

Construction of Masculinity and Domestic Violence Among Afghan Refugees: A Qualitative Study of Encamped Refugee Communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

Domestic violence among Afghan refugees in Pakistan remains substantially under-studied and inadequately addressed by existing humanitarian frameworks. This qualitative study investigates the socio-cultural construction of masculinity among Afghan refugee men and its relationship to the prevalence, forms, causes, and consequences of domestic violence within encamped refugee communities in District Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Guided by Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), complemented by Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity and feminist structural analysis of gender-based violence (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walby, 1990), the study draws upon 36 individual in-depth interviews with Afghan refugee women and men, 15 focus group discussions (~135 participants), and 10 key informant interviews with service provider professionals. Thematic analysis following the reflexive model of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) was employed. The findings demonstrate that masculinity is socially constructed around five interconnected roles — provider, protector, physically strong man, emotionally enduring man, and authoritative decision-maker — each of which is both culturally embedded and structurally disrupted by displacement, producing what the study conceptualises as a masculinity crisis. Domestic violence is documented as pervasive, normalised, and structurally embedded, encompassing physical, psychological, economic, and social forms, with its causes rooted in the intersection of patriarchal social structures, economic hardship, emotional suppression, and limited education and awareness. An intersectional analysis reveals that women's vulnerability is shaped not by gender alone but by the convergence of age, marital status, educational attainment, economic status, health, disability, physical appearance, and access to family and social networks. The study makes original contributions to the literature on refugee masculinities, gender-based violence in humanitarian settings, and the application of Intersectionality Theory to displaced communities, and carries significant implications for humanitarian policy and gender-transformative programming.

Keywords: masculinity; domestic violence; Afghan refugees; displacement; intersectionality; gender-based violence; Pakistan; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; qualitative research.

Introduction

Forced displacement generates profound disruptions not only to the material conditions of daily life but to the social, cultural, and psychological frameworks through which identity, family, and community are organised. Among the more than 110 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide in 2023 (UNHCR, 2023), Afghan refugees constitute one of the most numerous, geographically dispersed, and historically protracted populations — a consequence of four decades of unrelenting conflict, including the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989), successive waves of civil conflict, the post-2001 international military intervention, and the political transition of August 2021. Pakistan has hosted Afghan refugees for over forty years and, as of 2023, accommodates approximately

1.7 million registered Afghan refugees alongside a substantially larger undocumented population, the majority residing in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan (UNHCR, 2023).

Within this context of protracted displacement, gender-based violence (GBV) — and intimate partner violence in particular — constitutes a grave and pervasive humanitarian concern. International humanitarian research consistently demonstrates that displacement intensifies pre-existing gender inequalities, disrupts traditional social protection mechanisms, and generates conditions of heightened economic and psychological stress that elevate the risk of violence against women and girls (UNHCR, 2023; UN Women, 2023; Wirtz et al., 2022). Afghan refugee women in Pakistan face compounded vulnerabilities arising from the intersection of gender, displacement, poverty, legal insecurity, restricted mobility, and deeply entrenched patriarchal social structures.

Despite this, the relationship between masculinity and domestic violence within Afghan refugee communities in Pakistan remains substantially under-researched. Existing studies have tended to focus on the experiences of women as survivors of violence, without systematically investigating the constructions of masculine identity that produce and sustain violent behaviour or examining the structural conditions of displacement through which these constructions are reinforced and intensified. This gap is significant: domestic violence cannot be adequately understood, or effectively addressed, without examining how masculinity is socially constructed, how displacement disrupts and reconfigures masculine roles and identities, and how these dynamics interact with the structural conditions of encamped refugee life.

The present study addresses these gaps. It investigates the socio-cultural construction of masculinity among Afghan refugee men residing in encamped settings in District Haripur, KPK, Pakistan, and examines its relationship to the prevalence, forms, causes, and consequences of domestic violence within refugee households. Drawing upon the perspectives of both Afghan refugee women and men, alongside insights from service providers and sustained field observations, it provides an original, empirically grounded, and theoretically integrated account of how masculine identity is produced under conditions of displacement and how it is implicated in the dynamics of domestic violence. Four research questions organise the inquiry: (1) How is masculinity socially and culturally constructed among Afghan refugee men within the host community? (2) What are the prevalent forms of domestic violence experienced by Afghan refugee women in the context of displacement? (3) What factors contribute to the perpetration of domestic violence within Afghan refugee households? (4) How do constructs of masculinity influence the patterns and dynamics of domestic violence?

