

## **“Iranians on one side, immigrants on the other!”: Socio-cultural constraints to sport participation amongst Afghan women migrants and refugees in Iran**

### **Abstract**

**In this article, we consider the sport experiences (as a form of active leisure) of Afghan women migrants and refugees who reside in Iran. In line with previous leisure constraint models, we theorised that constraints may impact current ‘leisure participants’; therefore, in this study, nine second-generation women were interviewed who were active in sport at the time of the data collection. The interviews aimed to explore the extent to which socio-cultural constraints to sport participation exist, with a particular focus on gender norms and how these may be constrictive to full access and enjoyment of sport spaces. A reflexive thematic analysis was used to create themes from the data set and three findings are presented here. Firstly, gender-based constraints largely deriving from family and culture are explored. Next, resource-based constraints of time and finances are outlined from a gendered perspective. Finally, racist and discriminatory behaviours from others demonstrate the intersectionality of gender and ‘race’, impacting women migrants’ and refugees’ sporting experiences. While sport has the potential to facilitate greater feelings of belonging amongst migrants and refugees, we argue that more needs to be done to consider the complex constraints impacting women, to ensure greater inclusion in sport spaces.**

**Key words:** Refugees; migrants; sport; **leisure constraints; Iran; Afghanistan**

## Introduction

In recent decades, Afghanistan has experienced humanitarian conflicts and ongoing political changes resulting in one of the largest displacements of Afghans in modern history (Mohammadi et al., 2020). Major social problems in Afghanistan emerged during the invasion of the country by the Soviet Union in 1979, resulting in a considerable flow of Afghan refugees to other countries, in particular Iran. While Iran's initial response was to adopt an open-door policy, from 1993 onwards, there was a shift in attitude towards Afghan nationals living in Iran. The Iranian administration became less accepting of Afghans, considering them as immigrants as opposed to religious migrants or refugees, removing their identity cards and providing them with temporary registration cards instead (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008). There was also a push towards repatriation, including deportation campaigns, reduction in services such as education, and creating employment restrictions (Siavoshi, 2022). Furthermore, with the Taliban regaining power in Afghanistan in August 2021, a new influx of Afghan refugees emerged, with various government estimates suggesting 500 thousand to one million Afghan nationals fled to Iran in this period (UNHCR, 2022).

Despite repatriation efforts, instability in Afghanistan has resulted in a relatively small number of Afghans desiring to return to their home country. Therefore, due to the long-term settlement of Afghans in Iran, their young age demographic, low age of marriage, and high fertility rates, there has been a shift in the composition of the population. This has resulted in the emergence of a high number of second-generation Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2014). There is no official definition of what it means to be 'second-generation'. However, past research has identified those born in Iran with at least one Afghan parent, or those who immigrated to Iran before the age of seven, as second-generation (Songhori et al., 2017). While these groups are not homogenous, they may have experiences that are unique to that of their parents or their counterparts in Afghanistan (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2014), including their experiences of assimilation and discrimination.

Studies on migrants and refugees in Iran have suggested a high prevalence of mental health symptoms and disorders, as well as low quality of life in relation to several factors, including socio-economic conditions, recreation, and leisure (Pour Ahmad et al., 2014). **Regarding the latter, sport can be a form of leisure, as - alongside other practices such as hobbies and social exercises – sport is often undertaken during free time (Murad & Versey, 2021; Shahzeidi et al., 2023). Sport may even be a form of social participation, whereby relationships with others are facilitated, important for support and engagement in the wider community (Murad & Versey, 2021).** In this regard, sport has been identified as a catalyst for change for migrants and refugees - including those who are second-generation - in a range of countries. For instance, it can be an important tool for increased wellbeing and wider friendships and support systems (Abur, 2016; Alemu et al., 2021; Harwood et al., 2021). **However, this is juxtaposed with ideas that sport environments can be exclusionary, resulting in a complex array of issues**

**which may constrain participation (Jeanes et al., 2015).** In other words, sport can be a platform for oppression, reflecting the wider culture (Abur, 2016; Harwood et al., 2021). **For instance, Jeanes et al., (2015) found practices engrained in mainstream Australian sport clubs can be exclusionary, such as intolerance towards migrants and refugees and coaches being ill-equipped to deal with diverse communities. Therefore, any benefits of sport are not guaranteed, and** ultimately it is argued to be a ‘double-edged sword’ which has the potential to both assist and oppress migrant and refugee communities (Harwood et al., 2021).

**In this paper, we therefore explore the sport participation (as a form of active leisure) of Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran, with a particular focus on second-generation women. This is important to respond to calls for more international perspectives in areas that have previously been Western-centric (Hurly, 2019).** In agreement with Nasr and Hosseini (2016), we argue that the long history of significant presence of Afghans in Iran, as well as the systemic discrimination they continue to experience, provides a strong rationale for studying their lived experiences. **We particularly focus on women, as to our knowledge, no research to date has explored Afghan women migrants’ or refugees’ sport experiences in Iran. However, similar research has suggested lower physical activity rates amongst this demographic compared to men (Ahmadi et al., 2020), demonstrating the gendered nature of related spaces (Hurly, 2019). This is supported by wider research - outside of the Iranian context - on women migrants and refugees in sport. These studies suggest women may face multi-dimensional difficulties to gain access to sport and physical activity, deriving from social stigma, gender stereotypes, cultural expectations and the enforcement of traditional gender roles including domestic and childcare responsibilities (Alemu et al., 2021; Harwood et al., 2021; Hurly, 2019).** We theorise that this also applies to Afghan women, who experience social traditions, gender-related stigma, and the gendered division of labour (Askari et al., 2019; Songhori et al., 2017). This may result in increased difficulties in reaching Afghan girls and women in sport programmes.

