

Accounts of Discrimination: A Phenomenological Study of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Beenish Malik¹, Novel Lyndon¹, Yew Wong Chin Vivien¹,
Sivapalan S. Selvadurai² & Mohd Helmi A. Rahim³

¹Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Selangor Malaysia.

Corresponding Author: beenish.malik@hotmail.com

²Program of Development Science, Centre for Development, Social and Environment, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

³School of Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract

Refugees are considered one of the vulnerable groups of society. Generally, they face discrimination, isolation, marginalization, and rejection from residents and authorities of the host country. This paper is an attempt to understand lived experiences of Afghan refugee scavengers in reference to their relationship with authorities in Pakistan. The goal to explore the experiences of these refugee scavengers and explain it as it was experienced by them, was achieved through utilizing phenomenology research approach. The accounts of participants' experiences were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews by involving thirty-one full-time adult Afghan scavengers with at least five years' work experience. The collected data revealed that Afghan refugees are subject to constant discrimination, harassment, extortion, and detention at the hand of police. Daily investigations and bribe demands were found to be an essential feature of their everyday life. The scavengers also reported being living in fear of being arrested and detained. The findings suggest the need for refugee-friendly policies.

Keywords: Afghan refugees, Scavengers, Police, Discrimination, Bribe

Introduction

Fleeing the country of origin and leaving everything behind for the sake of a better life, is not an easy decision to make. It puts lives at risk. Afghanistan is one of the key sources of refugees worldwide (Mubarak Ali Kuhzad and Novel Lyndon, 2015). War and persecution

have forced Afghans to flee their homes and seek protection in the neighboring countries. Pakistan has been generously hosting one of the largest refugee populations in the world, for decades (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2009). According to an estimate, currently around three million registered and unregistered Afghan refugees are residing in Pakistan (Khan 2017).

Migration from Afghanistan to Pakistan has a protracted history, consisting of decades. Insufficient job opportunities in Afghanistan have always been motivating its residents to travel to Pakistan and other neighboring countries in search of work (Marchand et al. 2014). Apart from conflict and war people of Afghanistan have visited Pakistan to meet their friends, family, earn money and to escape natural disasters (Khan 2017a). However, the mass influx started when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan took over by overturning Muhammad Daoud's government in Afghanistan (Grare, & Maley 2011). Later in the 1970s, Soviet invasion and armed conflicts led a mass exodus from Afghanistan to the neighboring countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran (Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit 2005). Eventually, Talibanization and US war on terror added to the situation.

Post-migration life has not been easy for Afghan in Pakistan. Despite having access to basic facilities of life, most of them spend their lives miserably (Tabassum 2014). Being poor, refugees, uneducated and unskilled, Afghans generally have restricted access to formal job sector (Masood & Barlow 2013). The scarce job opportunities push them towards occupations, categorized as low in the society. Hence, most of them end up adopting scavenging as a survival strategy and consequently constitute most of scavenging population in Pakistan.

Despite prolonged stay in a country with cultural, religious and linguistic similarities (Ashrafi & Moghissi 2002), these refugees are still grappling to integrate into the host society effectively. In Pakistan, Afghan refugee scavengers are subject to constant discrimination, harassment, and abuse. Shehzad (2014), in his study, concluded that Afghan scavengers are victims of violence and sexual assault not only by the host community but also by the police. Similarly, a report by Sustainable Development Policy Institute (2004), confirmed that Afghan refugee scavengers face mobility restrictions, violence harassment, bribe, and confinement from the police. It was further reported that Afghans are constantly interrogated by the police and asked for the identity cards. Whereas in the absence of the cards they are taken into the custody and locked up till the matter is solved through a bribe.

Likewise, studies conducted in other countries (Medina 2005; Hayami, Dikshit, and Mishra 2006) have also reported police persecution against scavengers. Hayami, Dikshit, and Mishra (2006), found that police in India not only create hindrance at the workplace but in the absence of the legal documents, migrants' waste pickers are also often confronted by the police and demanded bribes. However, a study conducted in Pretoria, South Africa confirmed the absence of police violence and harassment towards waste pickers. It was also indicated that police attitude towards them is less bossy and hand-handed, hence, scavengers are allowed to do their work freely (Schenck & Blaauw 2011).

