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'A Qualitative Study Exploring the lived Experiences of Afghan Women's Migration to the UK'

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O' women and men why are you silent

Why do you look for an imaginary world

Having illusions about your might

Forget not that you are the makers of history.

Be not occupied in day-dreaming

Burn in your burning wrath

The invisible chain

Which cunning bucksters spun around you.

You are the one who destroyed

The foundation of slavery and feudalism

Smashed the foundation of Fascism,

Threw the reign of terror into the dustbin of history

and built a new world on their ruins.

Like the early Red morning Sun

You have fertilized the earth with your blood

And hoisted high the lofty banner of peace and freedom.

Come and swim in the depth of the stormy seas

Struggle against hardships

Because the essence of life is continuous battle

Sitting with folded-hand brings you no prosperity

Struggle makes you a great human being

It will record your name in the archives of history

Because you are the markers of history

Hafizullah Emadi

(Das, 2004)

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In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

This research is dedicated to the twelve extraordinary women who entrusted me with their stories. Your courage to reveal your personal experiences has been an honour and a profound privilege. Each of you has shared your pain, resilience, and hope with a vulnerability that has left an indelible mark on my soul. Your voices, rich with truth and strength, have breathed life into this research, and Iam committed to ensuring that your stories resonate with the depth and respect they deserve. Your experiences are not just valuable, they are a testament to the incredible fortitude and spirit that drives change and inspires us all.

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To my siblings, you've been my constant source of motivation, proving that against all odds, we can achieve greatness together. To my friends, your unwavering trust and grounding presence have been my refuge during the most challenging times.

To my beautiful niece Hadya, your innocent joy and gentle presence have been a beacon of light in the midst of difficulties. In moments when the harsh realities of the world felt overwhelming, your smileand touch reminded me of what truly matters and grounded me in what's important.

To the DClinPsy girls, our journey together has been a testament to our shared strength and resilience. The laughter, the reflections, the food, and the playful sarcasm have all been expressions

of how we embraced and celebrated our unique selves in a system that often didn't understand us. We transformed obstacles into cherished moments and built a bond that will forever hold a special place in my heart.

And finally, echoing my sentiment from the first day of the doctorate: "I wanna thank me," for enduringthe challenges, for finding strength in the chaos, and for keeping the humour alive even in tough times. Here's to celebrating the resilience that got me through!

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ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, Afghanistan has experienced one of the largest flows of emigration, with Afghan women often experiencing their migration journey through a politicised and reductive lens. This qualitative study critically examines the lived experiences of Afghan women immigrants in the UK through an intersectional lens, focusing on how socio-political contexts and immigration policies shape their realities. Grounded in critical realist and feminist epistemologies, the research uses in- depth semi-structured interviews with twelve first-generation Afghan migrant women aged 28-59 to reveal the intricate dynamics of power, gender, and systemic oppression.

An inductive Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to interpret three themes: "*Navigating loss and fostering hope*"' "*Behind the veil: unveiling the reality of Afghan women's lives in the UK" and* "*Liberation and empowerment of Afghan women."* The findings suggest significant barriers to accessing essential services such as healthcare, housing, employment, and education. These barriers are further compounded by systemic mistrust and discriminatory immigration policies, which often reinforce "us vs. them" ideology and create hierarchies of worth based on immigration status. Such structural challenges not only threaten Afghan women's psychological well-being but also undermine their ability to preserve their cultural identity. Despite these challenges, Afghan women in this study appeared to exhibit resilience through community solidarity, cultural preservation, and faith. This resistance may be reflected in their efforts to uphold their heritage and build supportive networks. Policy and clinical implications for working with Afghan women were also considered.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This research explores the lived experiences of Afghan women who have immigrated to the UK. While there is emerging knowledge detailing the migration experiences of Afghan men and youth, research on Afghan women remains particularly sparse in the UK context (Fischer, 2017; López & Ryan, 2023; Rostami-Povey, 2007; Ryan et al., 2024). This qualitative study uses an intersectional lens to examine how gender, race, religion, and immigration status influence their experiences and access to opportunities. In this chapter, I begin by positioning myself and exploring my relationship with this research. I will highlight how this research aligns with a Critical Realist (CR) and feminist standpoint epistemology framework. This terminology used in the study will be explainedfor clarity. Following this, an overview of the background literature will be summarised to provide context for the research. This approach emphasises the importance of understanding power dynamics and structural inequalities in shaping knowledge.

Position of the Researcher

Reflexive awareness in qualitative research involves critical self-evaluation of the researcher'spositionality, as defined by Dowling (2006). Traditional research often presents itself as neutral, yet researchers bring their own biases and cultural perspectives to their work (Thien, 2009). Reflexivity involves paying careful and analytic attention to the researcher's position and its impact on the research process and the outcome (Cutcliffe, 2003). By acknowledging the researcher's experiences,beliefs, knowledge, values, and biases, I aim to enhance the credibility of my research and deepen my awareness of the relationship between researcher and the researched in constructing knowledge (Cutcliffe, 2003; Finlay, 2002). My reflections and personal judgments are informed by available evidence (Webb, 1992), presented from a first-person perspective, while a third-person account will be used to centre the participants and the research (Webb, 1992).

Personal Relationship with the Research Project

My personal relationship to this research area is crucial for understanding and interpreting the experiences of participants. This awareness enables me to navigate how my position may influence various stages of the research reflexivity process. As Maykut and Morehouse (1994) note:

"The qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others, to indwell, and at the same time tobe aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand" (p.123).

As an Afghan, Muslim and immigrant woman from a Muslim-majority country, with an educational background, I occupy what Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describe as 'the space in between.' This dual perspective allows me to emphasise with the challenges faced by Afghan immigrant women in the UK while also understanding the complexities of their experiences. Growing up as a first- generation immigrant, I possess an intimate understanding of migration and cultural identity. However, I also acknowledge my outsider status compared to those who encounter stricter immigration laws and less support upon arrival (Knott, 2005).

My upbringing in a patriarchal society exposed me to the intersectional challenges Afghan women face due to gender inequalities. Moving to the UK at age twelve, I experienced distorted narratives about myself and Afghan women, where conversations with people often carried a tone of pity with a portrayal through a simplistic biased lens. As a Muslim, I also observed the significant role played by religious narratives and Islamophobia in shaping these perceptions. My role as a researcher demands an understanding of participants' diverse realities, recognising their marginalised status within societal, political, economic, and cultural contexts. This perspective enables me to appreciate shared experiences while respecting the unique journey of each participant.

From my earliest memories as an immigrant child, I have been intimately familiar with the struggles faced by immigrants, particularly through the lens of my mother's experiences. As a child, I frequently found myself in the role of interpreter during her mental health appointments. This firsthandexperience exposed me to the myriads of challenges Afghan women can encounter while navigating unfamiliar systems. In my clinical practice, I have supported Afghan women through their mental health journeys, prioritising their voices over institutional demands for conformity. This approach reflects my dedication to amplifying marginalised narratives and dismantling the silencing mechanisms inherent in societal structures.

A critical and significant ethical obstacle to my research is the possibility of contradicting this project's purpose and intent. While challenging the colonisation of Afghan women's identities, I must remain vigilant that despite my best efforts, there is an inherent risk that I may replicate some aspectsof the very systems of power and colonial dynamics in the process. Colonialism is not merely a series of individual actions, but a pervasive system that shapes societal norms and power dynamics. There are numerous challenges in "*speaking with and for others who many times are in unprivileged positions of power relative both to dominant structures in society (or) to the researchers themselves"* (Bosco & Moreno, 2009, p.122). As a trainee Clinical Psychologist (CR), my interactions are shaped by both privilege and power, guiding how I center their lives, realities, and specific needs within my research (Knott, 2005). As Longhurt (2009) notes, how individuals are "positioned within various contexts of power affects the way they understand the world" (Longhurt, 2009, p.583). It is therefore important that I, as a researcher, recognise my "own positions of power in the context of social relations and partiality and subjective nature of the data collected in the field and of the knowledge produced" (Bosco & Moreno, 2009, p.120).

As an Afghan woman, a Trainee Clinical Psychologist, and a doctoral researcher, I see it as myethical imperative to leverage my privilege and platform to challenge prevailing narratives and empower Afghan women. Inspired by activists like hooks (1989), my research endeavors to balance insider perspectives with an outsider's critical distance, ensuring that I stand in solidarity with participants' struggles while conducting research that is sensitive, respectful, and transformative (hooks, 1989; Merton, 1972). This project represents not only an act of resistance against dominant narratives but also a platform for sharing and amplifying marginalised voices with academic discourseand beyond.

Epistemological Position

The clarification and justification of my epistemological stance are crucial, as they influence themethodology, analysis, and quality assurance measures (Carter & Little, 2007). Epistemology, according to Willig (2013) is the theory of knowledge, encompassing what it is possible to know, and the reliability and validity of that knowledge. In this thesis, I utilised both Critical Realist (CR) and feminist standpoint theories as complementary epistemological frameworks. I was drawn to CR epistemology due to its focus on causation, and retroduction to uncover the deeper structures of social events (Bhaskar, 2016). It aims to provide practical policy recommendations to address social problems (Fletcher, 2017). CR posits a realist ontology and a subjective epistemology, asserting that reality exists independently of our perceptions, but our knowledge of it is always mediated by human experience and interpretation (Fletcher, 2017). This perspective allows for an in-depth explanation of phenomena, acknowledging the fallibility of empirical observations due to contextual frameworks and perceptions.

Feminist epistemology compliments CR by examining how gender influences conceptions of knowledge (Anderson, 2020) and understanding gendered experiences within their social contexts (Sinopoli, 2011). Central to feminist epistemology is the notion of situated knowledge, reflecting the particular perspectives of the 'knower' (Anderson, 2020). Feminist theory posits that subordinated social groups have an epistemic advantage in understanding issues related to their subordination (Collins, 1997). Unlike CR, which challenges positivism, feminist theory critiques the power dynamics in knowledge production itself (Harding, 1991). This perspective is crucial for examining how gender norms, societal expectations, and political and social contexts shape Afghan women's experiences and knowledge. Additionally, the feminist theory emphasises the goal of 'studying up' meaning to critically analyse 'what's wrong and what's still useful or otherwise valuable in the dominant institutions of society, their cultures, and practices' (Harding, 2009, p, 195). It applies an intersectionalapproach to social inequality, recognising and valuing the diverse experiences and perspectives of women (hooks, 1989).

Within the current research, CR provides a framework to explore the underpinnings of social phenomena concerning Afghan women's experiences of migration. Understanding Afghan women'ssocial reality necessitates examining the broader historical, social, and cultural factors influencing their experiences within the UK. The data collected from participants is not presented as the absolutetruth or 'direct' reality but as my interpretation of their reality, grounded in the assumption that their experiences reveal material and embodied reality with real effects on their lives (Maxwell, 2012). These assumptions will inform my thinking, and the research methods adopted to explore the researchobjectives.

Language and key terms

Language is defined as a fundamental social practice essential for understanding both our objective and subjective realities, and thus, our relationship with the construction and maintenance ofpower (Fairclough, 1989). The key terms discussed in this thesis will be summarised as in Table 1.

Table 1: *Key Terms and Concepts*

Migration/ Immigration/Emigration	Migration refers to the broader process of movement across borders, encompassing both leaving one's country (emigration) and entering a new one (immigration) (International Organisation for Migration, 2011). It includes diverse forms of movement, such as refugees, displaced persons, and those relocating for economic, educational, or family reasons (Lee, 1996; Djuretic, Crawford, & Weaver, 2007). In this study, migration specifically refers to the movement of Afghan women to the UK and their experience and settlement into British society. Beyond the physical act of relocation, migration also involves navigating a new social, cultural, and political environment, as well as addressing the challenges of building new lives, forming support networks, and integrating into a different societal context. While immigration focuses on entry and legal settlement, migration provides a broader framework that captures the entire journey, from departure to long-term integration. This

	study adopts migration to reflect the comprehensive experiences of Afghan women in the UK, emphasising their adaptation and engagement with their new environment.
Refugee	A refugee is defined by the UN as a "person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him—or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution" (United Nations Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 1951, p. 3).
Asylum Seeker	A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than his or her own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and

	national instruments, in case of a negative decision, the person must leave the country and may be expelled, as may any non-national in an irregular or unlawful situation, unless permission to stay is provided on humanitarian or other related grounds (International Organisation for Migration, 2013).
Afghan women	The term 'Afghan women' is used to refer to individuals who identify as being from or descended from Afghanistan. This term encompasses women, who regardless, of their current place or residence whether in Western countries, retain their ethnic identity and cultural heritage linked to Afghanistan. This includes maintaining aspects such as cultural traditions, language, and customs, It is crucial to recognise that while the term indicates a shared cultural background, Afghan women do not form a homogenous group. They have diverse experiences, perspectives, and responses, reflecting a range of individual and collective identities rather than a singular and uniform experience.
First-generation	The term 'first generation' has been defined in the literature to define individuals who have immigrated from one country to another with the intention of staying permanently, distinguishing them from tourists and holidaymakers (Bhugra, 2004). However, this definition is linked with legality, citizenship and the concept of borders,

	which I view as social constructs. Consequently, in this context, 'first-generation' refers to any individual who have migrated to a new country, regardless of the specifications related to government-related procedures.
Race	The concept of 'race' emerged in the 18th century from the work of anthropologists and philosophers such as Buffon, who classified people into pseudo-scientific racial categories based on geographical origins and physical traits such as skin colour (Montagu, 1942). While contemporary perspectives argue that 'race' is a social-political construct rather than a biological reality (Smedley & Smedly, 2005), debates persist in psychological research regarding its validity (Helms et al., 2005). Within this thesis, the construct of race is contested in terms of its scientific legitimacy, yet it acknowledged as a significant factor in the experiences of racialised communities (Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, 1991).
Islamophobia	Defined by the Runnymede Trust (Elahi & Khan, 2017) as a form of 'anti-Muslim racism'. It includes any discrimination, exclusion, or restriction targeting Muslims (or those perceived as Muslims) that aims to undermine or obstruct their equal recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This discrimination can occur across various spheres of public life, including political, economic, social, and cultural contexts (Elahi & Khan, 2017).

Racism	Racism is a form of discrimination upheld by systems of oppression that are based on the belief in the superiority of one race over others (Bulhan, 1985). The socioecological model highlights how racism operates at various levels, from the personal level, such as internalised racism, to the institutional level (McLeroy et al., 1988). Institutional racism refers to the systemic failure of organisations to provide fair and professional services to individuals based on their race, culture or ethnic backgrounds. This form of racism can be identified in organisational processes, attitudes, and behaviours that manifest as discrimination through unconscious bias, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racial stereotyping, thereby disadvantaging ethnic minority groups (Macpherson, Report, 1999).
Intersectionality	The term 'intersectionality' is often compared to a lattice netting, as it explores how intersecting systems of power, such as race, gender and class, create varying forms of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). Applying an intersectional approach to the current literature is essential for understanding how race, class, and gender intersect uniquely to shape the experiences of Afghan women during migration.
Racialised/Marginalised	In the literature, the terms 'racialised' and 'marginalised' will be used interchangeably. Although these terms have distinct meanings, where 'racialised' specifically pertains to the

	categorisation and disadvantage of groups based on perceived racial differences, and 'marginalised' refers to broader social and economic exclusion, both are employed here to highlight their interconnected effect (Phillips, 2011). Furthermore, it highlights how the two overlap and contribute to systemic inequalities, while acknowledging their differences within the context of the literature (Phillips, 2011).
Internal Oppression	Internal oppression refers to the external forces and systems of domination that marginalise, exclude, or discriminate against a particular group (hooks, 1984).
Internalised Oppression	Internalised oppression refers to the internal absorption of oppressive societal narratives, where individuals come to accept and enact the stereotypes and beliefs that marginalise them (Griifin, 1997). The intrapsychic process fosters self-blame, self-doubt, and compliance with oppressive norms, further entrenching systemic inequalities (Lorde, 1984).

Overview of the Theoretical and Empirical Context of this Research

This section reviews the relevant literature and situates this within a socio-political context. While the history of Afghan migration is complex and extends beyond the scope of this research, understanding key historical and socio-political contexts is essential (Rumbaut, 2012). Notably, the Soviet invasion, civilwars, and the rise of the Taliban have profoundly influenced migration patterns and current experiences. Therefore, this section will highlight the most pertinent historical aspects that impact Afghan immigrant women today. Understanding these historical contexts is essential to grasp the socio-political landscape, and the experiences of Afghan women, particularly in the contexts of civil wars, Taliban rule, and gender apartheid (Emadi, 2005). By contextualising these events, we aim to clarify misconceptions and stereotypes, offering a nuanced understanding of Afghan women's experiences and the intricate contextual factors shaping their lives and migration patterns (Dupree, 2002).

Cultural and Historical Dynamics of Afghanistan

Understanding the cultural and historical context of Afghanistan is essential for appreciating theadaptive processes of its people and the complexities they navigate (Evans & Barakat, 2012). As such, a brief introduction to the Afghan culture will be important in navigating researchers.

Afghanistan, a predominantly Islamic country in Central Asia, has a rich tapestry of cultural andhistorical influences. Its history stretches over 200 years, deeply influenced by various religions and empires (Hassan, 2024). It has been a crossroads for Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam (Ahmed, 2015). The country's rich historical tapestry is woven from centuries of invasions, cultural exchanges, and ethnic diversity. Numerous civilisations and empires, including the Greeks, Persians, Mongols, and British, have left enduring imprints over Afghanistan (Emadi, 2005; Evans & Barakat, 2012). Eachwave of conquest has contributed to the country's diverse and multifaceted identity (Emadi, 2005; Evans & Barakat, 2012). Although Afghanistan was declared completely independent in 1919, the conflict only ended following a peace treaty (Evans et al., 2003).

Afghanistan's population of approximately 40 million is spread across 34 provinces, with majorcities including Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e Sharif, and Kandahar (Hassan, 2024). The country's cultural complexity is reflected in its linguistic diversity, with Pashto and Dari serving as the official languages spoken by the Pashtuns and Tajik ethnic groups, respectively. (Dupree, 2002). Other languages suchas Uzbek, Turkmen, Balochi, and Hazaragi further highlight this multicultural heritage (Dupree, 2002). Religion holds a pivotal position in shaping Afghan society, with Islam, particularly the Sunni and Shiabranches, serving as the predominant faith (Emadi, 2005). Islamic principles permeate various aspects of daily life, shaping social norms, legal systems, and cultural practices (Dupree, 2002). Despite the predominant Islamic faith, Afghanistan is also home to small minorities of Sikhs, Hindus,and Buddhists (Nanda, 2003).

Afghan society is largely collectivist, emphasising the needs of the community and the importance of relationships within the in-group (Gorodnichenko & Ronald, 2012; Singh & Hoffman, 2022). Extended families play a crucial role in relational dynamics, where hospitality and honour are paramount (Georgas et al., 1997; Dupree, 2002). Authority and obedience are highly valued, with a significant degree of tolerance for inequality within family structures. Parents and elders are often seen as figures of authority, and obedience to them is considered a virtue (Dupree, 2002). Contemporary psychology often dichotomises cultures into collectivist versus individualistic frameworks (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). However, this binary approach can oversimplify the complexity of cultural identities. Migration and global interconnectedness are fostering cultural hybridisation, leading to increasingly complex identities that blend elements from multiple cultures (Talhelm, 2019). This nuanced understanding challenges the notion of coherent or stable cultural identities, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of culture in an interconnected world (Hermans &Kempen, 1998; Talhelm, 2019).

The Women of Afghanistan: A Journey of Resistance and Resilience

To grasp the full scope of Afghan women's resilience, it is essential to challenge the prevalent but misleading narratives that depict them solely as passive victims (Barakat & Wardell, 2002). For decades, Western portrayals have obscured their strength and agency, depicting Afghan women as symbols of suffering rather than their remarkable courage and resilience. The narrative of Afghan women is one of the extraordinary resistance against systemic oppression, showing their bravery andunwavering quest for equality and justice throughout the 20th and 21st centuries (Barakat & Wardell, 2002).

From the early 20th century, Afghan women have been pioneers in the struggle for gender parity (Ahmed- Ghosh, 2003). In 1919, they secured the right to vote, a significant milestone that preceded similar rights in many Western countries (Evans & Barakat, 2012). The 1920s under King Zahir Shah and the late 1970s saw significant advances in education and political participation, including the establishment ofthe first girls' school in 1921 and constitutional guarantees of rights to education, employment, and political participation (Lederman, 2002). Notably, the appointment of the first two women senators in 1965 further underscored their evolving role in Afghan society (Armstrong & Prashad, 2005).

The Soviet invasion in 1979 tested Afghan women's resilience as they continued to educate, heal, and lead within their communities, often stepping into roles as heads of households due to conflict-induced losses (Barakat & Wardell, 2002). Despite significant challenges, they embraced education as a transformative tool to challenge patriarchal control and empowering themselves. Educated women emerged as powerful agents of change, directly confronting regimes that sought tosuppress them (Ahmed- Ghosh & Inayatullah, 2022). Their pursuit of knowledge, even under life-threatening conditions, highlighted the pivotal role of education in dismantling oppressive structures (Freire, 1971).

Under both Taliban regimes, Afghan women faced severe repression. In the 1990s, they wererestricted from continuing their education beyond primary school, and their public lives were heavily controlled (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). The Taliban's return to power in 2021 reinstated and intensified these constraints, including a renewed ban on secondary education for girls and severe limitations on women's mobilityand employment. However, this time, Afghan women are resisting with unprecedented visibility.

Social media and global connectivity have transformed their struggle from a localised battle to a global movement (Harrell, 2018). For the time, women are directly addressing an international audience, demanding their rights and sharing their experiences without external filters. The surge in collective action among Afghan women symbolises a profound shift. (Hassan, 2024). Their ability to organize and lead protests reflects their unity and strength in confronting oppression (Hassan, 2024). This collective resistance is a powerful demonstration of solidarity and empowerment, showcasing how group mobilisation can challenge and dismantle oppressive structures (Harrell, 2018)). Activistslike Pashtana Durrani exemplify this shift, providing education to girls despite official bans, highlighting the resilience and agency of Afghan women. The grassroots movement, marked by slogans like "Bread, Work, Freedom" represents a diverse coalition of teachers, poets, writers, mothers, and former government employees. Prominent figures such as Shaharzad Akbar, Fatima Gailani, and Malalai Kakar, among many others, continue to lead with courage and resilience, their activism further amplified by social media brings global attention to their cause (Mehta, 2002).

Afghan Displacement: A Historical and Contemporary Overview

Afghanistan's complex relationship with external powers has led to significant displacement throughout history (Ahmed, 2015). The 19th-century conflicts with Britain, driven by geopolitical interests, set the stage for future upheavals (Britannica, 2020). The Soviet invasion in 1979 triggered a massive refugee crisis, reshaping the demographic landscape of Afghanistan as many sought safety in neighbouring countries (Amnesty International, 2019). The civil war of the 1990s, including the Mujadiheen's conflict with Najibullah and the rise of the Taliban, intensified the suffering of Afghanwomen, who faced severe restrictions and identity crisis (Lacopino, 1998., Rostami-Povey, 2007). This period saw a considerable number of Afghan women and children fleeing their homes (Khan, 2002).

The Contemporary Displacement and Ongoing Challenges

The aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, which led to the war in Afghanistan, further deteriorated living conditions (Crawford, 2018). The conflict, which resulted in over 38,000 civilian deaths before Osama Bin-Laden's death Pakistan, compounded the migration crisis (Noor, 2006; The Whitehouse, 2011). The death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, while symbolically significant in the context of the War on Terror, added further layers of complexity to the Afghan refugee crisis (Amnesty International, 2019). Although his death did not resolve Afghanistan's political instability, it intensified global scrutiny on the region and Afghan refugees, who found themselves caught in the crossfire of broader geopolitical tensions. As international security concerns evolved, the situation for millions of Afghan civilians became even more precarious.

For Afghan asylum seekers, the aftermath of bin Laden's death brough additional challenges (Hassan, 2024). They were increasingly subjected to stricter security vetting and political scrutiny, which complicated their migration pathways. Beyond the violence and instability in Afghanistan, refugees also faced heightened suspicion and barriers in countries offering asylum.

The rise in Islamophobia (Terman, 2017), and heightened scrutiny faced by Arabs, South Asian, and Muslim communities in the West added layers of complexity to the integration process (Gould & Klor, 2012; Kampf & Sen, 2006; Tindongan, 2011). The US and UK's involvement in Afghanistan began with the NATO-led invasion in 2001, while publicly framed as rebuilding and stabilising has been critiqued for being driven by strategic and economic motives rather than purelyhumanitarian concerns (Whitlock, 2021). The prolonged conflict and eventual withdrawal of international troops have contributed to ongoing instability and displacement.

The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 caused a sharp increase in internal displacement, with over 900,000 Afghans newly displaced by December 2022, adding to the millions already displaced (GOV. 2021). This resurgence also spurred a notable influx of Afghan asylum seekers to the UK, with Afghans ranking second only to Syrians in terms of the highest number of refugees across Europe (UNHCR, 2021).

This resurgence has led to a significant influx of Afghan asylum seekers to the UK, with Afghans becoming one of the largest refugee groups in Europe. By 2017, Afghanistan was the second-highest producer of refugees globally, and in 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR, 2021) warned of an "imminent humanitarian crisis". Additionally, around 6-million Afghans have sought asylum or registered with the UNHCR (2020), with many residing in neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan. The global context, including conflicts in Ukraine, has further complicated the situation, impacting the allocation of resources and international attention (GOV. UK, 2021). The British government's evacuation of approximately 17,000 individuals between April and September 2021 and the Afghan Citizen's Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), which aimed to settle 20,000 over a three-year period in 2021, reflectthe ongoing efforts to address this crisis (GOV. UK, 2021; Walsh & Sumption, 2021). However, the increasing Afghan population in the UK has highlighted inadequacies in support services and integration challenges (United Nations, 2021).

As we turn our focus to the experiences of Afghan immigrants in the UK, it is crucial to examinehow migration and asylum policies intersect with issues of power, identity, and resistance. The nextsection will explore these dynamics, shedding light on the impact of policies on Afghan women's agency and visibility within the migration context.

Historical and Legal Framework: UK Migration Policy and its Impact on Migrant Women

Over the past decade, global migration has surged due to escalating economic inequalities, political instability, natural disasters, and widespread persecution (Ruist, 2016). As migration becomes perilous, migrants encounter restrictive immigration policies in Western nations that exacerbates their risks and uncertainties. (UNHCR, 2022; Thompson, 2022). In the UK, rising hostilitytowards immigrants, fueled by social and political developments such as Brexit and the Anti-refugee Bill, has intensified these challenges (Langley, 2024; Leudar et al., 2008). Media narratives often perpetuate negative stereotypes, portraying refugees as burdensome and distorting their true needs and contributions. For example, reports claiming that Afghan refugees housed in hotels as of August 2021 cost taxpayers £1 million a day illustrate how media portrayals can amplify public hostility (Crew,2022; Syal, 2023b). The use of terms like 'illegal' or 'unlawful' further entrenches false hierarchies of deservingness, contributing to a polarised and negative discourse (Berry et al., 2016; Georgiou, 2021).

The UK's immigration policies have been profoundly shaped by over a decade of Conservative governance.The Hostile Environment Policy introduced in 2012 under Theresa May, marked a significant shift by criminalising undocumented migrants and restricting their access to essential services, thereby creating an atmosphere of fear (Griffiths & Yeo, 2021). This was subsequently followed by Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, which further marginalised migrants by limiting their rights and criminalising undocumented work (Jones, 2010; Maghribi, 2022; Crawford et al., 2020). The Nationality and Borders Act introduced in 2022 continues this trajectory with a focus on tighteningborder controls and prioritising skilled migrants through a points-based system (Home Office, 2021).

Despite its intention to create more regulated pathways for refugees, the Act has been criticised for itsdeterrence approach, particularly penalising those arriving via irregular routes (GOV.UK, 2021). For example, the controversial Rwanda Emergency Bilateral (REB) policy, aimed at deporting migrants to Rwanda, was widely criticised as a violation of human rights and a threat to the welfare of vulnerable migrants as concerns were raised that migrants would face a real risk of ill-treatment by onward refoulement. In November 2023, the UK Supreme Court ruled the scheme unlawful stating it breached both British and International human rights laws (UNHCR, 2022).

These policies have significant implications for marginalised groups, particularly Black and Brown immigrant women. Efforts like the UK's Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) aim to support Afghan immigrants, yet they often fall short in addressing the specific challenges faced by Afghan women. Many of these women who have been denied education and lack access to information, are frequently overlooked by ARAP and ACRS (Ryan et al., 2024). Additionally, the Bridging Policy under ACRS, intended to provide temporary accommodation, has been criticised for inadequately addressing the needs of Afghan immigrants, particularly women who face increased risks in mixed-sex initial accommodations (Burchill & Pevalin, 2014; Quinn, 2022). The No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) policy further exacerbates gender inequalities by reinforcing financial dependency on spouses and limiting access to education and employment opportunities (Patel, 2010).

Moreover, the broader UK immigration system fails to address the protection needs of migrantwomen, leaving them vulnerable to gender-based violence. Reports of abuse are often dismissed, and safety concerns lead to relocations that still expose women to risk (Baillot et al., 2014; Anitha, 2008). The prevalence of sexual violence and human rights violations against immigrant women is exacerbated by their unfamiliarity with host country's culture and authorities (UN, 2000). These systemic failures perpetuate silence among immigrant women regarding grievances and disconnect them from their official support structures (Cheal, 2008). With recent political shifts signaling the end of 14 years of Conservative rule, there is potential for changes in the UK's immigration policy.

This transition raises critical questions about whether new approaches will adequately safeguard the security and well-being of immigrant women. As global economic inequality rise, driven by factors suchas climate change and geopolitical instability, immigration pressures are expected to intensify (Sabella et al., 2020).

Theoretical Framework: Intersectional Feminism

The landscape of UK migration and resettlement policies, often shaped by policymakers guided by prevailing political and social narratives, significantly impacts marginalised groups, including Afghan women. Understanding these policies through an intersectional lens is crucial, as it reveals how overlapping forms of discrimination, rooted in gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, compound the challenges faced by marginalised groups (Abu-Laban, 1998; Anthias, 2012; Piper & Carron, 2011). This perspective not only highlights the distinct barriers experienced by Afghanwomen but also exposes the systemic biases embedded within policy frameworks. By critically examining who crafts these policies, and whose interests they prioritise, we can advocate for reforms that dismantle existing inequalities and promote justice and equity in resettlement practices.

Intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberley Crenshaw (1989), has profoundly shaped feminist theory by providing a lens through which the interconnected nature of power and oppression can be understood. Crenshaw examines how intersecting systems of power such as race and class combine to create different modes of discrimination and privileges. Her seminal work highlighted how traditional feminist perspectives centered on the experiences of white, middle-class women, thereby marginalising the complexities faced by racialised women and those with multiple marginalised identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Audre Lorde further expanded on Crenshaw's insights, emphasising how interconnected oppressions like racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia must be addressed collectively to dismantle patriarchy (Tastsoglou, 2019). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) further developed intersectionality in her influential work 'Black Feminist Thought' (1990), arguing for centering black women's experiences to understand the complex systems of oppression they navigate (Carastathis, 2014; Collins, 1990).

Intersectionality also challenges the tendency within traditional feminist theory to view women as a homogenous group (Collins, 1990). Iris Marion Young (2005) critiques this approach, arguing that defining womenas a singular category overlooks the diverse and multifaceted nature of their experiences (Young, 2005).

Young (2005) argues that the search for common characteristics among women often leads to normalisation and exclusions within feminist discourse. She acknowledges a pragmatic political reason for viewing women as a group but highlights that gender identity cannot be divorced from other identity categoriessuch as race, ethnicity, or class; each carrying its own relations of privilege and subordination. Gender, therefore, operates within complex and multifaceted structures that determine individuals'position within society (Young, 2005).

Historically, the tendency to view women as a singular collective has often marginalised racialised women, as feminist movements historically focused on the challenges faced by white, cisgender, and middle-class women. Young contends that defining women as a homogenous group denies their varied experiences, thereby reinforcing the privilege of those benefiting from keeping women divided (2005).

She argues instead for viewing women as a serial collective, recognising diverse identities while uniting through shared experiences of structural constraints and societal conditions that shape their actions and meanings. The application of intersectionality has transformed migration studies, a field traditionally dominated by male-centric perspectives. This approach aims to unravel the complexities of power dynamics, inequalities, and various forms of social oppression experiencedby immigrants. It does so by utilising intersectionality as a critical analytical framework (Abu-Laban, 1998; Anthias, 2012; Bastia et al., 2011).

Historically, migration studies often overlooked women's experiences, focusing predominantly on male-centric narratives. The integration of feminist perspectives into migration studies began in the 1970s and 1980s, marking a significant shift in the field's discourse.

A landmark moment was the 1984 special issue of the International Migration Review Titled "Women in Migration," which exposed the exclusion of women from migration studies. Morokvasic (1984) discusses the essay "Birds of the Passage are also Women," which has been instrumental in highlighting this oversight of patriarchal assumptions and stereotypes that have marginalised women within migration narratives (Morokvasic, 1984).

Feminist scholars such as Boyd (1997) and Khao et al (1984) challenge these patriarchal assumptions that depicted immigrant women as dependent and passive (Boyd, 1997; Khao et al., 1984). Their work demonstrated the complexity and diversity of women's migration experiences, countering the traditional, male-centric narratives that had dominated the field. These scholars revealed that immigrant women often face unique challenges, including barriers to accessing essential services like healthcare, education, and employment, as well as enduring poverty, discrimination, and legal dependency on spouses.

Intersecting Injustices: Deconstructing Immigration Policy through Feminist Perspectives.

Examining immigration and integration policies through an intersectional feminist lens unveils how these policies (re)reproduce power relations based on nationality, ethnicity, class, and gender. The coloniality of migration operates within a framework of social classification that mirrors historical colonial differentiation, embedding racial hierarchies into contemporary practices (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). This framework contexualises migration patterns and asylum claims within historical contexts, exposing how racialised, ethnicised, and gendered logics shape both inclusive and exclusionary policies (Butler, 1995).

Intersectionality and racialised neoliberalism are intricately linked to migration and social justice efforts. These concepts involve complex categorisation processes that are crucial for understanding societal structures. They also align with political agendas that undermine individuals' perceived 'worthiness' and restrict their access to rights (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018, p. 15).

Spathopoulou et al (2018) critique the 'vocabularies of crisis' challenging the political origins, and contemporary implications of terms such as 'crisis,' 'citizen,' 'immigrant,' and 'refugee.' They argue that these constructs are designed by states and supranational institutions to regulate movement and normalise the suffering of certain populations (Spathopoulou, Tsilimpounidi, & Carastathis, 2018). Crawley and Skleparis (2018) advocate for a critical examination of immigration policy categories, questioning the implicit hierarchies that deem some individuals more deserving than others. They call for a shift away from 'categorical fetishism' (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). These categories are influenced by intersecting systems of capitalism, white supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy, exposing multidirectional power relations that shape both external categorisations and internal dynamics of discrimination and struggle.

Marx (1844) argue that racism creates and sustains a labour hierarchy that benefits capitalism by ensuring a cheap and exploitable workforce (Goldberg, 2009). This critique extends to social movements, revealing how states employ 'symbolic change' to reinforce material subordination while co-opting and diffusing radical politics (Spathopoulou et al., 2018).

As Karl Marx observed, *"The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent ... The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object ... this realisation of labour appears as loss of reality for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as alienation*"(Marx, 1844, pp. 323–4). This perspective illustrates how individuals, under such systems, become depersonalised and devalued, highlighting the profound human cost of maintaining hierarchal and exploitative structures.

