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Uncovering the Nexus of Identity and Forced Migration: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Study of Afghan Women's Experiences in Diaspora
Découvrir le lien entre l'identité et la migration forcée : une étude collaborative auto-ethnographique des expériences de femmes afghanes dans la diaspora

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Résumé de l'article

Cette étude qualitative porte sur la mobilité éducative des femmes afghanes dans la diaspora, en particulier celles qui ont été forcées de migrer après la prise de contrôle de l'Afghanistan par les talibans en 2021. L'étude se penche sur comment l'intersectionnalité de leurs identités – ce qui inclut le genre, l'ethnicité, la religion et le statut socio-économique – impactent leurs expériences éducatives. Les parcours éducatifs de ces femmes afghanes sont rendus encore plus complexes par les défis posés par les conditions politiques et économiques dans les communautés de réfugiés, qui limitent leur accès aux opportunités d'éducation et d'emploi tout en augmentant le risque de discrimination et de violence. À l'aide d'une approche collaborative auto-ethnographique, nous utilisons nos expériences personnelles en tant que femmes afghanes ayant immigré au Canada lors de deux périodes distinctes de l'occupation talibane. Grâce à l'autoréflexion, à l'écriture de journaux intimes et aux observations de nos vies quotidiennes, nous apportons un éclairage nuancé sur les multiples facettes des défis auxquels sont confrontées les femmes afghanes au cours de leur migration et déracinement forcés.

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the educational mobility of Afghan women in the diaspora, particularly those who have experienced forced migration following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. The study delves into how their intersectional identities, including gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, shape their educational experiences. These Afghan women's educational journeys are further complicated by the challenges posed by political and economic conditions in refugee communities, which limit their access to education and employment opportunities while increasing the risk of discrimination and violence. Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we leverage our personal experiences as Afghan women who immigrated to Canada during two distinct Taliban occupation eras. Through self-reflection, journaling, and daily life observation, we provide nuanced insights into the multifaceted challenges faced by Afghan women during their forced displacement and migration.

Résumé

Cette étude qualitative porte sur la mobilité éducative des femmes afghanes dans la diaspora, en particulier celles qui ont été forcées de migrer après la prise de contrôle de l'Afghanistan par les talibans en 2021. L'étude se penche sur comment l'intersectionnalité de leurs identités – ce qui inclut le genre, l'ethnicité, la religion et le statut socio-économique – impactent leurs expériences éducatives. Les parcours éducatifs de ces femmes afghanes sont rendus encore plus complexes par les défis posés par les conditions politiques et économiques dans les communautés de réfugiés, qui limitent leur accès aux opportunités d'éducation et d'emploi tout en augmentant le risque de discrimination et de violence. À l'aide d'une approche collaborative auto-ethnographique, nous utilisons nos expériences personnelles en tant que femmes afghanes ayant immigré au Canada lors de deux périodes distinctes de l'occupation talibane. Grâce à l'autoréflexion, à l'écriture de journaux intimes et aux observations de nos vies quotidiennes, nous apportons un éclairage nuancé sur les multiples facettes des défis auxquels sont confrontées les femmes afghanes au cours de leur migration et déracinement forcés.

Keywords: educational mobilities, identity, autoethnographic methodology, Afghan women

Mots-clés : mobilités éducatives, identité, méthodologie auto-ethnographique, femmes afghanes

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Afghanistan has been embroiled in turmoil, marked by periods of Taliban rule that profoundly impacted societal norms, particularly concerning women's rights, and freedoms (Amnesty International, 2023). The Taliban's resurgence in August 2021 following the U.S. withdrawal has reignited fears of gender-based oppression, severely restricting women's access to education, healthcare, and employment (Ashna, 2024). This resurgence underscores the urgent need to examine the educational mobility of Afghan women forced to seek asylum abroad, navigating complex challenges influenced by gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status.

Educational Mobility of Afghan Women

The educational mobility of Afghan women refers to their ability to access, continue, and benefit from education despite displacement. Studies indicate that Afghan refugees in host countries face multifaceted challenges in educational integration, including language barriers, limited access to schools, and sociocultural adjustments (Stempel & Alemi, 2021). These challenges are exacerbated by their refugee status and the trauma of displacement, impacting their academic trajectories and long-term prospects (Perry & Mallozzi, 2017).

Educational empowerment is pivotal in this context, equipping individuals with knowledge, skills, critical thinking abilities, self-confidence, agency, and economic opportunities to positively impact their lives and communities. This research delves into the personal and psychological impacts of displacement on Afghan women, addressing issues such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the sociocultural elements that complicate their educational pursuits (Zeus, 2011).

To develop effective policies, the study underscores the necessity of additional research, including the autoethnography of Afghan women to gain deeper insights into their unique educational needs and experiences. By focusing on educational empowerment, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how education can be a transformative tool for Afghan women in diaspora, addressing both their immediate needs and long-term aspirations.

