



Revealing the Gendered Dynamics of Displacement: A Feminist Security Study on Afghan Refugees in Iran and Türkiye

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Abstract: This article examines Afghan refugee displacement across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye corridor through the lens of Feminist Security Perspectives (FSP). It argues that displacement should not be understood as a singular event beginning upon arrival in a destination country, but as a continuous and cumulative security process shaped by conditions in the country of origin, transit, and destination. The article critiques a tendency in Türkiye-centered refugee scholarship to analyze Afghan refugees as if their experiences begin in Türkiye, thereby producing what this study conceptualizes as transit discontinuity: the analytical separation of refugees' current vulnerabilities from insecurities accumulated during earlier phases of displacement. Methodologically, the article employs a comparative qualitative evidence synthesis of existing empirical studies on Afghan refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye. Reading these studies through FSP, the article shows how conflict and patriarchal restrictions in Afghanistan, legal exclusion and structural violence in Iran, and legal uncertainty, labor exploitation, limited access to services, social exclusion, and gender-based violence in Türkiye are connected across a broader displacement trajectory. The findings demonstrate that Iran is not merely a geographical transit route but a long-term host and transit space where gendered insecurities are produced, intensified, and carried into the Turkish context. The article contributes to a corridor-based, gender-sensitive, and people-centered understanding of refugee security, arguing that research on Afghan refugees in Türkiye must systematically incorporate origin and transit experiences.

Keywords: Security, Feminism, Displacement, Refugees, Türkiye, Iran

1. Introduction

The sudden collapse of the Soviet Union initiated a critical rethinking of dominant paradigms in International Relations, creating space for theoretical approaches that had long remained marginal to the discipline. Among these, feminist perspectives have fundamentally challenged conventional understandings of power, sovereignty, borders, and security by exposing their gendered foundations and reinterpreting them through a gender-sensitive lens. Feminist approaches insist that security cannot be understood solely in terms of state survival or military capability, but must instead be examined through the everyday experiences of individuals and marginalized groups. It is important to note, however, that feminism does not constitute a single, unified theory; rather, it encompasses a range of approaches that offer diverse interpretations of security and insecurity. The approach adopted in this study is Feminist Security Perspectives (FSP), which foreground relational security, human dignity, and the lived realities of displacement.

This article examines the gendered impacts of displacement on Afghan refugees across Iran and Türkiye through the analytical framework of FSP. It argues that displacement is not a singular event tied only to arrival in a destination country, but rather a continuous and cumulative process shaped by conditions in the country of origin, transit, and destination. From this perspective, insecurity is not confined to moments of armed conflict or formal asylum procedures; instead, it unfolds across time and space, manifesting through everyday practices, structural inequalities, and gendered power relations. Afghan women refugees, in particular, experience displacement as an ongoing security condition in which patriarchy, legal precarity, economic marginalization, and violence intersect.

Despite the growing body of literature on Afghan refugees in Türkiye, much of this scholarship implicitly treats refugees as if they arrive fully formed into the Turkish context, largely detached from their prior migration trajectories. Existing studies tend to focus on settlement, labor market participation, legal status, or integration challenges within Türkiye (Arpacı, 2020; Dağ & İkizoğlu,

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2023; Dinçer, 2025; Doğan, 2019; Özdemir, 2025; Tümtaş, 2022), often overlooking the prolonged and transformative experiences refugees endure before arrival. This tendency produces what this article conceptualizes as transit discontinuity: the analytical separation of refugees' conditions in the destination country from the hardships, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies accumulated during earlier phases of displacement. In effect, Afghan refugees are frequently examined as though they had been "transferred" directly from Afghanistan to Türkiye, without sufficient attention to the socio-political environments they traversed en route.

This gap is particularly striking given that Iran has for decades functioned not merely as a transit country but as a primary and often long-term host for Afghan refugees. For many Afghans, Iran represents a space of protracted displacement marked by structural violence, legal exclusion, limited access to healthcare and education (Golmohammad et al., 2025; Lebni et al., 2022; Moudi et al., 2025; Sharifi et al., 2020), exploitative labor conditions (Abdollahi et al., 2015; Tariq et al., 2024), and high levels of gender-based violence (Delkhosh et al., 2018). These experiences do not remain confined to Iran; rather, they shape refugees' physical health, psychological well-being, social capital, coping mechanisms, and mobility decisions long before they reach Türkiye. Consequently, the vulnerabilities Afghan refugees face in Türkiye cannot be fully understood without reference to the gendered insecurities they have already endured in Afghanistan and Iran.

This study therefore challenges the dominant tendency in the Türkiye-centered refugee literature to isolate the destination country from the broader migration trajectory. It argues that research conducted on Afghan refugees in Iran offers crucial analytical insights for understanding the conditions, behaviors, and insecurities observed among Afghan refugees in Türkiye. Iran is not simply a geographical corridor but a critical site where gendered forms of insecurity are produced, normalized, and internalized. Ignoring this dimension risks misreading refugees' experiences in Türkiye as context-specific or sudden, rather than as the continuation of long-term patterns of displacement and exclusion.

Methodologically and theoretically, this article conceptualizes Afghan displacement as a continuous process that spans origin, transit, and destination. It employs a comparative qualitative evidence synthesis of existing empirical studies on Afghan refugees in Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye. Studies conducted in Iran, particularly English-language research by Iranian and international scholars, are analyzed alongside Turkish and English language studies conducted in Türkiye. Drawing on FSP, the article reads these studies together in order to show how legal precarity, labor exploitation, restricted access to healthcare and education, gender-based violence, and coping strategies accumulate across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye displacement corridor. In doing so, it highlights how conventional, state-centric and destination-oriented security frameworks fail to capture the cumulative and gendered nature of refugee insecurity.