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Intersectionality Theory

The study is guided principally by Intersectionality Theory, originally formulated by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and subsequently elaborated by Collins (1990) and Collins and Bilge (2020). Intersectionality holds that social identities — including gender, race, class, age, disability, and refugee status — are not discrete categories but mutually constitutive dimensions of social experience that interact with structural systems of power to produce distinct and irreducible configurations of privilege and oppression. Applied to the present context, this directs analytical attention to how Afghan refugee women's vulnerability to domestic violence is produced not by gender alone but by the simultaneous operation of displacement, poverty, refugee status, cultural and religious norms, age, marital status, educational attainment, health status, and access to social support networks. Equally, it illuminates the paradoxical position of refugee men: simultaneously marginalised within the host society through economic exclusion and legal insecurity, whilst retaining domestic authority through culturally legitimised patriarchal gender norms.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Intersectionality Theory is complemented by Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which provides the conceptual vocabulary for analysing how masculine identities are socially constructed, culturally valorised, and hierarchically organised within gender orders. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant form of masculine practice in a given social context the idealised configuration of manhood that shapes the aspirations and behaviours of men even when they cannot fully conform to its demands. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) refined the theory to emphasise that hegemonic masculinity is historically variable, internally differentiated, and subject to ongoing contestation. In the Afghan refugee context, hegemonic masculine ideals centred on provision, protection, physical strength, emotional endurance, and authoritative leadership are both deeply internalised and structurally disrupted by displacement — generating a 'crisis of masculinity' with significant consequences for gender relations and domestic violence (Turner, 1999; Silberschmidt, 2001; Hassan et al., 2024).

Feminist Structural Analysis and Related Literature

The study further draws upon feminist structural analyses of gender-based violence, which understand domestic violence not as the product of individual pathology but as a mechanism through which unequal gender relations are reproduced within patriarchal social systems (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Walby, 1990). Research on refugee masculinities consistently demonstrates that forced displacement disrupts men expected social roles — particularly those of provider and protector — generating emotional distress, shame, and in some cases the reassertion of household authority through control and violence (Turner, 1999; Chynoweth et al., 2020; Gillespie et al., 2022). Studies of Afghan refugees in diverse host contexts document significant levels of intimate partner violence, with most cases remaining unreported due to fear, stigma, and the cultural framing of domestic matters as private (Ahmad et al., 2009; Hassan et al., 2024). The concept of compensatory masculinity — in which men reassert authority in private spaces when their public authority is undermined by structural disempowerment — is particularly relevant (Silberschmidt, 2001; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The Afghan cultural context introduces specific dimensions through the concept of *ghairat* (honour), which links masculine identity to the protection and control of family honour, positioning women's behaviour and social participation as direct expressions of male dignity (Khan, 2021; Kandiyoti, 1988). The practice of *parda* (female seclusion) and associated mobility restrictions represent a further dimension through which honour-based gender norms intersect with domestic violence (Freedman, 2016). Intersectional research demonstrates that vulnerability to GBV in refugee settings is shaped by the convergence of gender, displacement, poverty, age, marital status, and educational attainment (Guruge et al., 2017; Vu et al., 2020), whilst Social Learning Theory highlights the role of intergenerational transmission in the reproduction of violent behavioural norms (Bandura, 1977; Heise, 2011). Existing research has rarely examined both men's and women's perspectives within a single systematically designed study of domestic violence in an Afghan refugee context — a gap the present study addresses.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a social constructionist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology — a philosophical orientation appropriate for investigating the social meanings, experiences, and processes through which masculine identities are constructed and through which domestic violence is generated, sustained, and experienced within refugee households (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The multi-method approach encompassing individual in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and

researcher observation generated rich, triangulated data enabling cross-verification of findings across participant groups and data collection methods.

