

# *Freedom Beyond the Boarder*

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AFGHAN FEMALE REFUGEES' PERCEPTION  
OF FREEDOM FOLLOWING FORCED MIGRATION IN DENMARK**

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## Abstract

Throughout Afghanistan's history, Afghan women have faced numerous challenges and have been denied basic human rights, resulting in limited freedoms. Women's rights have experienced fluctuating progress and setbacks under various governmental regimes. The Taliban regime, which controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, severely restricted women's rights, where women were largely confined to their houses and were denied access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. They were forced to wear veils and faced harsh punishments for violating the Taliban's strict interpretation of Islamic law. Following their fall in 2001, there was a heightened focus on modernizing Afghanistan and promoting women's development by subsequent governments. However, with the resurgence of the Taliban in 2021, Afghan women now face the imminent threat of being subjected to religious extremism and oppressive laws. As a result, many Afghan women have become refugees, compelled to seek security and freedom elsewhere. Denmark is one of the few countries granting asylum based on gender, considering their vulnerability, and ensuring security. This forced migration has dramatically altered their lives, exposing them to vulnerability in a new society as refugees, on the other hand, offering an opportunity from an egalitarian perspective to access previously unattainable rights. However, settling into new surroundings comes with cultural challenges that often lead to conflicting situations. This study focuses on integrating these women and girls from a freedom point of view. The central research question focuses on whether they have the freedom to choose their desired lifestyle in Denmark. The study utilizes a mixed-method analysis and incorporates theories such as Intersectionality, Social Dominance Theory, and Empowerment. In the end, the study validates that the perception of freedom in Afghan girls and women is relative and varies depending on multiple factors imposed on them, whereas the older generation's perception of freedom restricts the younger generation from pursuing their preferred lifestyle choices. As a result, the potential outcomes include forced marriages, non-physical forms of violence, and the stigmatization of victims through honor shaming. However, different perceptions of freedom gradually converge, aligning with attaining all human rights.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Dominance, Women's Rights, Human Rights Violation, Gender Equality, Afghan Female Refugee

## **Acronyms**

DRC= Danish Refugee Council

EU = European Union

EUAA=European Union Agency for Asylum

GBV= Gender-Based Violence

GE= Gender Equality

HRD= Human Rights and Development

IDLO= International Development Law Organization

INGO= International Non-Governmental Organization

NRC= Norwegian Refugee Council

PoV= Point of View

SDG= Sustainable Development Goals

SDO= Social Dominance Orientation

SDT= Social Dominance Theory

UDHR= Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UIS= The UNESCO Institute for Statistics

UNAMA= United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNDP= United Nations Development Program

UNGA = General Assembly of the United Nations

UNHCR= United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF= United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

WB= World Bank

WEF = The World Economic Forum

WH= Welcome House, Copenhagen

VAWG= Violence Against Women and Girls

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Afghan women's life and freedom has had many challenges during the history of Afghanistan. For many years they have been deprived of fundamental human rights.

During the first period of governance by the Taliban regime (1996-2001), abuses of women's rights, such as prohibiting women from educating, working, free movement, and mandatory hijab (Burqa), etc. occurred. After the Taliban takeover on 15 August 2021, notwithstanding their promise to respect women's rights, once again, women were deprived of their fundamental rights. The first and second takeovers of the Taliban led to flee of many Afghan people as refugees to other countries. (Amir Jan, et al, 2022)

Following the deterioration of women's rights in Afghanistan, in January 2023, the EUAA (European Union Agency for Asylum) country guidance published a report regarding Afghanistan. It is asserted that Afghan women and girls should be entitled to grant refugee status based on their gender. Considering it as a "*guidance*," this declaration is not mandatory for all EU member states (Afghanistan: Taliban restrictions on women and girls amount to persecution, 2023).

Sweden had already opted to grant asylum status to Afghan women and girls in December 2022. In December 2022, Finland declared that Afghan women and girls will be granted asylum status. Denmark also prioritizes Afghan refugee women and girls "*solely based on their gender*," (Denmark to grant asylum status to Afghan women 'solely based on gender,' 2023). The logic behind this decision is attributed to the "*worsening situation for women and girls in Afghanistan*," according to the European Union Agency for Asylum country guidance on 24 January 2022. This decision makes Afghan women and girls' cases extraordinary since they are the only female refugees who are granted asylum status based on their gender. In most cases, if a woman is granted asylum, authorities generally extend protection to her husband and her children under the age of 18, ensuring that they receive safeguarding based on their relationship with the wife or mother (Info about Afghan women and asylum in Denmark, 2023). Afghan women have started to get residence permits and settling in Denmark from 2022.

In a democratic country like Denmark, they can benefit from numerous rights that they would never have had in Afghanistan. This includes the freedom of speech, freedom to choose their desired lifestyle comprised of choosing their partner, religion, clothing, and so on.

Considering the prolonged period of tension and hardship they have experienced, it raises concerns about how Afghan women and girls will adapt to their new circumstances in Denmark, where these people have never been or experienced living in those conditions. Besides their daily living style differences, the cultural shock and language barrier could also introduce extra challenges for adopting the new living condition. Furthermore, living under patriarchic culture for many years in their country could also lead to some potential conflicts in their families. In this thesis work, it is attempted to examine the effect of the new lifestyle on individuals' daily experiences considering the cultural background in different generations.

### **1.1 Problem Formulation**

In the aftermath of the Taliban's recent seizure of power in Afghanistan, women being subjected to oppressive conditions and widespread violations of their basic human rights turned many women being forced to leave their homeland in search of safety. As mentioned, Denmark is among the nations offering asylum to these vulnerable girls and women from Afghanistan, having known their background in Afghanistan, it is questioned how their life will change after moving to Denmark as asylum. Could they take benefits of the numerous rights that they are granted in Denmark as females or not? If not, what factors preclude them from benefiting from new opportunities?

After an Afghan girl or woman flees to Denmark due to the unstable situation in their home country, their cultural background would be in contradiction with the normal lifestyle in the host country. Now, the question is how an Afghan woman and girl could handle this contradiction to choose their desired lifestyle freely. Could this contribute to a dilemma to choose which way is the one that is closer to her desired lifestyle and what price she needs to pay if she decides to prefer one side?

It is obvious that the people who flee from the newly imposed situation in Afghanistan are not happy about it. However, there are some beliefs that root in their cultural background that they have been growing up with, and these beliefs and habits could be in contradiction with the accepted lifestyle in the host country. Could this contraction contribute to an external force on Afghan women and girls to hinder them from choosing their desired lifestyle, and if one to decide to take one side, could this lead to pay any price by them, or does the other side totally accept it?

Consequently, the research problem revolves around the question as follows:

***Are Afghan refugee women and girls free to choose their desired lifestyle in a liberal country, Denmark?***

To answer this question, three following sub-questions are made:

1. How is their background (the way of life in Afghanistan) impacting their lifestyle in Denmark?
2. What do Afghan refugee women and girls understand by 'Freedom of life' in Denmark?
3. How to bridge the gap between two generations' perspectives?

## **1.2 Research Objective**

This research seeks to explore the post-migration experiences of Afghan female refugees who have settled in Denmark, with a specific focus on understanding how their lives are influenced by the transition to a liberal and democratic country. Additionally, the study is aimed to identify and analyze various factors that impact the integration process of Afghan female refugees in Denmark.

In this context, this study objective is to focus on the gender aspect of the refugees' life, where Afghan female refugees will be studied broadly to understand how their lives are shifting after entering Denmark.

## **1.3 Rationale**

As culturally Afghan women are brought up in an extreme form of a patriarchal society where male-dominant rules and religious dogmatism constrain their lives, there is a massive gap in research about how their lives are tilted when they are staying in a foreign or liberal country. On the other hand, their integration in the host countries is also questioned because of negative stereotyping and cultural exclusion. Because of their ethnic culture and upbringing along with a lower level of education, accessing the digital system, accessing fundamental needs independently, and contributing to the labor sector are complex. The policy and its implication thus need a special design depending on the background of these Afghan women so that they can get out of the stereotyping and access every service as any other free and independent woman.

In this context, the study is conducted to address a potential research gap by investigating their migration experiences in Denmark as refugees, considering their past encounters with oppression,

war, and male dominance. By gathering empirical data, this research sights to contribute towards bridging this research gap.

It is important to clarify that the purpose of this study is not to criticize or blame any cultural aspect of the upbringing of Afghan girls and women. Instead, its aim is to bring attention to the harmful practices that can occur within cultures and highlight the normalization of human rights violations under the veil of "culture and religion". By shedding light on these issues, the study intends to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges faced by Afghan girls and women, as well as promote the protection of their fundamental human rights.

#### **1.4 Personal Motivation**

Driven by the recognition of the Afghan female refugees as one of the most vulnerable groups among other refugees from our perspective, we were motivated to undertake in-depth research focused on their unique circumstances. These women have faced prolonged exposure to human rights abuses, which forms the backdrop for our exploration of the complex issues they face. Our motivation is rooted in our belief in gender equality, justice, and human rights for all individuals, especially those who have endured significant hardships. We strongly advocate for modified support and dedicated attention to Afghan female refugees, given their distinct experiences and struggle by shedding lights on their experiences and for the establishment of specific laws and measures to ensure their protection.

## Chapter 2: Background

This section introduces a brief history of women's rights in Afghanistan throughout the last century. Being marginalized in the history of Afghanistan, women have had to obey the rules set by men in their absence and without their intervention. Even when some positive changes were happening, the success was negligent due to the lack of awareness of women and the top-down status of the rules (Wimpelmann, 2017).

### 2.1 Women from Afghanistan's Independence to the first Taliban Take over

After defeating Britain in the British-Afghan war (1919-21), Afghanistan became independent under the leadership of Amanullah Khan (A historical timeline of Afghanistan, 2021). From 1919 to 1926, he governed Afghanistan as "*emir*" and took power as a king from 1926-1929. Amanullah Khan was the first ruler in Afghanistan to acknowledge women's rights and implement measures in favor of women. He established a constitution that recognized "*civil rights*" for both genders, banned "*traditional*" cloth and scarf for women, and abolished forced marriage (Cox, 2022, p. 115).

Islam was chosen as the country's official religion without specifying Shia and Sunni (branches of Islam) despite most of the population being Sunni. Secular and religious laws were also identified in the Constitution with the same value (Wimpelmann, 2017). His wife didn't wear a hijab anymore and was a proponent of gender equality. His rules were against the religious belief of extremists and "*conservative groups*" in Afghanistan, and they encourage people to revolt against Amanullah Khan. These led to his fall in 1929 (Cox, 2022, p. 115).

After Amanullah Khan, Habibullah Kalikani and Nadir Shah took control of the country, respectively. Nadir Shah again banned girls from school, forced women to wear hijab, and ruined all improvements in women's rights and freedoms that Amanullah Khan had gained (M. Das, 2006). He also reestablished Hanifa Figh (a branch of Sunni in Islam) as the official religion of the country. He governed Afghanistan for four years and was killed in 1933. Zahir Shah, son of Nadir Shah, governed Afghanistan after his father. He reestablished Amanullah Khan's approaches to women's rights and freedoms. Once again, girls were allowed to attend schools, and he allocated a budget for opening new universities. With a new constitution in 1950, he launched a "*democratic framework*." Moreover, women were allowed to vote. Women's rights to work and participation in the political arena were other improvements during his period (Cox, 2022, p. 116). However, all improvements and reforms

were inspired by men in a “*top-down*” approach rather than being motivated by the women’s rights movement (Wimpelmann, 2017, p. 35).

Aided by “*pro-Soviet communism*”, Mohammad Daoud gained control over the country in 1973 by defeating Zahir Shah in a “*military coup*.” He steered Afghanistan in a dictatorship way. Notwithstanding being a dictator, he adopted positive measures to protect women’s rights (Wimpelmann, 2017, p. 34). Daoud ratified the criminal code in 1976 and civil law in 1977, which was very advanced for that time. According to the 1977 civil law, girls under the age of 15 were not allowed to marry, and some restrictions on men’s right to have several wives simultaneously were adopted. The criminal code criminalized forced marriage and set penalties for perpetrators. (Wimpelmann, 2017)

In April 1978, The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew Daoud and took power. Revolutionary Council seized power afterward, and Afghanistan was declared a “*democratic people’s republic*.” The Revolutionary Council ratified several advanced laws, including Mandatory education, liberation of women, and prohibition of Dowry, child, and forced marriage (Wimpelmann, 2017, p. 36). These all contradicted the people’s religious beliefs and consequently led to wide-ranging protests with Mujahedin’s backup. Following turbulence in the country, the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan in 1979. Numerous insurgencies and unrest occurred, and many people died subsequently.

Following the gradual transfer of power to Dr. Najibullah, once again Islam acknowledged as the official religion in 1987. (Wimpelmann, 2017) In 1989 based on a peace treaty in Geneva, Afghanistan’s independence and “*withdrawal*” of the USSR from Afghanistan were agreed. (A historical timeline of Afghanistan, 2021)

In 1992 Mujahedin took control of Kabul, and their leaders established a new government. It was the first time throughout Afghanistan's history that this country was announced as an “*Islamic republic*.” They declared new rules that women must be veiled and were not allowed to work or study. Furthermore, the new government considered workplaces and schools susceptible to sinning if women attended. In 1994 they announced that women were prohibited from going out unless it was essential. It was the first time in the history of women’s rights that they were banned from leaving home. However, due to the unrest and war in the capital, these flawed rules were not implemented effectively. (Wimpelmann, 2017)

## **2.2 Women in the first Taliban Governing Period (1996-2001)**

Being exposed to prolonged periods of war, drought, and hunger, Afghan people were wearied and yearned for peace. In those crippling circumstances, Taliban, with its commitment to Islamic rule and guarantee the peace, was the only option for the Afghan people. (A historical timeline of Afghanistan, 2021). Naming itself the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan (Cox, 2022), the Taliban governed Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 (Country Guidance: Afghanistan, 2023).

They enacted horrible and extreme rules against women. Implementing sharia as a resource of laws, the Taliban never introduced a constitution. In 1996, they announced that women were forbidden from going to school. But they went further and announced that not only are women not allowed to attend school, but they also should be banned from being literate due to the pernicious effects of being able to write. They held that by acquiring the knowledge to write, women could write about their immoral and illegal ambitions. Women were not allowed to leave home unless accompanied by a male family member. They must wear a “*Burka*” and refuse makeup or perfume (Wimpelmann, 2017, p. 39). Females also were not allowed to work or participate in any social activity. Shopping, “*driving*,” and using “*public baths*” were forbidden for women. Women’s physical punishments and death penalty cases were abundant in the Taliban governing period. Taliban believed granting women’s rights is against Islam rules and would contribute to “*moral corruption in the society*.” The only responsibilities they assumed for women were raising children and being in charge of home affairs. After the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack on Global Trade Towers, the US, with its Western alliance, attacked Afghanistan and defeated the Taliban (S. Sumitra, et al, 2023, p. 231).

## **2.3 Women after the Taliban’s Fall of 2001**

On 22 December 2001, Hamid Karzai was appointed as a “*leader of the interim government*”. Later, he was elected as the president in 2004. In January 2004, new constitutional law was enacted recognizing that men and women are equal; the new constitution established women's rights to study and to work. This constitution paved the way for women to be appointed in parliament, the judiciary system, ministries, and as ambassadors. Moreover, the ban on mandatory hijab was repealed (S. Sumitra, et al, 2023, p. 232).

Furthermore, according to the constitution, Afghanistan should respect all conventions on Human rights. Subsequently, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and Rights was established to support



women's rights. Besides, several laws concerning women's rights were enacted. Multiple women were recruited for official jobs such as "*ministers*," and many resources were allocated for supporting women's rights and involvement in all sectors of society (Cox, 2022, p. 118).

In 2009, a law that stemmed from Afghanistan's constitution on a ban on violence against women was ratified. Accordingly, violence against women was criminalized and considered a crime (S. Sumitra, et al, 2023). However, in 2009, parliament enacted a law under the pretext of Islam rules which contradicted women's rights. According to that law, if a woman refused sex with her husband, he could punish her (Cox, 2022). Parliament's decision to increase men's "*quota share in the provincial council*" exacerbated this situation. Alongside many regressions in women's rights, extremists declared that women's right is incompatible with Islam and is the imposition of Western culture. Thus, there were many clashes between extremists with access to power and women's activists who could influence the government with international donations. Consequently, women's rights were in fluctuation during that period (Cox, 2022, p. 122).

In September 2014, Ashraf Ghani was elected as Afghanistan's president (A historical timeline of Afghanistan, 2021). He made unprecedented reforms in favor of women. He chose women in his cabinet and obliged ministers to appoint a woman as their deputy. Moreover, girls took advantage of a great opportunity to attend schools in rural and urban areas (Cox, 2022).

