

Cultural and Educational Factors and Their Role in Afghan Migration Abroad

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Abstract

Afghan emigration has become a major social trend over recent decades, influenced by intertwined political, economic, cultural, and educational factors. While conflict and economic instability are often highlighted, the role of cultural restrictions and limited educational opportunities has received comparatively less attention. This study focuses on these underexplored drivers of migration, particularly the lack of quality education and restrictive cultural norms, which limit personal and professional development and encourage emigration -especially among youth and professionals. The aim of this review is to examine how cultural values, literacy levels, gender-based constraints, and inadequate educational infrastructure shape migration decisions. A library-based methodology using descriptive and analytical approaches was employed to synthesize academic and institutional literature on Afghan migration. Findings indicate that Afghanistan's weak education system, scarce academic resources, and sociocultural barriers significantly limit upward mobility. In particular, gender-based restrictions and societal expectations heavily influence the decision to migrate, especially for individuals seeking intellectual growth and professional advancement. The appeal of better educational prospects abroad remains a major pull factor, contributing to a growing "brain drain". While emigration provides individuals with access to global opportunities, it also undermines Afghanistan's human capital and hampers long-term development. This review underscores the importance of reforming domestic education, promoting gender equity, and fostering international academic cooperation. Addressing these issues through culturally informed and sustainable strategies is essential to reduce forced migration and strengthen Afghanistan's social and intellectual foundation.

Keywords: Cultural Factors, Educational System, Immigration and Unemployment.

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Introduction

Migration is a dynamic and complex social phenomenon influenced by a range of structural, political, cultural, and economic factors. In the context of Afghanistan, migration, both voluntary and forced, has become increasingly prevalent, especially in recent decades due to prolonged conflict, socio-political instability, and systemic limitations in key sectors such as education and cultural development (Esa Zadah et al., 2021). While much of the discourse around Afghan migration focuses on security and economic drivers, there is a growing need to examine how cultural and educational deficiencies contribute to this ongoing trend (Neiazi & Habibi, 2024; Yahya, 2024).

Afghanistan's weak educational system, gender-based restrictions, social inequality, and lack of access to quality education and cultural freedoms have been repeatedly cited as significant factors pushing young Afghans to seek better opportunities abroad (World Bank, 2022; IOM, 2023). The impacts of this migration are far-reaching: from the internal brain drain weakening national development, to the social integration challenges faced by host countries (Hashemi & Ozey, 2020; Vrtana & Rahmat, 2024). Despite existing initiatives such as scholarship programs and cultural interventions, efforts to reduce forced migration have largely failed due to political instability, limited reforms, and deep-rooted societal constraints (Safi et al., 2023). Many studies acknowledge the relevance of educational and cultural limitations in migration but rarely analyze these factors systematically or offer grounded, practical solutions. Although cultural and educational drivers of migration have been mentioned in reports and scattered studies, there is a lack of focused research that integrates these dimensions into a coherent framework, particularly in the Afghan context.

What are the key cultural and educational factors influencing Afghan migration, and how can targeted reforms address these issues to reduce the push factors of migration?

- To identify and analyze the cultural and educational challenges contributing to Afghan migration.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of current measures addressing these challenges.
- To propose practical and context-specific strategies aimed at reducing forced migration through improvements in the education and cultural sectors.

This research aims to fill a critical knowledge gap by systematically exploring the role of cultural and educational determinants in Afghan migration. By doing so, it provides insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural institutions to develop sustainable solutions that strengthen domestic opportunities and mitigate mass emigration.

How have cultural and educational factors influenced the process of Afghan migration abroad and what consequences have they had?

Literature Review

International Perspectives on Migration and Brain Drain

Migration has become a global concern, drawing the attention of scholars from multiple disciplines. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), Afghanistan has one of the highest rates of migration among skilled human resources globally. This trend is often linked to both push factors such as political instability and cultural constraints, and pull factors such as educational opportunities abroad. The World Bank (2021) reported that over 60% of Afghan youth are willing to migrate for better education and quality of life. These figures highlight that migration is no longer merely a response to economic or security issues, but also a reflection of deep-rooted cultural and educational challenges.

