

GLOBAL EDUCATION POLICIES AND LOCAL REALITIES: VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR AFGHAN REFUGEES IN BALOCHISTAN

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Abstract

This study analyses the global education policies and how these policies intersect and shape local realities in the refugee context. It evaluates the Vocational and Technical Education (VET) programs of UNHCR for Afghan refugees in Balochistan—across urban refugee settlements in Quetta and rural refugee villages in Saranan and Surkhab. It asks whether these VET programs expand refugees' freedoms/capability to choose lives they value and how access and participation of refugees in VET vary across intersecting layers of identities such as gender, ethnicity, and class. Theoretically, the paper combines the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) with an Intersectional framework. Using an exploratory qualitative research design, the researcher conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugees enrolled in VET programs and relevant stakeholders. Findings show that limited training duration, outdated tools, inadequate workspaces, and restricted electricity hinder refugees' skill development. Capability expansion is constrained, as program offerings rarely match participants' aspirations. Access is shaped by intersecting factors—gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status—with women and Hazara refugees particularly disadvantaged. Despite demand for digital and modern skills, limited training options restrict freedom and opportunity. The study contributes empirical insight into an under-researched population and suggests policy reforms focused on context-specific design, diverse skills, institutional collaboration, and inclusion of marginalized groups.

INTRODUCTION

Global displacement worldwide is on the rise, with the majority in the global south with protracted situations under legal uncertainty and economic vulnerability (UNHCR, 2024). Most of the countries in the global south are not signatories to the Refugee Convention of 1951, leaving refugees outside of the formal economic sector and exploited in the informal sector. And as a result, dependent on economic aid and assistance from the International Organization, such as the United Nations High

Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024). To address the issue of poverty, refugee exploitation in the informal sector, and refugee reliance on aid, UNHCR invests in the livelihood and educational sector for refugee self-reliance and to reduce aid dependency. Policy documents such as UNHCR's Global Compact for refugees (2018), The Global Framework for Refugee Education (2019), the UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report (2019) and Refugee Education 2030: A Strategy for Inclusion

(2019) mention the increased investment and participation of refugees in Vocational Education and Training (VET) for refugee self-reliance, ease pressure on host countries and meet targets set in the SDG 4. These policies do not automatically result in refugees' self-reliance and inclusion, as there are many challenges for refugees to overcome. Language barriers, legal hurdles, stigma, and discrimination against refugees significantly influence both access and participation in the VET (Thomas et al., 2024; Demir et al., 2025; Chadderton and Edmonds, 2015).

Pakistan's case in this context is quite interesting as it hosts one of the largest and most protracted refugee populations across the world, while non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and also has no refugee policy. This led to the legal and economic vulnerability of the refugee population. In response, UNHCR Pakistan also invests in VET programs for refugees' self-reliance, economic inclusion, etc. However, these programs do not automatically result in the desired outcomes; there are many barriers and challenges. To understand this issue, this study examines the UNHCR global VET programs for Afghan refugees in Balochistan and how they intersect and shape local refugee realities. This study combines the Capability approach with the Intersectional Theory to evaluate whether VET programs are expanding refugees' capabilities to pursue the life they choose and value. Drawing on the qualitative research methodology with semi-structured interviews with refugees and relevant stakeholders, the paper assesses the effectiveness and limitations of the VET programs for refugees in Balochistan.

Significance of the study

This paper contributes to the existing literature on VET in the refugee context by providing in-depth qualitative evidence from the protracted refugee setting in Balochistan. Empirically, it shows how global education policies intersect and shape local realities for Afghan refugees in Balochistan. It is an in-depth qualitative study on VET programs for Afghan refugees through a theoretical combination of the Capability Approach with the Intersectional theory, analyzing both urban and rural refugee settlements.

Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study is to critically analyze and evaluate the UNHCR VET program for Afghan refugees in both rural and urban settlements in Balochistan. Furthermore, the study seeks to identify key challenges affecting access, participation, and outcomes of VET interventions and to generate refugee-sensitive policy recommendations for improving VET programs.

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by two main questions: 1) To what extent do VET programs expand refugees' capabilities, or in other words, do refugees live the life they have reason to value and choose? 2) How do access and participation in VET programs vary among refugees based on their ethnicity, gender, and class identity?

