

Research Article

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## Exploring Afghan Women's Perspectives on Identity and Belonging: A Study Across Borders

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**Abstract:** Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their home countries in search of protection across international borders because of various forms of persecution, conflict, violence, or abuses of their human rights. This study explores the complex interplay of cultural identity and lived experiences among Afghan women refugees residing in the provincial capital Quetta of Balochistan, Pakistan. Utilizing a questionnaire survey of 100 Afghan respondents, this study investigates the impacts of border crossings and sociopolitical dynamics on Afghan women refugees' identities. The findings indicate that while many Afghan women retain a strong connection to their cultural roots, there is a notable influence from host country cultures, leading to the emergence of mixed identities. Despite positive perceptions about their Afghan identity being strengthened through the experiences of migration, challenges such as discrimination, lack of community support, and language barriers impede their ability to express and maintain their cultural heritage fully. The results also emphasize the need for community resources and support systems to facilitate social integration, while helping to preserve cultural identity. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of identity formation among Afghan women refugees and highlight the importance of community engagement in fostering a sense of belonging and cultural preservation across borders.

**Key Words:** Afghan Refugees, Migration, Afghanistan, Quetta, Pakistan

### Introduction

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a person who is unable to return home due to a legitimate fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a certain social group, or political beliefs is considered a refugee (UNHCR, 1951). The number of refugees has quadrupled in the last ten years, reaching an estimated 43.4 million as of the end of 2023. There were an estimated 117.3 million individuals who were forcibly displaced overall, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2024a). Remarkably, 70% of refugees live in countries that are next to their countries of origin, and 76% of refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries (International Rescue Committee, 2023). Globally, one of the longest-lasting and most complicated displacement situations is that of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Millions of Afghan refugees have sought asylum in Pakistan since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; however, the number has fluctuated owing to continuous hostilities and political

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changes in Afghanistan. Moreover, over 2.8 million Afghans were living in Pakistan as of December 2024, comprising more than 1.5 million Afghans with different statuses and around 1.3 million officially registered refugees (UNHCR, 2024b).

The provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan are home to the majority of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, however, Punjab and Sindh also have significant numbers. Over the years, many have integrated into the local communities, enhancing the cultural and economic scene. But they frequently encounter obstacles, including restricted access to jobs, healthcare, and education. Since many Afghans lack formal documents, their legal status is still a crucial concern, leaving them open to exploitation and deportation. Identity is relational and is framed as individuals identify themselves and their group in difference or sameness to other groups (Radford & Hetz, 2021). Many years of war compelled Afghans to migrate not only to Iran and Pakistan but also to the West and Australia since the early 1980s (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Millions of Afghans have crossed country borders with the hope of a better life and safety (Tober, 2007). This caused them a hybrid identity, which involves negotiating sometimes two contrasting cultural identities of the home and host nations (Ahmed & Hari, 2023). This means people lead political, economic, and social dual lives, pursuing economic, political, and cultural interests in both countries (Monsutti, 2004). These unavoidable processes and numerous other factors lead to changes in identity (Cormos, 2022).

The majority of Afghan women endured tough conditions to survive as refugees (Rostami-Povey, 2007) and became a focus of study. The body of work focusing on Afghan women includes numerous topics from their health to empowerment. As an example, Siddiq et al. (2023) investigated the sociocultural determinants of Afghan women's health in the United States and how these factors are complicatedly tangled with the women's family life and religion (Siddiq et al., 2023). Khan et al. (2024) highlighted challenges of gender inequality and socioeconomic marginalization of Afghan refugee women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (Khan et al., 2024). Similarly, findings by Worabo et al. (2024) reflect on the ways Afghan refugee women navigate their healthcare experiences in the U.S. as opposed to Afghanistan (Worabo et al., 2024). Furthermore, empowerment narratives show how Afghan women are gaining more control over their lives and identity through group efforts in response to oppressive systems (Khan, 2016).