The ongoing discussion has provided the background of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and evidence of persecution against them. However, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding how Afghans experience discrimination and harassment in the host country. Therefore, the current study was designed to document the missing voices of the Afghan refugees. Exploring their lived experiences will be valuable for law enforcement agencies and policymakers who have been seeking a solution to refugees in Pakistan

Research Methodology

The current study employed qualitative research design and phenomenology as the method to explore Afghan refugee scavengers' experiences with authorities in Pakistan. The qualitative research approach was appropriate to get insight into the lives of scavengers as it focuses on establishing the meanings people attach to their actions (Wagner et al. 2012; Novel Lyndon et al. 2018)). Similarly, phenomenology as a method of inquiry was used to explore and interpret the true essence of people's experiences on the phenomenon under study (Grbich 2007: 84). Phenomenology found to be the best match as it abstains the researcher from presuppositions, stresses to describe the phenomenon based on the facts and according to the perspectives of the people under study (Groenewald 2004; Sarmila et al. 2018). In other words, it studies the life as experienced by the individuals rather than conceptualizing, categorizing or theorizing about it (Van Manen 1984; Sarmila et al. 2015). As the main focus of phenomenological research is on lived experiences (Novel Lyndon et al. 2015), therefore it helped to achieve the objective of this research.

To get the rich description of the phenomenon, the Afghan refugees who had experienced scavenging were selected purposefully. The criteria of selection were: adult male Afghan refugee scavenger (as women don't work and children might not be able to share true essence of their experiences), who performs scavenging as fulltime activity, with minimum five years of work experience. The accounts of participants' experiences were collected through semi-structured interviews until it reached the saturation point where no new data emerged (Wagner et al. 2012). The data saturation point was achieved after conducting thirty-one in-depth interviews.

Before proceeding to each interview, as a prerequisite, the participants' consent of engaging in the study was taken. The participants were assured that all the shared information will solely be used for the academic purposes and its access to any third party will strictly be denied. Moreover, to protect their identities, the data was anonymized by assigning pseudonyms to all the participants (Creswell, 2013). These pseudonyms have been used in this paper. In order to make sense of the collected data, the audio recorded interviews were transcribed, translated and analysed through Max van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological reflection. The aim of phenomenological data analysis is to grasp the essential meaning of the experienced phenomenon by uncovering its thematic aspects (Kaite et al. 2016; Novel Lyndon et al. 2015). The emerged themes were then member checked with the available informants to enhance the credibility of the study (Thomas 2017).

Research Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that Afghan refugees, residing in Pakistan, experience discrimination on daily basis. It includes unnecessary interrogation, bride demand, raids, arrest, harassment, disrespectful behaviour and verbal abuse. While discussing Pakistani authorities' behaviour towards them, these refugees largely reflected on the discriminatory treatment from the police. Being in scavenging profession, informants have to roam across the city where they are most likely to meet the police officials on various check posts. On such security points, Afghans are not only harassed and investigated but also asked for the bribe, on daily basis. During the data analysis three themes namely: discriminatory treatment, investigation and demand for bribe, and police raids emerged. These themes are presented below:

Discriminatory Treatment

The narratives of Afghan scavengers revealed that police exhibit hostile attitude towards them, deliberately create problems, mistreat and disrespect them in public. Most of the informants were born and raised in Pakistan who never got a chance to visit their country of origin. After all the years spent in the host county, they consider it as their own, but the authorities still treat them as outsiders and treat unequally. Afghans complained to be considered as suspicious, untrustworthy and mess in the community that needs to be repatriated. In the research site, both Afghans and Punjabis work as scavengers but only the refugees are stopped for investigation while being at work. Informants were of the view that they are treated unequally in Pakistan, on the basis of their ethnicity and refugee status. Expressing his views about the inequality, Gul reported:

...they (police) do not treat us equally. When a Punjabi scavenger crosses the check post they ask him to stop but when he starts talking in the native language they let him go. As both of them (policeman and scavenger) are Punjabi so they do not create problems for them.