Literature Review

Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs have increasingly been employed to address unemployment, social exclusion, and reduce aid dependency (Dagar, 2024; Aziz, 2019; Preston & Green, 2008). UNESCO (2012) defines Vocational Education as:

“Education programmes that are designed for learners to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies specific to a particular occupation, trade, or class of occupations or trades. Such programmes may have work-based components (e.g., apprenticeships, dual-system education programmes). Successful completion of such programmes leads to labour market-relevant, vocational qualifications acknowledged as occupationally oriented by the relevant national authorities and/or the labour market.”

Many European countries specifically target refugees for VET, as refugees are at higher risk of being unemployed (Jeon, 2019; Heidenreich, 2016). Aziz's (2019) study on Afghan refugees in Balochistan highlighted that VET led to higher income among refugees. Shauri and Oswago (2010) and Dahlberg et al. (2024) also validated that VET leads to higher income and employment among refugees. Grawert and Mielke (2018) confirm that Afghan refugee who acquired a translocal network during displacement produces positive results in the future. Equating VET for economic purposes (higher income, employment, etc.) as proposed by the human capital approach (Becker, 1964; Bowman, 1966; Mincer, 1958, 1989; Schultz, 1961) has been criticized by

many scholars as it solely focuses on the economic aspect of the VET, neglecting a more humanistic perspective (McGrath, 2012; Billett, 2014; Dagar, 2024; Zhang, Y., 2025).

Theoretically, this instrumentalist approach to VET, as informed by human capital theory, has been criticized by Rawls's Theory of Justice (1973) and Sen's capability approach (1999), and in education specifically by Dewey (1966). Researchers such as Moodie, Wheelahan, and Lavigne (2019) studied VET employing the capability approach, and more recently capability approach is increasingly used in the VET (e.g., McGrath, 2012; Tikly, 2013; Powell, and McGrath, 2014; Bonvin, 2019; Powell and McGrath, 2019; McGrath et al., 2020, Diaz et al., 2020; Zhang, Y., 2025). However, studies on Vocational Education and Training in the context of refugees and internally displaced persons through the Capability Approach are recent and few. These include Hilal (2019), Thorne (2020), van Dijk et al. (2022), and Dagar (2024).

Despite the increased focus and policies on the VET for refugees by the UNHCR, other International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), refugees face challenges and barriers that hinder access, participation, and effective utilization of the skills acquired (Dagar, 2024). These barriers and challenges include legal barriers such as right to work/right to employment (Chadderton and Edmonds, 2015; UNESCO 2019), Discrimination and exploitation in the labor market (underemployment) (Bauböck & Tripkovic, 2017; Knappert, Kornau, and Figengül 2018; UNESCO, 2019; Aziz, 2019; Thomas et al., 2024), language and cultural barriers (Hannah, 2008; Jørgensen et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024), lack of recognition of the prior learning (Wehrle et al., 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2019), lack of diversity in VET schools (Bundesinstitut für Berufliche Bildung (BIBB), 2020), Social, political and economic situations of the host country, discrimination in the VET institutions and restrictive immigrant policies and regulations (Hormel, 2010; Hilal, 2012; Ahmadzadeh et al., 2014; Korntheuer et al., 2018a; Thorne, 2020; Jørgensen et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024).

Studies in the context of Afghan refugees in Pakistan are few; these include Sinclair (1990) about the income generation programs by NGOs in Pakistan. Easton-Calabria's (2022) work is more of an archival and historical work that studied the international assistance programs for the self-reliance of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Other studies (Ali et al., 2021; Javaid et al., 2022) are not relevant to the VET directly but address the labor market integration of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. A notable and relevant work in this context is Aziz's (2019) work on the Afghan refugees in Balochistan, where he argues that VET had positive results and led to higher incomes and employment of Afghan refugees in Balochistan. Aziz's study also adopts a more human capital approach to the study of VET in the refugee context, lacking a humanistic perspective. Not a single study exists that addresses the VET through the capability approach lens that discusses both urban refugee settlements and refugee villages of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Therefore, this study evaluates the VET programs for Afghan refugees in urban and rural refugee settlements in Balochistan through combining an intersectional approach with the capability theory. It examines whether VET programs are assisting refugees to live the life they desire and choice they make and how access and participation vary among different refugee groups based on their different and intersecting identities.