Literature Review

The internationalization of education is a pivotal focus in contemporary educational discourse amidst globalization. Knight (2008) defined internationalization as "the intentional integration of international, intercultural, or global dimensions into the functions and delivery of higher education" (p. 21). This process is driven by social and political objectives such as promoting global engagement, fostering cross-cultural understanding, encouraging civic responsibility beyond local boundaries, appreciating diverse languages and cultures, establishing global connections, and reinforcing diplomatic relationships and peacebuilding efforts between nations (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

International Education and Globalization

Globalization, characterized by interconnected economies, cultures, and societies, highlights educational institutions' active engagement with global entities through exchange programs, collaborations, and inclusive curricula (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). International education enhances academic standards, promotes cultural diversity, builds global partnerships, and supports economic growth and diplomatic relations as governments invest in education (Sharipov, 2020). Recent studies have shown significant growth in international student mobility, driven by global factors like conflicts, advancements in higher education infrastructure, and shifting economic opportunities (Javed et al., 2019). Motivations for international student mobility include personal and professional development, access to lucrative employment, career security, immigration possibilities, improved quality of life, and participation in the global labour market (Luo et al., 2023). Financial challenges persist, with middle-income families often relying on personal savings, family support, or loans to fund international education; however, it is contributing substantially to host countries' economies (Glass et al., 2021).

Intersectional Identities and Experiences of Afghan Women
Afghan women pursuing international education face distinctive challenges amplified by their homeland's sociopolitical context, encompassing cultural adaptation, gender-based barriers, linguistic hurdles, and financial constraints (Darwish, 2022). Their intersectional identities significantly influence their experiences in the diaspora, contributing to a more pluralized understanding of international educational mobilities.

Despite these adversities, international education offers crucial opportunities for personal and professional growth, empowering Afghan women within patriarchal societies by developing essential competencies and expanding their global perspectives (Darwish, 2022). The forced migration of Afghan women, particularly in the context of the Taliban takeover, adds complexity to their narratives of educational empowerment. These women uphold the immense value of education despite the challenges, reflecting resilience and a determination to rebuild their lives through learning. Their intersectional identities and experiences manifest in various forms.

Psychological and Personal Experiences
The psychological toll of displacement on Afghan women is significant, with forced migration leading to anxiety, depression, and PTSD that affect their education and well-being (Alemi et al., 2014). Trauma, a lack of social support system, and the strain of adjusting to new surroundings all make these difficulties worse. Additional challenges in their new countries, like socioeconomic problems, discrimination, and language barriers, exacerbate their mental health issues and impede their integration. Understanding these experiences is crucial for their integration and adaptation in host countries.

Impact of Forced Migration on Educational Empowerment
Forced migration, particularly in the context of the Taliban takeover, profoundly impacts and diversifies narratives of educational empowerment among Afghan women. This dynamic necessitates an examination of how these circumstances influence their educational journeys and empowerment narratives. Despite the challenges, Afghan women and their families demonstrate resilience and determination to pursue education, reflecting a strong commitment to their goals regardless of the adversities encountered during their transcontinental journeys (Streitwieser et al., 2020).

Diaspora, distinct from international education, refers to the dispersion of people from their homeland to various foreign areas where they establish communities while maintaining connections to their origin (Bamberger et al., 2021). Displacement, often resulting from conflict, persecution, or disasters, contrasts with voluntary migration typical of diaspora movements. It emphasizes immediate survival needs and refuge requirements (UNHCR, 2019). This distinction is crucial in understanding the specific challenges and resilience of Afghan women navigating forced migration and striving for educational empowerment.

Community Support and Integration
Community support plays a critical role in the integration, empowerment, and educational experiences of Afghan women during forced migration and resettlement in the diaspora. In the Canadian context, inclusive international education policies are crucial for addressing the intersectional challenges faced by marginalized populations, including Afghan women and other displaced learners (Brunner, 2022; Hawkins et al., 2021). Policies should prioritize psychological support, cultural sensitivity, networking opportunities for community building, and institutional

adaptations to foster a supportive educational environment. Ensuring equitable opportunities for academic and personal growth among all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, is essential.

Positionality of Authors

In our collaborative autoethnographic study, we intertwine our Afghan heritage and diasporic experiences to reveal the complex impacts of forced migration and educational mobility among Afghan women. Inspired by Ríos and Patel's (2023) insights on positions, positionality, and relationality, we blend personal reflections with scholarly inquiry to explore intersections of identity, displacement, and educational access.

I, Safia, share my journey from growing up in Afghanistan during the Taliban era to migrating to the United States and Canada. My educational path began in Kabul, where I completed my primary, secondary, and undergraduate degrees. I arrived in the United States on a Fulbright scholarship and pursued my PhD in Canada amidst the Taliban resurgence. These experiences inform my reflexivity within the research, highlighting the challenges Afghan women face in navigating displacement and educational opportunities.

I, Narjes, reflect on my upbringing as an Afghan refugee in Iran and my subsequent journey to Canada. My family fled Afghanistan during the Soviet era, settling in Iran and later moving to Canada. I completed my primary education in Tehran before moving to Canada for secondary school, and I pursued my undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees within the Canadian educational system. These personal histories enrich our exploration of diaspora, educational mobility, and identity, underscoring their relevance and enhancing readers' comprehension.

