



**A look at the Education and Health  
Conditions of Afghan Refugee and  
Migrant Women and Girls in Iran No. 6**



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**[www.odvv.org](http://www.odvv.org)**

## 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 few international coalitions and networks 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. 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 this end, and to shed light on 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 to provide such groups with better and more effective support.

In the first issue of this analytical booklet, the general conditions of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran and their living conditions are discussed and reviewed; in the second to fifth issues of this bulletin, the education, health, and livelihood situations of these groups were

reviewed and, in this edition, the education and health conditions of Afghan refugee and migrant women and girls Iran was reviewed.

# Index

Introduction.....	5
Afghan Women and Girls' Education in Iran.....	7
Health and Hygiene of Afghan Women and Girls in Iran.....	12
Conclusion.....	17
Resources and References .....	19

## **Introduction**

Two years have passed since the fall of Kabul and withdrawal of US forces and the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban (21 August 2021). Now it seems the main losers of this extremist invasion are the women of the country. Restricting measures of the Taliban against women can be put in four main categories: 1) Women's prohibition from the political arena, 2) Prohibition from social activities, 3) prohibition from continuing education, and 4) restricting women from economic activities. Taliban's pressures and these harsh laws have again resulted in a vast number of Afghans leaving their country and seeking asylum in other countries that include Iran and Pakistan.

According to the latest announced official figures in July 2023 it is estimated that 3.4 million Afghans have officially registered in Iran. This resulted in Iran being the second country in the world after Türkiye (host to 3.6 million), to host refugees. This is while in spite of holding censuses and inclusion of even the newly arrived Afghans in Iran, between 1 to 1.5 million Afghans in Iran have still not participated in any programmes and have not been included in the aforementioned figures.

This community which mostly lives in urban or semi-urban areas in various provinces across the country, has various needs, particularly newly arrived Afghans who require attention at national and international levels. On the other hand, in view of women being more vulnerable,

special and immediate attention must be given to their needs. Thus, in this issue we try to deal with Afghan women migrants' issues in Iran, in the education and health sectors.



## **1-Afghan Women and Girls' Education in Iran**

Refugee women and girls' education has always been seen as a glimmer of hope for their empowerment, finding their way and integration in society, and helping them find jobs. While they are struggling with numerous problems, they still put education as their priority and show more interest in continuing education than men and boys. This is while, the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan and their pressuring women to stay at home and creating extensive restrictions in education and social presence, made those who could, leave Afghanistan and go to other countries such as Iran, and those who couldn't had no choice but give in to these restrictions.

In spite of all efforts which have been made for refugees, women and girls in particular, in the Islamic Republic of

Iran due to the high density of schoolchildren in schools and the sudden rush of a large number of newly arrived Afghan schoolchildren to Iran, more than fifty percent of which are girls, the continuation of their education faces numerous challenges, such as finding nearby schools and payment of school fees (even though not too much). With regards to the figures for Afghan schoolchildren in Iran, the deputy Education and Training minister and director of the Bureau for International Affairs and Schools Abroad also reported an increase of 40 percent in the Afghan schoolchildren population and said that half a million Afghan schoolchildren currently reached to 800,000. To prepare the suitable means for the education of these children, at classrooms that can hold 40 schoolchildren and elimination of double shift classes in schools, 25 thousand new classrooms must be constructed (Salamat News 31 January 2023). This is while from 2015 to 2019, the UNHCR, which has had the most share in construction of schools among international organizations in Iran, has only co-funded the construction of 53 schools in various parts of the country. In this regard in 2020, Mehdi Mahmoudi, then director general of BAFIA<sup>1</sup> had said that 93 percent of the total cost of the education of foreign students is provided by the government and international organizations have only contributed 7 percent of the cost. Therefore, considering the Iranian government's financial issues, due to the sanctions, as well as the lack of capacity of non-governmental organizations

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs



in this regard, if the international community continues to have little contribution, it is predicted that not only the education status of Afghan nationals in Iran, especially women and girls, will face a serious challenge, but also this issue in view of the double shifting of schools and high density of schoolchildren, will affect the education of Iranian citizens too.