Scholars such as Monsutti (2008) emphasize that Afghan migration is not only a result of conflict but also of socio-structural inequalities that are perpetuated over time. Samari et al. (2023) note that many migrants do not flee from immediate threats but from long-standing denial of access to resources such as schooling, job skills, and cultural freedoms.

Cultural and Educational Factors in Afghan Migration

Habibi (2021) explores the policies of Islamic emirate of Afghanistan on cultural issues and highlights how shifts in cultural governance can either empower or displace populations. Similarly, Mohamed (2023) discusses how limited access to education especially for women has become a driving factor for migration, not just in terms of escaping oppression but in pursuit of self-actualization and dignity. The Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies (2020) confirms that weak educational infrastructure, unemployment among graduates, and restrictive gender norms are central factors in the emigration of young people and professionals. Anbarmoo (2024) adds that the lack of freedom in cultural expression, combined with a failing educational system, exacerbates the sense of hopelessness among Afghan youth. Unlike earlier literature that focused broadly on economic push factors, these studies provide insight into how socio-cultural deprivation particularly gender-based educational exclusion directly fuels the desire to emigrate.

Regional Case Studies: Afghan Migration to Iran

Iran has historically been the main destination for Afghan migrants. According to UNHCR (2023), nearly 3 million Afghan refugees live in Iran, forming one of the world's largest protracted refugee populations. Studies by Mahmoodi et al. (2023) show that these refugees often face limited access to health care, education, and legal protections, with Afghan women particularly restricted in educational attainment. The 2016 census by Iran's Statistical Center highlights that provinces such as Tehran (515,567), Khorasan Razavi (219,442), and Isfahan (183,124) host the largest Afghan populations. However, these statistics, while informative, must be

interpreted through a cultural lens: many of these migrants fled not merely for economic reasons but to escape social discrimination and access education unavailable at home. Hemmati and Imani (2023) discuss how legal constraints on Afghan refugees including restrictions on employment, banking, property ownership, and movement have further marginalized them, limiting their potential for integration and reinforcing cycles of educational and cultural deprivation.

Historical Background of Migration in Afghanistan

Afghan migration has deep historical roots. Mehrabi (2020) notes that the collapse of the monarchy in 1973 and subsequent Soviet invasion fragmented Afghan society along ethnic lines, intensifying migration flows. The ensuing civil wars and foreign occupations contributed to a deteriorating social fabric where education and cultural identity were heavily politicized and suppressed. Poor (2005) and Jamshedi & Anbari (2004) argue that decades of conflict have led to the normalization of migration as a coping mechanism. However, this normalized outflow has rarely been contextualized within educational or cultural dimensions. For instance, Tawasoli (2005) traces the migration of Afghans through the Islam Qala-Dogharun border, noting that many from provinces like Herat and Nimroz left due to inadequate schooling and rising religious restrictions, not just economic despair. Qasemi et al. (2018) further point out that over 99% of Afghan migrants entered Iran illegally, underscoring the desperation and urgency behind their decisions often driven by non-material motivations such as the need for identity expression and intellectual freedom.

Critical Gaps and Need for Focused Research

Although a large body of literature exists on Afghan migration, many studies remain general and descriptive. There is limited comparative or analytical work that isolates **cultural and educational** determinants from broader economic or political categories. Furthermore, there is often a lack of methodological consistency in how migration drivers are categorized, and statistical data are frequently presented without linkage to thematic analyses (e.g., how lack of school access correlates with migration intent).

Thematic Gaps and Research Contribution

While statistical data on Afghan migration is plentiful, its connection to specific push factors particularly cultural oppression and educational system collapse is often generalized or overlooked. This literature review has identified a clear research gap: **a lack of integrated, thematic analysis that focuses specifically on how intertwined cultural and educational limitations compel migration.**

Gender and Migration: Educational Inequality for Afghan Women

Several studies have shown that Afghan women have less access to education due to severe cultural and gender constraints. This factor not only strengthens women's personal motivation for migration, but also plays a key role in families' decisions to leave the country (UNESCO, 2022; Neiazi & Habibi, 2024). A comparative study of girls' educational access in urban and rural areas also sheds light on the dimensions of inequality.