Similarly, Iqbal stated:

Police do not misbehave with the native scavengers as they are residents of this country while they create problems for us because we are the refugees. Being Afghans is not our crime, we earn our ourselves but, yet we are being discriminated by police.

Gul and Iqbal were of the view that police draw a line between Afghanis and Punjabis and treat them unfairly. While roaming in the streets native scavengers are not disturbed whereas Afghans are not only stopped for unnecessary investigations but mocked, bullied and made fun of for enjoyment. Informants stated that Punjabis are only bothered and investigated when they break any law, however, Afghans have to face it daily even when it is not required.

Majority of the participants stated that police misbehave and treat them badly only because they are not the permanent residents of Pakistan. Saeed, a twenty-three years old scavenger, spoke about how his family and he is treated in Pakistan and despite experiencing inequality why they cannot go back to Afghanistan:

I feel like I am Pakistani not the Afghan as I born here. But the government do not consider us Pakistani and puts lots of pressure on us. A few days back my father came back from Afghanistan, he went to see some family members, but the situation back in my country is still not very good. There is still war, so we cannot go back and forced to tolerate the governmental pressure.

Saeed was of the view that he and his family is forced to face the discrimination as they cannot even go back to their county. After decades of war, the situation of Afghanistan is still deteriorating. The clashes among American forces and militant groups cannot let them lead a normal life. Whereas in Pakistan they feel secure enough and believe that they will sleep at night, safely. He also added that due to fresh policemen intake the situation has gotten worst. As to practice their authority, the young and fresh policemen around the city comparatively create more problems for them, while the senior policemen respect Afghans and scavengers. It is concluded that almost all the informants agreed that regardless of facing discrimination they never experienced violence from the authorities.

Investigations and Demand for Bribe

One of the widely discussed issues was daily investigations by security personnel that usually end up on paying hefty bribes. Afghans are mainly asked to verify their identity at check posts across the city and in the absence of an ID card, these refugees are exploited. Information discussed that despite having the identity cards, they are always stopped at different checkpoints with the purpose to harass and extort money from them.

The government of Pakistan issued refugees the identity card known as Proof of Registration (PoR), to legalize their refugee status and protect their rights. Afghans holding the PoR card are considered the legal refugees in Pakistan. The cards' validity expired on 31 December 2015 and while waiting for extension the refugees suffered harassment from security personnel. Later the cards were extended until June 2016. It was noted from the participants' statements that after the expiration of the card, harassment from police gained momentum. Thus, upon showing the expired cards policemen harass Afghans and tell them to go back to their country as the cards have expired. Additionally, police ask for bribes else threat to take them to the police station for further investigation. Likewise, Hayami, Dikshit & Mishra (2006), found that in Delhi, India, police deliberately create problems for the scavengers and in the absence of legal documents the Bangladeshi migrants are asked for hefty bribes. Akbar shared his experience of how policemen react to his expired ID card:

...then they (policemen) ask me to buy them tea, cold drink or give them the money for that. Sometimes they even ask for the minimum amount like 50-100 rupees. As they are government employees, so I cannot fight with them or complain about them.

The bribe paid by Afghans refugees ranges from minimum to maximum. Police want money no matter how small. Sometimes even the edibles or cigarettes do the job. Paying bribes on checkpoints was considered a better option by the informant, as upon refusal they face arrest that could make them pay comparatively a heavier amount to get themselves released. Sadiq shared a similar experience:

...it happened to me twice and once with my brother that we had to give bribe to get realized as they (police) locked us up. I paid Rs 10,000 first time, 5,000 second times and my brother gave Rs 8,000 to the police. Our previous Punjabi house owner helped us to get realized.

It was revealed that since the expiration of the card the security personnel has stopped showing leniency. Thus, arresting Afghans even on minor issues had become a daily occurrence. Yousif shared that besides asking for the ID card the cops have inquired about his motorbike repeatedly. They assume that a scavenger cannot afford a bike, so it must be a stolen one. Even after showing the license and required document they find a reason to get money. He shared his story at length:

The police usually treat us bad. Now when I was returning home from work the policemen stopped me on a check post and asked to show my motorcycle license. After that, they told me that my vehicle's number plate is a fake one. I asked them to take me wherever they want to, but they asked to give them 500 rupees. I told them I do not have any money and showed them my wallet afterward, but they did not let me go. They kept insisting for the money after locking my bike and occupying the keys. Then one of them asked me to provide them with a pack of the cigarette then they'll let me go. But I did not even have a penny to give them then he slapped me and asked to leave.

