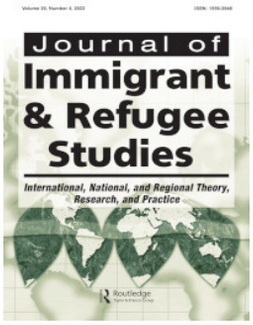

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"How Can I Trust People When They Know Exactly What My Weakness Is?" Daily Life Experiences, and Resilience Strategies of Stateless Afghans in Iran

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the daily life experiences of stateless Afghans in Iran and to describe their resilience strategies that enabled them to manage life deprivations. Using narrative analysis, we interviewed 34 individual stateless Afghans in Iran. Four main themes were identified in their daily life experiences: ignored as nonexistent, second-class Muslims, institutional discrimination, and unpredictability of the future. In terms of resilience strategies, three main themes emerged: cohesive community support, the role of religion, and ideological exploitation. Policy improvements are suggested to decrease discrimination and law amendments to provide a legal presence for Afghans residing in Iran.

KEYWORDS

Statelessness; Afghan; narrative analysis; resilience; human rights; qualitative study

Introduction

Forced migration and statelessness

Global forced migration reached the highest historical record of 89.3 million people at the end of 2021, of which almost 31.7 million were refugees and asylum seekers (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2022a). Forced migration is regularly used as an umbrella term in migration research. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines "forced migration" as all migratory movements that involve force, compulsion, and coercion (IOM, 2019). Following this definition and based on the level of protection offered by the countries of destination, forced migrants are divided into three different categories: refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons (IOM, 2019). Refugees and asylum seekers are those who receive or are considered to receive protection from host countries. However, the UNHCR defines a stateless person as someone who is not regarded as a national of any state under the application of its laws (Chen et al., 2019).

Stateless forced migrants are individuals who are outside the effective protection of the legal system in their unwilling host country (Sawyer & Blitz, 2011). They can be classified into two groups: "de jure" and "de facto stateless." De jure statelessness refers to those who lack any nationality or do not have a country to call their own (UNHCR, 2021), while de facto

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statelessness pertains to individuals who hold a nationality but are unable to exercise their rights and privileges as citizens due to factors such as discrimination, persecution, or displacement (Massey, 2010).

Statelessness is known to be a consequence, source, or catalyst of human rights violations (Zmiyenko, 2018). Stateless persons have no legal presence and are marginalized from all dimensions of formal social life in the host countries. They are deprived of freedom of movement, have limited access to healthcare and education, inheritance, the purchase of property, official employment, and marriage (Zmiyenko, 2018). Often on the move or parked in temporary makeshift camps, they are hard to access for safety and security reasons. Also, the greater visibility of legal migratory movements absorbs more attention than illegal migration (Gyulai, 2012).

Invisibility and lack of trust in outsiders for safety reasons result in the underrepresentation of stateless persons in empirical research as well as statistics. Studies focusing on stateless persons are challenging because the target population frequently resides precariously at the margins of society (Chen et al., 2019). Based on information provided by the governments of 94 countries by the end of 2020, the UNHCR (2020) roughly estimated the number of stateless persons to be 4.2 million. However, in the same document, the UNHCR asserted that the true number of stateless people is significantly higher (UNHCR, 2020).

Iran is a popular and sensible destination for Afghan immigrants, since the nations of Afghanistan and Iran share long borders, similar cultures, and common languages (Addelyan Rasi et al., 2021; Janzadeh, 2020). The total number of Afghan immigrants in Iran is based on speculation. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, 3.8 million Afghans are estimated to live there by the end of 2019. However, based on the government's latest estimation, at most 1.5 million Afghans have crossed the borders using irregular means since January 2021, and still some 2,000 individuals continue to make their way to Iran daily (UNHCR, 2022b). Of these, only 780,000 Afghans are registered refugees, and 586,000 hold Afghan passports (UNHCR, 2022b).

Compared to research on lived experiences, few studies have addressed de jure or de facto stateless Afghans' resilience strategies in Iran. Given the large number of stateless Afghans and the limited number of studies on their living experiences and resilience strategies, the aim of this research was to first explore the daily life experiences of stateless Afghans, 'de jure' and 'de facto,' living in Iran. The second aim was to describe the resilience strategies that enabled them to manage life deprivations.

Background

Afghan forced migrants in the Iranian context

Afghanistan is primarily a refugee-sending country (Ghosh, 2016). The main ethnic groups in Afghanistan are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Baloch (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2015). Most Afghan immigrants in Iran belong to a Hazara ethnic background and believe in the Shiite tradition of Islam. They mainly migrate to Iran as a predominantly Shiite country (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2015).