Social and political phenomena shape Afghan women's self-identities, especially when they move from one border to another (Hashemi & Amiry, 2024). Social expectations and a desire to belong to a certain group compel the individual to adopt a new identity. This illustrates their struggle for ethical identity and adds to a greater sociopolitical conversation within migration scholarship concerning nationality and gender identity (Hamidi et al., 2021; Keshavarzi et al., 2024). They have to navigate and assimilate their understanding of culture into other places referred to as cultural contexts (Tober, 2007). These Afghan female refugees now have to balance the expectations of diasporic societies with their own culture. The media is critical because it can either empower women or fuel stereotypes (Akrami et al., 2024). Social discrimination in host societies poses more barriers to acceptance, adding pressure to their socio-identity as these women face different socio-cultural and other forms of discrimination (Azizah & Ahsana, 2023; Stempel & Alemi, 2020). This ongoing journey affects how they see themselves and how society views them, thus making a complex of identity (Brodsky et al., 2012).

Even though Afghan women's difficulties have been the subject of various studies, little attention has been paid to how cross-border experiences have influenced their identities. There are studies on empowerment (Dadras, 2022), socioeconomic problems (Khan et al., 2024), and health (Siddiq et al., 2023), but they are not integrated into a coherent image of identity. The majority of studies concentrate on individual narratives without thoroughly examining the social and cultural factors that influence them. By combining several viewpoints, this study seeks to close that gap by demonstrating how Afghan women see and construct their identities internationally.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Study Area**

Quetta is the biggest and the capital city of Balochistan province of Pakistan (Mengal et al., 2025). Balochistan is the biggest province of Pakistan by area (Riaz & Panezai, 2022) and has a long border with Afghanistan (Rehman et al., 2019). It is also most backward in terms of social development (Panezai, 2017).

