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RISKING A GENERATION OF ILLITERACY

Afghans' struggle for education and other rights in Afghanistan and as refugees



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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| I. The Right to Education: Afghan Women, Girls and Refugees | 1 |
| Deprivation of Education in Afghanistan | 1 |
| Civil Society Strategies to Provide Education in Afghanistan | 2 |
| Deprivation of Afghan Refugees' Right to Education | 4 |
| Iran | 4 |
| Pakistan | 6 |
| II. Afghan Refugees and the Continued Need for Protection | 7 |
| Afghan Refugees in Iran and Pakistan | 8 |
| Wealthy Democracies' Migration and Deportation Policies | 11 |
| Dangers to Returned Refugees, Particularly Women, Girls and LGBTQI+ Persons, in Afghanistan | 13 |
| III. Conclusion and Recommendations | 14 |

Introduction

As the Taliban further concretizes its nearly five year-long discriminatory system of fundamental rights deprivations, many governments are turning their backs on Afghan refugees and Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis. This is entrenching life-altering setbacks to many Afghans' educational careers, economic possibilities, psychosocial wellbeing, and physical safety. Youth are being left vulnerable to violence, exploitation, dangerous coping mechanisms and potential forced recruitment by criminal actors. This report draws on publicly available human rights reports, news articles, and other relevant documents as well as interviews with Afghan refugees and human rights defenders and international humanitarian actors. It examines the deprivation of education that Afghans, particularly women and girls, face inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan and Iran, which host most of those who have fled. It also describes those neighboring countries' mass expulsions of Afghan refugees, and wealthy democracies' winding down of already inadequate resettlement and other refugee programs. It includes recommendations for centering Afghan victims in states' responses to the Taliban's alleged crimes against humanity and for recommitting states to their humanitarian and refugee protection obligations.

I. The Right to Education: Afghan Women, Girls and Refugees

The Taliban's deprivation of women and girls' right to education past sixth grade is stretching into five years, with harmful long-term consequences. Afghan students who fled to transit countries also face discrimination, inadequate educational access, and deportation threats, while all students in Afghanistan confront limited access to quality education. Afghan civil society advocates and teachers are trying to fill gaps via underground in-person schools and scattered online classes for those who can access internet, but their reach is limited. Young Afghans are left vulnerable to harmful coping strategies, and some may be vulnerable to recruitment by violent or criminal actors.¹

Deprivation of Education in Afghanistan

Since coming to power in 2021, the Taliban have deprived Afghan women and girls education beyond primary school.² Taliban restrictions have left at least 78% of young women and girls out of education, employment, or training.³ In December 2024, the Taliban eliminated women's last pathway to higher education by banning medical training for women, raising fears Afghanistan's already high maternal mortality rates will worsen.⁴ The Taliban's ban on women working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including those providing education, as well as its dismissal of women teachers has blocked some girls from even primary education, where the Taliban prohibits them from being taught by men.⁵

1 Naheed Farid, Systematic injustice requires systematic action: The case of Afghanistan, *Modern Diplomacy*, (3 Mar., 2026), <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/03/24/systematic-injustice-requires-systematic-action-the-case-of-afghanistan/>.

2 CEDAW, Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Afghanistan, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4, ¶¶ 8, 9 (10 July 2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4>.

3 *Id.* at ¶ 30(f).

4 *Id.* at ¶ 35 (10 July 2025); Jelena Bjelica, Is maternal mortality on the rise in Afghanistan? No official data, but much cause for concern, *Afghanistan Analysis Network*, (28 Sept. 2025), <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/rights-freedom/is-maternal-mortality-on-the-rise-in-afghanistan-no-official-data-but-much-cause-for-concern/>.

5 CEDAW, Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Afghanistan, U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4, ¶ 30(c), (10 July 2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4>.

The restrictions on women's and girls' access to education is contributing to early marriage and labor exploitation of girls, while provoking high rates of depression and suicide.⁶

While girls and women suffer in the greatest degree from the Taliban's systematic deprivation of education, all students confront limited quality of and access to education. Unmet humanitarian need amid overlapping crises, sanctions, inadequate infrastructure and investment, and the Taliban's emphasis on religious teaching over other subjects all contribute to Afghanistan having among the worst educational outcomes globally.⁷ Severe rights deprivations and discrimination against LGBTQI+ Afghans also present a barrier to safe, quality education. Due to harassment, sexual violence, and lack of support mechanisms, most transgender and intersex respondents to a recent study of Afghan LGBTQI+ people reported dropping out of or being expelled from school.⁸

De facto Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (PVPV) inspectors disrupt and alter students' education experience by regularly monitoring schools for compliance with behavior and appearance decrees, including checking for girls who may look older than sixth grade.⁹ The Taliban have closed informal learning spaces and

community-run education centers, harassing students and staff, and have intimidated and arrested teachers and human rights defenders attempting to provide girls education.¹⁰ They have reportedly conducted frequent raids, going street by street in search of clandestine classrooms, at times leading families to withdraw their children from underground schools.¹¹

Civil Society Strategies to Provide Education in Afghanistan

Despite the many obstacles, Afghan civil society, including women human rights defenders and teachers, continue to educate some of those denied access. UN agencies and international organizations have supported grassroots efforts to provide literacy and other schooling both in person and online.¹² While many of these efforts lack accreditation and are hindered by limits to internet and electricity coverage,¹³ students, parents, and teachers remain committed to these strategies in the face of the Taliban's denial of girls and women's fundamental rights. With international organizations' support, locals have created underground in-person schools.¹⁴ Teachers, often women who were teachers or university students under the republic, open makeshift classrooms in homes. Using pre-

6 *Id.* at ¶ 30(f).

7 UNESCO, UNICEF, Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025, 8-13 (2025), <https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/10/Afghanistan-education-situation-report-2025.pdf>.

8 Afghan Canadian Civil Society Forum, The Human Rights Status of LGBTQ+ People in Afghanistan 2023-2024, unpublished 6, [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

9 UNAMA, Report on the Implementation, Enforcement and Impact of the Law on the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in Afghanistan 14 (2025), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/pvpv_report_final_10_aprill_2025.pdf.

10 CEDAW, Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of Afghanistan, ¶ 30(d), 31(d), U.N. Doc. CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4, (10 July 2025), <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/4>.

11 Interview with international civil society organization representative, (8 Oct., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

12 See, e.g., UNESCO, Afghanistan: Four years on, 2.2 million girls still banned from school, (14 Aug. 2025), <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/afghanistan-four-years-22-million-girls-still-banned-school>; Sahar, Education for Afghan Girls, Current Programs, <https://www.sahareducation.org/current-programs>; Charmaghz, <https://charmaghz.org/>; Learn Afghanistan, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/learn-afghan_studentsuccess-graduation-learn-ugcPost-7425846981824098304-Lp5A.

13 UNESCO, UNICEF, Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025 13 (2025), <https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/10/Afghanistan-education-situation-report-2025.pdf>.

