

Understanding the Determinants of Emigration Decisions Among the Afghan Population

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Abstract. This study examines the factors influencing emigration decisions in Afghanistan from 2016 to 2021. Specifically, it analyzes the influence of economic, social, and demographic factors on emigration decisions, using a binary logistic regression model and a cross-sectional time series dataset. It finds that owning small land portions, less livestock, and having lower income positively influence emigration likelihood, while owning large land holdings, more livestock, and higher income have a negative correlation. Social factors like political instability, poor public services, insecurity, violence, and family connections abroad play a significant and positive role. Demographic factors such as being young, educated, single, male, living in urban areas, and belonging to smaller households are positively influence the decision to emigrate, while uneducated individuals show a negative influence. The research has implications for public policy, academia, and international donor organizations, emphasizing the need to address push factors in the source country. Future studies can expand the analysis to include additional factors and multiple countries.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Emigration Decision, Economic Factors, Social Factors, Demographic Factors, Logistic.

JEL classification: *O 15, F 22, and J 15*

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1 Introduction

Emigration from Afghanistan has increasingly been a regional and global issue for transit, destination countries, and for international organizations actively involved in humanitarian assistance efforts. According to the United Nations report, international migrants reached 281 million in 2022, which is 66 million higher than in 2010 [39]. Moreover, as per a comprehensive survey undertaken by Gallup, it has been substantiated that an estimated 700 million individuals, representing roughly 15% of the worldwide populace, exhibit a predisposition towards international migration, expressing a desire to relocate to alternative countries [17]. According to a report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in the year 2020, Afghan nationals constituted the second largest group of refugees globally, surpassed only by individuals from Syria [13]. Afghanistan, a nation classified as a developing country, has been grappling with persistent economic and political instability ever since the Soviet Union's invasion in 1979. This protracted state of affairs has precipitated prolonged periods of civil strife, societal instability, and substantial outflows of individuals seeking refuge beyond the country's borders. Nonetheless, antecedent to these upheavals, Afghans were also engaged in emigration predominantly driven by economic imperatives [29].

As illustrated in Figure 1, the initial wave can be identified by the presence of sociopolitical factors, particularly the onset of a war, which was initiated by the invasion of the USSR in 1979 [3]. Subsequently, the second wave emerged as a consequence of the civil war that erupted among the various factions of Mujahideens subsequent to the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, leading to widespread violence within the country. The third wave of mass emigration ensued when the Taliban assumed control over more than 95% of Afghanistan's territory in 1995 and implemented stringent societal regulations and restrictions. The fourth, fifth, and sixth waves of emigration were spurred by the escalation of armed conflict, political instability, and ultimately the collapse of the government in 2007, 2014, and 2021 respectively.

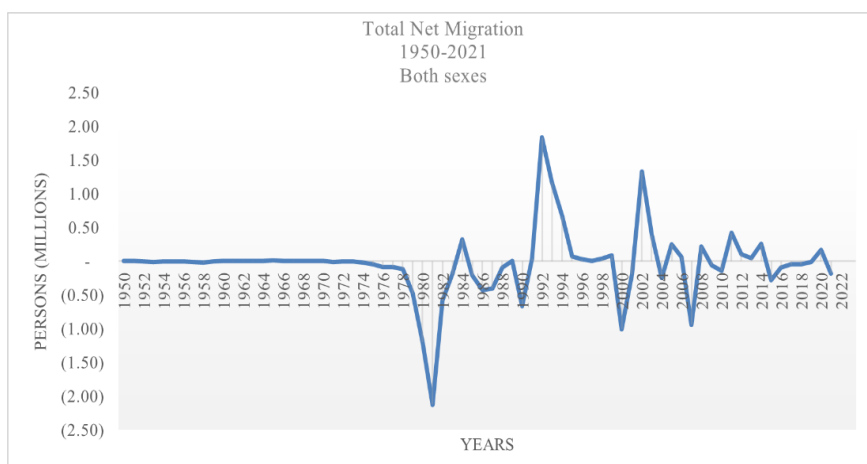


Figure 1. Net Migration Trend [38]

Notably, the announcement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troop withdrawal by 2014, coupled with the presidential election in the same year, precipitated a state of political instability and consequently resulted in an elevated number of emigrants.