**Importantly, we argue that exploring this topic with current ‘leisure participants’ is vital, as leisure constraints can impact those already participating (Crawford et al., 1991). For instance, constraints may create limitations to full enjoyment or may restrict further involvement amongst active groups. This aligns with previous arguments that constraints are not always impenetrable; they can be surmounted or negotiated to a greater or lesser extent (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007). As an example, some women’s sport participation may be contingent on their ability to continuously overcome obstacles, such as discriminatory and unfavourable reactions from others. Therefore, our research particularly highlights constraints to achieving the full benefit of sport participation – as a form of leisure - amongst women who are currently engaged in these spaces.**

## **Conceptualising leisure constraints**

A variety of models have been developed to explain ways in which constraints operate in the leisure context. These may influence people's preferences for leisure, their engagement, the extent to which they can access new activities, and – **significantly to this study** - their experiences and enjoyment when they do participate (Tsai & Coleman, 2009). **A model of leisure constraints was originally devised by Crawford and Godbey (1987), aiming to better understand people's leisure preferences and participation through categorising constraints as intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. The model helped conceptualise constraints more broadly, moving away from simply exploring barriers to participation (Arab-Moghaddam et al, 2007). The model was later adapted to consider how these constraints are hierarchical (Crawford et al., 1991), and how constraints may need to be negotiated sequentially if leisure participation is desired (Jackson et al., 1993).**

**Importantly, as these conceptual perspectives became increasingly sophisticated, it was argued that constraints are more likely to result in modification of leisure participation to sustain involvement, rather than non-participation (Jackson et al., 1993). This is because individuals can negotiate many constraints to leisure, depending on their intensity. In other words, individuals can actively respond to constraints they encounter, participating in leisure in different ways compared to if the constraints were absent (Jackson et al., 1993).** For instance, Tsai and Coleman (1999) argue that being faced with a larger number of constraints does not always equate to decreased leisure time, as certain individuals are able to navigate constraints better than others. This is supported by **Butler and Dzikus (2015), who suggest constraints are not always obstacles and instead encountering and negotiating constraints can lead to greater motivation and enhanced participation in leisure. Therefore, constraints are not insurmountable or absolute (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).**

**The model is useful to consider how constraints operate beyond individualised factors and has been widely accepted and adopted by researchers (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007). However, not all groups experience leisure in the same way and using models centring upon western-centric principles may result in the leisure constraints of non-westerners being less understood and underrecognised.** This is important to address, as the meaning, role and importance of leisure can differ amongst varied cultures, and power relations between the dominant culture and diverse ethnic groups may impact constraints to leisure, as well as perceived constraints (Tsai & Coleman, 1999). **For example, recent research in both active and non-active leisure spaces has suggested migrants and refugees may face unique challenges to access leisure (such as lack of language familiarity, limited community support/mentoring, and discrimination) and may also experience similar constraints to the mainstream population but with increased intensity, including limited time, money and transport (Li & Stodolska, 2022; Shahzeidi et al., 2023).** It is therefore acknowledged that a wider range of leisure constraints may be apparent for those from migrant and refugee backgrounds, due to their experiences of discrimination, the negotiation of cultural differences, and their minority status in a dominant culture (Tsai & Coleman, 1999). Based on this, Tsai and Coleman (1999) created a model of six constraint factors to leisure, which can be applied to diverse groups. These include socio-cultural constraints (incorporating gender-based stereotypes, racism and lack of acceptance of multi-culturalism); interpersonal reasons (including having no one to participate with); access

(including being unsure on leisure options, lack of provision and transport); affective (leisure opportunities not considered as meaningful); physiological (including health and injury); and resource-based constraints (such as lack of money and time).

**In this paper, we utilise aspects of leisure constraints theories – specifically the idea that constraints may result in the modification of leisure activities as opposed to the complete absence of participation – with a particular focus on the socio-cultural constraints to leisure as outlined by Tsai and Coleman (1999). We do this to ensure the role of culture and gender are made explicit, as women are more likely to face constraints to leisure compared to men (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007) and unique patterns of leisure constraints may be apparent when considering cultural and ethnic diversity (Tsai & Coleman, 1999). However, we also bear in mind that categories of leisure constraints can overlap and interact, with criticisms associated with attempting to create distinct categories (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Tsai & Coleman, 1999).**

While much previous research has used leisure constraints theories to explore the experiences of non-western migrants and refugees in western societies, we use it to consider the sport experiences (as a form of active leisure) of Afghan women in another non-western country, Iran. To our knowledge, this is the first paper to address this topic; in a critical review of 83 articles published between 1996 and 2019 on sport, physical activity, and refugee populations, only five studies were situated in the Global South, and none took place in Iran (Spaij et al., 2019). **This aligns with recent arguments by Shahzeidi et al., (2023), who suggest that while academic interest in the leisure experiences of migrants and refugees has increased, studies have mainly focussed on integration into Western societies.** This gap in literature in the Global South is more substantial when considering the experiences of *women* migrants and refugees. We therefore argue that a gendered perspective is an important addition to the current body of research. In this regard, our research questions are as follows:

- 1. To what extent do socio-cultural based constraints exist for Afghan women migrants and refugees to engage in sport?**
- 2. How are established gender norms constrictive to Afghan women's access to and enjoyment of sport environments?**
- 3. Are women able to effectively negotiate socio-cultural based constraints to fully participate in - and enjoy – sport spaces?**

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants and setting***

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds can be silenced and marginalised (Harwood et al., 2021). Research gives them a voice, and qualitative research is crucial for understanding refugees' and migrants' views since it enables them to fully communicate their experiences (Korac, 2003). This study's data derived from individual interviews with a total of nine second-generation Afghan women living in Iran. **While we had aimed to interview twelve to fifteen women, obtaining a larger sample for this research proved challenging. This aligns with**