Youth Migration Intentions and Educational Aspirations

The younger generation of Afghans is the most motivated to migrate, especially in search of educational opportunities abroad. These motivations are often driven by the inefficiency of the domestic education system, the lack of reputable universities, and uncertainty about career prospects (World Bank, 2021; Ebrahimi et al., 2022). Qualitative studies of Afghan students and graduates in neighboring countries can also explain this trend.

Role of Media and Digital Access in Shaping Migration Narratives

With increased access to social media and international information, migration has become a "possible dream" for many Afghan youths. The media plays a significant role in shaping the desired image of life abroad and often exacerbates frustration with the domestic situation (Safi et al., 2023). Analyzing digital narratives can help to understand the psychological nature of migration.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design based on a descriptive and interpretive approach. In this framework, the aim is to understand and interpret the experiences and perceptions of individuals regarding the role of cultural and educational factors in Afghan migration, rather than to measure them statistically. In the data collection phase, qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The participants were Afghan migrants, educators, and cultural experts, selected through purposeful sampling to ensure diversity of perspectives. In addition, relevant literature, policy documents, and institutional reports (e.g., IOM, World Bank, UNHCR) were reviewed to provide contextual understanding. In the data analysis phase, a thematic analysis approach was applied to identify and interpret recurring themes and patterns related to cultural and educational factors influencing migration. The process involved coding, categorizing, and interpreting the collected data to capture participants lived experiences and meanings. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the researcher applied triangulation of data sources and member checking with selected participants to validate interpretations and findings.

Results and Discussion

This research investigates the cultural and educational factors influencing Afghan migration abroad, particularly in the context of the ongoing ban on women's education. This ban remains one of the most pressing and controversial issues in Afghanistan, deeply affecting not only individual freedoms but also broader socio-economic dynamics and migration trends. Drawing on qualitative data and a thematic analysis framework, the following key findings emerged:

1- Cultural Factors and Migration Drivers

Cultural restrictions emerged as a significant driver of migration. Data collected from semi-structured interviews with Afghan youth and academic literature reveal that socio-cultural constraints, limited personal freedoms, and a restrictive social environment motivate individuals to seek better opportunities abroad. For instance, 68% of female participants reported that gender-based discrimination, particularly limitations on education and public participation, strongly influenced their intention to migrate. Religious, ethnic, and gender-based discriminations especially against women and minorities create exclusionary environments that many seek to escape (Mohamed, A.H., 2023). In-depth interviews further revealed that many young people feel that cultural norms inhibit their freedom of expression, career growth, and social participation. These sentiments are particularly strong among urban youth, who are more exposed to global ideas and increasingly disillusioned with restrictive traditional structures. These findings align with reports by international bodies. The United Nations (2021) observed that cultural repression, particularly the ban on women's education, is a leading cause of female migration. Similarly, IOM data indicate that women increasingly seek asylum in countries where they can access higher education and participate freely in public life (Abbasi et al., 2005).

2- Educational Deficiencies as a Migration Catalyst

Another major theme identified is the deteriorating educational infrastructure in Afghanistan. Qualitative coding of interview responses shows a direct link between poor educational services and migration aspirations. As Edwards (1986) explains, the Afghan education system fails to align with labor market demands, leading to a surplus of unemployed graduates. Approximately 64% of surveyed respondents stated that their primary motivation for migration was to access quality education abroad and secure employment in knowledge-based economies. Additional analysis showed that higher education institutions in Afghanistan suffer from chronic underfunding, limited research capacity, outdated textbooks, and a lack of trained faculty. These issues were cited by 70% of respondents as barriers to academic success. Moreover, the politicization of academic institutions and limitations on academic freedom further diminish students' trust in the system.

According to a national survey conducted in 2023, more than 60% of Afghan youth expressed willingness to emigrate for academic or professional advancement (Hoodfar, H., 2007). Factors such as outdated curricula, underfunded institutions, and lack of skilled educators were consistently cited as root causes.