Moreover, various factors including the intensification of insurgency, ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban, the contentious and fraudulent 2019 presidential election, and the US-Taliban Doha agreement, have emerged as the principal driving forces behind the prevailing upward trend since 2017. Following the withdrawal announcement by the US president in April of 2021 and the subsequent failure of Taliban peace negotiations with the Afghan government, the Taliban escalated their military operations, ultimately culminating in the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. This significant turn of events led to an unprecedented surge of 53% in the number of individuals expressing their intent to leave the country [34]. Following the occurrence of the collapse, an approximate total of 150,000 Afghan individuals have been successfully evacuated solely by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, and Australia [25,7,35]. Between October 2021 and January 2022, an estimated one million Afghans migrated to Iran, as reported by The New York Time [19]. Simultaneously, approximately 300,000 Afghans departed for Pakistan, according to a Pakistani official's report [20]. According to Augustova & Karimi (2021), a significant number of 12,000 Afghan individuals departed the country on a daily average subsequent to the collapse [5]. However, it is noteworthy that the neighboring countries have predominantly intensified their deportation efforts. For instance, within the period of December 1st to December 15th, 2022, Iran forcefully repatriated a substantial count of 18,665 Afghan nationals [22].

The decision to undertake emigration is influenced by a multitude of factors, encompassing a complex interplay of socioeconomic, political, and personal elements. In the field of migration studies, researchers commonly employ the conceptual frameworks of "push" and "pull" factors to elucidate the underlying reasons that impel individuals to depart from their country of origin [9].

The extant empirical evidence pertaining to Afghanistan exhibits a predominant presence of diverse factors exerting an influence on the choice to emigrate. Several studies have revealed that, taking into account the socio-political milieu of Afghanistan, the crisis of emigration is intricately intertwined with the recent surge in political turbulence, social instability, and insecurity [26,27,18]. Nevertheless, a plethora of scientific research has established climate change, land degradation, drought, and declining agricultural income as major contributors to social problems, resulting in both internal and external migrations [33,24,23,16]. Additionally, a group of literature focused on the demographic factors such as age, family size, province, education, and gender [28]. However, a comprehensive study of economic factors influencing emigration decision with application of quantitative methods and large sample size define the gap.

This study contributes significantly to the existing literature in several ways. First, the existing empirical evidence thus far has yielded inconclusive results with regard to comprehensively understanding the precise magnitude of economic, social, and demographic factors on emigration. No study has encompassed all three factors concurrently to thoroughly examine their collective influence on emigration. Hence, the existing gap can be defined by the absence of quantitative methods and large sample sizes. Therefore, this research endeavor seeks to address this gap by taking into account economic, social, and demographic factors in a comprehensive manner. Second, it is the first analysis to examine the impact of land on emigration decisions using a large sample size of 73,856 Afghans across 34 provinces of Afghanistan from 2016 to 2021. Third, this study provides distinct empirical evidence regarding the impact of land size, livestock holdings, and income levels on the decision to migrate, thereby highlighting the pivotal role of economic factors. Given that approximately 70% of the Afghan population resides in rural areas and relies on agriculture as their primary means of livelihood, the profound importance of land within Afghanistan's agrarian economy renders it a prime setting for examining economic determinants [42]. Finally, it incorporated comprehensively the social and demographic factors and also highlights the relevance of the research outcomes for policymakers, academics, and the international migration entities. The research is structured into sections covering methodology, results, and conclusion.

Research Question: What are the factors influencing the likelihood of a person in Afghanistan to emigrate?

