children in Iran are upheld, as well as the challenges and barriers they encounter in realizing their right to education within the Iranian context. By addressing these research questions, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape for Afghan refugee children in Iran, highlighting the gaps between policies and practices, as well as the multifaceted barriers and challenges they face. By the end of this chapter, I aim to ensure that all the necessary data to address the overarching question will be processed, and it will be directly addressed in the subsequent chapter.

### **6.1 Ensuring Availability: Overcoming Barriers to Access**

The HRBA emphasizes the principle of availability, which requires educational institutions and programs to be available in sufficient quantity and quality within the jurisdiction of the State party (UNSDG, 2006). This principle is grounded in the recognition that education is a fundamental human right, and States have an obligation to ensure its progressive realization for all individuals, including marginalized and vulnerable groups such as refugees (Amnesty International, 2021)

The documentary analysis indicates that the Iranian government has enacted legal provisions and policies aimed at ensuring the availability of educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children. Notable examples include the resolution on the education of Afghan refugees (1980) and the regulation on the education of foreign nationals (2003). These initiatives suggest an



acknowledgement of the government's responsibility to provide accessible education for refugee populations within its jurisdiction, aligning with the HRBA principle of availability. However, the thematic analysis of interviews reveals a discrepancy between the legal framework and the practical realization of availability. Participants reported challenges such as limited school capacity, missed enrollment periods due to arrival timing, and instances of school deprivation. Zahra's experience exemplifies this gap, as her family encountered repeated rejections from schools upon their abrupt relocation from Afghanistan due to missing the registration period. Ahmad's account further highlights the challenges posed by the timing of arrival, as their Afghan passports were not accepted for registration outside of the census period.

These findings align with the theory of marginalization (Cerna, 2019), which posits that marginalized groups, such as refugees, often face systemic barriers and exclusion from mainstream institutions and services, hindering their access to available educational opportunities. The limited availability of educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children could also be influenced by societal attitudes and perceptions towards this population, as well as economic factors that may impact the allocation of resources for their education (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

Furthermore, the existence of 'Madarese Khodgardan' schools, established by migrants but facing challenges such as lack of facilities and inadequate supervision, further highlights the need for greater availability and support from the government to address the unique educational needs of this population (Cerna, 2019). The failure to provide adequate resources and oversight for these schools also contravenes the HRBA principle of availability, as the State party is responsible for ensuring the availability of educational institutions and programs in sufficient quantity and quality (UN, 1999).

The theory of educational inequality offers valuable insights into the systemic barriers and exclusionary practices faced by marginalized groups, including refugees, in accessing available educational opportunities (Fazel and Stein, 2002). This theoretical lens aligns with the HRBA principle of availability, emphasizing the State's obligation to proactively address and dismantle these systemic barriers, ensuring that educational opportunities are genuinely

available and accessible to all, without discrimination based on legal status, nationality, or other grounds.

Concurrently, the social inclusion perspective on refugee education underscores the importance of addressing socioeconomic barriers and providing clear and accurate information to facilitate the successful integration of marginalized groups into educational systems (Thomas, 2016). This perspective complements the HRBA principle of availability by highlighting the need for comprehensive measures that extend beyond the mere establishment of legal provisions, but rather foster an environment conducive to the effective realization of the right to education for refugee populations (Amnesty International, 2021).

To fully realize the principle of availability, the Iranian government must proactively address the practical obstacles and systemic barriers identified through the interview data. This requires a multi-faceted approach that involves addressing societal attitudes and perceptions towards Afghan refugees, allocating adequate resources for their education, and ensuring consistent implementation of legal provisions across all educational institutions, regardless of the refugee population's arrival timing or documentation status (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Additionally, it is crucial to establish clear accountability mechanisms and involve Afghan refugee communities in the development and implementation of policies and programs aimed at ensuring the availability of educational opportunities (Rappaport, 1987).

By adopting a comprehensive and inclusive approach grounded in the HRBA principles and informed by complementary theoretical frameworks, the Iranian government can more effectively fulfil its obligations to ensure the availability of educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children, promoting their integration and empowerment within the educational system.