Migration involves both authorised and unauthorised crossings of nation-state borders, where sovereignty is enforced through legal distinctions between desirable and undesirable entrants. This marginalised migrants who defy border restrictions, exposing them to risks and exploitation due to theirnon-citizenship status and engagement in low-wage work (Anderson, 2010). States often selectively recruit certain groups based on racialised, gendered, and class-based dynamics, exacerbating vulnerabilities and structural inequalities.

Migration categories simultaneously afford protection and resources to some migrants while denying them to others, perpetuating structural inequalities and injustices (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

Reinterpreting Women's Rights: Islamic Feminism and the Challenge to Western Misconceptions

The portrayal of Muslim women in Western media and culture is deeply intertwined with misconceptions and myths that have persisted for decades (Said, 1978). These representations oftenreflect a skewed and monolithic view of Islam and its followers, particularly women, thereby reinforcing colonialist and neocolonialist attitudes. To critically address these issues, it is essential to explore how Western frameworks have shaped perceptions of Muslim women and to reconsider the narratives that have emerged from this complex interplay of power, culture, and ideology.

Language, Representation, and Afghan Women's Realities

Language plays a crucial role in shaping how gender, identity and social hierarchies are understood, particularly in the context of media representations (Foucault & Nazaaro, 1972). It constructs social categories, influences public perceptions, and determines which voices are amplified or silenced (Said, 1978; Lakoff, 1975). In the context of Afghan women, Western media often portray them as passive victims of oppression, reducing their diverse realities to a monolithic narrative. This portrayal, shaped by longstanding colonial narratives, can reflect a tendency to depict Muslim women from the Middle East and South Asia as powerless and in need of Western rescue (Said, 1978). In these portrayals, Afghan women are often shown as voiceless and oppressed, overlooking the cultural complexities that shape their lives (Said, 1978).

Edward Said's analysis in *"Orientalism*" (1978), critiques how Western societies have historically constructed a distorted view of the 'Orient,' including the Islamic world and its women. He argues that Western narratives have framed Eastern societies as 'backwards' requiring Western intervention, thus reinforcing a colonial mindset (Said, 1978).

When applied to Afghan women, this narrative can often be reductive, framing them as passive victims under the control of patriarchal systems (Said, 1978). Spivak's critique in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?"* (1988) further complicates this narrative by proposing that Western portrayals often depict "white men" as saviors of "brown women." This binary may reduce women's experiences to stereotypes of victimhood, ignoring their voices and realities (Gandhi, 2019, p. 94).

In Afghanistan, the roles of women are viewed through a different cultural lens, where the concept of *izzat* (honour) plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of women's actions and behaviours. In Afghan culture, women's honour is intertwined with family and community reputation, and their roles, particularly as mothers and caregivers, are considered essential for maintaining family integrity and cultural continuity (Jamil-Hanifi, 2023). Far from being merely a matter of subjugation, these roles can be viewed as integral to the social fabric, with *izzat* acting as a guiding principle that shapes the agency Afghan women can exercise within their communities (Jamil-Hanifi, 2023).

While Western discourse often focuses on the oppressive aspects of this framework, it is important to recognise that for many Afghan women, these roles offer a sense of responsibility and power within their cultural contexts (Safi, 2010). Afghan women's roles as mothers and caregivers may not always align with Western ideals of autonomy, yet they are often seen as crucial to the moral and social stability of Afghan society. Raising children, teaching values, and maintaining family cohesion are all responsibilities that confer power and agency within their familial and social spheres. In this context, caregiving is not necessarily about subjugation but about preserving family honour and contributing to a sense of empowerment that may not be immediately apparent in Western depictions of women's rights and freedoms (Kandiyoti, 1991).

Furthermore, Islamic feminism offers an important counter-narrative to the way Muslim women are portrayed in Western media and feminist discourse. Scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet argue that the Quran, when interpreted correctly, promotes gender equality, challenging traditional patriarchal readings (Wadud, 1999; Lamrabet, 2015).

Islamic feminism offers a critique of Western assumptions that gender equality can only be achieved through secular, Western frameworks. It advocates for gender equality within the religious and cultural context of Islam itself, arguing that empowerment and liberation are not only achievable but are inherent to the tenets of Islam (Badran, 2011).

Islamic Feminism: A Critical Counter-Narrative

Islamic feminism challenges the dominant narratives about Muslim women that are often framed in Western discourse, particularly the idea that women in Muslim-majority countries are universally oppressed and in need of external rescue. Scholars like Lila Abu-Lughod in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) and others critique this Western tendency to impose external definitions of 'oppressed' and 'empowered,' arguing that this approach fails to recognise the subjectivity and complexity of Muslim women's experiences. Abu-Lughod specifically argues that many Muslim women find empowerment within their cultural and religious contexts, which often defy simplistic portrayals of 'victimhood' and 'oppression' (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

In this regard, the concept of empowerment itself, as framed in Western contexts, often involves an external authority granting empowerment to those perceived as powerless. This dynamic raises the question: who is empowering whom? This framework can reinforce hierarchical views that undermine the genuine agency of individuals (Abu-Lughod, 2002). The binary of 'oppressed' versus 'empowered' fails to acknowledge the nuances of lived experience, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts where empowerment might manifest differently.

Moreover, the portrayal of Islam and feminism as mutually exclusive is a pervasive narrative in Western discourse. In this context, the concept of Islamic oppression is often strategically weaponised to serve specific political or ideological agendas. This narrative is exemplified in the words of Spencer and Chesler (2007), who argue:

> *"These facts show that the war we're fighting isn't just about bombs and hijacked airliners. It's also about the oppression of women—often in horrific ways. Nor is this oppression an incidentalbyproduct of terrorism. The Islamic law—Sharia— that terrorists are fighting to impose upon theworld mandates institutionalised discrimination against women. Islamic gender apartheid goes far beyond second class citizenship. It is intended to crush and subordinate women.* (Spencer & Chelser, 2007, p.6).

Such statements are widely disseminated in the media, significantly shaping public perceptions and reinforcing negative stereotypes about Islam and its treatment of women. This perspective, reflective of a narrow form of 'Western/White feminism,' assumes that Muslim women lack agency and that their cultures and religions are inferior. This perspective is heavily criticised by Third World feminists, who argue that such a view marginalises women with diverse experiences and reinforcing local patriarchal structures by perpetuating the narratives that women's roles within Islam are immutable (Safi, 2010). This perspective creates a 'split' in understanding, preventing recognition of how Muslim women can possess both faith and agency, leading to reductivestereotypes that ignore the complexities of their lives (Safi, 2010).

Another prominent discourse in Western feminism involves the valorisation of paid labour over domestic roles, often dismissing those who choose domestic roles. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in herarticle "*Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"* (1988), critiques this perspective, arguing that Western feminists often view themselves as modern and autonomous while portraying women from 'third world' countries as tradition-bound and victimised (Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty suggests that this binary framing risks reinforcing colonial and patriarchal views, as it fails to recognise the complex realities of women's choices and contributions (Mohanty, 1988).

Similarly, hooks (1989) critiques the Western feminist focus on professional success, pointing out that it often diminishes the value of caregiving and domestic roles. Both Mohanty (1988) and hooks (1989) argue that such perspectives overlook the diverse and empowering ways in which women across different contexts navigate their roles, contributing to a limited, and at times, colonial understanding of gender.

In particular, hooks (1989) underscores the importance of domestic work in nurturing future generations and strengthening familial bonds which are roles that capitalism and Western feminism may often overlook.

In a similar vein, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) discusses how African American women, in particular, have been marginalised within mainstream feminist discourse. Their experiences of race, class, and gender have often been underrepresented, and the neglect of caregiving work disproportionately affects marginalised groups. This intersectionality challenges dominant feminist narratives, highlighting how the prioritisation of paid labour can diminish the significance of domestic roles, especially in the context of non-Western and marginalised communities.

Islamic feminism presents a counter-narrative to these misconceptions by advocating for gender equality within the framework of Islam itself. Scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet argue that the Quran, when interpreted correctly, promotes equality between men and women. They assert that the Quran has often been misinterpreted through a dominant patriarchal lens (Wadud, 1999; Lamrabet, 2015). Margot Badran (2011) further emphasises that Islamic feminism seeks to reclaim gender equality as an inherent principle of Quranic teachings and to advocate for its application across various social institutions. His research supports the notion that the marginalisation of women was due to wrongful interpretations of Islamic laws rather than the religion itself (Badran, 2011).

Badran (2011) also highlights the work of Muhammad Abduh, who argued that the marginalisation of women within Islamic societies was a result of misinterpretations of Islamic law, rather than a fault of the religion itself. As Abduh writes:

> *"There are specific verses in the Quran address themselves to men or women, deal with either their physical differences or the role they each have to play in safeguarding the moral fibre of thesociety Islam envisages. In the divine scheme of regulation of the relationship between men andwomen Islam has assigned a position of dignity and honor to women, such beneficent regulation is essential for peace, comfort, happiness, continuation of the species and progress (Khan, 2014,p .7).*

This interpretation challenges the assumption that Islam inherently oppresses women, proposing instead that the religion provides a framework for gender equality and empowerment.

Saba Mahmood's concept of "pious agency" further complicates Western liberal notions of empowerment by illustrating how Muslim women exercise agency within religious contexts. Mahmood (2006) argues that religious practices can enable forms of empowerment that differ from secular liberal ideals. This perspective shows that agency in Islam is not solely about challenging patriarchal authority but also about reclaiming the rights that Islam inherently grants to women, such as inheritance, property ownership, divorce, and education. These rights were revolutionary at the time of Islam's advent and continue to be highly relevant today.

However, the broader field of psychology often neglects or fears integrating religious contexts into practice, reflecting a long-standing tendency to dismiss spiritual and religious practices as primitive compared to secular rationality (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). This mindset persists, failing to engage the full spectrum of human experience. Faith in Islam, however, can be a liberating force, offering a framework for personal and social justice (Gray, 2015).

Psychological Experiences of Migration

The psychological impact of migration is multifaceted, encompassing pre-migration trauma, post-resettlement stressors, and the pervasive effects of perceived discrimination (Austin, 2007; Coll & Magnuson, 2014). Immigrants often endure compounded distress from experiences such as the loss of social ties (Berry, 2013; Coll & Magnuson, 2014), challenges related to socio-economic and cultural adaptation (Berry, 2013), and difficulties navigating immigration and asylum processes (Alemi & Stempel, 2018). Perceived discrimination, a stressor marked by fear, exclusion, and social assaults, has been shown to negatively impact mental health through multiple pathways (Paradies et al., 2015). These stressors manifest in various ways, including structural barriers to employment, housing, and education, as well as physiological and emotional responses that further exacerbate mental health conditions (Nakash et al., 2015).

Moreover, perceived discrimination acts as a persistent stressor, leading to heightened emotional trauma responses such as anger, fear, and hopelessness, and contributing to conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe mental illness (Alemi et al., 2017; Alemi & Stempel, 2018; Omeri et al., 2006). Similar patterns have been observed in other immigrant groups, such as Somali youth in the U.S. (Ellis et al., 2008), Iraqi refugees in Sweden (Lindencrona et al., 2008), and North Korean refugees in South Korea (Um et al., 2015). Across these diverse groups, discrimination has been strongly linked to the onset of depressive symptoms, PTSD, and challenges with social adaptation (Omeri et al., 2006).

The role of ethnic identity and social connections in buffering the negative effects of discrimination is complex (Noh el a., 1999). Research shows that a strong ethnic identity can provide a sense of belonging and continuity, particularly for Afghan immigrants (Oppedal & Idsoe, 2015). However, when discrimination targets an individual's core identity, it can exacerbate mental health challenges, including depressive symptoms (Noh et al., 1999; Beiser & Hou, 2006). Interestingly, ethnic identity can also be protective, as seen in studies of Syrian refugees in Turkey, where ethnic identity provided a sense of control, distinctiveness, and meaning, helping to mitigate the harmful effects of discrimination (Çelebi et al., 2017).

Positive social connections, both within ethnic communities and with the broader host society, appear to play a vital role in mitigating the detrimental effects of discrimination. These connections promote healthier acculturation outcomes and improve mental health by fostering a sense of belonging (Renzaho, 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003). Integration, where immigrants retain their cultural identity while navigating the strengths and challenges of the host society, has been found to support better mental health outcomes and social adaptation (Noh et al., 1999). These findings underscore the importance of both social ties and acculturation preferences in shaping the psychological experiences of immigrants.

Gender, Migration and Mental Health

While the psychological effects of migration affect both men and women, immigrant women often face additional challenges due to the intersection of acculturation stress and gendered expectations (Yakushko et al., 2010; Yoshihama, 2002). Women's mental health is particularly influenced by societal norms around gender roles, which can be exacerbated during migration. In addition to the common stressors of acculturation, such as language difficulties, economic instability, and limited social support, immigrant women often experience heightened pressures tied to traditional gender roles (Garrusi et al., 2022). These additional challenges create unique psychological distress, underscoring the need for gender-sensitive approaches to understanding and addressing the mental health needs of immigrant women (Sabagh & Okun, 2010; Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2015).

The experience of Afghan women immigrants is marked by a complex intersection of migration-related stress and gender-based pressures (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Afghan women face dual challenges: the psychological strain of adapting to a new culture and the societal expectations tied to traditional gender roles (Afrouz et al., 2023), which often conflict with the norms of their host countries. These intersecting pressures can lead to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation, as women navigate shifting familial and social expectations (Garrusi et al., 2022). Acculturation, which is the process by which immigrants adapt to the cultural norms of their new society, plays a central role in shaping the mental health of Afghan women.

Research has shown that Afghan refugees who experience cultural resistance, particularly to gendered expectations, tend to report higher levels of mental distress (Mghir et al., 1995; Jamal, 2008). Afghan women often face significant challenges in learning the language, securing employment, and adapting to new gender roles (Mghir et al., 1995). These challenges can result in 'status dissonance', where women's expectations of social status and professional identity clash with their new circumstances in the host country (Afrouz et al., 2023). This dissonance is particularly pronounced when women find themselves relegated to low-paying or informal work that is often below their qualifications, which can be a significant source of stress and frustration (Afrouz et al., 2023).

Moreover, research has highlighted that women marginalised communities often experience the loss of familial and community support networks upon arrival in a host country (Goliaei et al., 2023). These networks are crucial for maintaining a sense of identity and social belonging. As Afghan women become more proficient in the host country's language and take on work outside the home, they often face an increasing strain on their mental health. This is particularly true as they may feel torn between their roles in the family, cultural expectations, and the pressures of adapting to the workforce (Welsh & Brosdsky, 2010). The intersection of gendered violence and immigration is another critical factor affecting Afghan women's mental health. Female immigrants, particularly those from patriarchal societies like Afghanistan, are at an increased risk of experiencing domestic violence. This is particularly true in situations where male family members feel emasculated by the challenges of adjusting to a new society (Goliaei et al., 2023). In these cases, Afghan women may find themselves dealing with the dual burden of managing their own mental health while also facing familial violence, financial insecurity, and cultural alienation.

These compounded stressors contribute to higher rates of PTSD and depression among Afghan women, who are disproportionately affected by these conditions compared to their male counterparts (Rostami-Povey, 2007). The mental health toll is significant, as many Afghan women struggle to cope with the trauma of displacement, the stress of acculturation, and the impact of gender-based violence.

While research consistently highlights the centrality of gendered roles and cultural context in shaping Afghan women's mental health, it is also important to recognise the limitations of Western mental health models (Burman, 2015). The tendency within Western psychiatry to pathologise symptoms through a purely biomedical lens can obscure the cultural nuances of distress and potentially marginalise the experiences of non-Western women (Burman, 2015). A more culturally sensitive approach to mental health care is essential for Afghan women, one that accounts for the intersection of gender, culture, and migration (Burman, 2015). Health care providers must understand that the psychological distress experienced by Afghan women is not merely a product of individual pathology but is deeply rooted in their migration experiences and the cultural and gender dynamics they face (Burman, 2015).

Community, Cultural Liberation, and Resistance

This section explores community, cultural liberation, and resistance to reveal how marginalised groups reclaim their identities and assert their agency amidst systemic oppression. These concepts highlight the powerful ways in which cultural revitalisation and communal solidarity serve as acts of empowerment and defiance against historical and ongoing marginalisation. Understanding these dynamics offers crucial insights into the resilience and adaptive strategies of these communities, enriching our approach to clinical practice and deepening our comprehension of the broader strugglesfaced by those navigating oppressive systems.

Liberation through the resistance of identity, culture, and religion is a powerful strategy for challenging oppressive systems and achieving social transformation. Scholars such as Frantz Fanon (1952) and Amilcar Cabral (1974) provide valuable frameworks for understanding how decolonisation involves reclaiming and revitalising cultural practices that affirm the humanity and agency of the oppressed (Cabral, 1974; Fanon, 1952). This section explores the interconnected roles of community,culture, and resistance in the liberation struggle. Community plays a crucial role in collective efforts toaddress trauma and oppression, encompassing both locality (e.g., neighbourhood) and relational groups without geographical restrictions (e.g., membership in a labour union) (Bradford, 2017; Kloos et al., 2012). Regardless of the specific context, community reflects a sense of connectedness through shared geography, history, culture, and belonging (Farwell & Cole, 2001; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This connectedness positions the community as a collective agent capable of proactively addressing oppressive systems (Checkoway et al.,1995).

Culturally syntonic processes, historical, socio-politically situated patterns of behaviour, belief, and belonging, are evident in communication styles and healing practices among groups with shared identities (Harrell, 2018). These processes, particularly storytelling and resistance, nurture communitybonds and develop action plans grounded in cultural wisdom (Mariette, 2013; Myers & Speight, 2010).

Storytelling is a rich oral tradition and effective healing intervention found in many cultures, including Black communities (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Narrative therapy and testimonio involve sharing personal stories to reprocess and reframe negative narratives (Comas-Diaz, 2021). Storytelling encompasses both personal and community narratives, which collectively represent commonly experienced events and counter dominant cultural narratives imposed by powerful societal institutions (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). Among racial survivors, storytelling facilitates understanding human behaviour, resisting oppression (Comas- Diaz, 2021), fostering healing, and promoting spiritual communion (Banks-Wallace, 2002). In a community setting, storytelling restores cultural identities and builds a sense of community and serves as a counterhegemonic tool to refute negative stereotypes about oppressed groups (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

Frantz Fanon (1952), a psychiatrist and revolutionary thinker, provides profound insights into the role of culture in resistance and liberation, yet his ideas remain largely overlooked in mainstream psychology (Fanon, 1952). Fanon's idea of 'strategic essentialism' and reconstructing identity to resistand redefine imposed narratives, highlights a critical gap in conventional psychological practices.

His critique disrupts conventional psychology and current mental health services by challenging its failure to address the psychological impacts of colonialism and racism. Similarly, Amilcar Cabral (1974) argues that colonial powers perpetuate control by attempting to eradicate the cultures of the colonised, arguing that culture is a fundamental tool for asserting opposition to domination and reclaiming humanity. For Cabral, national liberation is rooted in reclaiming cultural identity and historical process,which inherently rejects imperialist control (Cabral, 1974). His views of culture as a material base deeply connected to society's physical and historical realities highlight its importance in the struggle for emancipation. Both Fanon and Cabral emphasise that true liberation requires engaging with and understanding the cultural practices of resistance, a challenge that mainstream psychology often neglects due to its entanglement in colonial ideologies (Cabral, 1974; Fanon, 1952).

The ideas of Fanon and Cabral are highly relevant in contemporary struggles against power, oppression, and neoliberalism. Palestinian resistance, for instance, illustrates the importance of cultural liberation and global solidarity. The struggle against occupation and apartheid is not only political but deeply cultural, involving the preservation and promotion of Palestinian identity through arts, literature, music, food, and communal practices (Said,1978). Global mobilisations in support of Palestine, such as the boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, show how collective, international solidarity can amplify local resistance efforts and challenge oppressive systems globally (Barghouti, 2011). Neoliberalism's attempt to separate culture from politics has intensified the need for culturally grounded resistance. Contemporary movements, often driven by young people, use cultural practices to mobilise and sustain resistance, highlighting the enduring relevance of Fanon andCabral's ideas in the fight against oppressive systems.

Conclusions from the Empirical and Theoretical literature

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the broader context and historical background, emphasising how discourses about racialised women are deeply embedded within societal structures and policies. understanding these frameworks is crucial as it highlights how they significantly impact women's experiences, shaping how they encounter and access various support systems, often reflecting broader issues of systemic racism and exploitation. Such discourses have systemically marginalised and violated these women, highlighting the need for a critical examination of these systems. While the literature sets the broader scene by acknowledging that racialised women may share some characteristics and experiences due to common systemic challenges, it is important to note their heterogeneity. The experiences of different racialised groups cannot be homogenised or assumed to be the same. The next chapter builds on the overview of racially-minoritised women's experiences presented above, providing a rationale for the current study to detail the specific experiences of Afghan women's experiences of migration in the UK.

CHAPTER 2: SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents a systematic review (SLR) relevant to the current study, offering a review of what the existing literature says about Afghan women's migration experience in the UK. Chapter 1 discussed the broader challenges faced by racialised women, with some emphasis on Afghan women, highlighting the intersecting systems of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism embedded within various societal structures, such as migration policies, healthcare practices, and cultural narratives. While the literature provides insights into the experiences of racialised women generally, Afghan women's specific experiences, particularly within the context of migration, are often overlooked and generalised. This SLR aims to address this gap by focusing specifically on Afghan women's lived experiences within the UK's socio-political and cultural context. The review seeks to highlight the unique challenges and needs of Afghan women, particularly in navigating the migration experiences, ensuring that their voices are recognised and adequately addressed in the broader discourse.

A systematic literature review (SLR) follows a comprehensive and rigorous process that aimsto draw robust conclusions from existing evidence based on a specific topic (Siddaway et al., 2019).They play a crucial role in identifying gaps in knowledge and provide recommendations for both clinical practice and future research (Fink, 2019).

In initial scoping review on Afghan women's lived experiences of migration in the UK was conducted using databases such as PROSPERO and The Cochrane Library, which include protocols of upcoming and existing systematic reviews. This was conducted to provide a snapshot of the volume, breadth, and type of literature available for synthesis related to the research question. Additionally, it sought to confirm that no similar reviews were registered. The scope revealed gaps in the literature related to Afghan women's migration experiences, and the absence of reviews regarding their migration experiences in the UK specifically. No review on this subject has been done, providing the rationale for the current systematic review.

The aim of the SLR was to summarise and synthesise the relevant literature to answer the followingquestion: ***What are the Lived Experiences of Migration in the UK amongst Afghan Women?***

Methodology

The literature adopted a meta-synthesis approach, using rigorous methods to synthesise andinterpret findings from existing qualitative studies in order to generate new interpretations (Jensen &Allen, 996; Sandelowski et al., 1997). The literature review included studies with qualitative data because of their ability to capture nuanced and diverse individual experiences of migration, which quantitative surveys or structural methodologies may not fully represent (Willing, 2008).

As the review focused on Afghan women, any research involving participants aged 18 or over was used. There was no upper age limit included to ensure diverse range of perspectives and greatervalidity. In addition. Studies from various time frames were included, reflecting different political and policy contexts over time. The review was limited to studies conducted within the UK, acknowledging that Afghan women's experiences can vary widely between different socio-political contexts, includingother Western countries. This focus allowed for a more precise and contextually relevant understanding of Afghan women's migration experiences within the unique cultural, social, and political landscape of the UK. Additionally, due to practical constraints, studies not in English were excluded, as translation services were beyond the research scope (Neimann Rasmussen & Montgomery, 2018).

Grey literature defined as 'information not controlled by commercial publishing organisations,' (Adamset al., 2016) was included to capture insights beyond traditional peer-reviewed sources, addressing the scarcity of research on this topic and providing a more comprehensive understanding. The inclusion and exclusion criteria can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: *Literature Search Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
• The study must consist of qualitative data e.g. interviews, focused groups • The study must include data from Afghan women	• The study focuses on participants under the age of 18 • The study does not include femaleparticipants
• The study must be written in or translated into English • The study must contain primary data, although reviews would be screened for primary studies • The study must include women aged 18 or older • The study must be undertaken in the UK • The study must clearly distinguish findings on the lived experiences of Afghan immigrant women	• Review articles, theoretical articles, opinion pieces, and literature reviews • The study is quantitative The study is published in a language other than English

Search Strategy

An electronic database search was conducted using PubMed (27.02.2024); PsycInfo (01.03.2024); Cochrane (01.03.2024) and Scopus (01.03.2024). The databases were chosen to acknowledge the evidence base within a wide range of disciplines relevant to the research question, including applied social sciences, medicine and healthcare. Each database had a corresponding search parameter attached to it based on the available options. Alerts were created to enableconsideration of relevant studies up to the point of analysis.

A concept-based approach was incorporated to find keywords and synonyms related to 'Afghan', 'women', 'experiences', 'migration, and the 'UK' (McGinn et al., 2016). Databases were used to identify subject headings and thesaurus terms which expanded the search terms. Other termswere identified through reading literature obtained from the scoping search. Key terms were adapted using speech marks and truncation to obtain all relevant literature (e.g., immigrat*= immigration, immigrated). To find papers relevant to the literature review, Boolean operators of 'AND' and 'OR' were combined within the search terms to yield suitable papers in answering the research question. In line with Siddaway and Colleagues (2019) methodology, the researcher segmented the topic into separate distinct concepts to create search terms. They also explored alternative terminologies, prioritising sensitivity to ensure no relevant articles were overlooked. A PEO (Population/Exposure/Outcome) search framework was utilised which addresses qualitative questions. Using this tool helped to develop search terms and clarify inclusion/exclusion criteria.

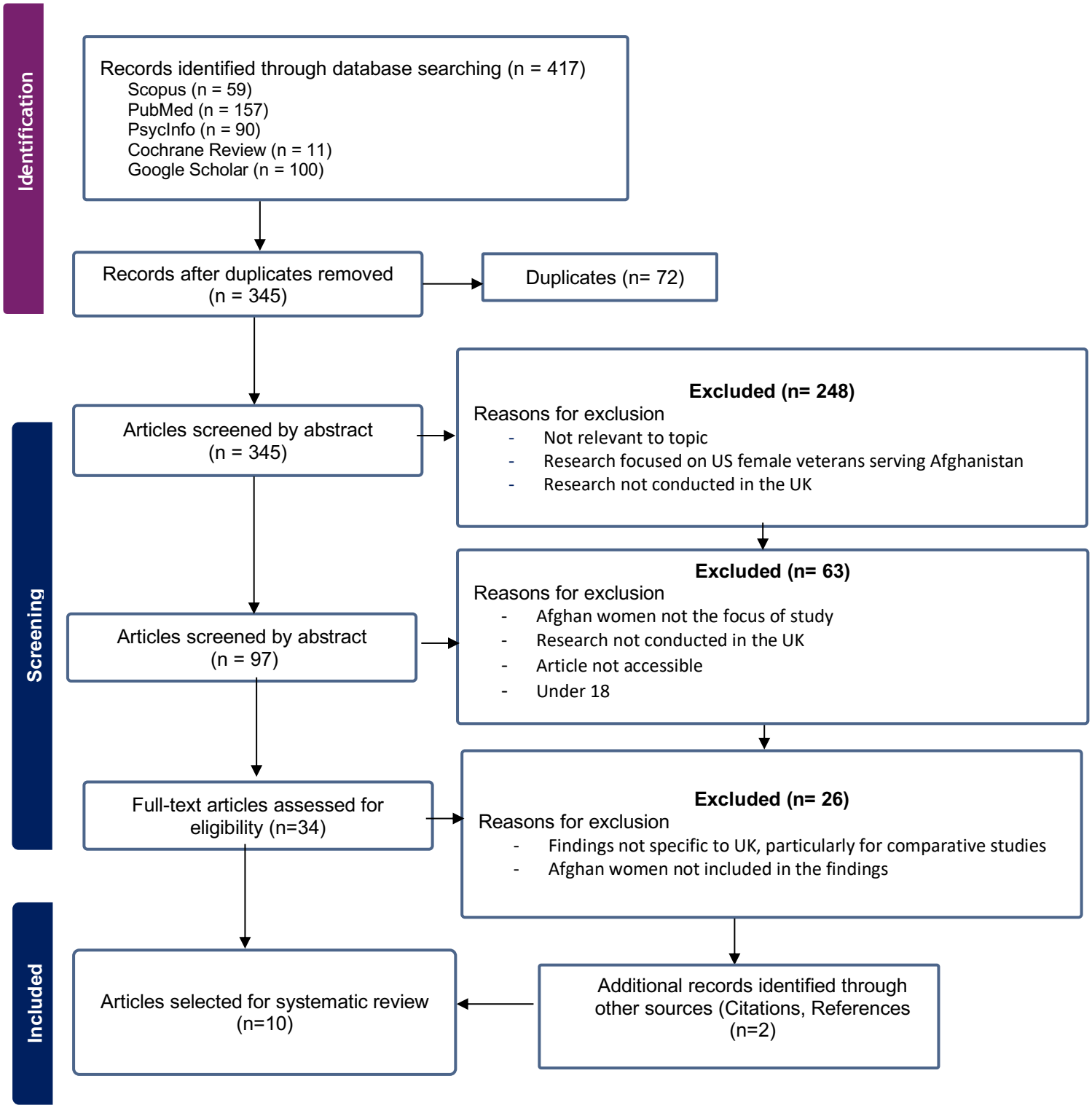
Table 3: *Search Terms Used in Systematic Literature Search*

Concept 1: **Population:** ***Afghan Women***		**Concept 2: Exposure/** **Terms relevant to** ***Migration in the UK***		**Concept 3: Outcomes/** **Terms relevant to** ***experiences of migration***
"Afghan Female" OR "Afghan girls" OR "Afghan women Diaspora" OR "Women from Afghanistan" OR "Females from Afghanistan" OR Hazara OR "Hazara Women" OR "Pashtun" OR Afghan People OR Afghans OR Afghan	AND	"Immigrat* OR Immigrant OR Migrat* OR Migrant OR "Immigration Status" OR Resettl* OR Relocat* OR Arriv* OR Entr* OR Emigrants OR Emigrat* OR Refugee* OR "Asylum Seeker" OR Asylum OR Settl* OR Move* OR In-migration OR Transmigrant OR Transmigrat* OR "First-generation Immigrant" OR "First-generation migrant" OR "Second-generation migrant" OR "Second-generation immigrant" OR "United Kingdom" OR Britain OR Britain OR England OR Scotland OR "Northern Ireland" OR Ireland OR Wales	AND	Experienc* OR Reflect* OR View* OR Challeng* OR Perspective* OR Opportunities OR Need* OR Adjust* OR Experienc* OR "Social Support" OR Barrier* OR Struggl* OR Distress* OR Benefit* OR physical* OR "Physical Health" OR "Mental Health" OR "Psychological well-being" OR Resourc* OR Integrat* OR Belong*
				OR Adopt* OR Stor* OR Narrative* OR Resilien* OR Cop* OR Resourc* OR Agenc* OR "Service delivery" OR "Seeking help" OR "Cultural Identity" OR Violence OR Abus* OR Coerc* OR Atrocit* OR Conflict* OR Cultur* OR Religio* OR Faith* OR Valu* OR Beliefs OR Practic* OR Human Rights OR "Equal Rights" OR "Legal Rights" OR "Human Freedom" OR System* OR "Impact of Migration" OR "Migration Crisis" OR Threat* OR Polic* OR Politic*

Lateral search techniques were employed to identify further relevant studies. This included manually screening the reference lists of the retrieved articles to check for primary studies not foundthrough the initial search. In addition, Google Scholar was also searched in order to identify any papers which were not found from the databases specified. As Google scholar is a less specified search engine which yielded 1,870,000 of results, the first 100 search results were screened. An additional 2 other peer-reviewed articles were found from the reference list of the retrieved papers.

Following the search across the 5 databases, 417 papers were returned. Search results were uploaded to Covidence, where 72 duplicates were automatically detected. The title of the combined 345 studies were first screened based on the relevancy of the title. For the relevant studies, if the title was too vague, the abstract was reviewed. In just under 17 cases, obtaining the full text was necessary as the abstract did not provide enough information to decide on the suitability. Abstract and full-text reviews led to further exclusions because the studies were not linked to Afghan women's lived experiences, nor did they contain a large sample of Afghan women included in the analysis. A total of 10 studies were therefore included in the review. The PRISMA flow chart (Moher et al., 2009) in Figure 1 outlines the process of selection of papers.

Figure 1: *Systematic literature Review Flow Chart*



Results

The literature review identified ten suitable papers that met the inclusion criteria, all exploring the migration experiences of Afghan women. All papers were qualitative with seven peer-reviewed papers (N=7) and three grey literatures (N=3), including doctoral thesis. Notably, four papers utilised overlapping datasets (López & Ryan; 2023; Ryan et al., 2024) and (Fischer, 2017; Fischer et al., 2020). While these studies shared datasets, each provided unique insights into different facets of the migration experience. Most of the research was centered in London, with two studies recruiting participants from the same organisation (López & Ryan; 2023; Ryan et al., 2024). Additionally, some were comparative studies that examined the experiences of Afghan women across different countries,including the USA, Germany, India, and Pakistan (N=4). All studies published within the last 20 years,with most studies published in the past eight years (N=8). Detailed findings, methodologies, and critical reviews of these studies are provided in Table 3 of the report.

