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From Displacement to Educational Mobility: Maternal Agency, Aid, and the Long Arc of One Afghan Refugee Family's Transformation in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how displacement, maternal agency, and educational opportunity interacted over time in the life course of one Afghan refugee family that resettled in Pakistan during the 1980s. The study asks how a widowed mother and her children navigated exile, gendered constraints, and uneven aid structures to convert schooling into long-term social and professional mobility. Methodologically, the study is a qualitative single-case study informed by narrative inquiry. The evidentiary base consists of semi-structured interviews with three members of the family, supported by personal documents, scholarship records, photographs, and contextual site observations. Rather than treating aid as a self-executing intervention, the analysis shows that access to educational opportunity depended on persistent household labour, social mediation, and the mother's willingness to contest community expectations around women's work and girls' schooling. The case suggests that educational mobility in refugee settings emerges through the interaction of formal programmes and informal navigation, not from policy design alone. It also shows that refugee women's agency is best understood relationally: as caregiving, advocacy, negotiation, and institution-building carried out under conditions of loss and uncertainty. Although a single case cannot sustain broad generalization, it offers an analytically rich account of how gender, education, and transnational opportunity structures are lived and reworked in protracted displacement. The study contributes to scholarship on refugee education, gendered resilience, and the limits of humanitarian inclusion in Pakistan.

Keywords: Afghan Refugees; Pakistan; Maternal Agency; Refugee Education; Gender; Educational Mobility

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 3 April 2026 | Revised: 19 June 2026 | Accepted: 26 June 2026 | Published Online: 3 July 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/cci.v3i2.102419>

CITATION

Ismail, A., Aqib, M., Arif, M., 2026. From Displacement to Educational Mobility: Maternal Agency, Aid, and the Long Arc of One Afghan Refugee Family's Transformation in Pakistan. *Cultural Conflict and Integration*. 3(2): 1–15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/cci.v3i2.102419>

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1. Introduction

The Afghan displacement to Pakistan is one of the most lasting and significant instances of refugees in the modern world^[1–4]. The initial mass movements were based on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, although the history did not end with a single geopolitical breakup. Repeated weapons, civil war, proxy war, economic instability, and new restrictions on social life have once again created new movements as well as prolonged previous exile across generations^[1–3]. Pakistan has thus been not only a neighbouring state of reception but also a social space where exile was made a normal, lengthy, and asymmetrical institutionalisation^[2]. Recent UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) indications point to the extent of that protraction: most registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan have decades to live there, and a significant percentage of them were even born there, not in Afghanistan itself^[3]. Simultaneously, the legal ambiguity, the presence of documentation issues, poverty, gender inequality, and regular pressure to go back to the motherland keep influencing daily living^[1, 2]. Education in this respect takes a paradoxical position. It has been extensively defined as a gate to inclusion and future security, but the entrance to it is still classified in terms of class, documentation, family conventions, language, and geography^[1, 4, 5].

Studies of Afghan refugees in Pakistan have provided a few significant aspects. To start with, access to education has never been universal^[3–6]. The experience of UNESCO and UNHCR in terms of inclusion of refugees in the national education systems demonstrates that the formal policy openings do not necessarily translate into equal participation^[3, 4]. The obstacles are documentation, cost, lack of information on refugee students, and institutional coordination^[3–5]. The situation of education in Pakistan adds to these limitations since the refugee children and young people are placed within a system that is already characterized by unequal infrastructure and gender inequality^[6]. Specific research on Afghan refugee girls and young women in Pakistan demonstrates that despite schools or universities being open in name only, household labour, travel bans, possession of devices, and social norms can acutely reduce real access^[5–7]. These inequalities were aggravated instead of being eliminated in crisis situations like the closures during the COVID-19 pan-

demic^[7].

Second, the recent scholarship has shifted past the description of refugee women as mere vulnerable dependents^[8]. The argument about Afghan refugee women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and in camp environments in Pakistan suggests that women usually play the role of an economic stabilizing force, informal leader, cultural broker, and survival advocate in a displacement situation^[8, 9]. The force of patriarchy, legal precarity, and violence does not deny such work. Rather, it restates the action of women as within social relations, moral obligation, and strategic negotiation^[8–10]. The change is particularly significant for research on female-headed households, where care work, educational planning, and income generation can overlap in the same individual^[8, 9]. A widowed mother in exile does not simply cope, but has to deal with risks, make sense of institutions, negotiate with relatives, and turn where she can opportunities into enduring benefit^[8, 9].

Third, scholarship on refugee education increasingly treats schooling not only as service delivery but also as a social and political process. Education may provide credentials, but it also carries symbolic meaning: dignity, moral continuity, adulthood, respectability, and the possibility of speaking back to displacement^[10–12]. Research on refugee girls' educational trajectories and on higher-education access in Pakistan shows that persistence in schooling is shaped by more than school availability^[5–7]. It is also influenced by the ability of a family to absorb both direct and hidden costs, the ability of mothers and daughters to negotiate movement in the public, whether teachers become mentors, as well as the intelligibility of the scholarship systems to the non-elite networks^[10–12]. The opportunity of education is relational or, put another way, educational opportunity^[6, 10–12].