According to the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants' Affairs of Iran (2021), Afghans in Iran are divided into three different groups: (i) those with passports, (ii) those with residence permit cards (*Amayesh cards*), and (iii) those considered illegal (de jure or de facto stateless). Many Afghans in the first two groups become stateless after a while because their residence permit cards need to be extended every three to six months, but paying high costs is unaffordable for them. According to a report from the Country-of-Origin Information Center, Afghans applying for a residence permit card are required to pay up to 200 USD for municipal tax and 15 USD for issuing the card itself (Landinfo, 2012). Moreover, to register for a short-term residence permit, Afghans need a valid passport for which they must first travel back to Afghanistan to renew it (Christensen, 2016). For many Afghans who fled to Iran to escape dangerous security conditions, this requires returning and risking their lives (Barr et al., 2013). It is a cumbersome

bureaucratic procedure that discourages many Afghans from being engaged in the process. In fact, they know that having a residence permit card confers no specific rights to an individual other than a temporary stay in a province or permission to apply for a short-term work permit (UNHCR, 2013n.d.).

Despite holding a residence permit card, they are deprived of different social services; that is, it is forbidden under the Iranian constitution for foreigners to buy or own property, including houses, cars, and SIM cards. Afghans who can afford to buy a house or car must purchase such property through Iranians (Landinfo, 2012). Also, according to Article 121 regarding "laws and regulations concerning employment of foreign nationals," work permits are given to foreign nationals under the following conditions: there is no Iranian applicant for the position, the foreign national has sufficient knowledge and expertise for the requested job, and the Iranian workforce is being trained to continue the job after the work permit of the foreign national applicant ends (Ministry of Cooperatives Labor and Social Welfare, n.d.). This explains why Afghans mainly have a low socioeconomic status in Iran and live in precarious conditions. Their job opportunities are limited, and thus they are forced to work in the black market, often in the construction industry, agriculture, brick production, recycling, well digging, or cleaning (Addelyan Rasi et al., 2021; Simbar et al., 2019).

Various studies have shown that, since 1995, the Iranian government has followed a policy of "making Iran a less desirable destination for Afghans" by establishing restrictive measures to limit the access of Afghans to free or subsidized resources, such as education, energy, and health services (Garakani, 2011; Naseh et al., 2018; Rajaee, 2000). Nasr Esfahani and Hoseini (2016) mentioned that educational restrictions were devised on the one hand to prevent further immigration, and on the other hand to encourage (or force) Afghan immigrants to leave Iran (Nasr Esfahani & Hoseini, 2016). The Iranian health service for Afghan refugees is exclusionary in the sense that Afghans feel discriminated against by being "ignored" or "rejected" (Heydari et al., 2016). The high costs of treatment for Afghans are mentioned as an important reason for not seeking professional health services in Iran (Heydari et al., 2016; Mohammadi et al., 2017). Moreover, Nekouei Marvi Langari et al. (2022) emphasized that immigrants' lack of general knowledge about healthy lifestyles results in poorer health and the development of chronic diseases in life (Nekouei Marvi Langari et al., 2022). Likewise, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) restrictions in Iran have had a huge impact on the income level of Afghan refugees, who represent the main black-market laborers; consequently, Afghans have avoided presenting at medical centers and have shown an unwillingness to be hospitalized (Salmani et al., 2020).

Discrimination and racism

Multiple studies have demonstrated the view that Afghans are inferior, even when they have lived in the country for generations, and this has been illustrated in various forms (Bashir & Keshani, 2021; Mousavi et al., 2021; Olszewska, 2010; Sadat, 2008; Taherpoor & Zamani, 2006). For example, Bashir and Keshani (2021) found that "humiliation" and "being looked down upon" were the least common experiences of Afghans living in Iran. Mousavi et al. (2021) stated that Afghan students are treated discriminately by teachers and other students at Iranian schools. Olszewska (2010) examined the poetry of second-generation Afghans in Iran and concluded that they are "portrayed as a confused generation subjected to the pains of exile and identity crisis," who are marginalized from mainstream Iranian society. Taherpoor and Zamani (2006) mentioned that Afghan immigrants face widespread prejudice in Iranian society. Christensen (2016) indicated that Afghans encounter significant discrimination, humiliation, physical attacks, or racism. Afghan interviewees referred to being considered less worthy than Iranians by highlighting that "it's a shame to say I'm Afghan" or "they call us *Afghani Kasif* (filthy Afghan)" (Christensen, 2016).

Racism and humiliation are felt even among Afghan elites living in Iran. Noghani and Akhlaghi (2014) found that the distrust among Afghan immigrant elites toward the Iranian people and

government was at a high level. The most important reason for distrust relates to the acts of humiliation and systematic discrimination that have shaped the experiences of immigrants during their residency (Noghani & Akhlaghi, 2014). In another study, Ghanbari et al. (2016) concluded that the quality of life of Afghan refugees was low and less than the average limit. About 60% and 37% of Afghans face moderate to severe and mild food insecurity, respectively (Omidvar et al., 2013; Pakravan Charvadeh & Mohammadi-Nasrabadi, 2020).