Study Area and Sampling

The study was conducted in District Haripur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — one of the principal areas of Afghan refugee settlement in Pakistan — across six settlement sites: Basomera Refugee Village, Padhana Refugee Village, Panian Refugee Village (Panian-1 and Panian-2), Camps 11, 12, and 20, and the Uzbek community camp. The researcher's sustained professional engagement with GBV prevention and response programmes in the area since 2018 provided the contextual knowledge, community relationships, and access necessary to conduct sensitive research with vulnerable populations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity across gender, educational background (literate and illiterate), and length of stay in Pakistan (0–20 years and 21–40 years). Data saturation — the point at which additional data collection yielded no new significant themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) — guided the decision to conclude data collection. Table 1 summarises participant distribution across methods.

Table 1. Overview of Research Participants and Data Collection Methods

Participant Category	Male	Female	Total	Method
Afghan Refugee Women	—	18	18	Individual in-depth interview
Afghan Refugee Men	18	—	18	Individual in-depth interview
Focus Group Discussions	5	10	15 FGDs (~135)	Single gender & mixed
Key Informants (NGOs/UNHCR)	5	5	10	Key informant interview
Total Participants	28	33	~181	Multi-method qualitative

Note. KII = Key Informant Interview. FGD participants include both single-gender and mixed-gender configurations. Key informants were drawn from UNHCR, CAR, SHARP-Pakistan, IMC, and IRC.

Data Collection

Individual in-depth interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended questions, prompts, and probes organised around the study's core thematic areas. Given strong cultural norms of gender segregation within the community, two trained female Afghan-speaking research assistants conducted all interviews and women-only FGDs with female participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and where necessary translated from Pashto and Dari into English. Fifteen FGDs (five women-only, five men-only, five mixed-gender) were conducted at between seven and eleven participants per group. Ten key informant interviews were conducted with professional staff from five service provider organisations engaged in GBV prevention and response. Researcher observation during field visits generated contextual data recorded in a field notebook throughout the data collection period.

Analytical Method

Thematic analysis, following the reflexive six-phase model of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), was employed as the primary analytical method. Approximately 280 initial codes were generated through systematic reading of the full data corpus (36 individual transcripts, 15 FGD transcripts, 10 key informant transcripts, and field notes), which were subsequently organised into candidate themes, reviewed iteratively against the data, and refined into the final thematic framework presented in this article. The analysis proceeded both deductively, in relation to the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and hegemonic masculinity, and inductively, in relation to dimensions of participant experience not anticipated by the theoretical frameworks. Trustworthiness was addressed through prolonged engagement, triangulation across methods and participant groups, member-checking, and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail and reflexive research journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the University of Peshawar Department of Sociology. Fully informed consent was obtained from all participants; consent was obtained verbally for illiterate participants. Participants were assured of strict confidentiality and anonymity; no identifying information is included in any research output. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, the team was prepared to pause or conclude any interview in which significant distress was evident, and where participant disclosures indicated serious risk of harm, established safeguarding protocols were followed in consultation with service provider partners.

Findings

The Socio-Cultural Construction of Masculinity

The findings demonstrate that masculinity among Afghan refugees in Pakistan is not a fixed or biologically given attribute but a socially produced and continuously reinforced identity, shaped through patriarchal norms, cultural values, religious frameworks, and community expectations. Five interconnected dimensions of masculine identity were consistently identified across both women's and men's accounts.

Men as Providers: Economic Identity and the Crisis of Displacement

Both male and female participants consistently described economic provision as the most foundational dimension of masculine identity. The ability to provide for the family was understood not merely as an economic function but as the primary marker of male dignity, social worth, and honour. This investment was embedded in the concept of *ghairat* — which links a man's social standing to his capacity to sustain and protect his family — and in Islamic frameworks through which many men described provision as a religious obligation (*fard*). An elder male participant explained: "A man who cannot feed his family has no face in front of others. *Ghairat* is tied to our ability to provide."

Displacement substantially disrupted men's capacity to fulfil this expectation. Legal restrictions on formal employment, inadequate documentation, unstable informal labour markets — dominated by daily wage labour, construction work, loading, and small-scale vending — and the chronic poverty of encamped refugee life collectively constrained economic participation. Men reported feelings of shame, frustration, and profound identity loss when unable to provide: 'I don't sleep at night. I think, what kind of father am I if I can't even buy shoes for my son?' This corresponds with Turner's (1999) foundational argument that displacement produces a masculinity crisis by disrupting breadwinner roles, and with more recent scholarship identifying the loss of the provider role as the most consistently reported source of masculine identity crisis among displaced men (Chynoweth et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2024).