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), who suggest researching culturally diverse people can be labour-intensive, often resulting in smaller sample sizes. Anecdotally, we believe this challenge partly arose due to many Afghan people’s experiences of discrimination, well-documented in past research, and which often leads to high levels of distrust amongst Afghans towards Iranian people and their government (Farahani et al., 2023). To expand, the interviewers in this study are Iranian, and while they took steps to build rapport and trust with the intended sample, some women did not want to engage with the data collection. Under ethical obligations, we fully respected potential participants’ rights to decline or withdraw from the research. Nevertheless, while nine is a relatively small sample size, qualitative research tends to aim for an in-depth understanding of human experience within a specific topic area (Carminati, 2018). Although generalisability of findings can be possible in qualitative research, it was not an aim within this exploratory study, and our goal was to instead provide a more thorough exploration of the nine women’s circumstances and the meanings they attach to their situations and cultural contexts.

To obtain the sample, convenience and snowball sampling methods were used. Firstly, a gatekeeper (from an informal group based in Iran who organise sport competitions for Afghan migrants and refugees) was used to gain contact with the first two participants, who then went on to recommend a further two interviewees. One of the research team also had contact with an Afghan woman in Iran who was active in sport, who agreed to be interviewed and went on to recommend the final participants. All interviewees were between 19 to 35 years old and were involved in sport at the time of the interviews. In total, six of them were born in Iran, while three had immigrated to Iran at an early age. While the nine participants had several commonalities including their status as second-generation migrants and their sporting experiences, there was some sample variety regarding age and religious background. Table 1 includes an overview of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of research participants

Pseudonym	Age	Place of Birth	Duration of Time in Iran	Religion	Ethnicity	Sport Experiences
Soheila	26	Iran	Since birth	Islam - Shia	Hazara	14 years as an athlete and coach - kickboxing
Fatemeh	35	Iran	Since birth	Islam - Shia	Hazara	15 years as an athlete and coach - karate and kickboxing
Helia	24	Iran	Since birth	Islam – Sunni	Non– Hazara	15 years as an athlete and coach - kung fu
Sedigheh	29	Afghanistan	23 years	Islam – Sunni	Pashtun -Tajik	15 years as an athlete and coach - football and futsal
Goli	24	Afghanistan	17 years	Islam - Shia	Sadat	3 years as an athlete - futsal and handball

Nadia	19	Afghanistan	14 years	Islam - Shia	Pashtun	7 years as an athlete - gymnastics, kabaddi and handball
Leila	24	Iran	Since birth	Islam - Shia	Hazara	12 years as an athlete - handball
Neda	21	Iran	Since birth	Islam - Shia	Sadat	11 years as an athlete - futsal and handball
Hanieh	23	Iran	Since birth	Islam - Shia	Hazara	7 years as an athlete – taekwondo, futsal and football

### ***Data collection***

Interviews took place between October 2021 and October 2022 and were conducted in Persian. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit the participants' lived experiences of sport as a form of leisure, and participants were asked to draw upon their experiences from their time spent in Iran. All interviews were conducted by phone and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes each. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were chosen so all participants could elaborate on their experiences. The semi-structured approach proved effective for exploring complicated human perceptions and views, as the researchers consistently used probing and follow-up questions to ensure richness of data.

Several ethical issues were considered. Firstly, the research gained ethical approval from (*university anonymised*). Before conducting the interviews, participants were provided with a project information sheet to acquaint them with the purpose of the study. Participant withdrawal could take place during the interviews or afterwards throughout the data processing stage, up to a certain date where this would no longer be possible. All participants were asked at the beginning of each interview if they had any questions about the study and for their verbal consent. To ensure anonymity, the research team removed the participants' names and other identifiable information, instead using pseudonyms.

### ***Data analysis***

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. It emphasises the importance of the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource, and their reflexive engagement with theory, data and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). To analyse the data, all interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed in Persian and then translated to English by one of the research team. Subsequently, the computer software program *NVivo* was used to assist with the **coding, facilitating the organisation of themes into different 'nodes'**. The analysis was conducted collaboratively by two members of the research team. **In line with reflexive thematic analysis**

there was no expectation that the themes created by one researcher would be reproduced by the other (Byrne, 2022). Indeed, creating ‘accurate’ and ‘reliable’ codes, or creating a consensus, was not the aim. Instead, the use of two researchers during this process was to explore multiple rich interpretations of the data, using a reflexive approach (Byrne, 2022).

To conduct the analysis, we followed the six-phase process from Braun and Clarke (2006) including: 1) data familiarisation; 2) data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report. A deductive approach was utilised, using ideas from leisure constraints theories - in particular socio-cultural constraints - to create themes from the dataset. **To expand, we started the process with ideas from these theories and used the associated concepts to consider relevant codes. To provide an example, some of our initial codes included ‘family support’, ‘perceived incompatibility women and sport’ and ‘impact of socialisation processes on women’s sport participation’. These names were later revised and condensed, before being grouped into the broader theme of ‘socio cultural constraints – gender norms’. After some refinement and integration to eliminate codes which were initially considered ‘miscellaneous’, five themes were developed from the data set, with several more specific codes integrated into each of these. Importantly, a latent approach was used, ensuring the underlying assumptions and ideas of the themes were considered, using researcher subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006).**

As reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges the researchers’ active role in producing knowledge, a positionality statement is important. The research team consists of two academics based in the United Kingdom (one British and one Iranian), as well as three Iranian academics based in Iran. All the research team are actively supportive of inclusion and diversity – in sport and more widely – but hold different ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions in relation to the sample, for instance regarding gender, sport participation, and lived experiences as refugees/migrants. According to Holmes (2020), both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions have strengths and limitations. As a research team, we believe we used our diversities as a strength, as our differing life experiences allowed us to approach the data reflexively, offering a richer and more nuanced interpretation of the data. Ultimately, our diverse backgrounds led us to the decision to include two researchers in the data analysis process, as opposed to a single researcher coding independently. We also acknowledge – and embrace – that our own (theoretical) backgrounds and life experiences will have influenced **the created themes**. In the next section, the findings and discussion around the lived experiences of Afghan women from migrant and refugee backgrounds who have settled in Iran are explored, using three of the themes developed from the data analysis.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***Gender norms as socio-cultural constraints to sport participation***

**While all interviewees considered their sport participation as a form of leisure – something they used to manage stress, anxiety, and form networks in their free time – many factors**



**influenced their ability to fully engage and enjoy in these spaces.** The most common theme across the interviews was the centrality of gender norms, stereotypes and myths on the participants' initial entry to sport, and the extent to which these cultural perceptions have influenced their continued access and enjoyment of these spaces. **In other words, gender-specific experiences were outlined, deriving from oppression within family and society (Shahzeidi, 2023).** For instance, Fatemeh (karate and kickboxing) claimed 'family authorisation is essential and necessary for women... the father's authorisation must be issued'. In one instance across the interviews, some familial support was apparent from the outset, with Helia explaining her father's strong encouragement to participate in kung fu:

'My dad always asked us about moves, after the gym, and wanted us to perform them. He would deeply get upset if we hadn't performed them correctly. He told us that despite others who don't encourage their kids to work out, he would do so' (Helia, kung fu)

However, Helia's case was unique, and this support was not apparent from her extended family, as she stated: 'Our uncles complained, why had he permitted us to work out? Girls doing sport is nonsense'. This experience was commonplace amongst the remaining interviewees, who outlined several instances of familial resistance, often due to perceptions around cultural (in)appropriateness. Demonstrating similarities to Helia's extended family's views, Nadia stated:

'The one who disagreed was my dad. He used to say, "it is not appropriate for a girl to go outdoors or work out! What's the use of her?" My uncles also repeated the same' (Nadia, gymnastics, kabaddi and handball)

Due to the patriarchal nature of the family in many Afghan communities, women's lives may be scrutinised, with strict social restrictions often implemented (Askari et al., 2019). Thus, women may be expected to adhere to traditional gendered norms which are not perceived to align with sport participation; it is suggested acting against social norms may even bring disrepute to families (Askari et al., 2019). While the participants in this study had been able to navigate these restrictions and were all active in various sports, the data revealed this had not always been a straightforward process, with several instances of family disapproval. When asked to elaborate on this, Goli outlined that Afghan communities prioritise women getting married, something recognised as incompatible with sport and exercise:

'They always insist that I get married. I reply, "so if I find a nice guy, I would, I wouldn't hesitate!" Then they reply that it is because I work out, I am socialised and open-minded, and I will never get married! They believe that if I were always at home and didn't go anywhere, I would have been married so far!' (Goli, futsal and handball)

According to Askari et al. (2019), marriage is a traditional custom and of high social value to Afghan women, while social stigma may derive from late marriage. Thus, it is more common for women to marry early, which is a sign of honour for Afghan women's families. This has previously

been emphasised by Lipson and Miller (1994) who suggest maintaining modesty and marrying young is of key importance to Afghan women, while being single may be considered 'unnatural'. As sport participation can be regarded as contradictory to this goal, this resulted in a significant constraint for the women in this study.

While sport is widely perceived as inappropriate for women overall, certain activities associated with traditional masculinities may be considered particularly problematic. For instance, Sedigheh (football and futsal) explained 'the traditional beliefs express that girls must not work out, especially soccer. Soccer seems like a boyish game to them!' While football (or soccer) may be perceived as an activity appropriate to boys and men, Helia (kung fu) outlined how 'our friends and our classmates were attending classes such as sewing, hairdressing. These classes are very popular among girls!' Thus, traditional ideas around appropriate masculinities and femininities are apparent through socialisation processes, with men potentially encouraged into more active forms of leisure such as sport, and women into more sedentary leisure activities. According to the interviewees, safety also plays a role, with concerns around risks to women. For example, Hanieh explained:

'For instance, my aunt would talk to my mother when she dropped in saying "your daughter needs to be very cautious doing taekwondo! Otherwise, she may get hurt!" Frankly speaking, the issue is my virginity! My aunt used to tell my mother what if something happens, her future life will be problematic, my family and the whole relatives' reputation would be lost!' (Hanieh, taekwondo, football and futsal)

The gendered nature of perceived risk is evident here. Specifically, it may be believed that girls and women are at risk of losing their virginity through sport participation, including myths this can occur through the tearing of the hymen (Hohmann et al., 2021). In some South Asian countries retaining virginity before marriage is culturally important, which may consequently lead to girls and women being discouraged from sport (Nanayakkara, 2012).