Resilience

Although Afghans have faced many issues in the last decades, through 40 years of internal war and being forced to live in a state of total deprivation, they have inevitably developed ways of living that are compatible with their in-hand solutions.

The primary strategy for overcoming the constant state of crisis in Afghanistan has been mass migration to neighboring countries and sending money back home (Monsutti, 2008). Sadeghi and Abbasi-Shavazi (2016) found that highly educated Afghans tend to migrate to European countries and consider their residence in Iran to be more of a temporary situation (Sadeghi & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2016). It appeared that independent Afghan schools run for and by Afghans developed as a response to the education deprivations in Iran. Even though such schools are considered illegal, and their certificates are not officially recognized by the Iranian government, stateless Afghan children, or those refugees who are not allowed to register at Iranian schools study there (Nasr Esfahani & Hoseini, 2016).

Prior research emphasizes that Afghan social networks provide emotional support as well as strength against life inequalities in Iran, especially for newly arrived immigrants (Mirzaei, 2016; Yousofi et al., 2016). On the contrary, Akhlaghi et al. concluded that Afghan migrants feel frustrated in achieving their expectations in Iran; moreover, they feel that there is no way to change or improve this situation (Akhlaqi et al., 2016).

Narrative approach to resilience

As Ungar (2008) and Harms (2015) mentioned, previous research on the general themes of "resilience" or "trauma growth" has mostly concentrated on individual psychopathology. However, resilience requires a more holistic and contextually relevant perspective. In such a stance, resilience refers to both the capacity of individuals to navigate their ways to psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their individual and collective capacity to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways (Theisen-Womersley, 2021; Ungar, 2008).

Depending on both personal and societal contexts, resilience strategies are constantly developed and creatively evolved through threatening or challenging situations (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Harms, 2015). Following Harms' suggestion, we differentiated between "recovery" and "resilience." Resilience, in this sense, represents "bouncing forward" in an immanently threatening and challenging situation. In contrast, recovery occurs in a shorter period. Resilience represents more of a collective action, whereas recovery is more individually concentrated. Originating from the limitations and hidden opportunities laid in a specific society, resilience is the key to survival. The identification of resilience strategies can ultimately illuminate the potentiality that rests within communities.

Narrative analysis best identifies factors associated with resilience strategies. Narrative analysis is concerned with internalized understandings of people from their own and others' perspectives. Narratives provide in-depth knowledge of how these understandings form and influence our encounters with other humans and wider social contexts. Thus, people's stories and scripts are central to this approach. These narratives shape how we think, feel, and behave as individuals, as well as how we see ourselves belonging to society (Harms, 2015). Acquiring such a holistic

approach, in which the participants of the study are the core, not the objects of the study, allows us to scrutinize their interactions with the environment, family, and society. This systemic approach helps us distance ourselves from psychopathological reductionism. Such a research method has proven to be useful in research with vulnerable populations and minorities (Farahani et al., 2021).

Methods

This qualitative study collected and analyzed narratives of de jure and de facto stateless Afghans in Iran in 2021.

Participants

Stateless Afghans who were above 18 years of age and living in Tehran were the study population. The sample consisted of 34 participants, including 16 women and 18 men aged 18–59 years. The authors (a man and woman) involved in the interview and data collection processes were themselves of Iranian origin and had experience conducting research as well as several months of voluntary work with stateless Afghans in Iran. Because of the distrust of outsiders among the study population, samples were recruited using the snowball sampling method in which the first interviewee introduced the next. The researchers were introduced to the first participant by two widely trusted insiders who had a strong connection with Afghans. The trusted insiders were two elder Afghans working in a mosque in Tehran. Researchers got to know them through a male Afghan connection, attending the same mosque regularly. Establishing further bonds was easier with the medium of the participants' mother tongue.

Interview process

We discussed the research implications with two Afghan elders (*Rish-Safid*) who were trusted by the sample population of this study and were themselves stateless Afghans who had lived in Iran for more than 30 years. We double-checked our interview questions with the two elders and obtained help from them to establish first contact with the interviewees. A semi-structured interview was then conducted with the study participants in Tehran. Participants were given an information sheet that included general information about the research and their rights. For illiterate participants, the research information and probable questions were verbally explained and answered. Participation in the interview was based on informed consent. Illiterate participants' consent was obtained verbally prior to the interview. Following the recommendations of the two Afghan elders, interviews were conducted in the interviewee's own house. This strategy was effective in building trust with participants considering the interviewee's vulnerable position, i.e., reluctance to spend unnecessary time outside of their houses to avoid risks of being arrested, or for women to feel safer at their homes than anywhere else. Minding cultural and religious nuances and providing a free atmosphere for women participants to talk, they were interviewed by a female interviewer. Otherwise, the women were only able to interview with one of their male family members accompanying them during the interview with a male interviewer. Each interview took an average of 80 minutes (ranging from 47 to 105 minutes). Participants received a 20 Euro gift card at the end of the interview. The study participants were interviewed in a common language. Farsi or Farsi Dari (dialect) was spoken lucidly by both interviewees and interviewers.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Department of the Social Sciences of the University of Tehran (81/91178). We secured the right for voluntary participation and full confidentiality for the potential study participants and explained the study plan in plain language after describing the aims and possible risks involved. Due to possible risks, minimal