Theoretical Framework:

In theoretically grounding this work, I take the Capability Approach by the economist Amartya Sen as a core analytical framework, complemented by the Intersectional framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw. By combining these two approaches, this study looks at the participation by refugees in VET programs, particularly in the context where different layers of identities, such as gender, ethnicity, refugee status, religious minority, etc, intersect and shape participation and outcomes.

The Capability Approach is a normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being for the development policies by the government and non-government organizations in the developing countries (Robeyns, 2005). This study has the same purpose to evaluate and assess the development policy of VET programs of the non-

governmental organization in the refugee settlements across Balochistan. Sen (1999) conceptualises development as freedom. By this, he meant, the primary end and means of development is the expansion of freedom and removal of various types of unfreedom that leave people with little choice and opportunities to exercise their agency (Sen, 1999).

Sen differentiates between the “process aspect” of freedom related to the freedom of actions and decision, and the “opportunities” that people actually have (Sen, 1999, p.17). There is a need to distinguish between the means (goods and services) and the functioning and capabilities. The availability of goods and services should not be thought of as resulting in the exchange of money or income; however, goods possess certain characteristics that enable functionings. In this way, “the relation between good and functioning to achieve certain beings and doings is influenced by the conversion factors” (Robeyns, 2005, p. 99). The conversion factors can be personal, social, and environmental. These conversion factors are quite important for my study as the findings highlight that the different layers of conversion factors hinder even the achievement of functionings, which indicates that the expansion of capabilities remains distant.

Moving forward, functionings are regarded as achieved ‘beings and doings’ while, on the other hand, “capabilities relate to the substantial freedom and opportunities needed to reach a desired functioning” (Preeti, 2024, p. 113). Capability ‘is essentially one of freedom—the range of options a person has in deciding what kind of life to lead’ (Dreze & Sen, 1995, p. 11). It is choosing a life ‘one has reason to value’(Walker 2006, p. 165). The central question are, argues Nussbaum, ‘What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them?’ (Nussbaum, 2011, X). This approach provides a lens to analyse the VET programs in the Urban and Rural refugee settlements in Balochistan. I look at the VET programs by different NGOs in the Urban and Rural refugee settlements. I ask how the conversion factors prevent refugees in VET programs from achieving the functionings? Followed by the question of whether these programs really expand the capabilities of refugees?

In addition to the Capability approach, this study also uses the Intersectional framework as a complementary theoretical framework. The objective is to know how the different layers of intersecting identities of refugees impact their participation, aspiration, and outcomes in the VET programs. The Intersectionality theory developed from Crenshaw's (1989) work, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, where she discusses the experiences of black women and how the courts frame and interpret the stories of black women plaintiffs. She argued that black women are discriminated against based on their race, gender, and class.

Intersectionality, conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), is a theoretical framework that examines how multiple axes of identity—such as race, gender, and class intersect to shape experiences of privilege, marginalization, and oppression. Intersectionality is the complex way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (based on race, sex, and class) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups. The core belief is that the system of power that governs people's lives cannot be understood in isolation. These systems include cultural norms, practices, perceptions, institutional structures, and social hierarchies that shape individual lives. These systems or structures determine the disadvantages and advantages people have in a social system; they also intersect and coproduce each other, resulting in different social realities (Collins et al., 2013; Preeti, 2024).

Intersectionality helps in the study to see how different layers of refugee identity impact their participation, aspiration, and outcomes in the VET programs. Afghan refugees are a diverse and heterogeneous group. The multiple identities, as a refugee, as a woman, a socio-economically disadvantaged group, followed by an ethnic and religious minority. These different layers of identity intersect to further marginalize and oppress refugees. In this study, for example, A Hazara girl, who belongs to an ethnic and religious minority and belongs to a group that has seen a history of persecution in the face of sectarian violence in the

host country, faces discrimination across these different identities. As compared to a man from the same group, a female is more discriminated against due to the complex and intersecting identities.

