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10.1177/14687968231181421

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Afghan immigrants in Western Australia: Divisions within the community and integration within the society

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Abstract
The integration process for immigrants is a multi-dimensional concept, influenced by a wide range of structural and individual factors, including social connections that immigrants make in the host society. An important part of this social connection can be developed with other co-nation immigrants within the immigrant community. However, this sometimes can be challenging due to the divisions that might exist within communities. Drawing on data with a mixed-method design, this study focuses on the Afghan community in Western Australia to understand, firstly, the relationship between Afghan immigrants’ social connections within their community and successful integration within Australian society, and secondly the causes of divisions and challenges within the community. To do this, the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) Integration Index was used to measure the level of integration among 115 Afghan participants in the quantitative phase, with 18 interviews and two focus groups conducted in the qualitative phase, to understand Afghan experiences of divisions within their community. Findings show that there is a correlation between Afghans’ social connections within their community and the four dimensions of economic, social, linguistic, and navigational integration. Qualitative findings also showed the details of the challenges that Afghans face within their community due to ethnic/regional divisions as well as the challenges women face in the community.

Keywords
Integration, social connection, afghan community, australian society

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Introduction

Afghanistan is an ethnically diverse country. There is no exact data about the proportion of ethnic groups in Afghanistan, as the last census in this country was conducted in 1979. However, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baluch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, and Aimaq are among the recognised ethnic groups in Afghanistan (Saikal, 1998). It is estimated that Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Hazaras constitute almost 80% of the population of Afghanistan (Bulut and Şahin, 2019). Historically, the Pashtuns have been the dominant politically privileged group in Afghanistan, and other ethnic groups, particularly the Hazaras, faced a wide range of discrimination and persecution by them within their home regions (Barfield, 2011). As a result, there has never been an overriding commonality among Afghan ethnic groups in Afghanistan’s contemporary history.

Afghanistan has suffered from political conflict, civil war, and invasion by superpowers for more than four decades, emanating from over 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees settling in different countries worldwide (UNHCR, 2021). The majority of these Afghan refugees live in the two neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran. Generally, the Pashtuns are settled in Pakistan and the Hazaras and the Tajiks have selected Iran as their host country, mainly due to the shared cultural and religious values between them and their host countries (Erdal and Oeppen, 2013). Even many Afghan refugees who live in other countries in Europe, Canada, or Australia, have lived in Iran or Pakistan for some time before moving to these developed countries.

Australia is one of those countries in which Afghan migration has been increasing. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) (ABS), there were 28,598 Afghanistan-born people in Australia in the 2011 census, while this number jumped to 57,797 in the latest census in 2021. The Afghan Community in Australia consists of mostly young people with a median age of 34, similar to the median age of Australia-born populations, and 11 years younger than the median of overseas-born people in Australia. (ABS, 2022). Most of Afghans arrived Australia as asylum seekers, many of them using boats and relying on people smugglers (Lange et al., 2007).

A recent study by Rezaei and his colleagues (2021), conducted in Western Australia showed that Afghan former refugees face major challenges in employment and their social connections within Australian society, even years after becoming citizens. Research undertaken with Afghan refugees in Melbourne showed that more than 62% of Victoria’s Afghan community members are illiterate which provided challenges in understanding their basic human rights and accessing services (Sanati Pour et al., 2014). Other studies have also shown that Afghan immigrants in Australia experience a range of challenges in employment, lack of social networks, and language barriers in their integration into Australian society. (Radford and Hetz, 2020; Sharifian et al., 2021; Vergani et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, in addition to the challenges that Afghans face within wider society, it seems that they also face challenges within their own community in Australia. One of a few studies in this area is conducted by Abraham and Busbridge (2014) in which some of the diasporic tensions among the Afghan community in Melbourne are discussed. For example, the term “Afghan” is controversial between different ethnic groups in the
community. Historically, it was used as a synonym for the Pashtuns and reminds Afghans of the dominant position they held in Afghanistan, which is generally not acceptable by some members of Afghanistan’s minority ethnic groups, particularly the Hazaras (Abraham and Busbridge, 2014). Instead, they prefer the terms “Afghani” or “Afghanistani” to distinguish between ethnicity and citizenship. In addition to this identity challenge, Afghan refugees’ religious differentiation, whether they are Shia or Sunni Muslims, and the country that they have come from, are other sources of diasporic tensions among the Afghan community in Australia (Abraham and Busbridge, 2014; Rezaei et al., 2021).