Nevertheless, the extreme and conservative groups were active and constantly struggled over reforms on women's rights with women's rights activists. Yet, the harassment faced by women by some government officials was on the rise (Cox, 2022).

Despite granting many rights to women after the Taliban's fall due to living many years under war, turmoil and violence, most Afghan men could not stand women's freedom and participation in the society. Consequently, women were still victims of violence (M. Das, 2006).

Forcible marriages, physical abuses, sexual harassment, and violence against women were prevalent in Afghanistan. In rural areas, the situation was even worse (S. Sumitra, et al, 2023).

## **2.4 Women after Taliban's takeover of 2021**

In August 2021, the Taliban started to regained power as the US withdrew its troops from Afghanistan as part of a peace agreement made in 2020. On 29 February 2022, the Taliban and the US signed the agreement “*for bringing peace to Afghanistan*”, which is called the ‘*Doha agreement*’ and the US agreed to withdraw their soldiers from Afghanistan (Country Guidance: Afghanistan, 2023). On 15th of August 2022 following the “*US withdrawal*” the Taliban took control over Afghanistan, and President Ashraf Ghani had to fled to UAE (Amir Jan, et all, p. 2766). Taliban set up the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan once gain (Country Guidance: Afghanistan, 2023). Although the Taliban promised that they won't restrict girls and women from their freedom, many women abandoned the country due to the past horrible experience of Taliban governing (Amir Jan, et all, 2022).

They resume most practices in their first governing period. They closed the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and once again, girls are forbidden to go to school and universities. Females are not allowed to work even in the private sector. The ban on the free movement of women was reestablished again, and a male in their family must accompany them (Cox, 2022).

Therefore, the history of Afghanistan reveals that women have been deprived of many rights and have been unable to lead the life they want. Even in some periods that they were granted some rights, Afghan women could not achieve such rights properly due to the unwillingness of men and extremists. Misusing religion as a justification to curtail women's rights, men have always been in a dominant position over women.

## **2.5 Afghan Refugee Women in Other Nations**

As gender roles are perceived through a patriarchal religious dogmatism way, Afghan women have always been associated with socially constructed feminine roles, which most Afghan women had to follow when they reached puberty. One qualitative study carried out in Melbourne, Australia, among Afghan refugee migrant women found two of the respondents were ‘bacha posh’ (girl wearing boy's clothes to portray themselves as a boy) when they were in Afghanistan because their parents prioritized having boy child in the family as a sign of ‘honor’ in the society, but when they moved to Australia, there was no need to continuing being bacha posh as Australia recognizes women rights as human rights and women can study, work and achieve freedom without governmental or social barrier (Hamidi et al, p.3, 2021). Another study revealed that Afghan migrants have access to various opportunities in a liberal country like Australia, but the transition from a fixed and distinct gender role-based conservative society to an egalitarian society creates barriers to integration. “*The process*

*of adaptation and integration into the new environment, alongside the demand to fulfill traditional gender roles, could result in disagreement and conflict”* (Afrouz et al, p.11, 2022). Family obstacles, individual barriers, and cultural and social hurdles to overcome become new challenges (Afrouz et al, 2021). Again, Afghan women in Australia's domestic violence-related health-seeking behavior is barricaded by the in-built cultural norms and community barriers to prevent family reputation and personal circumstances or views on healthcare provision (Afrouz et el, p.221, 2021).

Besides challenges in gender role transitions and barriers to accessing fundamental human rights, the cultural tradition of violence against Afghan women can be traced in many liberal countries within the community. According to Katarzyna Sadowa (2015), ‘honor-based violence’ in Europe has become a real problem and is causing on a broader scale due to migration effect. The inefficacy of identifying the nature of crime, lack of legal and practical measures to protect human rights and implication of existing law could be attributed to the rising number of such violence. The ‘shameful’ acts for which a person may be a victim of honor killing are considered events like: *“adultery, rejection of a forced/arranged marriage, being in relationship non-approved by family, seeking divorce, use of alcohol and drugs, inappropriate clothing, homosexuality, running away from home, being a victim of rape/sexual abuse or sometimes even just a rumor about rendering one of these acts.”* (Sadowa, 2015, p 1).

In Europe, the number of honor killings associated with Afghan or Afghan descendants are noticeable. In Norway in 2002, Afghan refugee Anooshe Sediq Ghulam, a victim of domestic violence in marital relationship, was murdered by her husband in the name of ‘honor’ (News: Stravanger Aftenblad, 2003). In Sweden in 2019, another Afghan man was found guilty of the honor killing of his wife (Jens Andersson, 2019). In Germany in 2021, an Afghan woman was murdered by her brothers for giving up practicing Islam and the list goes on (Matthew Becker, 2022). And all these marriages are traced back to being victim of ‘forced marriage’ with evidence of domestic violences in the marital relationship. In the case of Norway and Sweden the role of polices were highly criticized. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that Afghan women face violence from their own family and community when they attempt to integrate into societies that promote gender equality or opt for lifestyles different from the oppressive norms they experienced in Afghanistan.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This section presents various approaches and methodological considerations attached to our research problem. First, the choice of theories is described. In this regard, theories of intersectionality, social dominance theory, and theory of empowerment are applied to illuminate novel insight into the research problem. Next, the choice of data and methods of data collection is introduced. Subsequently, sampling and access to participants and Data collection techniques are elaborated. The subsequent step involves explaining the method of analysis, which encompasses descriptive and thematic analysis. Following that, information regarding the data is presented, including demographic details, perspectives on freedom-related aspects and dominance-based information. Ethical considerations are then addressed, followed by an elaboration of the limitations and delimitations encountered during the investigation and thesis writing process. The geographical study area is expounded upon in the subsequent section. Finally, the research timeline and design are sequentially depicted, providing a comprehensive overview of the research progression.

### **3.1 Choice of Theories**

This section introduces related theories and their operationalization in conjunction with our data.

The chosen theories are,

- A) Intersectionality
- B) Social dominance theory
- C) Empowerment

First, the theory of intersectionality is explained to indicate how multiple facets of Afghan refugee female intersect and brings about a pretext for discrimination. Subsequently, social dominance theory is introduced to reveal the power hierarchy in Afghan families with patriotic mindsets. Finally, to tackle the research problem, empowerment theory would present an insightful perception of the research question.

### **3.2 Choice of Data**

To provide our theories with concrete evidence, qualitative and quantitative data are utilized to investigate our research question. Qualitative data includes semi-structured in-depth interviews with 17 Afghan refugee females who reside in Denmark as refugees or have a refugee background. This study has a major contribution in terms of primary sources. However, for analyzing the research

problem, primary and secondary sources are both used. Interviews are our major primary sources. Along with that, the advantage of participatory observation was implied since one of the authors is a volunteer in a refugee camp in Copenhagen, which more than 100 Afghan refugees reside there.

This study also explores the existing research and recent literature, including scholars' and researchers' ideas, as well as documents and reports from various INGOs and organizations like; UN Women, UNDP, UNICEF, Save the Children, European Union, legislations, and ethnographic accounts found in social media platform like Facebook, and different international and local news portals from Denmark and Afghanistan as sources of secondary data.

### **3.3 Sampling and Access to Participants**

The respondents are found via different channels such as Facebook groups, refugee camps, and individual referrals. Out of the total of 17 respondents, four were found through a Facebook group called 'Afghans in Denmark', six were found through one of the authors who works as a volunteer at Welcome House in Copenhagen, and the rest were introduced via several referrals.

The respondents are chosen from age groups ranging from 15 to 45. They are also categorized based on the number of years they have been residing in Denmark. Due to confidentiality and ethical promises, it has been agreed that the name of the respondent is deemed to be anonymous. However, due to simplicity, a pseudonym is assigned to each respondent.

Some of the participants were enthusiastic about the interview knowing that it is merely academic research and conducted anonymously with having no fear about expressing one's statement. Among them some participants also expressed their gratitude saying, 'We are so happy that our voice could ultimately be heard and might influence the decision makers in protecting our rights, they hoped that the outcome of this research could be used as input to the Danish authorities to take necessary measures in the future to preserve their rights.

### **3.5 Data Collection Techniques**

Due to the convenience and preferences of the respondents, different ways were applied to collect the primary data. The dominant method was face-to-face interviews, while some chose to have it conducted through virtual meetings. It is worth mentioning that no participants were willing to have their voices recorded.

Most participants were speaking in the same language as one of the author's mother tongues (Farsi-Dari) except for two cases who spoke in English and Pashto. The former chose to be interviewed in English because she has lived in Denmark for many years; hence, she was not fluent in Farsi but fluent in English. The latter was interviewed with a translator's aid to avoid misunderstanding. It is important to note that two respondents were deaf, and the interviews were conducted with one of their daughter's assistance, who was familiar with communicating in sign language.

Four out of 17 respondents opted to be interviewed online via Teams. Seven face-to-face meetings were conducted in the café located in WH, and the rest were accomplished in several cafés in the Copenhagen area depending on the respondent's preference and time. Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes. It should be mentioned that written permission was obtained from the manager of WH prior to interviews.

The secondary data were collected through the desk research method where library studies, analyzing existing articles, cross-checking data in different websites, and follow-up of news portals were used.

### **3.5 Method of Analysis**

The method of analysis followed a descriptive analysis to present quantitative data from primary and secondary sources, along with the six-step process of 'Thematic Analysis' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to investigate the empirical data. This kind of analysis supports us in the case of theoretical freedom i.e. it can be applied to different theoretical frameworks. Our study is a mixed-method study and needs an analysis process that can help to understand the respondent's cultural background, experiences, and perspectives from their knowledge and way of life along with their participation in human development contexts such as education, healthcare, employment, justice sector and so on, to understand the correlation with their background. Thematic analysis fits perfectly here as it gives us the privilege to identify factors, skim speeches and code, generate themes, and organize an explanation of such extensive empirical data, and quantitative descriptive analysis fits to provide credibility in the context.

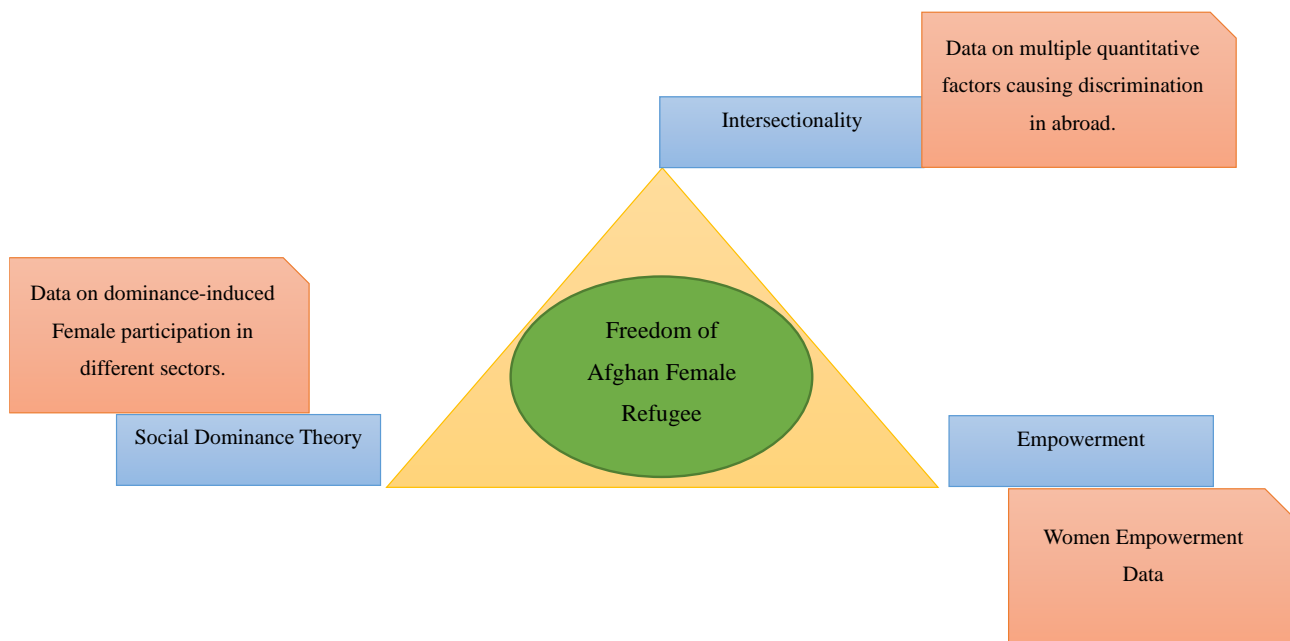


Figure 3.1: Descriptive Quantitative Analysis

Figure 3.1 shows a visual representation of the theory selected i.e Intersectionality, SDT, Empowerment and quantitative data in relation to these where the numerical data such as age, years of education and years of living in both countries, employment data as years of having experience in working, empowerment data such as participation of women in different sectors to help us to analyses the consecutive freedom perspectives.

Table 3.1: Six-Step Process of Thematic Analysis	
1. Familiarization	All the interviews are in written text form which was noted by one of us during the whole conversation of every interview. This allowed us later to go through the data repeatedly to understand the answers and features.
2. Coding	Attention was given to every answer and some parts of the speeches or sentences were highlighted to develop a primary code list where the semantic and latent codes were aligned.
3. Generating Themes	We identify the consistent pattern in the codes and come up with themes.
4. Reviewing Themes	This step allowed us to go through the themes multiple times so that we can arrange, rearrange, combine, or split up some themes. This helped us to have accurate themes and decline unimportant ones. Also, it helped to make sure if we missed anything.
5. Defining and naming themes	In this step, we defined and named the themes according to our study needs and for a better understanding of the factors derived. By defining we postulated what the themes exactly mean, and naming helped to understand the succinct themes.
6. Writing Up	Detailed written-up results (Chapter 5).

Table 3.1 shows the six-step process of the thematic analysis used in the study for the empirical data analysis which applied to generate the themes and analyze the qualitative data of freedom and dominance-based information.



### **3.5.1 Information about Data**

As the interviews were in text form, the semi-structured questions were categorized into convenient sub-groups for better understanding and overview of the collected data. The three respondents who have been living in Denmark for longer periods of time have different and extra open-ended questions for interviews.

#### **Demographical Information:**

- Name: All anonymous due to the respondent's request for confidentiality. Pseudo-names were applied.
- Age: Data collected between 15-45 age was categorized into two groups for analysis convenience: Above 25 age (Women) and Under 25 age (Girls)
- Education: No Education (0 years of Schooling), Primary Education (1-6 years of schooling), Secondary Education (6-12 years of schooling), Tertiary (Above)
- Marital Status: Married or Unmarried (=single)
- Number of children
- Employment: Divided into two categories and subcategories.
  - a) Employed before coming in Denmark or Unemployed
  - b) Employed in Denmark or Unemployed

#### **Perspective on Freedom-based Information:**

- Freedom of Choosing Life partner: Yes or, No
- Freedom of Choosing a Life partner from any nation and religion: Yes or, No
- Freedom of Wearing Clothes: Yes or, No
- Freedom of Getting married at any legal age they want: Yes or, No
- Believing in 'Gender Equality: Yes or, No

Every question had a further explanation, like why or why not.

#### **Dominance-base Information:**

In this part, we requested them to respond with following statements through the seven scale of agreement to understand SDO. Every respondent took part in it.

The scales are derived from the Likert scale of agreement.

- I. Strongly Agree

- II. Agree
- III. Slightly Agree
- IV. Neutral
- V. Slightly Disagree
- VI. Disagree
- VII. Strongly Disagree

- You can make decisions without your father/husband/brother's consultation.
- You are dependent on the man who is accompanying you financially.
- You depend on the man accompanying you in terms of traveling to other cities/countries.
- You can wear clothes of your choice.
- You can take part in social activities like singing or dancing.
- Your children can choose their own life partner by themselves.
- You can live in the community with honor and dignity if your children choose Danish lifestyles.
- You feel safe in your community.
- A boy child is expected in your family.

While answering, some of these statements had further comments, which were also used in the analysis.

Further questions (open-ended) were,

- What challenges and problems do you face in Denmark because of your Afghan background?
- What is your PoV on Denmark's laws on the freedom of girls and women?
- Do you consider yourself a free woman? Why or why not?
- Do you face any community pressure despite living in Denmark for many years?
- In relation to the Afghan community in Denmark, how do you define your Family? Progressive or Conservative?
- If you don't follow the path according to your family's expectations, what consequences can be faced by you?