It is important to note there are a wide range of constraints to sport participation in Iran for women more broadly, outside of the migrant and refugee context. For instance, socio-cultural stereotypes are also apparent for Iranian women, deriving from family and school experiences, and the patriarchal dominance of the country means women's sport may not be prioritised to the same extent as men's (Saadatfard et al., 2019). However, scholars have noted that Afghan women have better access to a gender-equitable environment in Iran compared to Afghanistan (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2014). For instance, Molnar et al. (2019) suggest Afghan women in Iran may have dedicated spaces for women's sport and physical activity, including women coaches and referees, leading to higher rates of participation. Despite opportunities for greater participation in sport in Iran, our data suggests that these Afghan women still face socio-cultural restrictions here, mainly deriving from gender norms and stereotypes from families and communities. This also highlights the unique experiences of second-generation Afghan migrants and refugees in Iran, whose values and aspirations can be different from that of their parents and counterparts in Afghanistan, due to being raised in more liberal environments (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2014). For women in our study who resist traditional norms, this has the potential to create 'culture conflict', due to their

disinterest with living in the confines of their Afghan culture (Songhori et al., 2017). **Considering Tsai and Coleman's (1999) model, socio-cultural constraints are clearly apparent with gender being a key constraining factor. Importantly, while the women had been able to navigate these constraints - to a greater or lesser extent – to enable their participation, the leisure lives of these women were still scrutinised by their families, with many women dismissing traditional beliefs and societal ideas about 'appropriate' leisure.**

### *Gender as a constraint factor impacting time and financial resources*

**While time and financial constraints may initially be considered as resource-based under Tsai and Coleman's (1999) model, in line with Arab-Moghaddam et al., (2007) we argue that leisure constraints can overlap and cannot always be placed into distinct, separate categories. Therefore, in this section we explore how time and financial constraints discussed by the interviewees are socio-cultural and gendered in nature.** Sedigheh firstly outlined how family size can impact finances, with leisure least likely to be prioritised compared to what may be deemed as more important expenses:

‘Afghan families are large. They are all populated, so the expenses are too exorbitant! It means that they can afford groceries, rent and the like, but they can't really spend on sports’ (Sedigheh, football and futsal)

While Sedigheh initially provided a more neutral account of financial constraints, based on large families where sport may not be a financial priority, other interviewees further critiqued the gendered nature of these constraints. For example, it has been noted previously that Afghans living in Iran often have restricted employment opportunities resulting in a lack of economic capital and marginalisation from their wider communities (Sadeghi & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2016). For Afghan women, these employment restrictions may be even greater, leading to women's economic dependence on their families. For instance, Nadia (gymnastics, kabaddi and handball) argued ‘we (*women*) are not allowed to have an occupation in various fields...Afghan boys work in construction sites and girls work as tailors’ and Fatemeh reiterated:

‘Legally, I don't have the right to work, unless it is in line with various occupations defined for women. The Ministry of Labour says there are twelve or thirteen jobs we can do, like spinning and sewing...Most women are economically dependent on their families, most Afghan families are living under the poverty line, meaning there is not a budget for sports! However, if there is, they mostly spend it for men and their sons’ (Fatemeh, karate and kickboxing)

**While governmental employment restrictions were most discussed, some interviewees outlined how cultural factors and gender norms deriving from family and wider society also**

**dictate that male family members should be the only ones who work, creating further economic dependency for women:**

**‘Well, men must make a living and go to work, they labour and make money to pay out for a field, pay a fee or whatever! On the contrary, especially in our Afghan community, which is traditional in its thoughts, as daughters of the family, we are not allowed to work and to be independent’ (Sedigheh, football and futsal)**

**While finances were one element of the constraints discussed, time was also outlined as a gendered phenomenon, with Leila (handball) stating ‘my mother believed that house chores are girls’ responsibility and boys can do sports!’. In line with past research, domestic responsibilities can therefore be barriers to leisure for women in particular (Murad & Versey, 2021). Neda (futsal and handball) discussed how she was able to negotiate this constraint, stating ‘when we got out of school, we took our jogging suit to go straight to gym afterwards having no food’. She later discussed how the ability to share household responsibilities with others assisted her leisure life:**

**‘Because there were three of us sisters, we could share the responsibilities when we arrived home, so everything was done in a blink. However, my cousin who was an only daughter, and always had trouble doing chores alone due to being exhausted, consequently her mother nagged. Her mother told ours “If they take her once more, there will be a quarrel between the two of us as mothers!”’ (Neda, futsal and handball)**

**For Neda (futsal and handball), the combined restrictions of (gendered) time and finances had a severe impact on her leisure experiences:**

**‘Generally, there are larger obstacles for girls, so my condition is more severe. This has been a period that my father can’t work due to his illness, so there is no supporter for me. I am an Afghan girl living in a country where I’m not permitted to do many things, yet. Our occupation situation has not been considered well, so we are not able to find an appropriate job. At present, I am the only daughter at home who needs to look after her father, because all my sisters are married. I need to work, go to the gym, and do plenty of other things. So, my situation is extremely harsh now!’**

Here, it is evident women have fragmented leisure time and inequalities in comparison to their male counterparts (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007). With Tsai and Coleman’s (1999) model in mind, while money and time may be resource-based constraints, it is evident resources can be determined by socio-cultural gender norms. This is firstly evident through Iran’s employment restrictions for Afghan women, and secondly through the prioritisation of men and boys’ leisure lives in some Afghan families and cultures where both time and economic capital may be limited. This aligns with research on restrictions faced by South Asian women more broadly (Nanayakkara,

2012), whereby men may be valued as economic assets, and through traditional and cultural practices, women's access to sport is restricted.