personal information was collected for the purposes of the research. The interview recordings were destroyed a maximum of three days after the transcription of the data, as recommended by the ethics committee, based on the sensitivity of the content.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were transcribed a day after each interview. The analysis of the data was conducted through guidelines (Riessman, 1993, 2008) for inductive narrative analysis. As Riessman (1993) mentioned, narratives include information about previous behaviors and people's interpretations of those behaviors or meanings. Moreover, the purpose of narrative analysis is to examine how interviewees order the flow of experience to make meaning of events and acts in their lives (Riessman, 1993) and how the researcher reinterprets the construction of the narratives. Resilience strategies in such a narrative analysis lens are thus constructed through establishing connections between different aspects of an individual's personal and social life experiences that might have been impeded because of a negative situation (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005). What is needed in this process is to ensure that the process of interpretation is reciprocal and contextualized. To make the process of analysis more systematic, we utilized NVivo 11 (QSR International) software.

The main author and two coauthors were involved in the data analysis process. In the first stage, the main author read transcripts of the interviews, concentrating on the verbal expressions and reactions of the respondents. An open coding technique was utilized at this stage by labeling key concepts and notes of the interview transcripts. The process of open coding was repeated for each single transcript, and during the coding of all interview transcripts, the focus was on merging repetitive categories as emergent themes. In the next stage, the authors tried to find logical connections and interpretive correlations between the emergent categories and tried to abstract them by merging them under various main themes. After this stage, the authors rechecked the coding, categories, and main themes without consulting each other. Finally, all authors discussed any disagreements to reach an acceptable level of mutual consent. Points of disagreements were modified, and codes, sub-themes, categories, and main themes were rechecked and rectified.

Results

After presenting the demographics of the study participants, we first reflected on the findings on the daily life experiences of stateless Afghans in Iran. We then focused on their resilience strategies, which were developed gradually to overcome life challenges.

Demographic of the study participants

The demographics of the study participants are shown in Table 1. The participants had been living in Iran for an average of 15.57 years (SD = 10.527), ranging from 1 to 37 years at the time of the interview. Fourteen men were working in the black market in the areas of day construction labor, recycling, brick production, and well digging. Two men reported that while studying, they had to meet their living costs through "street peddling." As described above, all participants were de jure and de facto stateless. 17 of them had been documented for some years, but eventually, they were unable to renew their residence permits. All 17 persons had direct encounters with government organizations. The rest of the participants never had a legal residence permit; thus, they mostly had indirect encounters with Iranian institutions other than the police. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the experiences of each group.

Table 1. Demographics of the study participants (n = 34).

	n
Gender	
Man	18
Woman	16
Age	38.21 (mean); 18–59 (range)
18–29	10
30–39	8
≥40	16
Ethnicity	
Hazare	23
Baloch	7
Not mentioned	4
Education level	
Illiterate	24
Primary school	5
High school	5
Living time in Iran (years)	15.57 (mean); 1–37 (range)
≤9	12
10–19	8
≥20	14
Children	3.35 (mean); 0–8 (range)
Occupation	
Student and street peddler	2
Construction worker	5
Pregnant/unemployed	2
Selling homemade bread	3
Brick construction	1
Cleaner	4
Recycling worker	4
Well digger	3
Not mentioned	9
Street peddler	1

Daily life experiences of stateless Afghans

Ignored as nonexistent

A substantial factor that all study participants articulated via their unique stories was the total state of powerlessness that resulted in feeling as if they were nonexistent. The main theme was developed out of four subcategories—political, economic, social, and cultural powerlessness. The feeling of powerlessness sounded normalized in those participants who had lived in Iran for more than six years. Four of the interviewees had been living in Iran for a shorter time, and their encounter with the host society was fresher; they talked more openly about examples of being considered nonexistent and ignored. Mobarak, a 32-year-old married man with four children who has lived in Iran with his family since 2016, said:

> I had no right at all, even to negotiate my working hours, let alone my wages. Many times [repeating], at the end of construction, the employer simply didn't pay me. Even no explanation why? [sighs deeply] Because he knew that I could not complain. If I went to the police, first they would look at me and say, "Hey, Afghani! Show us your ID card [*Amayesh card*]." If they saw that I had no ID on me, they would arrest me, and without even telling my family, they would send me back to Afghanistan.