*(All questions attached to Annex A and B)*

**Table 3.2: A brief Overview of the Respondents**

Factors & Different Generation	Name	Age	Education (yrs in school)	Marital Status	Time of living in Denmark (yrs)	Employment Status	Way of Interview Taken	Date of Interview
Afghan Refugee Girls	Ana	17	9	Married by Islam Law	1.5	Student	Physical interview	07.04.23
	Asal	18	10	Single	1.5	Student	Physical interview	11.04.23
	Azade	21	12	Single	1.5	Student	Physical interview	07.04.23
	Sara	23	3	Single	6	Student	Online	27.04.23
	Salma	24	12	Single	3	Student	Physical interview	04.04.23
Afghan Refugee Women	Khateereh	30	12	Married	1.5	Unemployed	Physical interview	24.03.23
	Arezo	33	2	Single	8	Student	Physical interview	20.03.23
	Saeede	38	12	Married	3	Unemployed	Physical interview	23.03.23
	Shadi	36	6	Married	1.6	Unemployed	Physical interview	24.03.23
	Nadi	39	4	Married	1.5	Unemployed	Physical interview	20.03.23
	Fariba	46	0	Married	6	Unemployed	Physical interview	30.03.23
	Roya	42	0	Married (Widow)	8	Unemployed	Physical interview	23.03.23
	Bahar	42	2	Married	1.5	Unemployed	Physical interview	20.03.23
	Leyla	37	0	Married	1.5	Unemployed	Physical interview	04.04.23
Afghan-Danish Women	Henna	25	More than 15	Single	22	Student plus Employed	Online	13.04.23
	Mary	37	More than 15	Single (Divorcee)	20	Full-time Doctor	Online	22.04.23
	Sana	26	More than 15	Single (Divorcee)	22	Student	Online	17.04.23

Table 3.2 is presented to provide an overview of the participants along with their demographic information.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Having considered the fact into account that our topic is sensitive and refugees generally are considered vulnerable groups, a few items should be pointed out as follows:

- One of the authors is originally from Iran and has a lot in common with Afghan people. Like, speaking the same language as Afghan people and culturally connected closely, so it diminishes any misunderstanding caused by language and cultural differences.
- The interview was taken out anonymously, and this was cleared and explained before any interview was conducted.
- A brief detail of the research is explained to our participants before any interview so they can decide whether to proceed.
- The questionnaire is designed so that they can choose not to answer any questions they are uncomfortable with.
- The participants were aware beforehand that they could withdraw their statements at any stage of the interview.
- They can also freely choose the way they want to be interviewed. i.e., this can be written or oral, with or without voice recording or online meetings. It can also be conducted informally without recording any voice or note-taking for the interviewer's participant observation.
- As an appreciation for taking their time, we considered a small gift (One gram of Saffron).
- We promise our participants to provide them with our research results after finishing our research.

### **3.7 Limitations and Delimitations**

In the process of conducting our research, there were some limitations. Due to the sensitivity of the topic and vulnerability of the respondents, they were taken into consideration prioritizing most, which means a significant amount of time was invested in making the questions and interviewing the respondents. The process thus turned out to be a time-consuming task within a short thesis period time. The prime concern was how to put the questions tactfully so that no one is offended, as well as all the questions were answered.

One of the major challenges was interviewing some of the female refugees because of their illiteracy. Some of them couldn't communicate properly though they were interested.

It should be mentioned that this study would have had more respondents, but some women said they should have their husbands' permission, and their husbands forbade them from having interviews with the authors. Similarly, girls asked for permission from their parents and couldn't obtain that.

Moreover, some information is confidential, and we could not access it.

Furthermore, we delimit our respondents from skilled base Afghan migrants who did not have refugee status because forced migration forced the respondents to settle in a different country, which was not their choice.

It should also be noted that, this thesis work's primary data sources is based on a rather small study group of seventeen Afghan women and girls. Thus, it is not representative of all of Afghan women and girls, but it could be regarded as an indicative of some of them.

### **3.8 Geographical Study Area**

The geographical study area is Denmark from the European countries, and the data is selected among Afghani female refugee in Denmark. We were open to take interviews of Afghan female refugee from any parts of Denmark but all the responses we received were from Copenhagen.

### 3.9 Research Timeline

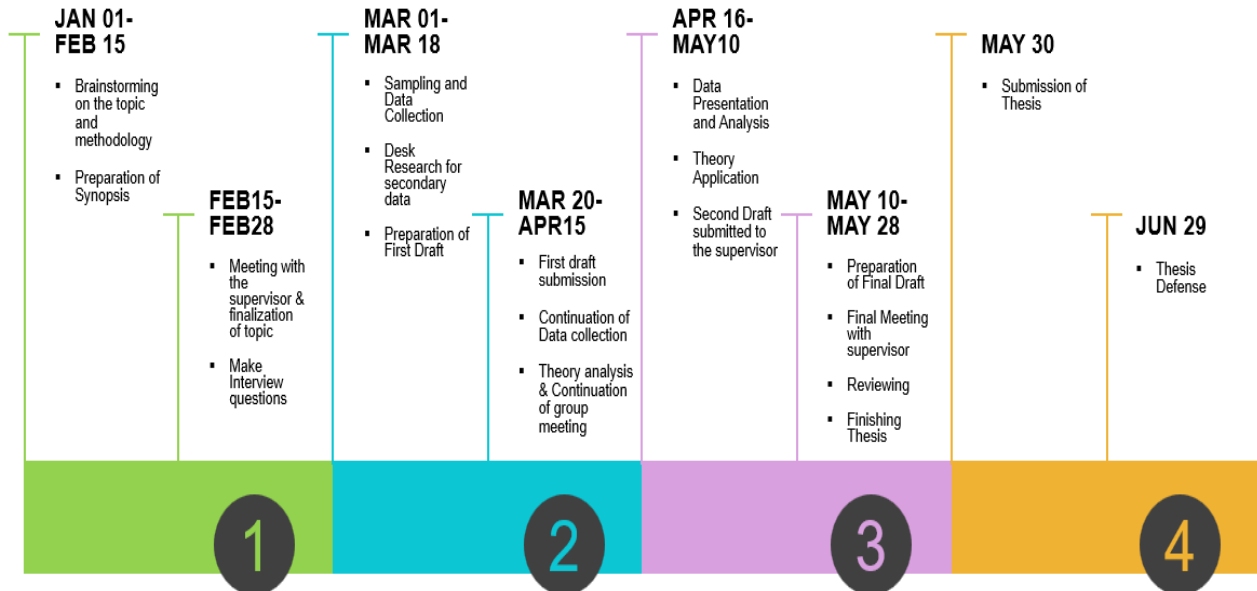
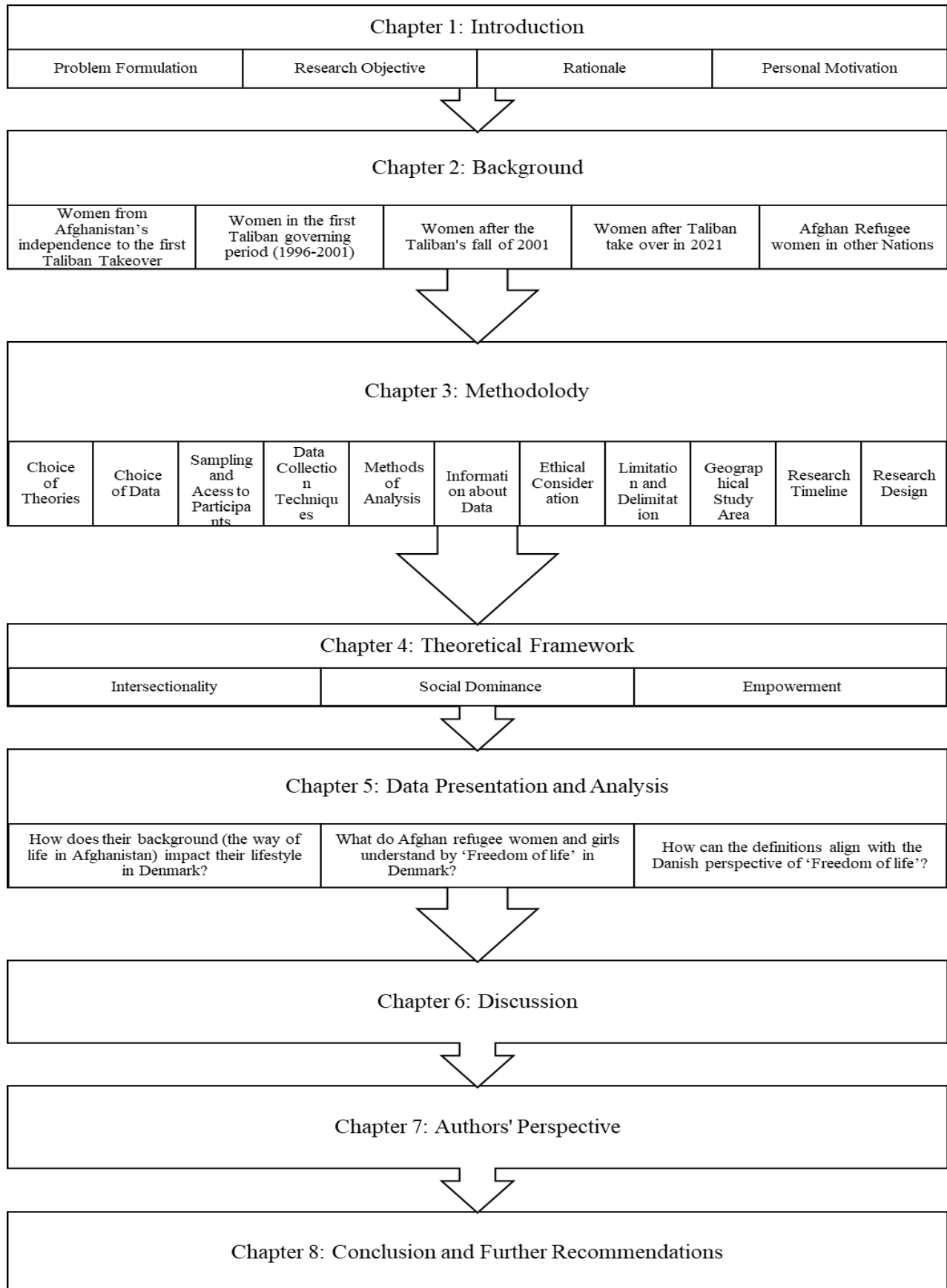


Fig: 3.1: The Research Timeline

The study period of the research was five months, including the synopsis and final submission, where two months (Jan-Feb) were given to brainstorming, preparation of synopsis and finalization of topic, (Mar-Apr) were given for sampling and data collection, and four months (Feb-May) were given to prepare the main thesis paper.

### 3.10 Research Design



## **Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework**

### **4.1 Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is an analytical framework that helps to understand how different factors related to demographic, socioeconomic, and political identities such as race, gender, nationality, religion etc. intersected at a point to create discrimination or disadvantages for a particular person or group. The ‘intersectionality’ was first proposed by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who was an activist and professor. The theory of intersectionality first started with the oppression of black women in the society. Where in the first and second wave of feminism it was massively driven by white women and cisgender about the inequality and oppression they face, the black and other color women’s life experiences were unseen. After the 2000s, in the fourth wave feminism where other factors like race, color, sexuality, body type, class, ability, and citizenship, were dragged to understand different types of oppression and dominance factor on different women, the ‘intersectionality’ became a broad and vital subject to research and study in the field of gender studies.

In the early analysis of feminism in terms of discrimination, the major discussions were based on how structuralism of gender put women in a disadvantageous situation in capitalist societies based on exploring the social effect of structural categories of gender in relation to interdependencies along with the two factors social inequalities, ‘class’ and ‘race’ (Bürkner, 2010). Thus, the disadvantages of a particular group of women were examined through the lenses of class differences and racial differences. Later, the ‘triple oppression model known as the ‘Big three’ guided theoretical and empirical research on inequality and discrimination connecting gender, class and race to address multiple oppression faced by a woman or a group with same characteristics (Segura, 1993). However, the principal criticism against this triple oppression model was, “multiple oppressions can’t be lined up in an additive way” (Yuval-Davis, 1983). Later, in empirical analysis, it was found that in the USA, the oppression faced by the black women community was very different and complex that the three-oppression model’s each factor can measure separately. Thus, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw articulated that, the situation and discrimination faced by black women also depend on the social context, not just on the intersection the structural categories and variables.

According to Alexandar Floyd, “Intersectionality consists of an assemblage of ideas and practices that maintain that gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability, and similar phenomena cannot



be analytically understood in isolation from one another; instead, these constructs signal an intersecting the constellation of power relationships that produce unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for individuals and groups positioned within them” (Alexander Floyd et al, 2012).

The increasing use of intersectionality in the academic world globally has proven the marginal level of discrimination around the world. The academic institutionalization of intersectionality set it as a research paradigm in critical race theory and gender studies (Yekani and Nowicka, 2022). On the other hand, intersectionality brings upon many feminist debates to understand the disadvantages and oppression faced by oppressed groups. Intersectionality encompasses various tenets (F. Tormos, 2017) to point out the focal point of understanding oppression and identities (Hankivsky, 2012). One of the major debates is whether intersectionality makes feminist activities bring down into too narrow subjects, especially in the case of ‘women in color’ which is differentiating these women from ‘white womanhood’ rather than, differencing ‘within’ the group of women (Puar, 2012).

According to Mccall, *“Intersectionality denominates cross sections and overlays of multiple features of disadvantage, underprivileged, and exclusion, which often have contextual origins”* (McCall, 2005). On the contrary, intersectionality can be comprehended in a way that gender plays a role in societies as a generator of several horizontal and vertical dimensions intersected at one point to create social inequality (Bürkner, 2010).

## **4.2 Social Dominance Theory**

Social Dominance Theory (SDT) was initially developed by Jim Sidanius, Erik Devereux, and Felicia Pratto in 1992. SDT is a theory that examines the group hierarchies practiced in and within societies and tries to stay stable and continue the dominant system of one group over others. (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p 30). The culture and ideologies shared and practiced by the groups and communities for many years provide the moral and intellectual justification for this group-based dominance and inequalities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p 39).

SDT was later explained and how it exists among the societies elaborated by other scholars and critics along with Sidanius and Pratto. First, Pratto and Sidanius categorized the group hierarchies existing in three form structures. The group hierarchies are generally based on which group’s dominance can provide an economic surplus. These hierarchies are first ‘age’ (elder people have more power and higher status than children), secondly ‘gender’ (men have more power and higher status than women)

and the third and last category of hierarchy what they defined as ‘arbitrary set’ (ethnicity, religion, nationality etc.) (Pratto, Sidanius, 1999). Nonetheless, it’s essential to mention that group dominance exists in every species of the world. Among humans, one of the hierarchies or multiple hierarchies can coexist at the same time. Again, the political and economic structure evolves around the system.

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) was composed by Pratto and Sidanius in 1994, to measure at what extent an individual accepts or differs to the social hierarchies. For data collection and validation, the SDO helped to understand the individual’s support towards group dominance or inequalities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p6). In the article, ‘Social dominance theory and the dynamics of intergroup relations: Taking stock and looking forward’, Pratto and Sidanius along with Levin analyzed their 15 years of previous research based on SDO to understand the Gender differences and the gender role in these group-based inequalities.

SDT is a theory that reveals the power inequities and power inequalities in the world where the pattern and dynamics of power between heterosexual people show one group’s dominance (as men’s dominance on women) or inequalities (men have more power in decision-making than women). To some extent, it also puts an effect on decision making like having sexual intercourse because heterosexual women and men interact intimately with each other prevailing male dominance of societal hierarchy (Pratto & Walker, 2004, pp 242-268). In one study, named, “Social Dominance Orientation Relates to Believing Men Should Dominate Sexually, Sexual Self-Efficacy, and Taking Free Female Condoms Among Undergraduate Women and Men”, Rosenthal et al discovered how heterosexual relationship follows power dynamics, even in the case of using female condoms which should be massively in the control of women, still followed the gender hierarchy and believed in male dominance which makes it challenging for the women to use (Rosenthal, Levy & Earmshaw, 2012).

SDT is a theory that justifies that the group hierarchy system is the most stable and functioning one (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, 2004). This is because the legitimizing ideologies help coordinate the individuals' belief system, which makes them accept the dominance or superiority of one group over others. The actions and institutional practices evolve around the thought of maintaining the hierarchy stable (Vargas-Salfate et al, 2018). On the other side, this needs to be clarified that SDT doesn’t imply that the dominated or the subordinated group approves the inequality accepting their inferiority (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In contrast, social dominance theory suggests that people who hold lower positions within a group are generally less accepting of inequality based on group membership compared to those who hold higher positions (Liu & Shaw et al 1994). So, unlike some societies, for

example in America, believing in equality leads to the ideology that whoever is not doing economically good is because they cannot take advantage of the equal rights. Means, the dominating group are justifying the inequality in societies with the legitimacy of 'equal rights' to remain in higher hierarchical position. Most of the capitalist societies set the hierarchy in these ways but, it is important to note that social dominance theory does not imply that subordinated groups in inferior positions approve of their own subordination or the superior positions of other groups in society. (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Furthermore, when in a society the individual is constrained by gender, age, ethnicity, religion, nationality, migration status and other salient superiority or inferiority, SDO will differ according to their higher status. In this case, SDT has predictions. The prediction is that "SDO will correspond to endorsement of legitimizing 'myths.'" (Vargas-Salfate & Perez et al, 2018). The people higher on SDO are more in favor of racism, nationalism, political-economic conservatism, and these sorts of ideologies put positive effect towards the social-economic policy makings which in turn reveals a system to sustain the inequality or an anti-egalitarian outcome in the society (Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001).