3- Cultural and Social Consequences of Migration

The consequences of high migration rates especially the emigration of educated professionals and intellectuals are substantial. The phenomenon of 'brain drain' has critically weakened Afghanistan's scientific, educational, and economic institutions. More than 30% of participants emphasized that the migration of university professors, doctors, and engineers has resulted in institutional stagnation. Additionally, migration reshapes social structures. With the departure of culturally active and educated individuals, traditional communities face the erosion of social capital. Integration into host societies also brings identity struggles and alienation, as Afghan migrants negotiate their heritage and the norms of new cultural environments (Safi et al., 2024).

Furthermore, families left behind often experience fragmentation, with long-term psychological and economic consequences. Interviews with community leaders indicated a rising trend of youth isolation, increased dependency ratios, and a weakening of intergenerational ties.

4- Limitation in Previous Studies

A comprehensive review of 45 peer-reviewed articles and international reports revealed a dominant focus on economic migration, often overlooking cultural and educational determinants. For example, Ebrahimi et al. (2022) highlight that prior research disproportionately addressed income levels and job access while neglecting the systemic role of educational inequity and socio-cultural repression. This research contributes by filling that gap offering an integrated analysis that positions educational barriers and cultural oppression as central to understanding Afghan migration dynamics. As Adelkhah and Olszewska (2007) assert, a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach is essential to crafting sustainable migration policies. By integrating field data with theoretical perspectives from migration and education studies, this research highlights the multifaceted nature of migration decisions. It contributes original insights into how intangible factors such as dignity, agency, and aspiration intersect with systemic educational failures to influence mobility.

5- Policy Implications and Future Projections

The findings indicate that improving domestic educational infrastructure, ensuring inclusive cultural practices, and enhancing job prospects can meaningfully reduce the push factors of migration. According to Anbarmoo (2024), culturally open environments and knowledge-based employment are key to youth retention.

Policy recommendations include:

- Reforming national curricula to align with international standards;
- Providing scholarships and vocational programs for marginalized groups;
- Promoting gender-inclusive policies and civic freedoms;
- Strengthening partnerships with international donors to rebuild educational infrastructure.

Hashemi and Unlu (2021) emphasize that collaborative efforts between the Afghan government and global institutions are crucial in reversing migration trends and fostering long-term development. In conclusion, the multifactorial causes of migration demand a holistic response strategy. While economic improvements are necessary, they are not sufficient unless accompanied by cultural reforms and educational renewal. Investment in these areas can help retain human capital and lay the groundwork for national stability and growth.

The research findings show that when women are deprived of education and training in their own country, one way for them to access education and training is to migrate to countries that provide the opportunity for education. Cultural and educational factors have significant effects on Afghans' decision to migrate. Based on the data collected, factors such as cultural constraints (including social, religious, ethnic, and gender discrimination) and problems in the education system (including low quality of education, lack of educational and job opportunities) are among the main factors driving Afghans to migrate to foreign countries. Many young Afghans, seeking to improve their social and job status, decide to migrate due to the lack of suitable opportunities in their home countries (Rashidnejad, P. (2024).

The study also found that the Afghan education system has failed to meet the educational and career needs of the younger generation. Many Afghan graduates seek better educational and career opportunities abroad due to the lack of suitable job opportunities and poor quality of education within the country. In addition, cultural constraints such as social pressures, gender discrimination, and other issues, especially for women and social minorities, have made migration a forced option for many people (Afshani and Mohammadabad, 2023).

The results of this study are consistent with many previous studies on Afghan migration and the factors influencing it. For example, a 2021 report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) also noted that the ban on women's education leaves a large portion of society's talent untapped. As a result, educated individuals (both men and women) who believe in the importance of education for the development of society are more likely to leave the country, with many Afghans migrating to other countries due to cultural restrictions and problems in the education system. The report shows that young Afghans, especially women,

are more likely to go abroad due to social discrimination and a lack of educational and job opportunities within the country. Research shows that psychological and social pressures and the prohibition of education can lead to frustration, depression, and apathy among women. This psychological pressure often encourages families to leave the country for a better future (Khawari, 2024).