Yet an important gap remains. Most of the extant literature is policy-based, at the population level, or themed in snapshots as to access barriers, school involvement, or camp-based gender inequality^[3–9]. These studies are useful, but they fail to reflect all the time the ways that the displacement, family strategy, and educational mobility are accumulated within a single household^[8, 9]. Neither do they sufficiently demonstrate how humanitarian assistance, social networks and maternal decision-making become confounded over decades. Alone, a case cannot be enough to answer all questions, but it can expose mechanisms, turning points,

and contradictions that more extensive studies tend to homogenize. It is able to demonstrate how a refugee family understands institutions in ways that are bottom-up, how gendered authority is put into practice, and how the sacrifice made by one generation is transformed into the qualifications and professional identity of another generation.

This article addresses that gap through a qualitative case study of one Afghan refugee family that relocated to Pakistan in the early 1980s after the death of the father, a mujahideen commander. At the centre of the narrative is the mother, referred to here by the pseudonym Zahra, who arrived in Pakistan as a widow with two young children. The article traces how Zahra's educational background, paid work, insistence on girls' schooling, and ability to navigate imperfect aid structures shaped the later educational and professional trajectories of her son and daughter. The family narrative ends with higher education, such as a Fulbright grant to the daughter, though the focus on analysis is not on success in the celebratory meaning. Instead, it is upon the gradual and sporadic transformation of displacement into educational mobility by labour that was both gendered and socially conflicted and institutionally weak.

The study is guided by one main question: how did maternal agency and educational opportunity interact within a protracted refugee context to shape the long-term transformation of one Afghan refugee family in Pakistan? Two subsidiary questions organize the analysis. First, in what ways did widowhood, gender norms, and community expectations condition both constraint and possibility for the mother's decisions? Second, what does this case suggest about the relationship between formal aid and informal navigation in refugee education? These questions matter because policy language often implies that once assistance exists,

opportunity follows.

This study makes three specific contributions to the literature. First, it offers a rare household-level, life-course account of how educational mobility is produced within protracted refugee displacement in Pakistan, rather than treating access as a static policy outcome. Second, it reconceptualizes maternal agency as relational, sustained, and institutionally mediated, showing how care, livelihood, advocacy, and educational planning operated together over time within a widowed refugee household. Third, it demonstrates that the effects of aid and scholarship opportunities cannot be understood through formal availability alone, because access depended on the family's ability to identify, interpret, and pursue opportunities through everyday social navigation. In this way, the article moves beyond descriptive accounts of refugee vulnerability by showing the micro-processes through which displacement, gendered labour, and educational opportunity were converted into long-term mobility.

2. Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that brings together intersectionality, refugee agency and resilience, transnational opportunity structures, and educational mobility. Instead of viewing them as distinct concepts, the framework is applied in explaining the process by which the path of one family was determined by the interplay of social position, household strategy, institutional access, and long-term educational persistence. The displacement to empowerment movement, as illustrated in **Figure 1**, is perceived as a stratified process that is influenced by identity and structural constraints and that is pursued by taking advantage of opportunities.

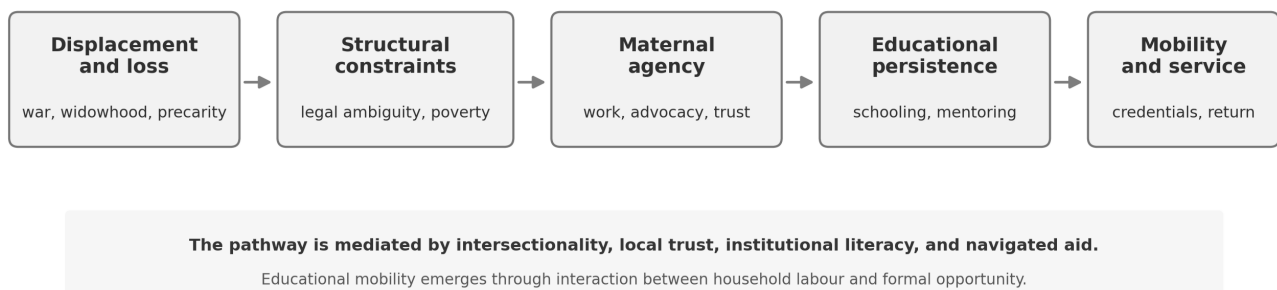


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the family's movement from displacement and constraint to educational mobility through maternal agency, navigated access, and social mediation.

Intersectionality offers the initial point of analysis^[13]. In line with Crenshaw, social position cannot be narrowed down to one identity marker. The experience of Zahra cannot be sufficiently attributed to gender, refugee status, or widowhood. Rather, her life was determined by the intersection of multiple and mutually reinforcing roles. A widowed Afghan woman, a displaced individual, a mother of dependents, and a partially educated employee who wanted to gain access to social life in a conservative refugee setting. Those roles influenced the perceptions of respectability, the social acceptability of employment, and determination of the value of her daughters' education and the nature of authority she could use. Intersectionality is thus useful in explaining why education was never an individual aspiration in this instance; this was bargained by gendered, family, and community power relations^[13].

The second lens is that of the refugee agency and resilience^[8]. The lives of refugees are often constructed using the humanitarian languages of vulnerability. Even though these vocabularies continue to be crucial in the documentation of failures of precarity and protection, they also tend to obscure the patterned manner displaced people operate under constraint conditions^[9]. In this study, agency does not imply unrestricted choice or individual triumph. Instead, it is situated action: the ability to make, defend and revise decisions in circumstances that are not of one's choice. Similar terms are applied to resilience. It is not considered as an inherent characteristic, but is a process created out of relationships, institutions, abilities, and moral commitments. Zahra is not only resilient due to her endurance, but also resilient in her teaching, advocating for the education of girls, her ability to develop a sense of trust in the community, and her long-term planning of education despite the pressure of survival at that moment.