Table 4: *Systematic literature Review Flow Chart*

Author(s), Year, Title, Country of Study & Applied Psychology Profession	Study aim	Participants/ Sample	Data collection and analysis	Summary of findings including any recommendations	Strengths (+) and Limitations (-)
Encountering the hostile environment: Recently arrived Afghan migrants in London Ryan et al. (2024) UK	To understand the needs of diverse Afghan communities in London in the context of hostile immigration policy	Purposeful and snowballing sampling in two Afghan organisations (n=30) 17 female and 13 male Age range: 20-30 years (n=5) interviews with stakeholders including two directors of migrant organisations and people involved in the resettlement programs at three-London local authorities	20 semi-structured individual interviews 2 focus groups Thematic analysis	Findings identified: 1. The Hostile Environment policy is driven by ideology rather than evidence, affecting how asylum seekers are treated 2. Afghan resettlement and asylum applications are slow and disorganised, exacerbated by understaffing and a lack of priortisation 3. Migrants face significant challenges with landlords and employers while trying to secure their status and rebuild their lives. 4. Different treatment of Afghan refugees based on	+ In depth exploration of the UK's immigration policies and its impact on immigrants + Provides rich historical context + Coproduction- recruited and trained 4 peer researchers who helped to shape the project (2 men and two women) + Ethical approval obtained - Data from the focus group is limited in depth and breadth - Sample not representative due to the predominance of university graduates among interviewees - Limited narratives from women

				their arrival routes creates a 'deserving versus undeserving' distinction, reflecting broader political ideologies.	
"What are you doing here**?":** Narratives of border crossings among diverse Afghans going to the UK at different times López & Ryan (2023) UK	To explore how migrants' journey narratives are situated within specific places and times, using a spatio-temporal lens to understand the dynamic interplay between individual experiences and broader socio-structural factors.	Purposive sampling in community organisations (n=30); 17 female, 13 male Age range: unclear/not stated	Semi-structured guide for qualitative interviews Focus groups Thematic and narrative analysis with an intersectional lens	Findings highlighted that Afghan migrants' experiences in the UK vary greatly depending on their entry routes and the inconsistency of the UK policies. Migrants with influential contacts generally have better outcomes, while those connected to smugglers may face exploitation. the evacuation process exposed significant disparities, leaving those without influential connections at a disadvantage. Restrictive UK asylum policies compel migrants to use dangerous, irregular routes. <u>Recommendations</u> ▪ Assess asylum applications based on the actual risks and threats faced by	+ Rich and detailed case studies drawn from diverse Afghan participants + Comparison of Afghan migrants arriving in the UK over various time frame(1990s-2020s) helps to understand how experiences differ + Community-based peer researchers received training + Collaboration of multiple peer researchers and Ph.D student who contributed to data coding, enhances the study's rigour and depth + Explored the intersection of broader systems on Afghan migrants, addressing influences from macro, meso, to micro levels

				individuals, rather than their route of entry	+ Larger sample of women compared to men + Participants were compensated for their time + Use of co-production with Afghan researchers from the organisation - Does not outline the data analysis process - Participants recruited from one geographical location (London) and across two organisations - Researchers do not own positionality within the research - -No clarification of the age range of participants - Does not offer limitations or areas for future research
The perceived role of religion and spirituality in the lives of women	To explore the role of religion and spirituality in the experiences of	Purposive sampling in religious centres, charities and Thematic Analysis	Semi-structured interviews	Three broad themes were discerned: 1. Religion and spirituality are crucial in participants' lives,	+ In depth and rich data + Statement of positionality included

refugees in the UK: A Thematic Analysis Torosyan (2023) UK	refugee women in the UK following forced migration.	organisations assisting refugees (n=7) female (n=1) Iran (n=1) Armenia (n=1) Georgia (n=1) Afghanistan (n=1) Egypt (n=2) preferred not to say Age range: 18-55 years	often taking on individualised forms and personal meaning. 2. Practical needs and daily challenges can diminish the prominence of religious practices, reflecting a broader societal trend towards individualism in the UK. 3. Participants shared a complex relationship with religion, characterised by a strong connection to the benevolent higher power. <u>Recommendation</u> ▪ Importance of incorporating religion and spirituality into clinical assessments and practice to better address participants' needs	+ Ethical approval from committee clearly stated + Rigorous approach to analysis + Rigorous quality control + No conflicting interests + A wide age range among participants captured a broader spectrum of experiences and viewpoints. + Epistemological position highlighted- critical realist. + Acknowledgment of having an insider perspective - Findings mainly reflect perspectives from Abrahamic religions like Christianity and Islam, which may limit religious diversity - Small sample due to covid 19 newly imposed therefore findings cannot be generalised - Self-selection of participants may have excluded the most

					marginalised refugee groups who lack community involvement or access to technology - Sample was not sufficiently heterogenous, participants who did not speak English were excluded from the study - Generalisability, 1 Afghan female participant included
"Afghan Women Refugees Enduring Domestic Violence Despite Finding Sanctuary in the UK Azizi et al. (2023)	To explore the factors that facilitate or inhibit the integration of female Afghan refugees	Purposive sampling in London refugee centre (n=15) (n= 7) Hazara ethnic group (n=8) Pashtun ethnic group Age range: 20-60 years	Semi-structured individual interviews Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).	Three themes generated: 1. Afghan women continued to face widespread patriarchal violence and marginalisation upon resettlement in the UK, with traditional patriarchal values enforced within their homes. 2. Differential experiences by ethnicity: Pashtun women experienced stricter familial control and ongoing oppression from both men and women, while Hazara	+ Provides detailed historical and cultural context for Afghan migration + Educational attainment was detailed to show its link to the ability to resist domestic violence + Sample spanning a wide age range Inclusion of Pastun and Hazara ethnic groups enriches diversity and depth of understanding of resettlement experiences - Single geographical location, potential sampling bias

		women, with more liberal family values and higher education levels, integrated more easily and faced less domestic violence 3. Dependence of male partners and lack of access to information about rights and education increased the risk of violence of Afghan women 4. Not usual for some women to occupy dual roles of oppressed and oppressor <u>Recommendations</u> - All Agencies (e.g., organisations, health and social care services) must work with Afghan migrants to enhance their understanding of women's rights in the UK	- Responses may be biased due to participants' relationship with the recruitment organisations - Researcher did not divulge their relationship to the phenomenon under investigation and the influence of this on data analysis - Language and translation issues: possibility of nuances lost in translation - Lack of representation from other Afghan ethnic groups limits generasability of findings - Does not clearly state the limitations of the study

Dimensions of agency in transnational relations of Afghan migrants and return migrants Fischer et al. (2020) UK	To explore how Afghan diaspora and return migrants engage with Afghanistan through their agency and resource mobilisation	Purposive sampling in community organisations, religious associations and initiative that aim to contribute to the development of Afghanistan (n=75) (n=32) Germany (n=23) UK (n=20) Afghanistan Number of male/female not clear/stated Age range: early 20s to mid 70s	Autobiographical narratives as semi-structured approach, supplemented by participatory technique: ıeline Drawing ɔup Discussions	Themes 1. Afghan migrants' engagement with their homeland depends on individual backgrounds and socio-political contexts 2. Engagement is shaped by agency and influenced by factors such as family, socio-economic status, educational background and legal status 3. Structural environments impact how agency is exercised, with privileged migrants more likely to promote change. <u>Recommendations</u> - A nuanced understanding of migrant engagement is crucial, extending beyond the traditional migration-development discourse	+ Diverse sample: different socio-economic, ethnic and political backgrounds + Inclusion of participants from various EU countries provides a comprehensive view of experiences + Repeated engagement which helps build trust and allows for more nuanced and accurate data collection - Limited generasability as only focused on a relatively 'privileged' subgroups of Afghan migrants - Translation issues: reliance on family members and children could introduce bias or inaccuracies in responses - Potential loss of nuanced meaning during translation - Ethics and transparency: concerns regarding confidentiality and potential bias for coercion

					- Does not address how children were safeguarded when used as interpreters - Experiences of those without secure residence permits or in less favourable socio-economic conditions not represented - Number of male vs female not clearly stated
Imagined Communities? Relations of Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora Groups in Germany and the UK Fischer (2017) UK	To explore the complexity of diaspora by focusing on the links between self-identification, identify categorisation and emerging ties among Afghans in the UK and Germany	Purposive sampling in community organisations, religious associations and initiative that aim to contribute to the development of Afghanistan (n=55) (n=32) in Germany (n=23) in the UK	Semi-structured interviews Notes of 18 informal interviews Analysis not clearly stated	Findings highlight that family ties, class, ethnicity and politics shape Afghan diaspora dynamics, resulting in a heterogenous social fabrics. Despite diverse identities, a shared sense of being Afghan and concern for Afghanistan persists. Group bouundaries and identities are fluid, evolving across different contexts <u>Recommendation</u> - Importance of examining social identities within their	+ Rich data from in-depth interviews and field notes + Participants came from diverse socio-economic, ethnic, and political backgrounds + Geographical coverage across major cities in the UK and Germany - Data analysis not detailed - Sampling bias from over-representing active community members

		Number of male/female not clear/stated Age range: early 202 to mid 70s		broader social, political and historical contexts, using a relational perspective to understand how individuals connect with wider diasporas	- The study had limited female representation with few UK respondents
Successful Integration of Afghan Women Refugees in the UK Gheisareh- Dehi (2017) UK	To examine factors that have contribute to how well Afghan refugee women have integrated in the UK	Snowball sampling Number of participants not stated	Semi-structured interviews, group discussion and participant observation Thematic analysis	Findings highlighted that successful integration is significantly influenced by stable housing, language proficiency, access to health and wellbeing services, employment opportunities, and educational access	+ Analysis method fits with aim of research, procedure clearly presented + Group discussions and observations provided rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences within their natural context + Offers limitations, areas for future research and clinical implications + Rigorous coding process with triangulation - Snowball sampling and the unspecified sampling- findings not representative of the wider population

Afghan Refugees in Iran, Pakistan, the UK., and the U.S. and Life after Return: A Comparative Gender Rostami-Povey (2007) UK	Explore the lives of Afghans in exile and how their experiences in diaspora have led to changes in their perceptions of gender roles	Purposive sampling (n=152), in Iran, Pakistan, the UK and the US Age range and the number of participants in each country and gender not stated	Semi-structured individual interviews (n=48) Focused groups (n=33) Drawing on qualitative participatory research and life history data Thematic Comparative analysis within thematic analysis	The main themes were around: 1. In non- Western countries, Afghan women immigrant face significant racism and marginalisation but can more effectively resist male-dominated identities due to shared Islamic cultural frameworks. 2. In Western countries (e.g., UK and US), Afghan women struggle to maintain their cultural and religious identities due to Islamophobia, which limits their ability to advocate for gender rights. 3. Afghan women aspire to create identities free from male, ethnic, religious, and imperialist domination but face obstacles due to ongoing Western interventions	+ Historical and cultural contexualisation + Focus on gender dynamics + Participatory research approach was implemented - Power dynamics between participants in a focus group setting were not addressed - Ethics not stated - Not explicit about how and where interviews were conducted or how participants were collected - Not explicit about the number of participants in each country or how many male/female - Research conducted during specific periods (2002 and 2004-2005), although not explicit about the gap in time frame.

				Recommendations: Advancing women's rights involves challenging both male dominance and imperialist influences	- Limited representation of Afghan women within the UK context
Coming to the UK: What do Asylum-Seekers Know About the UK before Arrival? Gilbert & Koser (2006) UK	To investigate the decision-making process and prior awareness of asylum-seekers regarding the UK, focusing on what they knew before arrival, how they obtain information and who influenced their final destination	Through refugee associations and detention centres (n=87) Asylum seekers (n=15) Afghans; 14 male and 1 female (n=25 Colombian (n=22) Kosovans (n=25) Somalians Age range: 20- 60+	interview survey consisting of open and closed ended questions Focus group session with two groups of Asylum seekers Analysis not clear/stated	The findings challenge the narratives that asylum-seekers exploit the UK systems and suggest that restrictive policies may advertently push genuine asylum-seekers towards smugglers, compromising their safety and undermining the intended policy goals. ▪ Participants provided with false or misleading information with most participants being poorly educated Implications - Current restrictions are counterproductive; policies should be balanced to better support genuine 'genuine' asylum seekers - Simply improving information may worsen the situation by pushing	+ Participants were provided with ample choice of interview location + Survey design used to achieve as much diversity as possible + Female interpreters also provided for female participants + Acknowledgement of what future research should explore - Consent procedure not outlined - Survey interviews can provide superficial insights and lack the comprehensive understanding provided by more detailed qualitative methods - Small sample of Afghan women reducing representative power - Social desirability due to fear of jeopardizing their immigration status

				asylum-seekers toward dangerous routes; consider policy impacts - There should be more focus on removing systemic obstacles to prevent asylum-seekers from being forced into dangerous routes	- While interpreters were used in most interviews, there may be issues related to translation accuracy
Taliban's War on Women: Live Experiences of Afghan Women in Transit on Ethnicity and their Identity Das (2004) UK	To explore the present and prevalent status of Afghan women affected by long-term violence and religious conflict	Sampling method unclear (n=20) Afghan women based in London and Delhi over an eight-month period	Qualitative analysis of Afghan women's personal narratives using semi-structured interviews Data was collected from Afghan women using a participatory learning and action approach Ethnographic method to assist for in-depth analysis	Findings show that Afghan immigrants struggle with integration in the UK due to lack of qualifications, employment, and language barriers. Also explored experiences of identity conflicts among these immigrants	+ Provides in-depth historical context + Rich and detailed narratives of Afghan women + Explicit mention of how the research findings will be disseminated - Participants may have felt obliged to take part, could have been social desirability - No clarification of the age range of participants - Ethics procedure not addressed - Does not offer limitations or areas for future research - Analysis methodology is unclear - Findings not clearly presented

	- Does not offer limitation or areas for future research

Quality Assessment

Critical appraisal in qualitative research involves systemically and carefully examining studies for their trustworthiness, value, and relevance in a given context (Noyes et al., 2018). However, the use of appraisal criteria can be susceptible to subjective bias, as qualitative researchers from different disciplines and theoretical backgrounds may apply different standards for assessing study quality (Sandelowski et al., 1997). For this review, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative tool checklist was employed (CASP, 2018). This comprehensive tool consists of ten items that evaluate three broad categories: rigour, credibility, and relevance, which are the cornerstones ofreliable qualitative research (CASP, 2018). The CASP tool is noted for its user-friendliness, particularly for novice researchers, and is backed by an extensive evidence base in health-related research (Carroll & Booth, 2015; Noyes et al., 2018).

During the review process, I reflected on my positionality as an Afghan female researcher and considered how my background and experiences might influence the process. This reflection helped ensure the transparency and credibility of the appraisal. In qualitative research,credibility is akin to internal validity in quantitative research within a positivist framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility checks can be performed using triangulation, which involves incorporating multiple qualitative analysts. To enhance the review's credibility and rigour and to reduce potential bias, a doctoral colleague, and an assistant psychologist independently reviewed 25% of the identified papers at the title/abstract, and full-text review screening stages. This was done to ensure consistent application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria acrossall retrieved results. Additionally, the reviewers also appraised the studies, resulting in a 95% concordance rate in ratings. This aimed to help minimise potential bias, and any discrepancies around the eligibility of papers were resolved through mutual discussion. It should be noted thatthe CASP tool was specifically used to assess the overall quality of the papers with a particular focus on checking for homogenisation and rigour in the narratives and experiences of Afghan women.

The ratings on the quality of the papers were combined and tabulated, as shown in Table 5. The overall quality of the papers and ameta-synthesis of the main findings will be presented in the upcoming section.

Table 5: *Appraisal of SLR papers against CASP 2018 criteria*

Paper	Was there a clear statement of the research aims?	Is a qualitative method appropriate?	Was the research design appropriate to address the terms aims of the research?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?
Encountering the hostile environment: Recently arrived Afghan migrants in London	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Highlights how political ideology shapes immigration policy, revealing systemic flaws and inconsistencies in the treatment of Afghan refugees in the UK
"What are you doing here**?":** Narratives of border crossings among diverse Afghans going to the UK at different times	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Highlight how disparities in migrant experiences based on entry routes. It highlights the crucial role of social networks, showing those with influential contacts fare better while

										others face greater challenges.
The perceived role of religion and spirituality in the lives of women refugees in the UK: A Thematic Analysis	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Provides an understanding of how religion and spirituality remain central yet increasingly individualised in refugee women's lives, while practical challenges and broader societal trends towards individualism often diminish their prominence.
"Afghan Women Refugees Enduring Domestic Violence Despite Finding Sanctuary in the UK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Provides valuable insights into how patriarchal violence affects Afghan women in the UK, with variations in domestic violence across ethnic groups and impacts of independence and lack of education in

										maintaining violence.
Dimensions of agency in transnational relations of Afghan migrants and return migrants	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Provides an understanding of Afghan immigrants' engagement with Afghanistan influenced by their socio-political contexts.
Imagined Communities? Relations of Social Identities and Social Organisation among Afghan Diaspora Groups in Germany and the UK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Findings contributes to existing literature on how different living contexts influence mobilisation and agency, highlighting the influence of family ties, socio-economic status, education, and legal status on social relations.
Successful Integration of Afghan Women Refugees in the UK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Provided exploration of factors contributing to integration including

										housing, language, health, and education employment. Also provided practical recommendations
Afghan Refugees in Iran, Pakistan, the UK., and the U.S. and Life after Return: A Comparative Gender	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Can't tell	Yes	Highlights that shared religious frameworks are important to resist male-dominated identities. Islamophobia in Western countries impedes their ability to maintain cultural identities and advocate for gender rights

Coming to the UK: What do Asylum-Seekers Know About the UK before Arrival?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Provides valuable understanding by challenging narratives, revealing that asylum seekers with limited knowledge of the UK often depend on smugglers for destination choices
Taliban's War on Women: Live Experiences of Afghan Women in Transit on Ethnicity and their Identity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Can't tell	No	Findings show that Afghan immigrants struggle with integration in the UK due to lack of qualifications, employment, and language barriers. Also explored experiences of identity conflicts amongthese immigrants

Quality Evaluation of the Literature

Each study was systematically evaluated for quality based on a set of predefined criteria. These criteria were designed to assess key aspects of research quality as detailed in Table 5. For each criterion, studies were assigned a score of Yes, No, or Can't Tell:

Yes: The study met the criterion thoroughly and demonstrated a high level of methodological rigour and transparency

No: The study did not meet the criterion, indicating significant weaknesses in its methodology or lack of transparency.

Can't Tell: The study did not provide enough information to assess the criterion adequately.

The final quality ratings were assigned based on how well each study met the criteria across all areas. The ratings were:

1- **High Quality**: Studies that met most or all criteria, demonstrating rigorous methods, transparent reporting, and ethical practices. They provided clear research processes and critically examined researcher positionality and biases.

2- **Moderate Quality**: Studies that met some criteria but had notable limitations in areas such as sample diversity or ethical transparency, though still offering valuable insights.

3- **Low Quality**: Studies with significant methodological weakness or ethical gaps, making their findings less reliable from drawing conclusions.

The studies included in the literature review were generally rated as moderate quality. Many studies clearly stated their aims and employed appropriate methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews and focus groups, providing rich qualitative data. However, limitations were identified, such as insufficient details on recruitment strategies or incomplete ethical discussions.

The predominant recruitment strategy was purposive sampling, which effectively targeted specific participant groups but may have limited the representativeness of the findings. This was particularly evident in the concentration of studies conducted in London and the presence of multiple studies from the same organisation within large Afghan communities.

A notable limitation was the lack of critical self-reflection on researcher bias. Only three papers explicitly addressed this aspect (Azizi et al., 2023; Gheisareh-Dehi, 2017; Torosyan, 2023), with two of these being grey literature, including doctoral theses (Azizi et al., 2023; Torosyan, 2023). This is consistent with recent research indicating that relational ethics is the least commonly reported validity strategy in qualitative research (Sabnis & Wolgemuth, 2023). Additionally, one study critically acknowledged the 'outsider' perspective and examined how the researcher's position and potential biases influenced the study's findings (Torosyan, 2023). This reflective approach contributed to a deeper understanding of the research process and its impact on the findings.

While the overall quality of the studies was rated as moderate, the methodological rigour, particularly in capturing and analysing Afghan women's narratives, was rated low. Many studies included only one or two Afghan women's narratives, which limited the depth and breadth of findings, affecting their credibility, trustworthiness, and rigour. Additionally, three of the reviewed papers were grey literature, including doctoral thesis, and were not peer-reviewed, further compromising the reliability and scholarly rigour of the evidence (Azizi et al., 2023; Das, 2004; Torosyan, 2023).

The use of mixed methods in some studies (e.g., Das, 2004; Fischer et al., 2020) presented challenges due to unclear analytical procedures. This lack of transparency made it difficult to scrutinise the trustworthiness of the findings, particularly given the limited representation of qualitative data. The study by Ryan et al. (2004), rated as high quality, engaged in co-production by working with insider researchers and training four peer researchers, including women who shaped the project. This participatory approach helped strengthen the research team and the processes followed to increase the internal validity of the data collection (Kia-Keating & Juang, 2022).

This was considered the strongest aspect of their research. All studies provided clear statements of findings that linked helpfully with the research objectives, except for one study (Das, 2004). Despite the study receiving a low-quality rating, an inclusive policy was adopted to ensure that potentially valuable research was not excluded. This approach focused on assessing research procedures rather than merely evaluating published articles.

Ethical considerations, such as informed consent and anonymity, were generally addressed, but there were gaps in maintaining ethical standards, particularly regarding safeguarding and confidentiality (Fischer, 2017; Rostami-Povey, 2007; Ryan et al., 2024; López & Ryan, 2023). Some studies mentioned committee approval, but comprehensive ethical reflections were oftenlacking. For example, Fischer et al. (2020) had transparency issues and did not provide evidence of steps to safeguard younger children and family members used as interpreters, while Das (2004) did not address ethics at all.

To conclude, all papers were deemed valuable by both reviewers and contributed to the understanding of Afghan women's migration experiences. However, it is crucial to interpret the findings within their specific contexts. The next section will present a meta-synthesis of the findings, holding in mind the homogeneity and heterogeneity in narratives shared by the participants.

Synthesis of Main Findings from Literature Review

Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to synthesise the findings from the studies included in the systematic literature review (SLR), following the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps involved in this process were as follows:

1) **Familiarisation**:

   The process began with familiarisation, where I closely reviewed the selected studies focusing on Afghan women's lived experiences in the UK. This involved reading through the literature repeatedly and noting initial thoughts and ideas that emerged. Data included in the synthesis included first-order data, which represented quotes from participants and second-order constructs, which represented the interpretations from the authors of the included studies' of their participant's experience.

2) Initial Coding and Theme Development

Following familiarisation, key patterns were coded and grouped into preliminary themes based on recurring ideas relevant to the research question. The goal was to inductively derive themes that captured the core aspects of the lived experiences of Afghan women as represented in the literature.

3) Refining and Reviewing Themes

The themes were reviewed and refined for coherence and consistency, ensuring alignment with the dataset and findings from individual studies. At this stage, third-order constructs were developed to reflect my interpretations of the extracted data.

Finally, the data was then synthesised into codes that were clustered into three major themes: i) *narratives, realities, and integration;* ii) *socio-political dynamics and internal divisions;* iii) *unity, resistance, and future aspirations.* Eight sub-themes were also identified. The themes were then reviewed, refined, and checked against the findings of each study to assess their relevance to the review question. The themes and sub-themes are presented in Table 6 (For full details of the thematic analysis process, please refer to Chapter 3 and Table 9.)

Table 6: *Table of Themes from the Meta-Synthesis*

Major theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Narratives, Realities, and Integration	1. *Policies and Systemic Barriers in Migration Experiences* 2. *Misconceptions and Stereotype* 3. *Impact on Identity and Integration*
Theme 2: Socio-political Dynamics and Internal Divisions	1. *Internalised Oppression* 2. *Ethnic and Political Fragmentation*
Theme 3: Unity, Resistance, and Future Aspirations	1. *Collective Identity and Aspirations* 2. *Cultural and Religious Resistance* 3. *Rebuilding Afghanistan*

Theme 1: Narratives, Realities and Integration

This theme explores the experiences of Afghan immigrants in the UK, revealing how their lives are profoundly shaped by intersecting narratives, policy frameworks, and the stark realities they encounter upon arrival. It examines the contrast between dominant societal narratives and the authentic lived experiences of Afghan individuals and communities, illustrating how these narratives impact their identity formation and integration processes.

Subtheme 1: Policies and Systemic Barriers in Migration Experiences

The common theme within the literature explores how Afghan women in the UK navigate the complex interplay between preserving their cultural identity and integrating into a new societal context. This theme reveals a deep struggle as Afghan women reconcile their traditional communal values with the individualistic norms of Western society.

Policies and systemic barriers create significant challenges for Afghan immigrants in the UK, impacting their autonomy and independence. The disconnect between their expectations upon arrival and the complex realities they face is starkly evident. Key issues include housing instability, employment barriers, and educational setbacks.
These challenges are intertwined, often exacerbated by language barriers, inadequate support systems, and difficulties accessing essential services such as healthcare and education (Gilbert & Koser, 2006; López & Ryan, 2023 & Ryan et al., 2024).

Participants have highlighted that arbitrary distinctions within support systems often create disparities between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' immigrants. These distinctions reflect deep-seated inequalities entrenched in historical and political contexts. For instance, one participant's narrative illustrates how those in bridging hotelsare allowed to work and claim benefits, while others remain in limbo:

> *"While those living in bridging hotels will be allowed to work and claimbenefits… the others are stuck in limbo."* (Ryan et al., 2024, p.252).

This disparity can be interpreted as a continuation of colonial legacies, which have historically perpetuated inequalities and shaped the framework of immigration policies.

For Afghan refugee women, family reunification laws further exacerbate dependency on male partners for legal status (Gilbert & Koser, 2006; López & Ryan, 2023; Ryan et al., 2024). These policies, embedded in patriarchal structures, perpetuate gender inequality. Women experiencing domestic abuse face heightened vulnerability, as fear of losing their legal status can prevent them from seeking help or reporting abuse. One participant's account reflects this fear:

> *"One day my husband took me to the police station, I thought I would be imprisoned, I kept crying and begging my husband that sorry, sorry, it was my bad, I won't do it again, please don't put me in prison. I was like a kid anddid not know anything about my rights in the UK. I thought anyone who brought to the police station would be captured and imprisoned, same situation as Afghanistan."* (Azizi et al., 2023, p.767).

This narrative highlights the inadequacy of support systems and culturally sensitive information, reflecting the broader impact of Western legal and social frameworks on Afghan women. It underscores how deeply ingrained systems can perpetuate feelings of helplessness and dependency among those unfamiliar with new legal and social norms.

Housing instability, employment barriers, and educational setbacks further deepen the dependency of Afghan immigrant women. The lack of clear communication from the Home Office about housing arrangement creates pervasive uncertainty and instability, undermining Afghan families' sense of security. As one participant expressed:

> *"When we asked them how long we should wait for a house and other information they always tell us, we don't know. Just wait and we'll let you know"… but still none of us know about the future."* (Ryan et al., 2024, p.252).

This uncertainty disrupts housing stability and impacts children's education, contributing to pervasive anxiety and helplessness among Afghan immigrant families.

Employment barriers further reinforce this cycle of dependency for Afghan immigrant women. Although legally permitted to work, many face significant obstacles due to bureaucratic inefficiencies. One participant's experience highlights these obstacles:

> *"The Home Office said 'you're allowed'. Also, we have got a letter that states that 'you are allowed to work, to study'…But when we are going for a job, in the middle of the interview they want an ID number or something, a reference number or something, but we do not have that. They are saying that without that we cannot give you a job, we cannot hire you."* (Ryan et al., 2024, p.255).

Such bureaucratic hurdles obstruct economic independence and exacerbate reliance on support systems. The lack of adequate documentation and the systemic devaluation of Afghan immigrant women's qualifications lead to persistent erosion of self-confidence (Das, 2004; López & Ryan, 2023; Ryan et al., 2024).

Subtheme 2: Misconceptions and Stereotype

This subtheme, cited across multiple studies, addresses the pervasive misconceptions and stereotypes faced by Afghan immigrants, particularly Afghan women in the UK. These stereotypes, perpetuated by media, public discourse, and governmental policies, frequently portray Afghans as burdensome and culturally incompatible, significantly impacting their reception and treatment (Das, 2004; López & Ryan, 2023; Rostami & Povey, 2007; Ryan et al., 2024).

A critical issue is the widespread belief that immigrants exploit the system, particularly through asylum claims. This reductive view oversimplifies the complex realities of Afghan women's experiences. Many Afghan women arrive in the UK with minimal knowledge of their new environment, including the UK immigration policies, and day-to-day living (Gilbert & Koser, 2006; Das, 2004).

One participant's reflection illustrates the deep emotional connection Afghan immigrants have to their homeland:

> *"Afghanistan is a poor, dusty country, but for me, it is heaven. It has a lot ofsun, we have good food, good people, kind people. Everyone loves their country, and I like my own dusty country…my mountains. My dream is to return there. My country is gold…it was gold."* (Das, 2004, p.45).

This perspective underscores the profound emotional ties Afghan immigrants maintain with their homeland, a dimension often overshadowed in broader migration narratives (Das, 2004; Rostami & Povey, 2007).

Further complicating their experiences are the role of smugglers and misinformation. Many Afghan immigrants depend on smugglers for their journey and initial settlement, often encouraging misleading information about their destination and the challenges ahead (Gilbert & Koser, 2006; Rostami & Povey, 2007). This misinformation heightens their vulnerability and dependency again. Additionally, Afghan immigrant women are frequently excluded from decision-making processes regarding their integration and employment. They are often misinformed and denied opportunities to express their needs or preferences, which undermines their autonomy and reinforces their marginalisation (Ryan et al., 2024; López & Ryan, 2023).

The systemic devaluation of Afghan women's skills and experience is exacerbated by pervasive stereotypes that depict Afghan women as uneducated, passive, and lacking autonomy. These misleading narratives not only misrepresent theirtrue capabilities but also hinder their access to education, employment, and other criticalopportunities (López & Ryan, 2023; Ryan et al., 2024;). Such stereotypes reinforce systemic barriers, contributing to their marginalisation and limiting their potential for integration and empowerment. This is illustrated by one participant's experience:

> *"After five years of living here, I still have no self-confidence to communicate with the public; always thinking I am violating a cultural/social norm or tradition, let alone being confident enough to go for a job."* (Gheisareh-Dehi, 2017, p.44).

This experience underscores a broader issue with the neoliberal framework that devalues diverse forms of knowledge and skills. Neoliberalism often prioritises specific types of expertise considered economically valuable, while dismissing or undervaluing the diverse qualifications and experiences of immigrants (Gilbert & Koser, 2006; López & Ryan, 2023). Consequently, Afghan women's educational and professional credentials

are frequently overlooked, impeding their ability to compete in the job market and perpetuating their exclusion from meaningful employment opportunities (Das, 2004; Ryan et al., 2024).

Subtheme 3: Impact on Identity and Integration

The common theme within the literature explores the intricate balance they must take between preserving their cultural heritage and adapting to the norms of Western society. This theme captures the profound struggle of reconciling communal values with the individualistic ethos prevalent in the Western society.

A young Afghan woman's reflection captured the essence of this struggle:

> *"I was fourteen when we left Kabul. When I was packing, I left my personal things, hoping that our departure will be temporary. Life in London was a culture shock. I tried very hard to cope with the shock for a long time. The separation from my friends and extended family was very hard to cope with.Here at school, school children were rude to their teachers and to each other.I could not understand this. We were polite to our teachers and we were veryclose to our friends at school. In Afghanistan, life was social and communal. We did not feel individuality. In London, it was the opposite. It was a real struggle to rebuild my life, but finally I found myself a space where I could merge a bit of both worlds."* (Rostam-Povey, 2023, p.253).

This account highlights the internal struggle Afghan women face as they navigate the clash between their traditional communal values with the individualistic demands of Western society. Finding a middle ground between these conflicting worlds is crucial to understanding their integration experience.

Rostam-Povey (2007) finds that Afghan women in Western countries such as the UK and the US encounter significant obstacles in maintaining their cultural and religious identities due to pervasive Islamophobia and systemic racism. These hostile environments complicate their ability to advocate for gender rights and exacerbate their marginalisation.

This sentiment is echoed in Torosyan's study, where a participant describes her dual marginalisation:

> *"I think, I'm proud to be Muslim, but the thing is, uh, I'm not kind of recognisedin the West, and I am not accepted in my hometown. It's just like… It's the same, like being a refugee, it's the same thing! […]. My way of thinking is different. I mean, one thing is religion, I am thinking completely differently."* (Torosyan, 2023, p.62).

This reflection underscores the theme of exclusion Afghan women face from both their cultural communities and Western society, illustrating their struggle to adapt while confronting racism and cultural hostility. Despite these challenges, Rostam-Povey (2007) notes that Afghan women in non- Western countries, may find it easier to resist male-dominated identities due to sharedIslamic cultural frameworks. These frameworks align with their traditional values and provides a cohesive support system for challenging patriarchal norms, thus offering analternative to Western-centric feminist narratives.

The intersection of immigration status further complicates these experiences. The challenges of seeking asylum or refugee status intensify feelings of marginalisation and restrict integration opportunities, making Afghan women more vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.

Historical and political contexts also shape these experiences. The legacy of colonialism and neoliberal values has influenced cultural identities. Colonial histories imposed external values on marginalised societies, while neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism often clashes with traditional communal values. Western policies frequently prioritise assimilation over multiculturalism, pressuring Afghan women to conform while risking cultural erosion.This backdrop explains why Afghan women face heightened conflict and compromise. They navigate a landscape shaped by these influences, striving to balancetheir cultural heritage with new societal expectations, resisting cultural erasure while confronting systemic biases.

A compelling example of this balancing act is illustrated in one woman's personal journey:

> *"My parents would not let me go out with boys because this would damage the reputation of the family within the Afghan community. At that stage, I feltthat this is the negative side of the Afghan culture. I decided that I was not Afghan and gave up my Afghan passport. I married an English man but someone who loves Afghan culture. Since then, I have decided to know more about the Afghan culture and way of life. I have now created a little Afghanistan in my home."* (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.252).

This reflection illustrates how the women's initial rejection of her Afghan heritage, due to restrictive cultural norms, transforms when she finds support in her English husband, who appreciates her culture. His acceptance and love provides a safe space for her e her identity, ultimately leading her to embrace and celebrate her heritage in her new life.

Theme 2: Socio-Political Dynamics and Internal Divisions

This theme explores how systemic power structures may influence Afghan families and communities, particularly Afghan women, and how these structures might intersect with micro-level familial and community dynamics. It suggests that internalised oppression may play a role in perpetuating patriarchal control, as Afghan women may internalise societal biases and potentially reproduce these power imbalances within their communities.

Subtheme 1: Internalised Oppression

The experiences shared by participants hint at a complex interplay between self-blame, fear and institutional manipulation, possibly resulting from internalised oppression. For example, a previously discussed quote from Azizi et al. (2023), p.767) illustrates how due to a lack of legal knowledge in the UK and fear of institutional authorities, abusive family members might exploit these vulnerabilities to maintain control. This could suggest that Afghan women internalise societal ideologies that frame their struggles as personal failures, potentially making it more difficult to challenge these systems and assert their rights.

A participant's concern about her mental health history being weaponised in custody battles further illustrates this dynamic. She shared:

> *"Even if I bring a baby because I have depression, if I face any problem withmy husband, they get the child from me and give it to him because I have ahistory of depression. Sometimes I think about it, and I find it would be moredifficult than not having a baby."* (Azizi et al., 2023, p.767).

This statement might point to how internalised perceptions of mental health, shaped by both societal stigma and patriarchal norms, can be used to further oppress Afghan women and potentially deepen their vulnerabilities and limiting their agency.

Internalised oppression may also manifest within Afghan communities themselves. One participant recalled how a friend, rather than offering support, betrayed her by recording and reporting her private struggles to her abusive husband.

> *"I had a friend whose husband was a friend of my husband. One day I talked with her about the problem that I had with my husband, she recorded my voice and reported it to my husband. It caused me more problems, and sincethen I never told anyone about what I was suffering from, what problems I had faced with my abusive husband."* (Azizi et al., 2023, p.769).

This example seems to suggest that the internalisation of patriarchal norms and fears of social exclusion within Afghan communities might sometimes lead individuals to perpetuate harm against one another. This could undermine trust and further isolate women, reinforcing the cycle of oppression and potentially making it more difficult to seek support.

Overall, internalised oppression may profoundly impact Afghan women's interactions with both community and institutional systems. The fear, misinformation, and self-blame driven by internalised societal norms might limit their ability to assert their rights and access resources. This ongoing vulnerability, combined with the lack of recognition or validation of their experiences, could reinforce their dependency and subordination.

The consequences of internalised oppression, as seen in these women's experiences, might reveal how cultural and societal power dynamics are not only enacted by external systems but are also reproduced within marginalised communities, creating additional barriers to self-determination and empowerment (López & Ryan, 2023; Ryan et al., 2024).

Subtheme 2: Ethnic and Political Fragmentation

This subtheme, emerged across three studies, delves into the fragmentation within the Afghan diaspora in the UK, shaped by factors such as family ties, class, ethnicity, and political affiliation. These divisions are fluid, shifting with time and local conditions, reflecting the influence of socio-political dynamics in both Afghanistan and the UK (Das, 2004; Fischer, 2017; Fischer et al., 2020).

Afghan culture and identity narratives are deeply intertwined with personal memories, family histories, and broader political contexts. The legacy of conflict and immigration significantly colours these narratives with experiences of violence, insecurity,and loss becoming central to diasporic identity. As noted by Das (2004) and Fischer (2017), increased violence and instability in Afghanistan have further strained social bonds among immigrants, leading to intensified political and ethnic tensions within the diaspora (Das, 2004; Fischer, 2017; Fischer at el., 2020).