In summation, SDT is a vast theory with components of group hierarchies based on categories like age, gender, and abstract component like race, ethnicity, national origin and other salient values which can create a dominant group and dominated group in the society based on the high power of these mentioned components, which leads to a sustaining and functioning unequal society but by no means approves the inequality, rather reveals that the dominated and/or, the inferior groups are most likely to not in support of the functioning inequality but due to the group hierarchies they can't access equal opportunities.

### 4.3 Empowerment

Empowerment is a broad term that has been used in various contexts. "*Development*", "*education, community work, health*", "*business management*," and "*race*" are the most significant notions that encompass empowerment. (Rowlands, 1997, p. 9)

At its inception, empowerment was used as "*alternative approaches to development*" due to the "*top-down approach*" malfunctions in the development concept. Its recent application has focused on enhancing the efficacy of the "*status quo*" rather than "*social transformation*." (Parpart, J.L., et al. 2002, p. 3) At the outset, empowerment was utilized for "*empowering [the] poor and marginalized*." Later, it has been used in business and management to enhance the "*productivity*" of employees. (Parpart, J.L., et al. 2002, p. 5) Women's empowerment concepts started flourishing to remove "*inequalities*" by the 1980s. (Parpart, J.L., et al. 2002, p. 10). Its widespread application in various contexts could be attributed to the "*fluidity in the word power*." (Parpart, J.L., et al. 2002, p. 5)

In essence, the origin of the empowerment, "*power*" has been defined in various ways, which makes the definition of empowerment intricate. According to Rowlands power can be a "*zero-sum*" power that indicates that the person in charge of that power has the superior position, and the other sides have to abide by its commands. (Rowlands, 1997, p. 9) Non "*zero-sum*" power does not necessitate one side's superiority or domination over the other. Instead, both sides would have a common goal without any severe dispute. (Rowlands, 1997, p. 12) Implementing power does not necessitate the existence of "*visible conflict*". Conflict might be hidden while power is implemented. In this context, power even prevents people from conflict covertly, which is still power. (Rowlands, 1997, p. 10)

Hence, for defining empowerment, various types of power should be distinguished. Rowlands segregated four types of power:

"**Power over**" is accompanied by force and "*control*" from the powerful side over the weak side and might have opposite responses from the latter side, such as "*resistance*."

"**Power to**" does not require force or "*domination*" of some people over others. This is a "*generative or productive power*." (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13). This form of power is equivalent to "*leadership*" and pursuing collective goals by a group (Rowlands, 1997, p. 12).

"**Power with**" is a participatory power in which all group members collaborate to solve "*problems*."

*"Power from within"* is a human aspect of having a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem and relying on *"individual"* dignity and ability (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13).

Therefore, the general meaning of empowerment according to Rowlands by applying different forms of power denotes that those affected by any decisions would be authorized to have a say in the *"decision making"* as well as its *"process."* The first aspect of empowerment, intervening in decision-making, is compatible with the *"power over,"* while another aspect, participation in the process, is aligned with the concept of power to and power with. By including people in the decision-making process, they would obtain knowledge about their rights and their conjunction with other people's rights. Consequently, they can be capable of impacting those decisions (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13).

Kabeer explicated empowerment by defining power as *"the ability to make choices."* Thus, if someone is deprived of making choices, he or she is *"disempowered."* Hence, empowerment implies *"the process"* that grants the ability to make choices to those who had been deprived of it. In this sense, empowerment requires *"change"* and for empowering someone he or she must be disempowered beforehand. In this context having a variety of options does not equivalent to empowerment. It, therefore, necessitates being disempowered previously and then obtaining the ability to make different choices. Consequently, empowerment occurs after disempowerment. (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14)

While the definition of empowerment is difficult, defining women's empowerment is even more challenging and complex (Herma, M., & Joke, M., 2009). Here, our focus on empowerment theory is women's empowerment. Women empowerment has been discussed mainly in the *"gender and development"* framework. (Rowlands, 1997) Rowlands described women's empowerment by implementing different types of power. Accordingly, Women empowerment utilizes a *"broader"* interpretation of empowerment by trespassing the boundaries of various types of power. *"From a feminist perspective, interpreting 'power over' entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalized oppression."* Therefore, within this framework, empowerment encompasses more than just engaging in decision-making; it also encompasses the processes that enable individuals to view themselves as capable and authorized to make choices. Consequently, it embraces *"power to and power from within."* In this concept, by taking advantage of the *"whole range of human abilities and potentials"*, people would be able to make decisions and act based on their *"abilities"* and needs without any *"negative social constraints"* (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14).

Stromquist's definition of women's empowerment is based on enumerating its "*dimensions*". From her point of view, Empowerment has four significant components that should be met simultaneously to empower women. "*These are the cognitive (critical understanding of one's reality), the psychological (feeling of self-esteem), the political (awareness of power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize), and the economic (capacity to generate independent income).*" (Stromquist.N.P, 2002, p. 23)

These components could be achieved through three criteria that have been spelled out by Kabeer. First, "*education*" has a positive role in this respect. Education can enhance women's "*cognitive abilities*", enabling them to gain self-awareness and acquire insightful knowledge about themselves. (Kabeer, 2005, p. 16). Besides, education would increase women's "*self-esteem*," and "*self-confidence*" and contribute to their participation in "*decision-making*" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 18).

If applied appropriately, education could fulfill all four empowerment components. (Stromquist.N.P, 2002). Second, "*access to paid work*" could transform "*the balance of power*" in families, which in turn contributes to positive "[self] *perception*" by the female. In the long run, this would also decrease "*domestic violence*" against them. Moreover, a sense of "*self-dependence*" is a positive impact of having paid work (Kabeer, 2005, p. 18).

Political participation is the third criterion for women's empowerment. "*Number of seats*" occupied by women in "*national parliaments*" is indicative of empowering women in political arenas (Kabeer, 2005, p. 21), which in turn impact other women's empowerment (Manders, 2009).

## Chapter 5: Data Presentation and Analysis

To answer the research question, “*Are Afghan refugee women and girls free to choose their desired lifestyle in a liberal country, Denmark?*”, we made three sub-questions under which the data is presented and analyzed. The questions are,

1. How is their background (the way of life in Afghanistan) impacting their lifestyle in Denmark?
2. What do Afghan refugee women and girls understand by ‘Freedom of life’ in Denmark?
3. How to bridge the gap between two generations' perspectives?

### **5.1 How does their background (the way of life in Afghanistan) impact their lifestyle in Denmark?**

Here, specific factors of Afghan women’s societal and cultural background are discussed briefly to have an overview of how their lifestyle is or is not constrained in Denmark. First, the type of their society, law, customs, and HRD situation of Afghanistan are presented, then their life in Denmark is derived from these backgrounds to a new set of geographic areas with a new set of rules and laws to see their progress or regress.

#### **5.1.1 Fundamentally Misogynistic Society**

Afghanistan is one of those countries that have always ranked the lowest in terms of gender equality (WEF,2021). In 2021, the World Economic Forum showed this country is the last among 156 countries in terms of gender equality. Historically it is a country where male dominance over women and other genders has existed due to an extreme form of a patriarchal society (Das and Rai, 2022). The patriarchy here is nurtured by religious dogmatism, the fundamentalism of different tribes and groups, constitution, and institutions, etc. After 2021, the ill-treatment of women by Taliban has been in the light due to women’s participation in different protests and activism through raising their voices. The progress in reducing the gender gap can be noticed. But it’s not significant enough to admire Afghanistan as a safe country for women as the major gaps remain (Albretch et al, 2022). Nadia Hashimi in her book “*One Half from the East*” (2016), portrayed the security of Afghan women in Afghanistan in a way that “*every aspect of women’s lives, from education to expression to movement,*

*is monitored and checked by the patriarchy through the perpetration of rigid cultural codes of conduct for women”* (Das et al, 2022, p9). From this misogynistic background where females are seen from the monolithic inferior background who are not allowed to take any decision or move publicly without a male accompany under fundamentalism like Taliban regime, crossing borders to have a safe life in another cultural set of land is a big leap.

When Afghan girls and women are seeking asylum status in a first-world country like Denmark, which has an egalitarian societal view, knowing all their rights and accessing available services to them can be overwhelming due to misogynistic cultural views.

### **5.1.2 Customary Law that Exhibits Gender Inequality**

Many scholars, throughout the time of different studies, indicated that ‘democracy’ and ‘Afghanistan’ struggled to get along historically (Larson, 2011). However, after 2001 sheer changes to the development in different sectors and increasing participation of women in the labor force can be seen to reduce gender inequality. Though people’s participation increased, the major power of the state remained male, and patriarch based. The judiciary of Afghanistan at present has the Supreme Court, appeals courts, civil courts, and city courts or local courts. The participation of women in Afghan law institutions has barriers from the bottom-top level. Urban women like those who resides in Kabul, manage to go to law schools for educating themselves. Nonetheless, women, in law sector are frowned upon in Afghanistan societally. Therefore, the women in the judiciary system like, female lawyers, and advocates are consequentially less (IDLO,2014). Moreover, in the rural areas where most Afghan people and tribes live, they follow their customary laws which mostly are solved by their justice systems within the communities and barricade women to seek justice in the formal system (Liccaro & Gaston, 2014). These customary laws (a general practice accepted as law) for a long time whether it supports democracy or not has been the norm in the Afghan communities. In all the regions of Afghanistan, all sorts of disputes and crimes are tried and resolved by a council of older people specifically called Jigras and Shuras (The customary law of Afghanistan, 2004, p 8). These are originally Pashtun societal code followed by the Pashtun group of people dominantly, but other tribal and ethnic groups are influenced by this. Those in the eye of the justice system are accused and/or, criminals don’t accept the decision, Afghan people take into consideration the ‘Jigra’ decisions which is a council made by elder people and predominantly ‘men’. There is a very narrow scope for women to enter the Jigra council, and women can’t even approach the justice system without the accompany of a male relative which in the Taliban periods are made mandatory not just in judiciary system but



in almost every public movement. On the other hand, Afghan judiciary system allows women to have equal rights to get justice under Afghan law, in practice these legal protections are under-enforced (UNAMA, 2011). Consequently, social dominance for Afghan women is not by the factor of gender only, but also, by age.

Where women are constrained by such laws and customs, the elder and more experienced women can also act as the perpetrator over younger girls making them accept the inequalities.

### **5.1.3 Where Forced Marriage is a Common Practice (!)**

Forced marriage in the Afghan community is a very common phenomenon since young girls are looked down on in a misogynistic way which takes control of making any decision to male authority. The young girls before they reach their legal marital age recognized by UNHCR, (which is 18 years old and standardized almost all over the countries) fall prey to consummate marital affairs by the force of their families. Forced marriage is considered a marriage that lacks the will of one spouse or both whether by using violence, force, threat, or any other form that influences “*the consent*” of one side or both (Villacampa.c, 2020, p. 344). The extended definition is also applied to a marriage in which both married with consent but later on are not willing to be in the relationship anymore, nevertheless, are forced to stay on that relationship (Arranged/Forced Marriage, 2023). Moreover, forced marriage is considered a “*gender- based violence*” and is against “*human right*” (Honkala, 2022).

In Afghanistan, the minimum legal age to get married for a girl is 16 years old, and at the age of 15, they can do it with parental consent. Each year cases are found for early marriages continuously (Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights. Practices for 2015). Normally forced marriages happened due to the annulment of any disputes or crimes that happened between the families to make a ‘pact’ by giving away the daughter to another family (Badal). In this case, a daughter from the criminal’s family is handed over to the victim’s family to set out the conflict. Under 18 age adolescents in most cases have no concrete opinion or take decisions considering all the facts. 28% of Afghan women aged 15-49 reported being married off before the age of 18-year-old (UN Women, 2021). Moreover, as they are dependent on their parents and family, it becomes easy to normalize this kind of marriage at a younger age. In the name of Islamic Shariah Laws, they normalize and legalize these early marriages as the holy book Qur’an does not specify any legal age for marriage (Gargh, 2021). However, Islam allows the believers to abide by the rules of the country, if the governing system has spaces to normalize early marriage it becomes difficult to prevalent. Again,

forcing a widow to get married to some other man in the husband's family is also normalized (Tomris Atabay, UNODC, 2007). In this scenario, women don't have any voice or actions but to accept the dominance attributed by the men, family, and believed communal ideologies. Altogether, it can be said, violence against women in the case of forced marriage became the norm in their societies maintaining the sustaining hierarchy passing through generation after generation, and acceptance of this kind of violence is also high in their communities (World Bank, 2021). On the contrary, on December 3, 2021, the Taliban released a 'special decree' addressing, women's consent is necessary in terms of marriage. *"A woman is not a property, being human is to be free and noble but, no-one can give her to anyone in exchange for a peace deal and/or to end animosity"* (Amir al-Mu'minin, Dec, 2021). Even so, after the Taliban took over the governing power of the state, the number of child-forced marriages has been escalating for different circumstances.

*"I didn't want to marry. But my father warned me that if I refused to marry, the Taliban would force him to marry me to one of their fighters"* (An Afghan adolescent, Radio Azadi, Dec 1, 2022).

Forced marriage is arranged by the families, mostly making it a private matter where it is hard to impose authorities to stop it. A significant amount of research has been conducted beyond the borders where within the Afghan community forced marriage has been a common practice even abroad. Forced marriage sometimes overlaps with child marriage. Particularly child marriage is some sort of forced marriage since the consent of a child is not legitimate consent. (Love, H., et al, 2019). SDG goal 5.3 urges the global community to end 'child, early and forced marriage'. These three terms are connected through the issue of non-consent. Henceforth, all child marriage and early marriages are forced marriages because at least one party has not reached the age of full and free consent. On the other hand, a person reaching the age of full and free consent also may face a forced marriage due to family and community pressure. Nonetheless, it's worth mentioning that forced marriage is different from an arranged marriage. An arranged marriage is a consensual marriage with both parties' consent that has been arranged by the family, and relatives. But a forced marriage is a marriage in which one and/or both parties have not expressed free and informed consent to the union (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). A person who has been forced into a marriage may become confined into a cycle of abuse, which can lead to long-term psychological and physical consequences (Kiran Rele, 2007).

#### 5.1.4 Human Rights Development

If we investigate the fundamental human rights index, access to education, and healthcare are seen as significantly low in Afghan women than in men. The participation in the workforce in the past 20 years among women has been increased but not satisfactory (from 15% in 2000 to 22% in 2022, WB, 2021). It is because the challenges faced by women are higher in the Afghan community than men. Before the Taliban regime, women's participation in the labor force was also low. This is because of factors like intensive 'patriarchist' attributes in the societies that only men should be the earning member of the family and female corresponds to the households. By the end of 2017, through the longitudinal study of women's participation in education, training, and workforce by the World Bank, Afghanistan was one of the lowest countries in the percentage of women participation in education. Almost 66 % of the women were left out of this criterion.

Examining the previous 20 years of human rights-related data in Afghanistan, a slight development can be seen in terms of accessing education by women. (See Table 4.1)

**Table: 4.1: The 20 years reviewing Access to Education by Females in Afghanistan**

Year	Primary Level Education			Secondary Level Education			Tertiary Level Education		
	Both sex	Female	% of Female	Both Sex	Female	% of Female	Both Sex	Female	% of Female
2001	773.6	No data	No data	202.5	No data	No data	160.0	No data	No data
2005	4318.8	1541.3	35.7	461.3	113.1	24.5	190.1	39.1	20.6
2010	5279.3	2076.9	39.3	1476.8	494.9	33.5	567.3	159.4	28.1
2015	6199.3	2441.9	39.4	1669.2	596.5	35.7	982.3	323.4	32.9
2018	6544.9	2549.6	39.0	1982.9	708.6	35.7	1081.0	367.5	34.0
Data Source: UIS Database, 2021									

In Table 4.1, the major change can be noticed in terms of accessing secondary and tertiary education as the number of years increases, maintaining a higher trend of accessing education for women

becomes challenging. Also, if we look at the both-sex participation in education, the female participation is noticeably low.