14 Interview with international civil society organization representative, (8 Oct., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

2021 textbooks, they assign homework and carry out exams.¹⁵ Education is organized around avoiding suspicion. For example, classes may occur before most people wake up or after they go to bed. Students enter at staggered times, differing their routes and concealing their school materials.¹⁶ Reportedly, some Taliban members bring their own daughters to these clandestine schools.¹⁷

Online classes, texts and other educational resources can be an educational lifeline for women and girls.¹⁸ Afghanistan's internet quality and reach present obstacles, however. Reversing their longstanding opposition to internet access, the Taliban's second regime has encouraged internet infrastructure development. Yet getting online is still costly and out of reach for parts of the population, with women, girls and rural people less able to than others.¹⁹ Additionally, the Taliban's interest and investment in digital infrastructure poses barriers and risks. De facto authorities have blocked access to millions of websites and to some digital services such as TikTok.²⁰ They have completely shut down internet access at

certain moments, including in late 2025,²¹ and have spread online misinformation.²² In May 2026, they reportedly asked internet providers to cut fibre-optic internet services across Kabul.²³ If provided third party service tracking data, they may be able to use it to monitor civil society.²⁴ To address lack of internet access, some NGOs preload educational resources on memory cards and USB drives, but the technology can be expensive and hard to locate.²⁵ Grassroots educators fear future internet shutdowns that will worsen already limited educational access.²⁶

An Afghan women's rights defender who provided education for free to other refugees in Pakistan as she and her family awaited asylum elsewhere is among the many who now provide online education to Afghans inside Afghanistan. She can only provide an hour's worth of instruction given her location many time zones away, yet consistently finds a high demand for her classes among those inside both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Internet access and quality is a perennial issue for her students in Afghanistan.²⁷

15 *Id.*; Sarah Zaman, *Despite Taliban Ban, Secret Schools Educate Afghan Girls*, VOA News, (22 Jan., 2023), <https://www.voanews.com/a/despite-taliban-ban-secret-schools-educate-afghan-girls-/6928776.html>.

16 Interview with international civil society organization representative, (8 Oct., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

17 *Id.*

18 Displaced International, *Statement by Displaced International on the Taliban's Internet Ban in Northern Afghanistan* (15 Sept., 2025), <https://displacedinternational.org/statement-by-displaced-international-on-the-talibans-internet-ban-in-northern-afghanistan/>.

19 Sophie Flensburg et. al., *International Media Support, Digital Infrastructures in Afghanistan* 6,7, 10 (2025), https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Digital_Infrastructures_Afghanistan_IMS.pdf; see also Lea Haas, *An interview with a teacher*, Wild Flower (22 October 2024), <https://www.wild-flower.ch/veroeffentlichte-artikel/ein-interview-mit-einer-lehrerin>.

20 Sophie Flensburg et. al., *International Media Support, Digital Infrastructures in Afghanistan* 7, 14, 15 (2025), https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Digital_Infrastructures_Afghanistan_IMS.pdf.

21 Amnesty Int'l, *Afghanistan: Taliban de facto authorities must immediately restore internet access* (30 Sept., 2025), <https://kabulnow.com/2025/09/taliban-order-nationwide-shutdown-of-internet-and-mobile-services-in-afghanistan/>; Taliban Order Nationwide Shutdown of Internet and Mobile Services in Afghanistan, *KabulNow* (29 Sept., 2025), <https://kabulnow.com/2025/09/taliban-order-nationwide-shutdown-of-internet-and-mobile-services-in-afghanistan/>.

22 Sophie Flensburg et. al., *International Media Support, Digital Infrastructures in Afghanistan*, 15 (2025), https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Digital_Infrastructures_Afghanistan_IMS.pdf.

23 Abdul Nasir Noorzad, *The Silent Digital Prison: The Taliban's Gift to the People of Afghanistan*, *Hasht e Subh* (17 May, 2026), <https://8am.media/eng/taliban-digital-prison-internet-shutdown/>.

24 Sophie Flensburg et. al., *International Media Support, Digital Infrastructures in Afghanistan*, 16, 17 (2025), https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Digital_Infrastructures_Afghanistan_IMS.pdf.

25 *Special Broadcast Services News*, *These girls are only able to study in secret. For many, their 'last hope' is being taken away*, (24 Sept., 2025), <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/afghanistan-study-secret-online-taliban-internet-ban/x60fs025y>.

26 Interview with international civil society organization representative, (8 Oct., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

27 Interview with Afghan woman human rights defender, (2 Oct. 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

Deprivation of Afghan Refugees' Right to Education

Those escaping the Taliban's rights violations and Afghanistan's disastrous humanitarian conditions have primarily fled to Iran and Pakistan, despite being denied refugee or other legal status there, as wealthier countries refuse to host adequate numbers of refugees.²⁸ The global community regularly fails to meet the humanitarian financial requirements to support Afghans in transit countries.²⁹ Discrimination, anti-refugee policies and economic constraints leave many Afghans in Iran and Pakistan struggling to access education, with disproportionate impact on women, girls and LGBTQI+ people.³⁰ Both countries have dramatically increased deportations and expulsions of Afghans. Afghanistan struggles to absorb new students into its underfunded education system and women and girl deportees are denied education access past sixth grade.³¹ These migration barriers and wealthy countries' failure to supply adequate aid to meet the refugee crisis serve to

buttress and reinforce the Taliban's deprivation of Afghan women and girls' right to education.

Iran

Afghan refugees' rights in Iran, including to official recognition as refugees, have diminished over decades as Iran's economic challenges have mounted.³² While Iran grants documented refugees a right to primary education, and from 2015 to 2023 permitted Afghans of any legal status to access its public education system, students lacking documentation confronted restricted enrolment under a 2023 regulation.³³ Many Afghans already faced barriers to enrollment due to school capacity limitations post 2021 as well as financial difficulties.³⁴ Human rights advocates report that for years public schools have barred enrolment of Afghan children lacking official residency documentation.³⁵ In late 2024, government guidelines barred all undocumented children from enrolling, including those who had received census count slips.³⁶ The

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- 28 Mitra Naseh, One of the World's Largest Refugee Populations, Afghans Have Faced Increasing Restrictions in Iran, Migration Policy Institute (7 Jan., 2025), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-refugees-iran>; JM Kirby, Tens of Thousands of Afghan Women Refugees Risk Being Returned to Acute Danger, Truthout, (1 Aug., 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/tens-of-thousands-of-afghan-women-refugees-risk-being-returned-to-acute-danger/>; Katrin Bennhold & Steven Erlanger, Why Europe's Leaders Say They Won't Welcome More Afghan Refugees, NY Times (23 Aug., 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/europe/afghanistan-refugees-europe-migration-asylum.html>; International Rescue Committee, Two years on: Afghans still lack pathways to safety in the EU (2023), https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/P%26A2305_Safe%20pathways%20for%20Afghans_Report%20Final_web.pdf.
- 29 JM Kirby, Tens of Thousands of Afghan Women Refugees Risk Being Returned to Acute Danger, Truthout, (1 Aug., 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/tens-of-thousands-of-afghan-women-refugees-risk-being-returned-to-acute-danger/>; Humanitarian Action, Afghanistan (RRP) 2023, (2023), <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1118/financials#page-title>; Humanitarian Action, Afghanistan (RRP) 2024 (2024), <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1166/financials#page-title>. Responses to domestic crises in host countries are also often underfunded. See, e.g., UNICEF, Humanitarian Situation Report No. 2, Pakistan (2024), <https://www.unicef.org/media/159786/file/Pakistan-Humanitarian-Situation-Report-No.2-01-January-30-June-2024.pdf>.
- 30 See text and accompanying footnotes below. Afghans' minimal access to education in Pakistan and Iran is also evident in the widespread lack of formal education among those being forced back to Afghanistan. UNESCO, UNICEF, Afghanistan Education Situation Report 2025 31 (2025), <https://articles.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2025/10/Afghanistan-education-situation-report-2025.pdf>.
- 31 UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Afghanistan Situation, (Accessed 24 May, 2026), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan?gsid=40ebee4b-1e34-49e6-b5c4-46f0a75233d>; UN Women, Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning From Iran and Pakistan 3, 4 (2025), https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/af-20250409708-Gender-Alert-Returnees-from-Pakistan-and-Iran_JUN2025.pdf.
- 32 Mitra Naseh, One of the World's Largest Refugee Populations, Afghans Have Faced Increasing Restrictions in Iran, Migration Policy Institute (7 Jan., 2025), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-refugees-iran>.
- 33 *Id.*
- 34 UNHRC et. al., Education Away From Home: Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in the Islamic Republic of Iran 6 (2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/115830>.
- 35 OHCHR, Consolidated findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/CRP.2, ¶¶ 432, 434 (13 Mar., 2026), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/ahrc61crp-2.pdf>; Homa Majid, No documents, no education: Afghan girls in Iran, Zan Times (6 Jan., 2025), <https://zantimes.com/2025/01/06/no-documents-no-education-afghan-girls-in-iran/>.
- 36 UNHRC et. al., Education Away From Home: Supporting education for Afghan refugee children and youth in the Islamic Republic