Drawing on Ríos and Patel's (2023) framework, our positionality emphasizes ongoing critical self-awareness and relationality. We challenge power dynamics in educational research, aligning with Pillow's (2003) call to disrupt established power structures and foster deeper engagement with our subjects and contexts. Our research offers insights into the obstacles Afghan women encounter amidst displacement and the need for inclusive educational policies and support systems.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality and human security theory provide robust foundations for understanding the experiences of Afghan women in diaspora, particularly in the context of forced migration and educational mobility. Intersectionality explores the intricate interplay among various facets of identity such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status, emphasizing how these intersecting dimensions shape individuals' experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). This approach acknowledges that Afghan women's challenges during forced migration, including access to education and integration into new societies, are complex and compounded by multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization (Collins, 1990). Their unique backgrounds and identities profoundly shape their experiences in host countries, influencing how they navigate new cultures and societal expectations. Embracing intersectionality helps us understand how Afghan women face overlapping barriers of gender-based discrimination and socioeconomic inequalities in diaspora, affecting their educational opportunities and social integration (Varsik & Gorochovskij, 2023).

By using intersectionality in our study, we highlight the interconnected challenges Afghan women encounter during forced displacement and migration, emphasizing the compounded difficulties in pursuing education and asserting their identities in new sociocultural contexts.

Human security theory extends the concept of security beyond state-centric views to include economic, environmental, health, and societal aspects (Newman, 2020). This framework is vital for understanding the challenges Afghan women face in the diaspora, such as economic insecurity, social exclusion, and limited access to healthcare and education (Newman, 2020). It also emphasizes empowerment and resilience, advocating for policies that support displaced individuals' agency and well-being (Camilleri, 2020). Our study applies human security theory to propose policy recommendations that enhance Afghan women's security and educational opportunities in the diaspora. This involves advocating for inclusive educational policies, economic empowerment, and social integration programs that address the identity and vulnerabilities of displaced populations. By integrating intersectionality and human security theory, we aim to better understand how Afghan women navigate migration challenges and contribute to global discussions on educational mobility, human security, and social justice.

Methodology

This study employs an autoethnographic approach to explore how the multifaceted identities of Afghan women in diaspora enrich our understanding of international educational mobilities. Autoethnography encompasses self-reflection, journaling, and the observation of personal life experiences, anchoring social research in the researcher's own lived experiences and connecting them to broader cultural, political, and social contexts.

Extending this inquiry, we utilize collaborative autoethnography to delve deeper into how these identities shape perceptions and experiences within international educational settings. Collaborative autoethnography involves joint reflection, interpretation, and analysis of personal narratives by multiple authors within a shared cultural and social framework (Chang et al., 2016). This method allows for a comprehensive exploration of shared experiences, highlighting the complexities of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation within educational contexts (Chang et al., 2016).

According to Tami Spry (2001), autoethnography is a "self-narrative that critically examines the positioning of oneself and others in a social context" (p.710), challenging prevailing discourses and offering unique insights into personal struggles and passions. This methodological approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate and make sense of challenging circumstances, revealing both personal narratives and broader social implications (Sohrabi, 2023).

Autoethnography serves multiple purposes, from exploring personal experiences within societal contexts to reviewing relevant literature through a personal lens (Poerwandari, 2021). Given the diverse nature of our subject matter, autoethnography proves apt for this study, offering a rich, context-sensitive approach to understanding Afghan women's educational experiences. For data analysis, thematic analysis is employed as a qualitative research method, focusing on identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data to uncover meaningful insights and conclusions (Clarke et al., 2015).

Our collaborative autoethnography explores Afghan women's experiences in forced migration and educational mobility within a broader context. By documenting our personal journeys, we aim to identify common themes and patterns that resonate with other Afghan women facing similar circumstances. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how our individual experiences intersect with broader social, cultural, and political contexts, shedding light on both personal narratives and systemic issues. In this study, we employed autoethnography alongside thematic analysis to investigate our research questions. Our findings were structured and

organized according to each research question, utilizing thematic analysis as our chosen methodology.

The following research questions guide our collaborative autoethnographic approach:

1.   How do Afghan women's intersectional identities influence their experiences in the diaspora, and how can these insights contribute to a more pluralized understanding of international educational mobilities?

2.   How do the psychological and personal experiences of Afghan women during displacement influence their integration and adaptation in host countries? How does the forced migration of Afghan women, particularly in the context of the Taliban takeover, impact and diversify narratives and understandings of educational empowerment?

3.   How does community support impact the integration, empowerment, and educational experiences of Afghan women during forced migration and resettlement in the diaspora? (By integration, we mean the process of incorporating individuals or groups into a cohesive and unified entity, fostering inclusion and mutual adaptation within a broader societal, community, organizational, or systemic framework.)