The participation in tertiary education in every five years from 2001 to 2018, followed an increasing trend but when we compare it with the participation in primary and secondary education, the number is gradually dropping out. But it also depends on the socioeconomic situation and geographical setting of life. Urban women always had higher literacy and education rate than rural women. In rural areas, where 74 percent of Afghans live, almost 90 percent of women there were estimated as 'illiterate' (UN Women, 2021). In Afghanistan, one in four reported attacks on schools were attacks on all-girls schools where the teachers are also female. This is extreme violence formed against females being a major barrier for girls to get dropping out of school (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2018).

On the other hand, women's development in terms of education immediately dropped off when the Taliban came into governance power again tailoring and restricting women's rights.

*“Since 23 March 2022, 1.1 million secondary girls have been prevented from attending secondary school until further notice. The ongoing crisis has had a detrimental impact on young women in higher education as well, with a 60 percent decline in enrollment recorded”* (UNESCO, 2023).

Are the schools and colleges open for girls and women or not this is very obscure (Grant Faar, 2022). It is declared that when there is a 'safe environment for girls' they can return to school (Jackson, 2022).

Albretch et al in 2022 explained the women's development pattern in the past 20 years in Afghanistan which exhibits that, women face more challenges than men in terms of every aspect to access human rights because of the cultural upbringing and established norms and values in the regime. Women also face different expectations in societies than men and it's like as soon as they were born their fates were written. In most cases, the men chose their choices and decisions. He gave an example from the statistics that, *“36.6 percent of Afghan men prefer women to wear a burka, compared to 27.6 percent of women”*. The right to take any decision in women's lives is not only obscured by their family and men's accompanying choice but also by the interpretation of the religion that came along or was preached in their life. So, from the beginning of their lives, they fell into the dominant group whether the social dominance orientation detains them as a dominant group, and it does not matter if they accept the hierarchy or not.

### 5.1.5 Freedom of Expression

The phenomena of freedom of expression for Afghan women and girls are influenced and restrained by various factors like the conservative patriarchal system, hierarchical dominance of elders in the community, religious values, and lack of women's awareness. *"Women indeed suffer in male-dominated societies, but the miseries of women depend on their cultural specifics"* (Ahmad Khan et al, 2021, p 175). According to UN Women's gender-based violence statistics, 87 % of Afghan females experienced at least one sort of violence in their lives in Afghanistan. The end of the Taliban regime in 2001 raised hopes and optimism in terms of women's improvement and empowerment with the signing of the Bonn Agreement (December 2001). This concerned the transformation, reconstruction, and development of Afghanistan, where the stakeholders and activists were motivated to reshape the life of Afghan women in a positive direction. However, as time went forward, the statistics of a different form of VAWG changed and fluctuated. In a randomized control trial study by Jewkes et al in 2018, it was found that, *"14% of women experienced mother-in law physical violence, and 23.2% of women experienced physical spousal violence in the previous 12 months. For 7.0% of women, these exposures were combined"*. Thus, the domestic violence for Afghan women is in noticeable amount but the reports of the violence are very low. With the Taliban in power again in 2021, the support centers for VAWG started to decline because the social workers were getting life threats, and many women who wanted to express themselves to them were turned away (UN Women 2021). In February 2023, Taliban officially banned Afghan women staff from working in different INGOs. The leaders of DRC, NRC, Save the Children, INTERSOS, Action Against Hunger and World Vision are trying to address the de facto authorities in Afghanistan to lift the ban so that they can function in Afghanistan. Because, without female staff, it's difficult to work in Afghanistan for women.

*"We call on the De Facto Authorities to lift the ban and allow all female aid workers in Afghanistan to return to work immediately. With Afghanistan facing record levels of hunger the cost of this ban will be measured by lives lost."* (April 2023, Signed by the mentioned organization)

This matter that Afghan women have lost their voices and right to study and work in Afghanistan is a regressive situation and the women who want to be educated, work, and have human rights are in the most vulnerable situation which may justify their gender-based residence permits in Denmark.

### **5.1.6 Community Practice Beyond Boundaries: The Life of Afghan Females in Denmark**

As after the Taliban took over Afghanistan, a direct outcome is girls and women being displaced and coming abroad for safety and security, this section will allow us to understand their lives in relation to the above background mentioned, how Afghan refugee women and girls are seeing their life in a liberal country Denmark. The generated themes from the interviews are explained here through the lens of the two generations' experiences.

#### ***Freedom is Relative***

In this section, the respondents' answers to the questions related to freedom are presented and analyzed in relation to the time of living in Denmark, marital status, age, and education level.

Bahar (1.5 year), Leyla (1.5 year), Nadi (1.5 year), Shadi (1.6 year), Saeede (three years), who are above 25 age, and all were married in Afghanistan expressed that their family chose their life partners for them at a younger age (age 16-21), and they had agreed with the arranged marriage. All these five women have two years, 0 years, four years, six years, and 12 years of education, respectively. According to them, their daughters should marry a boy who should be an Afghan Muslim. Leyla and Shadi emphasized that besides being Muslim and Afghan, he must be Sunni.

In terms of having a boyfriend, Bahar expressed that "*it [having a boyfriend] is against our norms and values.*"

Saeedeh explained that having a boyfriend "*is against our culture, our family, relatives', and friends' belief.*" She also stated that if her daughters have boyfriends or wear open clothes, they will lose their faces, and it's very shameful and embarrassing to them.

Fariba, who is living in Denmark for 6 years with zero years of schooling in formal education, expressed that from a mother's point of view, she will be okay if her daughter chooses someone from a different religion, but still, it's difficult and against the Afghan culture.

All who are under 25 years of age and have been living in Denmark for less than three years (Azade, Ana, Asal for 1.5 year and Salma for 3 years) claimed that they are not 'allowed' to choose their life partners without their families' approval. Moreover, the person must be from the same culture and religion. According to Asal, she is restricted by her family and their Afghan cultural norms and values, but she does not care. So, she has a boyfriend of her choice, but she hides it from her family. She has 10 years of education in Afghanistan, and in Denmark, is also a student.

Azadeh (21 years old), about freedom to choose her clothes, clarified that *“I have to wear it[scarf] due to my family’s desire, but I feel racism and humiliated outside our community.”*

Salma (24 years old), who has been living in Denmark for three years, declared, *“I have to do some things in my life for my family’s satisfaction, but these things restrict me from having friends. Here in Denmark, girls expect their friends to go out with them to bars and drink and smoke, but I am not allowed to do such things. Besides, I have to wear a scarf, but I feel some people look down on me.”*

Azade and Salma are single and have the highest years of schooling (12 years) in formal education from Afghanistan among all our respondents. They want to study further in Denmark and improve their lives. Their slight disagreement if they can wear clothes of their choice is due to the Afghan community’s sentiment behind it. Khatereh is a married woman who also has 12 years of education, strongly disagrees with the statement that she can live with honor and dignity if her children chose a life beyond Afghan culture.

According to the women who are mothers in our study stated, they can’t live with ‘honor’ if their daughters are living a Danish lifestyle. By Danish lifestyle, they mean the right to take every decision by themselves, get into dating culture or have boyfriends or partners before marriage, be involved in love affairs with a different background rather than Afghan descendants and/or, Muslims, get into alcohol drinking culture, freedom of wearing clothes rather than hijabs/veils/covered clothes, etc.

Again, for women living in Denmark for more than six years, we noticed a piecemeal trend of change and adaptation.

Sara, who lives in Denmark for six years, expressed that she can have a boyfriend or choose her partner by herself. Roya, a mother of a girl who has been living in Denmark for eight years responded. *“If he is a good man, it’s my daughter’s decision.”*

Arezo (32 years), a single female who has been living in Denmark for eight years, stated that she is free to have a boyfriend or choose her husband at any age. But she said it is her personal preference that her husband be Muslim and Shia.

Thus, Afghan women’s thoughts and perspectives vary according to their age, marital status, years of education, and time of living in Denmark. According to the theory of intersectionality, an individual can experience different inequalities based on two or multiple factors. The most educated Afghan women want to experience freedom on different scales, where the women who have less education

like zero to five years feel more bounded to their Afghan norms and culture. According to single women, their families' preferences are restricted to some specific ethnic features beyond which they can't have marital relationships. The same 'ethnicity' and 'religious belief' are noticeable as mandatory factors in every respondent's answer. According to them, if any case of exceptions happens to them even in Denmark, they are accountable to their community. On the other hand, Roya having highest number of schooling years in Afghanistan and living in Denmark for 6 years, more than other Afghan women of our study, till now can't see eye to eye with the freedom of choosing a life partner and from any religion for her daughter. On the other hand, Fariba is living in Denmark for 6 years with zero level of education, from the mother's point of view admitted to accepting her daughter's choice. Although for all newcomer single girls in our study, having security and the possibility to study and work are valuable assets, they gradually expect more freedom when comparing themselves with peers. Choosing their clothes, their partner freely, having a boyfriend, going to social gatherings, and taking part in social activities are new aspects in which they do not feel good if deprived. Yet, for married women, these kinds of things are considered against their norms and values and must be strictly forbidden for their daughters. So, the oppression felt or experienced by an educated Afghan single girl is different than an Afghan married woman due to their perception of freedom in different ways. One has more denial to the fact of accessing fewer human rights than the other.

***Restricted Freedom (outcome)*** = Afghan Single women\*More than 6 years of education\*Below 25 age\*Lived in Denmark less than 6 years.

***Not aware of Human Rights (outcome)***= Afghan Married women\*Less than 6 years of education\*Above 25 age\*Lived in Denmark less than 6 years.

Here these two equations are indicating, based on multiple factors imposing at the same time, how the outcome can be different for different groups of females where discrimination can be seen through restricted freedom and not being aware of human rights outcomes.



### ***Male Dominance and Community Pressure are Prominent***

*“My husband always tells me that I brought you here and you are here because of me. He worked in the Danish embassy in Afghanistan. He says if Denmark grants you asylum status it is your turn to make it up for me.”* (Nadi, 23 April, 2023).

There is an inhibiting dominance passing from generation to generation over Afghan women by their male companions due to the patriarchal societal structure and hierarchy. When Afghan women are coming to Denmark to seek asylum, their purpose is to have a better life beyond the Taliban regime. By having the privilege of getting a residence permit based on their ‘gender’ in this scenario, they are in a privileged position and this turn of their lives can lift them up to be highly educated, empowered, independent, and live a life in a more gender-equal position. Initially, the Afghan refugee women and girls have limited awareness about gender equality, which results in them perceiving their settlement in Denmark as merely a change in location, culture, and timeframe, rather than an opportunity to embrace and adapt to a life of numerous equal opportunities.

The all-married women replied that they must seek permission every time from their husbands to take any decisions, even the basic rights like going to the hospital; their husbands must approve them before doing anything. Furthermore, they don’t travel to other cities or countries without their men. They are financially dependent on their husband, and they showed worry in their replies thinking what if their husbands don’t get the residence permits to stay in Denmark with them. Only three of these women have previous experience of working to support their family. Saeede used to sew clothes in Afghanistan. Arezo and Roya lived in Iran for a couple of years with their family, they used to make shoes and weave clothes from their house. All of them replied culturally it is not convenient for Afghan women to work. The man in the family should be the earning member. Saeede also said she wants to work in Denmark but with six children it’s hard for her due to her duties and responsibilities towards children and family. This in-built mentality can be traced back to the theory of social dominance where men have more power and control over women not because of qualification or intelligence but because of their gender, just being ‘men’. The societal hierarchy shifts women to an unequal situation where they are bounded by some grounded norms of being dependent on their men financially and not having the confidence or intuition to take decisions independently. This can also be traced to their psychological behavior induced by the hierarchy which was sustained in their society for a significant period, that, they think they are bounded by the norm of dependency on a male figure in the name of culture. And when in Denmark they are set in a different cultural

environment, the hierarchy is set in the Afghan community of Denmark in a very narrow set of space. The cultural attributes and governor body of Denmark give them the right to work which is a dominating factor here, but the years after years of dependency may put them in a situation where social constructed duties and protecting their culture become the prime priority than testing their own eligibility.

The under 25 aged single women, all of them replied they must be accountable to their fathers and after marriage to their husbands. This indicates that dominance is sustained through a functionality where the unequal situation passes from generation to generation. As they changed the country, they are not motivated by their family to blend in with other international cultures, especially by wearing open clothes, drinking, and partying. Even though they like to take part in social activities like dancing, singing, or sports, they are not comfortable getting involved because it is considered as 'Haya' or a matter of 'having decency'. However, they all have a higher number of schooling years in Afghanistan, in Denmark they often find themselves in a situation where they reluctantly accept the dominance due to familial and community pressures, rather than willingly embracing it. It is not a result of their personal adjustment to this dynamic, but rather a consequence of external influences and expectations.

Asal (18 age), having 10 years of education said, *"It [life in Denmark] has changed a lot. We have freedom and security; we can study and work."*

*"He [life partner] must be Muslim. I am not allowed to have a boyfriend, but I do not care, and currently, I have a boyfriend. But my family is not aware of that."*

*"They [the community] talk a lot behind people (backbiting a lot), but it is unimportant to me, and I do not care."*

All of them replied that if they or their daughter choose a Danish lifestyle in Denmark, they can't live with honor and dignity in their society because people consider that way of life is against their culture and norm. Their family and community also tailor the choice of wearing any clothes in Denmark. Ten of the fourteen respondents slightly disagree that they can wear clothes of their choice. One of them slightly agreed and clarified that she does not care about the family and the community, in this case, so she wears it according to her choice, but she keeps it a secret from her family to avoid consequences. Three other respondents strongly agreed. However, freedom of choice of wearing

clothes has the opposite effect as well. Women who wear covered clothes by their choice faced discrimination from Danish societies, which we will discuss in the ‘Ethnic Barrier’ section.

Moreover, five of our respondents strongly disagreed with the statement that they feel safe in the community, one of them disagreed, six of them agreed, one was neutral, and one slightly agreed. Being a part of the community is a normative nature. In Denmark, they have a community due to their belief system, shared ideas and values, language, and ethnicity. But, according to their answers, a community pressure to lead according to the communal norms and values can be noticed because those who disagreed gave the reasoning of the community passing judgments or interference in their personal life.

In the statement of if a boy child is expected in their family, three strongly agreed with the statement, three strongly disagreed, answering equal number is desired, and the rest replied in neutral without further reasoning. So, Afghan women may face discrimination differently as their freedom perception is different based on their age, marital status, education level, and role in the family and community throughout their years of living in Denmark.

### ***Honor-Shame Culture***

As almost all the respondents have replied that they are accountable to their community even in Denmark if they do something which does not represent the ‘Afghan culture’, we asked them, what are the consequences if they chose a life beyond Afghan culture, and they replied they can’t have proper contact with the people they know in their family, relatives, and friends as they can honor shame them. They will be looked down upon with disrespect which can be one of the most unwanted events in their lives being Afghan women. They want to have a place in their community with respect and dignity. Committing an act beyond their religious and cultural values can occur utmost consequences as slut-shaming, and non-physical violence.

Forced marriage could be attributed to gaining “honor” and eradicating “shame” since females expect to hold the family’s honor. In some cases, women are forced to marry due to the pressure in their “community” which otherwise endangers the family’s reputation and leads to “stigma” for their family. Disobedience to marry in these communities has destructive effects. “Honor-based crimes” such as “honor killing”, and “forced suicide” are the worst consequences that aim to protect families’ honor (Courtenayb, 2021, p. 1250). A lot of Afghan women may accept a forced relationship or a forced marriage due to this culture and live a life with their socially constructed dignity. In our study,

the married women accepted that they were married off according to their family's choice and they accepted that. However, single women disagree with many practices that are expected from them by their families and community in Denmark. The most significant factor here is the life partner and choice of clothes.

### ***A Case of an Afghan minor being in Forced Marriage***

Forced marriage is a crime in many countries. Besides, numerous international organizations and NGOs have condemned it (McCabe, 2022, p. 2). The Law on Marriage Concession and Dissolution in Denmark specifies that the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 years. This age requirement was raised from 15 to 18 years in 2017 with the aim of protecting children. A higher number of underage marriages were seen among Muslim immigrants, especially Pakistani and Turkish (Schmidt and Jakobsen, 2004, p 127). In Denmark, this kind of marriage has been under debate since the early 2000s. In 2003, the Danish parliament introduced the 'rule of supposition' which is widely known as 'the cousin rule' where marrying a member of an extended family is considered forbidden if they are biologically related considering them as 'forced marriage' (Liversage, 2015, p 12).

Ana (17 years old) was forced to marry her cousin against her will. In a dilemma to choose between her parent's satisfaction and her desire, she selected her parents' satisfaction due to the fear of the consequences of disobedience.