## **6.2 Navigating Accessibility Challenges: Removing Systemic Obstacles**

The HRBA recognizes that educational opportunities must be accessible to all without discrimination, encompassing dimensions of physical, economic, and informational accessibility (UNSDG, 2006). This principle is grounded in the recognition that education is a fundamental human right, and States have an obligation to ensure that marginalized and

vulnerable groups, such as refugees, can access educational opportunities without facing systemic barriers or discriminatory practices (Amnesty International, 2021).

The documentary analysis reveals efforts by the Iranian government to address economic accessibility, such as waiving tuition fees for Afghan students and providing literacy classes for documented and undocumented Afghans (Hervé, 2018). These initiatives suggest an acknowledgement of the government's responsibility to remove financial barriers and promote economic accessibility to education for Afghan refugee populations within its jurisdiction, aligning with the HRBA principle of accessibility.

However, the interview data highlights persisting barriers to accessibility across multiple dimensions, including bureaucratic hurdles, complex registration processes, and financial constraints faced by Afghan refugee families. Naseer's experience exemplifies the informational accessibility challenges, as he encountered conflicting guidance from various departments, leaving him confused and unsure of the next steps. This aligns with the theory of social inclusion, which emphasizes the importance of providing clear and accurate information to facilitate the successful integration of marginalized groups, such as refugees, into mainstream institutions and services (Thomas, 2016).

Furthermore, Fatemeh's daughter faced limitations in accessing her preferred high school field due to capacity constraints, despite her excellent academic performance. This incident highlights the persistent barriers to physical accessibility and the principle of non-discrimination, as Afghan refugee children may face unequal opportunities based on their nationality or legal status, contravening the HRBA principle of accessibility without discrimination (Amnesty International, 2021).

The findings also resonate with the theory of educational inequality, which highlights the systemic barriers and exclusionary practices that marginalized groups, including refugees, encounter in accessing educational opportunities (Fazel and Stein, 2002). This theoretical lens aligns with the HRBA principle of accessibility, emphasizing the State's obligation to proactively dismantle these systemic obstacles and ensure that educational opportunities are genuinely accessible to all, without discrimination based on legal status, nationality, or other grounds (Amnesty International, 2021).

The limited accessibility to education for Afghan refugee children could also be influenced by cultural differences and societal attitudes, which may hinder their ability to navigate the educational system and access information effectively (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). Additionally, economic factors and financial constraints within Afghan refugee families may further exacerbate the challenges in accessing educational opportunities, as highlighted by the interview findings.

To fully realize the HRBA principle of accessibility, the Iranian government must adopt a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that addresses the systemic barriers and discriminatory practices identified through the interview data. This requires streamlining bureaucratic processes, providing clear and consistent information, and ensuring equal access to educational opportunities regardless of legal status or nationality. Additionally, it is crucial to address the socio-economic and cultural factors that hinder accessibility, such as providing financial support and culturally responsive outreach programs (Cerna, 2019).

By adopting a holistic and inclusive approach grounded in the HRBA principles and informed by complementary theoretical frameworks, the Iranian government can more effectively fulfil its obligations to ensure the accessibility of educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children, promoting their integration and empowerment within the educational system.

### **6.3 Fostering Acceptability: Embracing Cultural Responsiveness**

The HRBA principle of acceptability requires that the form and substance of education, including curricula, teaching methods, and institutional practices, be acceptable to students and parents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Tomaševski, 2001). This principle recognizes the importance of respecting and accommodating the cultural diversity of learners, particularly those from marginalized or minority groups, to ensure an inclusive and equitable educational experience (Amnesty International, 2021).

While the documentary analysis did not explicitly address acceptability, the interview data revealed challenges related to curriculum disparities and cultural barriers faced by Afghan refugee children in the Iranian education system. Participants noted the imposition of subjects, such as Arabic, which posed difficulties for Afghan students who had not previously studied the language. This highlights the need for greater cultural sensitivity and adaptability in the

curriculum to ensure the acceptability of education for Afghan refugee children, aligning with the HRBA principles of non-discrimination and respect for diversity (Tomaševski, 2006).