The third lens is transnationalism, to be more precise transnational opportunity structures. This idea links local family strategy to the cross-border operating institutions, such as humanitarian agencies, scholarship programmes and higher education pathways^[14]. The lives of refugees are said to be locally situated or globally controlled but in reality they are both. The family's trajectory moved through camp-based education, local NGO networks, the national education system, scholarship pathways, and later transnational academic mobility. These routes were not opened automatically. This needed social translation, institutional acknowledgment, and long-lasting navigation. Applications

needed to be interpreted, gatekeepers needed to be contacted and credentials needed to be transcended across contexts. The transnationalism here is not considered as such an abstract glorification of mobility, but as the description of how the cross-border opportunities can be realised only by means of labour, recognition, and strategic mediation.

The framework also relies on educational mobility as a social change and not necessarily progress through schooling^[10]. Education within the context of refugees can create economic opportunity, though its value may go beyond that in many situations^[11]. Here, education served as a protection of the home, moral continuity following bereavement, gender opposition to early marriage and as a basis for later service to the community. The fact that the daughter became a graduate student abroad was significant not only due to the fact that it broadened her qualifications, but also due to the fact that it changed the idea of what a refugee girl with camp background could have been considered possible in her dreams. Educational mobility, hence, has symbolic, relational, as well as institutional aspects and formal achievement^[12].

Taken together, these concepts clarify why the movement from displacement to educational mobility cannot be reduced either to structure or to determination alone. Intersectionality explains why the costs of decision-making were unevenly distributed within the household. Agency and resilience illuminate how those decisions were nevertheless made and sustained. Transnational opportunity structures show why aid and scholarships matter, but also why they remain ineffective unless they can be navigated. The framework therefore treats mobility not as a single outcome, but as the cumulative effect of interacting social, institutional, and agentic processes.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Design

The article adopts a qualitative single-case design informed by narrative inquiry^[15]. A case-study approach was appropriate because the research question concerns process rather than prevalence: how one refugee household translated educational aspiration into long-term mobility over time^[16]. Narrative inquiry complements this design by foregrounding participants' own sequencing of events, interpretations of

turning points, and retrospective meanings attached to hardship, schooling, and institutional encounter^[15]. The purpose of the study is not statistical generalization, but analytical interpretation. In this sense, the case is used to illuminate mechanisms, relational dynamics, and temporally layered processes through which maternal agency, aid navigation, and educational persistence interacted within protracted displacement. While the findings are not intended to represent all Afghan refugee families in Pakistan, the case provides theory-relevant insight into how educational mobility may be produced under conditions of gendered constraint, institutional unevenness, and long-term exile.

3.2. Case Selection

The family was chosen purposely due to its abnormally good access to the dynamics of displacement, gendered care giving, education, and aid navigation. There were three criteria that made the household analytically informative. To start with, the family had to leave Afghanistan and settle in Pakistan as refugees in the Soviet-Afghan conflict and endured exile as opposed to engaging in a temporary movement^[1, 2]. Second, the death of the father resulted in a female-headed household, so the decision-making in the household became maternal, which would determine whether the family survives and moves on. Third, the family had recorded experiences with educational systems and scholarship opportunities at various life levels. These aspects rendered the case especially appropriate to investigate the way formal opportunities are transformed into real trajectories in the long run.

Pseudonyms are used in the article when referring to family members. The mother is called Zahra and the children are called Omar and Laila. The naming system maintains the narrative integrity of the case and minimizes personally identifiable information. Certain biographical information is given in a general and not very specific form for the same reason.

3.3. Data Sources

The evidentiary base intertwined a number of qualitative material forms. The primary source was the semi-structured interviews with three family members including the mother and her two adult children^[15]. The interviews involved displacement, livelihood, gender norms, school

participation, experience with aid institutions, scholarship opportunities and subsequent professional identities. The interviews were recorded on tape with the consent of the participants and were about 60–90 min.

The document review of family-held materials was used to supplement the interview testimony. These covered school certificates, scholarship letters, photographs, and so on. This is significant not because documents can substitute narrative testimony, but because they can stabilize time and help understand which of the achievements were participant-reported and which were backed by written documents. It was also enriched with contextual site observations. These observations targeted the locations related to both past refugee settlement and subsequent learning or employment.

3.4. Data Collection and Method of Interview

The interviews were semi-structured and not totally standardized. This format enabled the researcher to follow a shared body of issues but also follow the family focus and recollections. The semi-structured interview is particularly effective when the purpose is to comprehend the meaning of the key events in the lives of people instead of enumerating them^[15]. The approach of strict questioning, used in a study like this, would make the narrative relation between bereavement, movement, education, and subsequent identity flat. The interviews thus seem to have involved open-ended questions on the migration story of the family, the mother's preference for work and schooling, encountering community resistance, and experience with aid and scholarship systems.

Interviews were conducted in Pashto/Dari/Urdu, depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed. Quotations included in the manuscript were translated into English by the researcher, who is a native speaker of the interview language(s) and is also fluent in English. This linguistic familiarity helped preserve contextual meaning, tone, and culturally specific expressions during translation. To enhance accuracy, the translated quotations were checked against the original recordings and transcripts, and meaning-based rather than word-for-word translation was used where necessary to reflect participants' intended meanings as faithfully as possible.

