CRIMINOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Vol 7(1) 2025
ISSN 2506-7583
DOI 10.26395/CE.2025.1.06

Constructing the Vulnerable and Deserving Refugee: A Discourse Analysis of News Media Coverage of Afghan Refugees in Canada

Neela Hassan
University of Waterloo
neela.hassan@uwaterloo.ca

Keywords: Afghan refugee crisis, vulnerability, media discourse, representation, Canada

Abstract: This paper studies how refugee crises are portrayed in the Canadian mainstream media by examining the news representation of Afghan refugees following the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in August 2021. In response to the crisis in Afghanistan, the international community, especially member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), launched immigration pathways for Afghans facing the threat of prosecution and violence. Canada, a NATO member that spent over 18 billion dollars fighting in Afghanistan against the Taliban, was one of the first countries to launch special immigration programs aimed at admitting 40,000 vulnerable Afghans at risk of violence and prosecution by the Taliban. This paper bases its analysis on a corpus of 345 English-language articles published by Canadian newspapers between August 2021 and September 2024. The study findings reveal that the media coverage of Afghan refugees in Canada is centered around the figure of deserving refugees, which is constructed in relation to individuals' affiliation with the Government of Canada and their gendered vulnerabilities. In doing so, the news media shifts seeking asylum from a legal right to a matter of deservingness, where refugees need to demonstrate how they are deserving of resettlement in Canada.

Introduction

The four-decade-long conflict and instability in Afghanistan made migration a major component of Afghan society and culture. However, the return of the Taliban in 2021 triggered a significant wave of migration, as many Afghans feared for their lives due to their gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and profession (Commissioner General for Refugees, 2023). Following the start of the United States (US) withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Canada, along with other member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) involved in the war against terrorism, announced special immigration programs aimed at resettling vulnerable Afghans at risk of persecution and violence, including journalists, human rights defenders, women's rights activists, and former government officials. On August 13, 2021, just days before Kabul fell to the Taliban, the Government of Canada announced a plan to resettle 20,000 vulnerable Afghans, which was later doubled to 40,000. Canada's resettlement program included a special immigration program for individuals who contributed to Canada's efforts in Afghanistan, as well as humanitarian pathways for vulnerable groups such as women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, persecuted minorities, and 2SLGBTQI+ individuals (IRCC, 2023). Additionally, in 2022, Canada introduced an additional temporary program to resettle 3,000 Afghan refugees without UNHCR status, further demonstrating its commitment to supporting those fleeing Taliban rule (IRCC, 2022).

This paper examines the representation of Afghan refugees in mainstream Canadian newspapers following the Taliban's takeover in 2021. Studies suggest that media reporting and commentary not only provide information about migrants and immigration but also construct people's understanding of what these events mean (Medianu et al., 2015; Mustafa et al., 2021; Van Dijk, 2012, p. 52; Wallace, 2018). It is the media that decides "what news merits coverage, and through its manner of portraying events, it can also shape the acceptable paths of thought concerning a given topic" (Caviedes, 2015, p. 900). Canada was one of the first countries to launch special immigration programs for vulnerable Afghans, welcoming the largest number of Afghan refugees in the world after the United States. The crisis in Afghanistan and Canada's special immigration measures to rescue vulnerable Afghans received substantial coverage in the Canadian media, which reported not only on the situation in Afghanistan but also on public reactions to Canada's response. As such, Canada constitutes a crucial site for exploring how the media represents racialized refugees from conflict-affected countries like Afghanistan. While a number of scholars have studied the media representation of refugees from racialized Muslim countries in the Canadian context (Greenberg & Hier, 2001; Medianu et al., 2015; Mustafa et al., 2021; Omidian Sijani, 2023; Paquet & Lawlor, 2022; Reitmanova et al., 2015; Tyyskä et al., 2018; Wallace, 2018), this study aims to understand how vulnerability and deservingness logic play out and intersect in mainstream media representation of Afghan refugees, particularly after the launch of Canada's resettlement program for Afghans.

To do so, the study examines a corpus of 345 English-language articles published by Canadian newspapers from August 2021 to September 2024 using sociological analyses of discourse. Drawing on Stuart Hall's notions of "regimes of representation" (1997) and "othering, the study argues that press coverage of Afghan refugees shifts protection and seeking asylum from a legal right to a matter of deservingness. In doing so, the media establish a particular "regime of representation", where refugee deservingness is assessed based on individuals' affiliation with Canada's military mission in Afghanistan during the War on Terror and their gendered vulnerability.

Literature Review

The media discourse surrounding refugees and asylum seekers is complex and multifaceted; however, many researchers point to categorization topoi that reduce refugees to "positive" or "negative" labels (Berry et al., 2016; Eberl et al., 2018; Mustafa et al., 2021; Seo & Kavakli, 2022). KhosraviNik (2010) argues that the categorization of refugees as "positive" or "negative" is problematic because it perpetuates the "us" versus "them" divide, even when the representations themselves are not inherently negative. Many studies on representation of refugees highlight the negative connotations associated with the terms "refugee" and "immigrant," which often appear in discussions framed around issues such as "immigrants and burden," "immigrants and crime," and "immigrants and illegality" (Mustafa et al., 2021). The media not only portray refugees as "unchecked" and "illegal" but has also depict them as "security threats," "criminals," and even terrorists, framing their presence as a potential danger to national safety and social order (Berry et al., 2016; Hameleers, 2019). Studies show that migrants are frequently constructed as

an economic burden and disproportionate consumers of social benefits, posing a threat to the economic stability and sustainability of the host country (Berry et al., 2016; Caviedes, 2015; Davis, 2021). They are also often framed as a challenge associated with race and ethnicity, which is perceived to threaten the cultural and social values of host countries. Such portrayals highlight concerns that the influx of diverse immigrant populations may disrupt established social norms and cultural cohesion (Alba et al., 2005; KhosraviNik, 2010; Semyonov et al., 2004).