In the context of Afghan immigrants, Putnam’s (2001) concept of bridging, bonding, and linking social capital can provide a useful framework for understanding the challenges faced in social connections within the community. This is particularly relevant to bonding social capital which refers to the connections that people have with those who are similar to them, such as family, friends, and members of their own ethnic or religious group (Robert, 2001). This is also particularly important for integrating within the wider society, as positive social connection with members of the community has many benefits for refugees’ effective integration in the host society (Ager and Strang, 2008).

Therefore, it seems that the Afghan community features some unique attributes that potentially highlight challenges in the social connections of the community members. This is highlighted in a recent review article published by Rezaei et al. (2023) that Afghan immigrants are among the most vulnerable immigrant groups within Australian society, particularly in terms of employment and facing racism and discrimination. In this regard, this research aims to understand what challenges Afghans face within their community in Western Australia in terms of their social connection, and also whether these challenges affect their integration within Australian society. It also presents challenges that women face in integrating into Australian society.

The concept of integration

According to Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015: 118), ‘integration is a chaotic concept: a word used by many but understood differently by most’. Its meaning is not clear in the public discussion and even in academia, sometimes it is equated with assimilation (e.g., Alba and Nee, 1997). Assimilationist perspectives usually burden immigrants with the responsibility of cultural adaptation often results in immigrants forgoing their home country’s cultural values to accept those of their host society. However, integration acknowledges both immigrants’ cultural heritage and the responsibilities of the receiving society (Verdía Varela et al., 2020). Accordingly, integration can be defined as a two-way process that depends not only on immigrants’ efforts and commitments but also on the openness of the host society (Klarenbeek, 2019). To conceptualise the integration process this research has adopted the Immigration Policy Lab (LAB) Integration Index (IPL) designed by Harder and his colleagues (2018) which have developed the Integration Index for measuring the level of integration of migrants within receiving society. The IPL is adaptable and helps researchers to fulfill various goals with the core of the framework.
consisting of ‘Knowledge and Capacity’ as two-essential parts of constructing the measurement of an immigrant’s integration level. Knowledge refers to some qualities such as fluency in a language that is spoken in the host society, and Capacity includes involvement in the host society’s labour market, its political system, and social institutions (Harder et al., 2018). While the IPL framework emphasizes the importance of knowledge and capacity in immigrant integration, it’s important to recognize that structural barriers such as discrimination and limited access to resources can hinder immigrants’ ability to fully participate in the host society’s labor market, political system, and social institutions.

The IPL integration index (refer to Figure 1) consists of six dimensions, psychological, economic, political, social, linguistic, and navigational. Psychological integration refers to immigrants’ feelings of attachment to the new society, their willingness to keep living in the society, and, having a sense of belonging. Economic integration means being active in the labour market, relying on their income, and having the capability of handling different levels of unanticipated expenses. Political integration refers to accepting the political system of the host society and exercising their rights within the political system, following the host society’s important political issues and the level of engaging in political actions. Linguistic integration refers to language proficiency, which includes immigrants’

Figure 1. Immigration policy lab (IPL) integration index.
ability to read, speak, write, and understand the official language of their host country. Finally, navigational integration is about the ability to meet basic needs, such as visiting a GP or a physician or having knowledge of a legal problem, tax payment, driving rules, or writing a letter- (Harder et al., 2018).

**Methods**

This research has utilised a mixed method design and has therefore collected data through quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach enabled this research to capture statistical information about the relationship between Afghans’ social connections and their integration within wider society as well as the views and opinions of Afghan immigrants about any divisions within their community in Western Australia. Therefore, the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design was used (Ivankova et al., 2006), according to which first quantitative data and then qualitative data were collected and analysed in two consecutive phases.