The custodian of the Preschool and School Education Office of the Education and Training Ministry also in the “Review of Education Challenges of Foreign Schoolchildren in Iran” sitting declared that Iran has allocated 18 thousand classrooms for Afghan elementary education schoolchildren, more than half of which are girls. He also said that the population ratio of Afghan schoolchildren in some small towns and villages is 70 to 30 80 to 10 and even 90 to 10. According to figures, the registered foreign schoolchildren in the Seida website has reached to the total number of 614,199 girls and boys; 144,226 of them are from Tehran province provincial town, which has the largest number of non-Iranian schoolchildren. Most of them are Afghans. Overall, it can be said that 35,470 schools in the country are host to non-Iranian schoolchildren (ISNA, 19 June 2023).

To support the education of refugee women also the Iranian government in partnership with various international organizations that include the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UNHCR has facilitated the registration of women and girls that are left behind from

education within the Literacy Education Movement project. In these nationwide programmes all Afghan women and girls who live in the Islamic Republic of Iran can enjoy free education. In this regard, the director of the Literacy Movement Organization (LMO) announced that in partnership with international organizations each year Iran provides official literacy education for approximately 30 thousand aliens over eighty percent of which are women and girls left behind from education (PANA News Agency, 30 May 2023).

With regards to higher education also the opportunity has been brought about for Afghans to be able to register in universities. Even in some instances, more opportunities have been brought about for Afghan women and girls. For example, with the qualifications that they have in hand Afghan girls can register in higher education centers and do not need to leave the country to get a passport and student visa, and the Iranian government has shown special flexibility towards refugee girls. According to the Science Minister's deputy in international affairs, forty-thousand Afghan university students are currently studying in higher education in Iran and because of the restrictions on women and girls' education in Afghanistan three girls' universities have stated their readiness to take in Afghan female students (ISNA, 02 May 2023).

Also, international organizations have provided scholarships for students. For example, thanks to the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) scholarship programme, BA students can

benefit from this programme which the UNHCR with the partnership of PARS Development Activities (PDA) implement. In 2021, five-hundred and sixty-nine refugee students benefited from this scholarship. DAFI gives refugee students and returnees the conditions so that they can study for BA in the country where they have sought asylum or in their own country. In 1992 thanks to the German, Danish, Czech governments, UNHCR and private donors, more than 18,000 young refugees across the world got backing for higher education (UNHCR website).



## **2-Health and Hygiene of Afghan Women and Girls in Iran**

Migration and negative psychological effects on women's health: the reality is clear for all that forced displacement, particularly migration and conforming to a new country and culture alongside other stressful factors as a result of social, economic and cultural problems which refugees face with can have effects on their mental health. Although there are notable differences between men and women from understanding mental issues and disorders from events and disasters, but women often have noticeable resilience when facing difficulties, but the displacement issue is extremely stressful and can have significant impacts on their physical and mental health. Since women compared to men are more dependent and sentimental, therefore, in dangerous situations they are affected by mental disorders more than men. In spite of

deliverable commonalities in culture, language, and religion between Iran and Afghanistan, we still witness the majority of refugee women suffering from behavioral disorders, schizophrenia, depression and anxiety, and a lot of them suffer from exhaustion, paranoia, and suicidal thoughts due to lack of sleep. This is while these individuals have no understanding of these issues and due to a lack of awareness they deem a lot of these disorders as natural and do not take any steps for treatment. For this reason, every year the ODVV in the partnership of UNHCR arranges technical, treatment and education courses in support of women, so that while making these individuals aware of their problems, to take action for their treatment.

Studies done in Iran have shown that while the spread of mental disorders among migrants and refugees, particularly those who live in the settlements, the main problems of these individuals are put in three categories of mental disorders, contagious and non-contagious diseases. With regards to mental disorders, the ODVV has tried to intervene through the presentation of solutions and while training refugee women, to also involve other family members for psychological treatment. In the other two categories, in partnership with UNHCR and WFO, the Health Ministry has implemented acceptable support projects, especially in refugees' settlements. According to assessments made by the ODVV, the most important causes of mental disorders among refugees and migrants are as follows: the cultural and social conformity levels

with the new society; isolation from host society (for those who live in the settlements); not having plans for the future; not being accepted by society; unsustainability of the family; culture acceptance stress; lack of social support; not having benefiting social role and meaningful links; suitable shelter problems; deep feeling of social isolation; different cultural-social orders; not having social skills; unemployment or working in hard jobs; not having job security; as well as negative views and poor awareness of mental illnesses.