To achieve this aim, the study first outlines the core principles of FSP and their contribution to understanding non-traditional security threats. The following section explains the methodological approach and the corpus of studies analyzed. It then examines the migration routes used by Afghan refugees, with particular emphasis on Iran's role as both a long-term host and a transit country. Subsequent sections synthesize the existing literature on the security challenges faced by Afghan refugees, especially women, across Iran and Türkiye. The final sections evaluate these findings through the lens of FSP, arguing that a people-centered, gender-sensitive, and corridor-based approach is essential for accurately capturing the realities of displacement and for developing policies that address refugees' security, dignity, and well-being in a comprehensive manner.

2. A Brief Introduction to Feminist Security Perspectives

International security studies have traditionally been a masculine "high politics" domain, constructed by statesmen, diplomats, and military officials, and have excluded women (Blanchard, 2003, p. 1289). This conventional understanding of security focuses primarily on state security, reinforcing the notion that state power is the sole means of ensuring safety. FSP, however, challenge this state-centered understanding by drawing attention to the everyday insecurities experienced by individuals and marginalized groups. The recognition that states can also be sources of insecurity, particularly for women, has gained prominence in feminist security debates. Efforts to define threats to states have increasingly been accompanied by attempts to define threats to individual security (Aydın Koyuncu, 2012).

FSP analyze threats to women beyond the conventional lens of state security. While Western women may perceive security through the prism of nuclear threats, women from developing countries often interpret security in relation to issues such as unemployment, sexual violence, and lack of access to education (Tickner, 1992). FSP employ a multifaceted concept of "violence" regarding the threats faced by women. Johan Galtung originally differentiated between three forms of violence: direct

violence, cultural violence, and structural violence. Galtung defined direct violence as any act in which a perpetrator inflicts physical pain, suffering, or distress upon another individual. In the context of international relations, direct violence can be exemplified through armed conflicts, economic sanctions, and wars. This form of violence has traditionally been regarded as the primary focus of conventional security approaches. Conversely, structural violence occurs without a visible agent directly inflicting harm. Galtung described structural violence as the degradation of people's lives and living standards caused by factors such as poverty, restrictions on freedom, disease, and environmental degradation (Galtung, 1969). Feminist scholars have drawn upon Galtung's analysis of structural violence to further develop their own security frameworks (Blanchard, 2003). They argue that, in contrast to traditional approaches, women face both direct and structural violence.

Feminists have long questioned whether the violence, rape, and poverty that women endure during wartime are confined solely to periods of war. Given historically entrenched patriarchal structures, women, who often occupy the lowest social and economic tiers, have faced violence, poverty, and exclusion both in times of peace and during war. This reality has led feminist scholars to challenge the war/peace dichotomy and to emphasize the continuum between violence and peace, showing that gendered insecurity may extend from the household and community to the public spaces of international politics (True, 2020). This critique is particularly relevant to Afghanistan, where decades of armed conflict, political instability, and patriarchal rule have deeply shaped women's access to education, employment, mobility, bodily security, and public life. The Taliban's return to power has intensified these insecurities by restricting women's and girls' access to education, work, healthcare, freedom of movement, and protection from gender-based violence (Kaya, 2024; Tan & İneli Cığır, 2023). From an FSP perspective, therefore, the insecurity of Afghan women does not begin only with migration, nor does it end when they cross a border. Rather, gendered insecurity may originate in Afghanistan, continue during prolonged residence or transit in Iran, and persist after arrival in Türkiye.

Moreover, the protector/protected dichotomy prevalent during wartime has rendered women and children, who are typically viewed as the "protected" class, vulnerable to different forms of insecurity. Feminist security scholars have shown that women may be represented as passive subjects in need of protection while their actual experiences of violence, displacement, poverty, and exclusion remain insufficiently addressed (True, 2020). In the Afghan case, this dichotomy is especially important because Afghan women are often discussed either as victims of war and patriarchal rule or as objects of humanitarian protection. Such representations may obscure the layered and continuing nature of their insecurity across the migration corridor. For Afghan refugee women, displacement does not necessarily represent a clear movement from danger to safety; instead, insecurity may be reproduced through legal precarity, labor exploitation, restricted access to services, gender-based violence, and social marginalization in both transit and destination contexts.

FSP interrogates conventional security frameworks by redirecting attention from state-centric paradigms to the security of individuals and by exposing the gendered dimensions of insecurity. FSP posits that traditional security discourses frequently neglect the specific vulnerabilities and lived experiences of women, girls, and other marginalized populations, thereby rendering their insecurities invisible (İren & Taşgetiren, 2022; Sjöberg, 2010). A core component of FSP is its critique of state-centrism and militarism. FSP argues that such a narrow focus may exacerbate gender-based violence and discrimination, as state security agendas do not always align with the safety needs of individuals, particularly those of women and girls (Den Boer & Bode, 2018; Foster & Markham, 2023; Sjöberg, 2010; Stokes, 2020). This disconnect can manifest in scenarios where a state may achieve military "security" while its population endures endemic domestic violence, legal exclusion, or economic marginalization.

Another pivotal concept in FSP is the broadening of the security agenda. This framework extends the notion of security beyond physical violence to encompass threats associated with poverty, environmental degradation, public health crises, and social injustice, issues that disproportionately impact women. This expanded understanding conceives of security not merely as the absence of armed conflict but as access to essential resources, physical safety, dignity, and the realization of human rights (Åse & Wendt, 2021; Lee-Koo, 2020; Sayan & Duygulu, 2024; Sjöberg, 2020).