Findings
Our analysis was structured around our research questions and involved coding for themes across three key areas. Firstly, we examined how Afghan women's intersecting identities—such as ethnicity, gender, and immigrant status—shaped their diasporic experiences, contributing to a nuanced understanding of international educational mobilities. Secondly, we explored how the forced migration of Afghan women, particularly amidst the Taliban takeover, diversified narratives, and perspectives on educational empowerment. Thirdly, we investigated how personal and psychological experiences of Afghan women influence their integration in the host environment and the role of community support in facilitating integration, empowerment, and educational experiences in the diaspora. This thematic coding approach enabled us to uncover insights into how these factors intersected to influence educational pathways. These findings have significant implications for policy, educational practice, and future research in international education mobility.

Exploring Intersectional Influences: Afghan Women's Educational Experiences in the Diaspora
In an era marked by globalization, immigration, and displacement, Afghan women's experiences offer critical insights into international education mobility. Their journeys serve as compelling case studies revealing profound lessons in forced migration, cultural adaptability, academic resilience, and the transformative role of education. Cultural adaptability, defined as effective adjustment in diverse cultural contexts (Sutton et al., 2006), is pivotal for their integration. Academic fortitude, characterized by persistence and resilience in overcoming educational challenges (Msengi et al., 2020), underscores their pursuit of educational goals despite adversity. Moreover, decolonization efforts seek to dismantle external oppressive systems, empower women's voices, and restore autonomy and cultural integrity within Afghan society (Tuck & Yang, 2012). These narratives highlight opportunities to diversify and decolonize international education, exemplified in our autoethnographic case studies. They underscore the daunting obstacles, personal commitment, and broader implications for gender equity, academic diversity, and advocacy for substantial change in international education.

Narjes's journey from Iran to Canada, marked by discrimination, shaped her early life and identity as an Afghan refugee. Her Afghan identity significantly influences her experiences and interactions in Canada. The internal conflict she faces regarding societal expectations of her being a "perfect Canadian" highlights her ongoing struggles with self-discovery. Her narrative challenges common stereotypes about identity, revealing the complexities of cultural integration and personal identity formation in a foreign land. She noted,

> Whenever I'm asked, "Where are you from?" I feel a sense of disappointment and alienation. It seems like I will never fully belong in Canada due to my Afghan ethnicity, given the common perception of what a "perfect Canadian" looks like, which often aligns with someone of White ethnicity.

Narjes's narrative challenges stereotypes about Afghan women, particularly the misconception of universal oppression perpetuated by Western media (Mitra, 2020). Biases rooted in gender and ethnicity shape Narjes's identity, as exemplified by a remark about her Afghan heritage: "what a transformation," reducing Afghan women to a narrow stereotype. Her educational journey underscores the impact of identity on opportunities and challenges. Her mother's emphasis on education reflects cultural values supporting academic achievement (Loo, 2017). Narjes's initial struggles adapting to the Canadian education system mirror common barriers faced by immigrant students (Guo et al., 2021).

Narjes's educational journey intertwines her Afghan identity with unique challenges she faced, echoing research on identity's impact on education (Driedger, 2011). Redirecting from traditional academic paths to vocational colleges highlights pervasive stereotypes in educational guidance (Loo, 2017). Her story illustrates how systemic factors shape educational choices, potentially limiting her full potential (Bajwa et al., 2017). Enrolling in a private career college despite higher costs underscores the limited resources available to her, echoing concerns in educational guidance research. These aspects reveal the complex landscape of refugee background students' experiences, advocating for equitable support systems (Bajwa et al., 2017). Narjes noted,

> I also remember speaking to my grade counselor about post-graduation plans. Looking at my transcript, she directed me towards vocational and career colleges or training programs, rather than academic and university programs ... counselor's predisposed notions of what I could do was wrong. I ended up at a private career college. … I spent $18,000 on … a diploma program, which I had to borrow through student loans. I could have done the same program in a public college for a fraction of the cost. I was 18 years old, and I didn't have the information to make an informed decision.

Narjes's journey through diverse educational institutions showcases her resilience, determination, and strength as a refugee navigating a complex educational landscape with intersecting identities. Resilience, per Southwick and Charney (2018), involves bouncing back from adversity, adapting positively despite challenges, and experiencing personal growth. Studies indicate refugees and their families often lack knowledge of host countries' higher education systems, facing ambiguous information and language barriers (Loo, 2017). This lack of support exposes refugees like Narjes to barriers in accessing crucial educational information (Bajwa et al., 2017), impacting their educational choices significantly. Narjes's ability to navigate these challenges underscores her determination and unique identity as an Afghan woman in the diaspora.

Narjes's experiences with discrimination in both Iran and Canada underscore the enduring impact of stereotypes and biases linked to her identity, highlighting the intersection of ethnicity

and gender. A poignant example is her distressing memory from eighth grade when Afghan refugee children, including herself, were barred from taking their final exams—a lasting symbol of humiliation and discrimination. Regarding this incident, Narjes recalled,

> During my eighth-grade year in Tehran, (Iran) the school principal informed us, along with other Afghan students, that we were not permitted to take our final exams. On that distressing day, we found ourselves sitting in the schoolyard while our Iranian peers were inside, writing their exams. The sense of humiliation and discrimination still lingers from that painful day.