Another common frame in media coverage is the victimization narrative, which emphasizes the suffering and hardships faced by immigrants and refugees. The depiction of victimhood is used to create a "sympathetic atmosphere" that encourages public empathy and support for refugees, fostering compassion and mobilizing public opinion in favor of humanitarian aid (Bahtić & Gebauer, 2023). In this context, refugees are depicted as victims of war and conflict, portrayed as "vulnerable bodies-in-pain" lacking basic resources for survival (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Emphasis on victimhood in media narratives about refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants can induce greater empathy among audiences (Mustafa et al., 2021; Seo & Kavakli, 2022). This includes reporting centered on the suffering of refugees, such as escaping war, making the journey to the destination country, and facing challenges upon arrival, including discrimination, lack of resources, and struggles for legal status. Such stories play a crucial role in shaping public opinion about migrants and can even inspire advocacy campaigns and solidarity groups dedicated to supporting their rights and needs (Berry et al., 2016). While it is difficult to separate the impact of media on public beliefs and attitudes from other factor such as education, political ideological orientation, and personal experiences research suggest that the content and perspective of individual stories, the frequency with which particular issues are covered, and the themes that are associated with those issues play a significant role in shaping the public discourse (Berry et al., 2016; Caviedes, 2015). Consequently, in response to evolving public attitudes, policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and charitable groups will encounter increasing pressure to adapt their strategies to align with societal expectations and concerns (Ahrens, 2024).

However, representations that solely focus on refugees' victimhood often strip refugees of their individual identities, reducing them to mere subjects of sympathy because of their affiliation Canada's mission to fight terrorism in Afghanistan rather than recognizing them as complex individuals with agency, resilience, and diverse experiences. In other words, while these portrayals may seem positive, depicting refugees as helpless victims in need of saving ultimately construct refugees as the "other". Majid KhosraviNik suggests that two key linguistic strategies are employed to represent refugees' victimhood, which reduce them to the status of the "other": passivization and collectivization. Through passivization, refugees are portrayed as passive, vulnerable bodies in pain who lack basic resources, emphasizing their helplessness and suffering while overlooking their agency as political beings. Similarly, the portrayal of refugees often depicts them as an anonymous mass of unfortunate individuals, where their unique experiences and identities are overshadowed by a singular narrative of suffering due to the war.

The victimization narrative not only emphasizes the suffering of refugees but also plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of who is deemed 'deserving' of empathy, support, and resources. Literature suggests that, in the specific context of refugees, deservingness is often grounded in either human rights or humanitarian rationales. Under human rights rationales, individuals who meet the criteria outlined for international protection, such as those defined in the 1951 Geneva Convention, are deemed "worthy" of protection (Welfens, 2023). In contrast, the humanitarian rationale relies on a "politics of compassion," where deservingness is determined based on individuals' suffering and vulnerabilities (Fassin, 2012, p. 13). It is through the "politics of compassion" that we can understand humanitarian practices, as well as the media portrayal of children in refugee camps or asylum-seekers in the Mediterranean, as both aim to activate moral sentiments and generate public support by emphasizing vulnerability and suffering (see Lee, 2015). The media images of suffering, like those of the three-year old Syrian Alan Kurdi's body on Turkish beach, engage in emotional and political work, producing not only sympathy and empathy but also fear and othering (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

Studies show that in the case of migrants, deservingness rationale is also connected to integration and security. For refugees to be perceived as deserving of protection, they must not only provide evidence that they do not pose a security, economic, or cultural threat to the host country but also demonstrate their potential to integrate well (Huysmans, 2000). Natalie Welfens (2023) suggests that security and integration are often framed as two sides of the same coin. To avoid being perceived as a threat to the receiving

state, migrants are expected to be "law-abiding, economically self-sufficient, and culturally adaptable" (p. 5). However, the evaluation of deservingness in contemporary refugee governance is far more complex and multidimensional, as refugees are expected to fulfill multiple, and at times conflicting, requirements to be deemed deserving (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; see also Tomczak-Boczko et al., 2023). The complex and multi-dimensional nature of deservingness is evident in the media representations of refugees. For example, Maria Kyriakidou (2021) study on deservingness of hospitality is constructed by the media narratives in the context of Syrian refugees in Greece highlights contrasting requirements that determine refugee's deservingness. Syrian refugees were constructed as deserving not only because they were vulnerable and suffering due to a war beyond their control but also because they were perceived as active agents and individuals with stable jobs and financial resources. In the context of racialized Muslim refugees, these contrasting requirements are often translated into perceptions that young, single refugees are neither vulnerable nor "promising," while women, children, and families—including men attempting to reunite with their loved ones—are viewed as more deserving (Kyriakidou, 2021; see also Holzberg et al., 2018; Mustafa et al., 2021) and what Welfens (2023) describes as "assimilable" to the host society.

Overall, compared to the past, Canadian media have become more inclusive in their representation of migrants and refugees, improving both the quantity and quality of coverage. Yet, negative representations of minority groups persist, as "too many media messages remain stuck in the past" due to institutional biases, organizational priorities, and the influence of political orientations (Fleras, 2011, p. VIII). As such, similar to many Western countries, Canadian media often rely on problematized narratives, such as national security, unemployment, scarcity of resources, and fraud and illegality, to describe immigration and integration into the society (Lawlor, 2015). These problematized narratives reflect not only biased representations but also specific framing[1] strategies that shape public perception of migration as a challenge or threat. Examining the content of media framing across Canada, Lawlor's findings suggest that while framing related to illegality and security peaked between the late 1990s and early 2000s, immigrants have tended to be positively framed regarding social services, the economy and labor market, and diversity from 2004 onward. In Canada, public opinion toward immigration has generally been positive since the 1980s. Data from a 2022 survey by the Environics Institute shows that more than eight in ten people strongly (50%) and somewhat (35%) agreed that immigration is beneficial to the country's economy, a view acknowledged even by the majority of those who believed immigration levels are too high (Confederation of Tomorrow, 2022). However, data from a 2024 survey indicates a significant shift in Canadians' perceptions of immigration, with 58% believing that the country accepts too many immigrants and 57% feeling that many immigrants are not adopting Canadian values (Confederation of Tomorrow, 2024).