Additionally, the concept of gender as an analytical category remains fundamental to FSP. This notion transcends a focus solely on women by examining how gender norms, roles, and power relations shape diverse experiences of security and insecurity across all individuals (Heathcote, 2025; Sjöberg, 2010). The theory examines how patriarchal systems influence policy formulation, conflict dynamics, and post-conflict reconstruction, often resulting in unique forms of violence and oppression directed at women and gender minorities (Den Boer & Bode, 2018; Sjöberg, 2020; Stokes, 2020). From an FSP perspective, the deprivation of education and freedom of movement for women must be recognized not merely as societal failings but as fundamental security issues.

In the context of this article, FSP is particularly useful because it allows displacement to be examined as a continuous and gendered security process rather than as a single event limited to border crossing or arrival in a destination country. It provides the analytical tools to understand how legal precarity, structural violence, restricted access to services, gender-based violence, and economic marginalization accumulate across Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye, shaping refugees' vulnerabilities and coping strategies across the migration corridor.

3. Methodology

This study employs a comparative qualitative evidence synthesis to examine Afghan displacement across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye corridor. The article does not generate primary empirical data through interviews, surveys, or fieldwork. Instead, it treats existing empirical studies as a body of evidence through which the cumulative and gendered nature of refugee insecurity can be analyzed (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010; Thomas & Harden, 2008). The aim is not to provide a conventional literature review, but to re-read and synthesize findings from studies conducted in Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye through the analytical lens of FSP.

The unit of analysis in this study is not a single host country, but the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye displacement corridor. This choice reflects the central argument of the article: Afghan refugees in Türkiye cannot be fully understood if their prior experiences in Afghanistan and Iran are analytically separated from their current conditions in Türkiye. Afghanistan is examined as the country of origin where conflict, political instability, and gendered restrictions produce initial forms of insecurity. Iran is examined as both a long-term host country and a transit space where legal precarity, labor exploitation, limited access to services, and gendered violence may accumulate. Türkiye is examined as a destination and transit country where these prior vulnerabilities interact with new legal, social, and economic conditions.

The empirical material for the synthesis consists of academic studies on Afghan refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Iran and Türkiye. Studies on Iran were selected primarily from English-language academic literature, including works by Iranian and international scholars. Studies on Türkiye were selected from both Turkish and English-language academic literature. The literature search was conducted primarily through Scopus and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of “Afghan refugees,” “Afghan migrants,” “Afghan asylum seekers,” “Afghan women,” “Iran,” “Türkiye/Turkey,” “gender,” “displacement,” “healthcare,” “education,” “labor,” “legal status,” “violence,” “human security,” and “feminist security.” Turkish-language searches were also conducted using terms such as “Afgan mülteciler,” “Afgan sığınmacılar,” “Afgan göçmenler,” “toplumsal cinsiyet,” “güvenlik,” and “Türkiye.” The search focused on English and Turkish-language studies and included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic book chapters, and relevant scholarly reports. Studies were included if they met three criteria. First, they had to focus substantially on Afghan refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, or displaced Afghans. Second, they had to address at least one of the three contexts central to this article: Afghanistan, Iran, or Türkiye. Third, they had to contain empirical findings or empirically grounded analysis related to legal status, labor conditions, health, education, gender-based violence, social exclusion, mobility, coping strategies, or resilience. Studies were excluded if they mentioned Afghans only marginally, focused primarily on other refugee groups without distinguishable findings on Afghans, lacked empirical or analytical relevance to displacement-related insecurity, or were not accessible in full text.

The final corpus consisted of 56 studies; 26 focusing primarily on Iran, 14 on Türkiye and 16 comparative or regional studies. The selected studies were analyzed through a combination of inductive and deductive thematic coding. In the first stage, findings related to refugee insecurity were extracted from each study. In the second stage, recurring themes were identified inductively, including legal precarity, labor exploitation, access to healthcare, access to education, gender-based violence, mobility restrictions, social exclusion, and coping or resilience strategies. In the third stage, these themes were compared across Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye in order to trace continuities and differences across the displacement corridor.

In the final stage, the synthesized findings were interpreted through FSP. This deductive stage focused on core concepts of feminist security analysis, including structural violence, everyday insecurity, bodily security, gendered vulnerability, agency, and critique of state-centric security. This framework made it possible to examine how insecurities experienced by Afghan refugees are not isolated within one national context but are produced, accumulated, and transformed across origin, transit, and destination spaces. The analysis therefore asks not only what kinds of insecurity Afghan refugees face, but also how earlier experiences in Afghanistan and Iran shape the vulnerabilities observed among Afghan refugees in Türkiye.

This methodological design has limitations. Because the article relies on existing empirical studies, it is shaped by the scope, language, and methodological choices of the available literature. English-language studies on Iran and Turkish- and English-language studies on Türkiye may differ in their research questions, categories, and accessibility. Furthermore, undocumented refugees and irregular migrants are often underrepresented in official data and academic research, which limits the ability to fully capture their experiences. Nevertheless, this limitation is itself analytically significant. From an FSP perspective, the invisibility of undocumented and irregular migrants within research and official statistics reflects broader patterns of legal and social precarity. By synthesizing existing empirical evidence across Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye, this study seeks to make visible the cumulative and gendered insecurities that destination-country approaches often overlook.

4. The Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye Displacement Corridor

Afghan refugees frequently undertake complex and perilous journeys to reach Türkiye and, in some cases, Europe. These routes are shaped by geographic proximity, social networks, political instability, economic inequalities, smuggling operations, and the interconnected nature of migration systems (İçduygu & Karadağ, 2018). A primary route involves neighboring countries, particularly Iran and Pakistan, which have hosted large Afghan refugee populations since the Soviet-Afghan War. For many Afghans, however, Iran is not merely a temporary passage point but a space of prolonged displacement before further movement toward Türkiye.