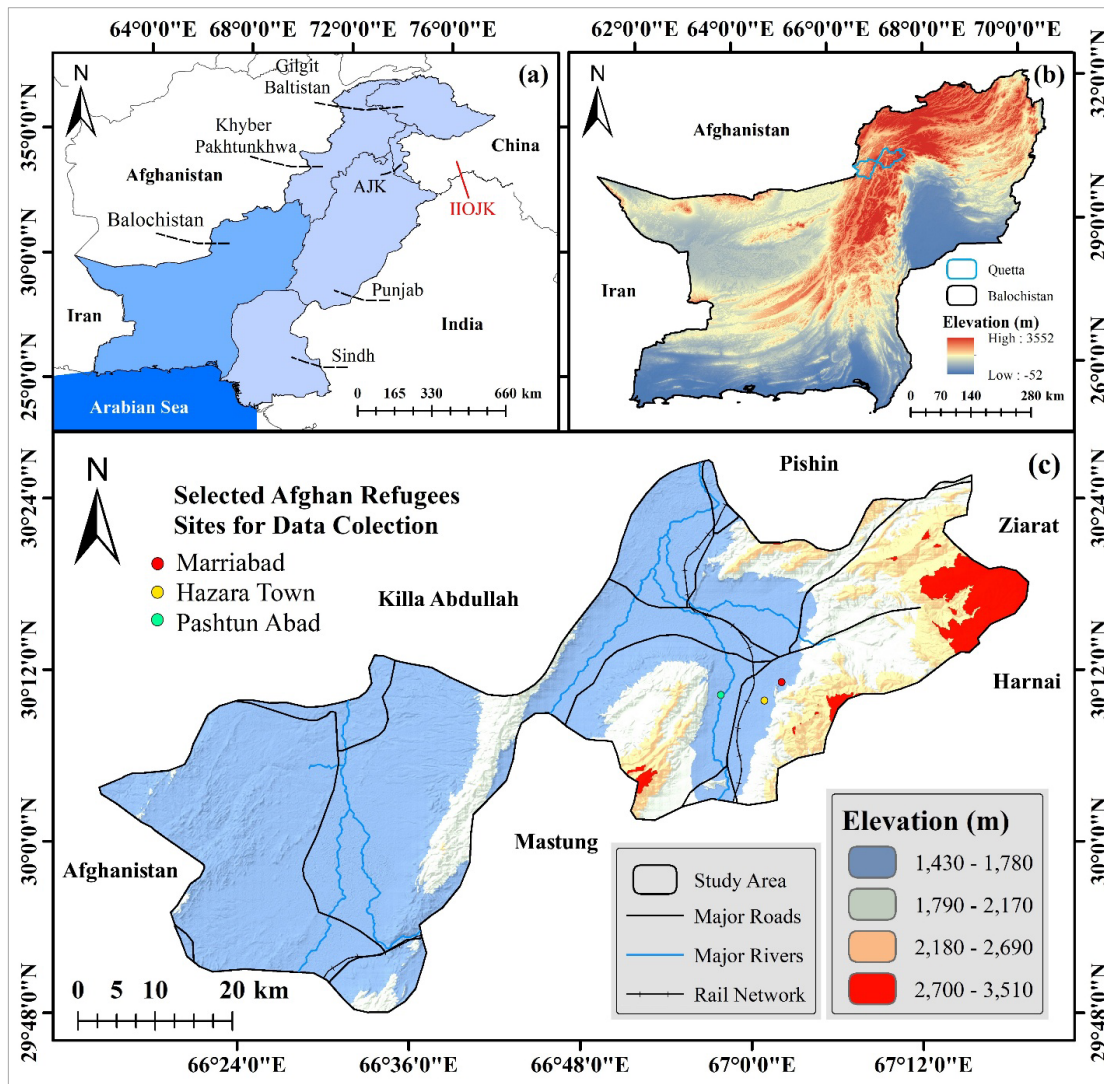




The Quetta is located in the northwestern part of the province, while the geographical location of the district is 29°48' and 30°27' north latitudes and 66°14' and 67°18' east longitudes (Ullah et al., 2025). Quetta is bordered by Killa Abdullah and Pishin in the north, Mastung in the south, Ziarat and Harnai in the east, while the Pak-Afghan border (Durand Line) is in the west (Figure 1). The Quetta district covers an area of 3,447 km<sup>2</sup>, and the valley is located around 5,500 feet above sea level (Ullah et al., 2024). According to the 7th Population and Housing Census, the population of the Quetta district is 2.59 million, with a male and female ratio of 50.85% and 49.14%, respectively, and with a population density of 752.97 people per km<sup>2</sup> (BPS, 2024). The urban proportion of the district is 60.32%, with an average household size of 8.9. Quetta's climate may be described as semi-arid, with notable seasonal fluctuations in annual temperature. The city is regarded as one of Pakistan's coolest urban centers due to its pleasant summers and frigid winters. The agricultural products of Quetta District are well known, especially the fruit orchards of the Hanna Valley, which produce apples, grapes, and almonds. The major ethnic groups of the district are Pashtuns, Baloch, and Hazaras, indicating the district's cultural diversity. Quetta has been one of the most popular destinations for Afghan refugees. It houses a large number of refugees from Afghanistan who took refuge in Quetta. Almost 11.1 percent of total Afghan refugees in Pakistan reside in Quetta (Kaleem et al., 2024).

**Figure 1**

(a) Pakistan's association with the neighboring countries, (b) Balochistan boundary with focus on the provincial capital Quetta, (c) map of the study area.



## Sampling

Quetta city consists of a large number of Afghan refugees, given that it lies close to the Afghanistan border and is the largest city in this region. For this study, a total of 100 Afghan refugee women were selected and



interviewed from various localities within Quetta. The aim was to capture diverse perspectives related to their lived experiences and identity perceptions.

Data collection

This study was based on primary data, and the data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to explore various dimensions of identity, cultural integration, and lived experiences of Afghan refugee women.

Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and entered into Microsoft Excel for cleaning. Later, the data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were employed to examine trends and patterns in the responses. This approach allowed for a clear representation of Afghan refugee women's perceptions, experiences, and identity-related insights.

Results

The study surveyed 100 Afghan refugee women living outside their country in Quetta, Balochistan. A study aimed to understand how their identity is shaped by cross-border experiences, their perception of cultural belonging, and the challenges of preserving identity abroad.

Demographic Profile

As shown in Figure 2, the largest age group was 18–25 years (37), followed by 26–35 years (30). A smaller portion was under 18 (10) or older than 45 (2). In terms of educational background, 36% had attained secondary education, 16% had undergraduate degrees, and 8% had graduate or higher education. Meanwhile, 10% had no formal education (Table 1).