Research Design

Study Context

Pakistan's case in this regard is quite interesting as it hosts one of the largest protracted refugee populations across the globe without signing the Refugee Convention of 1951 and having no domestic refugee policy. UNHCR also reported that Pakistan hosts around 1.38 million registered Afghan refugees and almost the same or a greater number of refugees living unregistered (UNHCR, 2024). The refugee population in Pakistan mostly resides in the two provinces, namely Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, both provinces having borders with Afghanistan. This study's geographical scope is limited to the province of Balochistan, which has both refugee villages and urban refugee settlements. The two refugee villages in the district Pishin, namely Saranan and Surkhab, and the Urban refugee settlements in the district Quetta include Hazara Town, Ghousabad, and Qadri Abad.

The VET programs included many types of skills and training, these include Hand Embroidery, Ladder Embroidery, Arts and Crafts, Dehydration of Food and Vegetables, Carpet Weaving, Tailoring, Basic Computer Skill and English Language Courses offered by a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Taraqee Foundation, funded by UNHCR in Urban Quetta for female refugees only. The Innovative Development Organization (IDO), another NGO funded by UNHCR, has its VET programs in both Urban settlements in Quetta and refugee villages. In the refugee villages, these programs include tailoring, poultry farming, Solar Food Dryer, Goat and Sheep farming, and Home Seed and Gardening. UNHCR invests heavily in the VET globally and in Pakistan, as shown. This paper aims to bring the unheard voices of refugees who are considered the silent aid recipients, neglecting refugees' agency. This study also considers the perspective of policy stakeholders from different NGOs and UNHCR for a deeper understanding of the VET programs in Balochistan.

Methodology

This research was conducted utilizing qualitative research methodology to evaluate and explore the refugee perspective on the VET programs by the UNCHR partner NGOs in the districts of Quetta and Pishin. In the qualitative method, this study focused on the refugees, policymakers, and NGO representatives to explore their perspectives on these programs, barriers, and challenges faced by the refugees (Patton, 2015). Qualitative methods include semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

This study adopted an exploratory research design, a qualitative approach that starts with qualitative data collection and analysis for an in-depth understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Furthermore, data collection commenced with semi-structured interviews with Afghan refugees, policymakers, and NGO representatives to explore their views on the purpose of VET, barriers, and recommendations for improvement.

The study focuses on those Afghan refugees who are beneficiaries of the VET programs of UNHCR in the districts of Quetta and Pishin. Secondly, the relevant stakeholders, such as policymakers and NGO representatives, who are involved in refugee livelihood programs, are interviewed for a better insight into the design, implementation, and challenges faced in such initiatives for both refugees and the organizations.

Purposive sampling was used to select refugees based on their participation in the VET programs, and for choosing the policy makers and NGO representatives, a purposive sampling technique was used, as they were involved in the refugee livelihood programs and VET programs in Quetta and Pishin. 'This type of sampling is essentially to do with the selection of units (which may be people, organizations, documents, departments, and so on), with direct reference to the research questions being asked' (Bryman, 2012, Page 416).

In qualitative studies, the sample size cannot be established at the outset that how many people need to be interviewed and the researchers rely on data saturation (Bryman, 2012). Overall, a total of 34 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the refugees and other relevant stakeholders. A sample of 29 refugees were interviewed to achieve data

saturation, and 5 other relevant stakeholders were interviewed. Participants from different ethnic groups, Pashtuns, Hazara, Tajik, and Uzbek, participated in this study. The geographical focus is limited to the urban refugee settlements in the district Quetta and the refugee villages in the Saranan and Surkhab.

All the data collected were audio-recorded with the participant's consent and later transcribed. The data from interviews were analysed through thematic analysis. The steps involved in thematic analysis are the following: Familiarizing yourself with themes, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and lastly, producing a report (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The same steps were followed in this study. Themes are grouped into categories such as program purpose, challenges/barriers, and skills trends.

Research ethics were also taken into consideration.

Before going to the field for data collection, institutional approval was obtained from the university. Refugees were also asked to sign written consent forms and, in some cases, they gave verbal consent. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were also considered. Refugees' voices in this paper are highlighted through verbatim and their names and identities are changed.