census slips had granted over 2 million Afghans a temporary status with limited rights in Iran in 2022 but the government withdrew their validity in 2025 and ordered holders to leave the country.³⁷ Given documentation for enrolment is costly and denied to most Afghan refugees as Iran has ramped up deportations since 2023 instead of increasing regularization,³⁸ recent Afghan refugees are largely excluded from schools. In addition, schools in several provinces informally or formally refuse to enroll Afghans.³⁹ On the heels of US and Israeli attacks on Iran and ensuing war, refugees are being expelled back to Afghanistan due to Iran's heightened crackdown on Afghan refugees, US and Israeli bombings, and job loss. This has placed education even further out of reach for many.⁴⁰

Deprivation of education in Iran forces Afghan women and girls in Iran into a trap. Most cannot pursue formal education, but if they return or are deported to Afghanistan, they cannot access education past sixth grade—one of multiple

fundamental rights deprivations amounting to gender persecution the Taliban are committing.⁴¹

For Afghan students granted proper documentation in Iran, while public school education is essentially free, their families often find it difficult to contribute to the expenses they are nonetheless expected to pay.⁴² Some Afghans find that even where they possess required official documentation, it does not work when they attempt to enroll their children in school.⁴³ Further hindering access, in the areas where Iran grants foreign nationals permission to reside, the government limits the percentage of school enrolment by Afghans.⁴⁴ Afghan girl students have also reportedly faced racist discrimination by school officials with no recourse.⁴⁵ Afghan students in Iran report universities have denied them enrolment in medicine, science and other technical disciplines, thus excluding them from high demand careers.⁴⁶

of Iran 6 (2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/115830>.

- 37 Abdullah Mohammadi, Iran's Deportation Drive and the Growing Crisis of Forced Afghan Returns, *Diplomat* (10 June, 2025), <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/irans-deportation-drive-and-the-growing-crisis-of-forced-afghan-returns/>.
- 38 *Id.*; UNHCR, Iran, Islamic Republic of, Situational Update (as of 30 April 2025) 1 (2025), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/116772>; UNHCR, Weekly Update 02 June 2026 Middle East Situation 3 (2026), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/122712>; Homa Majid, No documents, no education: Afghan girls in Iran, *Zan Times* (6 Jan., 2025), <https://zantimes.com/2025/01/06/no-documents-no-education-afghan-girls-in-iran/>; Matthew Willner-Reid, Afghanistan: Displacement Challenges in a Country on the Move, *Migration Policy Institute* (16 Nov., 2017), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghanistan-displacement-challenges-country-move>.
- 39 OHCHR, Consolidated findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/CRP.2, ¶¶ 432, 434 (13 Mar., 2026), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/ahrc61crp-2.pdf>; Homa Majid, No documents, no education: Afghan girls in Iran, *Zan Times* (6 Jan., 2025), <https://zantimes.com/2025/01/06/no-documents-no-education-afghan-girls-in-iran/>.
- 40 Surge in Afghans driven from Iran in spy hunt after Israel attacks, *Reuters* (2 Jul., 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/surge-afghans-driven-iran-spy-hunt-after-israel-attacks-2025-07-02/>; Elian Peltier, Caught Between Two Conflicts, Afghans Flee Iran, *NY Times* (23 Mar., 2026).
- 41 Homa Majid, No documents, no education: Afghan girls in Iran, *Zan Times* (6 Jan., 2025), <https://zantimes.com/2025/01/06/no-documents-no-education-afghan-girls-in-iran/>; ICC, Statement of the ICC Office of the Prosecutor on the issuance of arrest warrants in the Situation in Afghanistan (8 July, 2025), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-office-prosecutor-issuance-arrest-warrants-situation-afghanistan>.
- 42 Mitra Naseh, One of the World's Largest Refugee Populations, Afghans Have Faced Increasing Restrictions in Iran, *Migration Policy Institute* (7 Jan., 2025), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-refugees-iran>.
- 43 Homa Majid, No documents, no education: Afghan girls in Iran, *Zan Times* (6 Jan., 2025), <https://zantimes.com/2025/01/06/no-documents-no-education-afghan-girls-in-iran/>.
- 44 *Id.*
- 45 *Id.*
- 46 OHCHR, Consolidated findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/CRP.2, ¶¶ 433 (13 Mar., 2026), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/ahrc61crp-2.pdf>.

Pakistan

Afghan refugees' barriers to education in Pakistan are backdropped by the overarching deprivations that many Pakistanis face.⁴⁷ Pakistan is among the lowest global spenders on education and has among the highest rates of out-of-school children, with girls in certain regions less likely to be in school than boys due to discrimination and other structural barriers.⁴⁸

As in Iran, Afghan refugees' rights in Pakistan have diminished over time. Undocumented Afghan refugees, who constituted at least 965,000 of an estimated 3.1 million Afghans in Pakistan at the end of 2023,⁴⁹ have never been permitted formal school enrolment and have been generally excluded from UNCHR services.⁵⁰ Prior to 2025, Proof of Residency (PoR) or Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders could enrol in public schools, and UNHCR provided some education to refugees, though accessibility was still limited due to inadequate resources, with a reported 20 percent enrolled in formal schooling as of 2023,⁵¹ or around 50,000 in public school.⁵² Pakistan began

one of its largest campaigns of mass expulsions of Afghans in 2023,⁵³ foreclosing education access for many Afghans, particularly women and girls past sixth grade.

When in Pakistan, many Afghan refugees without documentation have been unable to attend any form of school, while some have established makeshift schools taught by volunteer community members.⁵⁴ Some have enrolled in private schools that did not require the documentation public schools do, but these are prohibitively expensive for many.⁵⁵ Some private schools charge Afghans high fees and require them to be guaranteed by Pakistani citizens.⁵⁶ For all Afghans in Pakistan, cost and distance can pose barriers to school access, as can inadequate facilities for girls in a context of discriminatory social mores that prevent their ability to attend schools with male pupils or teachers.⁵⁷ As the government began mass expulsions, numerous schools serving Afghans were forced to stop enrolling Afghans or to close, disrupting the education of many Afghans who had studied for years in Pakistan.⁵⁸

47 Asian Displacement Solutions Platform, Briefing Note: Afghan Children's Access to Education in Iran and Pakistan 7 (2023), https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Briefing-Note-2-Girls-Access-to-Education-in-Afghanistan-Iran-and-Pakistan_Final_131223_EJN-MCE.pdf.

48 Bridging the equity gap: addressing out-of-school children in Pakistan with the 2026 UNESCO GEM Report, UNESCO (14 Apr., 2026), <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/bridging-equity-gap-addressing-out-school-children-pakistan-2026-unesco-gem-report>; UNICEF, Pakistan, Education (visited 31 May, 2026), <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/education>.