Critically, this identity crisis had direct consequences for household safety. Women repeatedly described how men's unemployment and financial frustration generated anger and conflict at home, which in some cases manifested as verbal or physical violence: 'When I ask him for basic things like milk or food for the children, he gets angry and beats me and says I don't understand his struggles.' Men themselves acknowledged that feelings of humiliation and inadequacy sometimes affected their household behaviour (Abdullah, 2026).

Men as Protectors: Care, Honour, and the Ambivalence of Control

Both data sources identified the protector role as a central and socially valorised dimension of masculinity, encompassing physical safety, family honour, social reputation, and moral guardianship. Women largely described men's protective function positively. However, a critical finding is that protection is inseparably entangled with the surveillance and restriction of women's behaviour, mobility, and social interactions. Women reported consistently that men's protective actions translated into constraints on their movement, dress, employment, and interactions — justified as necessary for safeguarding family honour. A participant explained: 'If my wife ventures outside without informing me, individuals will mock me. I must maintain control for her safety; otherwise, my family name will be tarnished.' This conflation of protection with control reflects a broader pattern identified in gender and migration studies, where patriarchal protection functions as a mechanism for regulating women's autonomy (Freedman, 2016). Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the 'patriarchal bargain' helps explain why some women internalised and accepted these restrictions: the system simultaneously offered security and social legitimacy within a setting of precarious displacement.

Physical Strength: Social Capital, Survival, and the Normalisation of Aggression

Physical strength was consistently identified as a central marker of masculine identity — a resource with both instrumental and symbolic dimensions. Instrumentally, strength enabled engagement with the physically demanding informal labour constituting the primary livelihood strategy for refugee men. Symbolically, it conferred social authority and community legitimacy. Critically, however, social expectations of physical strength discouraged emotional expression, creating a structural disposition toward externalising distress through aggression. Women described recognising men's anger and shouting as culturally normalised expressions of masculine identity: 'Men were always told they had to be strong and never cry or show weakness. So, when they faced problems, they shouted or hit instead of talking.' This is consistent with global research identifying restrictive masculine norms emphasising toughness and emotional suppression as among the strongest attitudinal predictors of intimate partner violence (Jewkes et al., 2015; World Health Organization, 2021).

Emotional Endurance: Silent Suffering and Its Domestic Consequences

Emotional endurance — the expectation that men remain outwardly composed regardless of internal distress — was identified as a defining and socially enforced dimension of masculine identity. Men who expressed vulnerability were subjected to social ridicule: 'We are taught from childhood that a man should not show pain. Even when you are breaking inside, you stay silent.' Participants described what the literature identifies as 'emotional strain masculinity' (Erel et al., 2021): the accumulation of unresolved distress that surfaces as irritability, anger, and household conflict. A GBV caseworker from the International Medical Corps confirmed that emotional suppression among refugee men, combined with limited access to psychosocial support due to stigma, frequently manifests in controlling and violent behaviour within households. Displacement intensified these dynamics by fragmenting the kinship networks and communal dispute resolution structures that previously provided channels for emotional regulation.

Men as Leaders and Decision-Makers: Institutional Authority and Its Consequences

Both data sources confirmed that leadership and decision-making within Afghan refugee households and communities were overwhelmingly structured around male authority. Men controlled financial management, marriage arrangements, educational decisions, and the regulation of women's mobility and behaviour. At the community level, male dominance was institutionally reinforced through jirgas and shuras — traditional governance bodies in which men exclusively represent households and resolve disputes, with women structurally absent. An Assistant Director from the Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees observed: 'When we enter the community, our first point of contact is almost always male representatives, who speak on behalf of their families and often the wider community.' The concentration of authority in male hands contributed to women's systematic exclusion from decisions affecting their lives, generating feelings of dependency, invisibility, and diminished self-worth identified in the gender-based violence literature as key structural risk factors (Gillespie et al., 2022).