Although there is a growing body of literature on the representation of immigration in Canadian news media, significant gaps remain in research specifically addressing the representation of Afghan refugees following the Taliban's takeover. There are important reasons to examine the media coverage of Afghan refugees. For one, Canada was one of the first countries to launch special immigration programs for vulnerable Afghans, welcoming the largest number of Afghan refugees in the world after the United States. The country allocated over $80 million to fund its special immigration programs for Afghans in the 2022-2023 financial year (Dawi, 2023). Most importantly, Canada is one of the key actors involved in the 20-year-long war in Afghanistan, which has produced one of the largest protracted refugee situations in the world. This involvement is particularly significant given that Canada's military mission in Afghanistan from December 2001 to March 2014 is one of the country's largest military deployments since the Second World War (Dhaliwal, 2022).

Approach to Enquiry

This research is informed by Stuart Hall's (1997) sociological analysis of discourse, which understands language not only as a means for representing the social world but also as a means that defines and produces knowledge. In other words, discourse analysis is concerned with how knowledge is produced through language. For Hall, discourse is not purely a linguistic concept; rather, it "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about... it also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). In this sense, all practices have

1 Framing is the way news stories are constructed to encourage a specific interpretation or reaction from the audience. For more information on media framing, see D'Angelo (2017).

discursive aspects because all social practices entail meaning, and it is this meaning that shapes and influences the attitudes, understandings, and beliefs of individuals as well as entire populations.

The analysis of news discourse and the representation of refugees draws on Stuart Hall's concepts of "regime of representation" and "othering" (1997). Hall suggests that "othering" is produced through representational practices in popular culture, which are repeated, with variations, across texts or sites of representation. The representation of difference and "otherness" is created by reducing racialized individuals to a "few essentials" or simplified characteristics that are "fixed in nature" (p. 257). Racialized discourses define racialized bodies as "different" and are structured by a set of opposing binaries such as "good" and "bad," "civilized" and "primitive," and "familiar" and "exotic" (p. 229). This representation of "difference" between "white" and "black" serves as a strategy to divide the normal and acceptable from the abnormal and unacceptable, symbolically fixing boundaries and excluding everything that does not fit (p. 258).

Data Collection and Analysis

To understand the media representation of Afghan refugees, this study focuses on online news media because they provide stable and electronically searchable information. To develop the corpus of Canadian news coverage of the Afghan refugee crisis, I conducted a search of the Factiva database using the following search terms: "Afghan refugees or Afghanistan evacuation or Canada's special immigration programs for Afghans or Afghan refugee crisis or Canada's response to Afghan refugees". The search was further filtered to include articles specific to the Canadian region and covered the time period between August 2021 and September 2024.The Factiva database is a reliable digital archive of news from around the world, consisting of a wide range of sources, including newspapers, magazines, trade publications, and more. I identified 518 newspaper articles related to the Afghan refugee crisis from August 2021 to September 2024. I excluded articles that centered on the resettlement of Afghan refugees in other countries, those detailing the responses of other countries to the Afghan refugee crisis, articles that only mentioned Afghan refugees in passing, and duplicate articles. This resulted in a final total of 345 articles for analysis. The final corpus consists of articles and editorials from the news, politics, world, and opinion sections of national and local newspapers across Canada. Opinion pieces were included because they are a valuable means through which elites and experts advance their ideas, draw attention to specific issues, and influence policy agendas.

To understand how language and journalistic practices represented Afghan refugees, a combination of coding strategies was employed. The coding process involved at least three cycles. As part of the initial process, I constructed a table with key information about the articles. This table included details such as the headline, topic, date of publication, and the name of the newspaper. In the second cycle, codes were assigned to each article (e.g., government officials, Afghan refugees, advocacy groups, etc.) to capture an overall sense and identify potential categories within the data (Miles et al., 2019). In the third cycle, I focused on uncovering the meanings, assumptions, and ideologies that shaped the portrayal of Afghan refugees in relation to Canada's special immigration measures for Afghans. This involved analyzing the individuals and groups featured in each story and exploring how the articles represented them while conveying messages about the Afghan refugee crisis. The analysis specifically examined the forms of writing used to describe refugees, the patterns and sources of quotations, and the personal storytelling elements employed in news articles to represent the Afghan refugee crisis and Canada's response to the situation.

The following discussion outlines the discursive strategies employed by the media in representing Afghan refugees My findings indicate that the majority of articles, with 192 published in 2021 and 107 in 2022, were written within the first two years of Canada's special immigration measures for Afghans. Most of this coverage appeared in The Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, and Canadian Press (see Table 1 for a detailed breakdown the top 10 media outlets with the highest number of articles on the issue, Categorized by Bias, Region, and number of Articles). The first theme highlights how media prioritized Afghan interpreters and those worked for the CAF as "allies," creating a hierarchy of deservingness that marginalized other vulnerable groups. The second theme discusses the gendered victimhood that constructed Afghan women as deserving, portraying them as both highly vulnerable under the Taliban and resilient in rebuilding their lives in Canada.