Findings:

The purpose and Aspiration of refugees from the VET Programs

In both Refugee camps and the Urban settlements of refugees in the district of Quetta, including Hazara Town, Ghousabad, and Qadriabad, the skills offered by UNHCR are different based on community and market demand and the geography of that particular area. For example, the Goat and Sheep, home seed and gardening, poultry farming for females, and solar food drying are the only skills offered in the Surkhab refugee camp due to the Agricultural landscape of Surkhab. On the other hand, Saranan does not have such an agricultural landscape; the skills offered are different from those offered in the Surkhab. In Saranan, for example, the skills offered are mobile repairing, tailoring, Solar repairing, basic computer, and poultry farming for females.

In the urban settlements, NGOs offer a wide range of skills, including tailoring, mobile phone repair,

Hand Embroidery, Ladder embroidery, Arts and Crafts, Dehydration of food and vegetables, carpet weaving, basic computer skills, English language courses, videography, and photography. Most of the skills discussed are funded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and a few by Mercy Corps.

When asked what the purpose of the VET programs was, the staff member of the organization shared that the primary purpose of the programs is livelihood support among refugees, reducing aid dependency, promoting economic self-reliance, and social cohesion with the host community, as most of the skills offered include the host community as well. An organization staff member remarked about their objective as:

"Our objective is that a boy can stand on his own feet, support his family through the skills he has learned, and start a business."

Another member, in the same way, explained:

"Our objective is livelihood support to Afghan refugees so that they can learn a skill and then tomorrow they can easily start a business/work through the skill they have learned."

For the question of host-refugee members in the skill program, another member from the NGO said:

"Till 2023, we only had refugees in the skill programs, then later, the host community from the respective areas demanded their inclusion in the skill programs from time to time. Accordingly, the UNHCR from 2024 allowed 30% of the hosts while the 70% refugees. However, the carpet weaving program, from its start in 2023, had the host community included."

These quotes highlight the primary aim of the VET programs: to promote economic self-reliance among refugees, enable them to support their families, and facilitate entrepreneurship. The inclusion of host community members also reflects efforts to foster social cohesion.

The refugee participant mainly reported that they wanted to learn new skills and pursue them to meet their livelihood needs once they complete the program. They also mentioned that the skills learned would help make a living for our family members. Some said they would learn the skill and open shops, for example, in the tailoring shop. Refugees aspired to learn skills and make it a source of a better livelihood. A participant commented, 'I will have

goats and sheep and a medical where I will treat goats and sheep'. Refugees also expressed that they wanted to pursue the same skill on other cities, reflecting their mobility wishes. One participant in this context indicated that, as he has now learned this skill, he will go to Karachi to further polish this skill and work there.

Moreover, when interviewing refugees, I asked questions like Why did you join this program? And what was your main objective? A female refugee replied:

"I joined this program to boost my skills and, most importantly, to be among people from different nations to learn about their communities, cultures, and languages. I am deeply interested in the unity of nations—seeing people come together, sharing ideas, and learning from one another inspires me."

This demonstrates that refugees not only learn skills for better livelihood options but also learn languages, explore the culture, and communities around them. This closely aligns with the objectives of the NGOs for social cohesion among the different groups of refugees and also most importantly, the host community.

Structural and Environmental Barriers

The semi-structured qualitative interviews, when analyzed, highlighted the key structural and environmental barriers faced by the refugees in accessing and effectively utilizing the VET programs by the NGOs. Many participants mentioned that the duration of the skill taught is not sufficient for the few skills that are quite technical to understand and comprehend in such a short time. Participant A said:

"Software part of mobile repairing is technical as many of us lack basic computer/mobile literacy, and the software part of mobile repairing session is for a month only; if its duration is extended for some more time, it would be better."