These findings resonate with the theory of social inclusion, which emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing the cultural backgrounds and experiences of marginalized groups within educational settings (Thomas, 2016). By failing to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula, the Iranian education system may inadvertently contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of Afghan refugee children, hindering their ability to fully engage and thrive in the learning environment.

The concept of cultural responsiveness in education highlights the significance of tailoring educational practices to the diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and lived experiences of students, particularly those from marginalized communities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Furthermore, the acceptability of education for Afghan refugee children could be influenced by societal attitudes and perceptions towards this population within the broader Iranian society. Negative perceptions or cultural biases against Afghan refugees may manifest in educational settings, impacting the acceptability and inclusiveness of the learning environment (Cerna, 2019). Additionally, the power dynamics between the host community and the refugee population could shape the extent to which Afghan students and their families feel accepted and valued within the educational system (Dryden-Peterson, 2015).

To fully realize the HRBA principle of acceptability, the Iranian government must adopt a culturally responsive and inclusive approach to education. This involves actively engaging with Afghan refugee communities to understand their cultural backgrounds and educational needs, and collaboratively developing curricula, teaching methods, and institutional practices that are respectful and responsive to their diverse cultural and linguistic identities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

By embracing cultural responsiveness and fostering an educational environment that values and celebrates the diversity of Afghan refugee children, the Iranian education system can promote a greater sense of acceptance, belonging, and academic engagement for this marginalized population, aligning with the HRBA principles and promoting their overall educational success and well-being.

## **6.4 Promoting Adaptability: Addressing Diverse Needs**

The HRBA principle of adaptability requires that education be flexible and capable of adapting to the changing needs of diverse societies and communities, including marginalized groups such as refugees (Tomaševski, 2001). This principle recognizes that educational systems must be responsive and adaptable to the unique circumstances, backgrounds, and experiences of learners from diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts (Amnesty International, 2021).

The documentary analysis revealed some efforts by the Iranian government to enhance adaptability, such as the provision of short-term educational programs for undocumented Afghans and the facilitation of school and university enrollment for Afghan and Iraqi students (45245/88/DSH 2009). These initiatives suggest an acknowledgement of the need to adapt educational offerings to accommodate the specific circumstances of refugee populations within Iran.

However, the interview findings suggest that the education system has struggled to effectively adapt to the unique circumstances and needs of Afghan refugee children. Participants highlighted challenges related to school transitions, integration barriers, and the lack of coordination between departments in addressing their specific educational needs.

These accounts indicate a significant gap between the legal provisions and initiatives aimed at promoting adaptability and the practical realization of an adaptable and responsive educational system for Afghan refugee children in Iran. The persistent challenges faced by this population suggest that the Iranian education system has yet to fully embrace the HRBA principle of adaptability, failing to adequately accommodate the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and circumstances of Afghan refugee learners (Tomaševski, 2001).

The theory of marginalization (Cerna, 2019) offers valuable insights into the importance of adaptability in addressing the needs of marginalized groups, as mainstream institutions and systems often fail to adapt to the unique experiences and circumstances of marginalized populations, perpetuating their exclusion and marginalization. By neglecting to adopt adaptive and responsive educational practices, the Iranian education system risks contributing to the further marginalization of Afghan refugee children within the learning environment.

Furthermore, the lack of adaptability in the Iranian education system could be exacerbated by cultural differences between the host community and the Afghan refugee population. The failure to recognize and accommodate the diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, and educational experiences of Afghan refugee children may contribute to their marginalization within the educational setting (Cerna, 2019). Addressing these cultural and contextual factors through adaptive and responsive educational practices is crucial for promoting inclusivity and academic success for this vulnerable population.

To fully realize the HRBA principle of adaptability, the Iranian government must adopt a comprehensive and systemic approach to address the identified challenges and barriers faced by Afghan refugee children (Tomaševski, 2001). This involves fostering greater coordination and collaboration across educational institutions and departments, providing culturally responsive support services, and actively engaging with Afghan refugee communities to understand and address their unique educational needs (UNESCO, 2017).