49 UNHCR, Pakistan- Snapshot 2023 Response January-December 2023 (2024), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/110883>.

50 UNHCR, Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 27 (2022), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90521>.

51 Devon Cone & Sabiha Khan, Refugees International, "They Left Us Without Any Support" 16 (2023), https://d3jwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Pakistan_July2023_R-1.pdf; Mohammad Ali Nazari, Educational Challenges for Migrant Children in Pakistan: High Costs, Limited Access, Hasht e Subh Daily (28 Mar, 2024), <https://8am.media/eng/educational-challenges-for-migrant-children-in-pakistan-high-costs-limited-access/>; UNHCR, 10 Years of RAHA in Pakistan (2021), <https://www.unhcr.org/pk/media/raha-factsheet-education-pdf>; US DOS, Pakistan 2023 Human Rights Report 52 (2024), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/528267_PAKISTAN-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf.

52 Devon Cone & Sabiha Khan, Refugees International, "They Left Us Without Any Support" 16 (2023), https://d3jwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Pakistan_July2023_R-1.pdf.

53 IOM, World Migration Report 2024 73 (2024), https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd686/files/documents/2024-05/pub2023-047-l-world-migration-report-2024_1.pdf.

54 Devon Cone & Sabiha Khan, Refugees International, "They Left Us Without Any Support" 16 (2023), https://d3jwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Pakistan_July2023_R-1.pdf.

55 Asian Displacement Solutions Platform, Briefing Note: Afghan Children's Access to Education in Iran and Pakistan 7 (2023), https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Briefing-Note-2-Girls-Access-to-Education-in-Afghanistan-Iran-and-Pakistan_Final_131223_EJN-MCE.pdf.

56 Mohammad Ali Nazari, Educational Challenges for Migrant Children in Pakistan: High Costs, Limited Access, Hasht e Subh Daily (28 Mar, 2024), <https://8am.media/eng/educational-challenges-for-migrant-children-in-pakistan-high-costs-limited-access/>.

57 Asian Displacement Solutions Platform, Briefing Note: Afghan Children's Access to Education in Iran and Pakistan 6, 7 (2023), https://adsp.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Briefing-Note-2-Girls-Access-to-Education-in-Afghanistan-Iran-and-Pakistan_Final_131223_EJNMCE.pdf.

58 *Id.* at 7; Rani Andaleeb, Afghan Children in Pakistan: Denied Classrooms, Denied Futures, Tribal News Network (26 Apr., 2025),

Portrait of Courage and Determination:

An Afghan women’s advocate fled the Taliban with her family to live in Pakistan, from January 2022 until she received asylum elsewhere in late 2024. From a tent in an unrecognized refugee encampment in Islamabad, she repeatedly attempted to enter her children into schools in Pakistan. No public school accepted her children because they lacked PoR cards. Private schools were too expensive. Some, she found, charged higher than normal fees to Afghans. In addition to tuition fees, they charged admission fees, which refugee families had to repay each time they had to renew their travel visas. She found schools refused to allow Afghan students to study past ninth grade. Determined to educate her children and those of the desperate families around her, she started giving classes in the camp. After a few months, police arrived on a rainy night and beat inhabitants. She and her husband decided to try to rent a place and continued to provide education to those without access. She and her eldest daughter taught Afghan students math, reading, writing, Qur’an and art. Landlords wrongly assumed they were charging fees and raised their rent, forcing them to move seven times in one year. Wherever she moved, there was never a shortage of Afghan refugee children and young adults seeking schooling. One day the police arrested her husband at the factory where he worked, and detained him for lack of papers. She was terrified that he would be deported. Only through the efforts of journalists and the factory owner was she able to get him released. After receiving asylum in another country she learned from other Afghan refugees in Pakistan that arrests and abuse only worsened. Many feared leaving their homes and had trouble sleeping, awaiting the knock on the door of police coming to take family members. She heard that authorities shut down a school that had served Afghans for decades in Rawalpindi. As she navigated her new life multiple time zones away, she immediately started teaching online classes to Afghan refugees in Pakistan and to students in Afghanistan. Despite only being able to provide an hour’s worth of instruction a day, her class has been consistently in demand, with refugees in Pakistan crowding together for shared internet to attend.⁵⁹

II. Afghan Refugees and the Continued Need for Protection

The world is largely turning its back on Afghan refugees. As the Taliban took over Afghanistan throughout 2021, it was clear that a concerted protection and resettlement effort was necessary,

especially for women, girls and LGBTQI+ people and their families. Wealthy democracies coalesced around a plan to confine Afghan refugees to neighboring countries—primarily Iran and Pakistan—where previous waves had landed through decades of wars and persecution.⁶⁰ Afghanistan was the origin of 5.7 million refugees at the end of 2022, up

<https://tnnenglish.com/afghan-children-in-pakistan-denied-classrooms-denied-futures>.

59 Interview with Afghan woman human rights defender, (2 Oct., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

60 Katrin Bennhold & Steven Erlanger, Why Europe’s Leaders Say They Won’t Welcome More Afghan Refugees, NY Times (23 Aug., 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/world/europe/afghanistan-refugees-europe-migration-asylum.html>; JM Kirby, Tens of Thousands of Afghan Women Refugees Risk Being Returned to Acute Danger, Truthout, (1 Aug., 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/tens-of-thousands-of-afghan-women-refugees-risk-being-returned-to-acute-danger/>; Matthew Willner-Reid, Afghanistan: Displacement Challenges in a Country on the Move, Migration Policy Institute (16 Nov., 2017), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghanistan-displacement-challenges-country-move>.

from 2.7 million in 2021.⁶¹ Wealthy states repeatedly failed to provide the full funding outlay necessary to meet those refugees' basic needs⁶² in countries where their rights to move, to work, and to access education were constrained. Amid the Taliban's worsening crackdown on fundamental rights and a grave humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, Afghan refugees now face among the largest expulsion and deportation campaigns from Iran and Pakistan in recent history. Some wealthy countries are also ramping up deportations of the few Afghans who have made it across their borders, and many are terminating or refusing to fulfil asylum and resettlement programs and promises.

Afghan Refugees in Iran and Pakistan

Afghan refugees' rights to official recognition as refugees in Iran have diminished over decades as Iran's economic challenges have increased.⁶³ Iran's rate of deportations of Afghans jumped 190% as of August 2021 compared to the prior year.⁶⁴ In late 2023, Iran ramped up deportations and expulsions of undocumented Afghans, with over 750,000 Afghans returning from Iran by the end of 2024.⁶⁵ On the heels of US and Israeli attacks on Iran in 2025 and 2026 and

ensuing war, Iran deported more Afghan refugees and many refugees also left, fleeing US and Israeli bombings and war-related job loss.⁶⁶

Pakistan distributed Proof of Registration (PoR) cards to Afghan refugees it counted together with UNHCR between 2006 and 2007, providing them temporary legal status. It permitted children born to PoR holders and a few other relatives to obtain the cards in occasional recounts over the next years.⁶⁷ In 2017 it distributed Afghan Citizen Cards (ACC) to around 840,000 of those without PoRs, a temporary document that does not recognize recipients as refugees.⁶⁸ It intermittently renewed the cards in the following years.⁶⁹ It refused these documents to the latest waves of refugees, including those arriving since 2021.