**Study measures**

In conducting the quantitative phase of the research, a survey was undertaken to employ the IPL Integration Index and questions to measure both the quality and quantity of the social connections within the Afghan community in Western Australia. To do this, participants were asked how often they participate in different types of groups (religious, sport, and social) and how many of people in those groups are Afghans/non-Afghans. The IPL Integration Index consists of a short (IPL-12) format and a long (IPL-24) format (Harder et al., 2018). The latter (IPL-24) is used in this research as it measures the integration dimensions more in-depth. This index measures integration in six dimensions: psychological, economic, political, social, linguistic, and navigational, using a Likert scale between one and five for each question. The questionnaire was distributed in both Persian (Dari) and English to the participants in the research. Table 1 shows the operational definitions of these dimensions and the number of questions they cover.

In conducting the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted. Interview questions were developed based on the primary findings of the quantitative phase (IPL Integration Index) in which participants were asked about their social connections with the community members, focusing on potential divisions and the underlying reasons. The same structure was used for the focus groups in which participants were encouraged to share their experiences of any divisions within their community in Western Australia. All interviews and focus groups, except for one interview, were conducted in the Persian (Dari) language.

**Data collection and analysis**

Data collection took place in the Perth metropolitan area between September 2020 till October 2021. The first author is a Persian native speaker, the language that the majority
of Afghan immigrants speak at home (ABS, 2022), conducted several meetings with the Afghan community leaders, explaining the research objectives. Then, he was invited to the Afghan Community events, conducted mainly in two communities, the Ahlulbait Community of Western Australia and the Nabuwat Community of Western Australia to recruit participants for the research.

The IPL Integration Index was undertaken by 115 participants of both sexes selected through convenience and snowball sampling. In the qualitative phase, 18 participants, 10 men, and eight women were individually interviewed. Two gender-based focus group sessions, with eight men and five women were conducted. The interviews and focus group discussions were originally conducted in Persian/Dari language. Subsequently, the transcripts were translated into English before analysing the data. The interviews were conducted within safe and secure venues, including two campuses of Joondalup and Mt Lawley of Edith Cowan University in Perth. Other interviews and focus groups took place at participants’ preferred locations across Perth, including in Kings Park and Riverton Library.

This research was conducted according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, as well as Edith Cowan University’s Conduct of Human Research Ethics Policy (approval number 2020-01617). Therefore, at the start of each interview and focus group, a consent form was discussed with participants, and they gave their consent, either in writing or orally.

In analysing the quantitative data, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) (version 28) was used. In analysing the qualitative data, thematic analysis with a bottom-up approach was undertaken. To do this, all interviews and focus group sessions were transcribed, similarities in the data were identified, and codes were created and grouped to identify patterns in the data, resulting in the final themes emerging from the data.

Table 1. The IPL integration index dimensions and operational definitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration Dimensions</th>
<th>Operational definition</th>
<th>Number of questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>The feeling of connection with the host society, the respondent’s wish to continue living there, and the sense of belonging</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Income, employment satisfaction, and ability to meet different levels of unexpected expenses</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Understanding of the important political issues in the host society, and the degree to which respondents engage in discussion and political action</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Social ties and interactions with locals in the host society as well as bridging social capital</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic</td>
<td>Respondents’ assessment of their ability in the English language</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigational</td>
<td>The ability to manage the basic needs of the host society, such as seeing a doctor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The findings of the research are presented from both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. In the quantitative phase, the statistical relationships between the IPL Integration Index and Afghans’ social connections are presented and from the qualitative phase, the experiences of Afghans in facing divisions in their community are presented. Before discussing these sections, the participants’ demographic profiles will be described.

The participants’ demographic profile

Of 115 respondents in the first phase of data collection, 54% were men and 46% were women, 51.9% of whom were born in Afghanistan, and 44% were born in two countries of Iran and Pakistan. Regarding residency status in Australia, 70.6% in this study declared that they have come to Australia as refugees, and of this group, 96.2% of them are either Australian citizens or permanent residents, and 3.8% are on temporary visas. The majority of participants were the Hazara (65.4%) with others from other ethnic groups, such as Pashtun, Tajik, Seyed, and Qizilbash. 92.3% of participants were Muslim (80.8% Shia and 11.5% Sunnis) and also 7.7% declared that they have “no religion”. Regarding education, data showed that 21.9% of participants had no formal education, 32.8% had high school qualifications, 22.1% had some form of certificate qualification, and 23.2% had university qualifications.