Table 1
Media Outlets by Bias, Region, and Number of Articles

Media Outlet	Political Orientation	Region	Number of Articles
Globe and Mail	Right-Center	National	78
Toronto Star	Center-Left	National	56
Canadian Press	Least Biased	National	36
Ottawa Citizen	Right-Center	Ontario	23
National Post	Right-Center	National	22
Calgary Herald	Right-Center	Alberta	18
Calgary Sun	Right-Center	Alberta	15
The Hamilton Spectator	Left-Center	Ontario	15
Vancouver Sun	Right-Center	British Columbia	13
Waterloo Region Record	Left-Center	Ontario	13

Protect Vulnerable Groups but "Our Allies" First

The first significant finding is the construction of Afghans who worked on the Government of Canada's projects in Afghanistan, especially those who worked with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), as more worthy of protection. As discussed previously, Canada's special immigration programs included pathways not only for interpreters and those with ties to Canada but also for vulnerable groups such as women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, persecuted religious minorities, and 2SLGBTQI+ individuals (IRCC, 2021). According to the Amnesty International report, these groups, along with ethnic minorities like Hazaras and Uzbeks, religious minorities such as Sikhs and Hindus, and former government officials and military personnel, are at risk of arbitrary arrest, detention, and enforced disappearance under the Taliban regime (Human Rights in Afghanistan, 2023). However, in the news coverage of Afghan refugees following the Taliban's takeover, only Afghan interpreters and those who worked with the CAF are a central focus and are discussed in relation to Canada's special immigration programs for Afghans.

The majority of newspaper articles (n=180) on Afghan refugees highlighted Afghan interpreters and those who worked with the CAF as guards and drivers, detailing their accounts of being targeted by the Taliban, their journeys of escaping Afghanistan, and their experiences filing and waiting for the approval of their immigration applications. The news reports consistently referred to Afghans who served the CAF as "allies," "friends," and "individuals with enduring ties to Canada," underscoring their significant contributions and the urgency of their situation. For example, consider the following sequence of news headlines about Afghans who worked with the CAF: "Too many friends still left behind in Afghanistan" ("Too Many Friends", 2021); "We are failing our brave Afghan allies" (Mackay, 2022); "How Ottawa failed Afghans who risked their lives as our allies" (Blackwell, 2021); "A moral failure as Canada leaves Afghan allies stranded" ("A Moral Failure", 2021); "Ex-soldier helped get Afghan allies to Canada" (Laucius, 2021); "Canada abandoned its Afghan allies" (Ngo, 2021); "Former Afghan allies' lives on the line, veterans say" ("Former Afghan Allies", 2021); "Military sources have said that Canadians and Afghan allies were left behind in chaotic final days of evacuation" (Chase & Fife, 2024).

Canada's involvement during the 20 years of the US war in Afghanistan was not limited to its military mission as part of the NATO International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). In addition to humanitarian assistance, Canada has provided $3.8 billion in international assistance to Afghanistan to support reconstruction and development efforts (Dhaliwal, 2022). These initiatives were carried out in collaboration with thousands of local staff who played critical roles in implementing Canada's mission in Afghanistan. However, in the majority of news stories about Afghan refugees, only those who helped Canada's military mission and the Canadian embassy are represented as "allies" in need of protection. Overall, 72% of the articles that focused on the evacuation of Afghan individuals associated with Canadian government efforts in Afghanistan primarily discuss Afghans who worked with the Canadian Armed Forces and the Canadian Embassy. Almost a third (32%) of all the articles refer only to interpreters as Canadian allies or people with significant or enduring ties to Canada. Notably, the voices of individuals involved in Canadian-funded initiatives, such as peace and development programs, and other vulnerable groups with no direct ties

to Canada are largely neglected in the coverage of the Afghan refugee crisis, with only 33 news reports featuring interviews and stories from those who worked with Canada's humanitarian and development initiatives in Afghanistan . This selective representation in media coverage points to an emphasis on affiliation-based obligations, portraying Canada's responsibility toward Afghan refugees as stemming from their support to the Canadian military mission rather than its formal commitments under the Refugee Convention.

Gendered Victimhood: "Canada Needs to Welcome Afghan Women"

The discourse of Afghan refugees in relation to Canada's special immigration programs for Afghans is also closely bound up with gendered notions of victimhood and deservingness. Historically, the media representation of Afghan women has sparked some of the most volatile debates around Western intervention to defend women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan. In the corpus of news stories about Afghan refugees, the portrayal of Afghan women focuses on two themes: their victimhood and vulnerability due to their gender in Afghanistan, and Afghan refugee women finding freedom and empowerment following their resettlement in Canada. For example, consider the following statements in news articles about Afghan refugees: "Women and girls will once again be subjected to a brutal Taliban regime" (Nardi, 2021); "There is no rule of law, no respect for rights; it's a travesty" (Nardi, 2021); "The Taliban continue to impose restrictions on women and girls, including their right to work and access to education" (Carbert, 2021); "The fallout in Afghanistan is already leading to a rise in civilian deaths, particularly among women" (Do, 2021); and "The full story of the woman's bewildering crime is emerging as many Afghans once again struggle to exit the country, this time fearing a brutal Taliban regime" (Blackwell, 2022).

Two frequently reported cases in news stories about Afghan refugees involve former female parliament members and a group of Afghan female judges and prosecutors who are facing significant delays in receiving their Canadian visas while waiting in a third country. In articles such as "Canada Is Turning Its Back on Afghan Women Facing Death and Despair " (Berz, 2024) and "Advocates Plead for Afghan Women's Rights Activist to Be Let into Canada" (Laucius, 2022), a range of newspapers cover the fate of Afghan women under the Taliban regime, especially those who worked as advocates, human rights defenders, and musicians. Others highlight the murder of a former female lawmaker in Afghanistan to underscore the "dangerous climate created by the Taliban's anti-women decrees that have put female advocates like Nabizada in the crosshairs of extremists" ("The Urgent Need," 2023). The plight of Afghan women under the Taliban is described as "tragic beyond belief" (Snyder, 2021), "most at risk" (Karadeglija, 2023; Salem, 2021), and "traumatic and deadly" (Keung, 2022).