Pakistan began one of its largest campaigns of mass expulsions of Afghans in 2023.⁷⁰ From mid-September to December 2023 alone, an estimated 438,171 returned to Afghanistan from Pakistan as Pakistan implemented its "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan."⁷¹ In 2025, the government not only deported Afghans without documents, it also targeted ACC and PoR card holders.⁷² Amid the breakout of armed conflict between Pakistan and

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- 61 IOM, World Migration Report 2024 43 (2024), https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl686/files/documents/2024-05/pub2023-047-l-world-migration-report-2024_1.pdf
- 62 JM Kirby, Tens of Thousands of Afghan Women Refugees Risk Being Returned to Acute Danger, Truthout, (1 Aug., 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/tens-of-thousands-of-afghan-women-refugees-risk-being-returned-to-acute-danger/>.
- 63 Mitra Naseh, One of the World's Largest Refugee Populations, Afghans Have Faced Increasing Restrictions in Iran, Migration Policy Institute (7 Jan., 2025), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-refugees-iran>.
- 64 UNHCR, Afghanistan Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan 5 (2022), <http://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90521>.
- 65 UN Women, Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning From Iran and Pakistan 1 (2025), https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/af-20250409708-Gender-Alert-Returnees-from-Pakistan-and-Iran_JUN2025.pdf.
- 66 Surge in Afghans driven from Iran in spy hunt after Israel attacks, Reuters (2 Jul., 2025), <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/surge-afghans-driven-iran-spy-hunt-after-israel-attacks-2025-07-02/>; Elian Peltier, Caught Between Two Conflicts, Afghans Flee Iran, NY Times (23 Mar., 2026).
- 67 Devon Cone & Sabiha Khan, Refugees International, "They Left Us Without Any Support", 11 (2023), https://d3jwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Pakistan_July2023_R-1.pdf.
- 68 *Id.*
- 69 US DOS, Pakistan 2022 Human Rights Report 34 (2023), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/415610_PAKISTAN-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf.
- 70 IOM, World Migration Report 2024 73 (2024), https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl686/files/documents/2024-05/pub2023-047-l-world-migration-report-2024_1.pdf.
- 71 UNHCR & IOM, UNHCR-IOM Flash Update #8, Arrest and Detention Flow Monitoring (15 September – 2 December 2023) 2 (2023), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/105222>.
- 72 UNHCR, One Year Recap: 2025 Afghan Returns 3 (2026), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/121254>.

Afghanistan in 2026, Pakistan reportedly increased police raids, arrests and deportations.⁷³

Roughly 270,000 Afghans were deported to Afghanistan between January and late May 2026, primarily from Iran and Pakistan, but also from Türkiye, Tajikistan and beyond.⁷⁴ Over 1.2 million were deported from Iran and 150,000 from Pakistan in 2025.⁷⁵

Mistreatment and extortion during expulsion campaigns and at borders

Reports of aggressive tactics, police brutality and corruption surround the expulsion campaigns. Women forced back to Afghanistan have reported harsh treatment by authorities in both Pakistan and Iran.⁷⁶ In Pakistan, authorities closed refugee camps where Afghans had lived for decades.⁷⁷ They have reportedly subjected Afghans to night raids and mass arrests. They have also confiscated their valuables and livestock and bulldozed their homes.⁷⁸ Pakistan has refused to permit deportees to bring livestock or cash worth over \$175 with them to Afghanistan, and

reportedly police have seized cash even below that threshold.⁷⁹ Even for those fleeing persecution and accepted for relocation to third countries, Pakistani authorities imposed untenable exit fees.⁸⁰

Afghans held in detention prior to removal from Pakistan reported cases where authorities beat them, including with batons and cables.⁸¹ In at least one reported instance in Pakistan, police beat Afghan refugees and advocates at night in a tent camp in November 2025. They discarded the refugees' makeshift tents, rounded the refugees up into vehicles, and told them they were relocating them to Afghanistan.⁸² Authorities also sought to have landlords evict Afghan tenants.⁸³ Rights monitors note that the public rhetoric around the mass deportation campaign in Pakistan increased the police abuse directed against Afghans.⁸⁴ Many Afghan refugees reported being extorted for bribes by police to remain in Pakistan or avoid arrest.⁸⁵ In some instances Pakistani police attempted to extort refugee women for sex in exchange for avoiding

73 "Now they only deport": Afghans trapped in Pakistan arrested and sent back after 'open war' breaks out, Guardian (3 Mar., 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/mar/03/afghan-refugees-fear-pakistan-arrest-deport-taliban-war>.

74 OHCHR, Press Release: Türk: States must halt involuntary returns to Afghanistan (22 May, 2026), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/05/turk-states-must-halt-involuntary-returns-afghanistan>.

75 *Id.*

76 UN Women, Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning From Iran and Pakistan 4 (2025), https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/af-20250409708-Gender-Alert-Returnees-from-Pakistan-and-Iran_JUN2025.pdf.

77 Pakistan Shuts Afghan Refugee Camps Established 40 Years Ago, Newstrack (27 Sept., 2025), <https://english.newstrack.com/world-news/pakistan-shuts-afghan-refugee-camps-established-40-years-ago-544658>.

78 OHCHR, Press Release: Türk alarmed by reports of human rights abuses against Afghans forced to leave Pakistan (15 Nov., 2023), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/turk-alarmed-reports-human-rights-abuses-against-afghans-forced-leave>.

79 Ibraheem Bahiss, Pakistan's Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability, International Crisis Group (13 Nov., 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/qna/asia/south-asia/pakistan-afghanistan/pakistans-mass-deportation-afghans-poses-risks-regional-stability>.

80 Shah Meer Baloch, Pakistan under fire for 'shocking' \$830 exit fee for refugees who fled Taliban, Guardian (22 Nov., 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/nov/22/pakistan-under-fire-for-shocking-830-exit-fee-for-refugees-who-fled-taliban>.

81 UNAMA, No Safe Haven: Human rights risks faced by persons involuntarily returned to Afghanistan 14 (2025), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_hrs_-_human_rights_risks_and_returns_-_3_august_25_final.pdf.

82 Milad Sayar, Police raid Islamabad Park, 'beat' Afghan migrants and activists, Amu (25 Nov., 2025), <https://amu.tv/212603/>.

83 US DOS, Pakistan 2023 Human Rights Report 51 (2024), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/528267_PAKISTAN-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf.

84 *Id.*

85 Milad Sayar, Police raid Islamabad Park, 'beat' Afghan migrants and activists, Amu (25 Nov., 2025), <https://amu.tv/212603/>; OHCHR, Press Release: Türk alarmed by reports of human rights abuses against Afghans forced to leave Pakistan (15 Nov., 2023), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/turk-alarmed-reports-human-rights-abuses-against-afghans-forced-leave>.

detention.⁸⁶ Women described shakedowns for cash and valuables by Pakistani and Iranian border guards as they crossed into Afghanistan.⁸⁷ In 2025, women and girls made up a dramatically increased portion of Afghans returning from Iran as compared to years prior, demonstrating the breadth of Iran’s expulsion campaign.⁸⁸

LGBTQI+ Afghans who seek safety in Iran and Pakistan, which criminalize homosexuality, face discrimination and heightened risks in those countries and in the context of deportation.⁸⁹ For example, a transgender man fled to Pakistan after the Taliban tortured him and his family subjected him to forced marriage. Facing police abuse and community violence in Pakistan, he was forced to return to Afghanistan, where he lives under the threat of “honor” violence against himself and his sisters.⁹⁰ A lesbian who had been forcibly married to a Taliban supporter fled threats and family violence. She was in Pakistan awaiting resettlement to Germany when police raided the safe house where she was staying and deported all the inhabitants without accounting for their vulnerabilities to grave rights violations.⁹¹ Some transgender women who fled the Taliban have

reportedly been killed in Pakistan, with authorities unresponsive to advocates’ requests for them to investigate.⁹² Iranian authorities annulled some Afghan LGBTQI+ persons’ temporary residence cards and deported them without valid identification. In Afghanistan, obtaining identity documents typically requires support from paternal relatives, which can be impossible for LGBTQI+ Afghans who may be estranged from their families. As a result, they remain undocumented, hindering their ability to access evacuation programs,⁹³ a problem also for many women who fear approaching Taliban-controlled passport and other administrative offices.⁹⁴ Visa renewal processes can also become an opportunity for authorities on all sides of the border to discriminate against and abuse LGBTQI+ Afghans.⁹⁵