By embracing adaptability and fostering an educational environment that is responsive and inclusive of the diverse needs and experiences of Afghan refugee children, the Iranian education system can promote greater equity, inclusion, and academic success for this marginalized population, aligning with the HRBA principles and promoting their overall well-being and empowerment.

## **6.5 Combating Marginalization: Upholding Equality and Non-Discrimination**

The principles of equality and non-discrimination are central to the HRBA, ensuring that all individuals have equal access to education without facing discrimination. The documentary analysis reveals that Iran has implemented policies aimed at promoting these principles, such as the directive mandating that schools admit all children, regardless of their documentation status (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024). However, the interview data indicate that Afghan refugee children still experience significant discrimination and marginalization within the Iranian education system.

Participants reported instances of nationality-based limitations and differential treatment. For example, some schools imposed enrollment restrictions on Afghan children based on their

legal status, and instances of biased behaviour from administrative staff were frequently noted. These discriminatory practices highlight a gap between policy and practice, suggesting that the principles of equality and non-discrimination are not being fully realized in practice (Cerna, 2019).

Theories of educational inequality and marginalization provide a framework for understanding these systemic barriers (Fazel and Stein, 2002). These theories emphasize that marginalized groups, such as refugees, often face entrenched institutional biases that perpetuate educational disparities (Thomas, 2016). The persistence of discriminatory practices against Afghan refugee children in Iran aligns with these theoretical perspectives, underscoring the need for a more robust implementation of anti-discrimination policies.

The broader societal perceptions and cultural biases against Afghan refugees exacerbate these challenges (Cerna, 2019). Negative stereotypes and prejudices are reflected in the discriminatory practices within schools, as highlighted by participants' experiences. This societal context suggests that addressing educational discrimination requires not only policy enforcement but also broader cultural change (UNSDG, 2006).

To address these issues, it is essential to raise awareness among school staff and administrators about the rights and needs of Afghan refugee children. Implementing anti-discrimination training programs can help foster a more inclusive educational environment. Moreover, anti-discrimination policies must be strictly enforced, with clear procedures for reporting and addressing instances of discrimination.

Simplifying registration processes and ensuring that all children can enrol in schools, regardless of their residency status, are crucial steps (Cerna, 2019). Additionally, involving Afghan refugee communities in the development and implementation of educational policies can ensure that their voices are heard and their needs are met, promoting a more inclusive and equitable education system (Seddighi *et al.*, 2024).

By adopting these measures, the Iranian education system can more effectively uphold the HRBA principles of equality and non-discrimination, ensuring that Afghan refugee children have equal access to educational opportunities. This approach not only fulfills legal obligations but also promotes social justice and human dignity (UNSDG, 2006).



## **6.6 Empowerment: Participation and Accountability Mechanisms**

Empowering marginalized groups through participation and accountability is an aspect of the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA). It underscores the significance of including marginalized communities, in decision-making processes, Ensuring that their rights are protected through accountability measures (Amnesty International, 2021). Interviews suggest that Afghan refugee children and their families often face exclusion from these processes. Interview data reveals that Afghan refugee families encounter obstacles when trying to participate in school decision-making. Some parents expressed feeling unwelcome or facing communication challenges with school authorities due to differences. This exclusion hampers their ability to advocate for their children's needs contributing to their marginalization, within the education system (Cerna, 2019).

To tackle these hurdles actively involving refugee communities in shaping policies and programs is essential (Tomaševski, 2001). This inclusive approach ensures that their perspectives and requirements are taken into account resulting in tailored educational initiatives (Cerna, 2019). For instance, creating welcoming parent-teacher groups that involve parents in a way that can offer them a space to express their thoughts and participate in decision-making. Moreover, strong systems of accountability are crucial to guarantee the execution of strategies and initiatives as well, as the protection of the rights of Afghan refugee children (UNSDG, 2006).