2 Methodology

2.1 Model Specification

Based on the literature review, the author of this research is utilizing the logistic model to determine the impact of land on emigration decisions. However, the extensive array of factors that influence emigration decisions renders it challenging for migration-related studies to arrive at a dynamic, unified, interdisciplinary econometric model of migration [9].

The logistic regression model is frequently employed in social science research to assess the probability of an event's occurrence. It posits that the connection between the independent variables and the dependent variable follows a linear pattern within the log-odds framework. The logit function serves the purpose of converting this linear relationship into a probability.

$$P(Y = 1) = \frac{e^{(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \dots + \beta_k X_k)}}{1 + e^{(\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \dots + \beta_k X_k)}}$$

where $P(Y=1)$ is the probability of the dependent variable Y equaling 1 (the event occurring), X_1, X_2, \dots, X_k are the independent variables, $\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \dots, \beta_k$ are the coefficients to be estimated, and e is the base of the natural logarithm.

The coefficients represent the effect of the independent variables on the probability of the event occurring (Hosmer et al., 2013). Additionally, the study applied test for model specification (linktest), Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test, and multicollinearity test, called variance inflation factor (VIF) to ensure the application of proper regression model. STATA 17 is used for the analysis.

Suggested Model

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$i=1, \dots, n$

Where Y is the dependent variable which is emigration decision; X_i are the main variables of the focus study, and ε_i represent the random disturbance or errors of the variables.

2.2 Variables Description

The table below presents the survey questions along with their respective measurements.

Table 1. Description of Variables

| Variables | Questions | Type | Sign | Literature |
|-----------------------------|--|----------------|------|------------|
| Emigration Intension | If given opportunity, would you leave Afghanistan and live somewhere else? | Binary (yes=1) | | [10] |
| Land | How many of the following does your household have?... hectar of Land. | Categorical | -/+ | [40] |

| | | | | |
|--|---|----------------------------|---|------|
| Livestock | How many of the following does your household have?... Livestock (not poultry) | Categorical | - | [32] |
| Employment | Do you yourself do any activity that generates money? | Binary (yes=1) | - | [14] |
| Income | Can you estimate your average monthly household income on one of the following categories(AFN)? | Categorical | - | [10] |
| Female income | Do female members of the family contribute to this household income? | Binary (yes=1) | + | [36] |
| Public services (effectiveness) | How successful do you think the government has been in improving the living condition of people living in your area—a lot, a little, or not at all? | Categorical | - | [1] |
| Political Instability | Generally speaking, do you think things in Afghanistan today are going in the right direction, or do you think they are going in the wrong direction? | Binary (Wrong direction=1) | + | [11] |
| Happiness | In general, in your life, would you say you are very happy, somewhat happy, not very happy or not at all happy? | Categorical | + | [10] |
| Violence | Have you or has anyone in your family been a victim of violence or of some criminal act in your home or community in the past year? | Binary (yes=1) | + | [37] |
| Insecurity | In your view, does any group currently pose a threat to the security of this local area? | Binary(yes=1) | + | [12] |
| Access use | Do you or do you not use any of the following for obtaining information? ... The internet | Binary (yes=1) | - | [41] |
| Diaspora | Do you have a family member or close relative that lives abroad? | Binary (yes=1) | + | [8] |
| Age | How old were you on your last birthday? / How old are you? | Categorical | - | [43] |
| Gender | Male | Binary (male=1) | + | [2] |
| Household size | How many people live here at this address? | Categorical | - | [1] |
| Marital Status | What is your marital status? | Binary (single=1) | - | [30] |
| Education | What is the highest level (grade) of school you have completed, not including schooling in Islamic madrasa? | Categorical | - | [1] |
| Urban/rural | CSO Geographic Code | Binary (urban=1) | + | [1] |

Source: Compiled by author

2.3 Data

This research utilizes data from the Survey of Afghan People conducted by the Asia Foundation, an international nonprofit organization. The dataset represents all provinces, ethnic groups, and genders in Afghanistan and covers economic, political, and social issues. The survey has been conducted annually from 2006 to 2021, resulting in 148,196 randomly selected observations using a multistage, systematic sampling approach [4]. This paper will utilize cross-sectional time series data from the period of 2016 to 2021, where the data for the year 2020 is not collected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have chosen this specific timeframe to ensure the availability of pertinent data concerning our variable of interest, resulting in a total of 73,856 observations across all provinces.