In the second phase of the data collection, individual interviews with 18 participants were undertaken for between 45 and 90 min. 10 interviews were conducted with men and eight with women, two of which were done via telephone. The participants’ age range was between 19 and 62, most were in their 30s, all first-generation immigrants, and identified themselves as Muslim. Regarding the ethnic background, eight participants were from the Hazara, three from the Pashtun, the Tajik, and the Qizilbash, and two from the Seyed. The focus group participants were also mainly the Hazaras and Muslim participants’ average years of living in Australia was 9.8 years.

Social connections and integration

The quantitative data shows that some 87% of the respondents ‘definitely’ or ‘most probably’ want to live in Australia forever. More than half of the participants also consider both Afghanistan and Australia as their homelands, while 41.8% selected only one of them. Regarding intra-community relationships, 37.7% stated that they have ‘never’ received support from other Afghans in their community, while 28.3% ‘sometimes’, 13.2% ‘about half the times’, 18.9% ‘most of the time’, and only 1.9% ‘always’ receive the support. The participants were also asked about how often they participate in group activities with ‘Afghans from other ethnic groups’ in Perth. The data showed that more than half of participants never communicate with Afghans from other ethnic groups. However, when they were asked about the quality of their relationship with this group, 63.7% reported ‘very well’ or ‘well’.
Analysis of the IPL Integration Index showed that the participants’ integration means in four dimensions psychological, economic, navigational, and social are slightly higher than the average, and in the dimensions of linguistic and political the means are lower than the average. The average for each dimension varies as they are made of different numbers of questions. For example, the psychological dimension has an average score of 9, which is determined by three questions on a 5-level Likert scale. The total score for this aspect ranges from 3 to 15, and the midpoint of the average score for this aspect is 9. To determine whether each integration dimension’s mean which is scored by the participants is different from the dimension’s average, the One-Sample Test was used. The $p$ values show that except for political integration, other dimensions are significantly higher (in psychological, economic, social, and navigational) or lower (in linguistic integration) than the average. Table 2 shows the result of this test with the means of each integration dimension within the IPL Integration Index.

Inferential analysis shows that there are meaningful relationships between the social connections within the Afghan community (the quantity and quality of the respondents’ communications with the community members) and some dimensions of integration. The data suggests social connections within the Afghan community have a positive correlation with economic, social, navigational, and linguistic dimensions of integration. Nevertheless, there was no significant correlation between social connections and psychological and political integration. Table 3 shows the result of Pearson’s correlation test for the statistically significant relationships.

According to Table 3, those participants who have higher social connections within the Afghan community, have higher economic, social, linguistic, and navigational integration within Australian society. Among these meaningful correlations, navigational integration which refers to the ability to manage the basic needs of the host society, and has the strongest relationship with intra-community social connections.

**Experiences of division within the Afghan community**

Following data collected from the quantitative phase interviews and focus groups were undertaken to validate participants’ experiences of their perceived divisions within their community. Through thematic analysis, within the main theme, sub-themes emerged,
identifying multiple divided Afghan communities, the dominance of the community leaders, Afghans’ previous country of residency, and challenges experienced by women within the community.

**Multiple divided communities**

The data suggests there are about a dozen Afghan communities within the Perth metropolitan area. These communities are established based on various factors, including religion (Muslim Shia and Sunni), ethnic background, the geographical location in Afghanistan that Afghans have come from (Kabul, Herat, Qazni, Jaghori, etc.), as well as the country that they have previously lived in (mainly Pakistan and Iran).