### ***'Race' and racism as socio-cultural constraints***

While gender-based socio-cultural constraints were the most discussed by interviewees, racial discrimination also arose as a common theme. This impacted the women's feelings of belonging in their respective sport clubs and gyms and demonstrates intersectionality of lived experience. In other words, various components of an individual should be considered in multidimensional ways, acknowledging how they inter-relate to create a person's identity and influence experience (Burr, 2015). While sexism was one factor, racist attitudes were also commonplace and largely apparent from sport competition organisers, coaches, teammates, spectators, and leisure providers. These behaviours were often explicit and resulted in marginalisation and segregation amongst Afghan women migrants and refugees. For instance, Helia, Goli and Soheila explained:

'I remember when my sister didn't feel well so she couldn't attend the game, her opponent asked her reason for absence saying, "why hasn't Maryam come?" I replied, "she is sick and won't come". I was watching her stepping away she said, "thank God that savage Afghan is not here to hit me"' (Helia, kung fu)

'I recall the time that we exercised for some time, during the period which Iranian athletes attended the practice along with us. They would say, "Iranians on one side, immigrants on the other!"' (Goli, futsal and handball)

'Once my pupils and I went to a swimming pool. As we arrived there, the guard asked about our nationality. One of my pupils replied "Afghans". The security called the manager to ask for permission, saying "Afghans are here to enter the pool". The manager replied "No, Afghans are filthy, they are not allowed". I had nothing to say. I turned back saying that's a shame. Then we left!' (Soheila, kickboxing)

This highlights the minority status of many of the interviewees, aligning with past research whereby discrimination and fear of exclusion can prevent the formation of meaningful relationships amongst migrants and refugees, as well as integration into the wider community (Murad and Versey, 2021). In particular, the phrase 'Afghani' was recognised as a racist term used towards Afghan people. Hanieh discussed how the phrase had been used by spectators as well as coaches:

'The coach as well as Iranian players would quickly attack an Afghan player who made a mistake expressing "why did you destroy the shot Afghani?" ...Even the time when parents came to spectate our game, they would ask their kids where we are from. "Afghani?"' (Hanieh, taekwondo, futsal and football)

Discriminatory attitudes may in part derive from the Iranian administration's reduction in acceptance and push towards repatriation of Afghan migrants and refugees, previously outlined in the introduction section of this paper (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008; Siavoshi, 2022). As noted in past research (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2014), the potential for migrants and refugees to integrate and be included in their host country is also influenced by social structures and government policies and regulations, which may impact attitudes at a local level. The quotes also demonstrate similarities to previous studies, where it has been noted that sport is not always a tool for positive change for migrants and refugees. Indeed, sport can be a platform for racism and oppression, and to reinforce existing power structures between migrants/refugees and their country of residence (Abur, 2016; Alemu et al., 2021; Harwood et al., 2021).

Similarities can also be seen in research outside of the leisure context. For instance, Songhori et al. (2017) have demonstrated how adolescent Afghan refugees in Iran experience inequitable behaviours from Iranians, stereotypical representations, and racist ideas about ethnic superiority amongst Iranian nationals. Similarly, Sadeghi-Fasaei and Nazari (2017) have shown that Afghan adolescents can be humiliated, disrespected, and injured in their encounters with Iranians, causing an unwillingness to establish relationships, and a reduction in societal opportunities. Reduced discrimination and increased friendship may, however, be the case for those without an obvious Afghan accent (Songhori et al., 2017) as well as those with a non-Hazara face (Sadeghi-Fasaei & Nazari, 2017), due to being less distinguishable. To elaborate, according to Abbasi-Shavazi et al. (2008), Hazara Afghans are distinguished from Iranians due to their Central Asian phenotype, whereas Tajiks tend to have a Southern European phenotype and their facial appearance tends to be more alike to those from Iran. In our study, Fatemeh outlined:

‘When I arrive at a community, merely for my appearance, which is an oriental face with almond eyes, behaviours would be altered toward me, voices and tones would be changed talking to me, or even feeling of sadness about my situation would appear, which all are so irritating for me leading me not to involve myself in such communities’ (Fatemeh, karate and kickboxing)

**Therefore, ‘visible signs’ may increase discriminatory practices (Murad & Versey, 2021),** and while Fatemeh was easily identifiable as Afghan, Sedigheh was often assumed to be Iranian. This resulted in more positive sport experiences:

‘To be honest, I haven’t really encountered racism issues. Maybe there is another reason. In different situations, people don’t recognise me as an Afghan because I look Iranian in my appearance and accent. When I reveal my Afghan nationality, others don’t believe it!’ (Sedigheh, football and futsal)

The above data demonstrates the lack of acceptance of multi-culturalism which can result in a decreased sense of belonging for *some* Afghan migrants and refugees living in Iran. Furthermore, this shows that second generation Afghan migrants and refugees are not homogenous, and the type and extent of socio-cultural constraints to sport may depend on the extent to which an individual’s

nationality is explicit. In other words, Hazara migrants and refugees may report greater levels of negative experiences in contrast to others (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2014). Finally, some participants outlined that discriminatory attitudes may also arise from Afghan spectators, with Nadia stating:

‘Recently, we participated in a match located in Afghanistan, spectators there screamed our names and said, “they are Iranians!” They didn’t admit that we were Afghans. In a nutshell, we have no fans in Iran nor in Afghanistan, no one accepts us!’ (Nadia, gymnastics, kabaddi and handball)

While migrants and refugees’ host countries may be reluctant to accept them, similar discrimination may arise from home nations, impacting their sense of identity and extending the ‘culture conflict’ outlined earlier in this paper. Overall, instances of racism result in increased hostility in the sport context (Alemu et al., 2021), demonstrating a further socio-cultural constraint to leisure participation for these women (Tsai & Coleman, 1999).