The technical description of interview language, translation, and transcription conventions can be found incompletely in the study materials. These limits are thus given

in the analysis. The interviews were handled as narrative sources, audio recording and consent of the participants were included in the process, and the analysis that followed relied on the transcribed material. Where the translated or polished quotations are found in the article, they ought to be construed as faithful renderings ready to read and not as assertions of verbatim accuracy beyond the materials available.

3.5. Analytic Procedure

The combination of thematic and narrative strategies was used in analysis^[15, 16]. Thematic analysis was employed in determining recurrent patterns through the interviews and materials that supported the interviews^[16]. The coding was done in an iterative manner and themes were narrowed down after comparing with other data sources repeatedly. It has a thematic framework that is structured around four broad areas, namely displacement and early insecurity; maternal agency and adaptation; education as transformation; and aid, networks, and institutional gaps. **Figure 2**^[16] is a visual representation of these themes.

They were analyzed by the use of narrative analysis and thematic coding to maintain both the temporal order and meaning of participants^[15, 16]. It was important since the family did not define schooling, assistance, and movement as distinct spheres. They instead told them in a series of connected sequences of a bigger story, which started with death and displacement and then grew into a narrative of ad-

vocacy, credentialing, and professional purpose. The current analysis, hence, does not just consider what came out but how themes were connected by the family. As an illustration, the subsequent scholarship of the daughter is not considered an individual success, but rather the summative result of maternal work, bargained communal legitimacy, institutional tutelage, and years of educational tenacity.

Triangulation has been applied cautiously. In cases where there was documentary evidence, e.g., certificates or scholarship letters, claims are termed document-supported. In instances where the evidence was obtained through interview testimony, the statements are claimed as participant-reported. Such distinction is significant in a case study that contains emotionally colored and retrospective descriptions.

3.6. Reflexivity and Positionality

The study was conducted in a reflexive position. Studies of refugees, widows, and displaced families are never neutral in terms of social life. Unequal relations can be recreated in interview settings, decisions regarding quotation and the meaning of resilience when approached without criticism. The reflexive approach was thus needed to prevent the transformation of the family into passive victims or heroic exceptions^[17]. A participant was viewed as an informed storyteller of his or her own life in addition to understanding that retrospective testimony is influenced by memory, audience, and current context^[18].

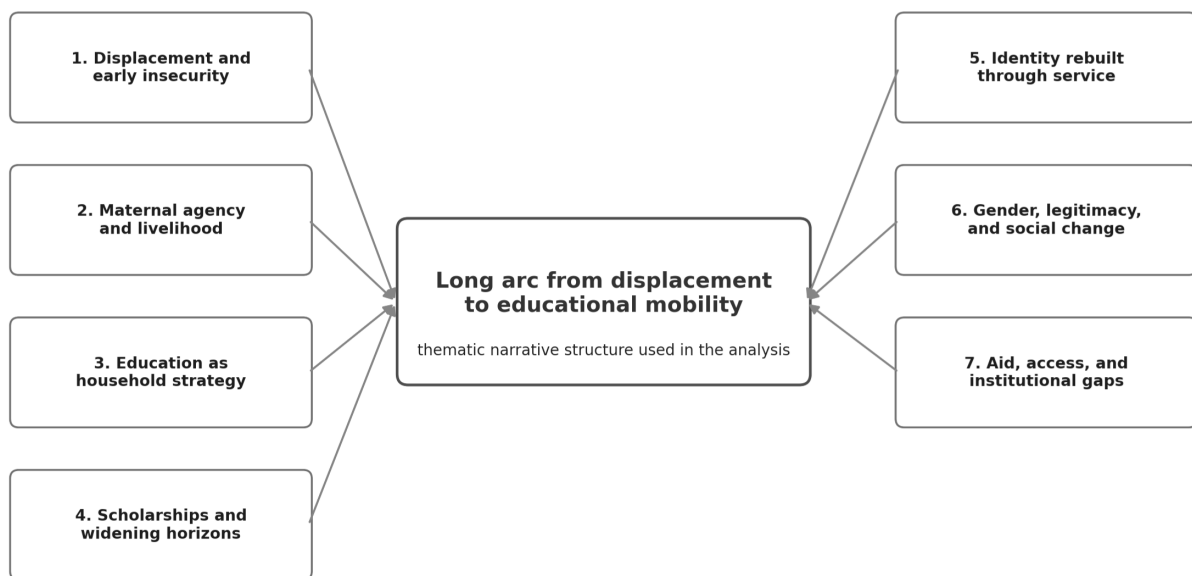


Figure 2. Thematic narrative structure derived from the analysis. The themes are interpreted sequentially and relationally rather than as isolated variables.

3.7. Ethics

The Institutional Review Board of Southwest University, Chongqing, China, gave the ethical approval (approval no. SWU-IRB-2024-0128). The source materials did not present formal documentation, yet the study was conducted according to the key ethical principles: informed consent, voluntary engagement, the right to give up, pseudonyms use, and a trauma-sensitive approach due to the sensitive issues of bereavement, war, displacement, gender discrimination, and similar.

3.8. Limits of the Design

A final methodological point concerns scope. This is a single case and should be read as such. It cannot determine how common this trajectory is among Afghan refugees in Pakistan, nor can it isolate the effect of any single intervention. Its value lies in showing how gender norms, care work, school participation, mentorship, and aid navigation became connected over time within one family's life course (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Transparency framework for evidentiary claims used in the analysis.