The development of multiple Afghan communities in Perth aligns with the diversity within the home country of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, though all people have lived together peacefully for thousands of years. But since Abdur Rahman Khan came to power in 1880, the Pashtuns became the politically dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan and others disappeared from public life (Barfield, 2011). The ethnic conflict in Afghanistan was challenged by other factors, such as religion and language, as the Pashtuns are Sunni Muslim and speak Pashtun which may not be shared with that of other groups. Accordingly, the Hazaras who shared both different religions (Shia Muslim) and language (Hazara) have been the target of most discrimination, compared to other groups. However, in Perth, unlike Afghanistan, the Hazaras constitute the majority of Afghans, many of whom have arrived in Australia after 1996 under humanitarian visas, as a result of facing the Taliban’s persecution in Afghanistan. The challenges continue as the Hazara itself has multiple communities in Perth. Vali, one of Hazara’s community leaders shared this explanation:

The Hazaras have more communities in Perth compared to the Pashtuns and Tajiks. There is a community named ‘Nabovat Community’ and another one ‘Altohid’. There is also another Hazara community named ‘Afghan Australian Human Rights’ which is active […] The Hazara population in Perth is now large and scattered all around Perth, so having multiple communities makes sense.

Being a dominated group for centuries and experiencing different levels of discrimination and persecution, by some of the Pashtun leaders in Afghanistan has presented further challenges for the Hazaras to develop positive social connections with the Pashtuns in Perth. On the
Other hand, another challenge that exists among the Pashtuns in order to have a natural relationship with the Hazaras in Perth, is a potential reflection of how such relationships are experienced in Afghanistan. Reza, a male Hazara, shared:

When a Hazara imagines a Pashtun in his mind, that Pashtun would be a guy that humiliated him, threatened him [...] and a Hazara in a Pashtun’s mind would be a person who is poor, labourer, illiterate, and from the lower class of society. This mentality doesn’t allow us to have a normal relationship here [...].

The Pashtuns don’t want to have any familial relationship [marriage] with the people from the lower class here in Perth [the Hazaras], even if their child was born here. Because this will have a bad reaction in their tribe in Afghanistan. They are thousands of kilometres away but still connected.

The increase in the population of Afghan immigrants in Perth is also another reason for the existence of multiple communities emanating perhaps from the lack of sufficient facilities to accommodate a larger population in one community, as seen in the Afghan community in Melbourne (see Abraham and Busbridge, 2014). Hamed, a male participant who is in his 70s, is one of the first Afghans that has settled in Australia since 1978. He shared his observations of how the Afghan community has evolved in Perth as more Afghan immigrants have arrived over time:

I came to Australia [Adelaide] in 1978 to continue my studies [...], and I decided to come to Perth in 1983. There were only a few Afghan families in Perth [...]. Then we established the first Afghan community in 1984 to teach the kids our culture and religion. For several years we had that community which was helpful for everyone [...]. Then, more and more Afghans arrived, and it was difficult to get everyone from different religions and ethnicities together. The rise of the Taliban in 1996 also worsen the disparities and people were divided and established their own communities.

In addition to a grouping of ethnic backgrounds, belonging to a geographical region in Afghanistan is another important factor that should be considered regarding Afghan immigrants, as (Barfield, 2011) noted that ethnicity in Afghanistan is more political and “most individuals’ primary loyalty is local-to kin, village, valley, or region” (p.56). Therefore, there are several communities for those Afghans who have loyalty to their region in Afghanistan. These communities in Perth mainly belong to the Hazaras, however, ethnicity is not always an important variable to the members, compared to religion. David, a 25-year-old Afghan shared:

Those Afghans who have come from specific regions in Afghanistan, like Kabul, Herat, or Mazar have a closer relationship with the Afghans coming from the same region. These communities are more active in terms of communications and ceremonies, but, for example in the religious programs, they might join a bigger Hazara community.

As discussed earlier, as a result of four decades of war, millions of Afghan refugees settled in two neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan. Thousands of these refugees
many of them were born in these countries and later moved to developed countries, such as Australia. This has created another division among the Afghan community, as living in those countries has made Afghans culturally different from each other. Now, there are at least three groups of Afghans living in Perth, in terms of the country that they’ve lived in before settling in Australia; those who have come from Afghanistan, those who have come from Iran, and those who have come from Pakistan. These three groups of Afghans have obvious differences in terms of accent, clothing style, and religious beliefs. For this group of immigrants, the data suggests one’s ethnicity is less important to them, as they have lived in a different context and away from ethnic tensions. Sara and Shirin, both housewives living with supportive husbands, are working diligently on improving their English language skills in order to successfully enter the Australian job market. They have previously lived in Iran for many years, and shared their stories about some of these differences:

I prefer to have minimum communications with Afghans here, as they are religious and I’m not […] It’s just difficult as they have a different lifestyle and different behaviour, and the majority of them have hijab, while I don’t. I have to put my kid in an Afghan Daycare and I see those Afghan parents a lot. I always feel uncomfortable communicating with them as I feel they judge me for being different from them (Shirin).