Prevalence, Causes, Forms, and Consequences of Domestic Violence

Prevalence and Normalisation

Women participants frequently described domestic violence not as an exceptional occurrence but as an ordinary and recurring feature of household life. An elder woman stated: 'It is rare to find a household in which the husband never shouts at or strikes his wife. Most of us encounter this every day.' This pervasive normalisation reflects deeply embedded patriarchal social structures in which male authority and female obedience are treated as moral necessities rather than power arrangements. A significant finding across both data chapters was the substantial gap between women's lived experience of violence and men's recognition of harmful behaviour as abuse: men consistently defined violence narrowly — limiting it to severe physical assault — whilst minimising or failing to recognise emotional, psychological, social, and economic forms of abuse. Controlling behaviours including shouting, restricting mobility, and monitoring social interactions were interpreted as legitimate aspects of masculine responsibility rather than as violations of rights.

This normalisation was sustained by a structural culture of silence in which domestic violence was treated as a private family matter. Fear of shame, social stigma, and community judgement discouraged disclosure. A GBV caseworker confirmed that many Afghan refugee women access support services covertly, repeatedly asking whether their husbands would be informed of their visits — demonstrating how surveillance and control extend beyond physical violence to shape women's help-seeking behaviour.

Causes of Domestic Violence

Participants across both data sets converged in identifying patriarchal social structure as the most fundamental driver of domestic violence. Within this system, men's authority is understood as culturally legitimate and socially necessary, with women expected to remain obedient and subordinate. The concept of *ghairat* legitimises a wide range of controlling and violent behaviours as expressions of masculine responsibility for family honour. Displacement intensified rather than weakened these dynamics: men reinforced household authority precisely as a means of preserving a masculine identity eroded in the public domain (Chynoweth et al., 2020; Hassan et al., 2024). Economic hardship constituted a further significant cause: men's inability to fulfil the provider role generated shame, inadequacy, and frustration that were frequently redirected onto wives within the household. Emotional suppression — in the context of limited socially acceptable emotional outlets — created accumulated distress externalised through anger and conflict. Limited education and awareness sustained patriarchal attitudes by preventing exposure to alternative

relational models, limiting men's interpersonal capacities, and reducing women's knowledge of their rights and available support (Abdullah, 2025).

Forms of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence manifested across four interconnected forms. Physical violence — including slapping, beating, and other forms of physical punishment — was among the most commonly reported and extensively normalised, frequently justified as 'discipline' rooted in masculine authority. A woman from Basomera described: 'He said it was to teach me respect and reminded me that, as the head of the household, he had the right to discipline me.' Psychological and emotional abuse — encompassing verbal insults, humiliation, threats, prolonged silence, and coercive control — was among the most pervasive yet least recognised, with many male participants failing to identify controlling behaviour as abusive. Economic violence — including denial of access to money, appropriation of women's earnings, prevention of employment, and denial of inheritance rights — was normalised as orderly family management. Women described having little control over household finances despite contributing through unpaid domestic labour and informal income-generating activities: 'Even when my children needed medicine, I had to beg my husband for money, and sometimes he refused or delayed it to show that everything depends on him.' Restricted mobility and curtailed public participation — enforced through requirements for male accompaniment, mandatory modest dress, and the prohibition of unsupervised public activity — functioned as pervasive forms of social violence. The phrase voiced across multiple sites encapsulated the underlying cultural logic: 'KHAZA YA DA KOR DAAW DA GOR' ('A woman belongs either to the home or to the grave').

Consequences of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence produced severe, multidimensional, and cumulative harm for Afghan refugee women. Physical consequences included immediate injuries (bruises, fractures, reproductive health complications, miscarriage attributable directly to assault) and chronic conditions (persistent pain, fatigue, disrupted sleep) compounded by male-controlled access to healthcare, financial constraint, and fear of social stigma. A health worker observed that women regularly presented with untreated fractures and advanced reproductive complications — conditions that had deteriorated significantly in the interval between injury and access to care.