The boundaries between groups defined by family ties, ethnic origin, political affiliation, or socioeconomic background are neither fixed nor universal. They vary with time and context, illustrating that diasporic communities are in a constant state of flux. This fragmentation is not only a result of internal conflicts but also shaped by historical and geopolitical factors, including Western involvement and historical legacies. External political and economic systems have exacerbated divisions, undermining community cohesion and complicating collective identity (Ryan et al., 2024).

While specific narratives of fragmentation are not included in this discussion due to lack of documentation in the findings of the papers, the studies reveal a generational shift among younger Afghan immigrants. Many younger Afghan immigrants express a desire to engage more deeply with their community despite existing divisions. One participant captured this generational shift:

> *"[M]y parents like keeping to themselves. […] But as I have grown up, I realised that I wanted to get involved with the Afghan community. […] I havealways just wanted to get to know people from my own community."* (Fischer,2017, p.27).

This sentiment reflects a broader trend among younger Afghans who aim to bridge ethnic and political divides, though face challenges balancing family obligations with their social aspirations. The fragmentation within the diaspora not only leads to a sense of alienation both in Western societies and within their own cultural communities but also affects agency. The struggle to reconcile differing views on religious and cultural identity complicates efforts to establish a unified sense of belonging, thus reinforces isolation and hindering collective actions.

Theme 3: Unity, Resistance, and Future Aspirations

This theme explores the collective identity of the Afghan diaspora, their resistance to external pressures, and their future aspirations. It examines how Afghans sustain a cohesive identity despite cultural and religious challenges and vision for contributing to the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Subtheme 1: Collective Identity and Aspirations

This subtheme explores the unity within the Afghan diaspora, highlighting their shared connection to Afghanistan that transcends geopolitical, political, and ethnic differences. Despite their diverse backgrounds, Afghans in the diaspora maintain a strong collective identity rooted in their homeland. Phrases such as "*we are Afghan," "our history," and "our country"* underscore a unified cultural and communal identity thatgoes beyond mere geography (Das, 2004, p.47).

This collective identity stands in contrast to Western ideals of individualism, which often prioritise personal autonomy and self-reliance. Western societies frequently valorise individual achievements, sometimes at the expense of communal values. The Afghan diaspora's emphasis on collective identity challenges this individualistic focus, highlighting the importance of shared values and communal support within their communities.

Historically, colonial and imperialist powers have imposed their own structure, often undermining indigenous collective identities. In resisting these imposed norms, the Afghan diaspora's commitment to collective identity serves as a form of cultural preservation and resistance. By fostering unity and shared purpose, they counteract the divisive impacts of colonial legacies and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of Afghanistan.

This sense of unity not only reinforces their cultural heritage but also empowers the diaspora to shape their narratives and aspirations It reflects their ongoing efforts to reclaim and assert their identity while navigating the complexities of immigration.

Subtheme 2: Cultural and Religious Resistance

The subtheme of cultural and religious resistance highlights Afghan women's resilience in maintaining their cultural and religious practices despite significant external pressures. This resistance underscores their commitment to personal autonomy and faith, which remains empowering even amidst adversity.

While Afghan women face significant challenges, including Islamophobia, their adherence to religious practices serves as a profound form of resistance. Despite facing threats and scrutiny, they continue to uphold their faith, framing it as deeply personal relationship with God. This perspective helps them navigate and resist external pressures.

One participant's experience starkly illustrates these dangers:

> *"During the month of Ramadan, I spent all my time in the mosque till late inthe evening. I respect all other cultures and religions. But I keep in my own culture...they told me that if I continued to wear the hijab, they may kill me. Isaid fine, I will be proud to die in my chaddari."* (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.255).

Her statement exemplifies how, even in the face of severe threats, her commitment to her religious practices remains a powerful testament to her personal and cultural identity.

Historically, the policisation of religion in Afghanistan complicates the experience of faith. Religion, which should provide spiritual solace, is often manipulated to reinforce political and patriarchal control. In response, Afghan women emphasise their personal relationship with their faith, viewing it as an individual and subjective matter rather than something imposed by external forces, as captured by Torosyan:

> *"This is, this is one thing that really annoys me that our people, who became,in their own right became more religious. Not certainly a good Muslim, but religious."* (Torosyan, 2023, p.59).

This statement reveals the complexity of religious identity and how it is scrutinised and politicised, complicating the notion that being religious necessarily aligns with being perceived as virtuous.

Despite these challenges, Afghan women also shared to find support in their familial and communal relationships. As Rostami-Povey observes:

> *"The love, comfort, and the affection of the traditional way of life within the family and the extended family is much greater than the pain of being rejected by the wider society. So we have made a choice."* (2007, p.256).

> This sentiment underscores how close-knit relationships offer crucial support, enabling them to navigate external pressures and maintain a sense of belonging.

This extract emphasises how close-knit family bonds offer crucial support, enabling Afghan women to navigate external pressures while preserving cultural and spiritual identity.

Subtheme 3: Rebuilding Afghanistan

This subtheme examines the complex interplay between identity, agency, and socio-cultural adaptation within the Afghan diaspora. It highlights how individuals navigate their cultural heritage while striving to shape their future, demonstrating a fluid and adaptable identity. The younger generation, in particular, plays a crucial role in bridging the fragmentation between traditional values and contemporary aspirations, reflecting their transformative impact on the community.

As Fischer and Van Houte (2020) illustrate, younger Afghans are dedicated to redefining and promoting a positive image of their culture. They aim to counter negative stereotypes and highlight the positive aspects of Afghan heritage:

> *"...we want to be the platform...to bring every possible positive thing that Afghans and Afghanistan have and show people that we are not all about war. We are not all about violence. We are about to make peace and bring some changes...we are mainly focusing on this generation, to work with youth. We do respect our elders a lot, but I think they made a lot of mistakes... We learned from their mistakes and we are going to take the mistakes on board, take the good things they have done on board as well."* (Fischer & Van Houte, 2020, p.564).

This commitment underscores their role in bridging the gaps between past traditions and future aspirations.

The younger generation's efforts to reconnect with their cultural roots while navigating societal expectations reflect a broader desire for cultural reconnection and identity reform. They move from familial and communal isolation to active engagement with the Afghan community, using their personal agency to redefine their identity within the diaspora. This dynamic process highlights their role in addressing and reconciling the fragmentation between traditional values and contemporary realities.

A significant aspect of this identity formation is the struggle against Islamophobia through education and dialogue. One participant's proactive measure to challenge negative stereotypes reveal their sense of personal responsibility to address misconceptions:

> *"I try to deal with anti-Muslim sentiments by educating my friends and talking to them; sometimes, it is very difficult as I feel that they don't listen and theydon't want to understand. But when they do listen and understand, I feel thatI have achieved a great deal. I try to convince my British friends that what the media says about Afghans and Muslims is not true."* (Rostami-Povey, 2007, p.254).

This effort highlights not only their agency but also a profound mistrust in the systems that perpetuate harmful narratives. Their proactive stance reflects a belief that change must come from their own initiatives, driven by a sense of responsibility to address and transform these narratives, given the historical failures of broader systems.

Clinical Implications

This review highlighted important implications for clinical practice. The research underscores the necessity for cultural sensitivity and systemic reform in therapeutic practices. Central to the Afghan immigrant experience is the significance of community, family, and religious practices, which often contrast with the individualistic models prevalent in Western psychology (Fischer & Van Houte, 2020). Current mental health frameworks frequently inadequately account for these communal and spiritual dimensions, focusing predominantly on individualistic approaches that may overlook the importance of cultural and religious contexts in therapeutic settings (Torosyan, 2023). Integrating these dimensions into therapeutic approaches is crucial for improving outcomes and challenging traditional Western models that may not fully address the unique needs of Afghan immigrants.

Moreover, it is essential to address the broader systemic issues of discrimination and racism that Afghan migrants face (Azizi el al., 2020). This involves recognising and countering dominant narratives that contribute to their marginalisation and ensuring that their voices shape research and service development. In clinical settings, fostering trust and engagement requires addressing these issues and approaching work with curiosity and openness, acknowledging cross-cultural similarities, and providing interventions tailored to the unique needs of Afghan migrants.

This approach will promote more equitable health outcomes and support inclusive practices that honor their resilience andaddress the complexities of their experiences (Rostami-Povey, 2007; Fischer & Van Houte, 2020).

Evaluation and Conclusions of the Systematic literature review

This review is believed to be the first to examine published literature exploring Afghan women's lived experiences of migration in the UK. The findings synthesised offer a significant contribution to understanding Afghan women's experiences, highlighting critical themes.

A particular strength of the evaluated studies was their examination of personal, interpersonal, and systemic levels impacting Afghan women's migration experiences. The studies emphasised the dangers of viewing Afghan women through a monolithic lens, revealing that their views and experiences are heterogenous. This heterogeneity reveals the complexity of their experiences and challenges simplistic or uniform narratives.

However, the findings must be interpreted with caution due to several limitations.

Several studies had small sample sizes and were specific to localised populations, presenting narratives from a small number of women. This raises questions about the representativeness and applicability of the findings. Additionally, some studies engagedin comparative analyses, contrasting the experiences of Afghan women in the UK with those in other Western and non-Western countries. While such comparison can provideinsights into how experiences differ across contexts, they sometimes resulted in ambiguous findings and limited specific testimonies from women in the UK.

The methodological rigour of the reviewed studies varied significantly. Many studies lacked explicit detail about their methodologies, which limits the transparency and reproducibility of their findings. This methodological opacity further complicates the interpretation and generalisation of the results. Most papers included narratives or perspectives from only one or two Afghan women, which highlights the limited representation of women's voices in the findings.

Additionally, three of the reviewed papers were grey literature, and not peer-reviewed, which further affects the reliability and scholarly rigour of the evidence. This underscores the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive research approach.

Gaps in the Literature

The systematic literature review identified significant gaps in research on Afghan women's experiences, particularly within the UK context. Existing studies are often limited in scope, with several relying on grey literature that is not peer-reviewed, which impacts the scholarly rigour and reliability of the findings. Additionally, the narratives of Afghan women in these studies are frequently limited and overshadowed by male perspectives, leading to a homogenised portrayal that does not accurately reflect the diverse realities of Afghan women. These gaps highlight the urgent need for more robust and inclusive research that captures the full complexity of Afghan women's lived experiences.

Furthermore, many studies fail to explicitly address clinical implications, particularly from the perspective of CP. This gap is significant, as understanding these experiences is crucial for developing effective support systems. The research aims to bridge this gap by providing actionable clinical implications for policymakers, service providers, and CPs, focusing on improving accessibility, support, and integration through empowerment and agency.

The Rationale for the Current Research Project

The current research aims to contribute to existing literature on Afghan women's migration experiences in the UK by focusing on their resettlement journey and gathering direct evidence of their experiences and perspectives on their support needs.Using an intersectional lens, the research addresses gaps in understanding the gendered experiences and challenges oversimplified narratives about Afghan women (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

A primary goal is to amplify the voices of women of colour and those from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, recognising their complex intersecting identities. By highlighting these varied perspectives, the research aims to uncover the specific challenges they face and contribute to a more inclusive and representative understanding in research and clinical practice.

Given that Afghan women's experiences of migration remains unexplored, their voices have been overlooked in support structures, reinforcing marginalisation. Lastly, the research aims to provide clinical implications for policy-makers, services providers, and CPs to improve accessibility, support, engagement, ensuring Afghan women receive empowering and humane routesto support systems.

Aims and research question or hypothesis

The research aims to examine Afghan women's lived experiences of migration in the UK through the following questions:

1) ***What are the lived experiences of Afghan women navigating their migration journey in the UK?***
2) ***How do Afghan women frame their understanding of support and within this what types of support do they see as being useful to them?***

Five further sub-questions will be explored:

What are the main challenges faced by Afghan women immigrantsupon their arrival and settlement in the UK?

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1. *What are the impact of migration on Afghan women on their physical and mental health? How were these areas supported? (what was missing)*
2. *How do Afghan women migrant access and utilise support networks and services in the UK during their resettlement process?*
3. *How do Afghan women migrants perceive and understand support in the context of their resettlement experience?*
4. *What recommendations can be made to enhance support services and facilitate the integration of Afghan women immigrants into UK society following their resettlement?*

Significance of the study

Given the profound impact of war and atrocities on the mental and physical health of people in Afghanistan, understanding Afghan women's migration experiences is crucial. This can occur in steps: First, the act of active listening to the stories of a marginalised and silenced group can foster empathy and social change, as taking the other's perspective is a necessary step in constructive social change. Second, these collective narratives can connect individual experiences to broader socio-political forces, revealing how gender policies perpetuate marginalisation (Dyck & McLaren, 2004). It is critical to contextualise how such forces underpin policy-making and have consequencesfor how immigrants are positioned in relation to social and material resources (Dyck & McLaren, 2004).

Many of these gender policies have been introduced and implemented to exert power and perpetuate marginalisation of women (Zulfacar, 2006). Amidst intense media focus on migration, this study aims to spark both small and large-scale social change (Castelli, 2018). The findings from this study may help provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the migration experiences of Afghan women on a small scale and on a larger scale social change, offering nuanced insights and informing policy and care improvements for future immigrants in the UK (Castelli, 2018).

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the method used to investigate the research questions. The research design is discussed, including the rationale for Thematic Analysis (TA), its theoretical grounding, and the epistemological considerations. Information pertaining to the recruitment and data collection processes will be presented. Ethical issues will be addressed and reflected upon within this chapter. The concluding section outlines the process of process of data analysis and quality appraisal of the current study.

Design

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research methods explore the richness and nuances of individuals' subjective experiences rather than merely seeking cause-effect relationships (Willig, 2008). Researchers using qualitative methodology prioritise understanding the meanings people attribute to events; recognising that this interpretative process is actively co-constructed with participants (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Qualitative research offers a unique and theoretically robust framework for studying subjective experiences, which can be challenging to contextualise through quantitative research methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995).

The Rationale for a Qualitative Design

An in-depth review of the literature and thorough searches uncovered a notable scarcity of research on Afghan women's lived experiences of migration in the UK. In Chapter 2, this review identified only ten studies addressing this specific topic, with a significant number of papers providing limited narratives of Afghan or allowed their perspectives to be overshadowed by those of their male counterparts. This underscores a significant research gap. This limited body of work highlights the need for deeper exploration into the experiences of this marginalised and under-represented group within the UK context.

To address this gap, participant reflections on their subjective experiences were gathered to produce rich qualitative data that may not have been obtainable through quantitative methods alone (Hennink et al., 2020).

Considering the complexity of immigrant women's experiences and the limitations of quantitative-only approaches in exploring the gendered aspect of migration, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. This approach allows for the capture and contextualising of rich information on participants' lived experiences and understanding their sense-making processes (Padgett, 2016). Thus, a qualitative feminist approach is justified in this case.

I was conscious of the limitations of quantitative methods and did not want the voices of Afghan women to be reduced to numerical or statistical data. This approach would have limited my ability to make sense of the complexities and nuances of the psychosocial contextual factors impacting their experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2013). The notion of 'giving voice', often praised as a strength in empirical research, posed ethical and methodological dilemmas. Despite my intentions as a researcher, hierarchies of power and privilege are perpetuated when assuming the role of 'giving voice' to others. Afghan women have strong and audible voices but often denied access to opportunities and platforms to be heard but rather have been spoken for by others (Hesse-Biber, 2013). In this context, building trust is crucial, particularly given the historical and ongoing marginalisation these communities face. For marginalised communities, a history of exploitation and misrepresentation, including by researchers, fosters skepticism and reluctance to engage. This makes trust essential for authentic and respectful representation in research.

I will be using a CR approach, which offers a multifaceted interpretation of reality, distinct from 'naive realism' where researchers believe they merely 'give voice; to their participants (Fletcher, 2017). By addressing the potential power differential inherent in the claim to 'give voice' (Fletcher, 2017), the aim remains in amplifying the voices of Afghan women and challenge existing dominant narratives about them using appropriate qualitative methodologies. The study also incorporates a feminist standpoint epistemology, which facilitates a distinctive perspective on knowledge building about women (Henn et al., 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2013). This perspective enables the deconstruction of the narrow view of Afghan women as helpless victims and encourages new interpretations of them as nurturers, and remarkable social agents.

By utilising qualitative methodology with a feminist standpoint allows to explore Afghan women's histories: their untold stories of conflict, survival, and settlement in various social and political contexts (Neuman 2002). The critical realist approach and feminist standpoint epistemology employed in this study thus offer a unique opportunity to interpret Afghan women's reality, address the power differential, and challenge prevailing narratives about them.

Consideration of Alternative Methodologies

Several qualitative methods were carefully examined, focusing particularly on those approaches that privileged in-depth individual experiences, in order to find the most suitable design for addressing the research questions. This exploration included looking into Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Grounded Theory (GT), andNarrative Analysis (NA), both of which place significant importance on subjective experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

An IPA approach, which typically requires a smaller sample size (6-8 participants), was considered for the study due to its focus on understanding how individuals make sense of their personal and social realities (Smith & Osbourn, 2003). However, due to its strong interpretative nature and idiographic focus on individual characteristics, this methodology was deemed unsuitable for the research objectives. Given the limited research on Afghan women's lived experiences of migration, it wasfelt that a large sample size was necessary, with a focus on identifying patterns across participants' narratives rather than on individual experiences.

Similarly, discourse analysis, though contemplated, was not pursued. This is because of its limitations in capturing the full complexity of lived experiences, particularly within the intricate context of Afghan women's migration in the UK. While discourse analysis offers invaluable insight into how language constructs social realities, its scope may fall short of encompassing the multifaceted nature of experiences beyond language, including emotions, cultural nuances, and material conditions (Willig, 2013) which may not be captured through linguistic analysis alone (Langdridge & Butt, 2004). Additionally, navigating through diverse cultural frameworks in discourse analysis may pose challenges, potentially leading to what is coined as "interpretive violence" (Alfieri, 2007).

Grounded Theory (GT) was also considered for this study; however, it was not deemed suitable. GT is primarily focused on generating new theories to explain social phenomena (Starks & Brown-Trinadad, 2007; Burck, 2005). However, my research aims to privilege and give voice to the meanings and sense-making of Afghan women's lived experiences of migration (the 'what'), rather than constructing new theoretical frameworks (the 'how'). Additionally, given the sparse research in this area, the focus on theory construction might overshadow the explanatory and descriptive value that is crucial at this age (Willig, 2013).

Narrative Analysis (NA), a methodology that delves into the stories people tell and how they tell them to make sense of their lives (Riessman, 2008). This approach places importance on personal narratives and can provide insight into personal stories that are privileged over others and the ways in which an individual construct meaning. However, the primary objective of the research was to identify shared patterns of meaning within the narratives of Afghan women, rather than to focus on 'extended accounts of experience (Riessman, 2008; p.7). Among the qualitative methodologies examined, TA emerged as the most suitable approach for addressing research questions.

Thematic Analysis

I chose TA for its theoretical flexibility, transparency, and suitability for managing large data sets. As defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), TA allows researchers to identify, organise, describe, and analyse patterns of meaning within qualitative data, facilitating a comprehensive interpretation of complex subjects (Smith, 2003). While TA allows for the identification and description of recurring patterns within the data, it is essential to recognise that these descriptive themes represent interpretations rather than a direct reflection of material reality. In other words, the themes identified in the data are construction of meaning shaped by the researcher and participant perspectives, rather than concrete representations of the objective world (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Vapio, 2020).

This aligns with CR which differentiates between 'events' (objective occurrences) and 'experiences' (subjective interpretations of those occurrences) (Bhaskar, 1975; Sim-Schouten et al., 2007). In the current study, Afghan women's migration challenges and support systems exist as objective events, but each women's experience of these is shaped by social, social, and personal factors.

TA thus allows an analysis that captures both the observable aspects of these experiences and the deeper, socially influenced meanings attached to them. By analysing themes at both semantic (explicit) and latent (interpretative) levels, this study probes beyond surface meanings to explore underlying assumptions and ideologies that shape participant's narratives (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The semantic level captures direct descriptions from participants, while the latent level interprets broader meanings and ideologies, aligning with CR's focus on social, political and historical influences (Willig, 1999).

TA's flexibility is one of its key strengths, allowing researchers to adapt it to their specific research questions and theoretical positions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013). Importantly, this flexibility does not imply a rejection of other qualitative approaches or their underlying assumptions. Instead, TA requires researchers to clearly define their own methodological position, ensuring coherence and rigour in the analysis. In this study, adopting a CR perspective facilitated an approach that considers both observable patterns and the deeper social influences of Afghan women's conceptualisations of migration challenges and support. This dual focus aligns with TA's adaptable framework, providing a foundation to analyse both explicit themes and the broader socio-political contexts that shape participants' experiences (Willig, 1999).

TA offers both inductive 'bottom-up' approach that draws themes directly from raw data (Crabtree & Miller, 1992), and deductive 'top-down' approach based on pre-existing theories and literature (Boyatzis, 1998). As the current study explores a novel area of research, an inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge directly from the data without being constrained by pre-conceived theories. Engaging in existing literature can hinder the process of making fluid interpretations of the data (Tuckett, 2005). However, due to my position as a first-generation Afghan women, researcher, and clinician, it is impossible to divorce from my personal, theoretical, and epistemological commitments from the research; inevitably influenced the relationship with the research process. While my background inevitably influences the research process, reflexivity tools such as bracketing interviews (Creswell & Miller, 2000) and reflective diaries were utilised to enhance transparency and address the impact of my interconnected identities. Although engaging with prior literature might constrain inductive analysis (Tuckett, 2005), it also enhanced sensitivity to subtle data features, balancing inductive insights with theoretical awareness.

In the analysis process, themes were analysed at both semantic (explicit) and latent (interpretative) levels (Boyatzis, 1998) The semantic level focuses on direct descriptions from participants, while the latent level explored underlying assumptions, ideologies, and broader meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990). In the current study, the analytic process followed a sequential approach, starting with the *descriptive* (semantic level) and moving towards the *interpretative* (latent level). This layered approach aligns with the CR 'contextualist' stance, which theorises the social-political and historical contexts shaping participants' narratives (Willig, 1999). By starting with explicit accounts and moving to deeper interpretations, this approach supports a nuanced analysis that considers both direct experiences and the broader structures influencing them.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis (TA) is widely recognised for its systematic and transparent approach to data analysis (Harper & Thompson, 2012). Its transparency allows for rigirous scrutiny by other researchers due to its methodical nature (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). By adhering consistently to its theoretical assumptions throughout the analysis and reporting, TA maintains clarity and rigour (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Despite not requiring extensive theoretical knowledge of other qualitative approaches, TA is valued for its flexibility and accessibility, particularly suitable for early career researchers wo may not have extensive theoretical backgrounds (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Despite its growing popularity, TA faces challenges concerning the rigour of analysis. This issue has been identified as disconcerting for novice researchers (Nowell et al., 2017). The method's flexibility can lead to inconsistencies and incoherence, as different interpretations may arise among qualitative researchers. To address these concerns, Braun and Clarke (2006) have provided detailed guidelines for the six phases of TA, which have been widely disseminated and cited. Holloway and Todres (2003) suggest that consistency concerns can be mitigated by being explicit about the epistemology position underpinning the study claims.

In comparison to other methodologies such as NA and IPA, TA has the drawback of not addressing the use of language in participants' accounts. The language used by participants in describing their experiences plays a crucial role in constructing meanings and attributions (Willig, 2008). In contrast, CR disputes the use of discourse as the primary unit of analysis, arguing that there is a material dimension to our lives that is partially non-discursive (Sims-Schouten et al., 2007). Despite their differences, CR and TA share methodological similarities due to the flexibility of the TA method, which allows for the exploration of the surface of 'reality' and the underlying ideologies that shape the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). To overcome the limitations of TA, existing quality criteria can be applied to assess the rigour, trustworthiness, and credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews

In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are the most widely used data collection method due to their compatibility with various data analysis techniques (DiCicco Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Willig, 2008). The primary goal of these interviews is to gain insight into the lived experiences of individuals and the meaning they attach to them (Seidman, 2006, p.9). A key element of semi-structured interviews is their practicality compared to other methods, such as participant observations or diary-keeping, which require more extensive negotiation of access and commitment from participants.

While Potter and Hepburn (2005) argue that the validity and authenticity of semi-structured interview data might be compromised by taking responses at 'face-value,' this concern can be addressed by understanding that interviewees' responses are interpretations of their reality rather than direct reflections of their thoughts and emotions (Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were selected for their flexibility, allowing for improvisation and adaptation as conversations develop (Lewis-Beck et al., 2015; Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Further details regarding the interview schedule will be presented in the subsequent section.

Devising the Interview Schedule

The interview schedule was designed to explore various themes related to the migration experience, including the initiation process, progress through sessions, and reflection on endings. This schedule was created with an open and flexible structure to allow participants to discuss concerns or topics relevant to their experiences (Whiting, 2008; Willig, 2008). Following the five-phase guide developed by Kallio et al. (2016) was a necessary step, as it ensured a comprehensive and well-structured interview process, addressing the lack of a uniform international protocol for designing semi-structured interviews. Details of the final interview schedule can be found In Appendix D.

1. ***Phase one*****:** *Identifying the prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews*
2. ***Phase Two***: *Retrieving and using previous knowledge*
3. ***Phase Three***: *Formulating and preliminary semi-structured interview guide*
4. ***Phase Four***: Piloting the interview guide
5. ***Phase Five*****:** Presenting the semi-structured guide

Piloting the Interview Schedule

The next phase of the research involved designing the interview schedule. Initially, a draft of the schedule was shared with one of the supervisors for preliminary feedback. To further refine the schedule, we held Zoom meetings to review each section in detail. During these discussions, the supervisor noted that the interview might be too lengthy and recommended consolidating questions into thematic groups to improve efficiency. Furthermore, it was noted that the questions included content focused on participants' experiences prior to migration, which was not central to the study's aim of exploring their experiences in the UK. As a result, the interview questions were refined and excluded pre-immigration questions. The final step of the design process involved conducting a virtual pilot interview with the research team. Feedback from the pilot session was generally positive, with suggestions to add more follow-up questions to get more detailed responses from participants.

Participation Criteria

To maintain homogeneity in the sample of participants, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria established as shown in Table 7. Participants were selected based on several key criteria. Firstly, individuals needed to be aged 18 or over to ensure they could provide informed consent and articulate their experiences with sufficient depth.
The study specifically targeted adult Afghan women due to their unique experiences shaped by intersecting factors like gender and immigration status. Focus was placed on first-generation immigrants, who face distinct challenges compared to those with established networks or support supports in the UK. These participants arrived in the UK without the benefit of pre-existing support structures and had to navigate both the immigration system and the socio-political landscape independently.

Furthermore, the study concentrated on individuals who immigrated to the UK within the past 20 years. This period is particularly significant due to the substantial geopolitical and policy shifts that have occurred since 9/11. The increased involvement of the US and UK in the Afghanistan war led to heightened displacement and migration. Additionally, this timeframe witnessed a rise in Islamophobia and the implementation of stricter immigration policies in the UK, factors that significantly influenced the experiences of Afghan immigrants during this period.

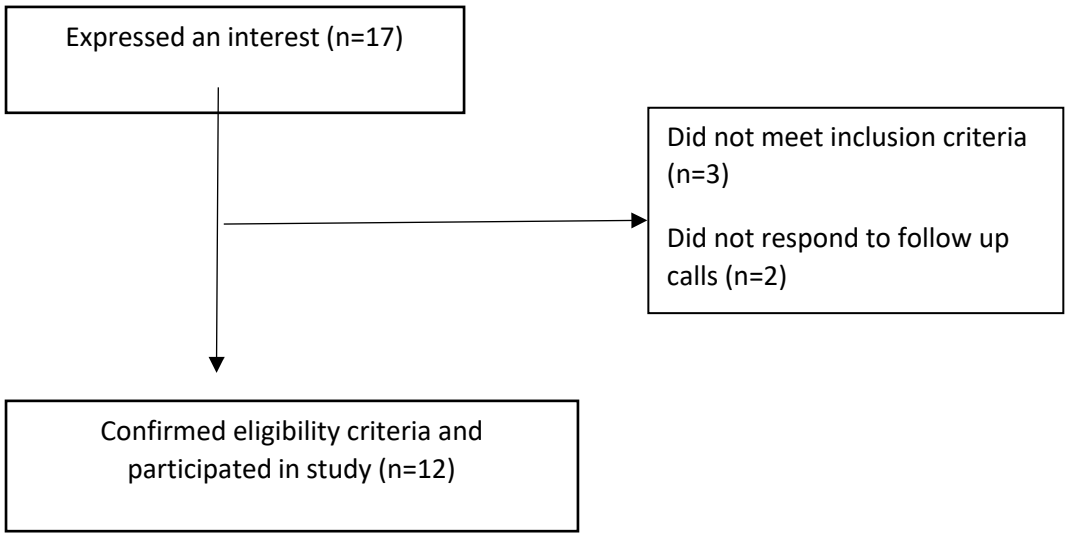
Table 7: *Participant Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
• Born in Afghanistan • Self-Identify as female • First-generation immigrant • Aged 18 or above • Have immigrated to the UK in the last 20 years • Willing to shared lived experiences • Dari, Pashto and English speaking	• Under the age of 18 • Does not identify as a female • Born outside of Afghanistan • Lacks Capacity

Recruitment

Participant recruitment was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals best placed to discuss relevant information about the research topic were selected (Palinkas et al., 2015). The recruitment period spanned from November to February 2024. To reach potential participants, poster advertising the study were strategically shared on Instagram and Twitter through dedicated research accounts. Additionally, these posters were distributed among local grassroots organisations working with Afghan immigrants (Appendix C). These organisations were contacted by telephone, and information sheets in English, Dari, and Pasho were provided for their reference. To further enhance recruitment, a snowball sampling method was employed, whereby initial participants were encouraged to refer others who met the study criteria and showed interest in participating (Berg, 2014; Patton, 1990). This approach led to 17 individuals expressing interest with 12 deemed eligible after a comprehensive screeningprocess outlined in Figure 2.

***Figure 2**: Participant Flowchart*



Participant Demographics

The study sample consisted of 12 Afghan women, consistent with the recommended sample size of six to ten participants for robust and rich data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Participants were aged between 28 and 59 years, representing diverse ethnic background, including Tajik, Hazara, and Pashtun. Most participants were married, while the sample also included divorced and widowed women. Most participants were mothers, while a few did not have children. Employment statuses varied, with participants working as housewives, carers, translators, or students, while others were unemployed or retired. Some held professional roles in Afghanistan, such as doctors, teachers, and midwifery, while others had no formal education, highlighting varying levels of educational attainment within the group. Immigration status also varied, with most participants being British citizens and a smaller number holding refugee status. Participants' time in the UK ranged from two to twenty years, reflecting a wide range of experiences with integration and adaptation.

To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, participants selected their own pseudonyms. Demographic details of each participant are summarised in Table 8.

Table 8: *Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants*

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Years in the UK	Immigration Status	Marital Status	Maternal Status	Employment Status
Hila	54	Tajik	Higher Education	7 - Years	British Citizen	Married	Mother	Housewife
Nilab	53	Tajik	Higher Education	20- years	British Citizen	Married	Mother	Housewife
Shabnam	51	Tajik	No Formal Education	2- years	Refugee	Married	Mother	Student
Mina	43	Tajik	Some Secondary School	19 - years	British- Citizen	Married	No children	Translator
Nargis	28	Hazara	Higher Education	5 - years	British Citizen	Divorced	Mother	Carer
Roya	58	Tajik	Higher Education	19- years	British Citizen	Married	Mother	Translator
Bahar	46	Hazara	No Formal Education	18- years	British Citizen	Married	Mother	Housewife
Nazifa	30	Tajik	Higher Education	2- years	Refugee	Married	Mother	Midwife/carer
Seema	59	Pashtun	Higher Education	18- Years	British Citizen	Widowed	Mother	Translator
Najiba	38	Pashtun	Higher Education	16- years	British Citizen	Married	No children	Student
Dina	33	Tajik	Higher Education	8- years	British Citizen	Divorced	Mother	Housewife
Zarah	35	Tajik	Higher Education	19- years	British Citizen	Married	Mother	Retired

Personal Refection and Recruitment

The process of recruitment for our project was a rollercoaster of emotions, filled with highs and lows that left me feeling both elated and disheartened. Initially, I found myself pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming response of volunteers eager to participate. The encouraging start filled me with optimism about the project's potential. However, as the process continued, participation gradually declined for various reasons, reflecting deeper external pressures on potential participants.

Despite early enthusiasm, many women withdrew due to familial and partner pressures, which I found both frustrating and disheartening. This highlighted a significant external factor: the profound impact of societal and familial expectations on women's participation. Some women faced challenges balancing personal obligations with external commitments, revealing how deeply these pressures can influence their ability to engage.

Moreover, the timing of Ramadan further complicated matters, as some potential participants found it challenging to allocate time amidst the demands of fasting and religious observances.

While some participants initially showed interest, their sudden withdrawal might also reflect a fear of uncertainty or mistrust, particularly if they have never been heard or offered a space to share or participate. These issues limited our ability to fully implement the planned Participatory Action Research (PAR) by involving participants as co-researchers (Kia-Keating & Juang, 2022). Despite the setbacks, I remained determined to persevere, recognising theimportance of resilience in navigating the complexities of recruitment and ultimately achieving our project goals.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Hertfordshire Health and Science Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee. Protocol number: LMS/PGT/UH/05464 (Appendix A). The Code of Human Research Ethics (British Psychological Society, 2014) was used to ensure the project adhered to the ethical guidelines including risk assessment given the sensitive nature of the research and potential for psychological distress (Appendix B).

Informed Consent

All participants received comprehensive information sheets in English Dari, and Pashto translated by a professional translator (Appendix E). Information sheet detailed the project aims, the commitment required, potential risks and benefits, and data storage procedures. Participants were given sufficient time to review this information and ask any questions before consenting to participate.

To foster rapport and trust (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), I engaged in informal conversations with participants prior to the interviews. During these discussions, I reviewed the information sheets with them and addressed any queries they had. Consent forms were sent electronically (Appendix F), with one copy retained by the participant and another securely stored by the researcher. At the beginning of each interview, the consent form was reviewed again, and verbal consent was obtained for audio recording.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

Participants were informed about confidentiality and its limitations through both verbal explanations and written documentation. Each interview was conducted in a private, soundproof room, ensuring a one-on-one interaction between the researcher and the participant. To maintain privacy, gatekeepers were instructed avoid disturbing the interview for its duration, which typically lasted 90 minutes. The room strategically located away from common areas, with participants seated with their backs to the door to prevent inadvertent identification.

Data was collected and managed according to the Data Protection Act (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2018). Information from the demographic questionnaire was pseudo-anonymised, downloaded, and stored on an encrypted hard drive. Identifying details within the interview transcripts were similarly pseudo-anonymised, with transcript assigned a unique code to ensure that only the researcher could trace back to the individual participants. Physical copies of data were promptly shredded to further protect confidentiality.

Participants were fully briefed on these confidentiality measures as detailed in the debrief form (Appendix G) and they informed that their data would remain confidential, barring any immediate safety concerns. These measures were explicitly outlined in information sheet provided. Participants were made aware that the research findings would be written-up in a dissertation and that anonymised interview transcripts would be used in any subsequent presentations or publications. They were also informed about the plans to disseminate the findings at conferences and in publications, ensuring their anonymity would be maintained throughout.