2.4 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2. Households Demographic Characteristics

| Category | Respondents | % | Category | Respondents | % |
|--------------------------|--------------|------------|-----------------------|--------------|------------|
| Gender | | | Rural/Urban | | |
| Male | 37380 | 50.61 | Urban | 16737 | 22.66 |
| Female | 36476 | 49.39 | Rural | 57119 | 77.34 |
| Education | | | Region | | |
| No formal education | 36860 | 49.91 | Central/Kabul | 14849 | 20.11 |
| Primary school (1-6) | 11656 | 15.78 | East | 8640 | 11.70 |
| Secondary School (7-9) | 5417 | 7.33 | Southeast | 5435 | 7.36 |
| High School (10-12) | 13490 | 18.27 | Southwest | 9973 | 13.50 |
| University degree (12 +) | 6188 | 8.38 | West | 7867 | 10.65 |
| | | | Northeast | 11478 | 15.54 |
| | | | Central/Hazarjat | 3901 | 5.28 |
| | | | Northwest | 11713 | 15.86 |
| Ethnicity | | | Age | | |
| Pashtun | 28587 | 38.71 | Young (18-25) | 20375 | 27.59 |
| Tajik | 25739 | 34.85 | Adults (26-59) | 49292 | 66.74 |
| Hazara | 8251 | 11.17 | Old (60 plus) | 4189 | 5.67 |
| Uzbek | 5422 | 7.34 | | | |
| Others | 5857 | 7.93 | | | |
| Marital Status | | | Household size | | |
| Married | 59843 | 81.03 | Small (1-5) | 8257 | 11.18 |
| Single | 12329 | 16.69 | Medium (6-10) | 39003 | 52.81 |
| Widow/divorced | 1684 | 2.28 | Large (10+) | 26596 | 36.01 |
| Total | 73856 | 100 | Total | 73856 | 100 |

Source: Calculated by Author in STATA

Table 3. Percentage of Individual who Leaves the Country by Category

| Category | Leave | Category | Leave | Category | Leave |
|------------------------|-------|--------------------------------------|-------|-------------------------------|-------|
| Gender | | Land | | Political Instability | |
| Male | 38.75 | Small (0-1) | 38.10 | right direction | 33.19 |
| Female | 35.41 | Medium (2-10) | 32.88 | wrong direction | 39.58 |
| | | Large (10+) | 29.23 | | |
| Rural/Urban | | Livestock | | Insecurity | |
| Urban | 42.25 | Small (0-10) | 37.37 | Yes | 39.97 |
| Rural | 35.59 | Medium (10-50) | 35.34 | no | 37.61 |
| | | Large (51+) | 29.18 | | |
| Age | | Employment | | Happiness | |
| Young (18-25) | 40.77 | Yes | 38.43 | Very happy | 33.71 |
| Adults (26-59) | 36.28 | No | 35.92 | Somewhat happy | 37.94 |
| Old (60 plus) | 28.96 | | | Not very happy | 40.34 |
| | | | | Not at all happy | 41.00 |
| Marital Status | | Female income | | Victim of Violence | |
| Married | 35.88 | Yes | 40.35 | Yes | 39.53 |
| Single | 43.67 | No | 36.30 | no | 36.56 |
| Widow/divorced | 32.36 | | | | |
| Household size | | Income | | Access to internet | |
| Small (1-5) | 40.38 | Low (0-5000) | 34.94 | Yes | 48.79 |
| Medium (6-10) | 38.71 | Medium (5001-25000) | 34.52 | no | 35.18 |
| Large (10+) | 33.72 | Large (25001+) | 31.60 | | |
| Education | | Public Services Effectiveness | | Diaspora (link abroad) | |
| No formal education | 32.74 | A lot | 32.02 | Yes | 47.20 |
| Primary school (1-6) | 36.27 | A little | 37.87 | no | 30.70 |
| Secondary School (7-9) | 41.43 | Not at all | 41.69 | | |

| | |
|--------------------------|-------|
| High School (10-12) | 44.60 |
| University degree (12 +) | 44.44 |