Iran and Pakistan share extensive borders with Afghanistan, making them among the most accessible first destinations for Afghans fleeing conflict, persecution, poverty, and political instability (Zandi-Navgran et al., 2023). These countries have hosted some of the most significant long-term Afghan refugee populations in Asia (Khan et al., 2020). For example, official figures from Pakistan in 1990 showed 3.27 million registered Afghan refugees, with a significant female over-male population, partly due to war-related male casualties (Yusuf, 1990). This historical background is important because Afghan displacement has rarely been a short-term or linear movement. Instead, it has often involved extended periods of residence, irregular status, onward migration, return, and renewed displacement.

Iran has played a particularly central role in Afghan mobility toward Türkiye. It functions both as a major host country and as a direct land corridor for Afghans moving westward. Migration from Afghanistan to Türkiye via Iran operates as an interconnected system influenced by political instability, economic hardship, social networks, smuggling infrastructures, and individual or family strategies (İçduygu & Karadağ, 2018). Conditions in Iran may also operate as secondary push factors. Lack of protection, limited rights and opportunities, economic hardship, and the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan have encouraged onward movement toward Türkiye and Europe (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022, p. 9). Since 2021, the Iranian state's portrayal of Afghan migrants as security, economic, or sociopolitical problems has also contributed to discriminatory practices and human rights concerns, further shaping mobility decisions (Zandi-Navgran et al., 2023).

The Iran–Türkiye route is often irregular and dangerous. Afghan migrants may become dependent on smugglers and may face exploitation, abuse, violence, detention, deportation risks, and even death during the journey (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022). The Iran–Türkiye border is therefore not only a geographical crossing point but also a site where insecurity is intensified. Legal uncertainty further deepens these risks, particularly for undocumented migrants whose lack of formal protection increases vulnerability during transit and complicates access to asylum procedures in subsequent countries (Khan et al., 2020). From the perspective of this article, these experiences are not merely “pre-arrival” events. They are part of the cumulative security conditions that shape refugees’ later experiences in Türkiye.

Türkiye occupies a dual position as both a destination and a transit country. It is an important temporary or long-term destination for many Afghan migrants while also functioning as a gateway toward Europe (Bermek, 2024). However, Afghan refugees in Türkiye often face policy uncertainty, settlement restrictions, legal precarity, and limited access to opportunities. Such restrictions may produce spatial immobility, limiting refugees’ access to employment, services, and social networks (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022, p. 9). Although onward movement to Europe remains part of the broader migration system, the present article focuses on how experiences accumulated in Afghanistan and Iran shape Afghan refugees’ vulnerabilities, coping strategies, and security conditions after arrival in Türkiye.

The routes Afghan refugees take are therefore complex and multifaceted. These journeys often begin in Afghanistan, continue through Iran, and reach Türkiye under conditions shaped by both formal policies and informal survival strategies. Understanding this corridor is essential for overcoming destination-centered analyses of Afghan refugees in Türkiye. If refugees are studied only after arrival, the legal, economic, bodily, and gendered insecurities accumulated during earlier stages of displacement remain analytically invisible. For this reason, the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye corridor should be treated not only as a route of movement but also as a continuous field of insecurity in which vulnerabilities are produced, carried, and transformed across borders.

5. Scale and Visibility of Afghan Mobility in Iran and Türkiye

The number of Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran and Türkiye varies depending on the reporting agency, legal category, and available documentation. Historically, Iran has hosted a significant Afghan refugee population. For instance, in 2013, it was estimated that over 4.5 million Afghan refugees had migrated to least developed countries, with more than one million legally registered in Iran (Farzad et al., 2021). More recent studies continue to identify Iran as one of the leading destinations for Afghan refugees after Pakistan (Zandi-Navgran et al., 2023). Some estimates suggest that approximately 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees live in Iran and Pakistan combined (Fatima et al., 2023). Due to its geographical proximity and accessibility, Iran has served as one of the primary host countries for Afghan refugees for the past four decades (Amuzadeh-Araei et al., 2025; Mowahid & Ahmadi, 2025). Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Afghan mobility toward neighboring countries, including Iran, increased significantly (Mohammadsadeghi et al., 2022; Rahimitabar et al., 2023).

Türkiye has also become a significant destination and transit country for Afghan migrants, particularly since 2021. Political instability and systematic oppression in Afghanistan, especially restrictions imposed on women and girls regarding education, employment, healthcare, and freedom of movement, have been among the primary drivers of this increased displacement (Almasri, 2023). Although Türkiye has hosted a large refugee population since the Syrian crisis, the presence and visibility of Afghan migrants have also increased in recent years. Existing studies have documented Afghan asylum seekers' protests, newly arrived Afghan refugees' health conditions, labor market difficulties, legal uncertainties, and integration-related challenges in Türkiye (Ayvaz et al., 2018; İkizoğlu Erensu, 2016).

However, available statistics capture only part of Afghan mobility. Official data generally distinguish between documented migrants, residence permit holders, international protection applicants, and irregular migrants apprehended by security forces. For this reason, these figures should not be read as representing the total Afghan refugee population. Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI) data provide information on documented migration flows by nationality, but these figures include individuals holding a valid residence or work permit, an international protection identity document, or an equivalent legal document. They exclude undocumented migrants, unregistered refugees, and those who avoid registration because of legal uncertainty, fear of deportation, or the need to remain mobile for employment.

According to TSI data, 256,373 Afghan nationals entered Türkiye as documented immigrants between 2016 and 2024, while 156,632 Afghan nationals were recorded as emigrants during the same period (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). The net figure for Afghan nationals was therefore 99,741. Gender-disaggregated figures show that male Afghan immigrants outnumbered female Afghan immigrants: 156,850 men and 99,523 women were recorded as documented Afghan immigrants during this period. These figures point to both the scale and the gendered composition of documented Afghan mobility. In particular, they show that men constitute a larger share of officially recorded Afghan entries into Türkiye, while women remain numerically less visible within regular migration flows.