## Conclusion

**Utilising models of leisure constraints, our study identified several socio-cultural constraints to sport participation – as a form of active leisure -** for Afghan women migrants and refugees residing in Iran. These predominantly included gender-based constraints including restrictions from families and culturally derived gender stereotypes. Aligning with Shahzeidi (2023), when women are disadvantaged regarding social power, this can negatively impact their experiences of leisure. Our research suggests many **women in this study** were expected to adhere to traditional gender norms, which had the potential to lead to more inactive lifestyles. **Despite this, women in this research were able to navigate and negotiate these constraints to enable their continued participation in sport, albeit with largely unfavourable reactions from many of their families. While restrictions on time and money may initially be considered as resource-based constraints (Tsai & Coleman, 1999), these were also arguably socio-cultural and gendered factors.** For instance, money can be a considerable constraint due to employment restrictions; limited jobs are available for Afghan women, leading them to be economically dependent on their families, who may prioritise men and boys’ sport participation. Time is also a resource-based constraint for Afghan women, who may be expected to take responsibility for the vast majority of household responsibilities. Socio-cultural constraints were also evident through discriminatory and racist attitudes and behaviours, demonstrating the lack of acceptance of the Afghan community in Iran, including those who are second-generation. In some cases, women migrants and refugees may also be marginalised by their country of origin, impacting their sense of identity and creating ‘culture conflict’.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, a relatively small number of nine participants were interviewed, **which was previously justified in the methodology section of this paper. Therefore, we do not claim that the findings are generalisable, and instead they provide a more in-depth exploration of the experiences of a small number of women. As**

**previously noted**, a perceived lack of trust from some Afghan interviewees towards the Iranian researchers resulted in a small number of unsuccessful interviews. This was later counteracted by taking more time to build up rapport with the participants and using the snowball sampling method. To expand, as potential interviewees were recommended by others in their friendship network, this resulted in increased reassurance prior to the interviews. Future researchers may need to further consider these factors, including (real and perceived) power imbalances between interviewers and interviewees. Despite its advantages in this study, the snowball sampling method **can lead to obtaining a relatively homogenous sample with similar experiences, a potential disadvantage in some research. This once again highlights that caution should be exercised if attempts are made to form general and broad statements about Afghan women migrants and refugees based on this data, which was not the aim of this research.** Finally, while it was advantageous to interview active sport participants to meet the research aims of this study, future research may also aim to target Afghan women migrants and refugees who are inactive, to consider if a wider variety of constraints are evident.

Despite the limitations, there are several implications to our research. Sport has the *potential* to be a space to facilitate greater feelings of belonging for migrants and refugees, leading to increased friendship and support networks (Oftadeh-Moghadam, 2022). While all the interviewees in our study were participants in sport, a multitude of constraints were evident, making their participation more complex and, at times, creating negative experiences. Thus, further training may be targeted towards coaches and sport teams to better understand and accept diversity, leading to more inclusive sport environments. Zero tolerance policies towards discrimination and racism should also be implemented, with clear reporting procedures and meaningful actions implemented. Further opportunities and training for Afghan women to work in sport coaching roles may also be advantageous, as coaches may act as role models for younger Afghan girls to inspire them to be more active. While driving cultural change in societies can be complex, more Afghan women role models may assist in mitigating some of the gender-based constraints deriving from family and upbringing. It is also important to note that the constraints evident are reflective of the wider societal context; in other words, government policies (including employment restrictions) and negative attitudes towards migrants and refugees more broadly are mirrored in the sport environment. Therefore, changes in policy more widely may positively impact attitudes towards Afghan migrants and refugees in sport.

## References

- Abbasi-Shavazi, M., Glazebrook, D., Jamshidiha, G., Mahmoudian, H., & Sadeghi, R. (2008). *Second generation Afghans in Iran: Integration, identity and return*. Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Abbasi-Shavazi, M., & Sadeghi, R. (2014). Socio-cultural adaptations of second-generation Afghans in Iran. *International Migration*, 53(6), 89-110.



- Abur, W. B. D. (2016). Benefits of participation in sport for people from refugee backgrounds: A study of the South Sudanese community in Melbourne, Australia. *Issues in Scientific Research*, 1(2), 10-26.
- Ahmadi, Z., Amini, L., & Haghani, H. (2020). Determining a health-promoting lifestyle among Afghan immigrants women in Iran. *Journal of Primary Care and Community Health*, 11, 1-8.
- Alemu, B. B., Nagel, S., & Hanna Vehmas, H. (2021). Barriers to sport participation faced by Ethiopian and Eritrean migrant women in Switzerland. *Italian Sociological Review*, 11(5S), 673-690.
- Arab-Moghaddam, N., Henderson, K. A., & Sheikholeslami, R. (2007). Women's leisure and constraints to participation: Iranian perspectives. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 39(1), 109-126.
- Askari, A., Rohani, A., & Gergichian, Z. (2019). Patriarchal contexts of female early marriage among Afghan migrants in the city of Yazd. *Journal of Iranian Social Studies*, 13(4), 78-110.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328-352.
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2015). *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage.
- Butler, B. N., & Dzikus, L. (2015). Sport labour migration: Understanding leisure activities of American professional basketball players abroad. *Leisure Studies*, 34(1), 67-81.
- Burr, V. (2015). *Social Constructionism*. Routledge.
- Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality and Quantity*, 56, 1391–1412.
- Carminati, L. (2018). Generalizability in qualitative research: A tale of two traditions. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(13), 1983-2131.
- Crawford, D. W., & Godbey, G. (1987). Reconceptualizing barriers to family leisure. *Leisure Sciences*, 9(2), 119-127.
- Crawford, D. W., Jackson, E. L., & Godbey, G. (1991). A hierarchical model of leisure constraints. *Leisure Sciences*, 13(4), 309-320.
- Farahani, H., Langari, M.N.M., Eliasi, L.G., Tavakol, M., & Toikko, T. (2023). "How can I trust people when they know exactly what my weakness is?" Daily life experiences, and resilience strategies of stateless Afghans in Iran. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2023.2199252>