Right to Withdraw

Participants were reassured that withdrawing from the project would not negatively affect their involvement or participation in future projects. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw their data up to one month after participation. This timeframe was specified because once transcribed data was included into codes and themes, it could not be removed from the analysis.

Potential Distress

To address potential emotional distress during interviews, I implemented several precautionary measures. Prior to the interviews, I consulted with participants to identify any specific needs or accommodations, such as arranging for refreshments and reviewing the interview schedule in advance (Appendix D). The questions were designed with sensitivity to avoid probing detailed disclosure of traumatic experiences unless voluntarily shared.

Throughout the interviews, I monitored participants' emotional responses closely and offered breaks as needed. Participants were informed they could withdraw or reschedule if they felt uncomfortable (Draucker et al., 2009). Following each interview, participants were provided with a debrief sheet (Appendix G) and information about available support services (Appendix H). In one case, a participant requested legal advice which was facilitated by coordinating with the team leader, who had access to legal support resources.

Given the sensitive nature of the interviews and my background as a clinical psychologist in training, I was particularly mindful of avoiding the creating of 'semi-therapeutic' relationships (Coyle & Wrights, 1996) with the participants and having dual roles in the process. Instead of providing direct psychological support, I offered a list of external services for participants to contact if they needed additional support (Appendix H). By being conscious of my own emotions, I felt I was doing justice to the research and the sense-making process. Reflective journaling helped with this, along with socialising with friends.

Interview Procedure

Participants were offered the option of face-to-face or online video interviews. Ultimately, all interviews were conducted in person, which facilitated the observation of non-verbal communication (Archibald et al., 2019). The interviews took place at the same location provided by a third-sector organisation, ensuring adherence to privacy and confidentiality protocols and creating a safe environment. Understanding the significance of accommodating Afghan women's needs, I maintained flexibility by scheduling interviews on weekdays, typically in the mornings after participants had fulfilled their childcare responsibilities. This approach minimised conflicts with their domestic obligations.

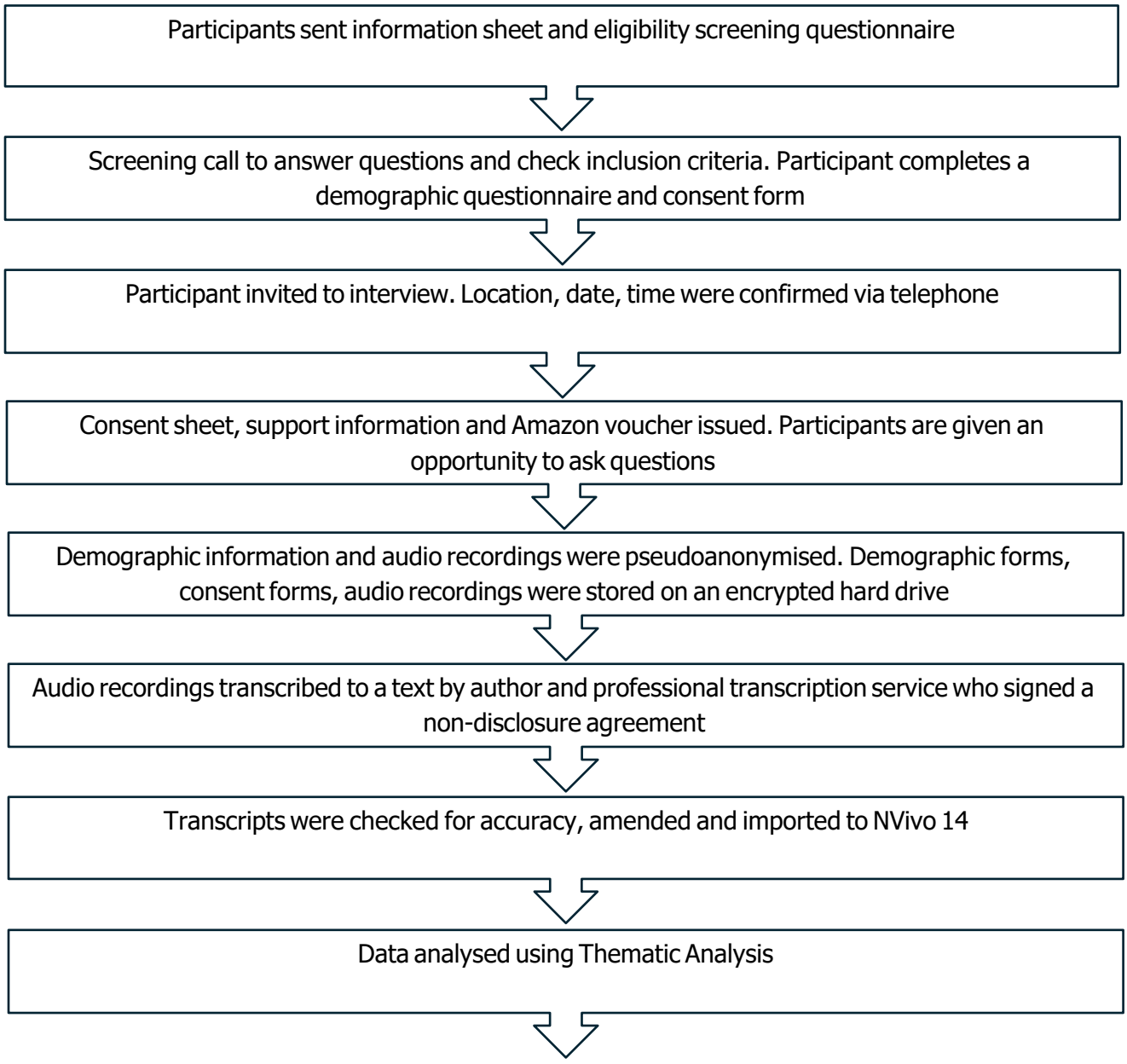
Most interviews were one-off encounters, though I had previously met many

participants at an event organised by the third-sector organisation last year. The interviews were semi-structured, featuring open-ended questions that allowed participants to share what they considered most important. The interview schedule was used to guide the conversation with a degree of flexibility to the material raised by the participants. The final interview schedule included open-ended questions (see Appendix D) and each Interview lasted between 60-70 minutes. Prompts were used to clarify questions or encourage reflections, while follow-up questions gathered more detailed information on intriguing aspects, facilitating meaning making without delving into analysis or interpretation. Given participants' limited English proficiency, I conducted the interviews in Dari which is my native language. This decision was informed by considerations of cultural sensitivity and the preservation of cultural nuances. This approach was intended to establish rapport with the participants and create an environment that fostered safety, open and authentic dialogue. Those fluent in Pashto also expressed their preference to communicate in Dari. In total, 12 interviews were conducted. Concerns about potential distress were addressed by allowing additional time for each interview and providing frequent opportunities for check-ins.

At the end of the interviews, £10 Amazon voucher, purchased through the course's researcher fund, was presented to each participant. Participants were informed about the voucher in the information sheet and reminded at the end of the interviews (Appendix I). The value of the voucher was discussed with the board of ethics, and supervisors, considering whether a larger amount might act as an inducement to participation. It was decided that the £10 voucher would serve as a 'token of appreciation' rather than remuneration, recognising the time, energy, emotional and cognitive labour associated with their contribution are worth far more. All participants accepted the voucher.

In addition to the interview transcripts and demographic questionnaires, field notes were kept for each interview to provide additional context for data analysis.

Figure 3: *Flowchart of interview Procedure*



Reflections on the interviewing process

Following each interview, I used a reflective diary to record possible themes, my emotions before, during, and after the interview, and the rapport established with each participant. Following Ellingson's (2017) guidance, I documented both physical and emotional responses experienced during the interviews. This reflective practice enabled me to consider my own embodiment may have influenced the research process and interactions with participants. I remained attentive to moments of connection and disconnection, which informed my reflections on the interview.

Transcription

This transcription process marked the initial phase of the analysis, allowing me to deeply engage with the data and familiarise myself with the participant's narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with the minimum requirements for transcribing in TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.88), I transcribed all verbal expressions and noticeable non- verbal cues and impressions (e.g., significant silences, laughter, tears, and pauses). To enhance readability, I incorporated basic punctuation where necessary. Upon completing the transcription, I meticulously cross-checked each transcript against the corresponding audio recordings to ensure accuracy and consistency with the original tone and context of the interviews (Parker, 2004). This step was crucial for preserving data integrity and minimising the risk of misinterpretation.

Furthermore, I carefully revised translations from Dari to English during the transcription and analysis phases to maintain the nuanced cultural meanings inherent in the participants' narratives (Santos et al., 2015). To prevent loss of contextual meaning, I prioritised prompt transcription, ensuring that each interview was transcribed within two days. After transcription, all audio files were securely deleted from my personal computer and hard drive. The transcripts were then imported into NVivo 14 (QSR International Ltd, 2018) for thematic analysis.

In recognising the power dynamics inherent in the transcription process, I adopted a transparent approach by clearly communicating my intentions to represent participants' views as faithfully as possible. As a researcher, I acknowledge that transcription represents a textual interpretation of the "interaction between the recording and the transcriber" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.162). Whilst efforts to offer an 'accurate' representation, transcription inevitably involves the 'selective rendering of data (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, p.12). Therefore, I approached this process with a critical awareness of its inherent limitations, aiming to capture the participants' voices as authentically as possible while acknowledging the challenges of interpretation.

Data Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2006) outline a framework consisting of six phases for conducting a TA, which offers flexibility to adapt the approach to the research question and data. In this study, an inductive approach to TA was followed, as described in the methodology section. The phases used to make sense of the transcribed data are outlined in Table 8. The quality of the TA was assessed using a 15-point checklist (Braun & Clarke,2006) (Appendix J).

Table 9: *Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)*

Phase 1. Familiarity with data	This begins during data collection and was expanded during transcription. The transcripts were thoroughly read multiple times “in an active way” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) for accuracy and to search for meanings and patterns within the data.
Phase 2. Generating initial codes	Initial codes were generated inductively from the transcripts using NVivo 14 (Appendix K). The software automatically recorded co-occurring codes, which were utilised in analysing subsequent data sets. An iterative and non-linear approach was adopted to ensure the process remained dynamic and responsive. Reflective notes capturing noteworthy observations were maintained throughout. Additionally, the initial codes were reviewed and validated by an external reviewer.
Phase 3. Search for themes	Codes were organised (Appendix L) in NVivo into broader themes (Appendix M). This process was experimental and iterative, with some themes being discarded or combined, while others were retained and developed into sub-themes: the ‘candidate themes’ and ‘sub-themes’ were visually represented across the dataset to facilitate the refinement and review process
Phase 4. Reviewing and refining themes	Themes were refined to represent a coherent narrative within the dataset (Appendix N). the ‘candidate themes’ were first

	reviewed with the supervisory team and latterly checked with doctorate colleagues via member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000). My supervisor's valuable feedback helped to refine and re-name some of the themes/sub-themes. Each theme was scrutinised and checked for coherence to ensure that it captured the essence of the participants' narratives and the data corpus.
Phase 5. Defining and naming themes	The overarching themes were honed into specific, concise themes and sub-themes, which were illustrated in preliminary thematic map (Appendix N). To ensure a rich and coherent analytical narrative that accurately captured the data's overall story, a 15-point quality checklist was utilised (Braun & Clarke, 2006, see Appendix J). The thematic map was further refined to enhance the specificity and precision of the themes. The final version of the thematic map is presented in Chapter 4
Phase 6: Producing the report	The report includes numerous data extracts to illustrate themes and invite the reader to evaluate whether the themes and quotes are reflective of the narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Elliot et al. (2005) argued that extracts should be offered to increase transparency and demonstrate analytic rigour. Thus, my interpretations of data were supported by extracts from the interview transcriptions to ensure that readers make their own judgements about the quality of the analysis.

Quality, Validity and Self-reflexivity

In this next section, the quality appraisal of the project and my positioning with the project will be presented.

Assessing the Quality of the Current Research Project

Notions of reliability, validity, and replicability, which are typically used to evaluate quantitative research and are rooted grounded in a positivist paradigm (Smith, 2003), are not suited for qualitative research. Therefore, the CASP (2018) criteria framework was applied to assess the quality of this study as detailed in Table 10.

Table 10: *Assessment of the Quality of the Current Research using (CASP 2018) Criteria*

Criteria for Quality (Y= Yes N= No? = Cannot tell)	**Criteria**	**Evidence for meeting the CASP criteria**
1. Is there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Y	The objective of this project was to explore migration experiences of Afghan women in the UK. The aims of the research and research questions were clearly stated in Chapter 1.
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? **3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?**	Y	A qualitative methodology was chosen to capture the experiences of Afghan women through open-ended and exploratory questions. This approach allowed for flexibility, enabling adaptation to the evolving data and informing the data collection process. The iterative nature of this methodology facilitated the collection of rich, in-depth, and nuanced accounts.
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Y	The SLR findings revealed a significant gap in research on the qualitative experiences of Afghan women's migration, with most existing studies being non-peer-reviewed and homogenising their experiences. To address this gap, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. A was selected for its atheoretical, flexible, and the

		transparent approach, aligning well with the research objectives.
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	Y	The project utilised purposive and snowball sampling to optimise participant recruitment. The snowball sampling method, leveraging referrals from trusted sources, was used to enhance interest and encourage participation in the research (Berg, 2014).
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Y	Participants had the option to be interviewed via online or face-to-face, allowing for semi-structured interviews with in-depth, open-ended questions. This format provided participants the flexibility to openly share their experiences and respond freely to the questions. The data collection process is outlined in detail in the early parts of the chapter.
6. Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Y	Given my 'insider-outsider' positionality as a researcher, it was crucial to transparently acknowledge my personal biases and subjective influences. This was achieved by positioning myself in the introduction chapter, engaging in regular supervision, employing inter-rater coding, maintaining a research diary (Appendix P) keeping reflective notes, and

		conducting member checking sessions.
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Y	Ethical issues are considered throughout the study, with a detailed discussion provided in the Ethics section of this chapter. A comprehensive risk assessment, covering situational, environment, and psychological risks to participants, was conducted and provided by the Ethics Committee. Ethical amendments were implemented to respond to the situational changes in the project.
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Y	A rigorous and in-depth process was followed in the analysis section, which outlined the iterative steps taken to identify the final themes. The process included extracting quotes that represented the main themes and sub-themes, as well as presenting excerpts that diverged from the predominant narrative.
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	Y	The discussion chapter begins with a summary of the research findings concerning the primary and secondary research questions.
10. How valuable is this research?	Y	The study provides a critical exploration of Afghan women's migration experiences to the UK, challenging mainstream

		narratives that often homogonies their stories. It uncovers the complex challenges these women face, rooted in systemic issues like racism and patriarchal policies. Overall, the study offers important implications for CPs, mental health practitioners, service providers, and commissioners to re-orient psychological provision to fit the unique needs and respond to the challenges faced by Afghan women.

Assessment of Quality of Current Research

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research, as it involves understanding and acknowledging how the researcher's experiences, perspective, and biases can shape the research process and outcomes (Willig, 2013). In this study, my commitment to reflexivity was central to ensuring the research remained robust and credible. I recognised that my background as an Afghan woman likely influenced how I approached the research and engaged with participants. This shared identity may have facilitated rapport-building, which might have encouraged participants to discuss sensitive topics such as migration, displacement, and the challenges they faced. However, I also acknowledge that my positionality could have introduced biases that may have shaped how I interpreted the participants' stories. To address this, I regularly engaged in self-reflection and kept a research diary (Appendix P), where I documented my thoughts, feelings, and responses to the data. This process helped me identify and manage biases, ensuring that the participants' voices remained at the forefront of the analysis.

Transparency was a central aspect of my reflexive approach. I aimed to demonstrate transparency at all stages of my study, starting with clearly stating my personal context in relation to the research topic. This included a detailed explanation of my epistemological position, ensuring that my theoretical stance was apparent throughout the study. I also offered a clear rationale for choosing TA as the methodology, while reflecting on alternative methodologies and acknowledging the strengths and limitations of my chosen approach. This transparent reasoning allowed me to contextualise the choices I made, and the processes involved in the research.

Commitment and rigour were integral to my approach to data collection and analysis. Commitment refers to the sustained engagement with the research topic and data over time. In my study, commitment has been attended to through my prolonged engagement with the research topic, not only in my role as a researcher but also through my personal experiences with migration. This personal connection reinforced my dedication to understanding the nuances of the participants' experiences. My commitment was further evidenced by continuous involvement in the data collection and recruitment processes. To ensure thoroughness and rigour, I engaged in ongoing reading about TA and actively developed my skills in this analytic method. For instance, I carefully followed each step of the analytic process and conducted a deep, detailed analysis of each transcript, attending to the complexity of the data.

Sensitivity to context is essential in qualitive research, as it acknowledges that research is situated within a specific theoretical, social, cultural, and linguistic context. In my study, I demonstrated sensitivity to context by engaging with relevant theory and literature on Afghan women's experiences, particularly in relation to migration in the UK. This allowed me to frame the research within the existing gaps and issues in the field. To ensure the study was accessible to the participants, I considered their linguistic and cultural contexts. I translated the research materials, such as the information sheet, consent form, and interview schedules, into Dari, Pashto, and English. I also conducted the interviews in these languages which allowed for richer, more nuanced responses and helped capture the depth of their experiences. Additionally, I considered the socio-cultural context of Afghan women during the analysis and discussions phases, particularly in relation to how systemic issues such the influence of socio-political context, influence their migration experiences.

CHAPTER 4- RESULTS

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, the findings from the TA will be presented. Three themes and ten sub-themes were constructed from the data as shown in the thematic map (Figure 4) and detailed in the table of themes (Table 11). The themes will be discussed in detail with verbatim extracts from anonymised interview transcripts.

It is important to note that the findings of this study are based solely on the lived experiences and perspectives of the Afghan women who participated in the research. As such, the conclusions drawn represent a specific interpretation of their realities rather than universal truths. Given the inherent gap between real-world events and individual accounts, these conclusions reflect the personal experiences of the participants and the meanings they attribute to those experiences.

Figure 4: *Thematic Map of Themes and Sub-themes*

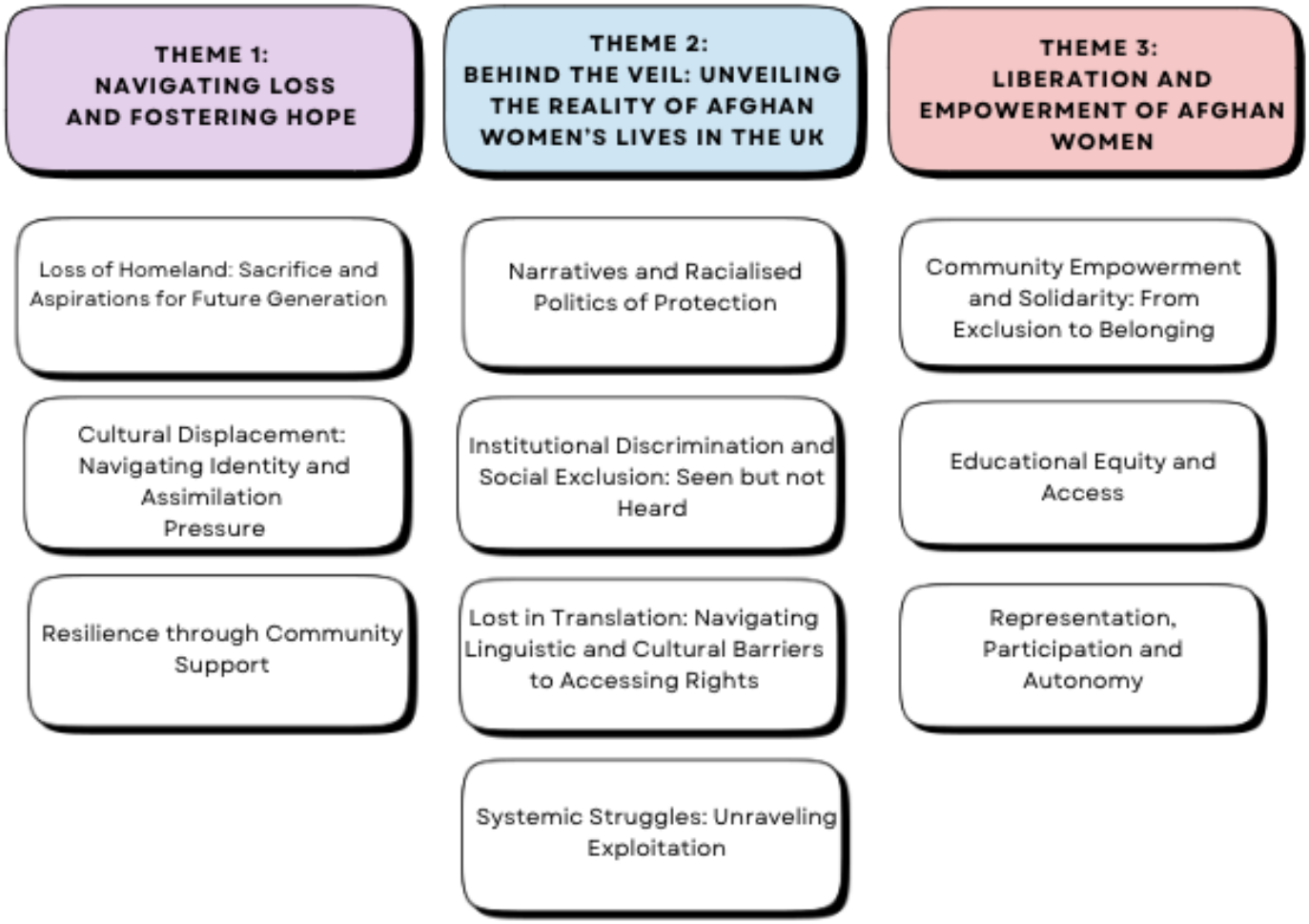


Table 11: *Table of Themes from the Current Study*

Major theme	Sub-themes	*Hila*	*Nilab*	*Shabnam*	*Mina*	*Nargis*	*Roya*	*Bahar*	*Nazifa*	*Seema*	*Najiba*	*Dina*	*Zarah*
Navigating Loss and Fostering Hope	*Loss of homeland: sacrifice and aspirations for future generations*	x	x		x		x			x		x	x
	Cultural displacement : navigating identity and assimilation pressure	x	x	x		x		x	x			x	
	Resilience through community support	*x*	*x*	*x*		*x*		*x*	*x*	*x*	*x*		*x*
Behind the veil: unveiling the reality of Afghan women's lives in the UK	*Narratives and racialised politics of protection*	*x*	*x*		*x*		*x*	*x*		*x*		*x*	
	Institutional discrimination and social exclusion: seen but not heard	*x*	*x*		*x*			*x*		*x*		*x*	
	Lost in translation: navigating		x	x				x		x	x		x

	linguistic and cultural barriers to accepting rights											
	Systemic struggles: unraveling exploitation		*x*		*x*		*x*		*x*	*x*		*x*	*x*
Liberation and empowerment of Afghan women	*Community empowerment and solidarity: from exclusion to belonging*	*x*	*x*	*x*	*x*			*x*	*x*	*x*	*x*	*x*	*x*
	Educational equity and access	*x*		*x*		*x*	*x*	*x*		*x*		*x*	*x*
	Representation, participation and autonomy	*x*	*x*	*x*			*x*		*x*	*x*	*x*		

Note on symbols:

(-) indicates words that have been omitted from the quote

(…) signifies pauses in speech

[ ] indicates words that have been added to improve clarity

Theme 1: Navigating Loss and Fostering Hope

The theme highlights the complex journey of Afghan women as they navigate the profound loss of their homeland while fostering hope for the future. It indicates that their journey involves more than just adjusting to new environments; it is about reconciling their memories, experiences, and attachments to their homeland with their aspirations and goals for a new life.

Subtheme 1.1- Loss of Homeland: Sacrifice and Aspirations for Future Generations

This subtheme delves into the profound sacrifices made by Afghan women as they seek a safer and brighter future, particularly for their children, amidst political turmoil and gender apartheid.

Participants' narratives reveal the profound tension between hope and sacrifice within immigrant communities, particularly concerning their daughters' futures. Roya's decision to forgo her medical career epitomizes the difficult choices Afghan women face, balancing personal ambitions against a deep commitment to their families. This sacrifice not only underscores the personal costs involved, it also reveals the significant emotional toll experienced in striving to secure a better future for the families.

> *Roya: I have been so focused on building my children's life (…) I have sacrificed my own needs. I used to be a doctor back home and now I am unable to use the same degree here...I am no longer working in the medicalfield.*

A significant aspect of these sacrifices is the pursuit of safety for their daughters. Participants emphasised that their decision to leave Afghanistan was driven by the harsh reality that their daughters faced severe restrictions and threats under the Taliban regime. In this context, sacrifices include not only leaving behind careers and familiarlives but also securing a safer environment for their children, who are vulnerable in Afghanistan's oppressive conditions.

They alluded to the gender apartheid in Afghanistan, where women's rights, especially the right to education, are systemically denied.

> *Hila: You want to live a life where you won't have to worry about your safety...Our children aren't safe in Afghanistan, especially our daughters. They can't go to school, they can't go out.*

By prioritising their daughters' safety over their own careers and familiar surroundings, these women demonstrate profound resilience and a powerful commitment to their families. Their sacrifices are not merely personal losses but also acts of hope and defiance against the political and social oppression they have endured,aiming to create a future free from such constraints for their children.

Subtheme 1.2- Cultural Displacement: Navigating Identity and Assimilation Pressures

This subtheme explores the complex ways Afghan women experience cultural displacement and its impact on their identity. The interplay between internal and external pressures not only challenges their sense of self but also reveals their sense of hope as they navigate new environments.

Participants shared that their identities are shaped not only by their personal experiences but also by how they are perceived in their new context. For Afghan women, the refugee label often signifies more than mere displacement; it can also implya silencing of their voices and a diminishing of their individuality. This struggle is illustrated through Dina and Bahar's narratives:

> *Dina: (…) I accepted that I was a refugee...you don't have a voice.*

> *Bahar: I used to be a teacher in Afghanistan (...) I had everything (...) I feel like nobody here. I feel like I am at the bottom of the hierarchy.*

Bahar's perception of being at the *"bottom of the hierarchy"* signifies the profound loss of status and visibility that refugees often experience. This transition from a respected professional role to a marginalised individual in a society highlights the profound emotional and psychological impact of displacement. The shift to her status poses a substantial barrier to social integration and community building, undermining their sense of self-worth.

Amidst this loss, participants also grapple with cultural displacement, feeling caught between their Afghan heritage and the pressure of assimilation into their new environment. Dina's inner conflict exemplifies this struggle as she navigates the tension between Afghan and British cultures:

> *Dina: I was living between two cultures and that was bothersome (...) who am I? Am I an Afghan or a British mum? What should I be?*

This cultural limbo fosters a persistent sense of alienation and confusion. Dina's questioning of the value of maintaining Afghan cultural norms reveals her struggle to reconcile traditional values with the realities of her new life. Her realisation that clinging to certain cultural practices might not be beneficial reflects her challenge in adopting to her new context. Yet, her realisation offers hope:

> *Dina: I have realised that holding onto the Afghan culture hasn't been helpful (...) everything that gets old you throw it away right? So why I hold onto an old mentality?"* captures this hope for renewal and growth. Just as shedding old skin allows for growth, embracing change offers the promise of a new, more hopeful future.

Dina's reflection captures a hopeful perspective on renewal and growth. Just as shedding old skin allows for a new growth, embracing change offers the promise of a more adaptive and hopeful future. Her experience illustrates an ongoing process of loss and renewal, where relinquishing certain aspects of her cultural identity is intertwined with the emergence of a new, more adaptive sense of self.

This journey of navigating grief and loss is integral to personal transformation, highlighting both the pain of changeand the potential for growth.

Subtheme 1.1.3- Resilience through Faith and Community Support

This subtheme explores how Afghan women find strength and resilience from their faith, community, and family support systems in navigating the challenges of migration. In a Western context that often emphasises individual success and integration, these women find grounding and emotional strength through religious and cultural practices, which help them cope and maintain well-being in the face of marginalisation.

Participants highlighted the role of faith as a critical source of resilience, offering an alternative to the Western preference for medical model of mental health care. For instance, Hilla shared:

> *Hila: My faith saved me (...) Everytime I would feel low, I would pray to God. I didn'tneed mental health support since.*

This testimony highlights the profound role of faith as a source of resilience and emotional well-being, contrasting sharply with the Western focus on medicalised interventions. In a society that often values individualism, the importance of community for Afghan women becomes even more pronounced. Their community not only offers support but also provides a sense of belonging and security, countering the isolating effects of individualism.

> *Seema: Community guides you...gives you shortcuts (...) this is why community is so important. People who understand and speak the samelanguage and who can make it safe.*

The theme of resilience is further illustrated through family solidarity. Hila described her husband’s unwavering support during a time of personal loss. His decision to leave his job to care for her defies a collective, family-based approach to resilience, contrasting with Western individualism and underscoring the significance of family bonds.

> *Hila: My husband's support was massive. I don't think he understood me initially when I had lost my parent he left his job. He stayed home for 6-months (...) my husband prioritised my mental health and our family (...) we both needed those months to heal and grow.*

Theme 2: Behind the Veil: Unveiling the Reality of Afghan Women's Lives in the UK

This theme examines the contrasting experiences of Afghan women immigrants in the UK, highlighting the gap between the idealised aspirations of a fair and equitable society and the realities they encounter. While Western policies aspire to uphold values of equality and human rights, the accounts shared by the participants suggest that, in practice, these ideals often fall short. Structural barriers and instances of exploitation were frequently highlighted, revealing the challenges faced by Afghan women in their daily lives. It is important to note that these findings are rooted in the lived experiences of the participants and represent their personal perspectives, rather than offering broad or definitive conclusions about the broader societal context.

Subtheme 1: Narratives and the Racialised Politics of Protection

This subtheme explores how gender intersects with racialised dynamics in policies and societal attitudes concerning protection and rights, particularly for Afghan. Itreveals how these women are perceived, treated, and supported within protective systems.

Participants highlight the contradictory nature of support Afghan women receive, where assistance from social services often comes with restrictions on their rights and autonomy:

> *Dina: Our voices are silenced...When they support you, they also take rights away from you...it's almost give and take. They silence you by gettingsocial services involved...it feels like they give you the right to give birth butnot the right to raise your children.*

The phrase “it’s almost give and take” can misleadingly imply a fair exchange of support and responsibility. In this context, it represents the metaphor of “the hand that soothes and the hand that slaps.” Illustrating the inconsistency where support is accompanied by control and restrictions.

This dynamic can be experienced as oppressive rather than genuinely supportive, highlighting the need to understand these interactions in their specific context.

Further exploration reveals how Afghan women, like Hila, feel constrained by societal narratives that depict them as compliant and passive, reinforcing expectations of obedience in exchange for protection. For Hila, this perception stems from both her personal background and her observations of others’ experiences. Reflecting on the anxieties that shape her view, she explained:

> *Hila: When you stop following their rules and regulations, next thing you know social services are involved, and your children are taken away fromyou.*

Hila’s comment seems to reflect a profound anxiety rooted in her observation of a friend’s experience with social services, where non-compliance led to the removal of the friend’s child. This experience can reinforce her perception of social services as punitive rather than supportive; an institution that may judge her harshly without fully understanding her or her family’s needs. This perception highlights a dynamic where protection feels conditional, as though it hinges on adherence to institutional norms.

For Afghan women, such expectations may create a precarious sense of security, making compliance seem essential to avoid punitive consequences. Policies ostensibly designed to protect immigrant families may unintentionally promote conformity, discouraging voices of dissent and reinforcing a status quo that limits agency. For marginalised women like Hila, efforts to challenge or resist these dynamics carry substantial risks, illustrating how power operates to maintain control over those in vulnerable positions.

In contrast, Hila's remarks challenges stereotypes about Afghan women as passive victims, instead emphasising their resilience, education, and capabilities despite societal barriers.

> *Hila: I disagree with the narrative created against Afghan women. We are hard working. We are educated and we overcome our challenges. We are just not given permission and pursue anything. Our rights are controlled bypeople both in the West and in Afghanistan (...) we are not the problem. We are intelligent and we have skill.*

This statement highlights Hila's attempt to challenge the societal expectation of passivity, presenting Afghan women as skilled, capable and resilient, even when constrained by external controls. Her statement implies that Afghan women are restricted not because they lack ability, but because societal structures both in the West and in Afghanistan appear to limit their freedom and control their choices. She suggests that external forces prevent Afghan women from fully participating and achieving their potential, rather than any inherent limitations on the part of Afghan women themselves. By framing Afghan women as skilled and capable, she directly counters the notion of them as "the problem," positioning societal control and oppression as the real issue.

Participants also reflected on how stereotypes undermine trust in Afghan women's skills and potential for meaningful, revealing how political protection intersects with systemic biases and exclusionary practices.

> *Bahar: There is a lack of trust in Afghan people. We are seen as someone with no education or skills (...) they don't trust us with having a job or doing something good with our lives.*

This perspective illustrates how prejudiced narratives impact Afghan women's access to employment, resources, and social inclusion, demonstrating the intersection of political protection with systemic biases.

Subtheme 2: Institutional Discrimination and Social Exclusion: Seen but not Heard

This subtheme examines the systemic barriers and discriminatory practices Afghan women face within UK support systems, highlighting the complexities of power dynamics and agency.

Participants' testimonies suggested that Afghan women may sometimes experience dehumanising treatment within healthcare systems, often described as neglectful and, in some cases, as involving what participants perceived to be experimental medical practices. For instance, Hila describes feeling as though she was being treated as a test subject.

> *Hila: You are treated like a rat experiment (...) I feel when they prescribe youany medication. It's almost like they are trial it on you. They keep experimenting on you.*

Hila's metaphorical reference to being 'treated like a rat experiment' could reflect a sense of being subjected to medical practices that feel impersonal or unethical, mirroring the legacy of exploitative medical experimentation on people of colour. This comparison may evoke historical instances where marginalised groups were used in medical trials without consent or proper care. While Hila's experience may not directly mirror such instances, her statement suggests a feeling of powerlessness and distrust towards the healthcare system, one that some participants described as reinforcing a sense of being invisible or unheard within institutional settings.

Systemic neglect further illustrated by instances of misdiagnosis and delayed treatment. Bahar shared a harrowing experience where a misdiagnosis led to severe health consequences:

> *Bahar: Because of my grief; my cyst had burst inside my stomach. The painwas unbearable (...) I remember going to my GP and I was told that it was stomach acid. I ended up in A&E one night because I was throwing up blood(...) I was then told that I had a cyst burst. I was then taken to the surgery immediately. They won't take you seriously unless you die in front of them.*

Bahar's narrative highlights how systemic failures in healthcare disproportionately affect marginalised individuals. Her experience of intense pain, initially misdiagnosed as mere stomach acid, and the delayed response that led to a burst cyst, underscores critical shortcomings in medical care. This further emphasises the importance of grounding her pain within the context of systemic inefficiencies and biases.

Similarly, narratives reveal how ethnic minority and migrant women are particularly vulnerable to racialised medical perceptions, with their pain is often underestimated or denied.

> *Hila: My GP did not explain what the medication was or the side effects. I remember feeling drowsy and I would wake up in the middle of the night crying. I wasn't myself at all.*

This illustrates how immigrants' vulnerabilities might get exploited within healthcare systems, contrasting starkly the lack of explanation about the medication reveal the systemic neglect and power imbalances in healthcare, where immigrant women of colour often receive inadequate explanations and care. This power dynamic exposes a paternalistic approach to medical care, where the healthcare provider's authority supersedes the patient's right to informed consent and autonomy.