Claim or Issue	Primary Evidence	Designation	How Reported in Text
Father's death in anti-Soviet resistance near Jalalabad	Interview testimony	Participant-reported	Presented as family testimony rather than independently verified fact
Mother's prior teaching experience and camp-based educational work	Interview testimony and contextual materials	Primarily participant-reported	Discussed as family narrative with contextual support
School progression and some educational milestones	School certificates and related documents	Document-supported where records existed	Anchored to family-held documents when dates or progression were described
Daughter's Fulbright award	Scholarship documentation and interview testimony	Document-supported	Reported as document-supported in Section 4.4
Claim that she was the first female Afghan refugee from her district to receive the award	Interview testimony only	Participant-reported	Reported as a family claim, not as externally verified comparison

4. Results

The results are presented as a thematic narrative organized around the family's movement from displacement to educational mobility. Direct quotations are retained where they are analytically useful. Because the case spans several decades, the section moves chronologically within each theme while distinguishing between participant-reported experience and claims supported by personal documents.

4.1. Displacement, Widowhood, and the Collapse of Household Security

The family's history was marked by a violent rupture in the early 1980s during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The family says that the father, Ali Jan, was killed as he engaged in anti-Soviet resistance close to Jalalabad. His death immediately transformed the household. In Zahra's recollection, the household became a female-headed family shaped simultaneously by grief, insecurity, and urgent

decisions. Although the father's death is central to the family narrative, the more important analytical issue is what followed: the collapse of income, protection, and everyday kin-based support.

With the further worsening of insecurity, Zahra, together with her two young children, moved to Pakistan and later into a refugee camp in Peshawar. Her narrative of the initial phase of exile gives more stress to the aspect of disorientation as opposed to linear adjustment. The family reported congested shelters, questionable legal status, under-rationing, and the general feeling that a decision was being made at gunpoint. During the interview, Zahra said that the initial days after displacement were the period when everything that people knew has been deprived of at once. The materials of the case therefore produce the notion of widowhood and refugeehood as statuses that appear to be overlapping. The family was not going into exile as a functional family in search of opportunity; the family was going into exile as a grieved unit trying to make ends meet.

It is also revealed in the story that the symbolic recognition failed to translate into material support. The remembrance of the father as a warrior might have had some moral weight within the community; however, it did not ensure a reliable source of livelihood for the widow and the children. This is an analytically significant gap. It demonstrates that honour, sacrifice or political symbolism do not necessarily alleviate the economic load of women in the aftermath of conflict. It is against this background that Zahra would later develop her agency: not through a stand of already-acquired support, but through the failure of it.

4.2. Maternal Agency as Livelihood Strategy and Moral Project

The second theme is about the decision of Zahra to transform her previous experience of education into a strategy of livelihood. She was formerly a teaching assistant who had received secondary education in Kabul. This background was important in the family story since it was one of the limited transferable resources that she could bring into exile. Instead of education being viewed as an abstract value, she perceived it as one of the only possible tools for maintaining dignity and making the home self-sufficient.

The transition to paid or quasi-paid educational employment, however, was socially disputed. The widowhood among the refugee community was associated with modesty, reliance, and retreating into life. The choice Zahra made to teach and to be a spokesperson in favor of schooling of children thus disrupted the gender norms in the area. The memory of community criticism, Zahra wrote: *There was an opinion among people that I was dishonoring the memory of my husband but how could one remain silent and hurt the children more than shame could ever hurt them?* This is a revealing statement in terms of analysis in various ways. First, it demonstrates that her labour was ethically positioned by other people as disgraceful instead of merely impractical. Second, it explains that Zahra herself made silence rather than action among the population seem the more threatening factor. Third, it poses care and dissent side by side. She was not refusing the family duty; she was redefining what it meant to be a responsible mother during displacement.

This agency of the family also implies that the agency of Zahra was managed by culturally intelligible means and not necessarily by social discontinuity. She is said to have

taught in a makeshift school setting that was connected with the provision of humanitarian aid, tutored and secured students in the evening, advised mothers on the importance of literacy, and leveraged her reputation as a teacher to convince families to continue sending girls to school. This is important since the agency in the case was not founded on personal defiance alone. It relied on the credibility, perseverance, and the capability to convert a disputed social position to a respectable social position over time.

The relational character of her work was also clear. She was not merely after wages; she had developed local confidence. She also interfered with fathers and local leaders who opposed the enrollment of girls, mentored younger women teachers and associated educational persistence with the honour of the family in novel ways. In this context, the maternal agency was acting as an adaptation as well as an institution-building. Zahra was establishing her own home order, and she was contributing towards establishing a local moral climate in which the education of girls would be conceivable.

4.3. Education as Household Strategy

Throughout the interviews, education emerged as the central priority of the household but the central long-term approach of the family. The family was said to have made schooling the main focus of daily life, even in a situation where material conditions were insecure. Omar and Laila learned in congested conditions, borrowed books and transformed domestic space into study space using the available resources. These details indicate that educational advancement was created by means of repetitive family labour and not by the sole provision of education.

The career path of Omar is termed as the more institutionally plausible of the two children. His strength in science was discovered by teachers, he was encouraged to compete academically, and even later on, to further his studies at a publicly funded university in Islamabad. Even though not all of the intermediate steps have the same level of documentary basis, the general order is similar in all the available sources: school recognition, encouragement, scholarship support, and subsequent work in the field of education development.