*"In the beginning, I could not accept that because I love my boyfriend, but I understood that I do not have any other option and I must obey my parent's decision."* (Ana, 13 March, 2023)

Ana and her cousin got married according to Islamic Marriage laws, which the Danish government does not acknowledge as 'civil marriage' in Denmark. But as she is under 18, the family can register her marriage in the system after she reaches the legal age. The concern for the Danish government in these types of cases is not centered on genetic health issues but whether it is 'forced marriage'. However, as a 'cousin marriage' is skeptical in Denmark, the girl said her family is looking forward to moving her to another country with her husband. This raises the question that considering this prevalence of forced marriages in a small sample size of seventeen cases, what could be the number of reported forced marriages brought to the Danish courts in Denmark so far. Unfortunately, the data limitation and inaccessibility can be seen in terms of various secondary sources. But according to a report conducted in 2012 following the amendment in law of 'forced marriage' in 2008 which doubled the punishment from two years to four years in prison, several criticisms can be noted which divided

the argument of criminalization of forced marriage in two ways. One is that the victim may not want to report about such cases or seek help from law thinking it may hamper future family reconciliation when found family forced her to marry. Another aspect is the law only recognizes forced marriages happened out of physical force where most forced marriages are convinced and make the victim accepted the relationship through psychological coercion (Global Justice Initiative, 2012). In our empirical data, the case of Ana resembles the latter one, where she eventually was convinced to accept the marriage and stay in this relationship.

Following the SDG 5.3 goal, Denmark has committed to abolish child, early and forced marriage by 2030 (Voluntary National Review, 2021). The government repeatedly criticizes SDG 5's whole plan as poorly funded. However, in January 2017, the Danish government passed a law in Denmark, that banned the recognition of marriages involving underage asylum-seekers who had been married abroad. This decision received criticism from various human rights groups, as they argued that it failed to consider the best interests of the children involved. However, in 2021, a commission appointed by the Danish parliament ruled that separating couples in asylum centers was illegal (Girls not Bride, country region: Denmark, 2021). This indicates the legislatures lack consistency when it comes to identify a child, early or forced marriage. Additionally, it is important to note that Danish law does not recognize Islamic marriages and does not regulate or address such marriages in community practices. This lack of recognition may potentially lead to cases like Ana's, where forced marriages can occur without legal acknowledgment or intervention and the bride must continue the relationship due to being religiously married.

### ***Afghan women who are living in Denmark for longer period***

To have a better understanding, we had three interviews with Afghan women who are living in Denmark for more than 10 years. Two of them are full-time master's students, who came here when she was three years old. Another woman is a doctor and a single mother (divorcee). From the perspective of freedom, they said they are free from every aspect of human rights in Denmark, but they don't feel comfortable communicating with the Afghan community living in Denmark. Henna said that her family always was progressive and believed in gender equality. Though her parents came to Denmark with refugee status, her life was not affected by the conservative side of the culture because her growing up into a woman from a child happened in Denmark. Rather when she introduces herself as an Afghan descendant, she had to face stereotyping by the Danish people about the situation

in Afghanistan like the conservativeness, if she is oppressed by her family, does she have freedom of clothing.

*'Having a central Asian background in a Nordic country, many Danes meet you with the expectation that you are oppressed by your family and that you were raised in a patriarchal community. When I was young this resulted in me having to constantly prove that I was just as free as my Danish peers to the point where I was trying too hard to be like them and forget my own roots. Integrating is positive but keeping parts of one's own culture is an asset. As I got older, I did not need to prove myself and I realized that I had to 'educate' people instead of just letting them assume things because that just feeds into the prejudice. Sometimes this is tiring, but it is worth it because people become less prejudiced.'* (Henna, A full-time master's Afghan-Danish Student, AAU, 13 April 2023)

On the other hand, another respondent is Mary, who is also a full-time master's student in Denmark and studying sociology; she expressed that it has been 22 years since she has been living in Denmark with her family, still, some judgments in her family are yet to change. Like, even now, a boy child is expected in her family. But in some aspects, her family has changed according to time, as they have become more progressive towards the acceptance of other cultural attributes which reflect individual freedom. She also said she was married to an Arab by her choice, which was initially not accepted at all in her family. Because this is not acceptable for an Afghan woman that she will choose a life partner for herself and again outside their culture and ethnicity, but some years later she got divorced and her life is now all by herself. Previously she couldn't think of a life where all her decisions had been made by her, going out whenever she wants. So, her single life gave her a lot of privileges that any European free woman would get without constraints. Furthermore, stereotyping her was also common throughout her life but in a different way.

*"I was a kid when I came to Denmark. People think I am Japanese, and they have other perspectives on me. They ask me about my Hijab and my early marriage whether it is my choice, or I am forced to do that."* (Mary, A full-time master's Afghan-Danish Student, AAU, 22 April 2023)

Our final respondent Sana is a doctor. She is a divorcee, and she is all by herself for a long period. According to her still, she is not comfortable introducing someone as a partner inside the community. Because it's a matter of 'Haya' (having decency), not to date before marriage. She also added, when she got divorced, her family was not flexible enough to accept a man from any ethnic background as

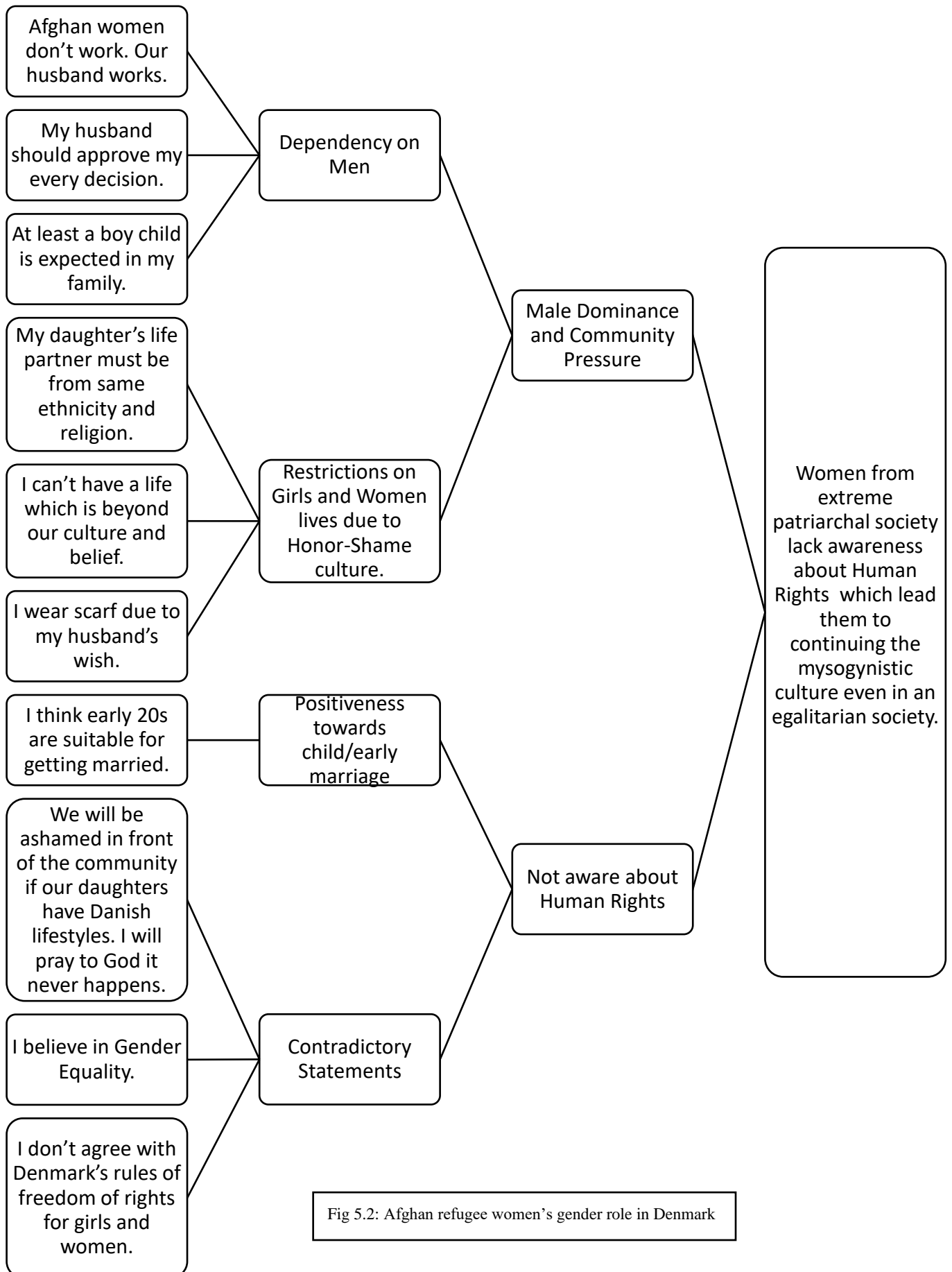
her partner but as time went by her family advised her that whoever she likes, can marry. So, eventually, a lot changed in her family.

*“It is very difficult to integrate into the Danish community. If I want to enter the job market, I must be four times more qualified than Danish people. I always have to prove myself. I’m always a foreigner and I must work more and receive less than them. Discrimination and racism are a lot because I am from Afghanistan.”* (Sana, An Afghan-Danish doctor, 17 April 2023)

All of them replied that they follow some Islamic and cultural values in their life, but they don’t think from a conservative and extreme form of religious point of view. And in their family, this has been normalized. Nevertheless, they don’t speak with the Afghan community much. All of these women were more likely to choose their lifestyle as they want and beyond the social dominance and stigmatization of the community.

***Free to choose their lifestyle (outcome)*** = Afghan-Danish Women\*Have more than 15 years of education\*Lived more than 10 years in Denmark.

The above equation shows how multiple factors tangling at the same point, revealing totally different outcomes compared to the Afghan female refugees who have recently come to Denmark. The differences in their time living in Denmark, their education, and their cultural adaptation can be labeled as the major differences in different adaptations of freedom and discrimination.





In Figure 5.2, on the left side, we have extracted the most frequently recurring statements from the detailed interviews. These statements are categorized into three primary factors, which are further divided into two sub-factors. Based on this analysis, a conceptual statement is formulated on the right side.

### ***Ethnic Barriers***

After coming to Denmark, the most practical barrier all the respondents faced is the language barrier. Most of them do not speak English or any other common tongue between the Danish authorities and them. So, in the beginning, everything was confusing to them, putting them in a position to have a strong Afghan community bond to help each other.

Three of our respondents replied that they faced problems applying for residence permits. They were all in their 30s (age) and had primary education schooling in Afghanistan. Also, they added they faced racism in Denmark. When we asked what sort of racism those were, they replied it was because of their 'hijab' and dress, she was being commented on her appearance.

One of the single women who has been living in Denmark for 20 years in the interview explained she had always worn hijab; however, in Denmark, in school, she was addressed as a terrorist by some other students.

*"When I [Sana] came here, I used to wear a scarf. But in school, some classmates called me a terrorist. My father allowed me to remove my scarf after hearing what I had been through in school."*

Two other women Azade and Salma who has been living in Denmark for 18 months and 3 years respectively stated, *"I [Azade] have to wear it [scarf] due to my family's desire but I feel racism and humiliated outside our community."*

*"I [Salma] have to wear scarf but I feel some people look down on me."*

In the case of Sana, Azade, and Salma, we can notice that their freedom to wear clothes of their choice is dominated and judged by both cultures no matter the time in relation. From Azade and Salma's family's point of view, as cultural dominance and, from the Danish society's point of view as matter of conceptualizing the headscarves a woman wears due to cultural pressure and not by her choice. Women like Sana may remove their headscarves due to this conceptualization. This leads to diversity exclusion because of a negatively stereotyped vision. As a result, women who wear headscarves by

their choice may face discrimination due to the assumption of maintaining or wearing hijab as a form of oppression and not empowerment in different environments where hijab is not a common practice.

Thus, Afghan-Danish women face different sorts of discrimination than the Afghan women who have recently come to Denmark, which gives credibility to the information following the Intersectionality framework. Afghan Danish women encounter challenges when trying to assimilate into Danish society due to the continued influence of patriarchal dominance in their families and communities. This dominance restricts their ability to adapt to the new environment, irrespective of their personal desires. Discrimination is prevalent against these women as they face presumptions and preconceived notions about their background, making them face cultural exclusion from Danish society.

However, it is noteworthy that Afghan-Danish women, regardless of their marital status, can overcome the constraints imposed by patriarchal dominance through higher education and multicultural experiences. These factors empower them to make independent and informed decisions, even when their families may attempt to restrict their choices.

In terms of integration into the Danish labor sector, Afghan-Danish women encounter additional difficulties. They find themselves positioned in a subordinate group within the hierarchical structure, which poses challenges to their successful integration into the workforce.

In outline, Afghan Danish women face obstacles in blending into Danish society due to patriarchal dominance within their families and communities. Nonetheless, those with higher education and multicultural experiences can assert their independence, even if their families try to limit their options. However, when it comes to integration into the Danish labor sector, they often find themselves in a subordinate position within the hierarchy.

### ***Homicide of Afghan Woman in Denmark***

In November 2022, an Afghan woman was stabbed to death in the Holbæk city center when she was returning home from finishing her work shift. She was seven months pregnant. Though the unborn baby survived at the spot initially, the hospital couldn't save it and announced dead at the hospital. One Afghan man and one Afghan woman were charged with this murder. According to the police, the murder was targeted, and suspicions directed to possible 'Honor Killing' (Christian Wenande, November 9, 2022, CPH Post). The woman was well-integrated in Denmark and knew the murderers well beforehand. Although six months have passed, if it was an honor killing or not, the information hasn't been made public. When we contacted the police to find out in detail, we were told the data was highly confidential.

Ten years back, another Afghan woman, Nilab Shahkor, 25 years old, was suspected to be dead in a targeted murder in Greve. The murder was targeted regarding stealing the 'den mohor' (one Muslim husband gifts to his wife as financial security fund during marriage) that Nilab's husband planned to gift her as a gift. The husband reported several times to the police that the house key was stolen, and after changing the lock, the new key also got stolen with the money amount for the gift. Despite informing the police, according to him and the neighbors, no security was provided. When the husband was away from Denmark for work, two young Danish citizens from Moroccan and Pakistani families set fire to the apartment with the patrol. The violence of the murder shook the whole neighborhood. This case was debatable both in terms of the police services and actions as well as for the nature of the crime. (Ray Weaver, September 17, 2012, Jyllands-Posten).

These two stories of violence towards Afghan women in Denmark indicate two types of violence against women regarding targeted murder. Where the first one may indicate a murder induced by cultural phenomena, the latter can be indicated by the criminal's personal profit and law implementation sectors' negligence.

## **5.2 What do Afghan refugee women and girls understand by ‘Freedom of life’ in Denmark?**

In this section first meaning of freedom is presented, and then comprehension of freedom in different generations of Afghan refugee females is introduced.

### **5.2.1 The Meaning of Freedom**

The meaning of ‘freedom’ has vast explanations derived from political, sociological, and philosophical views. In some definitions, freedom is equivalent to liberty, although they have different origins. Liberty originated from Latin, and freedom came from Anglo-Saxon. Liberty and freedom both have "*negative and positive*" dimensions. The negative aspect is getting rid of slavery or any cruelty that has arisen from power. On the other hand, the positive part is the circumstances that lead to the state of enjoying life for human beings (Anshen, R. N, 1942, p. 7). Again, a human living in a society, thus creating a community, is bound to abide by the state laws in a nation. Therefore, human rights law became a crucial scale to ensure freedom for any human. The recognition of dignity and equality in terms of the fundamental rights of a human is the foundation of freedom, peace, and justice in the world. In 1948, people from the legal and cultural backgrounds of different regions drafted and represented the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. Since then, mostly all humanitarians, researchers, and activists have targeted to label freedom of life in the notion of achieving these human rights when it comes to eradication of inequalities based on gender, sex, race, religion, nationality, and other factors.

In our study, Afghan women are restricted by several criteria to get that freedom in terms of human rights as explained under sub-question 5.1.

Article 13’s freedom of movement, article 16’s right to marry by choice, article 18’s freedom of thought, article 19’s freedom of expression, article 20’s right to freedom of peaceful assemblies, article 22’s social security, article 23’s rights to work without any discrimination, article 26’s right to education, article 27’s free to participate in cultural life (UDHR, 1948), these all are continuously violated in the set of Afghan societies due to the nature of their patriarch societies and considering women as the lowest hierarchy form where women face discrimination by men of different age, older

experienced women and social leaders. The Taliban took over, restricting women from achieving all these human rights even more. The rising number of Afghan women asylum seekers in Denmark is the consequence of this, but these women and girls face different challenges here, which may put them in a different societal hierarchy. Thus, the meaning of perceived freedom varies from woman to woman, girl to girl, and person to person.

Our data indicate differences between different generations' meanings and understandings of freedom.