Moreover, it is further exacerbated by racial and cultural prejudices that often view immigrant women of colour as less deserving of comprehensive and respectful care.

Of significance was that the lack of information not only compromised her physical well- being but also contributed to a loss of control and autonomy over her health, alluded to by the expression "*I wasn't myself at all." Hila*

She further recounts a distressing experience where her medical history was used against her, revealing the vulnerability faced by immigrants when seeking medical support.

> *Hila: I took anxiety medication once and it was used against me when raisingmy children. If you tell them that you become irritable, they will use that against you if they ever see your child hurt. They will question you.*

This illustrates how immigrants' vulnerabilities can get exploited within healthcaresystems, contrasting with the more comprehensive support afforded to White Britishcounterparts:

> *Bahar: I have seen another mum who is White and British and the supportshe receives is amazing (…) she gets all the entitled support and benefit (…) the social worker fills out her forms.*

This disparity reveals how racial and ethnic backgrounds influence levels of privilege and oppression, exposing biases with social systems. It underscores that support systems are not equally accessible to all.

Some participants shared accounts of feeling inferior in healthcare settings, where subtle cues convey that they are under-deserving of care due to their immigrant status. It shows how power is exercised subtly yet effectively, maintaining the status quoand institutional inequalities.

> *Dina: Some doctors would make you feel inferior, almost as though they tellyou that you are an immigrant...you are not deserving of care (...) they don't say it explicitly, but they show it through their behaviour.*

Participants also described feeling inferior in healthcare settings, where subtle cues convey that they are underserving of care due to their immigrant status:

> *Dina: When you are part of the system, you realise that it is incredibly messy(…) They love to Talk. They know how to talk. They make sure you question your reality, and you end up apologising to them. Then you think 'why am I apologising to them?*

Dina's reflection highlights the entrenched systemic discrimination and psychological manipulation within institutional frameworks, where women are coerced into questioning their own experiences and apologising for seeking basic rights.

Additionally, some participants reveal structural inequalities within UK housing policies. Nilab shared her family's reliance on rented accommodation due to ineligibility for council housing:

> Nilab: *We used to live in a rented house because we were not eligible for acouncil house (...) the UK law is such that you would need to have stayed inthe UK for a certain number of years before you are eligible for housing support.*

This demonstrates how residency criteria restrict access to secure housing and perpetuates social exclusion, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities.

Financial barriers further compound these challenges. Nazifa reflected on the economic prerequisites for securing housing:

> *Nazifa: I think there was an expectation to have a certain amount ofearning before being able to rent a house privately.*

This requirement highlights how economic barriers adds to the difficulties faced by Afghan families seeking stable accommodation. Nazifa also notes the impact of inadequate housing on health:

> *Nazifa: I have been living in the UK for 5 years, but I am still not registered to dental care. My tooth hurts, it's infected. My husband has been going to the dentist with me but because we receive universal credit, we are told thatwe are not eligible for free dental care.*

Bahar's testimony illustrates how poor housing exacerbates health issues:

> *Bahar: Because of poor housing, my physical health deteriorated…my arthritis worsened due to cold, moldy, and damp conditions.*

These accounts reveal the profound injustices stemming from inadequate housing and systemic neglect, raising critical questions about ethical responsibilities and the impact of social hierarchy on health and well-being.

Subtheme 3: Lost in Translation- Navigating Linguistic and Cultural Barriers to Accessing Rights

This subtheme explores the profound impact of linguistic and cultural barriers on accessing rights and services, highlighting a significant dimension of marginalisation faced by Afghan women.

Participants' shared experiences unveil how communication breakdowns within the healthcare system, such as last-minute interpreter cancellations, result in medical procedures performed without consent. These situations illustrate systemic violence, illustrated in previous subtheme, and a disregard for the autonomy of racialised women, reflecting how institutional practices can dehumanise and disempower:

> *Zarah: I remember the interpreter cancelled at the last minute and the doctors did what they had to do without consulting me. My uterus was operated on without my consent.*

These accounts reflect the intersection of gender, race, and immigration status, exemplifying institutional neglect that strips individuals of their agency. This aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of 'bipower' where institutional practices dehumanise and exert control (Foucault, 1984).

Participants also described challenges related to dialectical differences in interpretation. Even when linguistic support is available, variations in dialect can lead to miscommunications, demonstrating the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to language services in a multicultural society:

> *Najiba: They would also hire interpreters who spoke Persian. I would struggle a lot because their dialect is different, and our way of communicating is different too. I can see how the true meaning of things canget lost in interpreting.*

Many participants emphasised the broader impact of language barriers, illustrating how a lack of language proficiency can severely limit one's ability to advocate for themselves and assert their rights. Nilab compared this to being *"deaf or mute"*, underscoring the profound disempowerment created by these barriers:

> *Nilab: If they are taking long to make a referral, you are unable to ask themwhy.*

Nilab's comparison can indicate the political dimensions of language as both a toolof empowerment and oppression. The inability to communicate effectively within the healthcare system represents a form of silencing, an epistemic injustice, preventing individuals from fully engaging with and accessing their rights.

Subtheme 4: Systemic Struggles: Unraveling Exploitation

This subtheme examines the deep structural inequalities faced by Afghan women in the UK labour market, exploring how patriarchal and capitalist systems intersect to perpetuate these disparities. It also delves into how community support can sometimes become an arena of exploitation and tokenism rather than genuine solidarity.

Participants' narrative illustrates the stark discrepancy between their professional qualifications and the menial jobs they are forced to accept.

> Zarah: *I think immigrants get exploited...I used to work for an hour for a fewcents. I would clean offices and toilets in campuses...I used to be a teacherback in Afghanistan, it impacts my self-esteem.*

Zarah's testimony highlights the profound impact of structural inequalities, where skilled professionals are relegated to, low-wage and undervalued jobs. This situation is exacerbated by patriarchal and neoliberal systems that devalue women's labour. Afghan women face the dual challenge of rebuilding their lives and reconstructing their professional identities after displacement, which compounds their difficulties.

While similar experiences are well documented among international graduates, such as those in the medical field (Jager et al., 2023), the context for Afghan women is particularly significant. For them, the challenge involves not only rebuilding their lives in a new country but also reconstructuring their professional identities and status after experiencing displacement and loss. This dual burden of building anew while navigating systemic barriers and diminished self-esteem makes their situation uniquely complex.

Similarly, the systemic marginalisation of immigrants persists regardless of their qualifications and skills:

> *Nazifa*: *My husband Is highly educated and a graduate (...) he is incredibly smart, but he has to work in a low-wage job (…) they see all immigrants as lacking skills.*

> *Zarah*: *I feel like nobody here (…) I feel like I am at the bottom of the hierarchy.*

These testimonies highlight the unequal power dynamics, where immigrants without legal status rarely perceive themselves as holders of rights and hesitate to express grievances over inadequate working conditions. This power dynamic keeps immigrants in a state of 'illegality', reinforcing their subordinate status and restricting their access to meaningful employment and economic empowerment.

Exploitation is not confined to broader societal structures; it can also occur within the very communities that are supposed to offer support. Participants noted instances where community organisations fail to genuinely assist Afghan women, instead using resources for superficial purposes:

> *Dina*: *They exist but they need to genuinely help Afghan women...they usethe funded money to arrange parties for themselves.*

Seema's account further elaborates on this:

> *Seema: Take photos to put up on their website and show to the world that they are advocating for Afghan women, but the reality is far from it. It is notgenuine (...) there is no credibility*.

Seema's account highlights the disconnect between the rhetoric of support and the actual assistance provided. It suggests that organisations often create a facade of solidarity without addressing the real needs of Afghan women, resulting in tokensim and superficial gestures that do not translate into meaningful change.

Participants further expressed frustration over the misuse of resources, advocating for genuine investment in initiatives that would have meaningful impact on their lives:

> *Zarah: The organisation celebrated women's day but none of us were partof it (...) they could have invested that money on women's day to build a gym specifically for Afghan women.*

This reflection underscores the need for authentic and meaningful investment in community resources that address the real challenges faced by Afghan women, rather than perpetuating symbolic gestures that fail to address their pressing needs.

Theme 3- Liberation and Empowerment of Afghan women

This theme explores the multifaceted dimensions of liberation and empowerment of Afghan women, focusing on their journey from marginalisation to self-empowerment. It underscores the critical role of community support, educational equity, and meaningful representation in fostering a sense of belonging and autonomy.

Subtheme: Community Empowerment and Solidarity: From Exclusion to Belonging

This subtheme emphasises the significance of collective support and shared experiences in building resilient communities for Afghan women, transforming their experiences from exclusion to a sense of belonging.

Participants shared how community support can function similarly to a familial bond, providing both comfort and a sense of belonging: Seema described this communal connection:

> *Seema: Community is important because I am able to build together, talk to them, have discussions, celebrate our culture. Especially when you arean immigrant, you need them for safety. It gives you peace.*

Seema likens the support of the community to the nurturing presence of a mother, reflecting the deep emotional and psychological needs fulfilled by such connections:

> *Seema: It's almost like a baby sharing her difficulties with the mother.*

This analogy highlights how communities offer a safe haven for immigrants, mirroring the security and unconditional support a mother provides. For immigrants feeling alienated in a new and unfamiliar environment, such a community is crucial for solace and acceptance.

In conjunction with Seema's testimony, participants also emphasise the importance of intergenerational solidarity, where those experienced in navigating migration challenges help pave the way for newcomers:

> *Zarah: I think the community needs to come together to help. To guide them,particularly the ones who have been here longer. It is our responsibility to make the experience easy and safe for them.*

Some participants shared harnessing Afghan women's diverse skills as crucial for economic empowerment. This may resonate with the idea of not just giving Afghan women "a piece of bread" but empowering them to bake their own bread. It alludes to fostering self-sufficiency and agency, challenging narratives prevalent in patriarchal structures.

> *Hila: Maybe these communities or organisations can invest in handcraft orcarpenter jobs. Afghan women have so many more skills.*

Moreover, some participants stress the need for safe spaces within the community itself as crucial for women to assert agency. It addresses the silencing of Afghan women's voices in patriarchal societies and emphasise on creating spaces where marginalised voices can be heard and valued without fear of reprisal.

> *Bahar: It's hard to think about how best to bring their voices that is not dominated by the needs of other people. Maybe allowing them a safe and confidential space where they can freely express their needs. Maybe a community approach is what we need.*

Participants emphasise the importance of patience and empathy towards immigrants, recognising their diverse journeys and needs.

> *Nargis: I think the first step is to have patience with immigrants. They are human who have different journeys coming here. Take your time to understand them and their journey and their needs.*

Nargis's narrative profoundly challenges superficial and stereotypical views of Afghan women. By advocating for patience and deep understanding, Nargis calls for a transformative shift in how we engage with immigrants. This perspective is particularly crucial for psychologists and mental health professionals, who should approach their work without assumptions and biases. Instead, they must cultivate a genuine curiosity and openness to the diverse and complex experiences of each individual.

Subtheme: Educational Equity and Access

This subtheme highlights the crucial role of education in empowering Afghan women, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective integration and self-advocacy in their new environment.

Participants highlight the necessity for immigrants to understand their rights and the legal framework, viewing this awareness as essential for empowerment.

Nargis articulates the transformative potential of education:

> *Nargis: Immigrants should be made aware of their rights, what they need, where to go, what to do. We should be made aware of the positives and negatives of everything, and this includes their laws. If we know these things,then we can become aware of our rights.*

This perspective reflects a shared belief among participants that understanding one's rights is a foundational step towards self-advocacy and integration into the new society.

Zarah emphaises the power of knowledge sharing in empowering women, noting that the effective dissemination of information requires minimal resources but can yield significant benefits.

> *Zarah: It doesn't take that long. It doesn't take funding. It takes a room to bring all women in and give them information about their rights.*

This highlights the practicality and feasibility of community-based educational efforts, demonstrating that even simple acts of and information sharing can significantly empower Afghan women.

Several participants noted how technology has revolutionised access to information. Dina reflects on this democraticing effect by stating:

> *Dina: There is more access to everything today than it was 30 years ago (…)people have iPhone, and laptop. They can learn new languages. They can access knowledge. They can access laws. They can access mental and physical health.*

Conversely, some participants address how cultural norms intersect with educational deficits, creating barriers to advocacy for Afghan women. This mirrors the patriarchal society of Afghanistan where denying women education has historically been used to maintain control and keeping them subordinate.

> *Bahar: Some Afghan women are not aware of their rights or know how to access resources. They are unable to defend themselves. There is also this culture where women fear to express their needs…what would help is educate them (…) through better learning opportunities (…) invest in more learning spaces.*

Subtheme: Representation, Participation, and Autonomy

This subtheme explores the significant role of Afghan women's participation in societal decision-making processes and their pursuit of autonomy and agency. Participants shared the need for inclusive dialogue to understand Afghan women's specific needs, advocating for genuine inclusion in the decision-making process.

Nazifa emphasised the importance of directly involving Afghan women in decisions that affect their lives:

> *Nazifa: Make them sit down and engage in conversation with them (...) askthem what do you want, what do you need...What are your struggles? What do you think can help overcome those struggles? (…)* don't *just tellus that you are celebrating women's day or that you are organising yoga classes but ask us. You celebrated women's day but none of us were part of it.*

Here, Nazifa directs her critique at community organisations, particularly those tasked with addressing Afghan women's needs. Her comment may reflect her desire for a shift from prescriptive or surface-level initiatives (e.g., symbolic celebrations of women's day) to meaningful consultations that involve Afghan women directly in decision-making processes.

> *Seema: They should be allowed to go out more, engage in learning the language, access job opportunities…the laws and policies and ultimately to be able to depend on ourselves and our rights.*

Her statement may further highlight the importance of involving Afghan women in decision-making at various levels. It suggests that dialogue could take place between Afghan women and key stakeholders, such as policymakers, community leaders, and service providers, who influence social and economic opportunities. Such conversations may help ensure that Afghan women's perspectives are considered in shaping the solutions that affect their lives. Additionally, participants pointed to the need for Afghan women to have the opportunity to engage fully in social, political, and economic activities, suggesting that exclusion from these spaces could hinder their ability to exercise agency and autonomy.

The importance of financial independence for Afghan women was a common theme, challenging the ongoing dependence on men for financial support. Nilab saw financial independence as a cornerstone of women's autonomy, challenging patriarchal structures that control women through economic dependency.

Nilab: It is important for Afghan women to be financially dependent. How long do we have to ask men for money?

Shabnam advocates for job opportunities aligned with their skills and aspirations of Afghan women, highlighting the need for meaningful employment to foster financial independence.

> Shabnam: *Ask us what we need...we have tailoring classes. No one asks uswhat we want to do with this skill (...) Maybe create job opportunities for women so that we can continue to support ourselves financially without relying on others*

Moreover, she captures the significance of parental involvement in shaping children's educational journey, particularly concerning culturally sensitive subjects like gender and sexuality. She contends the agency parents wield in shaping their children's learning environment, advocating for their values to be honored within the educational framework, thus empowering them with a sense of control and influence.

> *Hila: Parents should be given the right to their children (…) they should be consulted before making decisions on their behalf (…) they are now teaching children about gender and sexuality in school (…) parents should be consulted whether they want their children to learn about it.*

This highlights the cultural nuances and the importance of respecting parental values within educational settings, thereby empowering parents to influence their children's learning experiences.

Roya's perspective critiques Western approaches of gender equality, arguing that capitalist societies often prioritise economic productivity over caregiving roles, such as motherhood. She emphasises the need for a balanced recognition of both traditional responsibilities and modern rights, cautioning that women's rights can sometimes be 'exploited' in ways that undermine the value of traditional roles. In her words:

> *Roya: I agree that men and women are equal but please don't exploit it. Every gender should know their roles (...) being a mum is hard and women today exploit women's rights here in the West.*

Roya's perspective reflects a concern that modern gender equality can overlook the significance of caregiving roles, which are highly valued in her cultural context. While her view may stem from her personal and cultural lens, it raises important questions about how gender equality intersects with cultural values, and the balance between rights and responsibilities in different societal contexts.

She further highlights the barriers Afghan women face in accessing educational and professional opportunities even in Western countries.

> *Roya: Then we have other groups of women who are not given permission or are allowed to go study or work by their husband. Despite being in a Western country, they are not allowed to study or attend English classes. (…) even if they study, they won't be allowed to work.*

This testimony exposes ongoing challenges Afghan women face in exercising their rights to education and employment, despite residing in countries with ostensibly greater freedoms.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Chapter Overview

This chapter aims to situate the findings within a theoretical context linked to existing literature. I will also discuss the strengths, limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research and conclude with my reflections on the project.

Revisiting the research Questions

The research explored Afghan women's lived experiences of migration in the UK. One-to-one interviews were undertaken with 12 women, analysed using thematic analysis. The main research questions were: 'What are the lived experiences of Afghan women navigating their migration journey in the UK?' 'How do Afghan women frame their understanding of support, and within this what types of support do they see as being useful to them?'

Summary of Findings

This study highlights the complex experiences of Afghan women navigating migration in the UK, revealing the intersection of cultural dislocation, systemic marginalisation, and personal resilience. Participants described profound losses from separation from their homeland, careers, and families, further compounded by barriers like immigration policies, Islamophobia, and the devaluation of their identities and qualifications. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated remarkable agency, drawing strength from their cultural and religious identities. Participation in community life, access to education, and involvement in advocacy were crucial for empowering these women as they sought to reclaim autonomy, assert their voices, and secure a sense of belonging in their new environment.

The themes and sub-themes from the project will now be presented and situated within existing theory and literature. These themes reflect the psychological and emotional impact of migration while also highlighting how participants navigate the challenges of displacement.

The patterns that emerged across the subthemes reveal complex intersections between personal identity, cultural adaptation, and collective resilience. This section discusses these intersections and how they influence the experiences of Afghan women.

‘What are the lived experiences of Afghan women navigating their migration journey in the UK?’

Navigating Loss and Fostering Hope

The loss of homeland emerged as a profound experience for participants, yet its impact seemed to vary depending on individual factors such as professional identity, educational background, and immigration status. For Afghan women who previously held prominent professional roles, such as doctors and teachers, displacement represented more than just a physical relocation; it signified a profound loss of societal contribution and personal identity. This loss can be understood through the lens of Murray Parkes (1993) psychosocial transition theory, which highlights that grief is not only an emotional experience but a process that challenges an individual’s sense of self, role, and place within society. Parkes (1993) describes grief as a major psychosocial transition, one that involves multiple layers of loss; not just the loss of loved one but also the loss of social roles, status, and lifestyle. Parkes (1993) identified loss as a process that includes three phases: disorientation, where individuals experience confusion and emotional turmoil; reorganisation, where new mechanisms and roles emerge; and adaptation, when the loss is integrated into a redefined sense of self. For many of the Afghan women in this study, particularly recent arrivals, disorientation phase appeared to be ongoing. Barriers such as the devaluation of non-western qualifications and systemic challenges within the UK left them feeling excluded from professional opportunities (Ryan et al., 2024).

These women, highly educated and once influential in their home country, often found themselves unable to contribute meaningfully in their new environment (Ryan et al., 2024). This professional displacement mirrors critiques of neolibral systems, which can often marginalise non Western expertise, contributing to both economic dependency and psychological distress for many Afghan women (Anderson, 2020).

In contrast, for participants who identified as mothers, the loss was reframed through the lens of sacrifice for their children's future. While they mourned the personal and professional opportunities left behind, many emphasised the perceived benefits of safety, stability, and the educational opportunities that the UK offered. This generational perspective may reflect a desire to view their sacrifice as part of a broader narrative of familial success. However, for women without children, the loss was often framed as a disruption to their individual aspirations, reflecting the challenges of rebuilding a sense of self in what was percieved as an alienating environment.

In addition to the loss of professional and personal identity, cultural displacement added yet another layer of complexity. For many Afghan women, they found themselves in a liminal space, struggling to balance the desire to preserve their Afghan identity with the need to integrate into their new cultural environment (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003). For a high number of Afghan women, particularly those with less formal education, the tension between maintaining these competing demands often triggered feelings of alienation (Rostami-Povey, 2007). These women often spoke about the British society, while on one hand, demanded assimilation; yet on the other hand, it offered scant resoures or recognition for the preservation of Afghan cultural practices. This left many feeling as though they were being forced to abandon who they were without offering a space for who they could become (Goliaei et al., 2023).

In contrast, women with higher education often approached cultural displacement as a moment of potential transformation; an opportunity for personal growth. It could be argued that their education provided them with tools to engage critically with both their Afghan heritage and their new cultural environment, allowing them to reframe the tension as a space for reflection and adaptation (Goliaei et al., 2023). The ability to engage in critical reflection on traditional norms and societal expectations, however, did not shield them from the external barriers that were still very much in place; such as language difficulties and structural discrimination, which limited their ability to fully integrate into British society.

For recent arrivals, particularly those without established community networks, isolation compounded the struggles of cultural integration (Rostami- povey, 2007). Without the support of family or familiar social structures, these women faced even greater challenges in navigating their new lives, thus supporting findings from the SLR (Rostami-Povey, 2007) and the wider literature (Renzaho, 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003).

In contrast, those with established networks, whether through educational or community ties, were better equipped to manage the challenges of adaptation. This could suggest that educational background, social connections, and support systems significantly influence how Afghan women navigate cultural displacement with educational attainment enabling some to resist or reframe systemic inequalities (Ryan et al., 2024).

Behind the Veil: Unveiling the Reality of Afghan Women's lives in the UK

Healthcare has emerged as a critical and challenging area for Afghan women in the UK. However, their struggles extend well beyond this sector, affecting their access to housing, employment, education, and social services. This theme is not only indicative of the challenges faced by marginalised communities but also reflects the ways in which systemic barriers, shaped by both historical and contemporary power dynamics, continue to undermine the health and well-being of these women. Afghan women's account reveal a persistent and often invisible pattern of exclusion that can be understood through the lens of racialised neoliberalism and colonial legacies. Healthcare in the UK, like many other systems, is shaped by structures that may perpetuate inequalities, with marginalisation potentially being a consequences of cultural insensitivity and systemic biases (Gheisareh-Dehi, 2017).

While all participants experienced some form of external oppression, the specific nature of these barriers varied based on key factors like immigration status, educational level and duration of stay in the UK. Women with longer histories in the UK, for instance, those who had established relationships with healthcare providers, were able to critically reflect on how institutional biases shaped their experiences. They described feeling that their autonomy was often undermined and their concerns were often dismissed which may be a consequence of systemic neglect that fails to address cultural difference (Ryan et al., 2024).

However, despite these harmful experiences, many women reported internalising these mistreatments. Despite the clear biases they encountered, many expressed feelings of guilt and self-blame, sometimes even apologising for their mistreatment. This self-blame reflects the process of internalised oppression (Griffin, 1997), a concept that explains how members of marginalised groups absorb and accept the negative stereotypes and prejudices imposed by dominant groups (Griffin, 1997).

In this context, Afghan women's mistreatment was not only experienced but also normalised, as they came to believe that they were somehow unworthy of better care. This finding aligns with the conclusions drawn in the SLR by Azizi et al. (2023), which highlihted similar patterns of internalisation of oppression among the Afghan community.

Internalised oppression, as a theoretical framework, helps explain how individuals from subordinated groups internalise the negative beliefs about them, which in turn shapes their responses to oppression. Lorde (1984) argues that internalised oppression leads individuals to adopt the worldview of their oppressors, viewing their subordination as deserved or inevitable. For the women in this study, this process of internalisation meant that they saw their struggles and mistreatment as a reflection of their personal inadequacies rather than a result of systemic bias or cultural insensitivity. As a result, they felt alienated and powerless, unable to challenge the healthcare system that perpetuated their inferior treatment. This supports findings in the SLR (Gheisareh-Dehi, 2017) and also aligns with Lorde's (1984) assertion that internalised oppression not only reflects how individuals are treated but also shapes how they perceive and react to their own worth and dignity.

The psychological burden of internalised oppression is crucial for understanding the perpetuation of healthcare disparities (Griffin, 1997). When marginalised individuals internalise the belief that their mistreatment is deserved, they are less likely to resist or demand better care. The very structures that oppress them are internalised, making it more difficult for them to challenge the status quo. In the case of Afghan women, their experiences underscore how deeply societal power dynamics shape both their external treatment and their internal self-worth. The process of internalisation serves as a mechanism that not only sustains external oppression but also embeds a sense of subordination in the mind of the oppressed (Griffin, 1997).

For women who had recently arrived, the challenges were more immediate and urgent. They focused less on systemic biases and more on practical barriers like language difficulties, misunderstandings in medical instructions, and the overwhelming fear of navigating an unfamiliar system. This survival-orientated perspective on healthcare illustrates how the lack of access to appropriate resources excerbates feelings of allientaion and vulnerability, particularly for those new to the UK.

A crucial barrier highlighted by many participants was the language gap, which supports findings from the SLR (Gheisareh-Dehi, 2017). Limited proficiency in English made communication difficult for many, reinforcing a sense of marginalisation within healthcare and beyond. Neoliberal ideologies often position language proficiency as marker of social and economic integration, linking it to upward mobility and access to resources (Gheisareh-Dehi, 2017). This ideology, however, may perceive women who cannot speak English fluently are treated as outsiders, further distancing them from essential services. Thus, the power of language in systems may serve as an additional tool of excusion, reflecting colonical and racialised power structures where margianlised groups have historically been silenced (Mills, 2014).

The intersection of immigration status also played a pivotal role in shaping Afghan women’s experiences. Those with refugee status often faced heightened vulnerability, amplified by the precariousness of their legal standing. The constant fear of being unable to access care or facing delays in services intensified their struggles. These findings resonate with the work of Ryan et al. (2024) in the SLR, which demonstrates how immigration status directly influences access to healthcare, further marginalising immigrant populations and amplifying their sense of dislocation.

For participants who were mothers, healthcare challenges were intertwined with concerns about the well-being of their children. Many of these women expressed a deep anxiety about the implications of their mental health on their children, particularly in the context of a system that is not attuned to their needs. They spoke about the fear of being judged or surveilled by authorities, worried that any sign of mental distress could lead to punitive measures, such as child removal by social services.

This reflects a broader pattern of surveillance and control, particularly for racialised mothers, where systemic structures may inadvertently reinforce their vulnerability rather than provide the necessary support for mental health and well-being (Azizi, Lane & Boyce, 2023). In contrast, women without children appeared to frame their healthcare struggles more as personal affronts to their dignity and autonomy. They often described feeling invisible within the healthcare system, with their concerns and symptoms dismissed due to both cultural misunderstandings and institutional biases. These women's experiences highlight the particular intersection of gender, migration, and healthcare, where individual agency is eroded through systemic neglect, and where their voices and needs are often marginalised (Azizi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, while many participants spoke about the importance of community in helping them adapt to life in the UK, as explored in Theme 1, their experiences also unveiled the harsh realities of how accessing these communities is far from straightforward. Several women described feeling exploited within Afghan community organisations, where patriarchal norms and neoliberal values often intersected to perpetuate cycles of exclusion and control (Azizi et al., 2023). Intriguingly, many women highlighted how exploitation and harm were sometimes perpetuated by other women within these organisation. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of internalised oppression, as discussed before (Lorde, 1984), where marginalised communities replicate harmful power dynamics that originate from external systemic forces, such as patriarchy or colonialism. Women within these organisations, conciously or unconciously, can reinforce patriarchal or exclusionary practices as a way to maintain their own sense of belonging or control in systems that already marginalise them (Azizi et al., 2023). This self- perpetuating cycle of harm complicates the idea of these communities having spaces of refuge and solidarity, showing how internalised oppression can manifest in ways that harm even those who seek support. These findings are supported by the broader literature, as seen in the SLR, where similar patterns of internalised oppression within marginalised groups were identified (Azizi et al., 2023).

How do Afghan women frame their understanding of support and within this what types of support do they see as being useful to them?

Liberation and Empowerment of Afghan Women

The experiences of Afghan women reveal that empowerment is not a linear process but a complex, multi-layered journey. For these women, empowerment was intricately tied to community solidarity, educational aspirations, and visibility. However, while community networks were vital for resilience, they were also sites of contradiction. Solidarity within these communities, often shaped by patriarchal norms and neoliberal values, provided support but also reinforced control, undermining women's autonomy (Mohanty, 1988; hooks, 1989). This complexity underscores a key support need: safe, inclusive spaces that protect women from intra-community control while still offering solidarity and empowerment (Ryan et al., 2024). Afghan women need spaces that simultaneously nurture their agency and challenge patriarchal structures within their communities.

Moreover, the desire for solidarity was frequently undermined by the feeling of being treated as ‘other’ within their own communities, further highlighting the need for programs that address intra-community power dynamics. Empowerment for Afghan women cannot be achieved solely through external support; it requires the transformation of the internal dynamics within their cultural and social structures. This underscores a crucial need for community-driven initiatives that dismantle patriarchal norms while fostering autonomy (Renzaho, 2009).

Education, widely recognised by participants as a path to liberation, revealed significant contradictions. Afghan women viewed education not only as a tool for personal mobility but as a way to disrupt generational cycles of exclusion. However, their expertise, especially in non-Western systems, was often devalued in the UK context. This points to the need for validation of diverse forms of knowledge within Western systems. Afghan women’s education and professional skills should not only be recognised but also integrated into social and economic frameworks that value different cultural contributions. This would enhance their participation in the workforce and contribute to the dismantling of exclusionary practices (Ryan et al., 2024).

Education also emerged as a critical tool for intergenerational empowerment. Afghan women viewed education not merely as an individual path but as a collective effort to ensure better opportunities for their children. This underscores the need for intergenerational support programs that provide Afghan women with the tools to empower not only themselves but also their children, breaking cycles of marginalisation for future generations (Renzaho, 2009).

Representation in leadership and public life was another critical area of concern. Afghan women expressed frustration at the systemic barriers, language difficulties, cultural stereotypes, that excluded them from decision-making roles. These barriers were not just logistical; they were rooted in colonial legacies and structural inequalities. To address this, Afghan women requested for targeted programs and policies that provide leadership training, language support, and pathways to public engagement. These initiatives would help Afghan women overcome barriers to representation and decision-making, ensuring their inclusion in societal narratives and leadership spaces (Ryan et al., 2024).

Additionally, the value of caregiving and motherhood within Afghan women's lives should not be overlooked or dismissed, particularly within Western feminist frameworks that prioritise professional success over domestic roles. As noted by Mohanty (1988) and hooks (1989), caregiving is often regarded as less empowering, yet for Afghan women, it is central to their identity and agency. This calls for a revaluation of caregiving as an empowering role, recognising it as both a form of resistance to historical disenfranchisement and a pathway to social justice. Afghan women’s roles as mothers and caregivers must be supported in ways that align with their cultural values and aspirations, without reducing them to passive or subjugated roles (Mohanty, 1988; hooks, 1989).

Afghan women’s desire for visibility and representation is closely linked to their need for autonomy and self-determination. Through everyday acts of resistance, they have sought platforms to amplify their voices and reclaim their narratives, challenging the stereotypes that often paint them as passive victims.

They have proven to be agents of their own empowerment, advocating for a locally defined, culturally relevant understanding of liberation. Support mechanisms must empower Afghan women to take charge of their own narratives, ensuring that their voices are heard in both their communities and in broader societal discourse.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Afghan women with migration in the UK and their support needs, highlighting their extraordinary resilience amidst systemic challenges. Through personal narratives, the research uncovers a crucial counter-narrative that challenges prevailing assumptions and emphasises the need for support services to be deeply attuned to the personal contexts of Afghan women, one that provides choice and autonomy. Collectively the three themes have been powerful in highlighting that there are many aspects of Afghan women's experiences of migration in the UK that are unique to them and serve as a stark reminder of the challenges inherent in their journey and those that are part of the context that they are entering andthe systems encountered.

There are also several shared experiences with other minoritised communities, which together act as a call to action raising questions about how communities can be supported to be part of two cultural identities without compromising heritage; how systems of support can be better structured to avoid harm and built trust. While the deep-seated systemic injustices faced by Afghan women will take time to dismantle, there is a pressing ethical obligation for CPs, policymakers, and service provider to leverage their collective influence to break down these barriers. The goal is to co-create a support system that genuinely serves and respects Afghan women.

Critical Evaluation of the Study

This study offers valuable insights into the experiences of Afghan women immigrants in the UK, addressing a notable gap in the literature. However, as with all research, it is critical to reflect on the methodological decisions and contextual factors that shaped the findings. These elements collectively inform how the findings can be interpreted and their broader applicability.

A notable strength of this research lies in its focus on a vulnerable and underrepresented group. By exploring the experiences of Afghan women immigrants who arrived in the UK within the last 20 years, the study provides timely and relevant insights into their challenges, needs, and resilience. The sample's diversity in terms of age, education, and immigration status enabled a nuanced understanding of different perspectives within this group. However, it is important to recognise that the participants were recruited from two Afghan community groups located in similar areas in London. This geographical concentration raises questions about the representativeness of the findings (Goliaei et al., 2023). The shared community context may mean that the experiences of these participants do not fully reflect the realities of Afghan immigrants in other parts of the UK, particularly those in rural areas or regions with fewer Afghan community networks (Goliaei et al., 2023).

Additionally, while the sample included women from a range of educational backgrounds, the majority had higher levels of education. This over-representation of individuals with greater access to resources may have influenced the findings, particularly in discussions around access to support services and opportunities for integration (Renzaho, 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003). Similarly, the predominance of Tajik participants means that the voices of other ethnic sub-groups, such as Pashtun or Hazara women, are less visible in the data (Mghir & Raskin, 1999). This raises important questions about why Tajik women were more represented in the study. Are there specific cultural, social, or logistical factors that make Tajik women more likely to engage in research? Conversely, what barriers might exist for Hazara, Pashtun, or other Afghan women that could hinder their participation?

As an Afghan woman and an immigrant, my insider status facilitated rapport-building with participants, enabling them to share sensitive and deeply personal experiences. This insider perspective, combined with reflexive practices such as maintaining a research diary, helped to navigate potential biases and ensure participants' voices remained central to the analysis.

However, this positionality also required ongoing reflection to manage the risk of over-identification with participants or projecting my own experiences onto the data. While reflexivity allowed me to critically interrogate these dynamics, it is important to acknowledge that my role inevitably influenced the research process. For instance, the shared cultural background may have shaped the way participants framed their responses, particularly when discussing culturally sensitive topics such as stigma or gender roles (Renzaho, 2009; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2003).

Language played a pivotal role in ensuring the accessibility and depth of the interviews. Conducting interviews in Dari, Pashto, and English allowed participants to express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable with, which was critical for capturing their authentic voices (Welsh & Brosdsky, 2010). However, the translation process introduced certain challenges. Some culturally specific terms and concepts did not have direct equivalents in English, which created the potential for subtle shifts in meaning during transcription and translation. To address this, I sought input from Afghan peers and consulted my supervisory team to ensure the translations were as accurate as possible. Despite these measures, it is important to acknowledge that nuances in language and meaning may have been lost, which could have implications for the interpretation of the findings.

The recruitment process, while effective in accessing a hard-to-reach population, also shaped the nature of the sample and the data collected. Partnering with Afghan community organisations facilitated trust and provided access to participants who were willing to share their experiences. However, this approach may have introduced selection bias, as participants connected to these organisations were likely to be more socially engaged or familiar with research processes. Additionally, the recruitment setting may have influenced participants' responses, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as trauma or social stigma, as individuals may have been cautious about how their narratives would be received or interpreted within their community context. These factors underscore the importance of considering how recruitment strategies can impact the data and the need for alternative approaches to engage less-connected individuals in future research.

