



**A Glance at Educational Conditions of
Afghan Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and
Immigrants in Iran**



SEP 2022

ORGANIZATION FOR DEFENDING VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

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Foreword

The Organization for Defending Victims of Violence (ODVV) is a non-governmental, non-political, and non-profit organization in special consultative status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) and was established in 1988 in Tehran. Due to its membership in a number of international coalitions and networks – including International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) – and in line with its main mission, this organization has always strived to include all groups of society in its working agenda, without discrimination and away from political environments. Therefore, it has offered support to all such groups, including Afghan asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. In order to achieve this goal, the organization has conducted various projects over the past years, both independently and within the framework of numerous bilateral and trilateral agreements, to support such groups.

To help vulnerable groups, and to shed more light on the situation of these groups, the ODVV is planning an expert study of conditions that govern Afghan asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in Iran. The main goal is to come up with a complete analysis of their situation in order to provide such groups with better and more effective support.

The first issue of this analytical booklet was dedicated to general situation of Afghan asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in Iran and their living conditions. The second issue focuses on a comprehensive review on their educational conditions in Iran.

Introduction

Since the independence of Afghanistan up to the present time, the country has rarely seen peace. These wars as well as civil and foreign conflicts have stymied the development of the country's bureaucratic and administrative systems. This problem has been plaguing all sectors of the Afghan society, including education. As a result, this country has the highest illiteracy rate in the world and only less than 29 percent of its population older than 15 years old can read and write. In addition, gender inequality in the education system has barred girls from pursuing education. Therefore, the number of educated girls is roughly half of the boys, and that ratio has even decreased further since the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan. At the same time, despite all structural and imposed problems (e.g., the US sanctions against Iran) facing the Islamic Republic of Iran, not only suitable conditions have been provided for education of all Afghan children but also literacy classes have been organized for Afghan adults, as a result of which the literacy rate among them has increased significantly. This is why the second and third generations of Afghans born in Iran are more educated and less illiterate than their first generation. In the meantime, the rate of illiteracy is lower among those Afghans who have lived longer in Iran compared to those who have lived here for a shorter period of time (Mahmoudian, 2016: 56).

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The status of elementary and secondary education of Afghan nationals in Iran

The influx of Afghan asylum seekers toward Iran has had many positive outcomes, especially for Afghan girls. This comes despite the fact that providing all foreign nationals in Iran with education services has had a huge financial burden on the government: about 9,850,000 Rials (roughly 33 US dollars) per every student (ECO Iran, 2019).

Official figures put the number of foreign nationals studying in Iran at 318,844 in 2013. However, after Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei decree in 2015 calling for the registration of all foreign children in Iranian schools regardless of their residence status, that figure

greatly increased. Following that decree, the government indicated its readiness to accommodate Afghan children in Iranian schools. In October the same year, a large number of Afghan children who were previously unable to study in Iranian public schools, were registered and started to study along with their Iranian classmates. According to reports released in 2015, a total of 46,000 Afghan children without identity documents officially registered to study in Iranian schools. The figure increased to about 77,000 in 2016.

Starting from the third year after the implementation of this plan began, several problems came to the surface until the Interior Ministry's Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA) issued a circular. According to that circular, only two groups of foreign children could register at government-run schools:

- The first group included those students who had received educational support slip (blue card) during previous years, subject to the presentation of the report card of the academic year 2020-2021.¹

¹ According to the educational circular issued by the Ministry of Education, students holding educational support slip/blue card issued for the Iranian academic year (1400-1401) can enrol in school with the same blue card. After enrolment, they need to renew the blue card and receive a new one for the current Iranian year (1401-1402), starting from 23 October 2022. In order to get an appointment, they should visit “kanoonnobat.ir” website and get an appointment to receive the current year's blue card.

- And the second group included those first-grade students aged 6 to 8 years old who have participated in the “Recount Plan”.²

That circular led to other problems. As a result of that circular, those students who have not officially registered in Iranian schools during the previous year or do not carry a general census certificate (Recount Plan) will face problems for school registration in the year 2022.

However, according to figures produced by Iran's Education Ministry, out of 500,080 Afghan and Iraqi children who had registered in Iranian elementary and secondary schools during the academic year 2020-2021, a total of 185,000 do not have identity documents (UN Refugee Agency Website in Tehran-IRAN).

Given this high number of foreign students and their per capita expenses, the country is clearly spending a lot of money on them so, the country needs additional humanitarian support to ensure education and other services to refugees are maintained. It must be noted that such international organizations as the UN Refugee Agency cover only a small fraction of that cost. This issue has been also emphasized by UNHCR that: “UNHCR remains concerned that without additional global support for refugee operations in Iran, our ability to continue

² This refers to general census of Afghan nationals without identity papers who live in Iran. those who took part in this census will be given temporary six-month residency permit, waiting for the government to make a decision when those permits expire.

supporting the government in providing education to Afghan children will be drastically affected”.

In Iran, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR) contributes financially to the construction of schools in areas with a high population of refugees. From 2015 to 2019, this agency supported the co-funded-with-the-government construction of 53 school buildings in Iran to provide equal educational opportunities for both Iranian students and those refugee children, who lacked identity documents. Of course, students have to pay partial tuition fees in many such schools.