After immigrating to Canada, Narjes faced discrimination, including a situation where her siblings were unfairly labelled as "Talib" due to their Afghan heritage. This incident highlighted the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, demonstrating how biases can affect individuals even in environments perceived as inclusive (MacNevin, 2012). These experiences emphasize the need to confront stereotypes and promote culturally sensitive environments that foster a sense of belonging (Ma, 2003) and ensure equitable treatment for all (hooks, 1993). Narjes also encountered workplace microaggressions related to her Afghan background, further emphasizing the pervasive nature of discrimination.

Safia's experiences are equally illuminating. Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, she was poised to begin elementary school just prior to the Taliban's takeover in 1996. However, with the Taliban in power, she experienced discrimination firsthand as a child when the Taliban imposed a ban on education for girls and women, which extended to excluding women from the workforce and essential medical care. But despite these oppressive circumstances, Safia's journey began within the clandestine world of underground schools, where women's rights activists and educators worked tirelessly to ensure that girls still had access to education. Safia's determination was evident in her continuous education journey, starting with elementary school in underground schools during the Taliban regime and eventually earning her bachelor's degree after the fall of the Taliban regime.

Safia's early experiences profoundly shaped her identity and fuelled her advocacy for women's rights and education. Her work aligns with broader social justice movements, recognizing the struggle against gender-based discrimination as essential (hooks, 1994). Safia's commitment to education and advocacy reflects her effort to dismantle oppressive structures and empower Afghan women (hooks, 2000). Her journey, from enduring Taliban suppression to advocating for change, showcases her perseverance. In 2017, she moved to the United States for her master's degree, adjusting first in Athens, Ohio, and later facing new challenges in Montréal during the 2020 pandemic lockdowns. Safia noted,

> When people in my new community learn about my background, they're often surprised by my independence, strength, and resilience, as they usually associate Afghan women with oppression and needing saving. I feel empowered by representing Afghan women as strong and independent, particularly through education. I value the opportunity to access quality education in the West, which helps me reach my full potential, though many Afghan women are deprived of similar opportunities. This disparity highlights a sense of discrimination, especially when other conflict-affected countries receive more attention.

In 2021, following Afghanistan's second fall to the Taliban, Safia faced an identity crisis that highlighted the challenges Afghan women encounter in accessing education. Her expiring Afghan passport and jeopardized study permit at McGill University mirrored broader concerns about refugees' educational access (Pinson & Arnot, 2007). Attempts to renew her passport through the Afghan embassy in Ottawa were hindered by bureaucratic obstacles, reflecting common hurdles

for refugees (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). This situation prompted deep questions about her sense of belonging and the broader issues of identity and cultural adaptation for Afghan women in the diaspora (Radford & Hetz, 2021).

As Afghanistan fell under Taliban control, which oppressed women, Safia felt estranged from her home. In Canada, as an international student, she faced statelessness and lacked support systems, highlighting the need for better support for refugee students (UNHCR, 2022). Legal assistance proved challenging due to the uniqueness of her situation, reflecting common difficulties refugees face in navigating legal systems (Morales, 2024). Safia struggled with culture shock and a sense of not fully belonging in either Canada or Afghanistan. For instance, Safia noted,

> Afghanistan no longer felt like home under Taliban control, which oppressed women, and as an international student in Canada, I felt stateless with no support system. Legal services proved unhelpful due to the unique nature of my situation, leaving me uncertain about where to seek assistance.

These experiences vividly illustrate the complex interaction of cultural identity, gender, and challenges shaping Afghan women's journeys, like those of Narjes and Safia. These narratives provide a deep understanding of the complex interactions between gender and cultural identity, particularly in the context of the diaspora. These stories are more than just first-person accounts; they are reflections of larger sociocultural dynamic and the continuous struggle for gender equality and cultural preservation.

Educational Resilience and Empowerment: Navigating Forced Migration and Academic Challenges

The forced migration of Afghan women under the Taliban underscores the complex interplay between their education and lived experiences. Here, resilience and determination are crucial for personal empowerment. Resilience in education signifies the ability to overcome challenges, while determination reflects unwavering commitment to educational goals despite adversity. The UN resettlement program highlights education's role in fostering social and economic integration mirrored in Safia's pursuit of higher education in Western contexts, recognized as pivotal for such integration (UNHCR, 2022).

Studying abroad offers a transformative educational opportunity, immersing students in new academic and cultural environments. Yet, many encounter challenges in cultural adaptation and integration, shaping their experiences profoundly. Cultural adaptation, as described by Kim (2001), is the dynamic process of establishing effective relationships in unfamiliar cultures. Narjes's cross-continental transition was marked by significant challenges, including experiences of discrimination. She struggled to adjust to a new environment and education system in Canada, facing limited support, which exacerbated feelings of discrimination. She highlighted,

> As a graduate student at McGill, I've … been told by my professors that "my English is very good." I usually respond with a shy "thanks," but I often reflect on the fact that it isn't really a compliment. Of course, my English is good; I'm Canadian.