Source: Calculated by Author in STATA

3 Result

The regression analysis aimed to examine the influence of various factors on the emigration decision in Afghanistan during the period of 2016-2021. The dependent variable is binary, representing whether individuals intended to emigrate or not. To obtain a reliable and consistent regression result, the current study first applied various model specifications and diagnostic tests, the results of which are presented in the following order:

3.1 Diagnostic Tests Result

To validate the assumptions of the logit regression model, such as the absence of perfect multicollinearity among the independent variables, we conducted the VIF test. The results indicate a mean VIF of 1.28 and a maximum of 2.42, which falls within an acceptable range below the lower boundary of 5. Moreover, the linktest, performed to assess model specification accuracy, suggests that the model is correctly specified ($\text{hatsq} = 0.403$). Furthermore, the Hosmer and Lemeshow's goodness-of-fit test ($\text{Prob} > \text{chi}^2 = 0.262$) confirms the fitness of the logistic model.

To account for potential heteroskedasticity and serial correlation, we utilized logistic regression while considering robust standard errors. The results obtained through various diagnostic and model specification tests consistently support the use of the logit model with robust standard errors. Nevertheless, for the purpose of demonstrating consistency and trend analysis, we included separate logit regression models for each year.

3.2 Discussion of the Regression Result

After controlling for other factors, the results indicate that a small portion of land, livestock ownership, and income have a significant positive influence on the probability of making an emigration decision, while owning large land, livestock, and having a high income have a negative influence. This suggests that individuals with less land, livestock, and income are economically more vulnerable and consider emigration as an alternative livelihood option. The expansion of irrigation networks to arid agricultural land and investments in the distribution of arable land will decrease the likelihood of Afghan people emigrating. This means that having a substantial amount of land, livestock, and income provides opportunities for employment or self-employment, reducing the probability of emigration. However, there is a positive and significant correlation between employment in 2016 and 2019. Additionally, households with female income significantly influence the probability of emigrating, suggesting that skilled women are more willing to leave [15].

Several social factors significantly influence the decision to emigrate in Afghanistan. These factors encompass dissatisfaction with political instability, inadequate public services, pervasive insecurity, widespread violence, and high levels of public unhappiness. Moreover, the presence of family or connections abroad, as well as the utilization of the internet for obtaining news and information, positively contribute to the likelihood of emigration. Social networks and information dissemination play a pivotal role in the migration process, suggesting that a well-executed social media campaign has the potential to discourage emigration.

Among the demographic factors examined, the analysis revealed that several characteristics are positively correlated with the decision to emigrate. These characteristics include youth, education, single, marital status, male gender, urban residence, and being in small households. Conversely, individuals lacking education exhibit a significantly negative correlation, indicating a diminished inclination to emigrate.

It is important to note that the results are contingent upon the specified time period and the variables incorporated in the analysis. Further research is necessary to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing emigration decisions in Afghanistan.