Establishing clear and accessible grievance redressal systems allows Afghan refugee children and their families to report instances of discrimination or exclusion and ensures that these issues are addressed promptly and effectively. Regular monitoring and evaluation of educational policies and programs are also crucial (UNSDG, 2006). Involving independent bodies, such as human rights organizations and refugee advocacy groups, in monitoring processes can enhance transparency and accountability (Gladwell, et al., 2016). For instance, periodic audits and inspections of schools can help ensure compliance with legal provisions and identify areas for improvement.

Strengthening legal frameworks to protect the educational rights of Afghan refugee children and ensuring their strict enforcement is vital. This includes enacting laws that guarantee equal access to education and provide penalties for discriminatory practices (UNHCR, 2015).

Building the capacity of educational authorities through training programs on human rights, cultural sensitivity, and inclusive education can also equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to support refugee children effectively (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

By fostering participation and establishing robust accountability mechanisms, the Iranian government can empower Afghan refugee children and their communities, ensuring that their educational rights are protected and promoted. This approach not only enhances the quality and inclusiveness of education for refugee children but also contributes to their overall integration and empowerment within Iranian society (Cerna, 2019). Through these efforts, the HRBA principles can be fully realized, promoting a more just and equitable educational landscape for all.

## **CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS**

In this concluding chapter, I will synthesize the key findings, drawing overarching conclusions that address our research questions. I will offer insights and recommendations to inform policies, advocacy efforts, and initiatives promoting educational equity and fulfilling the fundamental rights of Afghan refugee children in Iran. Furthermore, I will identify potential avenues for further research, underscoring the ongoing importance of this critical issue within the broader discourse on refugee education and social justice.

### **7.1 Conclusion**

The education of Afghan refugee children in Iran is hindered by numerous difficulties, which are closely connected to intricate legal frameworks, socio-economic conditions, institutional obstacles, and cultural dynamics. This study aimed to shed light on the multifaceted obstacles faced by this vulnerable population in accessing education within the Iranian context. The study was based on a comprehensive theoretical foundation and the use of a clear methodology. The main objective was to analyze the disparities between current policies,

legal frameworks, and real-life experiences of Afghan refugee children. This analysis attempted to evaluate the extent to which these policies and structures comply with human rights principles and international norms. This conclusion comprehensively examines each research question, combining the main findings and offering beneficial implications and recommendations for policy interventions, advocacy efforts, and initiatives aimed at improving educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children in Iran.

Addressing the overarching research question, which sought to uncover the primary obstacles that Afghan refugee children and their families encounter in accessing education in Iran, the thematic analysis of interviews unveiled a myriad of structural, legal, socio-economic, and cultural barriers that impede their educational attainment. The study highlighted complex registration procedures, limited school capacity, missed enrollment deadlines due to the timing of arrival, instances of educational deprivation, and disenrollment despite academic excellence as significant structural hurdles (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). These findings underscored the pressing need for streamlined and transparent processes to facilitate timely and equitable access to educational institutions.

Furthermore, the intricate legal and policy frameworks governing education access for Afghan refugee children in Iran presented impressive challenges. The analysis revealed frequent changes in document requirements, such as the introduction of "Carte Sabz" cards, "Code Yekta," and "Barge Hemayate Tahsili" papers, adding layers of complexity to the registration process. The lack of clarity and consistency within these legal and policy frameworks exacerbated the challenges faced by Afghan refugee families, resonating with the findings of Hervé (2018), who documented the fluctuations and inconsistencies in Iran's policies towards Afghan refugees over time.

Socio-economic factors also emerged as pivotal barriers, with financial hardships, unstable legal residency status, limited job prospects, and reliance on unstable daily wage labour forcing many Afghan children to contribute to their family's financial stability through employment, compromising their educational opportunities (Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.*, 2005). This finding aligns with the theories of educational inequality and marginalization, which highlight the systemic barriers and exclusionary practices faced by marginalized groups, hindering their access to educational opportunities (Fazel and Stein, 2002).