### **5.2.2 Freedom in the Eyes of Afghan Women (Above 25 age)**

Following the interpretation and analysis of 5.1, we know that the Afghan women in our study are highly influenced and dominated by the patriarchal culture of Afghan society. Most of our respondents were deprived of having a career due to these norms and feminine roles in their country. They mentioned that due to taking care of children, they were not able to work. Besides, many of them expressed that in Afghanistan is not normal for women to have a career. While in Afghanistan, they used to be deprived of fundamental rights like education, work, free movement, and freedom to wear cloth for most of their lives, obtaining these rights in Denmark is equal to having freedom from their point of view. Unanimously they consider themselves free women. Three of our respondents mentioned having security in Denmark as the best criterion for their freedom. They expressed that in Afghanistan, there was war in some periods, and women did not have security. They told if they have these rights and possibilities in Denmark, they are free women compared to their past in Afghanistan. Thus, their standard for freedom is access to education, work, and security.

Yet, in women's perspective concerning freedom, we noticed a contradiction. They acknowledge that they are highly reliant on their husbands and that they need to consult them or seek their approval for every decision. At the same time, they express their belief in gender equality. This contradiction can be attributed to their cultural background, which is shaped by a male-dominated society where such dominance is considered the norm. While we do not intend to criticize or pass judgment on their choices, it is important to raise awareness about human rights and gender equality so that they can recognize the discrimination they may face. It seems that their perception of freedom is primarily associated with the freedom of the state rather than from an individual perspective.

However, one of our respondents (Khatereh) mentioned that she was free in Afghanistan, and her life has not changed at all in Denmark despite living for 1,5 years in Denmark. She said "*It [my life] has*

*not changed. We had freedom of all kinds under the Taliban, and the Taliban did not restrict us at all.*” However, this part of the interview contradicts the reality of the Taliban regime and her refugee status from Afghanistan and seeking asylum in Denmark.

### **5.2.3 Afghan Girls' Criteria for Freedom (Under 25 age)**

For girls, in addition to what women expressed as the freedom criteria, they have had other benchmarks. Making decisions independently, choosing their partner, having the freedom to marry at any age, and having the freedom to wear cloth are mentioned by girls as their expectations of freedom. Therefore, they have a broader understanding of freedom than their ex-generation. All newcomer girls in our survey cited forced marriage as the main constraint to their freedom. They said they are destined to marry someone that their family prefers. A 17-year-old girl in our interview is the best instance of forced marriage (The case presented under sub-ques 5.1).

An 18-year-old girl mentioned that despite her parent's pressure and community expectation, she has a boyfriend and intends to choose her husband no matter what her parents would do. She said she does not care about community thoughts or judgment about her and is determined to have an independent life irrespective of all constraints (Presented under 5.1).

As a result, women find themselves caught in a dilemma when it comes to selecting a life partner. If they opt for someone whom they personally prefer but their parents disapprove of, they will have to confront the repercussions of defying their parents' wishes. The fear of disobedience is so strong that many girls end up prioritizing their parents' satisfaction over their own desires.

Nevertheless, it is not just confined to choosing a partner; in most religious families, they are forced to wear clothes that, in many cases, are not their choice. This also puts them in difficult decision-making dilemmas: parents' satisfaction and community approval or facing some stereotypical behaviors in society, as they said, because of their clothes, explicitly wearing the scarf. On the other hand, due to these factors, those who wear scarves by their choice and want to continue wearing them throughout their lives, some of them face discrimination in Denmark which also affects their freedom of choice in a new society in a new way.

Thus, the criteria for freedom for Afghan girls are in the most conflicted situation where their freedom can be restricted from both sides, exposing them to discrimination and mental discomfort. Their perception of freedom is mostly associated with being free from all sorts of oppression as an individual, rather than just free from state-related conflicts and warfare.

#### **5.2.4 Clashes in different standards of Freedom**

Women's standard for freedom is problematic when it intersects with their daughters' or younger generation's criteria. The women's background and cultural upbringing do not matter for them since they do not feel any constraint on their freedom; this matters when it comes to their daughters due to different perceptions. Since women believe that if they are in Denmark and not under the Taliban and can study and work, they are free, but girls demand more freedom. The under-25 age generation mostly has higher years of formal education, is ambitious to work and have a career, and inclines more towards a gender-equal society where they can choose their lifestyle on their own terms.

Due to the cultural upbringing and the stigma in their community, mothers do not accept any other standard than themselves for freedom. They expect their daughter to refrain from practicing the 'Danish lifestyle.' Girls are expected to maintain their customs and traditions, which they used to follow in Afghanistan. In such circumstances, girls are forced to accept their parent's standards due to the fear of consequences. A few of them do not care what their parents and community are forcing them to do yet, doing it secretly and hiding it from parents and community, but most of them are forced to live a restricted life which can cause psychological stress and trauma.

According to one of our respondents who has lived in Denmark for more than ten years, their expectation of a free life would increase as time elapses and as they are more integrated into Danish society. Girls and younger generations will face a dire conundrum if their mothers do not change and adapt to new circumstances over time.

### ***5.3 How to bridge the gap between two generations' perspectives?***

The Danish government, institutions, and NGOs must take positive measures toward this step. As mentioned, the reason behind women's perspective on restrictions on their daughters' freedom is community pressure and their customs and upbringing. The Danish government and institutions can not intervene in their community from moral standards. Nevertheless, they can pave the way for alignment with empowering women. This way, when women are empowered, they will be aware of their rights, and their daughters' rights and their backgrounds will be ameliorated.

These measures could be explored in three categories: first, what the Danish government has done to empower women, in general, irrespective of their race, age, and nationality. Second, what have the Danish government and NGOs done to empower refugee women, and lastly, what have done to empower Afghan refugee women?

#### **5.3.1 The Danish government's measures regarding women**

It has been more than a century since Denmark adopted positive measures for women's empowerment. Legislations on gender equality have been in line with the purpose of empowering women, which is considered a pivotal factor in *"The Danish welfare system"*. Law on universal primary education, enacted in 1814 which necessitates educating both girls and boys, is considered the first step to gender equality in Denmark. In 1915 women's suffrage and seats in Parliament were acknowledged. In 1999 the Ministry for gender equality was established. *"First female prime minister"* was appointed in 2011. (Gender Equality - An incomplete success, n.d.)

The gender equality committee was instituted in a *"parliamentary session"* in May 2011 with the purpose of gender equality and producing *"equal opportunities for men and women"* at national and international levels. (The Gender Equality Committee, n.d.)

Act on *"equal treatment board"* in 2012 with amendments in 2015 resolves *"complains about discrimination on grounds of gender; ..."* concerning *"equality between men and women," "equal treatment"* with males and females on *"employment," "payment," "insurance,"* and *"leave and unemployment benefits in case of maternity."* (Promulgation of the Act on the Equal Treatment Board, 2016)

In 2014 act on *"equal pay for men and women"* with amendments in 2016 enacted, which is about *"discrimination"* based on gender in wage, whether *"direct or indirect discrimination"*. (Promulgation of the Act on equal pay for Men and women, 2019)



### 5.3.2. The Danish government and NGOs' measures concerning Female Refugees

The Danish government, institutions, and NGOs have adopted specific measures to empower refugee women and girls.

First and foremost, as refugees, their living expenses are paid by the immigration service. Monetary allowances for clothing, personal hygiene, and essential healthcare, as well as access to social services are guaranteed by immigration service. Additionally, it includes the provision of education for both children and adults. *"Education"* which is the cornerstone of women empowerment is mandatory for asylum seekers. Refugees have the advantage of attending courses in school for free. If they fail to participate in courses, they will be deprived of allowance partially or totally. Courses are designed to enhance their *"general skills and [their] trade or professional skills"*. (Conditions for asylum seekers, n.d.)

Since our focus group in the current thesis is Afghan refugee women, above mentioned measures would benefit them directly or indirectly and consequently pave the way for empowering them.

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is a *"humanitarian, non-governmental, non-profit organization."* DRC helps refugees with *"integration and asylum procedures"* in Denmark. (DRC - Danish Refugee Council, 2023) DRC has an active role in asylum protection and ensuring their rights by giving them legal counseling. Besides, DRC is a *"leading"* NGO in Denmark in the *"integration of refugees and migrants."* (Denmark, 2023) DRC, in collaboration with the Women's Refugee Commission, initiated the *"Gender-Based Violence Innovation (GBV) program"* with the purpose of *"preventing GBV and ensuring economic empowerment survivors,"* which directly has a positive impact on empowering women. (Local Anchor Groups: A localized approach to address gender-based violence, 2022)

Copenhagen has three integration houses (Kringlebakken, Fakti, and Diversity Works) which actively focus on refugee and migrant women, and Copenhagen Municipality covers their budget. These houses provide migrants and refugees numerous opportunities to empower them and enhance their *"skills and knowledge."* Sewing workshops, computer classes, and Danish language classes are part of their activities that prepare women for a better life. (Denmark: Integration houses for women in Copenhagen 3:3 - "Diversity Works", n.d.)

Red Cross is an active NGO protecting asylum seekers' rights from arrival until obtaining the residence permit. Red Cross provides refugees with the necessary support and training, which prepare

them for future life in Denmark. Thus, it has an indirect impact on women's empowerment. (What we do in the Asylum Department, n.d.)

### **5.3.3. Measure with respect to Afghan Female Refugee**

Of all the measures, which impacts Afghan female refugees, is the grant of asylum exclusively based on gender. According to the Refugee Board Coordination Committee's ruling, Afghan women and girls are "*covered by section 7, subsection 1 of the Aliens Act.1(asylum)*". The reasoning behind this decision is linked to the deteriorating conditions faced by women and girls in Afghanistan according to EUAA country advisory issued on January 24, 2022. This development empowers women by reversing the traditional dependency dynamic ingrained in their culture. It means that an Afghan man's eligibility for asylum will now be determined by his wife's decision and intention.

The Danish government, institutions, and NGOs have had a constructive role in empowering women in general, whether directly or indirectly. Furthermore, some measures would benefit refugees irrespective of their gender. Thus, in our case, Afghan Refugee women in Denmark would have numerous opportunities, leading to their empowerment in the long run.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

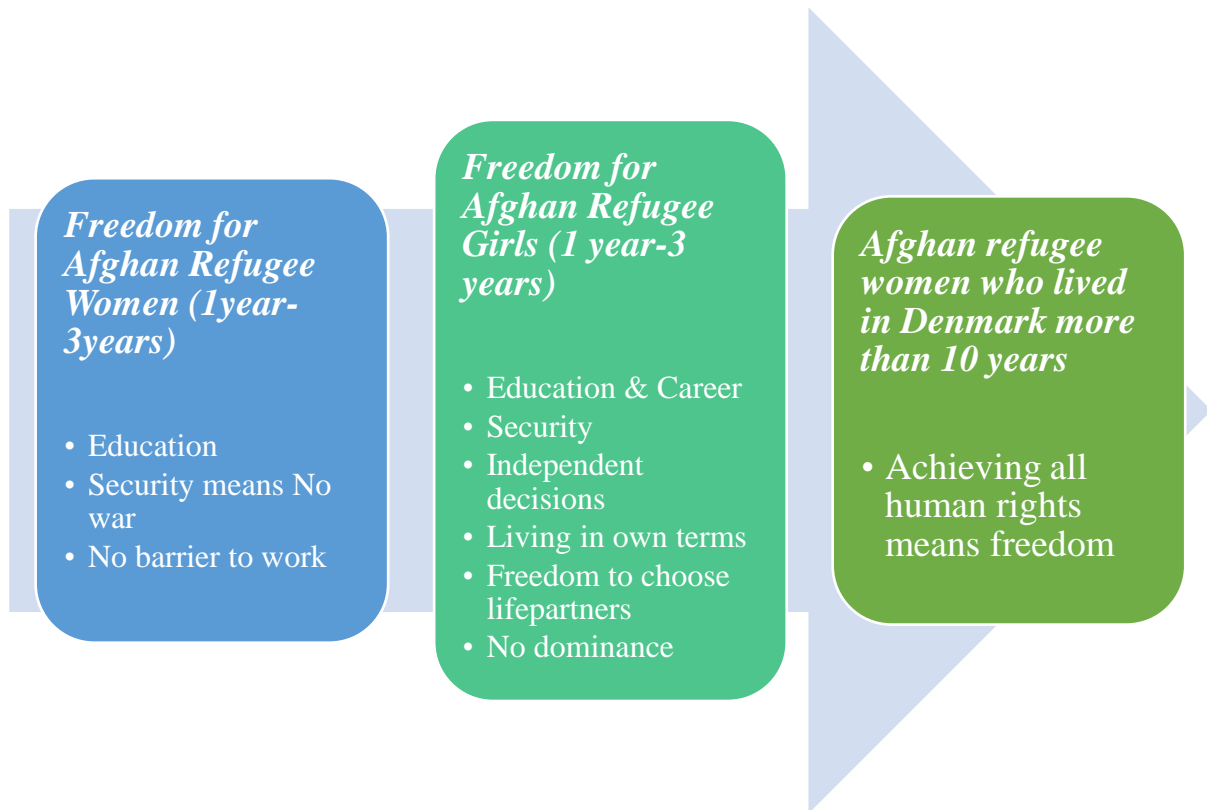


Fig: 6.1: Changing pattern of freedom throughout time

This section introduces a discussion of the changing pattern from Afghan women's perspectives of their and their daughter's freedom as well as the girls' perspectives in different years of living in Denmark to understand the trend over time. The pattern showed different views on freedom for different generations. Although, the view changes eventually with time to a more progressive side.

### Restrictiveness to Progressiveness

Gradual progressiveness can be noticed as time passes living in Denmark for Afghan Women. When they moved to Denmark with refugee status, they brought with them all the cultural phenomena that affected their daily life as an independent and free woman. Almost all the respondents in our study, who have lived in Denmark for less than three years, have a primary and/or, secondary education level. Five of them were dropped out of primary education, and three women have not experienced

any formal education. None of them had any chance to reach tertiary education. Because the girls who were studying for seven or more years in school couldn't even have continued their education if they were in Afghanistan as the Taliban totally restricted secondary education for girls. In Denmark, they can access formal education as they want eventually if they learn the language. So, language is only an external temporary barrier here for them. But in Afghanistan, going to school meant something rebellious and extremely restricted, not only due to the war situation but also because it was not supported by the misogynistic-oriented psychology of people. The public movement for girls and women is confined throughout history at different levels at different points in time; the social aggregated view on girls is, that they are considered to contribute only to household chores, along with bearing and rearing children, which they should invest most of the time. For Afghan girls and women, it became more of a secure situation for them to remain home rather than sending their daughters to school with the uncertainty of their lives following the bombing of schools in past years. After 20 years of revolutionary thoughts and actions for the development of women's empowerment in Afghanistan, once again, man is considered the only breadwinner of the family; boy child means 'power' so they can go to war when it is needed; they can be bold when it comes to the protection of the family, they are the main source of financial support and thus women become passive and irrelevant when it comes to studying, going outside to work, or living an independent life under the Taliban regime. Being an Afghan woman turns the coin for them to access every fundamental right passively i.e. by accompanying men, than any other woman of a liberal society. Consequently, in Denmark, Afghan women's reluctance can be seen when it comes to going out independently, for example, to go to the healthcare provider, going outside of the city if they have to work, attending any social activities or events without the permission of their fathers or husbands, etc. because the male dominance primarily they used to have in their lives in Afghanistan, here traveled along with them with the same values. So, in their understanding of freedom, Afghan women consider themselves free in Denmark as there is no authority to put barriers for women to educate themselves, to work, and to go out publicly. But they don't see eye to eye with the lifestyle in Denmark for women, which allows them to have a partner of their choice, social activities like dancing or singing, social gatherings in a pub or bar, travel outside the city by themselves to work which they think if any male does is not as questionable as when an Afghan girl does. Being an Afghan Muslim woman (Intersectionality) and coming from a different societal hierarchy (SDT) tangent with each other at a point where a major gender gap in terms of enjoying human rights can be noticeable, exposing them to utter marginality. On the contrary, all of them agree with their belief in gender equality shows their

misconception or less knowledge about their rights which put them into more vulnerability. This can be explained as a restrictive cultural phenomenon that maintains the sustainability of the same societal hierarchy that existed in Afghanistan and Denmark for a certain period.

For the under-25 age Afghan girls who have come here with their parents and have been living in Denmark for less than 3 years, as mentioned before, they are continuing their formal education with other international students and have different definitions of freedom. But being an Afghan Muslim girl puts them in a situation of negative stereotyping, whether they are oppressed in their family or not, and their appearances in terms of clothing. Freedom and independence mean to them to get restrained from the misogynistic cultural behaviors normalized in Afghan societies like they can't date someone before marriage, and their life partner must be from their religion, culture, and ethnicity. They want to take part in social gatherings with their friends, they want to live on their own terms. They want to recognize their rights to get educated, work, marry, divorce, and take independent decisions. 'Culture' does not mean for them to hold on to the practices that give boundaries to make their choices in a liberal country. This shows when they are in Denmark and exposed to a different societal system where gender equality is the norm, the availability of an equality system regardless of gender to get access to fundamental rights like education, healthcare, and security along with other recreational human rights these girls have the transition to break the shackle of patriarchal cultural dominance which their parents' generation brought with themselves in the country. For Afghan Muslim girls, the SDO or, the preference to the dominance hierarchy to accept is less than the Afghan Muslim women.