The use of NVivo was a significant strength of this study, enhancing both the rigour and transparency of the analysis. The software enabled systematic coding and organisation of the data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of themes and relationships across participants' narratives. This structured approach supported a thorough and iterative analysis process, ensuring that the complexity of participants' experiences was captured and documented.

Moreover, NVivo facilitated the tracking of analytical decisions, which contributed to the overall credibility of the findings.

However, it is important to reflect on how the use of NVivo may have shaped the analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). While the software provided valuable tools for managing and visualising data, the reliance on coded segments could risk fragmenting participants' narratives, potentially losing some of the contextual richness of their accounts (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). To mitigate this, I revisited the raw data frequently during the analysis process, ensuring that the themes and interpretations remained grounded in the participants' full narratives. Nonetheless, this highlights a broader challenge in qualitative research: balancing the benefits of analytical tools with the need to preserve the holistic nature of participants' stories.

Implications for Clinical Practice

The growing mistrust of mainstream healthcare systems among Afghan women and other marginalised groups suggests the need for significant shifts in clinical practice. Eurocentric frameworks, which are often entrenched in stereotypes, may inadequately address the complex socio-political realities and lived experiences of these communities (Boat et al., 2017; Ginwright, 2018). Afghan women's cultural identity, which is deeply rooted in relationships, community, and faith, appears to be at odds with systems that often fail to meet their needs due to language barriers, cultural insensitivity, and systemic exclusion (Boat et al., 2017).

As discussed earlier, internalised oppression may shape Afghan women's engagement with healthcare services, potentially diminishing their confidence and discouraging them from seeking help or asserting their needs (Griffin, 1997). Clinicians might benefit from adopting a more participatory and empowering therapeutic approach that actively includes Afghan women as collaborators in their care (Griffin, 1997). Co-creating therapeutic goals and timelines may help build trust, specifically for those who are hesitant to engage with healthcare systems due to prior negative experiences or cultural misunderstandings (Lee, 2019; Fredman, 2008).

Therapy could also provide a space to validate Afghan women's experiences while challenging the societal messages that marginalise their identities (Fredman, 2008). Reflective practice, both in-action and on-action (Schön, 1987; 1991), may help clinicians remain attuned to the evolving needs of their clients while avoiding 'interpretive violence' that risks imposing external meanings on their experiences (Alfieri, 2007).

Additionally, supervision and training could support clinicians in identifying and addressing unconscious biases and power dynamics that may inadvertently perpetuate inequities.

Murray Parkes' psychosocial transition theory (1993), discussed earlier, offers a potential framework for understanding the cumulative losses experienced during migration, cultural dislocation, severed relationships, and systemic marginalisation. While distinct from internalised oppression, this perspective could complement therapeutic approaches by highlighting the ways in which loss and adaptation shape Afghan women's experiences. Drawing on such frameworks may help clinicians support clients as they navigate complex transitions while validating their resilience and agency (Renzaho, 2009).

Collaboration with trusted community figures, such as elders and faith leaders, might further enhance the cultural sensitivity of interventions. Building such partnerships could help clinicians gain insight into Afghan women's needs while fostering trust. Afghan women themselves could be involved in the design and delivery of services, ensuring that their voices inform the care they receive (Sweeney et al., 2016). This participatory model might help challenge hierarchical structures in therapeutic settings, potentially creating spaces that promote empowerment and address internalised oppression (Griffin, 1997).

Finally, advocacy may be an important component of supporting Afghan women. Clinicians could assist them in navigating systemic barriers while helping to preserve their cultural heritage and supporting their integration into broader society. Therapeutic interventions that celebrate Afghan women's cultural identity could provide opportunities to honor their traditions and foster a sense of belonging in new environments. Such an approach may improve mental health outcomes by bridging cultural preservation and societal integration.

Ultimately, there appears to be a need for clinical practice to move beyond one-size-fits-all models toward more culturally responsive and intersectional approaches. Addressing internalised oppression and systemic inequities within therapy could help create spaces that honor Afghan women's resilience while supporting their well-being. While further research is needed, adopting these approaches may enhance therapeutic outcomes and contribute to a more inclusive healthcare system.

Implications for Research

Clinical psychologists have a pivotal role in reshaping research practices to more accurately capture the diverse experiences of marginalised communities (Daly, 2023). By involving participants as co-researchers throughout the research process, researchers can create culturally relevant and accessible interventions tailored to community needs (Dutt et al., 2022; Jacquez et al., 2021). Such engagement ensures that findings resonate with participants' lived experiences and challenges, improving the effectiveness of interventions (Abdi et al., 2022; Syed et al., 2023).

Collaborating with trusted community figures, such as elders, can further enhance trust and cultural relevance as they are often central to Afghan women's social and rleigious relevance (Abdi et al., 2022). Including these leaders ensures the research aligns with cultural norms, fostering its acceptance within the community (Tuck, 2009). Future research should adopt an intersectional approach, exploring diverse ethnic groups within Afghan communities (e.g., Pashtun, Hazara, and Uzbek) and examining how socio-political and geographic contexts shape their experiences as the challenges and support systems they encounter may vary depending on whether they are in larger Afghan communities or in more isolated areas.

The findings from this study also raise the importance of considering different demographic groups within the Afghan women population. Many participants in this study were married with children, and for these women, family often provided a significant source of comfort and resilience. However, single women, particularly those without family support or strong community networks, may experience different challenges. Future research should explore the experiences of single Afghan women, who may lack the familial and communal support systems that helped married women navigate their migration and settlement experiences. This distinction can further enrich our understanding of Afghan women's diverse needs and highlight the necessity for tailored interventions that cater to the specific circumstances of single women (Tuck, 2009).

Participatory action research (PAR) presents a critical avenue for empowering Afghan women as co-researchers (Kia-Keating & Juang, 2022), allowing them to shape research processse and outcomes (Halilovich, 2013). Involving participants as "experts-by-experience" not only enhances the validity of findings but also challenges dominant paradigms that often marginalise these communitues (Noorani, 2013; Faulkner & Thomas, 2011; Halilovich, 2013).

Decolonising research practices is essential in this context, particularly in the study of marginalised communities. Moving beyond Western psycho-biomedical frameworks allows for the integration of local cultural contexts, religious values, and lived experiences. This decolonisation approach ensures that research does not impose external frameworks but instead validates and amplifies the knowledge, resilience, and agency within these communities. It challenges the dominant paradigms that often position marginalised groups as passive recipients of care and instead empowers them as active contributors to the knowledge production process. By decolonising research, we ensure that the narratives reflect the true complexity and diversity of these communities, resulting in more relevant and effective interventions.

The findings from this study revealed that trust emerged as a central issue for Afghan women in therapy, with many expressing fears about the potential consequences of disclosing personal mental health struggles. Concerns about the involvement of services, including the risk of children being removed from the family, were significant barriers to sharing their experiences. This fear of repercussions from disclosure created a sense of vulnerability, hindering open communication and, ultimately, the effectiveness of therapy.

Given these findings, future research could explore how therapist disclosure, where therapists share relevant aspects of their own identities or personal experiences, might help to build trust in such situations. By humanising the therapist and reducing the power imbalance, disclosure could alleviate some of the concerns Afghan women have about confidentiality and the consequences of sharing sensitive information. However, it is crucial that therapist disclosure be approached with cultural sensitivity, as its impact may differ depending on how it is perceived within the specific cultural and familial contexts of Afghan women.

Future research could benefit from focusing on exploring how Afghan women view therapist disclosure, particularly whether it serves to reduce fear and enhance trust in the therapeutic relationship, or whether it could risk misinterpretation due to cultural expectations around authority, privacy, and family honour (Dupree, 2002; Jamil-Hanifi, 2023).. Understanding these dynamics would offer valuable insights into how therapist disclosure might strengthen therapy outcomes, while also ensuring that it is conducted in a way that respects the cultural boundaries and familial concerns of Afghan women (Jamil-Hanifi, 2023).

Implications for Policy

To enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of immigration policies, it is crucial for governments to incorporate stakeholder consultation, directly with those affected by these policies, particularly individuals with lived experiences, such as refugees, immigrants, and Afghan women. Their insights are crucial for understanding the real impacts of these policies on access to housing, healthcare, and other vital services. By incorporating these marginalised voices, policies can be more responsive and comprehensive, moving beyond narrow internal perspectives.

The focus should shift from mere reflection to actionable change. Policy-level advocacy is key, utilising legal frameworks to assess and monitor the impact of current immigration policies. CPs can leverage their expertise in evidence collection and formulation for necessary policy reforms. Prefigurative action research (Kagan & Burton,2000) is a strategic method for driving long-term policy change, addressing the social dynamics that hinder progressive change (Marx, 1888). Through such research, CPs can develop briefing papers that highlight the health and social impacts of immigration policies, thus raising awareness and fostering action. Integrating the professional experiences of Afghan women into workforce policiesis also crucial. These experiences offer valuable insights into their skills and potential, enabling the development of policies that not only acknowledge their existing expertisebut also support their transition into new roles.

Additionally, empowering Afghan women through action research helps them shift from victimhood to active advocacy. advocacy. This involves raising awareness about exploitation and enhancing access to education for women and girls. Implementing these strategies requires collaboration with civil society, state actors, and international bodies such as the UN. Effective communication, partnership, and humility are necessary to navigate the complexities and challenges involved. By adopting these approaches, CPs can play a pivotal role in shaping more just and humane immigration policies that uphold the dignity and well-being of Afghan immigrant women and other marginalised groups.

Researcher Reflexivity

Being an 'insider-outsider' researcher brought profound advantages to this study, rooted in my deep familiarity with the Afghan community under investigation. As an Afghan woman, my own racialised experiences and proximity to the research topic were inseparable from my interpretations of the findings. This insider perspective facilitated a space where participants felt comfortable to openly discuss sensitive topics, offering rich reflections and using cultural idioms that enriched their narratives. This is particularly significant, as research by Greenwood et al. (2014) has shown that minority participants often scale down their responses in interviews with the ethnic majority due to fears of mischaracterisation or being 'othered'. Moreover, this position allowed me to ask insightful follow-up questions that deepened our understanding (Greenwood et al., 2014).

However, being an insider also posed limitations, as it required careful navigation to ensure participants' narratives were not overshadowed by my interpretations. I was vigilant in centering their voices and creating a supportive environment for their stories to unfold authentically, without imposing my own biases (White & Epston, 1990). DeLyser (2001) cautions that deep familiarity with research subjects can risk compromising objectivity, leading to assumptions based on prior knowledge and experiences. Critically, marginalised groups may struggle to name experiences of racism or discrimination due to the inherent complexities and the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and social injustice (Serrant-Green, 2012).

Operating within a critical realist framework provided a methodological safeguard against claims of absolute objectivity. Instead, I embraced transparency about the subjectivity inherent in my interpretations, supported by peer debriefing sessions with supervisors and doctoral colleagues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These discussions allowed me to critically reflect on my findings and ensure a nuanced approach that respected the intricacies of participants' experiences, even when they grappled with articulating phenomena like racism. Thus, this study not only benefited from my insider-outsider perspective but also underscored the necessity of integrating social justice and colonial lenses in research with marginalised communities to foster deeper understanding and amplify their voices effectively.

Conclusion

This study has examined the lived experiences of Afghan women immigrating to the UK, revealing complex challenges shaped by systemic issues such as racism, discriminatory immigration policies, and patriarchal structures. These findings address the research question of Afghan women's experiences, demonstrating how their migration journey is shaped by both external and internal barriers that impede access to services and affect their overall well-being. The research also sheds light on the support needs of Afghan women. It highlights the importance of empowering these women in ways that respect and preserve their cultural and religious identities. Far from needing to compromise their values for autonomy, Afghan women's experiences suggest that empowerment can coexist with cultural preservation, where family roles, community support, and religious faith are vital sources of resilience. The findings emphasise the need for mental health services to consider the cultural context when designing interventions. Afghan women's support needs must be approached holistically, integrating cultural understanding, autonomy, and trust. The research suggests that empowering Afghan women requires offering services that are not only culturally sensitive but also enable them to remain active participants in the support process.

There is no doubt that years of the systemic injustices faced by Afghan women will take years to reverse. However, there is an ethical imperative for CPs, policymakers, and service providers to use their collective power to dismantle existing barriers and work towards co-creating a system of provision that dutifully serves and humanise Afghan women.

Table 12: *Dissemination*

	Dissemination
Academic Publication	Submit the study's findings to an open-access, peer-reviewed journal to ensure widespread scholarly access and review. This aims to contribute to the academic discourse and provide a robust platform for further research.
Multi-Agency Collaboration	Engage with NHS, immigration services, and support organisations to develop an integrated approach for addressing the needs of Afghan women. Collaboration across these sectors will enhance support mechanisms and implement findings in a practical, multi-agency framework.
Clinical Context	Present findings to service leaders in regions with large Afghan populations through consultative sessions and detailed reports. This will help tailor services based on the insights gathered, ensuring that service provision is more responsive to the needs highlighted by the research.
Individual Level Impact	Use the research to challenge and dismantle stereotypes about Afghan women. By presenting their experiences and emotional struggles, the study aims to provide a counter-narrative to dehumanising stereotypes and promote a more empathetic and accurate understanding of their lived realities.

Final Reflections

This research illuminates the stark injustice deeply entrenched within our global society, yet it confronts an even graver truth: our relentless commitment to unethical practices that sustain this status quo (Smail, 2010). As I embarked on this journey, grappling with unanswered questions and navigating through personal and societal challenges, I have been continuously confronted by the haunting inquiry, "Will it ever change?" The culmination of this research leaves me with profound anger, despair, and sorrow at the profound disparities that persist in the care of Afghan women.

In the face of ongoing atrocious like the genocide in Palestine, I felt a profound sense of disconnection and outrage over the persistent injustices. These tragedies evoke a deep emotional response, reflecting the broader human experience of trauma and displacement. While the struggles of Palestinian people are distinct from those of Afghan communities, both highlight the enduring impact of violence and displacement across generations, underscoring the universal suffering caused by such profound injustices.

The silencing perpetuated by academia, services, and systemic structures was chilling, resembling a tragic narrative unfolding before my eyes. It echoed the colonial and oppressive systems that continue to suppress marginalised voices. The narratives portrayed in media, the privileged voices, and the silenced ones, all underscored the pervasive hopelessness embedded in these systems. Witnessing this trauma and being told to simply "get on with it" further mirrored the enduring legacy of colonisation.

Yet, amidst these shadows, the trust and resilience of the participants in this study offered a beacon of hope. Their stories reminded me of the transformative powerof research in reshaping our understanding of marginalised groups and issues. I have learned to create safety through choice, acknowledging the privilege of access granted to me by those who share their lives. I honor the small acts of political resistance inherent in their stories.

This project underscores that Clinical Psychology cannot afford to be apolitical in the face of such profound inequity. It demands collective action to dismantle unjust structures and restore radical humanity to mental health provision for Afghan women and minority ethnic women. Let us heed this call with our minds, our actions, and our compassion, striving towards a future where justice and dignity prevail for all.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

University of Hertfordshire UH

HEALTH, SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY ECDA

ETHICS APPROVAL NOTIFICATION

TO	Hosina Gulzar
CC	Dr Shivani Sharma
FROM	Dr Rebecca Knight, Health, Science, Engineering and Technology ECDA Vice-Chair
DATE	21/09/2023

Protocol number:	**cLMS/PGT/UH/05464**
Title of study:	Lived experiences of immigrating to the UK amongst Afghan women: A qualitative study

Your application for ethics approval has been accepted and approved with the following conditions by the ECDA for your School and includes work undertaken for this study by the named additional workers below:

no additional workers named

Conditions of approval specific to your study:

Ethics approval has been granted subject to the following conditions being seen and approved by the supervisor as addressed prior to recruitment and data collection:

- Before data collection takes place, the supervisor must check the study advert.

General conditions of approval:

Ethics approval has been granted subject to the standard conditions below:

Permissions: Any necessary permissions for the use of premises/location and accessing participants for your study must be obtained in writing prior to any data collection commencing. Failure to obtain adequate permissions may be considered a breach of this protocol.

External communications: Ensure you quote the UH protocol number and the name of the approving Committee on all paperwork, including recruitment advertisements/online requests, for this study.

Invasive procedures: If your research involves invasive procedures you are required to complete and submit an EC7 Protocol Monitoring Form, and copies of your completed consent paperwork to this ECDA once your study is complete.

Submission: Students must include this Approval Notification with their submission.

Validity:

This approval is valid:

From: 21/09/2023

To: 29/02/2024

Please note:

Failure to comply with the conditions of approval will be considered a breach of protocol and may result in disciplinary action which could include academic penalties.
Additional documentation requested as a condition of this approval protocol may be submitted via your supervisor to the Ethics Clerks as it becomes available. All documentation relating to this study, including the information/documents noted in the conditions above, must be available for your supervisor at the time of submitting your work so that they are able to confirm that you have complied with this protocol.

Should you amend any aspect of your research or wish to apply for an extension to your study you will need your supervisor's approval (if you are a student) and must complete and submit form EC2.
Approval applies specifically to the research study/methodology and timings as detailed in your Form EC1A. In cases where the amendments to the original study are deemed to be substantial, a new Form EC1A may need to be completed prior to the study being undertaken.

Failure to report adverse circumstance/s may be considered misconduct.
Should adverse circumstances arise during this study such as physical reaction/harm, mental/emotional harm, intrusion of privacy or breach of confidentiality this must be reported to the approving Committee immediately.

Appendix B: Risk Assessment

Ref No.	
Date	
Review Date	
	OFFICE USE ONLY

SCHOOL OF LIFE AND MEDICAL SCIENCES
UNIVERSITY OF HERTFORDSHIRE

Life and Medical Sciences Risk Assessment

The completion of this is an integral part of the preparation for your work, it is not just a form to be completed, but is designed to alert you to potential hazards so you can identify the measures you will need to put into place to control them. You will need a copy on you when you carry out your work

General Information					
Name	Hosina Gulzar	Email address	h.gulzar@herts.ac.uk	Contact number	07838033527
Supervisor's name (if student)	Dr Shivani Sharma	Supervisor's e-mail address	s.3.sharma@herts.ac.uk	Supervisor's contact number	

Activity	
Title of activity	Lived experiences of immigrating to the UK amongst Afghan women: A qualitative study

Brief description of activity	• The study will use a qualitative methodology with 1-1 interviews guided by Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to provide a rich, contextual narrative of how Afghan women have experienced migration to the UK. • TA will be employed to identify, analyse and report themes (patterns) within the qualitative data. • Participants will partake in 1-1 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted most likely via an online UH zoom or MS team platform or face-to-face in a private community location hosted by a partner Charity in the research as detailed below. Participants will be recruited through advertising the study in community networks online and via the charity also. • Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with open-ended questions to enable a rich description and evaluation of lived experiences that are personally meaningful as well as allowing the opportunity for participants to take on an active role in the research process. **Aims and research question or hypothesis** Research question What are the lived experiences of Afghan women who have migrated to the UK? Aims and objectives 1. To generate qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore lived experiences Afghan women related to migration to the UK. 2. To analyse interview transcripts according to the Thematic Analysis (TA) approach. 3. To create a body of research which will serve as an impetus for future research on Afghan women in the UK. **4. Benefits of the study** Given the ultimate impact of war and atrocities on the mental and physical health of people in Afghanistan, understanding the lived experience of migration is a

	crucial starting point for future research. The findings from this study may help inform delivery of care and interventions to support Afghan women. Afghan women's experiences with migration has not been explicitly explored in the UK context and published literatures, therefore this study will offer new insight in this field. Secondly, the collective stories of a group can help make the connection between individual experiences and the broader social, political and historical forces that have contributed to the conditions of marginalisation (Dyck & McLaren, 2004). It is critical to contextualise how such forces underpin policy-making and have consequences for how migrants are positioned in relation to social and material resources (Dyck & McLaren, 2004). Many of these gender policies have been introduced and implemented to exert power and perpetuate marginalisation of women (Zulfacar, 2006). At the time where the political narrative in the media heavily focuses on the issue of migration, the findings of the study can be used to contribute to both small- and large-scale social change (Castelli, 2018).
Location of activity	• The researcher will schedule the interview at a mutually convenient time with participants meeting the inclusion criteria and giving informed consent to take part. • The interviews will be conducted face to face, in either Dari or English at the Afghan Association of London base, a third sector charity organisation. • To ensure that safety of all participants and the research, University, CPFT and BPS guidelines on any research activity will be followed.
Who will be taking part in this activity	• Data will be collected from 8-10 women, 18 years or over who have immigrated to the UK in the last 20 years. Inclusion: • Self-identifies as female (cisgender women) • Born in Afghanistan • First generation immigrant • Aged 18+ • Have migrated to the UK in the last 20 years. Exclusion: • Under the age of 18 • Does not identify as a female • Born outside Afghanistan • Lack of capacity

Types of Hazards likely to be encountered				
✓ Computers and other display screen	☐ Falling objects	☐ Farm machinery	☐ Fire	☐ Cuts
☐ Falls from heights	☐ Manual handling	☐ Hot or cold extremes	☐ Repetitive handling	☐ Severe weather
☐ Slips/trips/falls	☐ Stress	☐ Travel	☐ Vehicles	☐ Workshop machinery
✓ Psychological distress (to interviewer or interviewee)	☐ Aggressive response, physical or verbal	☐	☐	☐
Other hazards not listed above	COVID-19; Data Breach			

Risk Control Measures
List the activities in the order in which they occur, indicating your perception of the risks associated with each one and the probability of occurrence, together with the relevant safety measures. *Describe the activities involved.* *Consider the risks to participants, research team, security, maintenance, members of the public – is there anyone else who could be harmed?* *In respect of any equipment to be used read manufacturer's instructions and note any hazards that arise, particularly from incorrect use.*

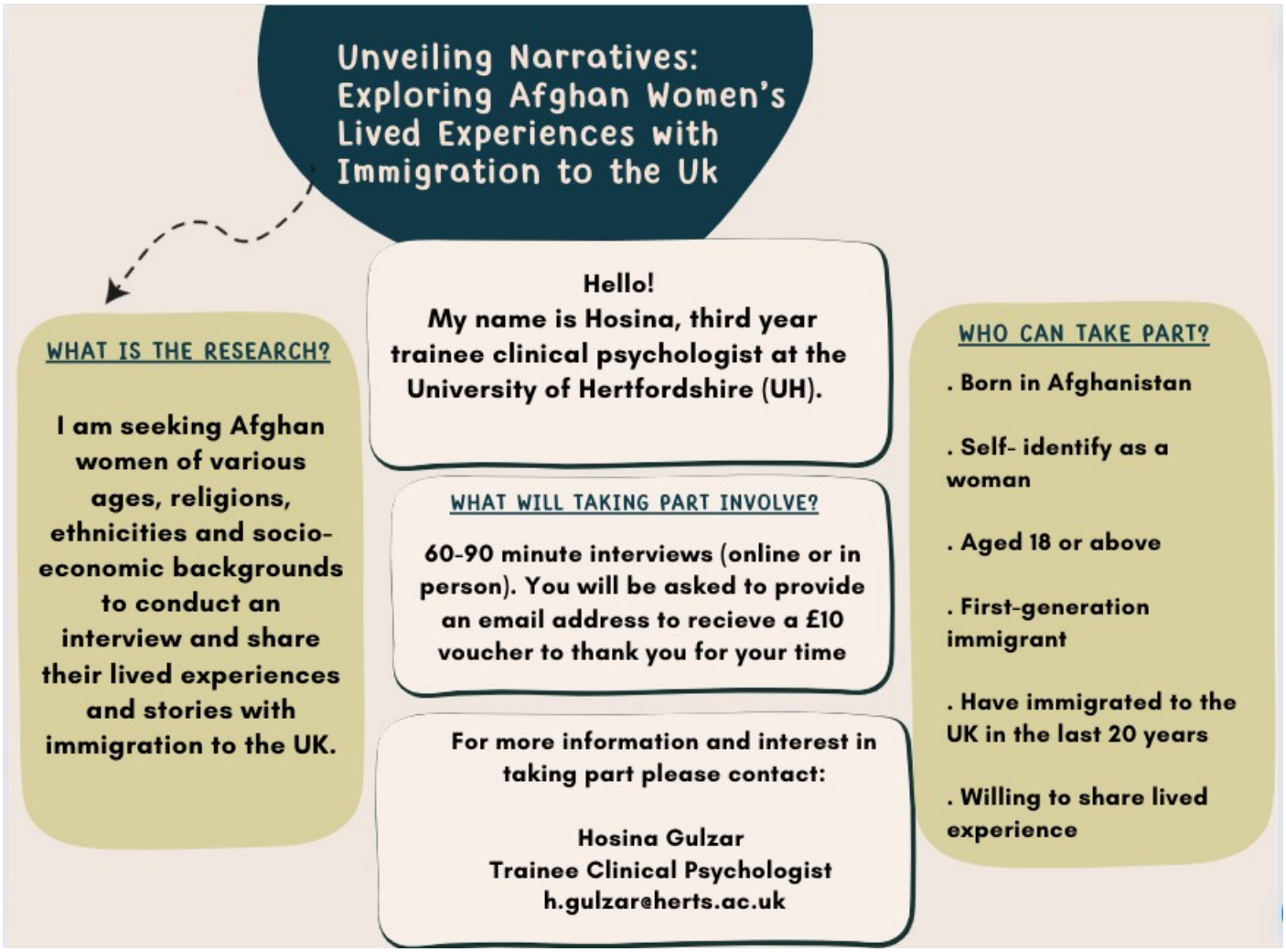
Identify hazards	**Who could be harmed?** *e.g. participants, research team, security, maintenance, members of the public, other people at the location, the owner / manager / workers at the location etc.*	**How could they be harmed?**	**Control Measures – what precautions are currently in place?** *Are there standard operating procedures or rules for the premises. Are there any other local codes of practice/local rules which you are following, eg Local Rules for the SHE labs? Have there been agreed levels of supervision of the study? Will trained medical staff be present? Etc*	**What is the residual level of risk after the control measures have been put into place?** *Low Medium or High*	**Are there any risks that are not controlled or not adequately controlled?**	**Is more action needed to reduce/manage the risk?** *for example, provision of support/aftercare, precautions to be put in place to avoid or minimise risk or adverse effects*
Computers and other display screen	Participant andresearcher	Computer screens and wires Eye strain and back strain Excess screentime and or risk of trips on cables.	Online- scheduled at a time where both parties agree and breaks can be offered. Personal responsibility re computer wires aside from face-to-face where the researcher will ensure that the space has no health and safety risks in the room such as this. Researcher will be using DSE guidelines.	Low	No	No
Psychological distress (to interviewer or interviewee)	Participants	Discussions about sensitive issues, that may lead to participant distress. Possible psychological distress due to recalling lived experience of distress and trauma.	Information sheet makes the nature of research clear. Offer check-ins throughout the interview. Monitor level of distress, take a break if level of distress increases. Participants will be reminded prior to the interview that they have the right to not answer any questions, stop at any time during the interview process or withdraw from the study if they feel uncomfortable. Participant's safety is paramount; any threats to safety and the interview will be terminated immediately. Signpost participant to appropriate support services in verbal and written de-brief. Check in on any concerned about via email or phone within 48 hours.	Medium	No	No
Psychological distress (to interviewer or interviewee)	Researcher	Psychological distress from hearing stories, especially as the researcher is from the same community.	Researcher is familiar with managing sensitive conversations as a Dclin trainee; can de-brief with supervisor as needed. Through my role as an experienced	Low	No	No

		Anxiety about dealing with complex situations.	clinician, I regularly work with people who are highly distressed, and I will endeavor to conduct the interviews as sensitively as possible. Signpost participant to appropriate support services. Researcher can reach out to supervisor for support. This will include how to escalate any concerns for participants if disclosing anything that raises concerns. Supervisor will be responsible for agreeing the suitable course of action.			
COVID-19	Participant and researcher	Risk of COVID-19 infection to participant and researcher when conducting face-to- face interviews.	Social distancing will be maintained to ensure the safety of participants and the researcher when conducting face-to-face interviews. Face masks will be worn by both the researcher and the participant if government requirements state this or it makes participants, or the researcher feelmore comfortable. If the researcher or participant has a COVID-19 infection, or has recently tested positive for COVID-19, the interview can be online or rescheduled.	Low	No	No

Data Breach	Participant	Confidential information shared on a public domain.	Transcripts and interview recordings will be stored on an encrypted digital recorder if face-to-face and in secure Zoom or Teams recording. Both will be placed onto secure OneDrive, and separate to consent forms with only researcher and main supervisor having access. Audio recordings will be deleted securely once transcriptions are completed. Only researcher will have access to the recordings themselves and supervisors to anonymised transcripts. Interview data that is anoymised may be retained long-term. Adhere to the University's data protection policy.	Low	No	No
			Consent forms will be emailed to researcher on a UH account, stored on OneDrive with transcripts including anonymity number only. 1-1 face-to-face interview on charity site will be in a quiet and private room to avoid information being shared beyond intended.			
List any other documents relevant to this application	BPS ethical code of practice. Life and Medical Sciences Health and Safety documents. Afghan Association of London Health and Safety policy documents.					

Signatures					
Assessor name	Hosina Gulzar	Assessor signature	Hosina Gulzar	Date	27/07/23
Supervisor, if Assessor is a student	Dr Shivani Sharma	Supervisor signature	Shivani Sharma	Date	27/07/23
Local Health and Safety Advisor/ Lab Manager	Alex Eckford	Local Health and Safety Advisor/ Lab Manager signature	Alex Eckford	Date	14th August 2023

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Poster



Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Challenges Faced Upon Arrival and Settlement

1. **Can you describe your initial experiences and challenges upon arriving in the UK?**
    - *Prompt*: What were some of the immediate difficulties you encountered in your new environment?
2. **What were the main obstacles you faced during your settlement process?**
3. **How did these challenges affect your day-to-day life and well-being?**

Impact on Physical and Mental Health

4. **How has your experience of migration impacted your physical health?**
    - *Prompt*: Have there been any noticeable changes in your health since arriving in the UK?
5. **In what ways has migration affected your mental health and emotional well-being?**
    - *Prompt*: Can you share any experiences or feelings related to your mental health since moving here?
6. **How have you accessed support for your physical and mental health needs?**
    - *Prompt*: What types of services or resources have been available to you?
7. **What aspects of support for your health (physical and mental) do you feel have been lacking?**
    - *Prompt*: Are there specific services or types of support you wish had been available to you?

Accessing and Utilising Support Networks

8. **Can you describe how you have accessed support networks or services during your resettlement?**
    - *Prompt*: What resources or community groups have you engaged with?
9. **How have these support networks or services been helpful or unhelpful in your resettlement process?**
    - *Prompt*: What has worked well for you, and what hasn't?
10. **What barriers have you encountered in trying to access these support services?**
    - *Prompt*: Were there any specific difficulties in accessing the help you needed?

Understanding of Support

11. **How do you define or understand 'support' in the context of your resettlement experience?**
    - *Prompt*: What does support look like to you?

12. **What forms of support do you feel are most meaningful or necessary for Afghan women immigrants like yourself?**
    - *Prompt*: Can you describe the types of support that have been most beneficial?
13. **In what ways do you think support services could be better meet the needs of Afghan women immigrants?**

Recommendations for Future

14. **Looking ahead, what changes or improvements in support services would be most valuable to you?**
    - *Prompt*: What specific recommendations would you make to enhance support for Afghan women immigrants?
15. **What advice would you give to organisations to better support Afghan women during their resettlement process?**
16. **Are there any additional comments or suggestions you would like to share about your experience and the support you received?**

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet In English/Dari/Pashto

University of Hertfordshire UH

Lived experiences of immigrating to the UK amongst Afghan women: A qualitative study

My name is Hosina Gulzar and I am trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Hertfordshire (UH). As part of my Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, I am conducting a research study exploring the lived experiences of Afghan women who have immigrated to the UK.

I would like to invite you to take part in this study. However, before you decide if you want to take part, it is important to understand why this research is being conducted and what it will involve for you. Please remember that taking part in the research study is completely your choice.

What is the research?

I am seeking participation from women aged 18 years and above, of various ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds who have lived in the UK for up to 20 years, immigrating from Afghanistan. Through this study, I hope to identify, via 1-1 interviews, the challenges and positives of immigrating for Afghan women. I also hope that this study will highlight the implications for service providers, community members and policy makers about how support for women can be enhanced.

The interview will take place at a time and location suitable to you and will take no longer than 2-hours, and can be faciliated in English or Dari. The interviews will be audio-recorded using a digital audio recorder or online facility subject to your consent. During the interview, I will ask questions regarding your educational background and employment status. The interview will ask you to share both positive and negative experiences. Due to the nature of some questions, the research interview may ask you to recall and share your experiences. Understandably, this may be upsetting. If this happens, I will try to help you feel at ease and remind that your participation in the study is completely voluntary and that you can take a break or stop at any time. Often, though sharing can be upsetting, there is an embedded positive of also sharing your story in your own words too.

Where will the meetings take place?

I will arrange to meet you for a face-to-face or for a virtual individual interview at a time, which is convenient to you. If face-to-face, the interviews will take place at one of the charity organisation sites of the Afghan Association of London.

Will what I say be confidential?

If you consent, your interview recording will be typed-up to for a transcript from which all identifying details will be removed. Your consent form, indicating that you are happy to take part, the audio recording, and transcripts will be stored separately on a GDPR compliant server to which only the researcher and primary supervisor will have access. The interview recording will be deleted once the transcript has been checked, and consent forms deleted securely at the end of the study. Only the anonymised transcripts will be kept for making the most of the overall study findings.

The study may use transcripts as quotes in the final report. However, I would like to remind you that the transcripts will be anonymised (meaning no identifiable information that could identify you will be included in the final report). I will use a pseudonym (a fake name) for each participant during data analysis and when presenting the findings to maintain confidentiality. If you change your mind about allowing me to use your data after you have been interviewed, you will have 2-weeks to withdraw your data.

Will there be any payment?

I will be offering a £10 Amazon voucher for your participation. This will be sent to you after the completion of the interview and is a small gesture of appreciation for your time.

Does this study have ethical approval?

This study has been given ethical approval by the University of Hertfordshire, Health, Science, Engineering and Technology Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority (ref…).

Any other questions?

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at h.gulzar@herts.ac.uk or my supervisor Dr Shivani Sharma at s.3.sharma@herts.ac.uk.

Although we hope it is not the case, if you have any complaints or concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please write to the University's Secretary and Registrar at the following address: Secretary and Registrar, University of Hertfordshire, College Lane, Hatfield, Hertfordshire, AL10 9AB

فورم قبولی شرکت کننده گان.

دوستان گرانقدر سلام.

من حسینا گلزارروانشناس ارشد کلینیکی و کاندید دکترای روانشناسی در پوهنتون هارتفورد شایر .می‌باشم. و موظف به انجام یک مطالعه تحقیقاتی در مورد تجارب زنده گی زنان افغان که به بریتانیا مهاجرت کرده اند می‌باشم. من از شما دعوت می کنم که در این تحقیق که حتماً به میل و رغبت خود شما می باشد نکاتی چند روشنی انداخته تا درک کامل از چگونگی تدویر این مطالعه تحقیقاتی که شرکت کنندگان کاملا طور داوطلبانه در ان حظور به‌هم می رسانند داشته باشید.

مطالعه تحقیقاتی چیست؟

من خواهان شرکت دختر خانم ها ی که سن شان در بین ۱۸ سال وبالاتر از قومیت‌های مختلف و پیشینه های اجتماعی و اقتصادی مختلف که در مدت زمان ۲۰ سال اخیر در بریتانیا زندگی کرده اند می‌باشم. ازطریق این مطالعه تحقیقاتی که از طریق مصاحبه های ۱_۱صورت می گیرد چالش‌ها و نکات مهم و مثبت مهاجرت برای خانم های مظلوم افغانستان را شناسایی کرده تا با در نظر گرفتن آنها درآینده از طرف سیاست گذاران و جامعه مدنی بریتانیا درحمایت از شما استفاده اعظمی صورت گرفته و مصدر خدمت به زنان افغان شوم.

