



A CASE STUDY:

THE PERSPECTIVES OF MOTHERS FROM AFGHANISTAN IN LONDON



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project summary

There is limited understanding of parenting and family life experiences of Afghan families in the UK. This study seeks to fill that gap in its exploration of the experiences of Afghan families' settlement and adjustment in the UK, focusing on the challenges and opportunities in parenting and family life within a new cultural and social environment (see Barn 2002, Barn 2006). The research was conducted, by academics at Royal Holloway University of London, in partnership with the non-government organisation, Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA) and builds on their efforts to support refugees and communities. The study aims to deepen understanding of Afghan parents' aspirations, the barriers they face, and the factors that support their children's well-being.

The study uses the Capability Approach as a theoretical framework, highlighting the importance of well-being, human development, and social justice (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). This framework emphasises capabilities, what people value and have reason to value and examines the factors that promote or impair these individual, family, community, and societal levels.

The overall aims of the study were to examine the experiences of Afghan parents in raising their children in Britain, their coping strategies, and the support they rely on to overcome challenges. The objectives were to:

- Engage with Afghan parents to understand their hopes, challenges and experiences in adapting to life in the UK, including cultural identity and preservation and integration.
- Examine the role of statutory and community services in supporting Afghan families and identify gaps in provision, including access to education, housing, and mental health resources.

- Develop recommendations for policymakers and service providers on culturally responsive practices to enhance the well-being and resilience of Afghan families.

The study aimed to recruit both mothers and fathers in order to capture their own unique lived experiences. Given the many challenges encountered in recruiting Afghan fathers, the study sets out to document parenting and family life from the perspectives of Afghan mothers only. Within the Afghan community, parenting and child-rearing responsibilities are often perceived as the primary domain of women. As a result, men may have been less inclined to engage in research on this topic, viewing it as less relevant to their role within the family structure. However, while this study captures vital insights into the experiences of Afghan mothers, it is equally important that the perspectives of fathers are also considered in future research studies.

Key findings included mothers' aspirations for their children to achieve educational success, maintain cultural values, and integrate into British Society. However, families face challenges such as language barriers, isolation, lack of adequate housing, and navigating parenting norms in a multicultural environment. Women often experience the dual burden of cultural expectations and systemic barriers, limiting their opportunities and well-being.

The study highlights the importance of accessible community-based services that promote cultural identity, provide practical support, and foster integration. It underscores the need for inclusive policies that address structural inequalities and build trust with refugee families.

Age	27 to 72 years
Sex	All Female
Place of Birth	All Afghanistan
Highest Educational Level	Varies from 'No Education' to 'Master Degrees'
Occupation	Housewife, Student, Care Worker, Unemployed, ACAA Employee, Driving Instructor
Religion	Islam (all respondents identified as Muslim)
Marital Status	Married, Divorced, Widowed, Single
Number of Children	Ranges from 0 to 5
Children's Ages	Varies widely, youngest is 18 months, oldest is 33 years
Years Lived in UK	Ranges from 2 to 23 years
Languages Spoken	Dari, Farsi, Urdu, Dutch, English, Turkic

METHODS

ACAA played a crucial role as a gatekeeper in facilitating this research. While the university provided the academic expertise, methodological rigour and funding to conduct the study, it was ACAA's established trust and rapport with the Afghan community that enabled meaningful engagement with participants. As an organisation deeply embedded within the community, ACAA provided a bridge between researchers and Afghan women, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and reassured about the purpose of the study. The women who took part were already service users of ACAA, which meant they were familiar with the organisation's support and readily embraced the study in which ACAA were a joint partner. Their existing relationship with ACAA fostered a sense of trust and confidence, encouraging and enabling women participants to be open and honest in sharing their experiences with the researchers. Without such community-based organisations acting as intermediaries, accessing and engaging with marginalised groups in a meaningful way would be significantly more challenging.