Figure 2  
Age Distribution of the Respondents

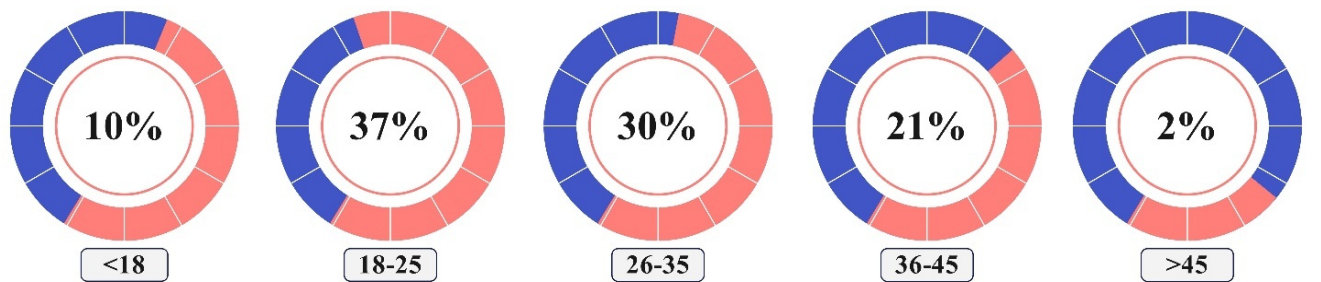


Table 1  
Educational Level of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency	Percent
No formal education	10	10.0%
Primary	30	30.0%
Secondary	36	36.0%
Higher education (Undergraduate)	16	16.0%
Higher education (Graduate/Above)	8	8.0%
Total	100	100.0%

Cultural Identity and Self-Perception

When the respondents were asked about cultural identity, participants had diverse views of their cultural identity. As reflected in Table 2, 29% identified as strongly Afghan, whereas 39% considered themselves Afghan with some influence from other cultures. Notably, 32% reported being more influenced by the culture of their host country, suggesting some degree of cultural assimilation.



**Table 2***Definition of Identity in a Cultural Context*

Identity Definition	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Afghan	29	29.0%
Afghan with some influence from other cultures	39	39.0%
More influenced by the culture of the country you currently live in	32	32.0%
Total	100	100.0%

### Impact of Migration on Identity

The effects of migration on cultural identity were mostly positive. As shown in Table 3, 46% of respondents said living abroad slightly strengthened their Afghan identity, and 19% felt it was significantly strengthened. Only 18% believed their identity had weakened, indicating a resilience in cultural connection.

**Table 3***Impact of Living Outside Afghanistan on Cultural Identity*

Impact	Frequency	Percent
Significantly strengthened it	19	19.0%
Slightly strengthened it	46	46.0%
No change	17	17.0%
Slightly weakened it	13	13.0%
Significantly weakened it	5	5.0%
Total	100	100.0%

### Challenges in Cultural Maintenance

Multiple challenges were reported in maintaining cultural identity by respondents during the study. Discrimination or prejudice (35%), lack of community support (28%), and language barriers (20%) were the most significant obstacles (Table 4). These suggest that despite the strengthening of identity, external factors still hinder full expression and hinder identity.

**Table 4***Challenges in Maintaining Cultural Identity*

Challenge	Frequency	Percent
Language barriers	20	20.0%
Discrimination or prejudice	35	35.0%
Lack of community support	28	28.0%
Adapting to new cultural norms	15	15.0%
Others	2	2.0%
Total	100	100.0%

### Cultural Acceptance and Belonging

Perceptions of social acceptance varied among Afghan women. According to Table 5, 43% felt more accepted in Afghanistan, while 40% saw acceptance as similar in both locations' origin and destination. Only 15% reported feeling more accepted in their current country, pointing toward partial social integration abroad.