We went out with an Afghan family here for a picnic […] and we brought some burgers for lunch. They had a 6-year-old kid that insisted to have some burgers, but his dad didn’t allow him, as he was not sure if the burger was Halal. It was really difficult to be in that situation […] and we decided not to go out with them anymore (Sara).

The data suggest multiple reasons why the Afghan community has been divided into multiple groups, which can become a potential barrier to their positive social connections within their wider community in Perth.

**The dominance of the community leaders**

Multiple divided Afghan communities in Perth that have minimum connections with each other are not the only challenge for Afghan communities. Apart from these inter-community divisions, there are some intra-group divisions within these communities, which were highlighted by young participants of this research. Such divisions generally relate to the dominance of community leaders.

In general, these communities are founded by first-generation Afghans who have had specific objectives, mainly around preserving their religious and ethnic values. In this regard, the community leaders, who have power and control over community resources, are those members who have had proven loyalty to these values. However, it seems that as these communities grow, these values are being challenged by some new members, particularly by the second-generation and Afghan newcomers. Saeed, a 41-year-old Hazara man, who has been living in Australia for 7 years, believes that the role of community leaders is crucial in maintaining the community’s direction. He shared:
These community leaders have their roots in Afghanistan and either their fathers or families have had influence in Afghanistan, [that’s why] people here listen to them, and they have this power not to allow anyone to organise any cultural activity or event in the community, like dancing or music classes. The only thing allowed is religious events.

The young participants added that they have tried several strategies to overcome this challenge, whether by joining with other Afghan communities who are more flexible regarding “cultural activities”, or by trying to organise the events themselves, ignoring the will of the community leaders. However, such strategies have not proved successful as Saeed and Ali shared that they haven’t been accepted into other ethnic communities and the cultural activities they suggested are not supported.

We cannot organise any cultural programme in our community, like poem-reading, music, or dancing, and I decided to go to a Tajik community because they have such activities […] I attended a music event there but soon after realising that I am Hazara, some of them started to some jokes about Hazaras and laughing […] I felt so bad and didn’t attend their programme anymore (Saeed).

Last year [2020], we organised a gathering for celebrating women’s day on the eight of March, but the leaders and the hard-liner were against the programme. They prevented people from attending our programme. They even tore up our flyers in which we were trying to invite Afghan women to join us. Finally, there were only a few women who showed up in the programme which was very disappointing (Ali).

Overall, the data suggest this places additional challenges for young Afghan immigrants.

**Challenges facing women within the wider afghan community**

Challenges for Afghan women within their community in Perth generally appear to align to their unequal position in power relations with their male counterparts. They may also face challenges with some Afghan traditional values which are less acceptable for them, particularly for Afghan young girls. The nature of this issue is different from the divisions discussed so far, as it is more or less prevalent among all Afghan communities, regardless of their ethnic or regional background. However, as reflected in the interviews and in the focus group with Afghan females, it is less problematic among Afghan families who have previously lived in Iran. Sanam, a 24-year-old participant, was born and lived in Iran, and migrated to Australia when she was 18 years old stated that the country that Afghans have come from is important in the extent of issues that Afghan women experience. Accordingly, she provides a categorisation of the Afghan immigrants in terms of challenges for women which was supported by other women in the focus group:

Because of my job in […], I’ve known many Afghan women in Perth […]. If I want

To say in order, those families who have come from Iran are the most open-minded Afghans, then those who have come from Afghanistan, and finally those who have come from Pakistan are the most narrow-minded ones. This is also true about Afghan men who
have lived in these countries […]. Even the people who have come from Pakistan don’t call themselves Hazara [while they are Hazara], but call themselves Pakistani, [they are] very strict.