One of the researchers involved in this project, Sheekeba Nasimi, brought an insider-outsider perspective that enriched both the research process and analysis. As a woman of Afghan heritage who was born and educated in the UK, she occupied a dual positionality, both as someone with lived experience of the community and as a researcher with academic training and integration into British society. This insider-outsider dynamic, often discussed in methodological frameworks, allowed for a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of the data. As an insider, she was able to understand cultural references, unspoken assumptions, and the social norms shaping participants' narratives. At the same time, her outsider perspective gained through formal education and professional experience in the UK enabled her to critically engage with the material, drawing connections to broader social and policy contexts. This positionality supported the dynamics of the research by fostering trust with participants while also ensuring a level of analytical distance, allowing for both empathy and critical reflection in the interpretation of findings.

This qualitative study involved focus group discussions with women from Afghanistan. The women were recruited through the ACAA. The focus groups were held at ACAA offices. The languages spoken were both Farsi and English as one of the researchers is bi-lingual. Initially, there were six focus groups with a total of 50 women. The women were all mothers and aged between 28-52 years. The number of children they had ranged from 1-6 children. The majority were married with a few separated or divorced. The number of years that the women had lived in the UK ranged from 1 to 20 years.

Efforts to recruit fathers and offered groups that were single and mixed gender but were not successful. All three of the researchers are women and the participants appeared to feel comfortable participating in a women-only space, particularly as the discussions often touched on sensitive topics, including their relationships and family dynamics. A woman-only setting provided a safe and more open environment for them to share their thoughts and experiences candidly.

The Capability Approach framed our discussions about the women's hopes and aspirations, what hinders and what helps them achieve what they value for their children and themselves. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed, with the data thematically analysed drawing on the individual, family, community and wider societal conversion factors, as outlined in the Capability Approach.

Two further focus groups were held with a sub-sample of women who attended the initial focus groups. Initial themes from the analysis were discussed with attention to 'what helps' (positive conversion factors), prior to finalising the analysis and recommendations.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study highlight the diverse and complex experiences of Afghan women raising children in the UK. They emphasise the interplay between cultural adaptation, systemic barriers, and family dynamics, revealing both the challenges faced and the resilience demonstrated by Afghan families.

Parents described the difficulties of navigating parenting norms in a multicultural society while maintaining their cultural identity. They highlighted the pressure of balancing traditional Afghan values with the expectations of British society, often resulting in a "two-worlds" dynamic for their children. Many parents expressed concerns about their children's sense of belonging, the preservation of Afghan culture, and the challenges of addressing racism and Islamophobia within schools and wider society.

A key theme was the critical role of education. Parents placed great importance on their children's education as a pathway to integration and success but faced barriers such as language difficulties, delays in school placements, and limited access to resources like ESOL classes. Their children's experiences of bullying, often racially motivated, were also reported.

Mothers often bore a disproportionate burden, navigating parenting roles, systemic inequalities, and restrictive gender norms. They spoke of limited

support networks, stigma surrounding mental health, and challenges in accessing adequate housing or employment. Fathers' reported engagement in parenting varied, with traditional roles sometimes hindering their active involvement.

The findings also underscored the resilience and resourcefulness of Afghan families, who relied on community support and their cultural values to overcome adversity. Community-based services, such as the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA), were seen as a vital bridge between Afghan culture and British society, providing not only practical support but also a sense of belonging and cultural continuity. These insights underline the importance of culturally tailored policies and community-driven support systems to empower Afghan families and enable their successful integration into British society.

Five key themes that emerged from the analysis of the data were:

- Cultural identity and integration
- Parenting challenges in new environment
- Education and Aspirations
- Social support and community connections
- Systemic barriers and Resilience.





Cultural identity and integration

The narratives emphasised the complexity of maintaining Afghan cultural identity while integrating into British society. Parents described their efforts to instil cultural values in their children while navigating unfamiliar social norms. A recurring concern was the fear of losing cultural heritage and language, as children often gravitated towards British customs. Many participants highlighted the importance of supplementary schools and community organisations in reinforcing cultural identity. However, challenges such as Islamophobia and stereotyping created additional barriers, underscoring the need for inclusive environments that celebrate cultural diversity.