Laila was more openly gendered in her pathway. Her education was a place of conflict, not just due to lack of resources but also due to the fact that their community and extended family limited the scope of what should be done to

a girl. An excerpt that is decisive is the reaction of Zahra to the pressure to marry early and the fact that she might not need more schooling. She recalled: *At fifteen they wanted her to get married. I replied to them I would not lose my life sooner than I would break her possibilities!* Its phrasing is dramatic, and its significance is what it tells us about the stakes of educational decision-making. The case did not involve school availability in the low-conflict case of girls being schooled. It demanded vigorous protest against the diversion of the life of a daughter into early wedding and household captivity.

This opposition was not shown as a nonconformity to life in the community. Rather, Zahra used the credibility she had built as a teacher to negotiate support. Her own education status seems to have eased her the burden to justify the continued education of Laila. In this case the findings are consistent with the conceptual framework: gendered authority was not eliminated, but was re-constructed with the help of maternal reputation, service, and persistence.

4.4. Scholarships, Recognition, and the Widening of Horizons

The family education policy became most evident as school advancement equated to access to scholarships. In different times, both children experienced the benefits of educational assistance that was associated with humanitarian or scholarship institutions, but the path to such opportunities was not straightforward and clear. This is where the case has most clearly complicated the simple accounts of aid impact. There was support but the family had to find it, make sense of it and still be eligible for it.

The subsequent Fulbright award of the daughter takes up a central position in the story and is among the most evident instances of education as qualification and symbolic revelation. The family said that she was the first female Afghan refugee in her district to be awarded. Though that specific difference must be interpreted with caution unless personally verified, the family definitely viewed the scholarship as much more than financial aid. The award, in the words of Laila, was a way of honoring the vision of my mother and opening up the doors that enable girls of my kind to walk in their footsteps. This quote is the key to this article. It finds the meaning of the scholarship in intergenerational labour and not in individual merit. It also states how transna-

tional educational mobility can be viewed as continuity of the moral struggle of a mother.

The subsequent return of the daughter to work with displaced women and children further brings out the symbolic aspect of educational mobility in the case. Education was not the sole determinant of individual upward movement. It was a narration of returning to the social sphere where the family had come out. Equally, in his subsequent education-related humanitarian programming, Omar does not discuss it in terms of professional prestige but as a continuation of family history.

4.5. Rebuilding Identity through Education and Service

One of the recurrent trends of the interviews is the fact that the family never mentioned educational success as a way to avoid refugee identity. They instead repackaged refugee identity into a vocation and civic mission. This is particularly evident in the way Omar remembers the death of the father as re-interpreted by his mother. He said: *My dad was killed in battle. Mom had shown us how to use another weapon books, not bullets.* This quote summarizes the plot of the entire case. It associates bereavement with maternal pedagogy, education, and redirection of ethics in a single sentence. More to the point, it demonstrates that the family did not tell the story of schooling as an unbiased developmental good. Instead, they told it as another way of responding to violence morally.

This was the orientation that influenced subsequent professional identity. Both brothers are said to have jobs in development-related jobs that are related to education, health and displacement. With or without all the professional details being well documented, the analytic point is evident the educational development of the family is pushed towards the sectors serving the refugees and not breaking the connection with them. Zahra, on the other hand, is reported as continuing to be engaged in community education as well as informal mentorship. The change of the household was not just a shift out of precarity. It also represented a shift into novel kinds of social power.

4.6. Gender, Legitimacy, and Social Change

Another example that can be heard in the case is the fact that the maternal agency can change the perceptions

of the community in the long run. At the beginning of her exile, Zahra was reportedly called to task regarding her teaching and public presence as being inappropriate for a widow. However, the story tells us that legitimacy was slowly re-established as the educational performance of her children accrued and as her own contribution to the education of the community became increasingly difficult to ignore. This change is not to be idealized. The loss of patriarchy is not indicated in the case. It demonstrates the potential of recreating respectability with long-term, socially beneficial employment.

The educational development of the daughter took a rather noticeable part in that renegotiation. Her education and subsequent scholarship are introduced as a sign that the education of a girl might bring honour, and not dishonour. This change has a sociological impact in that it implies that the symbolic vocabulary used by neighbours to evaluate the mobility of girls can change depending on the approach of one single household. The mother is later on recalled not just as a war widow survivor, but as someone who made futures by educating. Although that statement may be interpretive, but not verbatim, it defines the communal re-signification that is being outlined throughout the materials.

4.7. Aid, Access, and Institutional Gaps

The final thematic area concerns the family's relationship with aid. The evidence does not support a celebratory account of humanitarian assistance. Aid mattered: the family eventually gained access to schooling, scholarships, and institutional opportunities. However, the interviews consistently suggest that such support was difficult to locate, uneven in practice, and rarely accessible without active effort. As one participant put it, "*Aid did not come to us, we sought it.*" This is analytically significant because it reverses the usual grammar of aid, in which assistance appears to flow automatically to clearly identifiable beneficiaries. In this case, access depended on searching for opportunities, interpreting institutional requirements, and pursuing them persistently over time. The family's experience therefore suggests that aid functioned less as an automatic provision and more as a navigational process shaped by knowledge, persistence, and social mediation.

The mediating impact of social capital and institutional literacy is therefore noted in the case. The continued partici-

pation of Zahra in the schools, local actors and educational paperwork seems to have given the family more opportunities of identifying opportunity when they came. This does not mean that structure can be substituted for agency. On the contrary, it shows the process of exclusion: people who lack time, are illiterate, lack confidence, are not mobile or have no trusted intermediaries can be qualified formally yet practically locked out. The family narrative should not be read as evidence that aid functioned smoothly. Rather, it shows that formal opportunities became meaningful only when they were accompanied by sustained local guidance, persistence, and institutional navigation.