The same data also show important temporal changes. The highest number of documented Afghan immigrant entries was recorded in 2019, with 47,228 entries, followed by 44,977 in 2018 and 34,069 in 2021. After 2021, however, documented Afghan immigrant entries declined, falling to 21,469 in 2022, 12,732 in 2023, and 7,433 in 2024. At the same time, recorded emigration of Afghan nationals increased sharply, reaching 35,211 in 2023 and 35,845 in 2024. As a result, the net migration figure for Afghan nationals became negative in 2023 and 2024. These shifts should be interpreted cautiously, since they reflect documented mobility only and do not capture irregular crossings, informal residence, or unregistered onward movement.

Irregular migration statistics reveal another dimension of Afghan mobility. The Turkish Presidency of Migration Management (Presidency of Migration Management [PMM], 2025) records Afghan irregular migrants apprehended by security forces. Between 2011 and November 2025, a total of 789,551 Afghan irregular migrants were recorded. The highest number was observed in 2019, with approximately 201,000 apprehensions, followed by around 115,000 in 2022. These figures contrast sharply with the much lower number of documented Afghan immigrant entries in the same years. For example, while 47,228 Afghan nationals entered Türkiye as documented immigrants in 2019, approximately 201,000 Afghan irregular migrants were apprehended that year. Similarly, in 2022, 21,469 documented Afghan immigrant entries were recorded, while irregular Afghan apprehensions reached approximately 115,000. This contrast shows that official residence-based statistics capture only a limited part of Afghan movement toward Türkiye.

This gap between documented and irregular figures is analytically important. Afghan mobility cannot be understood solely through formal categories of residence, asylum, or settlement. Many Afghans move through fragmented and precarious legal conditions shaped by previous displacement in Afghanistan, prolonged residence or transit in Iran, irregular border crossings, smuggling networks, and fear of deportation. From an FSP perspective, this numerical uncertainty is not merely a statistical problem; it is also a security issue. Invisibility within official data may deepen vulnerability by limiting access to healthcare, education, legal protection, employment rights, and social assistance. Thus, the difficulty of counting Afghan refugees and migrants reflects the broader condition of legal and social precarity that characterizes the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye displacement corridor.

6. Gendered Insecurity Across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye Corridor

Extensive research has been carried out on Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran and Türkiye. These studies provide valuable insights into legal precarity, access to services, labor exploitation, gender-based violence, social exclusion, and forms of resilience. However, when read separately as country-specific literatures, they risk reproducing the very discontinuity this article seeks to challenge. A FSP approach makes it possible to read these studies together and to examine how insecurities experienced in Afghanistan and Iran continue to shape the conditions of Afghan refugees in Türkiye. This section therefore synthesizes existing research thematically rather than treating Iran and Türkiye as isolated cases.

6.1. Legal precarity and state-centered migration control

Legal precarity appears as a recurring source of insecurity across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye displacement corridor. Despite Iran's historical role as a major host country for Afghans, Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran have faced limited access to citizenship rights, legal protection, and stable residence conditions (Bavili, 2023; Mowahid & Ahmadi, 2025; Rostami-Povey, 2007; Zandi-Navgran et al., 2023). Afghan migrants' experiences of integration policies in Iran also point to discriminatory laws, exclusionary practices, and state-sponsored discourses of otherness, all of which affect their human rights and sense of belonging (Moinipour, 2017; Zandi-Navgran et al., 2024). Since 2021, the portrayal of Afghan migrants as security, economic, or sociopolitical problems has further intensified their marginalization and vulnerability.

Similar forms of legal uncertainty are visible in Türkiye. Türkiye's broader asylum and migration regime is characterized by complex, uncertain, and discretionary procedures, producing prolonged states of legal and social liminality for many refugees and asylum seekers (Dinçer, 2025; Özdemir, 2025). Although International Protection Status may provide access to certain services and work permits, settlement restrictions can produce spatial immobility by placing refugees in provinces far from metropolitan labor markets and social networks. Irregular Afghan migrants, meanwhile, often avoid formal protection mechanisms because registration may restrict their mobility and reduce their access to informal employment in larger cities (Tümtaş, 2022). Afghan refugees may also be unable to access education, healthcare, social assistance, or other services until they obtain identity documents; even after registration, adults may be forced to choose between employment and language training in order to meet basic needs such as food and housing (Doğan, 2019). From an FSP perspective, legal precarity is therefore not merely an administrative condition; it is a form of structural insecurity that shapes mobility, livelihood, bodily safety, and access to rights.

6.2. Health, education, and access to basic services

Studies conducted in Iran show that Afghan refugee women face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, especially maternal and reproductive healthcare (Golmohammad et al., 2025; Lebni et al., 2022; Moudi et al., 2025; Sharifi et al., 2020). Although refugee health insurance mechanisms exist, full coverage has not been achieved, and systemic barriers continue to restrict access to care (Amuzadeh-Araei et al., 2025). Research also points to gaps in health data and limited knowledge regarding disease patterns among Afghan refugees, including cancer and other chronic health concerns (Otoukesh et al., 2012; Otoukesh et al., 2015). Substance use disorders and associated stigma further complicate Afghan refugees' access to treatment and social support in Iran (Deilamizade et al., 2019; Naseh et al., 2022).

In Türkiye, access to education, healthcare, social assistance, and other services is also closely tied to legal status. Afghan refugees may be unable to benefit from services before registration, while economic hardship can limit their ability to access language training, education, or healthcare even after obtaining documentation (Doğan, 2019). Health-related insecurity is particularly visible among Afghan refugee women. Low breast cancer awareness and lower screening rates among Afghan women in Türkiye indicate reduced access to medical information and preventive care, leading to more advanced diagnoses compared to non-refugee populations (Kızılkaya et al., 2022). From an FSP perspective, these barriers demonstrate that healthcare and education are not secondary welfare issues but central components of human security, bodily integrity, and dignity.