A distinguishing feature of news coverage of Afghan refugees, particularly women, is the emphasis on vivid and dramatic details of their experiences in Afghanistan, as well as their fears and concerns. In an article titled "After the Taliban," Katharine Berz and Sharif Sharaf tell the story of an Afghan woman who fled to Pakistan following the Taliban's takeover:

> Karima (not her real name), 41, who arrived in Canada from Afghanistan in early September, is not afraid to ask for help but has not yet been able see a mental-health professional. She raised her family in a war zone and worried constantly about her six children when they were out of their house in Afghanistan. Medication that she received a few years ago in Pakistan for depression and anxiety has now run out. Safe in Canada, Karima has recurring memories of the blood-soaked hand of a small girl killed in an explosion and her brother-in-law's dead body (Berz & Sharaf, 2022).

Another article recounts a Canadian journalist's experience meeting a local female doctor in Afghanistan, stating: "She stuffed naan bread and sweet cakes into a journalist's pocket with the parting words, 'Ask the women in your country to be our voice'" She is begging Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to lead them to safety (Armstrong & Sher, 2021).

The findings of this study show that by constructing Afghan women as highly vulnerable and deserving of protection, the news media also tend to romanticize their lives after resettlement in Canada. In the majority of news reports concerning Afghan refugees' post-migration experiences, women are depicted as pursuing education and employment while successfully integrating into their new society. For example,

in an article, Gordon McIntyre of *Vancouver Sun* tells the story of an Afghan woman who is perusing her education after arriving to Canada with the help of a local advocacy group in Vancouver. The story underscores the resilience of Afghan refugee women, highlighting how they not only rebuild their own lives in exile but also become powerful advocates for the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan (2024). In another article from *Ottawa Citizen*, Christina Spencer writes about the aspirations of three Afghan women who are determined to pursue education and build careers, opportunities that were taken away from them under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan (2023).

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how media portrayals of Afghan refugees following the Taliban's takeover in 2021 constructed selective and hierarchical notions of deservingness. The analysis identifies two key discursive strategies that shaped these portrayals: emotional and moral connections to those who served Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, and gendered notions of victimhood. While these strategies led to more sympathetic reporting and public support for resettlement efforts, they simultaneously reinforced selective and exclusionary notions of vulnerability and deservingness that were often tied to Canada's involvement in the War on Terror. A central theme in the media representation was the emphasis on Afghans affiliated with the CAF, such as interpreters and support staff. These individuals were consistently referred to as "our allies" and "friends," employing semantic strategies that created a categorical division among vulnerable Afghan groups.

While Canada's special immigration programs included a broad range of at-risk populations (IRCC, 2021), media narratives constructed individuals with ties to Canada as more deserving of protection and resettlement. The sense of compassion and solidarity with this particular group of Afghans was created by what Piotr Cap calls "proximization" of their experiences and ideologies with Canada. Cap (2018) suggests that "proximization is a discursive strategy of presenting physically and temporally distant entities, events, and states of affairs (including 'distant' i.e. adversarial ideologies) – a symbolic them – as increasingly and negatively consequential to the speaker and her addressee (us)" (p. 289). In other words, to evoke closeness to an external threat or event, media discourse removes the distance between the audience and the event, making it relevant and immediate. This is achieved through spatial proximization (the construal of external "them" entities physically encroaching upon "us" entities), temporal proximization (the construal of the threat as imminent and requiring an immediate response), and axiological proximization (the framing of the threat as a challenge to the values and identity of "us" entities) (Cap, 2018). In the case of Afghan refugees after the return of the Taliban, the interpreters and the staff in Afghanistan are positioned closer to Canada because their contributions to the Canadian military mission during the War on Terror reflect Canadian values and ideologies. Thus, the targeting and persecution of these individuals by the Taliban symbolize a threat to Canada's legacy and the significance of its efforts in Afghanistan.

What is crucial to note here is that by portraying interpreters and the CAF affiliates as more deserving, media discourse relied on a binary of "self" and "other," positioning those affiliated with Canada's military mission as extensions of# the "self" and, therefore, more deserving of protection. Stuart Hall refers to this binary as a "splitting strategy," which functions to divide the acceptable and normative from the unacceptable and deviant, systematically excluding those who fail to conform (1997, p. 258). In the case of media representation of Afghan refugees, the "splitting strategy" led to a hierarchization of deservingness among different groups, determined by their perceived proximity to Canada and Canadian values. This process is evident in media coverage and at times overtly conveyed. For example, a *Toronto Star* article quotes a former CAF combat interpreter urging the Canadian government to "prioritize the displaced CAF combat interpreters' evacuation from Kabul instead of other civilians" (Keung, 2021). Similarly, Wendy Long, founder of Afghan Canadian Interpreters, is quoted in the *National Post*: "We do have a responsibility for those people, more so than anyone else, because of their connection to Canada… they protected our men and women, and we are responsible for protecting them" (Blackwell, 2021).

In addition to this hierarchical framing based on ties to Canada, media portrayals of Afghan women introduced a gendered layer to the constructions of vulnerability and deservingness. As illustrated in the findings section, the media discourse surrounding Afghan women emphasizes their vulnerability and victimhood while simultaneously romanticizing their post-resettlement experiences. The frequent focus on vivid and dramatic details of Afghan women's suffering under the Taliban, coupled with their

desperate cries for help from the West, may evoke feelings of solidarity and compassion, positioning them as a deserving group. However, as Didier Fassin (2012) highlights in his work on humanitarianism, such narratives often reinforce asymmetrical power relations by constructing vulnerable individuals as victims in need of help from those in positions of power (p. 3-4). It is for this reason that when compassion is exercised in the public space it is "always directed from above to below, from the more powerful to the weaker, the more fragile, the more vulnerable—those who can generally be constituted as victims of an overwhelming fate" (p. 4).