Apparently, police mistreatment towards Afghan scavengers was due to the expired PoR cards. However, Mustafa stated that the government of Pakistan has issued a notification stating that despite the expiration of the cards Afghans are allowed to stay in Pakistan until further notice. The notice has been issued to protect the refugees' rights in the country. Therefore, almost all the Afghan scavengers have a photocopy of the notice, as to prove their legal stay in the country yet cops at the security posts ignore the government order and create problem for refugees and demand bribe. Contrary to the notion presented by nearly all the participants, a few Afghans reported that whenever police create the problem for them or ask for the bribe they get a help from well-known native residents. Kamran explained:

I have a friend who is working in one of the police department, I tell about him while being investigated. Usually, the policemen who ask for money let me go after my reference but if they do not trust me I make a call and let the policemen talk to my friend on the phone.

Karman's excerpt shows that he has been stopped by cops repeatedly. However, one of his Punjabi friends, attached to the police department, has saved him from unnecessary interception and botheration. Likewise, Shair's Punjabi employee saved him from giving bribe and getting arrested.

Police Raids

Raids from law enforcement agencies were described by the Afghan refugees as next level harassment and discrimination against them. It was shared that police visit Afghan houses late at night, search it, inquire about the ID cards and sometimes take the men of the family along. Sadiq recalled when his brother was taken into the custody and moved to the police station after a raid at his place. Later, they had to pay 8,000 rupees to get him released. He recalled:

...they (police) come to our houses at midnight. Once they took my elder brother from the house. He was here at home on holidays. Police came inside the house. They came in three vans and arrested a lot of Afghani from the neighbourhood.

The raids at Afghans houses gained momentum after a massacre at Army public school Peshawar, killing 145 people including students, teachers, and staff, in December 2014. The deadliest attack was executed with the assistance of Afghans in Pakistan and across the border. The terror attack made the Afghan refugees life in Pakistan even worse. Kareem confirmed:

After the Peshawar school attack, they (police) kept visiting our homes, investigating our identities and the work we do.

Kareem further added that after the attacks his family got frightened by the repeated raids and due to the trauma, his children used to get the fever. However, he also confirmed that over the time the intensity of the raid and arrest has gone down.

Concludingly, Afghan scavengers experienced discriminatory treatment from the security personnel. Since the involvement of Afghans in terror attacks in Pakistan, the authorities especially the law enforcement agencies treat them as suspects and interrogate regularly. Additionally, upon the absence of the ID card and its expiration, they have been demanded bribes or taken to the jail.

Conclusion

This paper highlights Afghan refugees' experiences with authorities in Pakistan. The narratives cumulated from thirty-one Afghan refugee scavengers through semi-structured in-depth

interviews revealed that they are subjected to constant discrimination and harassment from police. Investigation and bribe are the key aspects of refugees' everyday life. Informants complained to be routinely stopped by policemen, even when it is unnecessary. Having been stopped by the police for identification might not be an act of discrimination but the way they are treated at checkpoints and asked for bribes surely are. During the investigation, refugees are mistreated, disrespected and verbally abused. Moreover, in the absence or expiration of the PoR card hefty bribes are charged from them. In some cases, refusing bribe demands further leads to detention. Despite spending a significant time in Pakistan Afghan scavengers are still treated as outsiders and harassed on the bases of their ethnicity, language, and temporary status. The findings of the study contribute to the limited knowledge of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. It also has implications for government agencies, human rights-based organizations, and future researchers. The findings of this study further highlight the need for policymaking, in order to fully protect the rights of refugees in Pakistan.

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Corresponding Author

Beenish Malik is a PhD student from Anthropology and Sociology Program, School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. E-mail: beenish.malik@hotmail.com

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