5. Discussion

This case clarifies several issues in the literature on refugee education, gender, and humanitarian inclusion^[9, 10]. Most importantly, it shows that educational mobility in protracted displacement cannot be reduced either to policy provision or to individual determination. The path of the family came up as a result of interaction between the two. Schooling, scholarship, and institutional access were important, but only became consequential in the sense that the household could recognize them, stay long enough to take advantage and resist educational interests to other competing demands. The results are thus in favor of scholarship that sees refugee education as relational and mediated as opposed to being available or not^[10–12].

5.1. Gendered Agency beyond the Language of Vulnerability

A contribution of the case is to the recent research on Afghan refugee women in Pakistan by demonstrating that agency works through care, pedagogy, and moral negotiation instead of spectacular actions of resistance alone. Zahra did not transform the family just through inspirational approach; she did it in an organizational way. She made previous education her livelihood, resisted the temptation of the early marital womanhood to have her daughter educated, was a mentor, and connected educational perseverance with family survival. This aligns with recent Pakistan-based studies that describe Afghan refugee women as active participants in social and economic life even under severe structural constraints. At the same time, the case refines literature by

showing how women's actions may become legible only retrospectively, after children's achievements have converted earlier "improper" behaviour into recognized wisdom^[8, 9].

Intersectionality comes in handy, in this case. Zahra's public role carried significant social costs, not only because she was a woman, but because she was a widowed refugee woman seeking to work and advocate in a setting where public respectability was strongly gendered. The case therefore affirms that gender can never be examined outside the legal precarity, uncertainty of classes, widowhood and the issue of taking care of others. It also warns of the need to generalize all women refugees into one analytical group. The education that Zahra had received in her previous school provided her with a tool that many others might well have lacked, despite the fact that displacement drastically limited her choices. Her agency was actual, but it was carried out and partly due to a particular array of social positions^[13].

5.2. Education as More Than Service Delivery

The results also support a significant finding in research on refugee education: schooling is a material support, a symbolic recognition, and a future-making. To this family, education was a way of offering pathways to qualifications and jobs, and it was also a language of morality by which loss would be redefined. This transformative power is well captured by Omar when he says books, not bullets. The family made bereavement into an ethic of nonviolent struggle and service to the community through education. This is not to say that the family somehow overcame the trauma by going to school alone. It implies that education contributed to organizing a significant answer to it^[10, 12].

The path of the daughter is particularly significant in considering the issue of gender and mobility. The research on the Afghan refugee girls in Pakistan has demonstrated that formal access usually accompanies practical exclusion particularly when domestic labour, device ownership, transport, or community rules intervene^[5-7]. The current case is an affirmation of that literature, although it provides time. The development of Laila did not only rely on admission to school or scholarship opportunities but on decades of maternal activism, built up legitimacy, and the ability to hold off the untimely termination of her education process. The post-process scholarship can then not be interpreted as an independent intervention. It was the top of a wave of household

labour which was to run much farther^[5-7].

5.3. What the Case Suggests About Aid

The third contribution is related to humanitarian aid and educational aid. Opportunities associated with aid and scholarship systems were evidently beneficial to the family. However, the case is rather adamant that aid itself was somehow the source of transformation. The testimony of participants, on the contrary, indicates that the help was biased, hard to navigate, and unevenly provided. The participant's statement, 'Aid did not come to us, we sought it,' captures how access functioned as a navigational process. This echoes broader criticisms of humanitarian systems, which emphasize formal coverage to the detriment of more emphasis on brokerage, information asymmetry, and concealed participation costs^[3, 4, 6].

The case hence justifies a less idealistic view of aid effectiveness. The most important things about the programmes are whether they can be found, culturally comprehensible and administratively navigable by the neediest^[3, 4, 6]. In opaque application systems, or where women are restricted in their movements, both formal inclusion and practical exclusion can exist^[3, 4, 6]. Zahra was persistent, literate, and possessing social status, and bridged that gap to her own household. However, more significantly, how about the families that lack such capacities in terms of policy. It is argued in the current instance that the major portion of educational inequality might not be as a result of lack of programmes but rather unequal ability to access them^[3, 4, 6].

5.4. Transnational Opportunity Structures and the Politics of Mobility

Another contribution made by the article to the debate on transnationalism is its demonstration of how the structures of cross-border opportunities are made significant in the ordinary life^[14]. The subsequent mobility of the daughter with a Fulbright scholarship was easily interpreted as an international success story unrelated to life at camp. The case indicates the contrary. Very local labour, the teaching of a mother, negotiation with kin, long-term persistence in schools, and the capacity to retrospectively interpret institutions, formed the basis of transnational opportunity. This helps to sustain a perspective of transnationalism as not being

free movement but as a socially mediated passage of several gatekeeping systems^[14].

Meanwhile, the case demonstrates that mobility does not always mean that refugee identity is not attached. The subsequent inclination of both children towards development and work in the sphere of displacements indicates that access to transnational education can reinforce, instead of obliterating, the commitments to the sphere of serving refugees^[10, 14]. This aspect makes the storytelling about scholarship mobility a complex one where it is solely seen as assimilation into elite global networks. Mobility created a sense of return, re-engagement, and a new feeling of responsibility in this family.