این مصاحبه در زمان و مکان های مختلف و مشخص صورت می‌گیرد وبیش از یک‌ونیم ساعت رادربرنمیگیرد. می‌تواند به زبان های انگلیسی،دری یا پشتو باشد.

صورت مصاحبه می‌تواند با استفاده از دستگاه های ظبط صوتی ویا هم با استفاده آز تسهیلات آنلاین با کسب موافقت شما صورت می گیرد.

در شروع من سوالات ازقبیل سابقه تحصیلی وضعیت اشتغال شما خواهم کرد. وهم از شما خواسته خواهد شد که تجارب مثبت و منفی خویشرا با من شریک سازید. در جریان مصاحبه ممکن بعضا حکایت هاي مختلف ناراحت کننده ودلخراش از طرف شما وجود داشته باشد. در این صورت سعی خواهم کرد که به شما کمک کرده و یک احساس فضای راحتی را ایجاد کنم. می‌توانید برای لحظه‌ای صحبت هارا قطع وبعد از وقفه دوباره شروع کرد. تکرار می خواهم بگویم که شرکت در پروژه کاملا طور داوطلبانه میباشد. شما می توانید استراحت کنید وقفه بگیرید.

وزمانی که آماده ارایه احساسات تان شدید به پیش رفته و تجارب و داستان های زندگی تان را با هم شریک سازید.

جلسات در کجا برگذار می‌شود؟

من چگونگی ملاقات با شما را برای شرکت در این مطالعه رودررو و یا برای مصاحبه های فردی مجازی ویدیویی در زمان مشخص که برای شما قابل قبول باشد تنظیم میکنم. مصاحبه رودررو در یکی از سایت های سازمان خیریه انجمن افغانستان مقیم لندن یا منچستر صورت می گیرد.

آیا آنچه من می‌گویم محرم ومحرمانه میماند؟

تمام صورت جلسات اشد محرم بوده وتا همیشه محرم خواهد ماند. در صورت رضایت شما مصاحبه صوتی تان برای متن تایپی که تمام جزئیات شناسایی تان از آن حذف میگردد ارسال خواهد شد. و جریان مصاحبه صوتی بعد از بررسی و مطالعه و تحلیل طور جداگانه در سرور محفوظ که تنها تحقیق کننده به آن دسترسی میداشته باشد حفظ و نگهداری می شود. درپایان تمام اوراق خطي و فورم رضایت شما با اسم و امضای تان بین برده می‌شود. فقط متن‌های ناشناس جهت استفاده بعدی نگهداری می شوند. این مصاحبه ممکن متن بعنوان نقل قول استفاده شود.

به‌این مفهوم که تمام قصه ها واطلاعات شما با حذف نام و نام‌خانوادگی اصلی شما باانتشار یک اسم مستعار جهت محرمیت هر شرکت کننده استفاده صورت می گیرد. اگر شما نظر خود را بعد از جلسه تغییر دهید مرا در جریان قرار داده و من وظیفه خودم می دانم که تمام گزارشات شما را با تمام محرمیت و امانت داری آن واپس برای شما ارسال کنم.

آیا پرداخت هم وجود دارد؟

چون این پروگرام حیثیت معنوی واخلاقی برای جامعه زنان افغانستان را دارد که نسلی بعدی از تجارب و داستان های شما استفاده اعظمی کنند واز طرف هیچ بنیادی برای من کمک مادی ننموده .روی هم رفته من جیب خرج شخصی خودم جهت احترام برای هر شرکت کننده یک کوپون ده پوندی شرکت آمازون را ارسال خواهم کرد.که یک حرکت کوچک اخلاقی واحترام بشما ازطرف من باشد.

آیا این پروژه و مطالعه رسمی ودارای تایید رسمی هست؟

بلی این پروگرام ازطرف.

بلی این پروگرام ازطرف یونیورسټی هارتفورد شایر انگلستان تایید رسمی دارد

اگر هرگونه سوالاتی در مورد داشته باشید لطفا بامن h.gulzar@herts.ac.uk

ویا امرمن دکتر شیوانی شارما s.3.sharma@herts.ac.uk

Appendix F: Consent Form

University of Hertfordshire UH

Lived experiences of immigrating to the UK amongst Afghan women: A qualitative study

Participant Consent Form

I, (signature of participant) have agreed to take part in an interview, exploring Afghan women's lived experience of immigration to the UK. I understand that this interview is being conducted by Hosina Gulzar from the University of Hertfordshire as part of the requirement for her doctoral thesis.

- I have read the Participation Information Sheet for the study. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered.
- I understand that the interview will last no longer than 2 hours
- I understand that I will be granted anonymity and none of my personal information will be identifiable and will be disclosed in the final report.
- I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded but these recordings will be stored securely and no longer than needed to produce anonymised transcripts.
- I understand that transcripts (quotes) from me will be used in the final report and dissemination of the research.
- I understand that the research may be published. I understand that the research may also be presented at a conference but my participation will remain anonymised in all cases.
- I understand that information I provide will be kept confidential unless I disclose information regarding risk of harm to myself or others, in which case I will be informed of the action that would be necessary in order toe ensure my safety and that of others.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time by advising the researcher without disadvantage to myself or without being obliged to give any reason.
- I agree that I will only be referred to other clinicians or a GP with my consent, except in the case of disclosure of the risk of harm to myself or to someone else where I understand that the professional has the duty of care that outweighs my wishes.

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me

Name of participant (print).....Date.....Signature..... Name of participant (print).....Date.....Signature.....

If you wish to be consented by email to receive a short summary of the findings of this research, please provide email below:

Email Address:

موافقتنامه شرکت کنندگان در مصاحبه ها

من ( ) موافق بوده که درمصاحبه امروزی داوطلبانه شرکت کرده وتجربیات زندگی زنان افغانستان را شناسایی کرده و من مطمئنم که این مطالعه تحقیقاتی توسط خانم حسینا گلزار از دانشگاه هرتفوردشایر بعنوان بخش آخر دفاعیه دکترایش انجام می شود.

- ☐ اطلاعات درباره چگونگی شرکت در این مطالعه رامطلع بوده و مطمئنم که نقش من در این تحقیق چیست. وتمام سوالات من پاسخ داده شده است.
- ☐ من میفهمم که مدت مصاحبه بیشتر از یک ونیم ساعت طول نخواهد شد.
- ☐ به من اطمینان خاطر داده شده است که شهرت من ناشناس و محرم وتمام اطلاعات شخصی خودم قابل شناسایی نخواهد بود. ودرگذارش نهایي فاش نخواهد شد.
- ☐ من مطمئنم که مصاحبه من شکل صوتی ریکارد شده ودر جای مصون ذخیره سازی شده و در مورد استفاده بعدی با استفاده از اسمای مستعار استفاده خواهد شد.
- ☐ به من تفهیم شده است که از متن اصلی مصاحبه با اسم مستعار نقل قول خواهد شد که بعدا در گذارش نهایي و انتشار پژوهشی استفاده شود.
- ☐ من درک میکنم کهاین تحقیق ممکن در یک کنفرانس بزرگ ارائه شود شهرت من ناشناس باقی بماند.
- ☐ من میدانم که تمام گزارشات ارائه شده توسط من محرم نگهداری می شود. اگر من احساس کنم که افشای اطلاعات من برایم آسیب میرساند در این زمینه با مشورت محقق موضوع (حسینا گلزارروانشناس) موضوع را بررسی می کنیم. و چگونگی دلیل تغییر مفکوره ام رابا وی در جریان قرار می دهم.
- ☐ من موافقم که تمام گزارشات ام به متخصصان حرفوی و یا GP بارضایت من درصورت حفظ تمام محرمیت موضوع وشهرت خودم ارجاع شود.چراکه در این زمینه من بیشتر خواهان حفظ محرمیت هویت و گزارشات خود می باشم.
- ☐ من با پردازش تمام قصه ها واطلاعات بشکل محرمانه که برای اهداف تحقیقاتی ازطرف پوهنتون یاد شده صورت می گیرد موافقم.

اسم شرکت کننده _____
تاریخ _____
امضا _____

اسم محقق_____
تاریخ _____
امضا

Appendix G: Debrief Sheet

University of Hertfordshire UH

Lived experiences of immigrating to the UK amongst Afghan women: A qualitative study

Debrief

Thank you for taking time to participate in this study. The aim of the study was to explore the lived experiences of Afghan women on migration to the UK. Through this study, I hope to inform service providers, community members and policy makers about the issues facing Afghan women so that care can be better aligned to needs.

The information you provided will be used for research purposes only. The data you provided will not be linked to you and it can be withdrawn from the study at any time during the interview up until the data analysis, 2 weeks after your interview. If you have any concerns or general queries related to the research, please do not hesitate to email Hosina Gulzar (Principle researcher): h.gulzar@herts.ac.uk or Dr Shivani Sharma (research supervisor): s.3.sharma@herts.ac.uk

What will happen next?

All data collected will be analysed to similarities and differences in themes/experiences. The findings of the study will be written up and disseminated (e.g., published as a journal or poster presentation) which can contribute to discussions on the implications of migration and will help inform service providers, community members and policy makers about the issues facing Afghan women.

Things to remember

- Taking part is always your choice and you can you change your mind at any time.
- You have the right to withdraw your data 2-weeks after the interview.
- The information gathered will be kept anonymous and confidential within the limits already explained to you.
- You are entitled to request for a summary of the findings. This will be made available upon your request when the study is completed.

Sources of further support

Sometimes we all need a little extra help. Below are contact details to some of the resources which may offer further support if taking part in the study has raised discomfort for you or you feel in general after the research that this may be useful for you.

- **GP**- please consider contacting your GP if you are feeling low or anxious
- **Mind**- is a mental health charity organisation in England and Wales. The service provides mental health advise and work in collaboratives with a range of services including supported housing, employment, crisis services and counselling and befriending. Call 0300 123 3393 or go to www.mind.org.uk

- **Psychological therapies**- provides talking therapies (such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). You can refer to your local psychological therapies service via your GP or through self-referral via their website. To find your nearest service, you can search IAPT NHS or NHS Choices.
- **NHS Direct**- delivers telephone health advise, day and night, directly to the public. To access the service call 111 or go to www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Hosina Gulzar

Trainee Clinical Psychologist (Doctorate in Clinical Psychology)

Email: h.gulzar@herts.ac.uk

Working days: Monday-Wednesday (placement), Thursday and Friday (University)

University of Hertfordshire Doctoral College

Health Research Building, College Lane Campus, Hatfield, AL10 9AB

Research Supervisor: - Dr Shivani Sharma, s.3.share@herts.ac.uk

Appendix H: Support Information

Helpline contact numbers

If you have a plan to end of your life and feel you may act on it today:

Please go to your local Accident and Emergency department or call 999

If you experience non-urgent distress following the interview, here are some numbers you may find useful:

NHS Direct

http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/

Operate 24/7 and should be able to provide details of local crisis support services or advise on accessing local A&E

Tel: 0845 4647

Samaritans

http://www.samaritans.org/

24 hour emotional support line

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

Saneline
http://www.sane.org.uk
Emotional support line for people in mental distress

Tel: 0845 767 8000 opening hours: 6pm-11pm everyday

Anxiety Alliance

http://www.anxietyalliance.org.uk/

Helpline for people with anxiety disorders

Tel: 0845 296 7877 opening hours: 10am-10pm everyday

The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network

https://www.baatn.org.uk/

Tel: 020 3600 0712

The Naz Project
www.naz.org/uk/counselling
Counselling services for Minority Ethnic individuals and young adults aged 18-25 years old Tel: 0208 741 1879

Afghan Association Paiwand

UK's largest independent organisation specialising in working psychologically, informed by an understanding of intersectionality, with people who identify as Black, African, South Asian and Caribbean.

http://paiwand.com/about/

Services for Afghan Refugees.

Tel: 0208 905 8770

Appendix I – Agreement for volunteers and lay members involvement in research.

Doctorate in Clinical Psychology research study:

Title: _____

This research project is a study based at the University of Hertfordshire [or for NHS studies: XXXX Trust and the University of Hertfordshire]. The researcher is [XXXX]. The purpose of the study is to understand

Payment will be made to volunteers and lay members of the public for their participation in meetings and other research involvement activities. The project will finish on XX/XX/XXXX.

This form must be completed by the participating volunteer before payment can be made. Any queries concerning this Agreement should be referred to the relevant Head of Research Centre at the University of Hertfordshire

_____

_____.

Between:

and

Name

Address

Tel No.
Email Address

ACTIVITY

The University of Hertfordshire

(The "Participating Volunteer")

Volunteer for Doctorate in Clinical Psychology research study

The **Participating Volunteer** has agreed to assist the University by voluntarily taking part in the research **Activity**.
1. The Activity to be undertaken is described below and it is the Activity for which you have given

your consent/agreement.

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First and Second Generational Stories of Distress and Hope amongst Indian Parents and Adult Children

e.g., Attend meetings to discuss recruitment, study progress, findings and how to share our results.
Review participant information and materials as a Participating Volunteer
Give his/her views to inform the research process and direction.

There will be no requirement for the participating volunteer to attend all meetings or take part in all activities.

Complete

CONFIRMATION OF ATTENDANCE

2. The Researcher will confirm the Participating Volunteer has attended the Activity outlined above.

PAYMENT

3. The Participating Volunteer will receive a participation payment of £20ph in the form of vouchers / one-off payments for completion of the activities described above. Payment will not be made for any activities in which the Participant did not participate at all.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY AND THE PARTICIPATING VOLUNTEER

4. **The University does not regard the Participating Volunteer as an employee of the University nor as a worker, and the payment made to the Participating Volunteer for the participation is not**

   made with respect to any employment relationship with the University.

5. **The Participating Volunteer is advised that it is their personal responsibility to declare any payment for participation to HM Revenue & Customs under Self-Assessment, if that is appropriate to their personal circumstances. The University will not deduct income taxes from the payment.**

SIGNED FOR AND ON BEHALF OF THE UNIVERSITY

The signatory for the University confirms they have authority to enter into this agreement on behalf of the University e.g., Principal Investigator

....
.....

DATE .....SIGNED BY THE PARTICIPATING VOLUNTEER
I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this agreement and accept its terms.

.....

..... **DATE** .....

SIGNED

PRINT NAME

Position at UH

SIGNED

PRINT NAME

Appendix J: 15-Point Quality TA Checklist (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

A 15-Point Checklist of Criteria for Good Thematic Analysis

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as *active* in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

Appendix K: Transcripts with Initial Codes Generated on NVivo

Respondent: Well…its difficult. I think its important for communities to provide job opportunities for Afghan women. Its important for Afghan women to leave the house, to have a job, to have their independence.
We now have tailoring classes for Afghan women. This is valuable. I hope that in the future, there is opportunity given for Afghan women to utilise their skills.

This is so important.

I believe that some Afghan women are not interested in having a job or having independence. They may not have the education or skills.

Then we have some Afghan women who want to study or pursue further education, however they have family challenges. Some have children to look after.

Then we have other groups of women who are not given permission or are allowed to go study or work by their husband. Despite being in a western country, they are not allowed to study or attend English classes. Even if they study, they won't be allowed to work.

Maybe if we have communities that provide job opportunities just for women?

Maybe these communities or organisations can invest on hand craft or carpenter jobs. Afghan women have so much more skills.

I wish I accessed these services more but it was challenging for me. I had 4 children and I only desired to invest my time and energy on them and their future.

I strongly believe that its important to pay attention or invest on your children. I have no regret at all.

I am happy. My children are independent. My children are doing well.

I enjoyed counselling so much. It was validating. For the first time I felt like someone was listening to me. That I wasn't wrong. There is so much humanity. There are psychologists who respect you. It was the first space that felt safe. Counselling was a saviour. Almost like how my father was to me.

I wasn't scared of my family.

The thing that I would've wanted was to have access to knowledge of the side effects of medication.

The first medicine that I took was fluoxetine. That was in 2001 and it was useful. It gave me heartburn. But for those 6-months, it helped me get up and become motivated.

It was hard. My life was hard. Motherhood was hard. i still cant diagnose myself. I don't know what is acceptable and what is not. Where I go wrong. How to be.

At times, I remind myself that I don't have mental health but its stress. Its circumstantial. I have to remind myself of the context. I have learned to be more grounded. I am learning to not blame on anything or anyone.

Sometimes I struggle to hold both identities of being an Afghan woman and a British mum.

Interviewer: Can you hold both identities?

Respondent: No….i have realised that holding onto the Afghan culture hasn't been helpful. It hasn't got me far in life. Everything that gets old you throw it away right? So why would I hold onto an old mentality.

I have always thrown things away and ran away so why should I hold onto a culture that doesn't give me safety, food, parents, identity. Nothing!

The day when I am sick and in trouble. When I am alone. That culture is not there.

6) From your experience, what specific support or resources would better assist Afghan women in the UK?

Well first of all we need to have unity amongst us. Maybe once a week for one hour we should sit and talk about our women's rights. Discuss that when I am in a country like the UK, what rights do I have.

want to socialise and be among other women. It helps me not overthink.
I live at home with my husband and it gets isolating.

I have physical health issues. I have arthritis. I cant do any chores at all. I cant go out and socialise much so I rely on these spaces to be able to do that.

(pauses) There used to lots of community events for Afghans but no one would know about it. These things have become private for the elite people if you ask my opinion.

Interviewer: What do you think needs to change to feel better supported?

Respondent: Well, first and foremost…(paused)

Firstly, when it comes to health care or the GP for example, we need to be provided with interpreters. We all need them. Sometimes when we are provided an interpreter, they are either an Urdu interpreter or a Persian interpreter.

We know that our understanding of health is different. Our dialect is different. Even the words we use is different to them. I think this impacts how our difficulties are interpreted when we go for appointments. In this instance, I think everything gets misinterpreted.

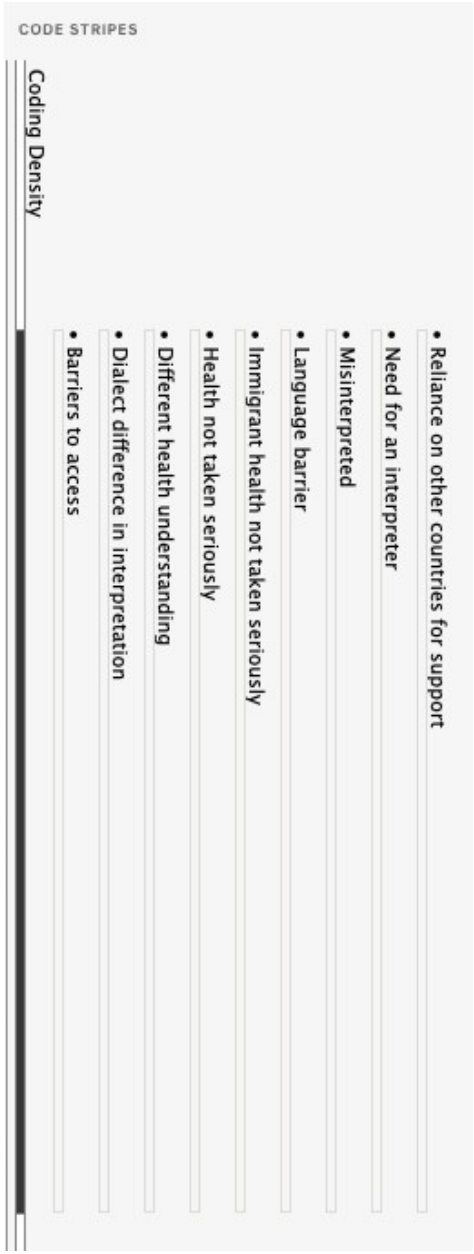
And…and I do believe that one of the biggest challenges of accessing the NHS is that our health is not taken seriously. We are left to suffer for years before we are taken seriously.

Some have asked me to go to foreign countries like India to get support for my physical health. I don't think people realise that going to another country is not easy. It requires finances, time and the support of another family member.

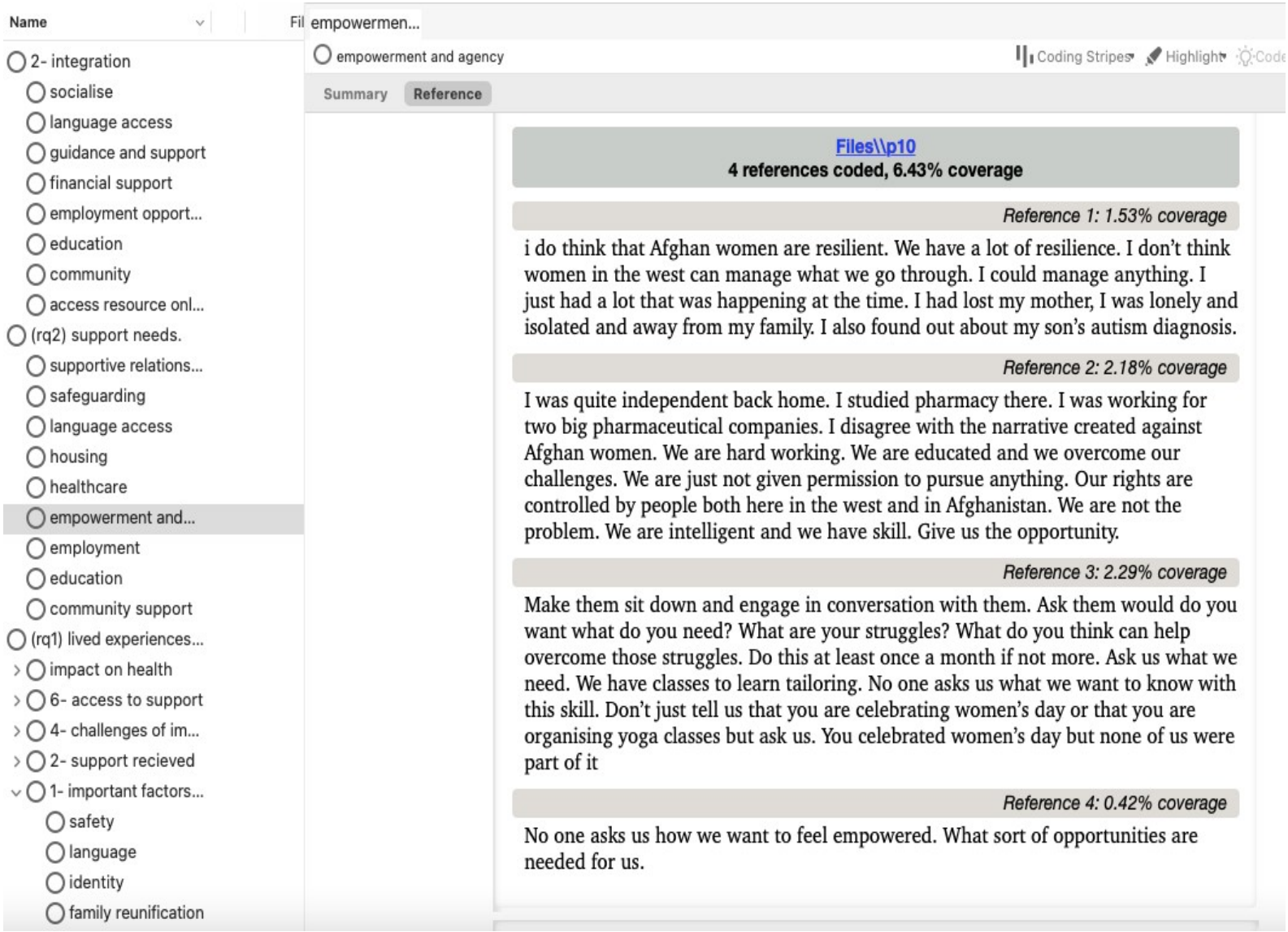
My children all work and I need someone who understands and speaks English. I am 59 and I wonder sometimes what part of my body is well? I feel my entire body is fragile. If someone is healthy, they can do everything. But….I am not.

***Interviewer:* what do you think is impacting the NHS support towards migrants?**

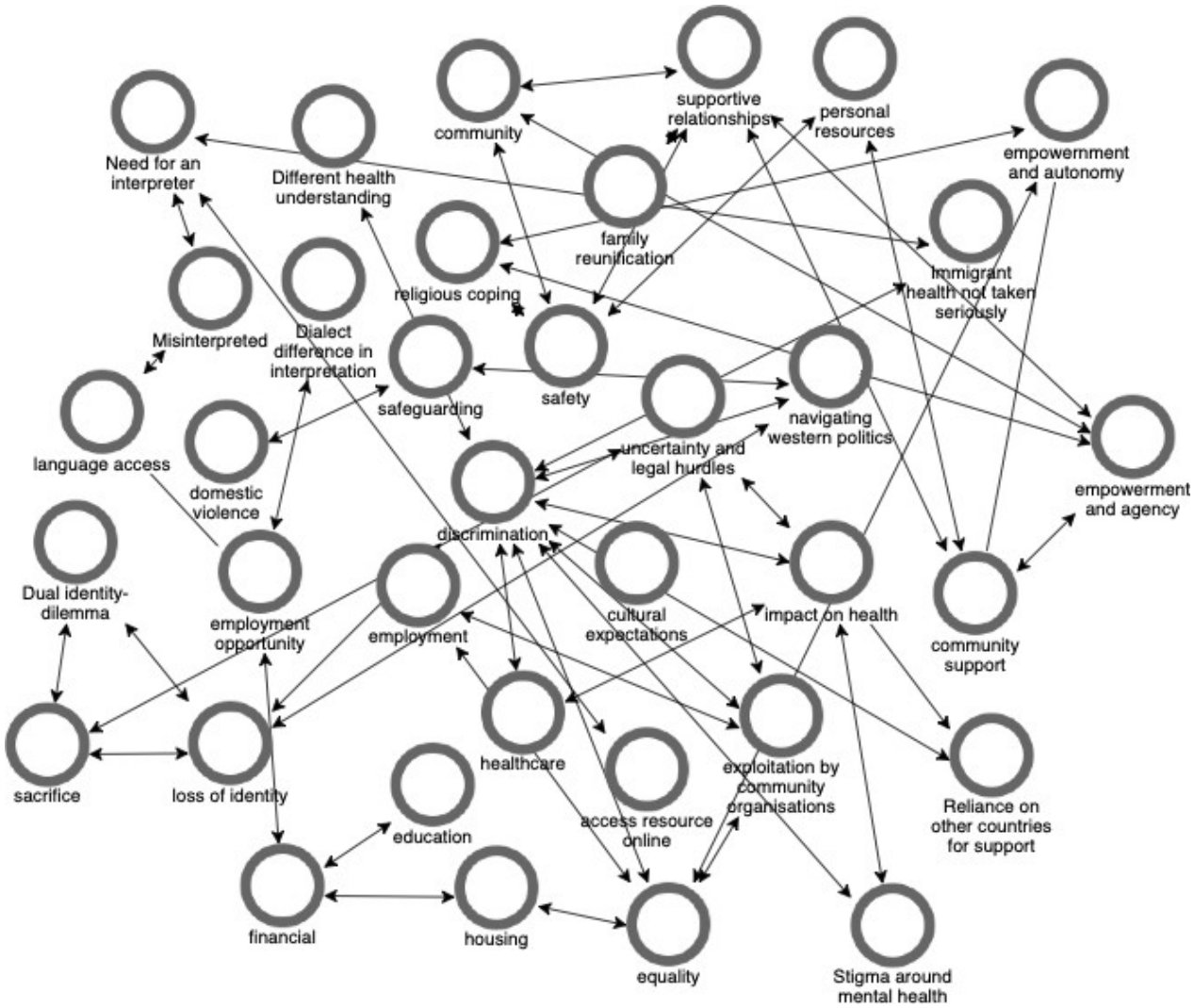
Respondent: I do think that they are careless towards migrants but I don't know why. But I don't know….



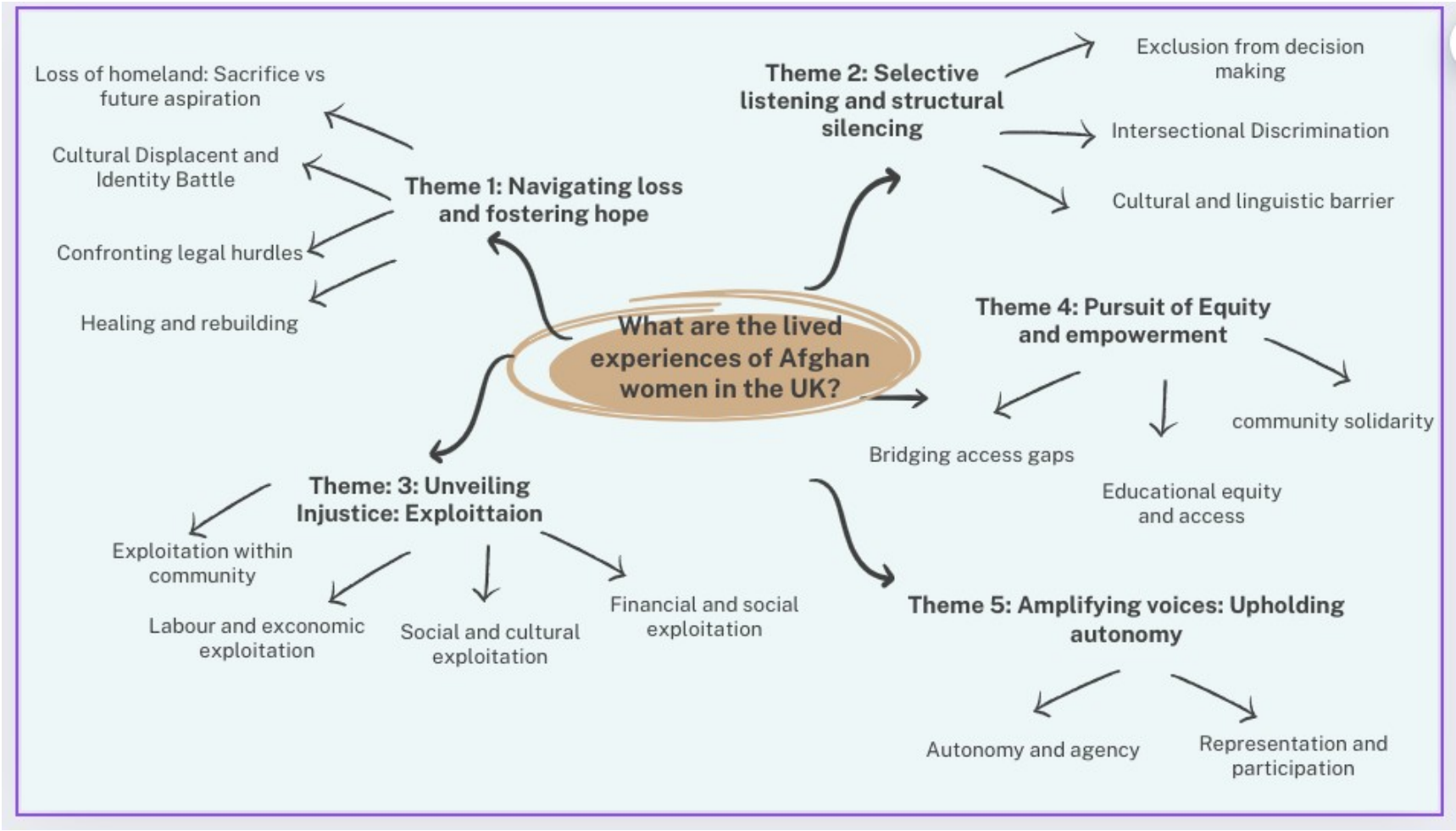
Appendix L: NVivo Codes



Appendix M: Stage 3 Analysis- Searching for Themes



Appendix N: Preliminary Thematic Map



Appendix P: Excerpts from Reflexive Diary

Date	Reflection
15/01/2024	*After my third participant, the team manager and another woman unexpectedly walked in and asked if I could provide therapy and support for an Afghan lady seeking legal assistance. I found myself in an uncomfortable and unanticipated situation, unable to clearly articulate my boundaries or limitations.* *As the woman began to share some of the most traumatic experiences of her life, I was overwhelmed with internal conflict. I wanted to support her, but I was deeply aware that interrupting or pausing the conversation might feel like an extension of the silencing she had already faced. Balancing the need to uphold my professional boundaries with her urgent need to be heard was challenging and emotionally charged. Upon reflection, I realised that my frustration with the team lead went beyond the immediate circumstances. Their well-meaning but misguided attempt to offer help highlighted a critical gap: the severe shortage of Afghan psychologists who can truly grasp and empathise with the cultural and emotional nuances of Afghan experiences. For many Afghans, having the opportunity to share their stories with someone who understands their cultural context can be profoundly validating and meaningful.*
23/01/2024	*As I went through the transcripts from my recent interviews, one quote really hit me: a participant described her feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness as being "deaf and mute." This description was a stark reminder of how deeply she felt excluded and unheard, capturing the broader issue of Afghan women struggling to have their voices acknowledged.* *During this time, as I was immersed in these interviews, I was also following the heartbreaking news about the genocide in Palestine. The overwhelming sense of silence and helplessness I felt watching these events unfold, combined with the limited support I saw for trainees in our course, seemed to mirror the participant's feelings of being mute and powerless. It felt like there was so much oppression around us, and I was left grappling with the question: what can we do? By the end of our interview, there was a shift in the participant's demeanor. She seemed to find some comfort and connection in our conversation. When I offered her*

	a voucher as a token of thanks, she declined, saying it would feel like an insult. Her refusal seemed to reflect a deeper need for genuine recognition and respect, rather than something material.
27/01/2024	*Reflecting on today's interview, the participant's repeated mention of, "I was a psychologist in Afghanistan too," struck me deeply. Her words seemed to carry a heavy sense of loss and frustration.* *Imagining her situation, I can see how devastating it must be to have a cherished professional identity in one country and find it dismissed in another. Her role as a psychologist was not just a job but a core part of her identity and purpose. To arrive in a new country where her qualifications are not recognised must feel like a profound erasure of her past achievements. I couldn't help but wonder if she was subtly urging me to delve deeper into her professional background. Maybe she wanted me to ask more about her work in Afghanistan, to validate her experience and acknowledge her expertise. Her repeated references to her role seemed to signal a deep-seated need for recognition and connection.*
06/04/2024	*Over the last couple of weeks, I have been fully immersed in the preliminary stages of data analysis, searching for initial codes. The process of familiarization, reading, and re-reading the data has given me intimate contact with the participants' responses, felt-sense, utterances, and latent/manifest meanings. I was struck by the depth of their insights, especially their openness and transparency in sharing their experiences, which mirrored their experiences of migration.* *I noticed that my responses to their disclosures were often met with murmurs and direct questions, which I employed to maintain a degree of distance as a researcher due to my proximity to the subject matter. I have been conscious of my own biases, wondering if I was making assumptions based on my lived experiences as an immigrant Afghan woman. I also worried about the influence of my knowledge in the subject area tainting the inductive coding process. When I noticed my coding was moving towards a theory-driven rather than data-driven approach, I paused and recorded a memo about my emotional reaction to the content. I also kept a post it note displaying the research question to anchor my process and ensure I maintained an inductive approach. I questioned if I was coding beyond what the data was conveying, such as eliciting latent codes. I was surprised by some findings, such as discussions about exploitation within our own communities, which, although I was aware of, still shocked me to see how wider systemic dynamics play out in smaller spaces. This reflection made me realize that transparency about my process enriches it and enhances its credibility.*