Moreover, many of the beneficiaries of the VET programs also mentioned that the stipend provided, which is six thousand rupees, is insufficient. It, at best, can only cover the daily commute to and from the center where skills are being taught. As many of the refugees in the VET programs are in an economically disadvantaged position, that group is deliberately targeted by the NGOs to support them in their livelihood. The majority of refugees who

were part of the VET programs had precarious livelihoods, including daily wage laborers, shopkeepers, and small farmers, who had to work daily to fulfill their basic daily needs. This created an uncertain situation for refugees, who had to attend the VET programs in the morning for almost five hours and also find work once they were done with their skill classes, which most of the time left them with no work, especially for daily wage laborers. As a result, refugees had to learn skills and also work simultaneously to manage their basic needs at least. This also reflects how social classes are affecting participation in VET programs. In his context, they demanded a higher stipend, which at least could help them manage their day-to-day household economic activity for the period of training sessions. In this regard, Participant B stated:

"Six thousand is very minimal. I was a daily wage laborer before joining this program, earning almost fifteen hundred rupees daily, which accounts for almost thirty to thirty-five thousand rupees for a month. Now I get only six thousand rupees. After the classes, I do nothing as I cannot find any work."

Furthermore, the refugees in the VET programs also highlighted that outdated equipments or toolkits were huge barriers to the effective utilization of the skills gained. The toolkits are given to each participant in the VET programs to encourage the participant to continue this skill and make it a source of income. Refugees, both in the refugee camp of Saranan and Surkhab, explained that equipment such as a Sewing machine in Saranan and the food dryer in Surkhab were outdated and could not compete with market demands. These toolkits were both inefficient and time-consuming. They further mentioned that the equipment utilized in the market is much more advanced and upgraded compared to what refugees get, resulting in discouragement in competing with the market and abandoning the skills learned in favour of other types of work. Participant C said, in the context of tailoring skills and the outdated equipment they receive:

"We are given a Sharp sewing machine, and we want a Jockey sewing machine, which is efficient and widely used in the market. We cannot purchase it ourselves, as it is too expensive, and we work as daily wage laborers, earning just enough to make ends meet at a maximum. The Sharp

machine is of little use, and many of us end up selling it in the market and ultimately leaving tailoring as a skill.”

Moreover, there were many other challenges reported by refugees in the refugee camps of Saranan and Surkhab. The lack of electricity in the Saranan refugee camp was considered to be the major challenge to convert these skills into a livelihood source. The Saranan refugee camp, as highlighted by the refugees, had no electricity, and they relied on the solar panel in the camp. In this way, the tailoring machines also require electricity to operate. They demanded a solar panel and a battery to operate the skill and make it a source of income. Participant E said:

“We ask for a solar panel and a battery with the toolkit, as the camp lacks electricity, and tailoring demands electricity; we can use solar panels and batteries as an alternative.

The refugees of Surkhab camp stated that it lacks a community center. By a community center, they meant a place where skilled refugees from around the camp can come to work collectively, specifically in the case of a solar food dryer. They will have a representative and will take orders from companies and the market and work collectively for that order in the community center. Individually, it is not efficient as not everyone can access the market. This way, they will not only have a good link with the market but also will serve their economic interest in the best possible way. Participant F observed:

“We need a center (for food drying) where the trained refugee will work collectively. They will have a representative and will take orders from companies and the market. This will make market access easy and efficient.”

Furthermore, refugees highlighted barriers to access to the skill programs. Refugees mentioned that they lacked access to the skills program. They observed that the refugee population is very large while the opportunities offered are minimal, making it inaccessible to a large part of the community, leaving them excluded. In this context, a participant from the Saranan refugee camp remarked:

“There is only one computer lab, and we have almost five thousand households in the camp. The skills only admit fifteen refugees per session, leaving the majority of refugees. It should be extended to allow more people to participate in such sessions.”

Adding to this, the refugees from Saranan unanimously emphasized that the precarious

economic conditions prevent them from attending any private institution in the city for computer-related courses. The refugees in the camp have to work to make a living and do not have the capacity for the daily travel expenses and the tuition fees to attend institutions. To clarify one thing, the refugees in Saranan mostly work in the Brick Kiln Industry as daily wage laborers. In this regard, a participant reported:

“The little money we earn from brick kiln work, should we use it to run our household, or spend it on tuition fees and travel for the courses in the city?”

This clearly illustrates the lack of access to skills programs by the large population of refugees excluded systematically, and the situations are further exacerbated by the dire economic conditions in the refugee camps, which severely restrict their ability to pursue alternative opportunities.