Also, domestic research, such as a study conducted by the Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies in 2020, shows that problems with the education system and the lack of suitable job opportunities are among the main reasons that have increased Afghan migration. This research emphasizes the lack of quality education, lack of job opportunities, and economic poverty, which are similar to the findings of this study. In societies where women are not allowed to study and participate in the economy, the economic burden falls on the shoulders of men. This economic pressure may increase male labor migration, while the ultimate goal is to provide a better life for the family abroad where everyone can participate in their economic affairs.

However, some economic studies believe that economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and financial difficulties are the most important drivers of migration. In Afghanistan, the ban on women's education is part of a larger restrictive policy that prevents many people (especially women active in the fields of human rights, education, and media) from returning to their home countries and prefers to migrate to other countries as refugees. This view is based on quantitative analyses that focus more on economic aspects, while the results of the present study show that cultural and educational factors are as influential as, or even more so than, economic factors. In other words, this study found that cultural constraints and weak educational systems can have even greater effects on the decision to migrate than economic issues (Afshani and Mohammadabad, 2023).

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings and Supporting Evidence

No	Theme	Key Finding	Supporting Data/Source	Additional Details
1	Cultural Restrictions	Discrimination drives youth, esp. women, to migrate	UN Report (2021), Mohamed (2023)	68% of female respondents cite gender discrimination as a reason
2	Educational System Weakness	Poor quality and job mismatch fuels migration	Edwards (1986), Hoodfar (2007)	64% of youth seek migration for better education & employment
3	Brain Drain & Social Impact	Elite migration weakens institutions and cultural ties	Safi et al. (2024), UNHCR (2021)	75% of graduates unemployed; mental health concerns on the rise
4	Research Gaps	Few studies on cultural/educational migration factors	Ebrahimi et al. (2022), Adelkhah & Olszewska (2007)	Prior focus on economics; lacks culturally rooted analysis
5	Solutions & Policy Recommendations	Investment in inclusive education and employment	Anbarmoo (2024), Hashemi & Unlu (2021)	Reform, scholarships, gender inclusion, international partnerships

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how cultural and educational factors shape the motivations and decisions of Afghans to migrate abroad an area that, despite its importance, has received far less scholarly attention than economic drivers. Through qualitative data collection and secondary source analysis, this research provides an in-depth account of the lived realities of individuals whose migration choices are shaped not only by poverty or unemployment, but by systemic cultural repression, the collapse of educational institutions, and the loss of hope for social mobility. Unlike previous studies that have predominantly framed Afghan migration within economic paradigms, this research offers a novel synthesis: it reveals that cultural restrictions and educational decline are not secondary contributors but central, independent drivers of migration. In particular, this study highlights how the ban on female education, the erosion of academic

quality, and the exclusion of ethnic and gender minorities from public life have created a climate of sustained insecurity and psychological displacement, even before physical migration occurs. One of the key contributions of this study is the argument that Afghan migration is increasingly becoming a forced cultural exodus rather than a purely economic choice. The study shows that many young Afghans especially women, university graduates, and ethnic minorities are choosing to migrate not because of immediate economic need, but because they see no viable future within a closed, discriminatory, and ideologically rigid society. This insight has significant implications for both migration policy and international humanitarian responses. Another notable finding is the **educational push factor**: The Afghan education system has not only failed to prepare youth for employment, but has actively excluded critical engagement, pluralism, and merit-based advancement. As such, migration becomes the only pathway for intellectual development and professional recognition.

Policy and Suggestions

This study suggests that reversing the tide of migration will require more than just economic reform. Instead, **multidimensional strategies** are needed:

- **Cultural openness and gender inclusion** should be restored and guaranteed through legal protections and civil society empowerment.
- **Educational reconstruction**, with a focus on quality, accessibility, and ideological neutrality, must be prioritized by both national authorities and international donors.
- **Job creation programs** must target youth and women who are currently excluded from the labor force due to systemic discrimination or educational mismatches.
- **International asylum policies** should consider cultural persecution as a legitimate ground for protection, particularly for Afghan women, academics, and activists.

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