Aman, a 21-year-old unmarried man who has been living in Iran for barely a year, commented:

> [The] first time that I tried crossing the borders of Iran, I got arrested by the border police … police treated us like animals. They returned us to the police building on the border and beat us while we were naked… What could I do?

For those stateless Afghans who had lived in Iran for a longer time, the sense of nonexistence sounded more normalized. Baset, a 50-year-old married man with seven children who has been living in Iran for 24 years, said:

> I have a daily feeling of hesitation, as my family has no future here [relaxed]. But what happens? What can we do? [laughing] … If I get older than this, meaning that one day I can't go to work, my family will perish [laughing].

The sense of powerlessness and the feeling of being ignored were multidimensional. The first two quotations above were categorized under the concept of "political powerlessness." The third refers to "economic powerlessness." Similarly, according to the content of the interviews, we drew subcategories regarding social and cultural powerlessness. The social sense of being ignored, as the following quote from Sharif, a 36-year-old married man with three children who has been living in Iran for 10 years, exemplifies, refers to the weak social bond stateless Afghans share with Iranian society resulting from distrust and a sense of inequality (or injustice):

> For us, as ID-less ones, I cannot trust even in myself. How can I trust in people's good intentions when they know exactly what my weakness is? [looking down] I found two other Afghan families like myself, and they are my only help. I trust them like I trust my eyes.

Nasir, a 31-year-old married man with three children who has been living in Iran for six years, depicted the nature of trust between Afghans and Iranians:

> I need to trust one of you [referring to me] inevitably. I needed to buy a car for my work and income. I had no ID to first own the car and then get a driving license. If a car accident happened, I would need to call an Iranian and beg him to quickly come and take the blame.

Cultural powerlessness was another subcategory referring to the Afghans' experiences of verbal, racial, and identity harassment or being humiliated in daily life situations, as Fatemeh, a 19-year-old unmarried woman born and living in Iran, told the woman interviewer:

> I was born in Iran. I look just like them [excited]! I got to know an Iranian boy. Same age as myself … The second day after he learned I was originally Afghan, he blocked me on all social media. Why? Because I was Afghan? … Am I guilty for who I am?!

Second-class Muslims

Based on the overt expressions of the interviewees, 15 participants identified themselves as Shiite Muslims, whereas the rest did not specifically refer to which Islamic sect they belong. They tried to refer directly to the Quran to prove that all Muslims are brothers (whether Shiite or Sunni) and must be kind to each other[1] (Al-Fadhli, 2019) to challenge their current living situation in Iran as an Islamic country. Emran, a 40-year-old married man with five children who has been living in Iran for 11 years, said:

> I always think about what Islam Iranian people believe … in Islam, for example, it is said to be kind to your neighbors. But throughout my life, I have had lots of bad neighbors. The worst was four years ago, when my wife's brother and his family had just immigrated to Tehran. Because they had nowhere to stay, they stayed with us until they sorted things out. Our snub-nosed neighbor informed the owner, and the owner increased the rent a lot!

Abed, a 45-year-old married man with two children who has been living in Iran for 17 years, referred to this theme in another life setting in Iran:

> I would usually go to the mosque in our neighborhood to say my evening prayers with other people. I used to sit on the front prayer line. I clearly heard people behind me saying, "What is he doing at the front?" Some even avoided praying collectively whenever I was there because I pray differently[2]. But isn't it that we all pray only to Allah?

Institutional discrimination

Institutional discrimination was a recurring theme in the participants' narratives. Hamid, a 37-year-old married man with four children who has been living in Iran for 11 years and had been documented before for three years, said:

> My wife is Iranian. She was under pressure from her side of the family not to marry an Afghan. I remember vividly that she was in the way of "Sabti-Ahval"[3] for two years! Why? Because we wanted to get ID cards for our children … They kept telling us our children are not Iranian because I was Afghan. Most of the time, we were humiliated by hearing them telling my wife, "You married an Afghan; you better go to Afghanistan to get an ID card for your child [sad looking]!"

Ebrahim, a 58-year-old married man with six children who has been living in Iran for 32 years, highlighted a similar point, saying:

> It used to be different 10 or 15 years ago. At least we could negotiate to register our children in official schools. I had a valid ID card then. I was eligible to register my children at official schools by paying money [bribing]. But now, I don't even think about it. My children studied until they learned how to read and write. At least they are not deaf and blind [a metaphor referring to illiteracy], like their parents [laughing].

In another setting, Akabar, a 36-year-old married man with four children who has been living in Iran for five years, explained discriminatory experiences with Iranian police:

> I had a quarrel with an Iranian at the bakery … Police on patrol noticed our near fight and took the two of us to the police building. They let him go but kept me for 24 hours. Because I was an illegal immigrant, they sent me to the border police for forced repatriation. I mean, they didn't even ask what the reason for the fight was! My family was so stressed and thought I was dead before I called them from Afghanistan four days later [anxious].