Narjes's experience as a graduate student at McGill reflects a nuanced aspect of human security theory, which aims to safeguard individuals' vital cores from critical and pervasive threats while promoting long-term fulfillment (Alkire, 2003). Despite being Canadian, Narjes receives compliments that subtly suggest surprise regarding her English skills, potentially undermining her sense of cultural security within the academic environment. Human security theory emphasizes

the importance of psychological well-being alongside physical safety (Alkire, 2003). Narjes's reaction to the compliment and subsequent reflection illustrate how such seemingly benign comments can affect an individual's psychological security. She acknowledges the compliment politely but reflects discomfort with the implied stereotype that Afghan Canadians may not excel in English proficiency, emphasizing that her ethnicity should not dictate assumptions about her language skills.

Narjes' cross-continental transition from Iran to Canada serves as a vivid illustration of the complex cultural adaptation processes integral to international education mobility. Her narrative underscores the significance of linguistic proficiency, cultural acumen, and the necessity for institutional frameworks to facilitate the assimilation of Afghan women into diverse educational environments. Her experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of cultural adaptation in international mobility and highlight the importance of individual resilience and institutional support which is also evident in Safia's story moving to the United States then Canada for her PhD program. Safia's pursuit of a U.S. scholarship reveals the challenges students face abroad, including feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome—a psychological phenomenon where individuals doubt their abilities and fear being exposed as frauds despite evidence of competence (Breeze, 2018). These challenges involve both psychological and sociocultural aspects of adaptation, highlighting the need for mentorship, psychological support, and guidance for international students. She noted,

> In 2017, I moved to the U.S. for my master's degree … that is when I started experiencing imposter syndrome, I have always felt I was not enough, I don't know as much as my peers

This shows the potential for international education mobility to enhance inclusivity, considering the multifaceted challenges related to students' ethnicity, gender, and more (Ainscow, 2020). Similarly, Narjes' pursuit of higher education illustrates the educational resilience of Afghan women in the face of forced migration, highlighting their capacity to overcome disruptions and navigate foreign academic systems through personal determination. This narrative underscores the pivotal role of individual resolve and ambition in international education mobility. Narjes recalls,

> I had big dreams and ambitions. I experienced a lot of racism and discrimination in my schooling in Iran. For instance, due to my Afghan refugee status, I was not permitted to continue my education past Grade 8, or I was called racial slurs by my classmates. So, I was excited to be in Canada, where opportunities seemed limitless. But I struggled, because I lacked the tools to succeed … when I came to Canada, I was placed in high school based on my age, so I had to attend Grade 10. … I struggled with subjects like sciences and math because of gaps in my schooling, so I didn't get good grades, but I wanted to go to university … eventually, after trial and error … I transferred to a university. I didn't want to stop. I enjoyed learning … so I applied to master's programs, despite some doubts, like my academic advisor …, who told me to have a backup plan. … But I applied to the three schools of my choice and got accepted into all three prestigious programs among the 23 highly ranked universities.

Narjes' journey demonstrates that international education mobility transcends academic learning, fostering personal growth, skill development, self-confidence, and a global perspective, impacting both individuals and the academic community. Her unwavering commitment to education aligns with academic aspirations among refugees (Khawaja & Milner, 2012), showcasing resilience and motivation in overcoming educational challenges (UNHCR, 2020) and highlighting education's role in empowerment and transformation. Narjes's narrative vividly illustrates how education empowers Afghan women, challenges stereotypes, and reveals its transformative potential for

forcibly displaced individuals (Shakya et al., 2010). These scholarly insights underscore the critical need for gender-equitable and inclusive educational frameworks to promote empowerment and drive societal change. Narjes's experiences illuminate education as a catalyst for resilience and agency, enabling women like her to navigate and overcome barriers imposed by displacement and discrimination. Safia's experiences, starting from her childhood under the Taliban regime, reveal the pervasive gender-based barriers Afghan women encounter. Her narrative shows these challenges persist during international education mobility. Safia's journey exemplifies the critical role of education in advancing gender equality and empowering women. Her story enriches our understanding of education's transformative power in addressing entrenched gender discrimination.

However, it also highlights the power of education for promoting empowerment and gender equality when fostered in the right manner. Safia's role as an advocate for Afghan women's education underscores the profound societal impact of international education mobility. Her narrative transcends the personal sphere to illustrate the potential of international students to become influential voices in advocacy and policy reform. Her experiences underscore the fact that international education mobility can empower individuals to be agents of positive change and advocates for social justice and equity, thereby influencing broader global narratives surrounding educational empowerment. Safia noted,

> Throughout my life, I've remained a vocal advocate for women's rights and gender equality, which is deeply rooted in my experiences growing up under the Taliban regime. My passion for advocating women's rights, particularly the right to education, has been a constant throughout my time in the U.S. and now in Canada. I've actively participated in various events, media interviews, and scholarly work focusing on advocating for Afghan women.