Moreover, cultural and integration barriers, such as curriculum disparities, language barriers, and instances of discrimination from classmates' families and education department staff, hindered the successful integration of Afghan refugee children into the Iranian education system, undermining their educational experiences. This resonates with the social inclusion perspective on refugee education, which emphasizes the need to foster a sense of belonging and participation for refugee children within the host country's educational system (Thomas, 2016).

Turning to the first sub-question, which aimed to examine the key provisions of national and international laws and policies governing the right to education for Afghan refugee children in Iran and how these legal frameworks and policy measures shape their educational opportunities and challenges, the documentary analysis revealed a complex web of policies and regulations issued by various entities within the Iranian government. While some policies, such as the 1980 resolution allowing documented Afghan children to register in Iranian schools and the 2015 directive recognizing undocumented children's right to primary and secondary education, aimed to facilitate refugee education, others imposed restrictive measures, such as the 2003 code of conduct limiting educational opportunities for undocumented Afghans.

The analysis also highlighted inconsistencies and contradictions across different policymaking bodies, with some entities introducing policies to expand access while others imposed limitations. This lack of cohesion and alignment within the Iranian government's approach contributed to the educational challenges faced by Afghan refugee children, resonating with the findings of Cerna (2019), who emphasized the need for coordinated and coherent policies to address the educational needs of refugee populations.

Furthermore, while some Iranian policies aligned with international instruments like the UDHR, the CRC, and the ICESCR others diverged from the principles of equal access and non-discrimination enshrined in these conventions. The limitations on access to higher education and the deportation of undocumented immigrants contradicted global commitments to ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all, including vulnerable groups like refugees, as outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals and the UNHCR Education Strategy (2015).

Addressing the second sub-question, which explored how Afghan refugee families navigate socio-economic factors and practical barriers to access education in Iran and how they experience and navigate these obstacles, the interviews revealed the multifaceted challenges faced by these families. Financial constraints, coupled with the reliance on unstable daily wage labour, often force Afghan children to contribute to their family's financial stability through employment, compromising their educational opportunities. Fear of potential arrest and deportation due to unstable legal residency status prompted some Afghan families to settle in suburban areas, limiting their access to educational resources and complicating the procurement of necessary documentation for school registration.

Additionally, Afghan refugee families encountered complex bureaucratic procedures, instances of favouritism, and difficulties in integrating with Iranian students during the registration process. They often faced conflicting information from different departments, leaving them confused and unsure of the next steps, echoing the findings of Dryden-Peterson (2015), who highlighted the systemic barriers faced by refugee populations in accessing educational opportunities.

Despite these obstacles, the interviews revealed instances of resilience and perseverance among Afghan refugee families. Some parents sought assistance from Iranian relatives or community members to navigate the complex registration procedures, while others persisted in their efforts to enrol their children in schools, even in the face of initial rejections. This resilience and determination resonate with the theories of community engagement and empowerment (Rappaport, 1987), which emphasize the importance of fostering agency and participation among marginalized groups in overcoming barriers and shaping their educational experiences.

Addressing the third sub-question, which aimed to understand how socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors intersect to impact the educational opportunities and barriers for Afghan refugee children in Iran, the analysis revealed the intricate interplay of these dynamics. Instances of cultural discrimination against Afghan refugees within the Iranian society manifested in differential treatment or exclusionary practices within educational institutions. Negative societal perceptions and cultural biases towards this population contributed to their marginalization and hindered their ability to fully engage in the learning

environment, aligning with the findings of Cerna (2019), who highlighted the impact of societal attitudes on the educational experiences of refugee children.

Economic inequalities and financial hardships faced by Afghan refugee families emerged as significant barriers to accessing educational opportunities. Limited job prospects and the reliance on unstable daily wage labour exacerbated these economic challenges, forcing some Afghan children to prioritize employment over education, resonating with the findings of Abbasi-Shavazi *et al.* (2005), who documented the economic vulnerabilities faced by Afghan refugees in Iran.