**Table 5***Perceived Acceptance of Identity*

Acceptance Location	Frequency	Percent
More accepted in the current country of residence	15	15.0%
More accepted in Afghanistan	43	43.0%
Acceptance is similar in both places	40	40.0%
Not sure	2	2.0%
Total	100	100.0%



Shifts in Personal and Family Values

Migration also influenced personal and family values of Afghan women refugees in Quetta, with 26% experiencing significant changes, and 37% observing some changes (Figure 3). However, cultural preservation remained important, as 64% deemed it extremely or very important to maintain Afghan customs in their host country (Table 6).

Figure 3  
Changes in Personal or Family Values

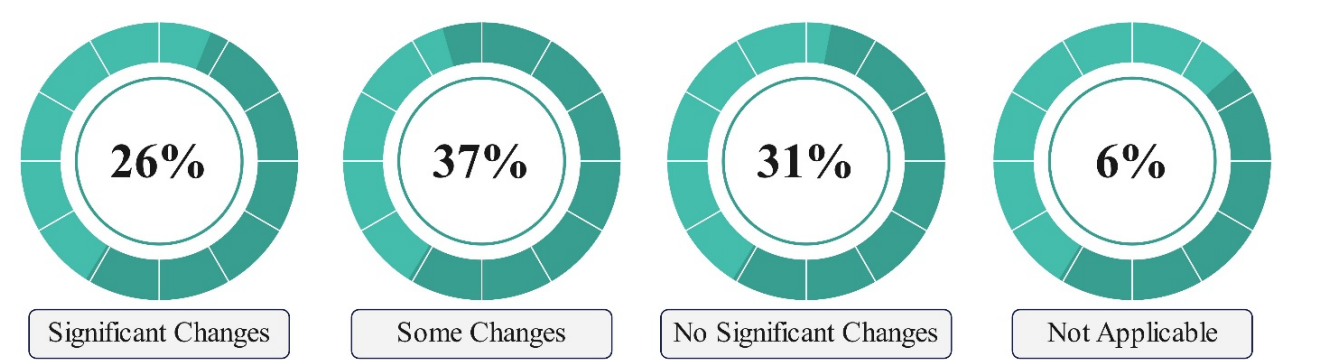


Table 6  
Importance of Preserving Afghan Culture

Importance Level	Frequency	Percent
Extremely important	34	34.0%
Very important	30	30.0%
Moderately important	26	26.0%
Slightly important	8	8.0%
Not important	2	2.0%
Total	100	100.0%

Social Integration and Participation

Regarding social integration, 54% of respondents reported being somewhat integrated into their host community, and 29% felt very integrated (Table 7). Further, community involvement was strong, with 29% of respondents actively participating in Afghan organizations and 40% participating occasionally (Table 8).

Table 7  
Level of Integration into the Local Community

Integration Level	Frequency	Percent
Very integrated	29	29.0%
Somewhat integrated	54	54.0%
Not very integrated	16	16.0%
Not at all integrated	1	1.0%
Total	100	100.0%

Table 8  
Participation in Afghan Community Organizations

Participation	Frequency	Percent
Yes, actively	29	29.0%
Yes, occasionally	40	40.0%
No, but I am interested	28	28.0%
No, I am not interested	3	3.0%
Total	100	100.0%





## Media Representation and Aspirations

Media representation of Afghan women in host countries was a concern among Afghan refugees. As seen in Table 9, 44% of respondents found the portrayal to be generally negative, and only 6% viewed it as positive and accurate. Looking ahead, 55% hoped to balance Afghan and host cultures, while 18% expressed a desire to strengthen ties with Afghanistan (Table 10).

**Table 9**

*Perception of Afghan Women's Representation in Media*

Integration Level	Frequency	Percent
Positive and accurate	6	6.0%
Generally positive, but some inaccuracies	22	22.0%
Neutral	22	22.0%
Generally negative	44	44.0%
Very negative	6	6.0%
Total	100	100.0%

**Table 10**

*Future Hopes for Cultural Identity and Integration*

Integration Level	Frequency	Percent
Strengthening cultural ties with Afghanistan	18	18.0%
Balancing between Afghan and local culture	55	55.0%
Fully adopting the culture of the current residence	26	26.0%
Other	1	1.0%
Total	100	100.0%

## Support Needs

To maintain cultural identity, 39% of respondents called for access to cultural education and events, and 23% requested community support and organizations (Table 11). Online platforms and family networks were also valued (each cited by 19%).