Safia's journey vividly portrays the daunting educational obstacles Afghan women face, especially due to the Taliban's ban on education. Her narrative underscores how education is crucial in their lives despite formidable challenges. This aligns with literature (Ghosh et al., 2022), which identifies societal barriers that prevent specific groups from accessing education, perpetuating inequality. Safia's story highlights the intertwined struggles of Afghan women's forced migration and ongoing educational difficulties, emphasizing the urgent need to address these profound challenges.

 Safia's PhD journey at McGill University illustrates significant disparities in higher education, particularly for international students facing steep tuition fees compared to local peers. Her application experience for a scholarship aimed at supporting Afghan women raises transparency concerns and suggests potential ethnic discrimination, highlighting broader societal inequalities:

> I applied for a scholarship at McGill University focused on Afghan women and education. Later, I learned it was awarded to someone studying dance. No clarification was provided as to why I didn't receive the fellowship, despite my background and PhD research being highly relevant to the scholarship requirements. (Safia)

Human security theory (Alkire, 2003) underscores how educational discrimination intersects with economic and social security, emphasizing the need for inclusive, equitable educational environments. Addressing these barriers is crucial for promoting well-being, fostering social integration, and ensuring fair access to education for all students.

Intersectionality offers insight into academic discrimination experienced by refugees like Safia, revealing how interconnected social identities contribute to systemic inequalities in

educational settings. Refugees often confront marginalization due to intersecting identities such as ethnicity, gender, and immigrant status (Baban et al., 2021). For Safia, as a non-White woman from Afghanistan, these intersections shape her experiences of discrimination, illustrating how biases based on race, nationality, and gender compound to disadvantage her. This framework highlights that academic discrimination is influenced by institutional policies, cultural norms, and societal attitudes, emphasizing the need for inclusive educational environments that address these intersecting inequalities. Safia's narrative illuminates the challenges Afghan women face, challenging stereotypes and biases while pursuing education in new host countries. Her journey underscores refugees' academic aspirations and the transformative potential of education.

Narjes' immigration journey, driven by Iran's political turmoil, aligns with academic discussions on challenges faced by refugees (Ghosh et al., 2019). Her experiences with racial slurs and discrimination in Iran underscore the urgency of addressing educational barriers encountered by Afghan women and refugees (UNHCR, 2020). This resonates with existing literature that emphasizes how certain populations, including refugees, are excluded from education (Pinson & Arnot, 2007). Narjes' narrative illuminates her cultural adaptation, identity development, and the consequences of stereotypes and biases, both locally and globally. These experiences are in line with scholarly discussions on cultural conflict and the importance of recognizing diverse identities (MacNevin, 2012). Furthermore, her personal narrative underscores the potential of education in promoting cultural understanding and societal acceptance (Raghuram, 2009).

Overall, Narjes and Safia's narratives highlight how forced migration profoundly impacts Afghan women's education and empowerment, showcasing their resilience amidst challenges like cultural adaptation, discrimination, and mental health issues. These stories underscore the importance of robust support systems and inclusive education, demonstrating how education can transform their lives despite adversity. They broaden our understanding of education amidst forced migration, revealing urgent needs such as addressing gender-based barriers, psychological challenges, academic discrimination, and financial constraints. Ultimately, these narratives illustrate education's potential to empower and catalyze social change in difficult circumstances.

The Impact of Community Support: Diversifying Narratives in Forced Migration
In Narjes and Safia's immigration journeys, their experiences as Afghan women in the diaspora underscore the vital role of community support. They highlight the intertwined themes of identity, social integration, and community assistance during forced migration and resettlement. These personal narratives illuminate the complexities of social integration, challenge stereotypes, and debunk perceptions that Afghan women are merely passive recipients of Western rescue efforts. This resonates with scholarly research emphasizing the importance of community networks in aiding refugees and underscores the urgent need for robust support systems for newcomers (D'Avino, 2021).

The role of community and support networks in Narjes's life is evident throughout her narrative. She expressed gratitude for the role of community support and how these experiences benefited not only her but also her siblings and friends. For example, the establishment of the MAWJ: Afghan Cultural Association highlights the importance of preserving cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Her involvement in cultural events and her dedication to volunteering with organizations like MOSAIC (Settlement and Employment Services for Newcomers) are examples of how she found support and established connections with people from diverse backgrounds. Narjes noted:

> Afghan refugee youth came together to establish MAWJ: Afghan Cultural Association, a local group focused on cultural and social activities. … preserving our language (Farsi), as well as

embracing various cultural aspects like poetry, music, and art. … these activities, along with our community involvement, played a vital role in fostering our sense of connection and belonging.

Safia's immigration journey intertwines cultural identity and gender dynamics, challenging stereotypes and showcasing Afghan women's resilience. This underscores the pivotal role of community support in fostering refugees' sense of belonging (Al-Hamad et al., 2023). However, her story also highlights the critical need for strong support structures in stateless contexts. Safia's experiences with social integration reveal stark differences between her time in the United States and Canada. In the United States, interactions with international students provided support, highlighting the need to embrace diverse identities (hooks, 2000). In Canada, she experienced limited community connections due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown which contributed to the increased challenges she experienced with sense of belonging and identity during the fall of Afghanistan for the second time to Taliban in 2021. Safia's journey underscores the importance of inclusive, supportive communities that empower individuals seeking belonging and driving social change (hooks, 2000).