Moreover, the study highlighted institutional barriers within the Iranian education system, including curriculum disparities, lack of coordination between departments, and limited adaptability to the unique needs and circumstances of Afghan refugee children. These institutional factors perpetuated the marginalization and exclusion of this population, hindering their academic success and integration, aligning with the theories of educational inequality and marginalization (Fazel and Stein, 2002).

The findings underscored the intersectional nature of these socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors, creating a complex web of interrelated barriers that impede the educational attainment of Afghan refugee children in Iran. Addressing these intersecting challenges requires a holistic and multidimensional approach that considers the interplay of various factors shaping their educational experiences, as advocated by the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and the social inclusion perspective on refugee education (Thomas, 2016).

## **7.2 Recommendations and further research**

Drawing from these comprehensive findings and the synthesis of insights, this study offers several implications and recommendations to inform policy interventions, advocacy efforts, and programmatic initiatives aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for Afghan refugee children in Iran.

- Efforts should be made to harmonize legal and policy frameworks governing education access for Afghan refugee children across different policymaking bodies within the Iranian government. This includes simplifying document requirements, standardizing registration procedures, and ensuring transparency and consistency in policy implementation to alleviate the bureaucratic burdens faced by Afghan refugee families, as highlighted by the experiences shared during the interviews.
- Providing financial assistance, scholarships, or subsidies to Afghan refugee families, as well as promoting access to stable employment opportunities and legal residency pathways, can mitigate the socio-economic pressures that often force Afghan children to prioritize employment over education, as documented in the findings.
- Investing in institutional capacity-building within the Iranian education system is essential. This encompasses improving coordination between departments, enhancing teacher training on inclusive education practices, and fostering greater adaptability and responsiveness to the specific circumstances of Afghan refugee children during educational transitions and school placements.
- Encouraging meaningful participation and engagement of Afghan refugee communities and civil society organizations in the development and implementation of educational policies and programs is crucial. By fostering a sense of agency and empowerment among Afghan refugee families, the Iranian government can ensure that their voices and perspectives are considered, thereby promoting accountability and addressing their specific educational needs.
- Efforts should be made to align Iranian policies and practices with international conventions and instruments related to the right to education for refugees. This includes adhering to the principles of equal access, non-discrimination, and inclusive education as outlined in the UDHR, the CRC, and the Sustainable Development Goals. By upholding these global commitments, Iran can ensure that the educational rights of Afghan refugee children are protected and their opportunities are not hindered by discriminatory practices or access barriers.

- Fostering cross-sectoral collaboration and partnerships between governmental agencies, international organizations, civil society groups, and academic institutions is imperative. Such collaborations can facilitate the exchange of best practices, promote knowledge-sharing, and leverage collective resources to develop comprehensive and sustainable solutions to the educational challenges faced by Afghan refugee children in Iran.
- Investing in longitudinal research and continuous monitoring is crucial to track the long-term educational trajectories of Afghan refugee children in Iran. Ongoing data collection and analysis can inform evidence-based policymaking, identify emerging trends and challenges, and enable the evaluation of interventions and programs aimed at enhancing educational access and outcomes for this vulnerable population.

In conclusion, addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Afghan refugee children in accessing education in Iran requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that considers the interplay of legal frameworks, socio-economic factors, institutional barriers, and cultural dynamics. By streamlining policies, promoting socio-economic inclusion, enhancing cultural sensitivity and adaptability within the educational system, strengthening institutional capacity and coordination, fostering community engagement and empowerment, aligning with international standards and commitments, facilitating cross-sectoral collaboration, and investing in longitudinal research and monitoring, stakeholders can collectively work towards ensuring that every Afghan refugee child in Iran has equitable access to quality education – a fundamental human right and a catalyst for personal growth, social inclusion, and sustainable development.



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# APPENDIX

## Interview Guide

**This is a semi-structured expert interview on the following topic:**

*The Right to Education for Afghan Refugee Children in Iran: Barriers and Progress*

**Time:** up to 45 minutes

**Researcher:** Mojgan Nateghi (The Arctic University of Norway)

**Interviewee:**

**Question No. 1.** Please describe your experience with attempting to enrol your children in Iranian schools.

**Question No. 2.** In your opinion, to what extent are your children able to access education and schools in Iran?

**Question No. 3.** What are the main barriers and obstacles that prevent or limit your children from attending Iranian schools?