Given the threats and deprivations returnees face in Afghanistan, UNHCR predicts many will be driven to go back to Iran or Pakistan or attempt to travel onward, despite facing vulnerability to police aggression and dangers associated with irregular migration.⁹⁶

86 Ibraheem Bahiss, Pakistan’s Mass Deportation of Afghans Poses Risks to Regional Stability, International Crisis Group (13 Nov., 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/qna/asia/south-asia/pakistan-afghanistan/pakistans-mass-deportation-afghans-poses-risks-regional-stability>.

87 UN Women, Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning From Iran and Pakistan 4 (2025), https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/af-20250409708-Gender-Alert-Returnees-from-Pakistan-and-Iran_JUN2025.pdf.

88 Id. at 2, 3; IOM, Flash Update: 2 June 2025 (2025), <https://afghanistan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11071/files/documents/2025-06/iom-afghanistanflash-update-1.pdf>.

89 OHCHR, Consolidated findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/CRP.2, ¶¶ 438 (13 Mar., 2026), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/ahrc61crp-2.pdf>; Zofeen T Ebrahim, ‘She narrowly escaped three bullets’: Pakistan’s trans community shaken by attacks and killings, Guardian (27 Jan., 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/jan/27/pakistan-transgender-attacks-killings>; Asia Pacific Transgender Network & GATE, Joint Submission on the Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) People in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan for the Fourth Cycle of Universal Periodic Review (2023), https://gate.ngo/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GATE_Joint-Submission-UPR-Shadow-Report-LGBTI-Pakistan_2023.pdf.

90 Interview with former case worker, (17 Nov., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

91 *Id.*

92 Interview with Afghan LGBTQI+ rights activist, (18 Nov., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

93 OHCHR, Consolidated findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Islamic Republic of Iran, UN Doc. A/HRC/61/CRP.2, ¶ 444 (13 Mar., 2026), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session61/ahrc61crp-2.pdf>.

94 Interview with former case worker, (17 Nov., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

95 *Id.*

96 “[M]ass returns in adverse circumstances have strained Afghanistan’s already overstretched resources ...and lead to risks of onward and new displacement, including return movements back into Pakistan and Iran, and onward.” UNHCR, Operational Data Portal (visited 31 May, 2026), <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/afg>.

Wealthy Democracies' Migration and Deportation Policies

Afghans fleeing persecution and war have sought asylum and refuge in Europe and other wealthy democracies for years, filing over 386,000 asylum applications in Europe during 2015-16. Just over half their applications were approved, as compared to far higher approval rates for asylum seekers from other armed conflict contexts. European countries reportedly deported many Afghans during those years, and several negotiated controversial bilateral agreements with Afghanistan to return unsuccessful asylum seekers. The EU negotiated an agreement on migration and aid with Afghanistan in late 2016, attracting criticism that it was conditioning development aid on acceptance of Afghan returnees.⁹⁷

As the Taliban seized Afghanistan for the second time in 2021, some wealthy countries provided limited humanitarian resettlement and accepted greater asylum claims by Afghans, but those states also coalesced around a plan to prevent most Afghans from migrating to their countries.⁹⁸ Lacking other options to reach Europe, many Afghan refugees resorted to smuggling networks which charge high fees and subject them to substantial risks and abuses.⁹⁹ Roughly 18,000 Afghans reached European

Union states in irregular fashion in 2022. In response to irregular migration the European Commission proposed permitting states to derogate from their duties under asylum law in certain cases,¹⁰⁰ adopting the proposal as part of a broader regulatory package in 2024.¹⁰¹

The US, the UK, Germany, and other European states have more recently deprioritized or eliminated humanitarian resettlement options for Afghans while reducing asylum acceptance. While Greece's Afghan asylum acceptance rate was 99% in 2024, that year the UK's was 59%, and 38% in the first half of 2025, down from 99% in 2023. That of the Netherlands, Austria, Spain and other European states have also dropped since 2021.¹⁰² The UK closed all Afghans resettlement schemes to new applicants in July 2025.¹⁰³

Germany's Afghan resettlement program, while commendable for including people persecuted based on gender or SOGIE, was slow to operate. Its complex requirements, including that applicants must be selected from inside Afghanistan through a designated civil society organization, left many with the choice to either hide inside Afghanistan, or wait in limbo in Pakistan, where Germany has an embassy.¹⁰⁴ Despite a pause in 2023, Germany did ultimately admit Afghans via the program—around 30,000 by early 2023.¹⁰⁵ By the middle of 2025,

97 Matthew Willner-Reid, Afghanistan: Displacement Challenges in a Country on the Move, Migration Policy Institute (16 Nov., 2017), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghanistan-displacement-challenges-country-move>.

98 JM Kirby, Tens of Thousands of Afghan Women Refugees Risk Being Returned to Acute Danger, Truthout, (1 Aug., 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/tens-of-thousands-of-afghan-women-refugees-risk-being-returned-to-acute-danger/>; Mihnea Cuius et. al., Migration Observatory, Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the UK (2025), <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/afghan-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-the-uk/>.

99 IOM, World Migration Report 2024 84 (2024), https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl686/files/documents/2024-05/pub2023-047-l-world-migration-report-2024_1.pdf.

100 IOM, World Migration Report 2024 84 (2024), https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl686/files/documents/2024-05/pub2023-047-l-world-migration-report-2024_1.pdf.

101 Regulation (EU) 2024/1359 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 (2024), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32024R1359>.

102 Mihnea Cuius et. al., Migration Observatory, Afghan asylum seekers and refugees in the UK (2025), <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/afghan-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-the-uk/>.

103 *Id.*

104 Natasha Mellersh, Who is eligible for Germany's Afghanistan reception program?, Infomigrants (22 Sept, 2023), <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/51980/who-is-eligible-for-germanys-afghanistan-reception-program>.

105 Germany announces temporary halt for Afghan admissions, Infomigrants (30 Mar., 2023), <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/47862/germany-announces-temporary-halt-for-afghan-admissions>.

however, Germany suspended the program and stopped evacuation flights from Pakistan.¹⁰⁶ Afghans awaiting resettlement found themselves vulnerable to arrest in Pakistan, with some reportedly separated from their families and deported, including two sisters, aged 17 and 18.¹⁰⁷ In December that year, Germany terminated admission routes for hundreds of Afghans in Pakistan who had previously been promised resettlement in Germany, again leaving them at risk of deportation from Pakistan.¹⁰⁸ Pakistani police reportedly visited those Afghans' homes after news broke of Germany's refusal to resettle them, apparently as a prelude to their deportation.¹⁰⁹ Afghans have been left to attempt to slowly fight their cases in German courts while stranded in Pakistan.¹¹⁰ This happened as resettlement programs in other countries, including Canada and the US also stalled in 2025.¹¹¹

Recently, twenty European countries have urged the European Commission to prioritize the return

of undocumented Afghan nationals in Europe, either "voluntarily" or by force.¹¹² In August 2024, Germany became the first European country to deport Afghans to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in violation of UNHCR's non-return advisory.¹¹³ In January 2026, twenty EU states held talks with the Taliban to facilitate returns of Afghans with either criminal records or undocumented status, and are inviting Taliban leaders to Brussels for further talks.¹¹⁴ EU states' attempt to frame this as mere "administrative" engagement with the Taliban papers over its harmful impacts,¹¹⁵ including the legitimization of the Taliban.