In the case of the media portrayal of Afghan women, this asymmetry is political rather than psychological. Historically, Afghan women have been framed as deserving of Western protection and rescue from their communities and their so-called "backward" and patriarchal culture (Ayotte & Husain, 2005). The trope of "saving" Afghan women has been a recurring theme in foreign interventions in Afghanistan, including the War on Terror and the two-decade-long international efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment (Razack et al., 2010). In fact, as Sara Farris notes, the invasion of Afghanistan was widely endorsed by the international public as both a mission to liberate Afghan women from the Taliban's oppressive regime and as an act of defense and retaliation against the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks (2017). During that period, Western media representations heavily focused on the image of women under the burqa, using it as a symbol to reinforce the narrative of victimhood and the West's moral obligation to intervene (Macdonald, 2006). The desire to save Afghan women is rooted in the White Imperial logic that perceives Brown women as vulnerable and threatened by their own people and culture (Razack et al., 2010; Thobani, 2010). Over two decades later, the figure of Afghan women in Canadian media discourse remains vulnerable and in suffering, whose protection is portrayed as the moral responsibility of Canada. In doing so, the media discourse not only portrays Afghan women as silenced and waiting for rescue but also highlights Canada's generosity and moral superiority while ignoring its 14-year military involvement in the US-led war in Afghanistan, which contributed to the very conditions of marginalization and oppression that Canada claims to be addressing (see Fluri, 2009; Razack et al., 2010; Thobani, 2019).

As outlined in the findings, media depictions of Afghan women extend beyond the simplistic portrayal of vulnerable, racialized Muslim women in need of protection. Afghan women are represented not only as vulnerable and requiring safeguarding but also as highly motivated individuals with aspirations to pursue higher education, contribute to society, and advocate for the rights of women left behind in Afghanistan. A *Canadian Press* article refers to them as an "aspiring community" (Woolf, 2021), while another article from the *Globe and Mail* notes that they are individuals who demonstrate resilience and determination, whether by protesting against the Taliban's oppressive regime in Afghanistan or by pursuing education and working toward their dreams in Canada (Fung, 2024). This contrasting notion of deservingness creates "complex boundaries of inclusion and exclusion" (Welfens, 2023) that refugees must navigate, where their status as victims can both facilitate access to protection and simultaneously limit their agency and opportunities for self-determination. Additionally, this narrative of Afghan women as highly motivated and aspiring individuals can also lead to the exclusion of those refugees or asylum seekers who are unable or unwilling to meet this idealized standard (see Clark et al., 2024).

It is without doubt that Afghan women have been the primary victims of patriarchal values, local wars, the Taliban's fundamentalist ideologies, and systemic gender inequality enforced by various regimes throughout the history. However, portrayals that focus exclusively on women's vulnerability because of their gender oversimplify their experiences and obscure the broader context, including the 20-year foreign intervention under the guise of the War on Terror that have shaped their current realities. This discursive construction of care and compassion also does little to improve the policies and practices concerning Afghan refugee women.

Conclusion

This paper builds on studies of mainstream news representation of refugees and asylum seekers by providing a discourse analysis of how they are portrayed in the media. It sheds light on how media portrayals of Afghans as deserving refugees are shaped by Canada's role in the US-led war in Afghanistan, where refugee status is framed not strictly through the Refugee Convention, but through Canada's perceived moral obligation resulting from its involvement in the war. The study's central argument is that press coverage of Afghan refugees' shifts seeking asylum from a legal right to a matter of deservingness, where refugees need to demonstrate how they are deserving of resettlement in Canada. In doing so, the

media establish a specific regime of representation, where refugee deservingness is assessed based on individuals' affiliation with Canada and their gendered vulnerability. Within this context, deservingness functions as a "mode of bordering", which is reinstated through and within media discourse (Holzberg et al., 2018).

The study findings reveal that the media coverage of Afghan refugees in Canada is centered around the figure of deserving refugee, which is constructed in debates around individuals' affiliation with Canada 's military mission in Afghanistan and their gender. While the media discourse presents the arrival of Afghan refugees to Canada as a positive phenomenon, it reinforces a dehumanizing logic of deservingness that requires the racialized 'other' to conform to a white imperial logic of vulnerability in order to be deemed worthy of protection. In doing so, the media constructs the binary of "self" and the "other" in which the "self" emerges as a savior and a nation with moral responsibility to protect vulnerable refugees. This kind of representation not only shows Afghan refugees as mere subjects in need of protection from the West but also overlooks the many factors that have contributed to the Afghanistan current situation, including the US military intervention, where Canada was involved for over ten years.

Bibliography

A moral failure as Canada leaves Afghan allies stranded. (2021). *The Ottawa Sun*, A12.

Alba, R., Rumbaut, R. G., & Marotz, K. (2005). A Distorted Nation: Perceptions of Racial/Ethnic Group Sizes and Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Other Minorities. *Social Forces*, *84*(2), 901–919. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0002

Armstrong, S., & Sher, J. (2021). Afghan refugees are being unfairly blocked from coming to Canada. *The Globe and Mail*, A13.

Ayotte, K. J., & Husain, M. E. (2005). Securing Afghan Women: Neocolonialism, Epistemic Violence, and the Rhetoric of the Veil. *NWSA Journal*, *17*(3), 112–133. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4317160

Bahtić-Kunrath, B., & Gebauer, C. (2023). Narratives of Crisis vs. Narratives of Solidarity. Analyzing Discursive Shifts in Austrian Media Coverage of Refugee Movements from an Interdisciplinary Perspective. *DIEGESIS*, *12*(2).

Berry, M., Garcia-Blanco, I., & Moore, K. (2016). *Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries*.

Berz, K. L. (2024). Canada is turning its back on Afghan women facing death and despair. *The Toronto Star*. 1.

Berz, K., & Sharaf, S. (2022). After the Taliban: Leading Afghan women now struggle to survive as refugees. *Toronto Star*, 0.

Blackwell, T. (2021). How Ottawa failed Afghans who risked their lives for Canada. *National Post*. https://nationalpost.com/news/world/canadas-long-struggle-to-get-our-allies-out-of-afghanistan-and-how-it-ended-in-failure

Blackwell, T. (2022). How a refugee wooed, swindled asylum-seekers; Woman built reputation as humanitarian. *National Post*, NP5.

