

## The Social Life Experiences of Afghan-Refugee Scavengers in Gujrat, Pakistan

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### Abstract

Pakistan is home of millions Afghan refugees, who are battling with multiple challenges during their stay in the host county. Being poor, marginalized and uneducated most of them are forced to engage in low-status jobs to put bread on their table. This paper is an attempt to understand the life experiences of the Afghans who are living away from their country of origin and working as scavengers. To get the true essence of individuals' experiences, the phenomenology research approach was used. Full-time adult Afghan scavengers were involved in this study conducted from April-August 2016 through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Whereas in-depth interviews along informal discussions continued till the data achieved its saturation point. Only male adults were interviewed as per the Afghan culture women are not allowed to engage in scavenging activities. To purely explore the social aspect of Afghans' life as scavengers, this report focuses on their relation with two extremely influential social groups (i) family and (ii) peer group, based on their daily interaction with them. The findings of the study reveal that family being the most significant unit of scavengers' life provide continuous social, moral and economic support. Apart from that friends and peer groups also help and encourage them whenever it is needed. The findings of the study not only give an insight into the refugees' lives in Pakistan but also contribute to the pre-existing body of knowledge on the subject.

**Keywords:** *Afghan, Scavengers, Life experiences, Social life, Phenomenology.*

### Introduction

War and persecution has forced thousands of people to flee their homes. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), currently, some **21.3 million refugees are in the world and more than half of them are younger than 18 years of age. Pakistan is one**

**of the top hosting countries worldwide and so far, it has hosted around 1.61 million** registered Afghan refugees which is one of the largest protected refugees' populations in the world (UNHCR, 2014). Migration from Afghanistan started in late 1970s due to Soviet invasion and armed conflicts in the country (Afghanistan research and evaluation unit (AREU), 2005).

Usually refugees spend their lives in a vulnerable condition as they have to face different challenges to adjust in a new social set-up. Majority of Afghans moved to Pakistan as common cultural traits and language in some part of the country, made it one of the convenient places for them (AREU, 2006). Despite of the fact that Pakistan is suitable country for Afghans, sometimes it becomes difficult for them to adjust in the host country. Afghans face various challenges while staying in Pakistan and getting an appropriate job is one of them. Being uneducated, poor and marginalized these refugees have less to no access in the formal job sector (Houte et al., 2014). Usually these Afghans can be seen performing low-status jobs in the host country and scavenging is top of the list (Mubarak Ali Kuhzad and Novel Lyndon, 2015).

Socio-cultural adaptation is generally linked with the acquired culturally appropriate skills that are needed to adjust and fit in new social or cultural settings (Abu-Rayya, 2013; Sarmila et al. 2015). It is obvious that migrants have to face several intercultural challenges and difficulties during their stay in a new country and psychological distress is one of them. Whereas this adjustment stress is more common in teenagers as compared to the adults as they have less emotional and cognitive maturity to deal with all these challenges (abid, 2013). Whereas, social networks mostly help them to cope with the stress by providing psychological and material resources (Cohen, 2004; Novel Lyndon et al. 2018).

Family and friends matter in everyone's life (Novel Lyndon et al. 2018). Studies have found a connection between social interactions and health (Sarmila et al. 2018). People who are less socially integrated are less healthy both physically and psychologically, whereas it affects human life expectancy as well (House et al, 1988). Furthermore, the individuals who get more emotional support from their friends and peers are less likely to have psychological disturbance as compared to those who receive less emotional support from friends (Kurdek & Schmidt, 1987). Undoubtedly, family of origin, parenting style, and family dynamics play a momentous role in the adolescent life and influences their career choices (Bates, 2015). People's occupational choices and family views on them go hand-in-hand. Adolescent's decision to choose an occupation can highly be inspired and influenced by their parental choice (Rodrigues et al., 2011). In-addition family occupation influences the individuals' career choice and a considerable number of persons may continue their family profession to sustain it (Olaosebikan & Olusakin, 2014).

Peer and social network leave dominating impacts on the career choices, decision making and personality development of an individual (Novel Lyndon et al. 2015). The peer groups' influence in boy's life is stronger and more observable as compared to the girls. Influence on intensions and realisations is based on gender-specific peer group, male peers influence the boys the most (Webber & Walton, 2006). In addition to, a person's reliance on his peers while choosing a job, peer and friends also direct the person's career decision making and help to select the occupation (Naz et al., 2014). This research was designed to understand the social life experiences of Afghan scavengers in Pakistan, with especial emphasis on the family and friends' influence on their profession and lives.

### **Location of the Study**

District Gujrat, a protohistoric settlement, is situated in the province Punjab, Pakistan. This ancient district is believed to be existed prior to the invasion of Alexander the Great (District disaster management authority (DDMA), 2009). Initially, it was named as *Udanagri*- the everlasting or sweet smelling City by its founder Bachan Pal, a Rajput Hindu Raja, in 460 BC (Provincial disaster management authority (PDMA), 2009; Punjab cities improvement investment program (PCIIP), 2011). The total area of district is 3,192 square kilometres which is divided into three tehsils, Gujrat, Kharian, and Sarai Alamgir. The research was undertaken in tehsil Gujrat. The area is well known as an industrial city where hundreds of small and large manufacturing units are working. The city is nation-wide known for its high-quality ceramics, fans and furniture. The literacy rate of the area is 81.4% while 45% of the population has access to the public health facilities (UNITED nation industrial development organization (UNIDO), 2010). The majority of the city dwellers was native Punjabis whereas there were several settled communities of Afghan scavengers that facilitated to access the suitable data and respondents for the research.