The US was slow to act to protect vulnerable Afghans before August 2021, despite calls from civil society that it do so.¹¹⁶ It resettled around 65,000 Afghans it evacuated during its military withdrawal as of February 2022. But it then put the brakes on humanitarian parole, slowing processing and rejecting most applications even as it increased acceptance for

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- 106 Nette Nöstlinger, Germany's tough-on-migration turn leaves Afghans in perilous limbo (13 June, 2025), <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-migration-leaves-afghans-limbo-friedrich-merz-asylum-seekers-donald-trump-us-spd-afd/>.
- 107 Richard Conner, Pakistan detains Afghans waiting for Germany relocations, DW (14 Aug., 2025), <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-detains-afghans-waiting-for-germany-relocations/a-73644150>.
- 108 Ana P. Santos, German government revokes Afghan admissions and tightens resettlement policy, Infomigrants (12 Dec., 2025), <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/68661/german-government-revokes-afghan-admissions-and-tightens-resettlement-policy>; Deborah Cole, Germany drops promise to resettle hundreds of Afghans, Guardian (11 Dec., 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/11/germany-afghanistan-u-turn-migration-pakistan>.
- 109 German Foreign Office, Press conference statements (17 Dec., 2025), <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/regierungs-pressekonferenz-2748626>.
- 110 Natasha Mellersh, Germany stands firm on revoked Afghan promises amid lawsuits and Taliban crackdowns, Infomigrants (11 Mar., 2026), <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/70148/germany-stands-firm-on-revoked-afghan-promises-amid-lawsuits-and-taliban-crackdowns>.
- 111 HRW, Afghanistan: Events of 2025 (2026), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2026/country-chapters/afghanistan>.
- 112 Nineteen EU countries and Norway demand measures to return Afghans either voluntarily or forcibly, Euronews (18 Oct., 2025), <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/10/18/nineteen-eu-countries-and-norway-demand-measures-to-return-afghans-either-voluntarily-or-f>.
- 113 EU's push to deport Afghan refugees brings the Taliban back to the table, RFI (15 May, 2026), <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20260515-eu-push-to-deport-afghan-refugees-brings-taliban-back-to-the-table>; UNHCR, Position on Returns to Afghanistan (2021), <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2021/en/18554>.
- 114 Belgium negotiates with Taliban to send unwanted Afghans home, Brussels Times (24 Jan., 2026), <https://www.brusselstimes.com/1934811/belgium-negotiates-with-taliban-to-send-unwanted-afghans-home>; Arpan Rai, EU faces backlash over first invite to Taliban since 2021 takeover, AOL (22 May, 2026), <https://www.aol.com/articles/eu-faces-backlash-over-first-114959000.html>.
- 115 Sadokat Jalolova, Austria to Use Uzbekistan as Transit Route for Afghan Deportations Under New Agreement, Times of Central Asia (4 May, 2026), <https://timesca.com/austria-to-use-uzbekistan-as-transit-route-for-afghan-deportations-under-new-agreement/>.
- 116 JM Kirby, Tens of Thousands of Afghan Women Refugees Risk Being Returned to Acute Danger, Truthout, (1 Aug., 2022), <https://truthout.org/articles/tens-of-thousands-of-afghan-women-refugees-risk-being-returned-to-acute-danger/>.

Ukrainian refugees.¹¹⁷ Ultimately 200,000 Afghans were evacuated to the US,¹¹⁸ with the expectation they would apply for asylum or other status once there. The Afghan Adjustment Act, which would provide more stable migration status to Afghan refugees in the US,¹¹⁹ has repeatedly failed to pass Congress.¹²⁰ In January 2025, the US paused the Refugee Admissions Program and halted asylum, visa and other immigration processing, leaving thousands of Afghans, including women's activists about to board resettlement flights, trapped in places like Pakistan, and many in legal precarity in the US.¹²¹ In April 2025, the US ended Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Afghans—granted in 2022 to those who were in the US but not under humanitarian parole.¹²² While a court challenge to the decision continues, Afghan TPS holders are no longer protected from deportation through that mechanism.¹²³ In June the US issued a travel ban on Afghans and nationals of 18 other countries, with an exemption for Special Immigrant Visa holders.¹²⁴ In late 2025 the administration announced it would pause review of visas and other immigration

applications for people from those 19 countries and re-review the status of anyone who entered the US as a refugee under the prior administration—an order that a June 5, 2026 District Court decision lifted for many currently in the US.¹²⁵ The US also indicated it may force Afghan allies held in Qatar while awaiting final resettlement to the US to either return to Afghanistan or go to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Afghans at the Qatar camp, who assisted U.S. forces during its war, describe conditions as akin to prison.¹²⁶

Dangers to Returned Refugees, Particularly Women, Girls and LGBTQI+ Persons, in Afghanistan

Dire humanitarian and human rights conditions await those returning to Afghanistan. Afghanistan's poverty levels soared after 2021, with over half the population in poverty as of early 2024 and an estimated 36% unable to afford adequate food, a figure that worsened in 2025.¹²⁷ Funding and aid cuts

117 Id.; Camilo Montoya-Galvez, U.S. is rejecting over 90% of Afghans seeking to enter the country on humanitarian grounds, CBS News (20 June, 2022), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/afghan-refugees-rejected-us-entry-humanitarian-grounds/>.

118 Daa Hadid & Juliana Kim, Afghans who helped the U.S. are in dangerous limbo after Trump's order on refugees, NPR (27 Jan., 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/27/nx-s1-5273521/trump-executive-order-refugee-afghanistan-veterans>.

119 Dara Lind, The Afghan Adjustment Act of 2023: Everything You Need to Know, American Immigration Council (18 July, 2023), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/afghan-adjustment-act-2023-everything-you-need-to-know/>.

120 Displaced International, Policy Brief: Afghan Adjustment Act of 2025 and the Protection Way Forward (2025), <https://displacedinternational.org/policy-brief-afghan-adjustment-act-of-2025-and-the-protection-way-forward/>; H.R. 4895, 119th Congress 1st Session, (5 Aug., 2025), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/4895/text>.

121 Daa Hadid & Juliana Kim, Afghans who helped the U.S. are in dangerous limbo after Trump's order on refugees, NPR (27 Jan., 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/01/27/nx-s1-5273521/trump-executive-order-refugee-afghanistan-veterans>; Gisela Saloman, Trump cutoff of humanitarian parole for immigrants from Ukraine, 6 other countries challenged, AP (1 Mar., 2025), <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-humanitarian-parole-trump-lawsuit-ukraine-551604bda702699598d15ad2c57fdc4b>.

122 Sudhin Thanawala, Thousands of Afghans face possible deportation after court refuses to extend their legal protection, AP (22 Jul., 2025), <https://apnews.com/article/afghans-protected-status-trump-homeland-security-8ea0569a79700c32ddbca3a4b616cb1>; Dara Lind, The Afghan Adjustment Act of 2023: Everything You Need to Know, American Immigration Council (18 July, 2023), <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/afghan-adjustment-act-2023-everything-you-need-to-know/>.

123 CUSP, Fight for TPS: Active Lawsuits & What They Mean for You, Casa v. Noem (visited 31 May, 2026), <https://www.wearecusp.org/campaigns/tps-litigation-updates/#case-afg-cam>.