Unpredictability of the future

Unpredictability was another important life challenge for stateless Afghans living in Iran. Nasrin, a 23-year-old unmarried woman who was a child when her parents migrated to Iran, stated to the woman interviewer:

> All people have sweet memories in their childhood … of fairy tales, plays, and so on. But what always resonates in my ears was my mom telling me, "Do not fight with Iranians if something happens; put your head down and go. Avoid answering back." … Because of that, I guess, I still have this doubt in my life, and I cannot even fight for my basic human rights. If trouble happens, not only my life is ruined, but it is ruined for the whole family. I survived so far, but I'm not sure how it ends [desperate look].

Feelings of unpredictability seemed to be more normalized among those who lived in a stateless situation longer. Alim, a 59-year-old married male participant with five children who migrated to Iran in the 1990s, stated:

> I couldn't get an ID for more than 30 years. What happened? I'm still alive earning halal income [money gained through the right way]. I raised seven good children; they found their way. It is true that I could live a better life but thank God. I have no worries, but for my youngest children to find their way before I die.

Resilience strategies to overcome life challenges

Cohesive community support

The study participants, whether first- or second-generation migrants, admitted that life in the diaspora was possible only via the medium of *Ham-Watan* (compatriot). According to the participants' beliefs, the concept of Ham-Watan is associated with sacrifice and unrestricted help, especially for those who arrive in Iran for the first time and have no idea about how to find a place to live, work to survive, and so on. Jamal, a 38-year-old married man with three children who has been living in Iran for three years, stated:

> I could never imagine life outside Afghanistan. I was always thinking about staying and thought things would get better. But I was wrong … I decided to move with my family. I had only my friends in Iran. I called them once, and they tried their best. They found a smuggler and came to pick us up from

> Mashhad after our arrival. They hosted us for nine months, and all of us—nine people—were living in a small home.

Ali, a 28-year-old married man with two children who has been living in Iran for two years, said:

> I had my brother in Iran. He migrated 15 years ago. I stayed in Afghanistan with our parents to help them … Things got worse, and I had to leave Afghanistan … My brother helped me a lot. We not only lived together, but he also helped me find work in the same brickmaking workshop with other Afghans. I guess we can now support our parents better together.

Mohammad, a 54-year-old married man with five children who has been living in Iran for 11 years, explained in more detail how it was important for him to help his compatriots there:

> Afghans in Iran have no legal existence, but they help each other like they help their family members. For example, those who can afford it and are mostly documented, and sometimes some good Iranians, prioritize Afghans for employment. That is a mutual benefit for them. Afghans can earn halal money, and employers spend less on the knowledge that Afghans are hardworking ethical workers.

Naser, a 39-year-old married male participant who has been living in Iran since 2009, working as a school manager for stateless Afghan children, said:

> For example, I had an idea to help educate Afghan children. I contacted many NGOs to arrange an independent school … It didn't work. Finally, Afghans themselves financed me … each depending on their ability, and they helped me with some other compatriots as teachers and the support of some Iranian teachers to start the school. Although our schools are not official, they still help children to be ready for the future when they can study at Iranian schools officially.

Role of religion

Another factor related to justifying stateless Afghans' life challenges in Iran was belief in God and religiosity. Some of the participants justified what they were going through life by framing it as a test imposed by God on His selected servants. They referred to a verse in the Quran: "So surely with hardship comes ease. Surely with that hardship comes more ease"[4] (Ali, 2001). Momena, a 52-year-old married woman with three children living in Iran for 20 years, said to the woman interviewer:

> Without His help, it's impossible. Whenever my sons and their father leave home, I instantly pray for God to bring them back again safe and sound. I feel relieved talking to God, and He is always there to help us, as He helped us before.

Sakineh, a 50-year-old married woman with six children who has been living in Iran for 22 years, said:

> I cannot control everything. Many things are out of my power. In that case, I do my best. I sweat, but I am confident that God will handle the rest.

God played a supportive role for participants facing daily life hardships, giving them the confidence to go through the impossible. At the same time, when something bad happened in life, religion helped them by allowing them to justify and explain the event. In this regard, Hamed, a 29-year-old married man with two children who has been living in Iran for 12 years, said:

> I tried crossing the border twice. The first time, I was arrested and beaten by the border police, my wrist was broken. After three years, I was arrested one day, coming back from work, and I was sent back to Afghanistan. In all stages, I had to start from zero. I never complained because there is something good for me after everything that only God knows.