One of the challenges identified is the dominant power of men/fathers in the family in different areas, one of which is about making decisions over the financial resources of the family. This is mentioned by several female participants stating they have little power not only over financial decisions in their family but also in some cases, over their own salaries. Donya, a

A 51-year-old Afghan woman shared her experience with this:

This is not my own case, but I have some [Afghan female] friends who work but whose husband has access to their account and manage their money. They have no idea how their money is being spent by their husband […]. We encouraged one of them to go and ask about your money […] when she did that, her husband put many limitations on her relationship with us.

Power by the male/fathers in the family is expressed by preventing Afghan young girls to follow the lifestyle that they prefer. This is particularly related to hijab and also Afghan young girls’ relationship with boys. According to traditional Afghan values, it is highly prohibited to have a relationship with the opposite sex before marriage. Sanam as a young Afghan girl has many stories of the challenges that mainly Afghan second-generation females face in their families in Perth:

I know many Afghan teenage girls who have hijab in their community and neighbourhood, but as soon as they get to the train station to go to school or whatever, they take their hijab off […] Again, when they are coming back and getting closer to their suburb, they put a hijab on.

A friend of mine was telling me that she sometimes goes out with her boyfriend at night, when her dad is asleep, and comes back at 6 a.m before her dad gets up. This is the way she manages her relationship, otherwise, it would be difficult for her to meet the boy because of her strict dad.

In some cases, the pressure is not from the family/father but from the wider Afghan community. This community pressure is felt more by those Afghan women who have come from Iran. Fathers from these families are more flexible in terms of power relations in the family but are more under the pressure from community expectations. Zari, a 28-year-old female who has lived in Iran for 20 years and moved to Australia 6 years ago, shared how they were more comfortable living in Iran, compared to Australia due to the Afghan community pressure in Perth:

In Iran it was only government that put some limitations on our freedom, but people were nice and didn’t judge your lifestyle […]. I was a uni student in Iran, and I was free to do whatever I wanted, from going out with friends at night, to going to a café with my boyfriend. But here, Afghan people just want to say that you are talking to a boy, then gossips begin badly […]. My father has had no issue with my wearing style or lifestyle in general, but I can tell that he is
now influenced by other Afghan men and says that “just be more careful”. I would never think that I will have less freedom in Australia than in Iran [laughing].

A female participant in the focus group also stated that many Afghan women suffer from domestic violence by their husbands. The prevalence of domestic violence among Afghan families can contribute to a sense of isolation and disconnection from the wider Australian community (Afrouz et al., 2021a, 2021b). Domestic violence is a highly stigmatized issue, and individuals who experience it may feel ashamed or afraid to seek help or speak out about their experiences. This can create a sense of isolation and marginalization from the wider community, making it more difficult for individuals to form social connections and access resources that could help them integrate into Australian society.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has identified that integration is a multi-layered concept and a complicated process for immigrants in their host societies. This is particularly challenging for those immigrants from non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) as well as refugees in Australia. This is the case for the Afghan community in Australia, with a long history of settlement and yet still experiencing major challenges in integration into the wider society.

Through using Harder et al. IPA Integration Index, the study found that the participants’ integration level in the four dimensions of economic, social, psychological, and navigational is slightly, yet significantly higher than the average value, however, in two dimensions of political and linguistic, they reported a lower integration level. These findings are in line with a recent study conducted by Rezaei and his colleagues (2021) on former Afghan refugees in Australia in which the participants didn’t have major issues in some integration areas, such as housing, education, health, and safety, and had major challenges in some areas, particularly social connections and English language proficiency. Sharifian et al. (2021) in their research on Afghan refugees in Melbourne also showed that the English language is a major challenge for Afghan refugees, particularly women. Higher levels of integration in certain dimensions may suggest that Afghan refugees have a strong desire to integrate into their host country and actively seek out opportunities to do so. They may also receive support from the host community or government programs, which can aid in their integration. On the other hand, the lower levels of integration reported in the political and linguistic dimensions could be attributed to various factors. For instance, Afghan refugees may face challenges in accessing political and government institutions due to language barriers or lack of familiarity with the political system. Moreover, due to four decades of war in Afghanistan, many haven’t had the opportunity to attend education rendering them illiterate in their native language and still struggling to speak English fluently.