In addition to this, the female respondents from Hazara town reported that the security situation of the city were a huge challenge for them to tackle. Quetta city has seen sectarian violence, where the minority Shia community was persecuted for too long. Even the college or university buses from Hazara town were not safe, nor were the taxis they took for their daily commute from Hazara town to the city. In this context, the refugee girls from Hazara town, who belong to the Shia community, were in a state of dilemma and fearful about whether to attend the classes or not. One thing to clarify here, most of the skills classes were in the area where refugees reside; however, a few skills program classes were not near their homes, and they had to travel for classes daily. The family members also discouraged them from abandoning classes due to the security situation. A refugee girl stated:

“It was a bit difficult to go to the area where classes were held, and even once there was a bomb blast, but no casualties were reported. At first, I was scared. Everyone used to say this road is dangerous, this problem, that problem. But slowly, I got used to it.”

Another girl also said:

“At that time, as Shia, they were killing the Hazara community's people, so we were afraid to go out of our home, but staying at home is not the solution, so we were going.”

The refugee voices clearly show that fear and the trauma they had to face daily for attending classes. It

shows the multiple burdens they had to carry, first as a refugee, and then as a woman, and lastly as a religious minority, intersecting different layers of identity affecting their access and participation in the VET programs. It also shows how the situations restrict mobility, especially for minorities and the marginalized population. However, it did not stop them as they had mentioned. They still pursued their dreams, attended classes, and showed resilience.

Shifting Skill Preferences Toward Modern and Digital Economies

During the interviews with refugees, they highlighted the demand for new skills that need to be included in the VET programs. They emphasised the digital skills, language skills, and entrepreneurship. When asked about the skills that need to be included, a female participant in an interview said:

"I would suggest programs like Business ideas, Startups, freelancing, and other online opportunities. These skills can empower refugees to build their own careers and become self-reliant."

This actually reflects the growing interest in online skills, business, and entrepreneurship type of skills. This also demonstrates that through online business, they can escape the discrimination they face in the market. Women from the Quetta Urban area also asked for the beautician courses that are in high demand. Women in Saranan, however, asked for home-based skills such as embroidery. A participant in this context mentioned:

"We know a little bit of embroidery and stitching type skills; NGOs can introduce such skills to channelize them further."

Refugee participants from the Refugee villages mostly focused on the language and basic computer skills. They have asked for the introduction of program including language courses and basic computer skills. In this context, a participant shared:

"Due to our curriculum change in schools, and as our community lacks Urdu and English-speaking people, language institutes would really help us."

Another participant said:

"We also lack basic computer literacy, and a computer center is needed."

A participant from the Saranan mentioned:

"Computer-based programs are available; however, these are not sufficient as this skill is highly demanded in our community."

This clearly reflects a shifting preference among refugees in both Urban and Rural refugee villages. In the Urban refugee settlements refugees reported new skills such as business startups and other advanced skills like videography, graphic designing etc. However, in the rural refugee areas refugees mostly mentioned the need for language and basic computer courses. This also shows that refugees are not silent aid recipients, but they actively exercise their agency and they want more diverse VET programs to be introduced.

Discussion:

The core argument of Sen's Capability Approach (CA) (1999) is that development is conceptualized as the advancement of freedom. CA supplemented by the Intersectionality, this paper shows the effects of multiple and intersecting identities of refugees (race, religion, nationality, socio-economic status, gender) on their freedom in relation to the VET programs. I start by asking if the VET programs are successful in the first place in converting means (goods and services) into functionings. By this, I mean the conversion factors that influence the conversion of goods into functionings. Robeyns (2005) argued that these conversion factors include personal, social, and environmental/structural. The study recorded different types of conversion factors influencing the conversion of goods into the functionings. These included the insufficient timeframe for a skill; specifically, some skills, like mobile repairing, are somewhat technical and require more time.

In addition to this, the outdated tools that could no longer compete in the market were given to refugees at the end of the session. The equipment served no purpose. Refugees asked for more advanced toolkits that could, at a minimum, compete in the market. Moreover, as some refugee settlements lacked electricity, a solar panel and a small battery were needed to operate the tailoring machine. Refugees demanded a solar panel and a battery to be given to them at the end of the session with other toolkits. Furthermore, the findings also show that refugees lacked a community center where they could come and work collectively and produce more goods,

specifically in the case of the solar food dryer. They asked for a community center that would make it more efficient and effective for refugees to reach the market through the community center and produce more goods. These are some of the conversion factors that prevented refugees from achieving the functionings.