124 Presidential Proclamation 10949 (4 June, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/06/10/2025-10669/restricting-the-entry-of-foreign-nationals-to-protect-the-united-states-from-foreign-terrorists-and>.

125 Ximena Bustillo, U.S. pauses green card, citizenship applications for people from 19 countries, NPR (3 Dec., 2025), <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/03/g-s1-100218/trump-administration-halts-immigration-19-nations>; Ximena Bustillo, Stuck in limbo: millions of professionals risk losing status under Trump pause, NPR (28 Apr., 2026), <https://www.npr.org/2026/04/28/nx-s1-5775869/trump-travel-ban-pause-limbo-professionals>.

126 Yasmine El-Sabawi, 'It's a prison': Afghans stranded in US camp in Qatar exposed to Iranian strikes, MEE (30 Mar., 2026), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/its-prison-us-afghans-stranded-us-camp-qatar-exposed-iranian-strikes>.

127 Avand Azeez Agha, The Harrowing Trek: Afghan Migrants' Near-Death Journey to Hope (2024), <https://afghanistan.iom.int/stories/harrowing-trek-afghan-migrants-near-death-journey-hope>; Latest Food Security Report Confirms Fears of Deepening Hunger Crisis in Afghanistan as Winter Sets In, World Food Program USA (16 Dec., 2025), <https://wfpusa.org/news/report-confirms-deepening-hunger-crisis-afghanistan/>.

have left humanitarian organizations unable to meet returnees' basic needs.¹²⁸ Many women returnees lack identity documents, potentially hindering their access to aid, school enrolment for children, and SIM card activation.¹²⁹ Women returnees, and particularly single women and women heads of households overwhelmingly lack the ability to earn money and afford housing. Coupled with restrictions preventing women from renting without a mahram, these conditions leave many susceptible to exploitation and gender violence.¹³⁰

Returnees have reported fear of extrajudicial killing and arbitrary detention in Afghanistan.¹³¹ This fear leaves some in hiding in neighboring countries. An Afghan human rights activist who fled to Iran with his family after torture by the Taliban shared his constant fear of deportation and being killed in Afghanistan.¹³² Women and LGBTQI+ people face discriminatory deprivations of fundamental rights in Afghanistan for which the ICC has charged Taliban leaders with crimes against humanity, including gender persecution.¹³³ The Taliban recently announced a policy that institutionalizes child marriage, further worsening returnee girls' susceptibility to gender violence.¹³⁴ Women returnees have described themselves as under house arrest and forced into hiding and reliance on male relatives.¹³⁵ Conditions

for LGBTQI+ people in Afghanistan have deteriorated even further over the last couple years as the Taliban has consolidated power. A case worker confirmed the Taliban's increased surveillance capabilities and said its members continue to be directly involved in sexual assault and exploitation of LGBTQI+ people they identify, in addition to subjecting them to arbitrary detention and other torture.¹³⁶

III. Conclusion and Recommendations

Punitive migration policies and inadequate refugee support are contributing to instability and a humanitarian crisis that reinforces the Taliban's deprivation of Afghan women and girls' right to education¹³⁷ and leaves Afghans vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and potential recruitment into criminal networks. Enhanced support for a multilateral framework like UNHCR's Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees would be one step toward supporting dignity and rights. A rights-based approach also requires states to adhere to non-refoulement obligations,¹³⁸ to end expulsions, and to expand safe, regular pathways for Afghans in need of protection. States must maintain pressure on the Taliban to end rights violations and alleged crimes against humanity and

128 Afghan women returnees face rising risks, UN warns, UN News (7 Aug., 2025), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165594>.

129 UN Women, Gender Alert: Gendered Needs and Challenges of Afghans Returning From Iran and Pakistan 4 (2025), https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/af-20250409708-Gender-Alert-Returnees-from-Pakistan-and-Iran_JUN2025.pdf.

130 *Id.* at 3, 4 (2025).

131 US DOS, Pakistan 2023 Human Rights Report 51 (2024), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/528267_PAKISTAN-2023-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf.

132 Interview with Afghan activist in Iran, (30 Sept., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY & MADRE].

133 ICC, Statement of the ICC Office of the Prosecutor on the issuance of arrest warrants in the Situation in Afghanistan (8 July, 2025), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/statement-icc-office-prosecutor-issuance-arrest-warrants-situation-afghanistan>.

134 Zahra Joya, Taliban 'legitimising child marriage' with new law, activists warn, Guardian (22 May, 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/may/22/taliban-legitimising-child-forced-early-marriage-law-women-rights>.

135 UNAMA, No Safe Haven: Human rights risks faced by persons involuntarily returned to Afghanistan 16-17 (2025), https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_hrs_-_human_rights_risks_and_returns_-_3_august_25_final.pdf.

136 *also, id.* at 18, (describing Taliban arrest and violence against a non-binary Afghan recent returnee); Interview with case worker, (16 Nov., 2025), [name withheld for security reasons] [on file with CUNY]; UNHCR, Guidance Note on Afghanistan - Update II ¶¶ 38, 39 (2025), <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countrypos/unhcr/2025/en/150460>.

137 OCHA, Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, Humanitarian Program Cycle 2026 9,20, 21 (2025), https://reliefweb.int/attachments/0a995c74-1bea-401b-be47-bbe697adae9c/AFG_Humanitarian_Needs_and_Response%20Plan_2026.pdf.

138 The principle of non-refoulement has attained the status of customary international law. UNGA, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, U.N. Doc. A/80/302, ¶25 (4 Aug., 2025).

avoid legitimizing their rule through negotiations for return agreements. They should uphold human rights and other international legal obligations, including under treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women; the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the Refugee Convention, by ensuring protection and equal access to education for Afghan women, girls and other refugees.¹³⁹ Urgent recommendations include:

- 1. All states must halt forced returns, deportations and mass expulsions of Afghan refugees, asylum seekers, and people in need of international protection, especially women, girls, human rights defenders, journalists, former government members, ethnic and religious minorities, and LGBTIQI+ persons, in accordance with non-refoulement obligations and the UNHCR non-return advisory for Afghanistan.**
- 2. Pakistan, Iran and other host states must halt arbitrary detention; physical and sexual violence; threats; and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment of Afghan refugees and asylum seekers, and ensure accountability for violations. They must also cease extortion, property seizure, and high visa, exit and other administrative fees that leave Afghans destitute and without regular status.**
- 3. Host states must ensure education access for Afghan refugees, regardless of legal status. Donor states must fully fund education and other humanitarian services for Afghan refugees and host communities, including secondary and higher education for girls barred from education in Afghanistan. States must increase student visas and fund civil society education efforts for girls inside Afghanistan.**
- 4. States must accelerate resettlement of at-risk Afghans, including those awaiting relocation in transit countries, and expand safe and regular pathways, including humanitarian visas and family reunification.**
- 5. States must support accountability, including at the ICC and ICJ, for the Taliban and refrain from policies and negotiations that legitimize the Taliban while they deprive Afghans, particularly women and girls, of fundamental rights. Any engagement with the de facto authorities must be grounded in human rights, accountability, and meaningful participation of Afghan women and other persecution survivors.**
- 6. The Taliban must end its discriminatory deprivations of Afghans' fundamental rights, including to education for women and girls.**

¹³⁹ International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Arts. 2(2), 13; CEDAW, General Recommendation No. 32 on the gender-related dimensions of refugee status, asylum, nationality and statelessness of women, CEDAW/C/GC/32, ¶33 (2014); Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Art. 22.

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