Despite the aforesaid financial problems, the Iranian government is well aware that lack of education for refugees could face the country with direct and indirect challenges. On the other hand, education plans will increase the possibility of sustainable repatriation of refugees to their countries and even if they stayed in Iran, they would be more beneficial to the country. When children attend classes, they not only receive necessary education, but can also avail themselves of various forms of physical support. On the other hand, their regular education will be effective in preventing forced child labor while protecting them against gender-based violence or sexual harassment. Meanwhile, in case of proper planning, they will be certainly influenced by the culture of the host country. These issues have been handled differently at different junctures due to lack of adequate awareness or other issues, and the Iranian

government, unfortunately, has not pursued a coherent and continuous policy in this regard. Perhaps a reason was that previous Iranian administrations considered the residence of Afghan refugees in the country as a temporary plan. Therefore, while calling off some mechanisms that could help assimilate them in the Iranian society, they just thought about providing conditions for them to go back to their own countries.

On the other hand, since Iran was dealing with a burgeoning population, and faced with such conditions as war and financial constraints, the country could not provide education for all foreign nationals in a proper manner. Even now, unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran and insignificant aid offered by international organizations compared to immense educational needs of foreign nationals, have caused problems for provision of adequate services in this field.

Although, the educational and cultural status of refugees in the Iranian society have greatly improved with the help of people, media or schools, but in the absence of necessary mechanisms, wanted or not, has led to the deprivation of some Afghan nationals living in Iran from proper primary and higher education which has various consequences as follows:

1. Although the current generation of Afghan nationals in Iran enjoy better educational conditions compared to their predecessors, problems facing them have forced them to find a way out of their current situation. The high number

of refugee's resettlement requests, the number of detainees who intended to illegally cross Iran or Turkey to Europe, or the number of cases who managed to reach the borders of Europe, especially Germany, are proof of this claim.

2. If Afghan refugee children were not able to continue education, they would pour into the unofficial labor market. The existence of tough employment laws (four job categories authorized for refugees) and the employment problems that the Iranian society itself is struggling with, leave them with no other choice but to undertake black or illegal jobs. Many Afghan children end up on the streets or in the construction sector. In the long run, lack of education for children will lead to many social maladies whose remedy would entail an even higher cost. On the other hand, considering the current situation in Afghanistan, there is no hope for these people to return to their own country.



The status of higher education for Afghan nationals in Iran

Providing higher education for Afghan nationals will certainly lead to finding sustainable solution for their residence in Iran or their repatriation to their own or a third country. Based on the available figures, there are currently 40,000 Afghan students in Iranian universities while many Afghan elites have also been graduated in Iran.

At the present time, refugees in Iran can have access to higher education after obtaining a passport (from Afghanistan Embassy or Consulate) and then applying for student visa. However, most of them must pay for their education. Therefore, due to the high cost of higher

education and various restrictions, especially when it comes to choosing a city and an education course, only a few of them can avail themselves of such education. Scholarships and other forms of financial support are also available for only about 250-300 talented Afghan students per year (Young Journalists Club News Agency, 2021).

On the other hand, there is the DAFI Tertiary Scholarship Program,³ which provides educational and livelihood support for master's degree students through the UN Refugee Agency and with cooperation of Pars Development Activists (PDA)⁴. During 2021, a total of 569 refugee students took advantage of this scholarship (The UN Refugee Agency).

However, generally speaking, Afghan refugees face different problems in their effort to take advantage of higher education. Even when refugees are able to

³ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees offers a limited number of higher education scholarships through the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund, known as DAFI. The goal of DAFI initiative is to help refugees attain self-sufficiency through strengthening their professional qualifications for later employment. This scholarship is special to education of refugees in their host countries. DAFI initiative allows applicant refugees to continue their studies at the master's degree level both in countries where they have sought refuge and/or in their own countries. Since 1992, this initiative, which is supported by governments of Germany, Denmark, the Czech Republic, the UNHCR and private contributors, has provided higher education opportunities for over 18,000 young refugees across the world.

⁴ An Iranian non-governmental organization helping refugees.

overcome all economic problems without the help of international or national scholarships and finish their primary and secondary education, they face new problems after admission to a university. If an Afghan refugee intends to continue higher education in Iran, they have to return their Amayesh Cards which means loss of refugee status. That is, if he is a man, he must first travel to Afghanistan, get a passport there, and return to Iran after obtaining a student visa through Iran's embassy or consulate in Afghanistan. Even after graduation, they are required to leave Iran a year later and return to their own country even if their families live in Iran.

On the other hand, all measures taken by Iran and international organizations, including grant of scholarships, have not been able to solve Afghan students' educational problems in a suitable way. To make matters worse, the runaway increase in the parity rate of the US dollar to Iran's Rial since 2018 has faced students studying at international universities of Iran with serious financial problems, because they have to pay their tuition fees in dollars. Those who pay their fees in Rials are also facing serious financial problems due to high inflation rate in Iran. Of course, some universities have been trying to help Afghan students by asking for tuition fees to be paid in instalments or using a different payment system. However, education has become more difficult for Afghan university students and some of them have been forced to drop out of universities.