Psychological consequences were described by many participants as more debilitating than physical injuries. Women described chronic fear, hypervigilance, anxiety, emotional numbness, identity loss, depression, and suicidal ideation consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman, 2015). A participant articulated the gradual erosion of selfhood: 'I don't recognise myself anymore. I used to laugh, I used to have dreams, but now I feel empty. He tells me I am useless every day, and now I believe him.' Social isolation — actively enforced through mobility restrictions and the severing of connections with family and community networks — both constituted a form of coercive control (Stark, 2007) and represented one of the most damaging consequences of violence, removing the protective mechanisms that might otherwise enable recovery and help-seeking.

Intersectional Factors Shaping Women's Differential Vulnerability

The study's third major finding concerns the differentiated and cumulative nature of women's vulnerability, shaped by multiple intersecting structural and biographical factors. Age and marital status functioned as socially constructed positions of power structuring exposure to violence. Younger women and those married early — separated from natal family support networks at the moment of greatest vulnerability — faced substantially elevated risk due to asymmetrical power relations and limited negotiation capacity. Women married at sixteen reported: 'I didn't know how

to stand up to him. Now we are refugees and I don't know anyone here who can help me. It feels like there is no way out.' Widowhood and divorce produced acute vulnerability through loss of male protection and intensified social stigma, whilst older women with sons experienced partial but by no means complete status elevation that shifted rather than eliminated abuse.

Educational attainment and economic status were deeply intertwined intersectional dimensions. Low education was linked to reduced rights awareness and limited help-seeking capacity, whilst economic dependency structurally constrained women's ability to challenge or exit abusive relationships: 'Even if he beats me, I cannot leave. I have children and no money. Where will I go?' However, the relationship was not straightforwardly protective: women who pursued education or income-generating activities sometimes experienced intensified backlash — increased control and psychological abuse from partners who perceived their empowerment as a challenge to masculine authority (Jewkes, 2002; Vyas & Watts, 2009).

Health status, disability, and physical appearance constituted further intersectional axes. Women with chronic illness or physical disabilities described intensified dependency, reduced autonomy, and increased exposure to emotional abuse and neglect. Socially constructed beauty norms — particularly those privileging fair skin — shaped women's treatment within households, with women regarded as less attractive more likely to face verbal ridicule and emotional neglect. A participant from Basomera described being repeatedly insulted and compared unfavourably to others on the basis of her skin tone — illustrating how colourism and aesthetic hierarchies translate into everyday emotional abuse (Wolf, 1991; Glenn, 2008).

Family support and social networks emerged as a critically ambivalent intersectional factor. The presence of supportive extended family members — particularly natal relatives, mothers-in-law, or trusted elders — provided informal protection and mediation. However, family networks in Afghan refugee communities frequently reinforced silence and endurance of abuse rather than providing protection, prioritising family honour and marital permanence over women's individual safety. Displacement significantly weakened these networks: 'In Afghanistan, my brothers and uncles were nearby and they would protect me if something went wrong. Now it is just me and my husband and he uses that against me.' The physical separation from natal kin removed a critical deterrent against violence and compounded the structural isolation that characterises encamped refugee life.

Discussion

The findings of this study advance understanding of the relationship between masculinity, displacement, and domestic violence in three analytically important ways.

First, the study provides empirical grounding for the concept of compensatory masculinity (Silberschmidt, 2001; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) within the specific Afghan refugee context in Pakistan. When structural conditions of displacement — unemployment, legal insecurity, restricted mobility — undermine men's capacity to fulfil the provider, protector, and leadership roles central to hegemonic Afghan masculinity, the domestic sphere becomes the primary site through which masculine authority is reasserted. The study demonstrates that this dynamic is not a straightforward expression of individual aggression but a socially produced response to the interaction of patriarchal gender norms with the structural conditions of encamped refugee life. This understanding has important implications for programme design: interventions that address only the individual or behavioural dimensions of domestic violence, without engaging the structural conditions of masculinity crisis produced by displacement, are unlikely to achieve sustained reduction in violence.

Second, the study enriches the existing literature on domestic violence in refugee settings by documenting the full range of abusive forms — physical, psychological, economic, and social — and demonstrating how each is embedded within and legitimised by specific constructions of

masculine authority and responsibility. The finding that economic violence and restricted mobility are extensively normalised as expressions of masculine care and protection — rather than recognised as forms of abuse — has significant implications for GBV identification, service provision, and community-level awareness programming. The substantial recognition gap between men's and women's accounts of what constitutes violence suggests that traditional GBV data collection methods relying on male community gatekeepers are likely to substantially underestimate the true prevalence of abuse.