Ideological exploitation

The theme of ideological exploitation was linked with religion but leaned toward the ideological side of religiosity. Some participants mentioned that there was a religious duty to volunteer for

the Fatemiyoun Division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to fight and defend Shiites' holy shrines in Syria and Iraq; this is also something that can easily result in Iranian citizenship and end the person's statelessness. Others had active memberships in Sāzmān-e Basij-e Mostaz'afin, which is another division of the IRGC. This theme emerged gradually in response to the following question: "What options do you think you have to change your future life in Iran to what you wish?" Younger participants in the study, who saw a blurred picture of the future in their statelessness, made comments such as the following:

> Two brothers I knew joined Fatemiyoun in 2016. They easily got citizenship, not just for themselves but also for close kin. I heard that the youngest brother was injured and is now considered a war veteran. That changed their lives forever. (Ahmad, a 25-year-old unmarried man who has been living in Iran for six years)

> Joining Fatemiyoun is like what Iranians say for military service: "It makes men, real men" [laughing]. I know people think about it, and those who can—I mean, for example, my whole family—count on me. If I leave them even for a day … I can't. (Ehsan, a 29-year-old married man with two children who has been living in Iran for 13 years)

> It is more of a duty than getting privileges. You know what I mean? If I once tried it, the first thing I'd do it for was to defend our holy shrines. But thank God, Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is gone with the Americans. (Rashid, a 31-year-old married man with one child who has been living in Iran for seven years)

> I have very good Basiji friends who have helped me a lot. Other than doing our religious rituals there, I found lots of good people who, I can say, felt like my family. We have a lot of educational training together. Being with them feels like living. (Matin, a 19-year-old unmarried man born in Iran)

Discussion

Daily life experiences of stateless Afghans

The main study findings suggest that discrimination at three levels, e.g., micro- (personal), meso- (institutional), and macro-levels (laws and regulations), are common experiences of stateless Afghans living in Iran. Findings on the personal level of discrimination showed that participants feel powerless in four main dimensions of life: political, economic, social, and cultural. Based on the participants' narratives, the sense of powerlessness seemed to be associated with strong feelings of distrust to others and, in extreme cases, to themselves. Like Christensen (2016) and Olszewska (2010), despite the commonalities between the two nations, participants described their feelings of being seen as ignored or nonexistent, second-class Muslims, and in various circumstances humiliated or racially targeted (Taherpoor & Zamani, 2006).

The findings suggest that stateless Afghans' experiences of institutional-level discrimination relate to discriminatory laws and regulations at the macro level. The theme of "institutional and systematic discrimination" emphasized participants' numerous unfair encounters with the Iranian bureaucracy. As Naseh et al. (2018) and Garakani (2011) mentioned in their findings, a policy of "making Iran a less desirable destination" for Afghans has long been followed by Iranian governments. For instance, the situation of children born to Iranian mothers married to non-Iranian fathers has been an area of vast controversy for a long time (Zahedi, 2007). Children born from such marriages are not granted Iranian ID cards. This means that they become de jure stateless upon birth. The confining Iranian labor laws that force Afghan immigrants into the black market is another example of how regulations can reproduce precarious living conditions (Addelyan Rasi et al., 2021; Simbar et al., 2019).

Sometimes, stateless Afghans not only struggle with unfair laws and regulations in Iran, but also encounter what Lipsky (1980) called "street-level bureaucrats" to negotiate their access to the least possible social services. Our study participants stated that, in some circumstances, despite having valid residence permits, they were unable to exercise their legal rights, such as

registering their children at state-run schools or getting legal jobs. Because of this, on various occasions, they had to pay money (bribe) to accomplish their tasks. Regarding this, Landinfo (2012) highlighted that even in the least important situations, such as having SIM cards, Afghans are forced to deal with significant injustice.

The unpredictability of the future is another main finding of this research. The literature has demonstrated the negative impact of blurred future visions on the well-being and quality of life of stateless persons (Esfahani & Hosseini, 2018; Farahani et al., 2021; Ghanbari et al., 2016; Khosravi, 2009; Leśniewska, 2020; Zahedi, 2007). However, the findings of the current research indicated that the sense of unpredictability appeared to be more normalized among stateless Afghans who lived in Iran longer than those who just recently arrived. The study participants explained that due to the illegality of their stay in Iran, they felt highly stressed and unable to control and predict what would happen in the short term. The feeling of unpredictability is related to developing a strong sense of distrust toward outsiders, leading to remaining invisible to avoid being caught by local authorities (Nardone & Correa-Velez, 2016). In such a sense, the unpredictability of the future systematically reproduces further exclusion and isolation from society. The lack of any integration, adaptation, or harmonization (Hoffmann, 2016; Özçürümez et al., 2021) plan at the national level seems to be associated with the sense of unpredictability and the fact that Afghan's residence in Iran is regarded as "temporary" (Nasr Esfahani & Hoseini, 2016). A feeling of unpredictability was reported to be an immanent feeling for the study participants when they were constantly worried about being arrested by police and forcefully repatriated to Afghanistan. Khosravi (2009) and Barr et al. (2013) discussed the devastating effects of forced repatriation, including the high costs of return, the threat to returnees' lives recrossing the borders, and the termination of remittances and financial sources for the families of deported persons. Such forced deportations and associated financial insecurities force returnees to hide themselves or leave the country again (Khosravi, 2009).