Cap, P. (2018). From 'cultural unbelonging' to 'terrorist risk': Communicating threat in the Polish anti-immigration discourse. *Critical Discourse Studies*, *15*(3), 285–302. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2017.1405050

Caviedes, A. (2015). An Emerging 'European' News Portrayal of Immigration? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *41*(6), 897–917. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.1002199

Carbert, M. (2021). Loneliest envoy: Afghanistan's man in Ottawa has no contact with Kabul. *The Globe and Mail*, A1

Chauvin, S., & Garcés-Mascareñas, B. (2014). Becoming Less Illegal: Deservingness Frames and Undocumented Migrant Incorporation. *Sociology Compass*, *8*(4), 422–432. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12145

Chouliaraki, L., & Zaborowski, R. (2017). Voice and community in the 2015 refugee crisis: A content analysis of news coverage in eight European countries. *International Communication Gazette*, *79*(6–7), 613–635. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048517727173

Christina, S. (2023). Levine: Coping with Canada—How three Afghan women greeted 2023. *Ottawa Citizen*.

Chase, S., & Fife, R. (2024). MPs to investigate former defence minister Harjit Sajjan's use of special forces to rescue Afghan Sikhs; Military sources have said that Canadians and Afghan allies were left behind in chaotic final days of evacuation. *The Globe and Mail*, GMBN.

Clark, S., Haw, A., & Mackenzie, L. (2024). The "good refugee" ideal: How discourses of deservingness

permeate Australia's refugee and asylum seeker narratives. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, *59*(1), 148–163.

Confederation of Tomorrow 2024 Survey of Canadians. (2024). Environics Institute. https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/confederation-of-tomorrow-2024-survey-of-canadians

Confederation of Tomorrow 2022 Survey of Canadians. (2022). Environics Institute. https://www.environicsinstitute.org/projects/project-details/confederation-of-tomorrow-2022-survey-of-canadians

Davis, R. M. (2021). The 'bad' and exceptionally 'good': Constructing the African refugee. *Media International Australia*, *179*(1), 113–126. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20926540

Dawi, A. (2023, May 9). *Canada on Track to Host Largest Afghan Resettlement Program*. Voice of America. https://www.voanews.com/a/canada-on-track-to-host-largest-afghan-resettlement-program-/7085788.html

Dhaliwal, S. (2022). *Honouring Canada's Legacy in Afghanistan: Responding to the Humanitarian Crisis and Helping People Reach Safety*. Retrieved from the House of Commons Website: https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/AFGH/Reports/RP11826943/afghrp01/afghrp01-e.pdf

Do, A. (2021). PM should follow in father's footsteps. *Toronto Star*, IN3.

D'Angelo, P. (2017). Framing: Media frames. In P. Roessler, C. A. Hoffner, & L. van Zoonen (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0048

Eberl, J.-M., Meltzer, C. E., Heidenreich, T., Herrero, B., Theorin, N., Lind, F., Berganza, R., Boomgaarden, H. G., Schemer, C., & Strömbäck, J. (2018). The European media discourse on immigration and its effects: A literature review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *42*(3), 207–223. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2018.1497452

Farris, S. (2017). *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Duke University Press.

Fassin, D. (2012). *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press.

Fleras, A. (2011). *The Media Gaze: Representations of Diversities in Canada*. UBC Press.

Fluri, J. L. (2009). The beautiful 'other': A critical examination of 'western' representations of Afghan feminine corporeal modernity. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *16*(3), 241–257. https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690902836292

Former Afghan allies' 'lives on the line, ' veterans say. (2021). *The Ottawa Sun*, A16.

Fung, M. (2024). Afghan women are in a hopeless situation – and yet they still hold hope. *The Globe and Mail.*

Greenberg, J., & Hier, S. (2001). Crisis, Mobilization and Collective Problematization: "illegal" Chinese migrants and the Canadian news media. *Journalism Studies*, *2*(4), 563–583. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700120086413

Hall, S. 1997. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London: Sage.

Hameleers, M. (2019). Putting Our Own People First: The Content and Effects of Online Right-wing Populist Discourse Surrounding the European Refugee Crisis. *Mass Communication and Society*, *22*(6), 804–826. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2019.1655768

Holmes, S. M., & Castañeda, H. (2016). Representing the "European refugee crisis" in Germany and beyond: Deservingness and difference, life and death. *American Ethnologist*, *43*(1), 12–24. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12259

Holzberg, B., Kolbe, K., & Zaborowski, R. (2018). Figures of Crisis: The Delineation of (Un)Deserving Refugees in the German Media. *Sociology*, *52*(3), 534–550. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518759460

Human rights in Afghanistan. (2023). Amnesty International. Retrieved June 18, 2023, From https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia/afghanistan/report-afghanistan/

Huysmans, J. (2000). The European Union and the Securitization of Migration. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *38*(5), 751–777. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00263

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2021). *Canada expands resettlement program to bring more Afghans to safety* [News releases], Retrieved March 2024 from https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2021/08/canada-expands-resettlement-program-to-bring-more-afghans-to-safety.html