**Question No. 4.** Which national policies or legal commitments related to refugee/migrant education in Iran are you familiar with? How do they impact access?

**Question No. 5.** Have you witnessed or experienced issues with discrimination, bullying, or social tensions affecting education access?

**Question No. 6.** Do existing education policies, programs, and resources in Iran meet the needs of refugee students and support their inclusion?



**Question No. 7.** What could the Iranian government do differently - either through policy changes, improved programming, or greater resources - to boost enrollment and inclusion rates of your children?

**Question No. 8.** Any other perspectives, experiences, or recommendations you want to share regarding your children's education access in Iran?

## Consent Form

### Are you interested in participating in the research project?

*The Right to Education for Afghan Refugee Children in Iran: Barriers and Progress*

- **Purpose of the Project**

You are invited to participate in a research project examining Afghan children's ability to access education in Iran. The project aims to assess to what extent Afghan children can access to education given Iran's domestic policies and obligations under international law. It will identify major barriers that limit educational access and inclusion in policy and practice. The goal is to develop recommendations for improving Iran's approach based on evidence and insights from affected refugee families and communities.

- **Which institution is responsible for the research project?**

The University of Tromsø, Norway is responsible for the project (data controller).

- **Why are you being asked to participate?**

As the parent of an Afghan child familiar with refugee education issues, you have valuable insights into the challenges refugee families face accessing schooling. We hope to learn from your firsthand experience with enrollment processes,

interactions with schools, understanding of policies, and ideas for improving inclusion.

- **What does participation involve for you?**

Participation involves approx. 45-minute interview by phone/video based on your preference. Questions will cover your experiences and perspectives related to Afghan children's access to schooling in Iran. With your permission, interviews will be recorded for translation and accuracy.

- **Participation is voluntary**

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you choose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

- **Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data**

We will only use your data for the purpose(s) specified here and we will process your personal data in accordance with data protection legislation (the GDPR). Only the researcher will have access to the data collected. I will implement strict access controls and authentication mechanisms. This includes strong password policies, multi-factor authentication, and limiting access to the devices storing this data. I will also encrypt the data collected, both in transit and at rest. This ensures that even if unauthorized access occurs, the data remains unreadable without the proper decryption keys. Each participant would grant consent regarding to what extent they want to be recognizable in the publication. These identifiers may include name, occupation, and relevant expertise or involvement in the Afghan children's enrollment at schools.

- **What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?**

The planned end date of the project is the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, 2024. The collected data will be anonymized at the end of the project.

- **Your Rights**

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- Access the personal data that is being processed about you
- Request that your personal data be deleted
- Request that incorrect personal data about you be corrected/rectified
- Receive a copy of your personal data (data portability)
- Send a complaint to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

- **What gives us the right to process your personal data?**

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the University of Tromsø, The Data Protection Services of Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project meets requirements in data protection legislation.

- **Where can I find out more?**

If you have questions about the project or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- UiT Arctic University of Norway via Mojgan Nateghi (email: [monat8686@uit.no](mailto:monat8686@uit.no))
- UiT Arctic University of Norway via Jennifer Hays (email: [Jennifer.hays@uit.no](mailto:Jennifer.hays@uit.no))
- Our Data Protection Officer: Anniken Steinbakk (email: [personvernombud@uit.no](mailto:personvernombud@uit.no))

If you have questions about how data protection has been assessed in this project by Sikt, contact:

- email: ([personvertjenester@sikt.no](mailto:personvertjenester@sikt.no)) or by telephone: +47 73 98 40 40.

Yours sincerely,

Project Leader  
(Researcher/supervisor)

Student (if applicable)

## CONSENT FORM

I have received and understood information about the project '*The Right to Education for Afghan Refugee Children in Iran: Barriers and Progress*' and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

to participate in a 45-minute semi-structured interview

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end of the project.

(Signed by participant, date)