6.3. Labor exploitation and economic insecurity

Economic insecurity is another major theme structurally linking the Iranian and Turkish contexts across the migration corridor. In Iran, Afghan refugees experience pervasive poverty, food insecurity, exploitative labor conditions, and urban inequalities, particularly within informal settlements (Naseh et al., 2018; Tariq et al., 2024). Food insecurity has been documented as especially severe, with one seminal study reporting that 88% of Afghan refugee households in Pakdasht faced food insecurity (Abdollahi et al., 2015). These conditions are not isolated economic problems; rather, they represent entrenched forms of structural violence that restrict refugees' ability to live with dignity and security. Furthermore, studies on sanctions and state policies in Iran demonstrate how macroeconomic and geopolitical crises actively reshape gendered labor regimes and survival strategies, producing conditions in which women's informal labor is increasingly mobilized while remaining socially and politically invisible (Abdi, 2025).

This economic precarity compounds as irregular paths extend into Türkiye, where Afghan workers face cumulative hardships including unemployment, low wages, delayed payments, difficulty paying rent, insufficient food intake, and deep social exclusion (Dağ & İkizoğlu, 2023). Irregular migrants are uniquely vulnerable within the Turkish labor market because they often work under highly insecure conditions, receive the lowest relative wages, lack official identification, and navigate a constant fear of deportation (Tümtaş, 2022). These structural vulnerabilities are frequently exacerbated by the financial strains of the journey itself; studies on human trafficking risks show that Afghan irregular migrants often pay smugglers for dangerous transit and are subsequently forced to accept exploitative labor conditions due to debt, desperation, and fear of authorities (Alakuş & Uzan, 2020).

Crucially, although some empirical studies report no significant gender differences in certain baseline labor-market difficulties, a FSP reading cautions against interpreting such findings as evidence of gender neutrality. Seemingly symmetric economic outcomes often conceal distinct, gender-specific burdens. Parity in aggregate statistical indicators frequently masks localized disparities related to unpaid care work, severe mobility restrictions, domestic violence, social stigma, and continuous exposure to targeted harassment.

6.4. Gender-based violence and bodily security

Gender-based violence is central to understanding Afghan women's insecurity across the corridor. In Iran, research reports a high prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among Afghan refugee women, with approximately 79.8% of women surveyed experiencing some form of IPV within a twelve-month period (Delkhosh et al., 2018). Afghan women in Iran also face legal exclusion, limited access to services, poverty, and social marginalization, all of which may intensify vulnerability to violence. These findings demonstrate how bodily security is shaped not only by direct violence but also by structural conditions that limit women's ability to seek protection or leave abusive environments.

In Türkiye, Afghan women's migration experiences are also deeply shaped by gender-based violence. Some Afghan women report migrating to escape violence, protect their children, and seek solutions to threats faced in Afghanistan and within family structures. Yet migration does not automatically eliminate these insecurities. Economic hardship, irregular status, stigmatization, and dependence on family or community networks may reproduce vulnerabilities after arrival. Young Afghan women in Türkiye experience post-migration life through the intersection of gender, age, class, and legal status, all of which shape their daily lives and sense of self (Tunç & Yaylacı, 2025). Ulutaş and Topaloğlu (2023) also show that migration can both reproduce and transform patriarchal norms: while some women become primary breadwinners or escape domestic violence, single women may face stigmatization and harassment.

6.5. Social exclusion, stigma, and discursive othering

Social exclusion and stigmatization constitute another form of insecurity. In Iran, Afghan refugees frequently encounter discriminatory laws, urban marginalization, informal settlement conditions, and discourses that construct them as outsiders or threats (Hosseini et al., 2024; Moinipour, 2017; Zandi-Navgran et al., 2024). These processes affect refugees' access to housing, employment, social services, and public recognition.

In Türkiye, public and political discourse frequently portrays Afghan refugee men through contradictory images, including as both threats and victims. Such representations reinforce civilizational hierarchies, ethnic boundaries, and exclusionary policy orientations (Öcal et al., 2024). Afghan refugees may also experience invisibility and loneliness within a migration landscape where public attention has often focused more heavily on Syrians. Discriminatory discourses directed at Syrians can indirectly marginalize Afghans as well, leading them to assert their identities more strongly in response to social pressure (Erol, 2025). The 2011 Van earthquake also revealed the vulnerability of refugees during crises, as asylum seekers received only partial support despite urgent needs for housing, food, clothing, and financial assistance (Deniz & Yıldız, 2016).

6.6. Agency, coping, and resilience

Although Afghan refugees face significant insecurity, the literature also highlights agency, adaptation, and resilience. In Iran, some studies suggest that migration may lead to greater self-awareness and changes in traditional gender roles among Afghan women. Afghan women working in Tehran, for example, have demonstrated adaptability and responsibility in response to social and economic challenges, including through the renegotiation of gender identities (Naini, 2023). Such findings are important because FSP does not treat refugee women only as passive victims; it also examines how they navigate, resist, and reinterpret insecurity.

In Türkiye, Afghan women use social capital and family networks to facilitate migration and adaptation. Although Afghan women are fewer in number compared to men, they may possess significant social capital and use social networks to navigate the migration process. However, these networks are also gendered, as many communication channels guiding Afghan women's mobility may depend on husbands, fathers, or male relatives (Arpacı, 2020). More collectively, refugee women's committees, cooperatives, and civil society initiatives in Türkiye provide spaces for participation, solidarity, and rights-based advocacy. Even in the absence of a national action plan, the Women, Peace, and Security agenda has been mobilized to promote refugee women's participation in decision-making processes (Şahin & Şengül, 2025; Şengül et al., 2022). Civil society organizations have also increasingly adopted intersectional and rights-based approaches, fostering solidarity and resistance among refugee women (Sunata & Özsoy, 2022).