- Hohmann, K., Karimi, N., Sabbiti, L., & Schwenzer, V. (2021). *Action research for inclusion: Migrant women and girls in sports*. [https://sportinclusion.net/files/2021-05\\_SPIN-Women\\_Action\\_Research-web.pdf](https://sportinclusion.net/files/2021-05_SPIN-Women_Action_Research-web.pdf)
- Harwood, G., Sendall, M. C., Heesch, K. C., & Brough, M. (2021). A Bourdieusian analysis exploring the meaning of sport for young women from refugee backgrounds in an Australian state high school. *Sport, Education and Society*, 26(2), 175-187.
- Holmes, A. G. D. (2020). Researcher positionality – a consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research – a new researcher guide. *International Journal of Education* 8(4), 1–10.
- Hurly, J. (2019). ‘I feel something is still missing’: Leisure meanings of African refugee women in Canada. *Leisure Studies*, 38(1), 1-14.
- Jackson E. L., Crawford, D. W., & Godbey, G. (1993). Negotiation of leisure constraints. *Leisure Sciences*, 15(1), 1-11.
- Jeanes, R., O’Connor, J., & Alfrey, L. (2015). Sport and the resettlement of young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 39(6), 480-500.
- Korac, M. (2003). Integration and how we facilitate it: A comparative study of the settlement experiences of refugees in Italy and the Netherlands. *Sociology*, 37(1), 51-68.
- Li, M. Z., & Stodolska, M. (2021). Leisure as a constraint and a manifesto for empowerment: The life story of a Chinese female migrant worker. *Leisure Sciences*, 44(1), 121-137.
- Lipson, J. G., & Miller, S. (1994). Changing roles of Afghan refugee women in the United States. *Health Care for Women International*, 15(3), 171-180.
- Mohammadi, Y., Khodaverdi, H., Keshishiyan, G., & Motallebi, M (2020). Causes and characteristics of the migration of Afghan citizens to Iran and its impact on the national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Islamic Revolution. *The Islamic Revolution Approach*, 13(49), 65-86.
- Molnar, G., Amin, S. N., & Kanemasu, Y. (2019). *Women, Sport and Exercise in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Routledge.
- Mosawi, M. (2021, October 12). *A lost generation’s story: Identity challenges of second-generation Afghans in Iran*. International Labour Association. [A Lost Generation’s Story: Identity Challenges of Second-generation Afghans in Iran – ILA \(ilabour.eu\)](https://www.ila.org/en/publications-and-resources/publications/a-lost-generation-s-story-identity-challenges-of-second-generation-afghans-in-iran)
- Murad, S., & Versey, H. S. (2021). Barriers to leisure-time social participation and community integration among Syrian and Iraqi refugees. *Leisure Studies*, 40(3), 378-391.
- Nanayakkara, S. (2012). Crossing boundaries and changing identities: Empowering South Asian women through sport and physical activities. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29(13), 1885-1906.
- Nasr, E. A., & Hosseini S. H. (2016). The effect of education policies on Afghan immigrants in Iran: *Social and cultural strategy*, 5(20), 55-83.

- Oftadeh-Moghadam, S. (2022). #RefugeesWelcome: Sport as a vehicle for change. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, 73, 19.
- Pour Ahmad, A., Zayyari, K., & Zahedi, J. (2014). The Evaluation of Afghan Immigrant's Urban Quality of Life by Mental Method (Case study: Robot Karim). *Geographical Urban Planning Research (GUPR)*, 2(1), 1-15.
- Rouhani, A., Ahmadi, H., Iman, M., & Goli, A. (2015). The study of Iranian negative social emotions' towards Afghan refugees (case study: Shirazi citizens). *Quarterly Journal of Social Development*, 10(1), 67-96.
- Saadatifard, E., Javadipour, M., Honari, H., Saffari, M., & Zareian, H. (2019). *The context of recreational sports for women in Iran. Annals of Applied Sport Science*, 7(1), 83-95.
- Sadeghi, R., & Abbasi-Shavazi, M. (2016). Return migration to Afghanistan or staying in Iran among Afghan youth. *Iranian Population Studies*, 2(1), 119-150.
- Sadeghi-Fasaei, S., & Nazari, H. (2017). Formation of self and other in everyday life experiences Afghan teens. *Quarterly of Social Studies and Research in Iran*, 5(3), 437-456.
- Shahzeidi, M. (2023). Unequal or unavailable: gender, leisure and quality of life of refugees in Turkey. *World Leisure Journal*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16078055.2023.2236069>
- Shahzeidi, M., Stone, G., & Filiz, B. (2023). The influence of leisure on the quality of life of refugees in Turkey. *Leisure Studies*, 1-17.
- Siavoshi, S. (2022). Afghans in Iran: The state and the working of Immigration policies. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2022.2113504>
- Songhori, N., Maarefvand, M., Fekr-Azad, H., & Khubchandani, J. (2017). Facilitators and barriers of Afghan refugee adolescents' integration in Iran: A grounded theory study. *Global Social Welfare*, 5, 243-252.
- Spaaij, R., Broerse, J., Oxford, S., Luguetti, C., McLachlan, F., McDonald, B., Klepac, B., Lymbery, L., Bishara, J., & Pankowiak, A. (2019). Sport, refugees, and forced migration: A critical review of the literature. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 1(47), 1-18.
- Tsai, E. H., & Coleman, D. J. (1999). Leisure constraints of Chinese immigrants: An exploratory study. *Society and Leisure*, 22(1), 243-264.
- Tsai, E. H., & Coleman, D. J. (2009). The influence of constraints and self-efficacies on participation in regular active recreation. *Leisure Sciences*, 31, 364-383.
- UNHCR (2022). *Refugees in Iran*. UNHCR. Retrieved September 18, 2022, from <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>
- Vossughi F., & Mohseni M. R. (2016). Investigation citizen attitudes on foreign immigrants resident in Mashhad. *GeoRes*, 31(2), 4-18.