One of the important findings of this study was the positive correlation between Afghans’ social connections within their community and their integration into Australian
society. The correlation was specifically significant for economic, social, linguistic, and navigational dimensions of integration aligning with Ager and Strang’s (2008) work. Some studies also showed that connections with ‘like-ethnic groups’ have an effective impact on successful integration among immigrants (Hale, 1993; Zetter et al., 2006). This finding is also relevant to Putnam’s (2001) social capital theory. According to Putnam, individuals who have stronger social connections within a community are more likely to have access to information, resources, and opportunities, and are better able to navigate the challenges of daily life. This has been particularly highlighted regarding employment opportunities that are created by immigrant’s social networks (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007). Therefore, the finding that intra-community social connections are correlated with navigational integration supports Putnam’s theory.

Nevertheless, the qualitative data shows that there are some major divisions among Afghan community members in Western Australia which limit their positive social connections and consequently undermine the role of an important facilitator in successful integration within Australian society. The study found that these divisions are driven by different factors. Firstly, as a multi-ethnic country, Afghanistan has long been experiencing ethnic divisions with the dominant political power of one ethnic group, the Pashtuns, discriminating against and persecuting other minority groups, mainly the Hazaras. Secondly, experiencing four decades of war, refugees fleeing the war have lived in different countries before coming to Australia. Thirdly, many Afghans have loyalty to the geographical region in Afghanistan that they have come from which is sometimes even stronger than their ethnic affiliations. These divisions have created dozens of communities with limited communications across the Afghan community in Western Australia. Abraham and Busbridge (2014) in discussing some ‘diasporic tensions’ within the Afghan community in Melbourne in terms of Afghan unity and ethnic diversity, aligned with the findings from this study.

In addition to the inter-community divisions, there are also some intra-divisions within these divided communities, mainly due to the lack of inclusivity by and the dominant power of the community leaders. This is a major problem for younger community members because they cannot ‘fit in’ to their community, due to the strict manner of the older founders of the community. Not being able to organise some ‘cultural activities’, such as music programs, dance classes, poem-reading gatherings, and female-focused programs are some examples of challenges that young members are facing in some ethnic communities. The study suggests there is a generation gap between older and younger Afghans in terms of preserving the traditional culture and embracing the new trends within the community.

The existence of internal divisions within the Afghan community in Australia can act as barriers to integration in several ways. Firstly, these divisions can create a sense of mistrust or tension between different community members, which can hinder their ability to work together towards common goals or to form positive social connections. This can lead to social isolation and limit opportunities for community members to fully engage in Australian society. Secondly, the dominance of community leaders or lack of inclusivity within these divided communities can limit the participation of certain members, especially those who do not conform to the expectations of the dominant group. This can
include women, youth, or members of minority ethnic or religious groups within the Afghan community. Such exclusion can prevent these members from fully accessing resources needed for successful integration. Finally, these divisions can lead to the formation of sub-groups within the Afghan community, which can result in the maintenance of cultural or linguistic barriers that hinder linguistic and cultural integration. This can limit community members’ exposure to Australian culture and language, and restrict their ability to communicate effectively with the wider community.

Challenges for women within the wider Afghan community transcend social connections among the community members. The challenge is about the unbalanced power relation, particularly in financial decisions, and family as well as conforming to Afghan traditional values that are faced by Afghan mothers and daughters, respectively. These challenges can have a significant impact on Afghan women’s ability to integrate into Australian society. The unbalanced power dynamics within the Afghan community can limit their access to education, employment, and other resources that are critical for successful integration. Similarly, conforming to traditional Afghan values can create a cultural divide that makes it difficult for women to build relationships with people outside their community. To overcome these integration challenges, it is important to provide Afghan women with the support and resources they need to navigate these complex issues and fully participate in Australian society. This can include language classes, mentoring programs, and community-based initiatives that help women build connections and establish themselves in their new homes.

While the participants in the study reported a slightly higher integration level in several domains, this does not mean that there are no challenges. The findings suggest that more needs to be done to address the challenges that Afghan immigrants face in their integration process. Therefore, there is a need for the Australian government to improve community integration programs for Afghan immigrants in Western Australia. This could be done through various policy initiatives, such as increasing funding for community integration programs, developing policies, like community events to encourage social interaction, and strengthening language support services.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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