**Map 1: Location of city Gujrat, Pakistan**



(Source: Planning and Development Department, Punjab)

### Research Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted by using phenomenology research approach to get the true essence of individuals' experiences. It helped to develop deeper understanding of the scavengers' life experiences and the factors that play important role in their lives as this approach focuses on several individual experience on a common phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The study was conducted in city Gujrat, Pakistan where Afghan refugees settled communities and accessibility of suitable informants made the locale beneficial for the present research. Data was obtained from April 2016- August 2016, through conducting face-to-face and in-depth interviews by the researcher personally. A semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions was used, which allowed the informants to express their life experiences freely. Full-time, adult, male, Afghan scavengers were taken as the unit of analysis.

Among Afghans women are not permitted to work at the dumpsites as women are considered more prone to face harassment from the society, police and local authorities (Zia et al., 2008). Data collection continued till the data reached its saturation point. Most of the interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the informants whereas field notes were taken where it was not allowed to record the interview. All the interviews and field notes were transcribed as soon as possible so that no information could be missed. To sum-up the social experiences of Afghan scavengers, the thematic data analysis technique was applied.

### Research Findings

This study primarily focuses on the social experiences, related to the two most significant units of scavengers' life, based on their daily interaction. Findings illustrate, family and network of friends play a key role in their lives. Themes identified, are discussed below, in-detail.

#### ***Family stance towards their profession***

Family plays a significant role in the Afghan scavengers' lives. Majority of informants' calmly stay in the joint and extended families, consisting of up-to 50 members under the same roof. Apart from sharing the house rent and utility bills, the purpose of staying together is to maintain the family bond with the close relatives. Almost all the informants of the study claimed that after involving all the male members of the family, scavenging in like their family occupation now. Usually head of the families started scavenging initially, that further transferred into their offspring. In many families, children start helping their fathers and learning skills with the purpose in mind to get trained before their fathers get old and stop working. In this way, the profession of scavenging is transmitted to the next generation. Ajjab Gul, 23, who has been working for the last ten years stated:

*"My brother, I and many of our relatives are involved in the same job, we do. Few years back there were four people in our home who were undertaking the scavenging activities but currently my father and a brother is not working with us. My father is an old man now so he doesn't work whereas my brother deals with plastic bottles. He actually crushes the retrieved plastic bottles. He has his own mini factory now"* (8 April, 2016).

Similarly, baser khan who was 19 years old said:

*"My father was doing this job before my birth and when I reached at the age of 6, I started accompanying him in his job. By then I am helping him through scavenging"* (15 April, 2016).

Apart from being voluntary involved in scavenging activity for numerous years, many of the family members specially the women want the males to skip waste related work and start doing something more respectful. Informants stated that our families want us to find out some other jobs but when we give them logical reasoning of how difficult it is to earn through other ways, they let as continue our work. Whereas some families encourage its members to continue their work as they are of the view, this profession helps them to put food on the table. In relation to the acceptability of scavenging, Jummah khan, aged 45, related the following:

*"My family knows that it's not possible to get any other consistent and suitable job so for them scavenging is good as it at least brings food at home. Initially they used to tell me to do something else but I wasn't able to find any other job. I have started a part-time job in a newspaper agency as well. Where I do the office cleaning and*



*they pay me 5,000 rupees as salary. Even these two jobs are not sufficient to make enough money” (5 June, 2016).*

Around 95% of the informants claimed that their families consider scavenging as an income generation activity. For them, scavenging is the only way that helps them make their end meet. That is why they are carrying out this job even when women at the home do not like it.

### **Control over earned money**

In the Afghan household, head-of-the-family is considered the most influential person, who has the authoritative position and ultimate power to take decisions. This person, usually the male, has authority to take all sort of decisions either their status is profound or trivial, in addition he is supposed to look after the monthly household expenses. After the intense labour and handwork, normally at the end of the month the collected items are sold to earn money. The earned money goes to the head-of-the-family's hand straight way, who decides how and where to spend it. In scavenger's house, the labourer has no control over the money he earns. Most of the informants expressed that they hand over the earned money to the family and never keep any money with them, secretly. They further added, they themselves know that their household expenses wouldn't be fulfilled if they keep some money with them. In some families where the family head is unfortunately not alive, there the eldest family member usually the mother over take this position. In such cases all the earning hands give the earned money to the old woman of the family. Fazal Rehman, aged 25, revealed:

*“We give the earned money to our mother and she looks after the household expenses. As a youngest brother of the house it is my duty to do shopping. When I go to buy grocery or any other food stuff my mother gives me the required money” (3 April, 2016).*

He further added:

*“I don't keep any money with me. Whatever I earn, is given to my mother. I ask her for money if I need some occasionally” (3 April, 2016).*

Whereas one of the afghan scavengers disclosed that he keeps some money with him secretly, without his father's notice. He was of the view, as being a married man he wants to fulfil his wife's wishes for which he needs some money.