The fracture of social links and networks subsequent to migration which with the change in the role of women in society and ethnic, racial, cultural, and economic problems that they come with, increases the damaging impacts of migration on women's mental health. In view of the low rate of the participation of women's workforce in society, particularly in developing countries, makes women more vulnerable to economic aspects and as a result, they are less prepared when facing difficulties, and are affected more. Today, the fulfillment of women's health needs has extensively been accepted as a humanitarian necessity and observation of human rights, and the guaranteeing women's access to health is deemed as a path for regaining, reducing of threats against communities in crisis. Because if women and girls can have health care alongside a diverse collective of humanitarian programmes which target inequalities, its positive impact will flow into all aspects of humanitarian actions. Considering that the needs of refugee and migrant

women are numerous and complex and are related to their demographic and social characteristics, women's vulnerability increases in displacements and migrations. Thus, the understanding of specific needs and the vulnerability dimensions of this group and existing challenges and obstacles in responding to the needs of this group is very necessary. This type of understanding improves psychotherapeutic services and facilitates planning their living conditions. To this aim, the ODVV always tries to consider the needs of refugee women in health, self-care, livelihood, social investment, and social support, and while providing awareness, the ODVV also provides on-demand support for this group.

Training and hygiene information needs of refugees and migrants in Iran: attention to the information needs of migrants with consideration of cultural differences and social gaps with the Iranian society is unavoidable. Awareness of the hygiene knowledge of these people in various living conditions and provision of suitable services by health, health information provision, mass media, doctors, and nurses and also removal of obstacles and challenges in the way of their access to information on health through the use of promotion of health-hygiene programmes, setting up comprehensive hygiene education for refugees and migrants and also simple and understandable education for this group of people is a necessity. Also, since the health and treatment of individuals are closely linked with their health knowledge levels, it is recommended that effective steps are taken

towards educating refugees and migrants, and raise their hygiene knowledge and awareness levels so that with the creation of care and prevention programmes, as well as reducing treatment costs, to also help in the shaping of a healthy immigrant community. In this regard, various educational-recreational programmes are held by the Health Ministry with the partnership of national and international NGOs in the settlements where refugees reside. Nevertheless, there is a need for further policy-setting and planning is still needed in this regard. In view of the vulnerability of migrants and the increase in their population and the challenges as a result in our country, attention to health and hygiene programmes is very necessary and failure in policy-setting and planning in this regard will bring along serious economic, social and health problems for refugees and migrants and the Iranian society.

Treatment costs for Afghans: another problem that refugees and migrants, particularly women are faced with in the health sector is the health and treatment costs. Due to the high costs of treatment and the poor economic conditions of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran, usually initial medical treatments are postponed. This delay results in illnesses getting worse and imposition of further costs on their families and the host society. To this aim, in cooperation with UNHCR, the Iranian government has tried to provide health insurance for the most vulnerable refugees and eliminate some of their problems. In this insurance plan as well as improving refugees'



access to medical care, direct and indirect benefits such as reduction of the risk of negative confrontation related to economic vulnerability and affected by very expensive individual treatment, and prevention of children from education is presented (UNHCR website). In the current year around 95,000 vulnerable refugees have been included in this plan free of charge. According to UNHCR in Iran officials, Iran is one of the few countries that provides health insurance coverage the same as their Iranian citizens receive. Nonetheless, a lot of other refugees have not been eligible for the insurance plan and are faced with numerous problems in this area. In view of the fact that according to the health laws and regulations in Iran, hospitals are obliged to accept patients this has resulted in a lot of Afghan refugees and migrants not being able to pay treatment fees after receiving medical treatment and owe hospitals and numerous legal problems have risen as a result.

### **3- Conclusion**

With the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, not only the conditions for the repatriation of Afghan refugees and migrants was not brought about, but due to the imposition of numerous restrictions, particularly for women, the number of Afghans departing their country for other countries, such as Iran, significantly rose. This situation went on in a way that the Iranian government had to include the newly arrived refugees in new census programmes and basic education and health services had to be provided for them. But due to America's unilateral

sanctions against Iran now the trivium aid of international organizations, the host country's issues, and problems, and also refugees and migrants have become more complex, particularly in the education and health sectors.

Thus, as it has been mentioned in this research, the lack of increase in international aid can cause unforeseeable problems for Afghan refugees and migrants, particularly in the health and education sectors. Also, in view of the financial and economic-livelihood situation has significant impacts on the social welfare of women and their families therefore, it is very important that governments and national and international humanitarian organizations work towards the elimination of women's economic needs, employment in particular. This can while reducing their mental disorders help speed up these women's integration into society. Due to the importance of this matter, it is hoped that in a separate issue of the newsletter women's livelihood situation will be discussed and reviewed in detail

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