The thematic comparison below summarizes how key forms of insecurity appear in both Iran and Türkiye and how they accumulate across the displacement corridor. The table is not intended to present Iran and Türkiye as identical contexts, but to show how legal, economic, bodily, and social insecurities are produced, transformed, and carried across borders.

Table 1*Thematic Comparison of Gendered Insecurity Across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye Displacement Corridor*

Theme	Iran / Transit-Host Phase	Türkiye / Destination-Transit Phase	Cumulative Security Implication
Legal precarity	Limited citizenship rights, unstable residence conditions, discriminatory integration practices, and portrayal of Afghans as security or economic problems.	Complex asylum procedures, international protection uncertainty, settlement restrictions, fear of deportation, and irregular status.	Legal insecurity is reproduced across borders and shapes access to mobility, work, protection, and services.
Access to healthcare and education	Barriers to maternal and reproductive healthcare, incomplete insurance coverage, limited health information, and restricted access to services.	Access to education, healthcare, and social assistance depends heavily on registration and identity documents; preventive health awareness remains limited among Afghan women.	Health and education problems are not isolated destination-country issues but accumulate through interrupted access across the corridor.
Labor exploitation and economic insecurity	Poverty, food insecurity, informal labor, urban inequalities, and exploitative employment conditions.	Low wages, delayed payments, insecure work, fear of deportation, debt to smugglers, and vulnerability to trafficking-like exploitation.	Economic insecurity travels with refugees and may intensify through irregular mobility and undocumented labor.
Gender-based violence and bodily security	High prevalence of IPV, legal exclusion, poverty, and limited protection mechanisms.	Domestic violence, harassment, stigma toward single women, and gendered vulnerabilities shaped by age, class, and legal status.	Gendered violence is continuous rather than episodic, connecting origin, transit, and destination experiences.
Social exclusion and discursive othering	Afghans are constructed as outsiders, burdens, or threats through discriminatory practices and public narratives.	Afghan refugees are often portrayed as threats, victims, or culturally backward; they may also remain invisible within refugee debates dominated by Syrians.	Othering reinforces marginalization and limits social recognition, belonging, and access to support.
Agency, coping, and resilience	Afghan women may renegotiate gender roles, develop self-awareness, and adapt to difficult conditions.	Afghan women use social networks, family ties, civil society initiatives, committees, and cooperatives to navigate displacement.	Refugee women are not only victims; their agency emerges within and against unequal legal, economic, and patriarchal structures.

Note: Compiled by the authors based on the thematic synthesis of studies reviewed in Section 6.

As Table 1 demonstrates, Iran and Türkiye form connected stages of a broader displacement process. The table supports the article's central claim that Afghan refugees' vulnerabilities in Türkiye require greater attention to prior experiences in Iran and Afghanistan.

7. Discussion: From Destination-Country Bias to Corridor-Based Security

The findings synthesized above demonstrate that Afghan refugees' insecurity cannot be adequately understood through a destination-country lens alone. Much of the Türkiye-centered literature provides important insights into legal status, labor market participation, access to services, social exclusion, and gendered experiences after arrival. However, when these findings are disconnected from earlier phases of displacement, they risk reproducing what this article calls transit discontinuity. Such an approach makes the vulnerabilities observed in Türkiye appear as if they emerge only after arrival, rather than as part of a longer process shaped by experiences in Afghanistan and Iran.

Overcoming this discontinuity requires tracing insecurity from the country of origin through transit and destination contexts. In Afghanistan, decades of armed conflict, political instability, and patriarchal rule have shaped women's access to education, employment, healthcare, mobility, bodily security, and public life. The Taliban's resurgence has intensified these insecurities by denying women and girls fundamental rights, including access to education, employment, healthcare, freedom of movement, and protection from gender-based violence (Kaya, 2024; Tan & İneli Cığır, 2023). This systematic oppression forms an initial basis for women's flight and shapes their subsequent experiences of displacement (Heinrichs, 2024). It has also strengthened debates over whether Afghan women and girls should be recognized as a particular social group deserving protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention due to gender-based persecution. From the perspective of this article, these conditions show that Afghan women's insecurity does not begin at the Iranian or Turkish border; rather, it is rooted in the country of origin and then carried into transit and destination contexts.

Iran constitutes the next major phase in this continuum of insecurity. For many Afghans, Iran is not simply a route toward Türkiye but a long-term host and transit space where vulnerabilities are reproduced and transformed. Legal exclusion, limited access to healthcare and education, food insecurity, exploitative labor conditions, social marginalization, and intimate partner violence all shape refugees' physical and psychological well-being before they arrive in Türkiye. These experiences matter because they influence refugees' health, social networks, coping strategies, mobility decisions, and exposure to further insecurity. Therefore, studies conducted in Iran are not peripheral to understanding Afghan refugees in Türkiye; they are essential for explaining the prior conditions through which vulnerabilities are accumulated.

Türkiye, in turn, represents not a clean break from earlier insecurity but another stage in the same displacement process. Legal uncertainty, settlement restrictions, irregular status, fear of deportation, low-wage work, limited access to services, and social exclusion interact with vulnerabilities already produced in Afghanistan and Iran. From this perspective, the problems identified in Türkiye-based research should not be read only as consequences of Turkish migration governance or integration challenges. They should also be understood as part of a cumulative security trajectory in which prior experiences of violence, exclusion, and deprivation continue to shape refugees' lives after arrival.