### **Discrimination and violence**

Many studies claim that scavengers face discrimination and violence even within the four walls of their own houses. Whereas Afghan scavengers in city Gujrat, Pakistan denied this notion and revealed that they never felt discriminated and faced violence at home. Nearly all of them unveiled that most of the earning hands of the family and relatives are involved in the same waste-related work that is why there are less or no chances of discrimination among us. Normally scavenging is not considered a worst profession among many of Afghans, despite of the fact that many informants want to skip this job only if they are able to get a better job, in terms of salary. Several Afghans expressed that they do not hesitate to scavenge as it is a halal way of earning and way better than begging and thieving.

As far as the prevalence of violence is concerned, the interviewees of the study stated that scavenging is a voluntary work and cannot be done under coercion. They further expressed

that their guardians never beaten them for retrieving less items or earning less than expected. Abdul Rehman, a married man, aged 23 believes that his family played a motivation role in his work. He illustrated

*"I never received any kind of violence. I remember when I was living with my parents they used to motivate me by saying if I work hard they will buy me cycle, motorbike, mobile or any item of my choice. They never beaten me rather they motivated me to hard work and earn more money"* (10 April, 2016).

Overall the informants refused to receive the violence from their family members. Even the families claimed not to punish or pressurize the workers for earning more. Whereas a contract opinion was presented by Ajjab Gul, who complained about occasional violence from his father. He was of the view:

*"It happens sometimes even now, when I am fully grown up and married, that I get slightly punished both verbally and physically. Sometimes the family compares my brother (scavenger) with me as he brings home more material than I do. I cannot collect more because when I walk my legs start pain so I take rest for some time to restart my work. Resultantly, I collect less than him. When the money is given to my father he gets angry on me for not bringing much"* (8 April, 2016).

### **Nature of relation with the peer group**

During our life span we are surrounded by broad range of people who often share similar age, interests and social status, group of such people is called peer group. Peer groups can play a pivotal role in a person's life and can easily influence his attitude and behaviour. Peer support enables its members to manage stress and tensions by providing social, moral help. Similarly, the peer group plays an essential in Afghan scavengers' lives. After whole day efforts and absence of television, friends are the only source of recreation. Majority of the informants stated that they have plenty of friends and most of them are from the Afghan ethnicity, as they feel more comfortable with them. Whereas several scavengers claimed to have local friends from Punjabi ethnicity, who are studying in school, colleges, doing business locally and internationally. Khan Muhammad, who was having a native friend, said:

*"One of my Punjabi friends, is a police man who is working on a higher post. He often asks me to harvest his wheat so in response he gives me grain and the money. I share my problems with him. Whenever I have a problem he comes to help me. If I get a fight with anyone he comes to resolve the issue between us"* (8 April, 2016).

Scavengers exhibited the positive relation with friends by saying that they share their problems with each other and everybody tries their best to solve it. Borrowing money and taking other sort of favours are very common among them. Due to the labour work a lot of them cannot make it possible to see their friends daily, whereas Friday, the holiday is well-spent with them by gossiping and playing cricket.

### **Friends and their views toward scavenging**

Scavenging is quite common profession among Afghan refugees in city Gujrat, Pakistan. Nearly all of the interviewees were having more Afghan friends than the Punjabis-residents of district Punjab. Stating the influence of scavenging on their friendships, they said their profession doesn't effect it. According to them, one of the main reasons is, that all of them are involved in the same work and know why they have been doing this job. They fully understand

each other's difficulties and worries. Many of the scavengers claim that they encourage each other that one day they will surely get better jobs and will leave this filthy work right way. They were of the view that scavenging has affected their relation in a way that due to labour intensive work they get less time to meet up and spend some quality work with their mates. They usually wait of the holiday which is spent by playing games and roaming in the stresses purposelessly.

### Conclusion

Themes emerged from the study have been discussed in this report. The respondents' feedback shows that family and friends being the key element, play important role in their lives. Friends and family is the basic source of continuous support and wellbeing for them. It can be concluded that Afghans carry out scavenging activities voluntarily whereas majority of them do not face any discrimination and violence from family, based on their job. The scavengers have less to no control over their earned money. After the whole lot of efforts, the earned money is supposed to be handed over to the head of the family, who spends this money according to his wish to fulfil the family needs. Furthermore, the peers are the source of comfort for them, who provide all sorts of supports when needed. All most all of the scavengers were having friends who were engaged in the same work, that's why they understand each other's situation very well and provide encouragement in the time of difficulties. The findings of the research have given an insight into the Afghan scavengers' social life and the part their social capital play in their lives. At the same time, this research will contribute to the scarce literature on the experiences of Afghan-refugee scavengers in Gujrat, Pakistan.

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