

# Hope in exile: Afghan refugee children struggle for education in Pakistan



Afghan refugee parents and their children gather at My TOEFL House in Rawalpindi, determined to build a brighter future through education

*Photo Credit: Asif Hamraz*

by Mehrullah Rahmani

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Exile is silent, but its pain lives on in the dreams of Afghan children. The noise of factories in Pakistan has come to supplant the ringing of school bells in the refugee settlements. Empty notebooks sit around waiting to be used in what is becoming a more distant future. For thousands of Afghan children, education is now a luxury — something they may wish to have but won't receive.

In August 2021, my family left Kabul when **the Taliban came back to power** and we had to leave our home and all that was familiar to us. I was then a high school student and I wished to follow my dream of becoming a doctor because I thought education would protect me against the world's confusion. However, the act of going across the border into Pakistan froze that belief. We didn't find any waiting classes, any teachers, any assurance of the future — only the raw realities of displacement and uncertainty.

This isn't only my case; it is the case for thousands of Afghan refugee children in Pakistan. The National Commission on the Rights of the Child Pakistan indicates that **only 28% of school-aged refugee children have access** to public schools or schools supported by UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency. The rest, who would love to study, are pushed out by law or policy. To access formal schools, **certain documents** such as birth certificates, national identification and family registration records from Afghanistan are required. However, most families fled quickly without these documents or lost them along the way. Even when they do produce them, they are often turned away, leaving children to spend years waiting at home.

For the children this means lost years of education and for parents it means watching their children grow up believing that education is for others, not for them. Even when schools are open to refugee children, costs such as fees, uniforms and transportation become barriers for families already struggling to survive. For many, the choice is not between school and no school, but between school and food. Even worse, girls are even more restricted to their homes because of safety concerns.

In response, communities and small organisations have stepped in where formal structures fall short. Across Pakistan, a quiet network of community groups and small organisations is trying to hold the promise of education together for Afghan refugee children. These are not large, well-funded systems but improvised efforts shaped by necessity. They have created informal schools and classrooms, learning circles and support networks that attempt to bridge the gap between exclusion and opportunity.

**My TOEFL House Learning Circle** was formed by two Afghan educators in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Parents and young adults met every day in a community centre, using donated books and online resources to support each other's learning. Over time, these informal circles not only improved the academic skills of the children but also gave families a strong sense of support and community.

In Mohammadi Chowk in Delhi, a group of Afghan families gathers every day. Without a formal school building, they meet in a small, shared space, sometimes inside a mosque or a community centre. Using donated books and free wi-fi, these informal gatherings allow children to study, share knowledge and grow together.

Dawood Hosseini, an educated Afghan, established a refugee-led group there that provides informal classes for younger children in rented rooms or community centres. These informal classes focus on core subjects like literacy, maths and English, along with Afghan cultural studies to preserve their heritage and identity.

Refugee-led groups play an important role in sustaining access to education and at the same time ensures that cultural identity is retained during migration. These efforts are not perfect, but they reflect a practical and human response to a crisis that policies alone have not resolved. They show that while the barriers are real, so too are the attempts, often quiet and unnoticed, to overcome them.

Local organisations try to support these spaces with supplies or small stipends, but funding is uncertain and inconsistent. There is also the challenge of recognition. Children who study in these informal settings rarely receive certificates that are accepted by formal education systems, making it difficult for them to transition into schools later.

There are important lessons in these experiences for those working in humanitarian education.

First, community-led efforts should not be seen as temporary or secondary, but as essential foundations that deserve support and investment. These initiatives understand the realities of refugee life better than any external system and are often the first to respond.

Second, reducing barriers to formal school enrolment would immediately expand access. Flexible policies around documentation and fees could allow thousands of children to return to classrooms.

Third, education programs must be consistent and long-term. Short-term interventions cannot address a crisis that has already lasted for years. Refugee children need continuity, recognition of their learning and pathways into accredited systems.

Finally, listening to refugee communities themselves is critical. They are not only beneficiaries but partners with knowledge, resilience and solutions shaped by lived experience.

It is clear that these learning spaces offer something vital: a sense of normalcy, dignity and hope. They show that even in displacement, communities are not passive recipients of aid but active creators of opportunity.

Education in exile isn't merely a learning process but an act of resistance. It says that borders and political indifference will not define our lives. "One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world," as Malala Yousafzai [told the United Nations in 2013](#) as a sixteen-year-old. The pen of Afghan refugees is often broken, but the hand holding it is steady.

Behind every statistic there is a true story ... stories such as mine. A boy who lost his classroom, a mother who cried without making a noise, a family struggling to survive. Such tales seldom feature in the headlines, but the world should recognise the weight behind them.

Education shouldn't be a privilege, but a lifeline. This crisis won't be over until every Afghan refugee child in Pakistan is able to open a book without fear. While the world is preoccupied with borders and policies, Afghan refugees are waiting, not to be given charity but to be given a chance, not to be offered sympathy but to be granted justice.

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### **Disclosures:**

*The author was previously a student at My TOEFL House Learning Circle, which supported Afghan refugees in Pakistan. The Learning Circle is no longer active due to recent changes affecting Afghan refugees.*

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<https://devpolicy.org/hope-in-exile-afghan-refugee-children-struggle-for-education-in-pakistan-20260523/>