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (2022). *Special program to sponsor Afghan refugees without refugee status from the UNHCR or a foreign state*, Retrieved March 2024 from Canada.ca. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan/special-

measures/sponsor-without-rsd.html
Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2023). Canada meets commitment to welcome 40,000 vulnerable Afghans, Retrieved September 2024 from *Canada.ca*. https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2023/10/canada-meets-commitment-to-welcome-40000-vulnerable-afghans.html
Karadeglija, A. (2023). MPs urge expedited visas for women who served in afghan parliament; Former MP, bodyguard killed in Kabul. *Ottawa Citizen*, NP2.
Keung, N. (2021). Turmoil may prevent interpreters from reaching Canada. *Toronto Star*, A12.
Keung, N. (2022). "I just want to be who I am." *Toronto Star*, A8.
KhosraviNik, M. (2010). The representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in British newspapers: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Language and Politics*, *9*(1), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.9.1.01kho
Kyriakidou, M. (2021). Hierarchies of deservingness and the limits of hospitality in the 'refugee crisis.' *Media, Culture & Society*, *43*(1), 133–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720960928
Laucius, J. (2021). Ex-soldier helped get Afghan allies to Canada. *Ottawa Citizen*, A1.
Laucius, J. (2022). Advocates plead for Afghan women's rights activist to be let into Canada. *Ottawa Citizen*, A8.
Lawlor, A. (2015). Framing Immigration in the Canadian and British News Media. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *48*(2), 329–355. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423915000499
Lee, A. (2015, September 15). *Migrant crisis: The truth about the boy on the beach Aylan Kurdi*. Express. Co.Uk. https://www.express.co.uk/comment/expresscomment/604590/Migrant-crisis-the-truth-about-the-boy-the-beach-Aylan-Kurdi
Macdonald, M. (2006). Muslim Women and the Veil: Problems of image and voice in media representations. *Feminist Media Studies*, *6*(1), 7–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770500471004
Mackay, P. (2022). We are failing our brave Afghan allies; It's not too late to save them from the Taliban. *National Post*, A10.
McIntyre, G. (2024). B.C. advocacy group brings hope to girls in Afghanistan. *Vancouver Sun*, A1/Front.
Medianu, S., Sutter, A., & Esses, V. (2015). The portrayal of refugees in Canadian newspapers: The impact of the arrival of Tamil refugees by sea in 2010. *IdeAs. Idées d'Amériques*, *6*, Article 6. https://doi.org/10.4000/ideas.1199
Miles, B. M., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (Fourth edition). SAGE Publications, Inc.
Mustafa, M., Pilus, Z., & Mohammad Lotfie, M. (2021). The Representation of Syrian Refugees in Canadian Online News Media: A Focus on the Topos of Burdening. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *46*(4), 875–903. https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2021v46n4a3807
Nardi, C. (2021). Desperate pleas "tear at our souls"; Canada's top soldier laments those left behind. *Vancouver Sun*, NP1.
Ngo, W. (2021). Canada abandoned its Afghan allies. *Edmonton Journal*, A6.
Omidian Sijani, N. (2023). A corpus-assisted discourse analysis of the representation of Syrian refugees in Canadian newspapers. *Discourse & Communication*, *17*(4), 415–440.
Razack, S., Smith, M., & Thobani, S. (2010). State of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century In S. Razack, M. Smith, & S. Thobani (Eds.), the *States of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century (pp. 5-10)* . Between the Lines.
Reitmanova, S., Gustafson, D. L., & Ahmed, R. (2015). "Immigrants Can Be Deadly": Critical Discourse Analysis of Racialization of Immigrant Health in the Canadian Press and Public Health Policies. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *40*(3), 471–487.
Salem, A. (2021). Toronto's Afghan community rallies at city hall in solidarity with those struggling to escape Taliban rule. *Toronto Star*.
Semyonov, M., Raijman, R., Tov, A. Y., & Schmidt, P. (2004). Population size, perceived threat, and exclusion: A multiple-indicators analysis of attitudes toward foreigners in Germany. *Social Science Research*, *33*(4), 681–701. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2003.11.003
Seo, S., & Kavakli, S. B. (2022). Media representations of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants: A meta-analysis of research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *46*(3), 159–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2022.2096663
Snyder, J. (2021). There is so much more we can do'; PM assailed for response to fall of Kabul. *Vancouver Sun,* NP1
Spencer, C. (2023). Levine: Coping with Canada—How three Afghan women greeted 2023. *Ottawa Citizen*.

The urgent need to help Afghans. (2023). *The Toronto Star*. 0

Thobani, S. (2010). White Innocence, Western Supremacy: The role of Western feminism in the "War on Terror." In S. Razack, M. Smith, & S. Thobani (Eds.), *State of Race: Critical Race Feminism for the 21st Century* (p. 248). Between the Lines.

Thobani, S. (2019). The visuality of terror: Gender, sex and desire in war. *Social Identities*, *25*(4), 523–541. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2018.1514166

Tomczak-Boczko, J., Gołębiowska, K., & Górny, M. (2023). Who is a 'true refugee'? Polish political discourse in 2021–2022. *Discourse Studies*, *25*(6), 799–822. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614456231187488

Too many friends still left behind in Afghanistan. (2021, September 13). *Waterloo Region Record, TKWR.*

Tyyskä, V., Blower, J., Deboer, S., Kawai, S., & Walcott, A. (2018). Canadian Media Coverage of the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Representation, Response, and Resettlement. *Geopolitics, History, and International Relations*, *10*(1), 148–166. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26803985

Van Dijk, T. A. (2012). *Ideology and Discourse: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. https://discourses.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Teun-A.-van-Dijk-2012-Ideology-And-Discourse.pdf

Wallace, R. (2018). Contextualizing the Crisis: The Framing of Syrian Refugees in Canadian Print Media. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, *51*(2), 207–231. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423917001482

Welfens, N. (2023). 'Promising victimhood': Contrasting deservingness requirements in refugee resettlement. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *49*(5), 1103–1124. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2117686

Woolf, M. (2021). Female Afghan students bound for Saskatoon; Dozens flee via perilous Pakistan route. *The Canadian Press*, A5.

Neela Hassan is a PhD Candidate [ABD] in Sociology at the University of Waterloo. Her research focuses on the intersection of gender-based violence and immigration status, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of women with precarious immigration status in Canada.

How to cite this article (APA– 7th ed.):

Hassan, N. (2025). Constructing the Vulnerable and Deserving Refugee: A Discourse Analysis of News Media Coverage of Afghan Refugees in Canada. *Criminological Encounters.* 7(1). 72-85. https://doi.org/10.26395/CE.2025.1.06

© The author(s), 2025 | Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.