**Table 11**

*Support Needed to Maintain Cultural Identity*

Integration Level	Frequency	Percent
Community support and organizations	23	23.0%
Access to cultural education and events	39	39.0%
Social media and online communities	19	19.0%
Family and social network	19	19.0%
Total	100	100.0%

## Discussion

The experiences of Afghan refugee women in Quetta enlighten us about the complex dynamics of cultural identity and the sense of belonging created by their migration journeys from Afghanistan towards their destination. The young and educated respondents, who make up the majority of the participants in the study, represent a mixed variety of backgrounds that may be affected by their identities formed under displacement. As 37% of the interviewees were in the age range of 18–25, this shows a prime stage in life for transition in terms of cultural identity and belonging. This argument is supported by the rising conception from the literature that young people have in the process of migration are vital in shaping cultural narratives (Zehra & Usmani, 2021). Moreover, this educational status is associated with the successful integration of people in society, with those having some higher education being rather oriented toward connecting with both the host community and their ethnic group.

The results revealed that there exists a great intersectionality between Afghan identity and the host culture. Though 29% of respondents maintained an Afghan identity, quite a significant majority (39%) expressed recognition of hybrid identities, recording the process of cultural assimilation experienced by



most refugees (Ma, 2023). This is consistent with previous research that shows how migrants tend to balance between maintaining their native cultural ways and adjusting to a new culture (Cormoş, 2022; Martén et al., 2019). As almost half of the respondents believed that their identity was made stronger through their experience abroad confirms resilience in cultural narratives among Afghan refugees (Alemi & Stempel, 2018).

Although some positive developments about cultural identity were reported by the Afghan women, they also had serious difficulties in maintaining their home heritage while in exile as refugees. In this study, discrimination, lack of community support, and language barriers were found to be some of the most significant barriers to full cultural expression (Nakash et al., 2015). It has also been noted that discrimination can affect mental well-being, which is likely to impact a refugee's feelings about identity and heritage, as feeling alienated (Alemi & Stempel, 2018; Çelebi et al., 2017). Moreover, the said challenges confirm the findings of research that highlight the importance of social networks and ethnic community support in overcoming such obstacles among refugees (Martén et al., 2019).

Though most of the Afghan refugees of the study were unsure whether they were welcomed or not in the study area, but they felt accepted in Afghanistan. This shows how difficult it can be for refugees to live in two cultures at the same time (Hangartner et al., 2018). Respondents' opinions were also influenced by how involved they are in their community. They may feel more welcomed or isolated depending on the level of their community participation (Aléncar, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2015). Therefore, community groups and sociocultural activities play a crucial role in developing cultural identification among refugees.

Lastly, respondents highlighted how important community support and cultural education are to their identity's survival. These women showed a strong interest in cultural activities, as they help them to maintain their identity while also adjusting to a new culture in a new place. This is supported by earlier research where these activities maintain identification and integration (Bacishoga et al., 2016; Syed & McLean, 2016). This study shows that despite challenges; Afghan women refugees had not only adapted to the host culture but also maintained their culture. However, they still need help to both maintain and adapt their identity and host culture.

## Conclusion

People are forced to leave their homes and live in other countries due to wars and conflicts. Millions of Afghan refugees have left their homes and migrated to other countries. In this study, the complicated nature of identity conceptions among Afghan refugee women is examined. The majority of respondents showed a strong feeling of their Afghan identity despite living in a different society and being exposed to a lot of host cultural influences. Migration affected their personal and family life, but they still maintain their identity across the border. Afghan refugee women shape their identities in different ways as they try to adapt to new cultures and find a sense of belonging in host communities. Afghan refugee women's diverse identities demonstrate how they adjust to many cultures to feel like they belong. However, integration is challenging for Afghan refugee women due to problems including discrimination, a lack of community support, and language barriers. To improve their situation, there is a clear need for things like social support, community programs, and cultural education, which can help them not just survive, but actually live better and succeed in their new environments.

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**Availability of data and materials:** Data and materials for the present study will be available upon request from the corresponding author (niamatullahza@gmail.com).

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