However, Afghan women who are living in Denmark for more than six years, gradually accept the fact that their daughters can have a partner of their choice if he is a good human being. The Afghan women who are living here for more than 10 years, expressed their parents are now progressive with Islamic values and encouraged them to get educated, have a career, and be independent. The girls who have come here with their parents as refugees more than 10 to 20 years ago, their becoming a woman from childhood was developed in a Danish society where they experienced and understand being free and independent means being treated like a 'human' not just a 'girl' and thus being free and independent means having all human rights to them. They showed independence to avoid those Afghan communities who still believe in the patriarchal dominance culture which allows them to restrict their deserved rights or judge their independent decisions. Thus, as time goes by, the once strong community that they were actively engaged in and cared for its judgments gradually diminishes

in significance for them, and in order to lead a liberated life, they would minimize their involvement and interactions within the community. They live on their own terms and take decisions by themselves for their life. They try to consult or have suggestions from their family, friends, and peers, but they don't have to seek permission from anyone to change any decisions in their lives. They have an education in whichever sector they want, they have careers, and they choose their partner by themselves. However, being an Afghan descendant means difficulties in getting integrated into the Danish labor market due to stereotyping and skepticism of the background they have by the nationals. Facing discrimination for wearing hijabs or proving themselves multiple times to get a similar position job with other nationals is still a matter of exclusion. This defines, though these women have learned the language, have been brought up in Danish society, and are empowered, their Afghan background puts them in a different hierarchical position of a new societal system where they can be exposed to different sorts of the discriminative domain due to their race, ethnicity, and cultural demonstration.

So, at the beginning years of their life in Denmark, these two generations are in conflict in the perception of human rights, and in some cases, the older generation is the perpetrator of restricting the younger generation from achieving human rights. According to our empirical data, this time is between one to three years, where the girls can face most restrictions almost same as they used to face in their homeland. Three to six years is the time when the older generation's perception starts to change according to their integration into Danish society. Whoever lives more than ten years gradually shows legitimacy towards the gender-equal perspectives of freedom of life.

Figure 6.2 shows the overview of Afghan female refugees' freedom, where the nature of perceiving freedom and subsequently being exposed to discrimination is reflected through multiple factors of intersectionality and social dominance theory. Combinedly, these factors affect their lives, restricting them from achieving human rights; on the other hand, through empowerment, they can gradually lift themselves up from their marginal situation.

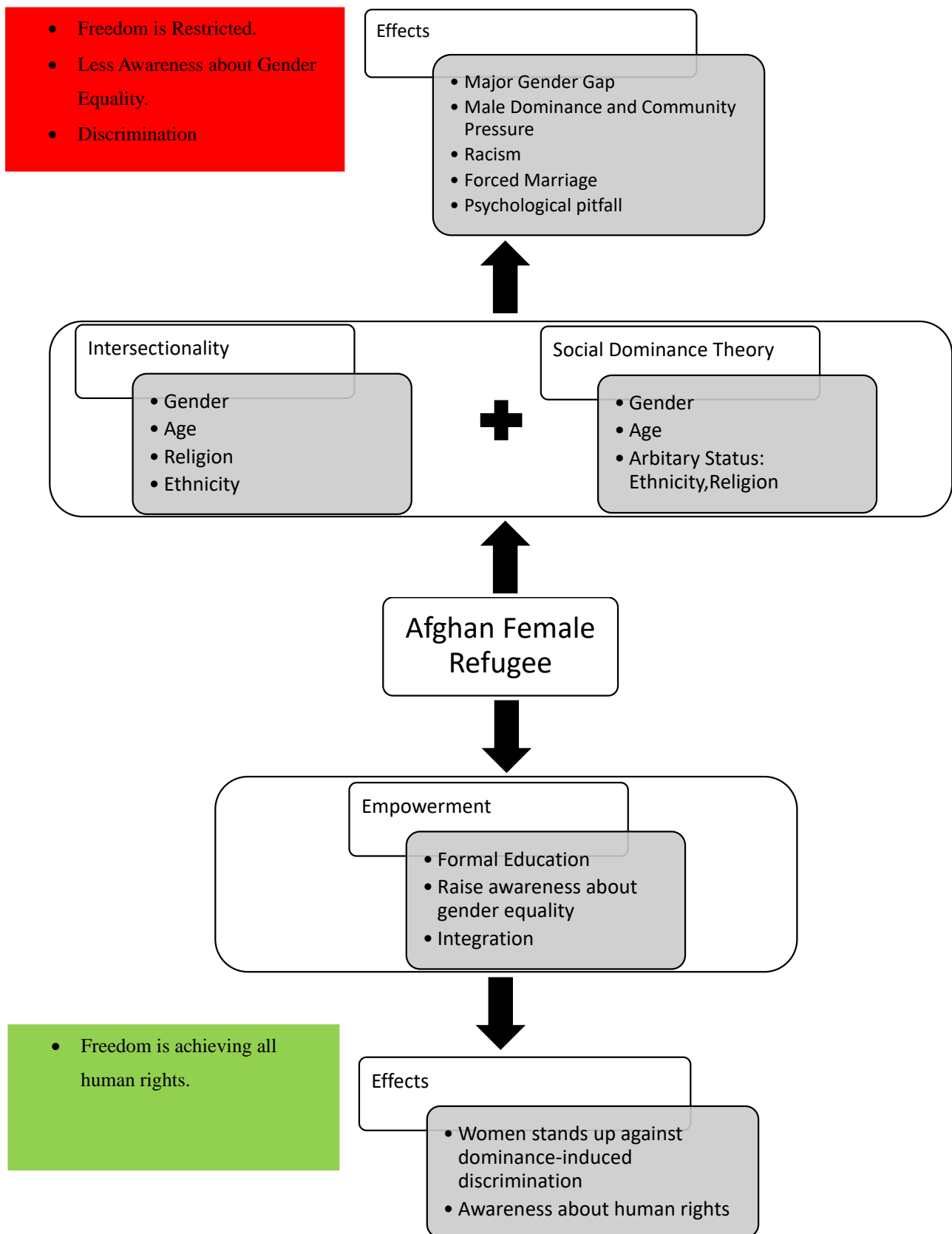


Fig 6.2: Overview of Afghan Female Refugees' Freedom Perception

## **Chapter 7: Authors' Perspective**

This research brings out the notion that though the definition and meaning of freedom may vary from person to person in relation to their gender, age, sex, religion, and cultural background, the human rights violation should be addressed regardless of these factors to bring down justice to the victim person. The forced marriage of a minor in this study is an example of how cultural dominance can approve criminal offense, which is later normalized through the acceptance of the relationship by the victim and moving on, leaving the law enforcement and implementation authorities ineffective in addressing the crime. The other cases of affirmation that they are not allowed to choose their life partners bring two notions, do they want to choose their life partner despite knowing that, or do they acknowledge that they have every right to choose their life partner and by not letting them it is a human rights violation. The conflicting situation here is to address which kind of marriage is a forced marriage to them. Different communities having lower human development criteria impose forced marriages around the world against the law. From our point of view, authorities can raise awareness not only among girls and women but also among men about the cause, consequences, and moralities regarding forced marriage and other human rights through vocational training or part of their ongoing education curriculum for refugees with extra concern. On the other hand, law enforcement should scrutinize in depth how to address unlawful marriages, and law implementation authorities should act in practicality where it needs to intervene. Furthermore, more empirical studies should be carried out in different vulnerable communities in Denmark to reduce the data limitation and inaccessibility regarding human rights violation.



## **Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendation for Further Research**

### **8.1 Conclusion**

The historical record of Afghanistan indicates that even during periods when certain rights were granted, Afghan women faced challenges in fully exercising those rights due to male unwillingness and extremist ideologies. Men have consistently held a position of dominance over women, often misusing religion as a pretext to limit women's rights. Yet, after moving to Denmark as refugees, where their rights are guaranteed, females are still expected to uphold their cultural norms and values as imposed by their families and communities.

The answer to the research question, “Are Afghan refugee women and girls free to choose their desired lifestyle in a liberal country, Denmark?” has different dimensions. To simply answer the question, ‘Yes,’ all married and older generations consider themselves free women in Denmark. Again, in terms of human rights, they are still in a lower hierarchal position because of their cultural values in day-to-day life. Unlike the situation in Afghanistan, Danish society and democratic laws of Denmark gave them all the rights to be free, to get integrated, and to improve their lives. But the understanding of living their life on their own terms is near to ignorance for married women who have always been dependent on their husbands in making every life decision. The freedom of their life lies in the domain of security, with no warfare and no external barrier to education and work. On the other hand, the barrier comes from their own family, personal circumstances like household duties and rearing children, and the cultural attributes that restrain them from getting out of their previous gender role. As a result, they end up imposing the same hierarchal structure on their daughters, restricting them to their desired lifestyle. The perception of being free is thus limited by the fact of shifting to a country that ensures security from war and security as a woman.

However, for younger generations, the answer is no, as the standard for leading a free life compared to older generations does not suffice since they expect a wider range of freedoms than their proceeding generations and the existing standard falls short of meeting their expectations. They face a dilemma between parental and community satisfaction versus Danish society approval. Whichever side they choose, they risk being frowned upon by the other side. In the initial years of residing in Denmark, they might also not feel the confidence to preserve their religious and cultural values in Danish

society. However, with the passage of time, they would gradually choose their desired lifestyle with reduced apprehension about facing social judgment in Danish society or severe consequences stemming from defying parental or community expectations. This could be facilitated by empowering women through education, employment, and independence. Parallel to this piecemeal change, older generations would have a moderate and lenient outlook toward freedom, reflecting their integration into Danish society, education, and other factors.

Nevertheless, newcomers and younger single females are those who endure conundrums in decision-making and would pay the price on whichever side they take, whether it is the parent and community's satisfaction or Danish society and peers' approval in the early years of their living in Denmark. Yet, the Community remains an obstacle that persists regardless of the passage of time and would not change; rather, women might conceal their lifestyle within their community or will reduce their interactions within it to pursue a life of freedom and preserve their honor simultaneously.

## **8.2 Recommendations for Further Research**

While writing the thesis, we encountered significant gaps in certain areas that require further investigation. In our interviews, a considerable number of young women expressed discomfort with wearing a headscarf or hijab due to experiences of racism and discrimination. Furthermore, the ruling issued by the European Court of Justice on 15 July 2021, which prohibits wearing headscarves in the workplace, highlights a larger issue concerning the lack of freedom for Muslim women in Europe to choose their attire. This decision resonates with similar laws proposed in Denmark, such as the ban on wearing the hijab in schools and other contexts. These measures collectively indicate that Muslim women in Europe face restrictions on their ability to dress according to their personal choices. Thus, the research on the freedom of Muslim women to choose their dress has not been done elaborately. Consequently, there remains a need for more comprehensive research on the topic of Muslim women's freedom to select their clothing.

There is another significant area that necessitates further research, namely the issue of violence against Afghan women, including physical and non-physical violence, sexual harassment, and honor-related violence. Although our thesis primarily focuses on exploring the freedom of Afghan women to select their lifestyle, with a particular emphasis on forced marriage, it is crucial to acknowledge the prevalence of violence and honor killings faced by Afghan women. These cases demand special attention and further investigation to shed light on the underlying causes and develop effective strategies for prevention and support.

Lastly, addressing the challenges arising from the disparities between Islamic principles and Danish laws contributes to certain dilemmas. Many Muslim countries adhere to Islamic laws, particularly in matters of personal status, such as marriage and divorce. In Islam, a simple declaration can deem a couple married or divorced. However, this approach is not recognized or accepted in non-Muslim countries, leading to potential difficulties for women migrating to such countries. While forced marriage sometimes aligns with Islamic marriage practices, it is necessary to consider the complexities surrounding divorce. In most Muslim communities, Islamic divorce is the only recognized form of divorce, and obtaining a divorce as a Muslim woman can be challenging, as it largely depends on the control and intention of men in accordance with Islamic principles. However, when a Muslim woman migrates to a European country like Denmark, she may find it relatively easier to obtain a divorce under Danish law, which may not be acknowledged or accepted by her ex-husband under Islamic law.

Consequently, if the woman remarries after such a divorce in a non-Islamic marriage, it would be deemed illegal and considered adultery in the eyes of Muslim society. In some cases, the ex-husband may perceive himself entitled to harm or kill his former wife due to this perceived transgression. These conflicts arising from the differences between Islamic and Danish legal systems pose significant challenges for Muslim women navigating the intersection of religious and secular laws. By examining these complexities, a deeper understanding of the legal and cultural dilemmas faced by Muslim women who migrate to non-Muslim countries could be gained. This knowledge is vital for addressing the gaps in legal protection and support systems, as well as fostering dialogue and promoting cultural sensitivity to ensure the well-being and rights of Muslim women within diverse societies.

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## **Annex A**

### **Interview Guideline (Afghan Female Refugees)**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Education Level:
4. Marriage Status:
5. How many children do you have?
6. How long have you been living in Denmark?
7. At what age did you get married?
8. From your point of view, what age is suitable for getting married?
9. Do your family always expect a boy child to be born?
10. Did you have a job in Afghanistan? If not, why?
11. Do you want to have a job in Denmark? If not, why?
12. In Denmark, in terms of your life, what things have changed from your life in Afghanistan?
13. What challenges and problems do you have in Denmark?
14. What is your PoV on Denmark's laws on the freedom of girls and women?
15. When deciding anything regarding your basic needs, do you need to ask someone? Or do you make your own decisions independently?
16. Do you believe in Gender-Equality? Yes.
17. If you are single, do you have the possibility to get married at any age or have a boyfriend or choose your partner by yourself?
18. Do you feel any necessity in your family that your partner must have the same nationality or religion as you have?
19. Do you wear clothes according to your preference and comfort? If not, why?
20. Do you feel safe and free as a girl or woman in your community? If not, why?
21. Do you agree with Denmark's rules on the freedom of girls and women? If not, why?
22. Do you consider yourself a free woman? Why or why not?
23. Other comments?

## **Annex B**

### **Interview Guideline (Afghan-Danish Women)**

1. Name
2. Age:
3. Education Level:
4. Marriage Status:
5. Employment Status:
6. How long have you been living in Denmark?
7. From your point of view what age is suitable for getting married?
8. Do your family always expect a boy child to be born?
9. When deciding anything regarding your basic needs, do you need to ask someone? Or do you take your own decisions independently?
10. Do you believe in Gender-Equality?
11. If you are single, do you have the possibility to get married at any age you want? Or can you have a boyfriend or choose your partner by yourself?
12. Do you feel any necessity in your family that your partner must have the same nationality or religion as you have?
13. In relation to the Afghan community in Denmark, how do you define your Family? Progressive or Conservative?
14. Do you feel safe and free as a girl or woman in Afghan community? If not, why?
15. Do you face any community pressure despite living in Denmark for many years? If not, why?
16. What challenges and problems do you face in Denmark because of your Afghan background?
17. In Denmark, in terms of your life what things have changed from your life in Afghanistan?
18. Please explain what changes happened in your life from when you first came to Denmark to your current life?
19. Do you describe yourself a free woman? If not, why?
20. Other Comments:

## **Annex C**

### **Informal Interviews**

In a friendly discussion with a 38-year-old woman with three daughters and two sons, she said:

*“I have an 18years old girl. My husband and I would like her to marry ASAP because it is already late for her. If we were in Afghanistan, she would get married. But here in Denmark, it is hard because most of our relatives are not here. We expect her to marry someone we know beforehand.”* (11 April 2023)

She also has a 3-year-old daughter. I told her maybe her first daughter was raised in a culture where you approve of that, and she can obey what you expect. But for younger girls, it would be different. Because they will grow up in a Danish environment and might adopt a different culture. They might have a boyfriend, drink, or whatever is unacceptable for you. She replied this is my big concern here in Denmark. *“We cannot stand these kinds of things at any cost. Even if I accept, her father and brothers cannot tolerate these things, never”*.

### **Participatory Observations**

We planned to do dance activities for girls. Four of Afghan girls approached me and said we love dancing, but we are not allowed to dance. I assure them that it will be done in private rooms with no men observing them. But they said dancing is not appropriate from our parents' view. One of them said, “My mother would say you want to be a ‘dancer’!” to refer negatively. (There is an inappropriate word for dancer in Dari language).