Resilience strategies

In line with previous research, the findings of the current study suggest that the formation of resilience strategies in each society is rooted in existing individual, social, and contextual capacities. Stateless Afghans who participated in this study depicted their pregiven life situation in Iran and the limited agency they had to negotiate. However, narratives of resilience showed that Afghan's individual and collective capacity helped them to resist existing limitations but also devise some alternate survival opportunities. These life-threatening limitations, as well as survival strategies, merit further attention and discussion.

More than 40 years of Afghan migrants' survival in exile proves that, despite all obstacles in the host countries, they have stabilized their presence by developing resilience strategies in response. Forming a responsive and cohesive community around the concept of *Watan* (homeland) proved to be a well-functioning element that could compensate for social deprivation and marginalization. As Sadat (2008) discussed, "Afghan's collective identity, *Afghaniyat* (being Afghan) consists of *akhlaq-e wejdani* (moral values), *aqa-id* (beliefs), and *ananat* (customs) that are all represented in the concept of *Watan*" [homeland]. In accordance with the findings of Yousofi et al. (2016) and Mirzaei (2016), especially for those stateless Afghans arriving in Iran for the first time, a *Ham-Watan* is the one who helps in terms of resettlement and finding jobs. Independent unofficial Afghan-run schools could be another example of how community support functions for stateless Afghans. Even though a causal relationship cannot be drawn in this research, it seems that the formation of such cohesive Afghan communities can be considered a response to the feelings of distrust of Iranians as well, where participants articulated how they feel utterly powerless in various social life dimensions. Such community support compensates for the lack of legal social support in host societies, as Nasr Esfahani and Hoseini (2016) highlighted in their studies.

The findings suggest that although Afghans are discriminated against as second-class Muslims, the concept of religion still plays a positive and supportive role in their private lives. Religion proved to be reviving and a source of justification in the face of hardships. The concept of religion overlapped with the ideological dimension of religiosity too when we discussed how participants tried to compensate for social deprivations by volunteering to fight in the Iranian proxies in Syria, or Iraq in exchange for Iranian citizenship. Schneider (2018) found that the socioeconomic context related to Hazara ethnicity in Iran is an important factor when Afghans consider joining the militia. He added that "potential fighters are often enticed to sign up for Fatemiyoun with promises of generous pay, legal residency, and social status upon return" (Schneider, 2010). Karataş (2021) similarly found that Iran recruited fighters in Fatemiyoun forcibly from undocumented Afghan migrants. He added that Iran is exploiting the vulnerability of migrants for its ends and may use them to cause future conflicts in Afghanistan (Karataş, 2021). In fact, vulnerability, and limited opportunities to improve their life conditions leave no option for stateless Afghans but acquiescing to such exploitative demands of Iranian governments. Further research is needed to analyze the intentions behind joining the Fatemiyoun militia, which is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is a matter of fact that stateless Afghans have limited options for improving their living conditions, which might put covert pressure on them when it comes to thinking about any possible solution.

Limitations and strengths

It is essential to acknowledge the intrinsic limitation of qualitative research in the generalization of the findings. Another important limitation was related to the interviews with women participants: there are cultural and religious boundaries for Afghan women to avoid talking face-to-face with men they do not know. To control for this, the women participants were interviewed by two women coauthors of the current research.

This study included a large sample population and analyzed a rich dataset from 34 interviews, which were hard to access and trust us. Using a bottom-up approach allowed the unheard voices of stateless Afghans in Iran to be raised, representing contact with a population that was difficult to access. This research avoided psychopathological reductionism by employing a holistic approach to addressing the lived experiences of participants in the social context of the host society. Finally, an overview of how stateless Afghans manage life in Iran, along with all its challenges, was addressed.

Conclusion

Stateless Afghans are hard to access for research. There are ethical and methodological subtleties to consider when conducting research on stateless forced migrants compared with other types of immigrants. This study, however, accessed this opportunity and shed light on the life experience narratives as well as resilience strategies of stateless Afghans in Iran. Our findings reflect how stateless Afghans are affected by systematic discrimination. At the same time, despite all life-threatening challenges, stateless Afghans have developed various resilience strategies to survive. Policy improvements are suggested to decrease systematic discrimination and provide a legal presence for stateless Afghans in Iranian society.

Notes

1. We found many verses in the Quran referring to the importance of brotherhood among Muslims. Five interviewees referred to the two following well-known verses: "And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided" [Surat: Ali-Imran, Verse: 103] and "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and those with him are forceful against the disbelievers, merciful among themselves…" [Surat: Al-Fath, Verse: 29] (Ali, 2001).

2. Researchers avoided asking private questions, but it might refer to the fact that this participant was Sunni. The way Sunnis pray is a bit different from how Shiites pray and that can be noticed.
3. National Organization for Civil Registration of Iran
4. Surat: Ash-Sharh, Verse 5-6.

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