FSP is particularly useful for analyzing this trajectory because it asks how and by whom security is defined. Conventional state-centered approaches tend to prioritize border control, migration management, and national security, whereas FSP foregrounds bodily security, dignity, legal recognition, access to basic services, and freedom from violence. In the context of Afghan displacement, this distinction is crucial. In Iran, the portrayal of Afghan migrants as security, economic, or sociopolitical problems has contributed to discriminatory practices and social marginalization. In Türkiye, legal uncertainty, settlement restrictions, irregular status, and fear of deportation similarly show how state-centered migration policies can produce insecurity even when refugees are no longer in the country of origin. From an FSP perspective, limited access to maternal healthcare, food insecurity, intimate partner violence, exploitative labor, undocumented mobility, and reduced access to preventive healthcare are not secondary humanitarian concerns; they are central security problems because they affect bodily integrity, autonomy, survival, and dignity.

At the same time, FSP helps avoid representing Afghan women only as passive victims. The literature also shows agency, coping, and resilience. Afghan women in Iran may renegotiate gender roles, develop self-awareness, and adapt to difficult social and economic conditions. In Türkiye, Afghan women use social networks, family ties, civil society initiatives, women's committees, and cooperatives to navigate displacement and participate in collective forms of support. However, this agency is not separate from insecurity. Rather, it emerges within unequal legal, economic, and patriarchal structures. A feminist reading must therefore hold vulnerability and agency together.

This discussion has important implications for refugee research. Studies on Afghan refugees in Türkiye should more systematically incorporate refugees' prior migration trajectories, especially experiences in Afghanistan and Iran. Without this, legal precarity, health problems, labor exploitation, social isolation, and gender-based violence may appear as problems that begin only after arrival in Türkiye. A corridor-based approach instead shows that these insecurities are cumulative and relational. It also explains why research conducted in Iran is essential for interpreting the vulnerabilities and coping strategies that refugees bring with them.

Finally, the findings point to the need for gender-sensitive and corridor-aware policy responses. Policies addressing Afghan refugees should move beyond gender-neutral and destination-limited approaches. This includes improving access to legal protection, maternal and reproductive healthcare, education, psychosocial support, employment rights, protection from gender-based violence, and

participation mechanisms for refugee women. Frameworks such as the Women, Peace, and Security agenda may offer useful principles, but their relevance depends on whether they are connected to refugees' lived realities across origin, transit, and destination contexts (Li, 2023). A people-centered security approach must therefore recognize Afghan displacement not as a single act of border crossing, but as a continuous process in which insecurity is produced, accumulated, and transformed across Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined the gendered dynamics of Afghan refugee displacement through the lens of FSP, arguing that displacement should be understood as a continuous and cumulative process rather than a singular event confined to arrival in a destination country. By employing a comparative qualitative evidence synthesis of existing empirical studies on Afghanistan, Iran, and Türkiye, the article has shown how insecurity is produced across time and space through structural inequalities, legal precarity, patriarchal violence, economic marginalization, and gendered power relations that shape refugees' everyday lives.

A central contribution of this study lies in its critique of Türkiye-centered refugee scholarship that implicitly treats Afghan refugees as if they arrive directly from Afghanistan, largely detached from their prior migration trajectories. This article conceptualizes this tendency as transit discontinuity: the analytical separation of refugees' conditions in the destination country from the vulnerabilities, survival strategies, and insecurities accumulated during earlier phases of displacement. Such an approach risks misreading Afghan refugees' experiences in Türkiye as sudden or context-specific, rather than as part of a longer displacement trajectory shaped by conditions in Afghanistan and Iran.

The findings demonstrate that insecurity begins in the country of origin, where decades of conflict, political instability, patriarchal rule, and the Taliban's restrictions on women's education, employment, healthcare, mobility, and public life produce the initial conditions of flight. However, these insecurities do not end once refugees leave Afghanistan. Iran functions not merely as a geographical corridor but as a long-term host and transit space where legal exclusion, limited access to healthcare and education, food insecurity, exploitative labor conditions, social marginalization, and gender-based violence further shape refugees' physical, psychological, and social well-being. These experiences are then carried into Türkiye, where they interact with new forms of legal uncertainty, settlement restrictions, labor exploitation, limited access to services, and social exclusion.

By reading studies conducted in Iran and Türkiye together, this article has shown that many of the challenges Afghan refugees face in Türkiye cannot be fully understood without reference to earlier phases of displacement. Legal precarity, health problems, labor exploitation, gender-based violence, social isolation, and coping strategies are not produced independently in the Turkish context. Rather, they are layered, relational, and historically accumulated across the Afghanistan–Iran–Türkiye displacement corridor. This perspective is particularly important for understanding Afghan women, whose lives are shaped by intersecting forms of patriarchy, migration control, economic vulnerability, bodily insecurity, and resilience across multiple national contexts.

Grounded in FSP, the article emphasizes the necessity of a people-centered, gender-sensitive, and corridor-aware approach to refugee security. Such an approach challenges narrow definitions of security that prioritize borders, state control, and migration management, and instead foregrounds human dignity, bodily integrity, legal recognition, access to basic services, freedom from violence, and everyday safety. It also avoids representing Afghan women only as passive victims by recognizing their agency, coping strategies, social networks, and participation in collective forms of support, while still acknowledging the unequal structures within which such agency emerges.

Finally, this study calls for future refugee research to move beyond territorial and temporal fragmentation by systematically incorporating origin, transit, and destination contexts into analysis. For studies on Afghan refugees in Türkiye, this means taking the Iranian phase of displacement seriously as an essential part of the analytical framework. For policymakers, it means developing protection responses that are not only gender-sensitive but also attentive to the cumulative insecurities refugees carry across borders. Only by acknowledging displacement as a continuous, gendered, and corridor-based security process can researchers and policymakers more accurately address the lived realities and security needs of Afghan refugees in Türkiye and beyond.

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