Third, the intersectional analysis reveals that vulnerability is produced not by gender alone but by its interaction with displacement, poverty, age, marital status, educational attainment, economic status, health, disability, physical appearance, and social network access. This finding directly challenges single-axis analytical frameworks that treat refugee women as a homogeneous category of vulnerability. The backlash effect documented among women who pursued education or income-generating activities — in which empowerment triggered intensified rather than reduced control — is a particularly important caution for humanitarian programming: gender-transformative approaches must simultaneously address masculine norms and household power structures rather than pursuing women's empowerment in isolation from engagement with men (Kabeer, 2005; Gillespie et al., 2022).

Conclusions and Implications

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three principal theoretical contributions. First, it extends Intersectionality Theory into the under-examined context of encamped Afghan refugees in Pakistan, demonstrating how gender intersects with displacement, poverty, refugee status, and socio-cultural norms to produce differentiated forms of both masculine identity crisis and domestic violence — forms not captured by gender-only or structural-only analyses. Second, it contributes to the emerging literature on refugee masculinities by providing empirically grounded evidence from a substantially underrepresented population and by examining masculine identity from a dual-gender perspective, enabling a more complete analytical account than studies focusing on a single gender group. Third, it advances feminist structural analyses of GBV by situating domestic violence within the overlapping structural conditions of displacement, poverty, and patriarchal social organisation, demonstrating that violence in refugee households is structurally produced rather than individually determined.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings carry several concrete implications for humanitarian policy and GBV programming. Gender-transformative approaches that engage men in critically examining harmful masculine norms — including provider identity, emotional suppression, and honour-based constructions of authority — are urgently needed alongside survivor-centred protection services. Such programmes must address the structural conditions producing masculinity crisis — unemployment, economic exclusion, displacement stress — rather than treating these as background context. Livelihood support and skills development programming addressing refugee men's economic exclusion would reduce the material conditions driving both identity crisis and household violence. Psychosocial support services for men — culturally sensitive and designed to challenge the stigma surrounding emotional expression — are essential for interrupting the pathway from emotional suppression to household aggression. Education and gender awareness initiatives targeting both men and women are critical for transforming harmful gender norms and enabling recognition of non-physical forms of abuse. Service delivery models must account for the structural invisibility of domestic violence in this context: women-only outreach, mobile services, and confidential case management are essential for reaching survivors who cannot access

services through male community gatekeepers. Finally, any empowerment programming for women must be accompanied by simultaneous engagement with male partners and community-level gender norms, to mitigate the risk of backlash effects.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the findings are contextually specific to encamped Afghan refugees in District Haripur, KPK, and may not transfer directly to other refugee populations or host contexts. Second, the qualitative design, whilst enabling rich contextual insight, does not permit statistical generalisation. Third, the sensitive nature of the research topic may have introduced social desirability effects, particularly among male participants. Fourth, the study draws on cross-sectional data gathered at a single point in time and cannot capture change over time. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how gender norms evolve with duration of displacement; comparative designs to examine Afghan refugee communities across different host countries; and evaluate the effectiveness of gender-transformative interventions in Afghan refugee settings specifically. Greater attention to the perspectives and experiences of particularly marginalised subgroups — including widows, women with disabilities, and members of non-Pashtun Afghan ethnic communities — would further enrich the intersectional analysis.

This study investigated the construction of masculinity and domestic violence among Afghan refugees in one of the most protracted and under-addressed refugee situations in the world. The findings demonstrate that both the production of masculine identity and the perpetration of domestic violence are socially structured and structurally produced phenomena, shaped by the intersection of patriarchal gender norms with the specific conditions of encamped refugee displacement. Domestic violence cannot be addressed adequately within refugee communities through protection responses alone: it requires engagement with the social production of masculinity, the structural conditions of displacement that produce identity crisis, and the intersecting inequalities that shape women's differential vulnerability. These insights demand integrated, gender-transformative, and structurally responsive approaches from humanitarian actors, policymakers, and communities alike.

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