

Afghan refugees face discrimination, employment and social challenges in Australia

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New Edith Cowan University (ECU) research has found that while many former Afghan refugees value the security and open democracy of their new home in Australia, they face significant challenges integrating into society.

The study, led by Ph.D. candidate Omid Rezaei, explored the experiences of Perth based Afghan-Australians' who arrived as refugees and were subsequently granted citizenship.

Researchers surveyed 102 people, conducted 13 in-depth interviews, and held two focus groups.

Mr Rezaei said most former Afghan refugees now considered Australia to be their new home, with around 90 percent of them wanting to live in Australia for the rest of their life.

"They are happy to live in a peaceful country. Safety in Australia has been the most attractive thing for them, demonstrating that four decades of war in Afghanistan is still alive in Afghans' memories," Mr Rezaei said.

"They are also grateful to Australia for granting them citizenship and for providing them with high quality education and health care."

However, Mr Rezaei said that while former Afghan refugees enjoyed some aspects of Australian society, they also faced significant challenges in taking full advantage of their Australian citizenship.

"Barriers to employment, [social challenges](#), discrimination and socio-religious difficulties within their own community are among the

challenges the community experienced," he said.

Barriers to employment

Employment was the top of the list of issues faced by Afghan-Australians.

The 2016 Census reported an unemployment rate of 17.8 percent for Afghanistan born people, more than three times the 5.7 percent [unemployment rate](#) for all Australians at that time.

Higher unemployment among Afghans meant the median individual weekly income for the Afghanistan-born population in Australia was just \$371, compared with \$688 for all Australian-born and \$615 for all overseas-born.

"Many participants faced problems in finding employment in their chosen fields or having their overseas qualifications recognized," Mr Rezaei said.

Sadiq is a participant in the study who came to Australia as a refugee in 2015 and was recently awarded Australian citizenship. He holds a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Kabul University and worked as a high school teacher in Afghanistan, but Australia does not recognize his qualification.

"They don't recognize my qualifications here. So, I have to study 8 years if I want to be a teacher [in Australia], but I don't have time. I have to work and make money to support my family in Afghanistan. That's why I'm working in construction field now." (Sadiq)

Mr Rezaei said discrimination in the process of the finding a job, as well as in the workplace, was another [challenge](#) that many Afghan refugees

face in Australia, regardless of their citizenship status.

Zari, as a Hazara woman, is an example. She is in her 20s and mentions that she has been facing many barriers in finding a job because of her hijab.

"I haven't been able to find a job mainly because of my hijab. Even some employers have said this to me directly. My uncle is an owner of a business in Perth, but even he doesn't hire me for my hijab... That's why I have to look for a job only in Afghan community." (Zari)

Socio-cultural barriers

Mr Rezaei said Afghan refugees had also faced several challenges in the social context of their lives in Australia, one of which is the problem of revealing their identity as Muslim-Afghans.

"Most participants received negative feedback from other Australians about Afghanistan, mainly after the tragic events of September 11, so they became uncomfortable with expressing their Afghan identity while communicating with people outside of the Afghan community. Some of them also were not comfortable with their former [refugee](#) identity," Mr Rezaei said.

Ali, a participant in the study, explained how he hid his Afghan background after he received discriminatory reactions.

"At first, sometimes people would ask me: where are you from? And I would say: I am from Afghanistan. Then they would say: Oh, Taliban. Or they'd say do you know Osama Bin laden? So, I realized that I don't have to tell them the truth. Since then, whenever somebody asks me where are you from? I say Tajikistan or Uzbekistan." (Ali, 39 years old)

Participants also described other social barriers such as not being able to broaden their social network to include Australian friends, and challenges in dealing with their children who were second-generation Afghans.

"First generation Afghan refugees wanted to maintain their culture, religion, and language, while their children were sometimes reluctant to accept these values," Mr Rezaei said.

Challenges within the Afghan community

Mr Rezaei said former Afghan refugees also experienced challenges in connecting within their own community in Perth.

"One of these challenges is related to the fact that Afghanistan is a multiethnic society and people have been involved in ethnic divisions for a long time.

"There is no single Afghan community in Perth, rather there are several. Each ethnic group has its own members in terms of organizing social or cultural events," Mr Rezaei said.

Mehdi, a participant in the study who has been living in Perth since 1992, has witnessed the changes in the Afghan community over time.

"In those first years the number of Afghans in Perth was low; ethnicity was not so important and there was a single community. But after arriving more Afghan refugees in the following years, and especially after establishment of Taliban and deteriorating the ethnic divisions in Afghanistan, the situation in Afghan community in Perth changed. So, every ethnic group started to build a community for itself. Today, there are several of them which are independently active." (Medhi)

Mr Rezaei said despite the Australian government's support in granting many Afghan refugees citizenship, they still cannot enjoy the full advantages of citizenship rights in practice.

"The Afghan community in Perth, with the strong commitment to make Australia as their permanent home, strongly needs and deserves to receive the Australian government's support.

"In addition, the inclusion of Afghan people within the broader Australian society facilitates the integration process and the media can play a vital role in developing the local community's awareness about refugees, their backgrounds, as well as their potential contributions to Australian society," Mr Rezaei said.

The paper is published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

More information: Omid Rezaei et al, Integration Experiences of Former Afghan Refugees in Australia: What Challenges Still Remain after Becoming Citizens?, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph181910559](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph181910559)

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