Safia's narrative underscores the vital role of support networks during sudden statelessness under Taliban control in 2021. Her persistent search for assistance and community left her isolated, highlighting the critical link between identity and social support, crucial for fostering social change (Collins, 2008). This emphasizes the importance of support networks, especially for refugee women navigating unique challenges in new countries and cultures. Safia vividly portrayed her isolation and the lack of essential support during her adjustment to statelessness in Canada after the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. She recalled,

I faced the dual challenges of supporting my family in Afghanistan while dealing with my own statelessness in a foreign country. Despite reaching out to many organizations for help, their responses were often minimal, leaving me with a deep sense of displacement and questioning my belonging. I had to navigate these difficulties on my own.

Safia's narratives illuminate the intricate interplay of identity, social integration, and community support for Afghan women in the diaspora. Her experiences highlight both challenges and resilience in navigating complex identities and confronting discrimination. These stories underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing various forms of oppression within society. Overall, Safia's immigration journey underscores how experiences, social integration, and community support profoundly shape individual identity, emphasizing the crucial role of advocacy and support networks in combating discrimination and fostering social change.

Discussion
Reflecting on our narratives deepens our understanding of the diverse challenges Afghan women face in pursuing education amidst forced migration. Our stories vividly depict education's transformative power in fostering empowerment, advocacy, and social change. Safia's advocacy for Afghan women's education and her encounters with academic discrimination at McGill University highlight the transformative power of education but also the pervasive issues of inequality and bias within academia, stressing the importance of transparent and equitable educational environments for students from diverse backgrounds. Similarly, Narjes's journey from Iran to Canada, navigating cultural adaptation and community support networks, underscores the vital role of social integration in the resettlement process.

Our narratives reveal the profound impact of forced migration on Afghan women's education and identity. The educational barriers imposed by regimes like the Taliban, combined

with systemic discrimination in host countries, create significant obstacles that we must navigate. Our resilience and determination to overcome these barriers exemplify the potential of education to drive social change and promote cultural understanding. However, our experiences also highlight the urgent need for robust support systems and inclusive educational policies that address the specific needs of refugee and migrant populations.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Enhancing Transparency and Equity in Academic Funding: Our experiences with discriminatory funding decisions underscore the need for greater transparency and equity in academic funding processes. There is a need for policies to ensure that opportunities are accessible to all students, regardless of their ethnic or national background. Further, these policies should prioritize transparency to minimize discrimination and inequalities.

Strengthening Support Systems for Refugee Background Students: Our narratives highlight the critical role of community support in the integration and well-being of refugees. We need to focus on enhancing support networks through community organizations, cultural associations, and mentorship programs. These support systems can help refugees navigate the complexities of resettlement, promote cultural preservation, and foster a sense of belonging.

Promoting Cultural Understanding and Inclusivity in Education: The cultural adaptation challenges we faced emphasize the importance of promoting cultural understanding and inclusivity within educational settings. Educational institutions should implement gender-sensitive policies and practices that support women from marginalized backgrounds, incorporate cultural competency training for staff and students, foster inclusive curricula that reflect diverse perspectives, and create safe spaces for dialogue and cultural exchange.

Implications for Future Research

Our collaborative ethnographic study highlights the urgent need to address academic discrimination faced by international and refugee students, emphasizing both immediate policy interventions and broader systemic changes. By exploring these experiences, we aim to inform the development of effective global policies and support systems that foster inclusive educational environments and social integration. Our research underscores the importance of community support and gender-sensitive educational policies in advancing equity and inclusion for marginalized student populations.

Further collaborative research is essential to fully understand the importance of inclusive learning environments for these students. It will help international education systems address their unique challenges and ensure they reach their full potential. Moreover, ongoing collaboration is crucial to explore how community support influences the educational success and social integration of refugee and migrant populations, identifying best practices for robust support networks. Evaluating gender-sensitive educational policies through our collaborative approach will offer valuable insights into supporting female students from marginalized backgrounds and guide the implementation of inclusive and equitable educational practices.

Conclusion

In the context of our autoethnographic study, Afghan women's experiences in international education mobility may have the potential to bring about transformation on various levels. Our

experiences as Afghan women navigating challenges in pursuing international education shed light on the experiences of empowerment and adversity faced by Afghan women in international educational settings. Moreover, their advocacy for women's education within Afghanistan has the potential to impact legislative changes and enhance support for female students. Afghan women contribute to cultural exchange, adding diverse perspectives to discussions and acting as bridges between their Afghan culture and the international academic community. Their experiences also empower them to advocate for gender equality and work towards breaking down gender-based barriers. Ultimately, Afghan women's experiences in international education mobility offer a significant and multifaceted contribution to the field, with potential benefits for Afghan women and the broader goal of creating a more diverse and inclusive education system.

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