5.5. Narrative, Temporality, and the Value of the Case Study

In terms of methodology, the study demonstrates the contribution a narrative single-case design can make to the research on the education of refugees. The survey and policy research cannot be done away with to gain insight into scale, enrollment, and system-level barriers. They usually, however, downplay the manner in which choices compound over time within households. The current case brings into view the order in which the educational background, widowhood, social criticism, local legitimacy, institutional mentorship, and access to scholarships become interrelated. The results did not come out as independent variables. They came out as a life course^[15, 16]. Because the narrative involved memories of war, bereavement, displacement, and gendered exclusion, a trauma-informed and reflexive approach was also important to reduce harm and avoid presenting participants only through vulnerability or heroic exceptionality^[17, 18].

Such a view of time is particularly helpful in explaining why some turning points were important^[19]. It was not a one-time decision when the mother decided to go to work, when she defended her daughter to continue her education in school and when the family went in search of scholarship opportunities. The horizon of one was reconfigured that of the other. Narrative inquiry thus does not just render the article readable, but also enables the analysis to reflect causally relevant sequences without the pretence of establishing universal laws^[20].

These implications are also consistent with recent studies on refugee girls' access to higher education^[21], UNHCR's

work on forcibly displaced women in higher education^[22], and UNICEF guidance on including refugee learners in national education systems^[23]. Evidence from Balochistan further links Afghan refugee student dropout to financial hardship, discrimination, restrictive cultural norms, gender roles, and weak institutional support^[24]. Broader research on Afghan refugee women's human security^[25], key tensions in refugee education^[26], language learning and agency among refugee-background women^[27], and educational rupture and loneliness among refugee and asylum-seeking people^[28] reinforces the need to design refugee education access as a mediated social process rather than a purely administrative opening.

5.6. Limits and Implications

The discussion must also remain careful about scope. A single family's success cannot stand in for the experience of Afghan refugees in Pakistan more broadly. The family might have been abnormally strong, with the mother having an educational background and the development of positive role models. Also, there is the possibility that retrospective narration cleanses contradictions, failures and ambivalence that were more apparent in the situation. These are the reasons why the case should be perceived as illustrative but not representative.

Nevertheless, the research has some real-world use. To begin with, the access mediators, namely, trusted teachers, female community teachers, documentation assistance, and low-friction guidance on accessing scholarship avenues, should be given much more attention through the refugee-education policy^[3, 6, 7]. Second, gender-sensitive programming should treat mothers and female caregivers not only as dependents or beneficiaries but as educational actors whose decisions can shape entire household trajectories^[8, 9]. Third, higher-education initiatives for refugees should be designed with the recognition that eligibility alone is insufficient. Navigation support is not auxiliary to access; it is part of access^[3, 6].

Taken together, the findings suggest that the long arc from displacement to educational mobility is built through both structure and struggle. Formal programmes create openings, but households still do the work of turning those openings into futures. In this case, that work was led by a widowed mother who redefined what care, respectability, and ambition could mean under protracted exile.

6. Conclusions

This paper has discussed how a single Afghan refugee family in Pakistan transitioned from acute displacement to educational and professional mobility by interacting with maternal agency, educational persistence, and disproportionate institutional opportunities. As depicted in the case, education was not just a service provided to this household, but a strategy, an ethic, and a means of restoring social purpose following loss. The role of Zahra was key: she turned the previous schooling into a livelihood, justified the educational course of her daughter, promoted herself through the aid system and provided the conditions under which her children could get higher education and further professional employment.

The results indicate three general lessons. To begin with, the agency of refugee women is more often an organizational and relational than a dramatic form; it can be teaching, bargaining, advocacy, and patient institution-building. Second, the availability of programmes is not the only factor that influences educational mobility in displacement. It is also determined by whether households are able to recognize, decode and maintain access to opportunities. Third, transnational scholarships and assistance only make a transformative change when linked to local labour, mentorship and socially negotiated legitimacy.

The article does not purport that this family is the complete representation of the Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Nor does it claim that a successful path is a demonstration of effective aid mechanisms. Instead, it provides an analytically vivid description of how gender, displacement, and education might be experienced over a period of time in a single household. Future studies can use such comparisons and contrasts to understand which mechanisms are common to all cases and which are more extraordinary. Protracted exile means that access is mediated at all times, and such households as that of Zahra demonstrate the ability and the price of carrying said mediation with them.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.I. and M.A. (Muhammad Arif); methodology, A.I.; software, A.I.; validation, A.I., M.A. (Muhammad Aqib) and M.A. (Muhammad Arif); formal analysis, A.I.; investigation, A.I.; resources, M.A. (Muhammad Arif); data curation, A.I.; writing—original draft preparation,

A.I.; writing—review and editing, A.I., M.A. (Muhammad Aqib) and M.A. (Muhammad Arif); visualization, A.I.; supervision, M.A. (Muhammad Arif); project administration, M.A. (Muhammad Arif); funding acquisition, M.A. (Muhammad Arif). All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

No external financing was granted for this research.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Southwest University, Chongqing, China (approval no. SWU-IRB-2024-0128).

Informed Consent Statement

All the participants of the study were informed and gave consent before the process of interview recording occurred.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data used to prepare this article are not publicly available due to the possible identity of personal stories and family reports. The authors can regard limited access as ethically safeguarded.

Acknowledgments

The authors credit the family involved in the research for sharing their experiences and the teachers and other community members who were supportive enough to inform the family's educational process.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

The authors declare that AI-assisted language editing was used solely to improve the clarity and quality of English in the manuscript. Specifically, Wordtune was used for refin-

ing language and phrasing. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of the research content. All intellectual contributions and original work remain solely that of the authors.

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