On the other hand, since Afghan students have not been able to avail themselves of the privileges that accompany a distinguished educational status, and due to high tuition fees, they are generally under the impression of being discriminated against.

In addition to problems that they face in primary, secondary and tertiary education, as explained above, even if all services were cost-free, there would still be vulnerable groups that would need more support and allocation of more money by the government.

Recommendations

The educational challenges and problems of Afghan nationals in Iran are different from elementary to higher education level and are tied to various factors. As Iran has been hosting hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees for the past four decades and remains the host of one of the largest protracted refugee populations, while receiving extremely low international aid in this area, therefore, challenges remain unsolved. In view of these problems, the following suggestions and recommendation are offered:

Allocating more quota for free education to Afghan students and even launching specialized libraries, schools, and laboratories in Afghanistan by Iran. This will not only help accelerate the pace of development in Afghanistan but will also increase security along Iran's eastern borders

and boost political interactions between Iranian and Afghan governments. This situation will benefit both Iran and Afghanistan.

Building a suitable culture to improve interactions between the host society and foreign nationals through Iran's national radio and television will be also highly effective. Many positive steps have been taken in this direction during past years and let's hope they would continue in the future as well.

Organizing orientation courses for teachers, directors and other people involved in Iran's education sector at all levels, especially with regard to better assimilation of foreign nationals in Iranian schools and universities.

Increasing more international assistance to support education of foreign nationals, especially Afghans, in Iran. This could happen in various forms, including through international contribution in building schools and distribution of educational material, especially such smart devices as smartphones, among foreign nationals. This will enable them to continuously avail themselves of suitable educational services during special periods of time, including a Covid-19 pandemic.

De-securitization of some issues with regard to Afghan refugees and immigrants who are living in Iran. Due to security concerns that surround many problems in this area, free flow of information is slow, and the situation of many undocumented foreign nationals is not clear. Many donor countries have difficulty to access the relevant

reports, statistics and figures, as well as other field information, therefore, they do not have much desire to invest in this field. If Iran could shift the problems related to immigrants and refugees from a security field to a social and finally humanitarian field, it could be easier to provide international organizations with raw data on the needs of immigrants and refugees. In this way, Iran would be able to receive more international financial aid. A comparison between international aid received by Iran and Pakistan will shed more light on this issue. According to available data, the annual budget allocated to the UNHCR in Iran during 2022 was 101,524,519 dollars compared to 112,502,500 dollars for Pakistan.⁵ While, the number of Afghan nationals in Pakistan does not exceed three million⁶, there are about 3.5 million Afghan nationals in Iran⁷. Some unofficial figures even put the number of Afghan nationals in Iran between four and five million.

On the other hand, some incorrect policies adopted with regard to Afghan immigrants and refugees, including changing the refugee status to immigrant, have greatly increased the number of undocumented Afghans in Iran. This issue not only has given rise to security problems, because they are not easy to monitor, but also cast serious

⁵ UNHCR Global Appeal 2022

⁶ European Union Agency for Asylum, May 2022

⁷ The website of UNHCR in Iran

doubt on Iran's ability to receive financial aid from international organizations for this group of refugees.

Determining the status of Afghan new arrivals who have recently participated in the comprehensive census plan (Re-count Plan). Since this category includes most of Afghan students in Iran, their condition must be clarified and clear requests for international aid must be then submitted to international organizations.

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran has provided as much services to Afghan refugees as it could during past years. However, the challenging socio-economic situation in Iran causing substantial increase of the costs which is deteriorated due to the COVID-19 and the US sanctions have seriously affected them. In the absence of an integrated assistance network and other social support measures, the livelihood of most refugees has been in great jeopardy due to their low income and lack of access to financial and credit services available to the host society. Therefore, the first victim of such conditions among the refugees is their education. Many children, therefore, have had to drop out of schools and work on the streets while adults have been barred from higher education too.

Apart from financial problems, lack of public awareness, especially in some small and remote Iranian cities, and

their biased approach to problems faced by Afghan nationals have made this group's access to education more difficult. Therefore, increasing public awareness and participation of people in political affairs will reduce the state institutions' vulnerability in the face of domestic and foreign threats and is, therefore, of high significance. This is why people must be totally aware of domestic and foreign developments and must be able to analyse the existing issues away from superficial sentiments so as to prevent further deepening of the gap between Iranian and Afghan nationals. This issue highlights the high importance of educating people and uplifting their cultural approach to refugees and also the government's role as the means of doing this. Presence of Afghan refugees in schools and other educational facilities would create good conditions for bolstering the bond between the host society and refugee community, improves their education, and help them boost their standing in the host society. It also increases satisfaction of Iranian citizens with the existing conditions. When citizens are more satisfied, the government will be more at ease to interact with foreign environments and, therefore, general and security conditions of the country will also improve. There is no doubt that educated Afghan children can be ambassadors of peace and friendship for both countries when they return to their homeland.

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