Parenting challenges in a new environment

Parents expressed the difficulties of adapting to new parenting expectations in the UK, especially when grappling with differing cultural norms. Language barriers, a lack of familiarity with the education system, and concerns about safeguarding laws often led to feelings of insecurity and isolation. Many mothers

highlighted their struggle to discipline children in ways that adhered to British societal standards, while fathers were reportedly often less engaged in parenting roles. The absence of extended family support, a cornerstone of Afghan parenting, compounded these challenges. Despite these obstacles, parents employed various strategies to foster open communication and build trust with their children, often learning through trial and error.

Education and Aspirations

Education emerged as a cornerstone of Afghan parents' hopes for their children. Parents viewed academic success as a means of securing stability and integration into British society. However, many faced barriers such as language difficulties, limited access to extracurricular resources, and the high cost of private tutoring. Participants also noted the gap between parental expectations and children's realities, with some children struggling under the pressure to excel in their academic studies. Despite these challenges, parents were deeply committed to supporting their children's education and ensuring they had access to opportunities that they themselves were often denied.

FINDINGS

Social support and community connections

Community networks were described as lifelines for Afghan families, offering both emotional and practical support. Participants praised organisations like the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA) for creating spaces where parents could share experiences and learn from one another. Religious and cultural events provided opportunities to maintain traditions and build a sense of belonging. However, the fear of judgement within the Afghan community often limited open discussions about challenges, particularly around mental health. The findings underscored the importance of culturally tailored support systems in fostering resilience and well-being.

Systemic barriers and resilience

Systemic issues such as inadequate housing, precarious employment, and restrictive immigration policies exacerbated the struggles of Afghan families. Many participants spoke of difficulties in accessing services due to language barriers and a lack of culturally sensitive support. Experiences of racism and Islamophobia further compounded these challenges. Despite these systemic barriers, Afghan families demonstrated remarkable resilience, drawing on cultural values and community support to navigate their circumstances. Participants called for greater understanding and tailored policies to address these entrenched inequalities.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Service Providers

The challenges faced by Afghan families living in the UK, as highlighted through this study, reveal ongoing impacts of systemic barriers and cultural integration struggles. To address these issues and foster resilience and well-being for Afghan children, young people, and their families, we propose the following recommendations:

- 1. Culturally appropriate parenting support**
Develop parenting workshops tailored to the unique cultural needs of Afghan families, with a focus on bridging generational cultural gaps between parents and children.
- 2. Improved access to education and resources**
Ensure affordable access to ESOL classes, extracurricular activities, and digital resources to support children's academic success and parents' ability to navigate the educational system.
- 3. Mental health services**
Provide accessible, stigma-free mental health services in native languages to address the psychological impacts of migration, trauma, and social isolation.
- 4. Community led programmes**
Strengthen funding and support for community-based organisations like ACAA to foster trust, provide practical assistance, and act as cultural mediators between Afghan families and wider societal systems.
- 5. Employment and housing support**
Implement policies to improve access to stable housing and fair employment opportunities, particularly for refugee and low-income families.
- 6. Safe spaces for youth**
Increase efforts to build trust between Afghan families and institutions such as schools, social services, and healthcare providers by addressing fears of judgement and ensuring culturally sensitive communication.
- 7. Building trust with public services**
Increase efforts to build trust between Afghan families and institutions such as schools, social services, and healthcare providers by addressing fears of judgement and ensuring culturally sensitive communication.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is needed to explore ways to help engage Afghan men more effectively. This study recommends the establishment of a men-only forum, and a dedicated research focus specifically on understanding the experiences of Afghan fathers.

This would provide a more comprehensive and integrated understanding of parenting experiences within the Afghan community and contribute to more inclusive and effective policy recommendations.



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Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the women participants from the Afghanistan and Central Asian Association (ACAA) who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights throughout this project. Their voices have been invaluable in shaping this work. Our gratitude also goes to Dr. Nooralhaq Nasimi MBE for his continuous support and dedication to empowering Afghan communities in the UK. His leadership within the ACAA has been instrumental in creating spaces where Afghan women can thrive. We further acknowledge the generous support of the Royal Holloway Civic University Fund, which made this project possible.