Furthermore, and most importantly, the question is whether these skill programs expand the capabilities of refugees and whether these refugees have the opportunities and freedom to choose the life they value. Based on the data, it can be argued that in reality, refugees have few options to choose from. For example, a female refugee highlighted that 'we were left only with one option: videography and against our will we had to agree to it.' In the same way, refugees from the Saranan refugee village mentioned that 'there is only one computer lab and only fifteen refugees are admitted per session in the six months', leaving the vast majority of refugees not able to attend this program, keeping in view the highly dense and populated refugee settlements. Furthermore, there were many participants who were not interested in the programs offered. They wanted many other skill programs that were currently unavailable. This clearly reflects the lack of options in the skills offered, hence the freedom to choose from. The skills programs seem to be designed without listening to refugee voices, ignoring their agency. However, during the interview, refugees have voiced their concerns and demanded many other skill programs that were lacking. This is also demonstrated through the graphs in the findings section, where refugees have asked for more digital and modern skills, discouraging the traditional ones. In digital and modern skills, refugees prefer online skills, with them they have strongly desired the basic computer skills, especially in the Saranan and Surkhab refugee villages. This reflects refugees not as the recipients of aid but actively exercising their agency and demanding diversity in the skills offered. Women from the refugee villages preferred home-based stitching and embroidery-type work that could be completed at home, indicating the tribal structure of the society. In the same way, Hazara refugee girls, while on their way to the skills center, faced multiple challenges as they are an ethnic and religious minority and have a history of sectarian violence.

They argued that training centers near their homes and their specific areas would be safe for them. This indicates how the intersecting layers of identities- refugee, girl, patriarchy, ethnic, and religious minority- are affecting the participation of female refugees in VET programs. Not only female, but even the male refugees' participation is affected by their dire socio-economic conditions. Refugees during the data collection highlighted that they were unable to decide whether to join skill programs or earn money for their daily household expenses, as they were the only breadwinners of their families. It shows how the socio-economically disadvantaged groups have a double burden to carry compared to other groups.

Building on the findings of this study, I suggest that the VET programs need improvements in several key areas. First, there is a great need to look at the conversion factors that prevent refugees from realizing the functionings, which include the lack of advanced toolkits, insufficient timeframe, community center, etc. Secondly, as Sen argues that development should be conceptualized as freedom, in this regard, most of the skills are repeated time and again with a lack of diversity. Refugees have been actively demanding new skill offers, from basic computer skills to the business incubation center, to digital skills. The requirements and aspirations of refugees need to be considered. As most of the refugees have expressed that they want not only economic self-reliance but also, they have desired to learn new languages, explore different cultures, and social cohesion with the host community. The overall objective of the VET programs should be expanding capabilities, in other words, freedom, having multiple choices to choose from, and living the lives that refugees value. UNHCR and other NGOs designing VET programs should also consider the requirements of the marginalized groups, especially for refugees, women, ethnic and religious minorities, and economically disadvantaged people. It was found that women are often not part of the decision-making bodies while designing and implementing these courses. An important point to consider is collaborating with the national institutions of the host country, such as in Balochistan, where there are multiple institutions that regularly offer such skill programs. This way, refugees will have many options to choose from and

could interact with the host community, resulting in social cohesion.

Conclusion

The study examined UNHCR VET programs for Afghan refugees in Balochistan through the combination of the Capability Approach with the Intersectional Theory, focusing mainly on expanding refugees' capabilities, access, participation, and outcomes. The findings reveal that VET provides valuable skills. However, structural barriers, limited options, and intersecting refugee identities based on gender, class, and ethnicity constrain refugees' capabilities and the life they wish to pursue, demonstrating the need for VET programs to address conversion factors and diverse refugee aspirations. Policy efforts should prioritize diverse, inclusive, and refugee-sensitive VET offerings, ensuring refugees not only attain economic independence but also exercise their agency and live the lives they reason to value.

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