Table 3. Regression Result

| EMIGRATION DECISION VARIABLES | (1) Pool-logit | (2) 2016 | (3) 2017 | (4) 2018 | (5) 2019 | (6) 2021 |
|--|---------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Small Land (0-1 hectar) | 0.185*** (0.0269) | 0.175*** (0.0573) | 0.243*** (0.0593) | 0.262*** (0.0422) | 0.206*** (0.0477) | 0.0706 (0.0477) |
| Large Land (10+ hectar) | -0.313*** (0.0915) | -0.0844 (0.239) | 0.323* (0.187) | -0.149 (0.1620) | -0.056*** (0.161) | -0.196 (0.161) |
| Low Income (1-5000afs) | 0.0766*** (0.0283) | -0.0819 (0.0546) | -0.166*** (0.0623) | 0.0436 (0.0504) | 0.0913*** (0.0474) | 0.0591 (0.0474) |
| High Income (25001afs+) | -0.157 (0.114) | -0.191 (0.327) | -0.464** (0.209) | -0.199 (0.131) | -0.0954 (0.189) | -0.195 (0.189) |
| livestock (10-50) | 0.0595* (0.0356) | -0.128* (0.0702) | 0.120* (0.0699) | 0.0404** (0.0441) | 0.0139 (0.0689) | 0.109 (0.0689) |
| Livestock (50+) | -0.276*** (0.104) | -0.0561 (0.237) | -0.0118 (0.205) | -0.100*** (0.187) | -0.1522 (0.260) | -0.522*** (0.160) |
| Employment | -0.0359 (0.0288) | 0.175*** (0.0612) | 0.0673 (0.0641) | -0.0354 (0.0546) | 0.154*** (0.0476) | 0.0144 (0.0476) |
| Female Income | 0.156*** (0.0246) | 0.0276 (0.0517) | 0.0716 (0.0552) | 0.135*** (0.0446) | 0.219*** (0.0414) | 0.119*** (0.0414) |
| Public services (not satisfied) | 0.162*** (0.0203) | nil | 0.105** (0.0448) | 0.176*** (0.0343) | 0.223*** (0.0335) | 0.123*** (0.0335) |
| Political Instability | 0.296*** (0.0201) | 0.118*** (0.0430) | 0.254*** (0.0448) | 0.366*** (0.0341) | 0.236*** (0.0361) | 0.236*** (0.0361) |
| Insecurity | 0.0981*** (0.0198) | nil | nil | 0.0017 (0.0332) | 0.0735** (0.0318) | 0.135*** (0.0318) |
| Violence | 0.0110 (0.0245) | 0.370*** (0.0490) | 0.217*** (0.0523) | -0.1203* (0.0491) | -0.0185 (0.0410) | -0.0185 (0.0410) |
| Happiness (not at all) | 0.256*** (0.0445) | 0.130 (0.0879) | -0.115 (0.101) | 0.119 (0.0886) | 0.348*** (0.0463) | 0.248*** (0.0663) |
| Internet use (for news) | 0.346*** (0.0266) | 0.316*** (0.0692) | -0.0140 (0.0742) | 0.407*** (0.0511) | 0.2425*** (0.0592) | 0.325*** (0.0392) |
| Diaspora (relatives abroad) | 0.577*** (0.0191) | 0.987*** (0.0406) | 0.538*** (0.0432) | 0.511*** (0.0329) | 0.597*** (0.0319) | 0.697*** (0.0319) |
| Age group (18-25) | 0.0452* (0.0263) | 0.0296 (0.0550) | 0.117** (0.0571) | 0.0123 (0.0314) | 0.0648** (0.0456) | 0.0648 (0.0456) |
| Marital Status (single) | 0.132*** (0.0319) | 0.189*** (0.0638) | 0.105 (0.0708) | 0.048*** (0.0380) | 0.1416 (0.0533) | 0.141*** (0.0533) |
| Household size (1-5) | 0.0871*** (0.0293) | 0.0986 (0.0675) | 0.114* (0.0692) | 0.195 (0.0550) | 0.1765** (0.0466) | 0.0765 (0.0466) |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Urban | 0.150*** (0.0232) | -0.0716 (0.0488) | 0.0445 (0.0553) | 0.006 (0.0570) | 0.143** (0.0351) | 0.243*** (0.0351) |
| Gender (male) | 0.0558** (0.0285) | -0.0202 (0.0606) | 0.143** (0.0633) | 0.0354 (0.0542) | 0.255*** (0.0469) | -0.0551 (0.0469) |
| Educ (no formal education) | -0.154*** (0.0227) | -0.195*** (0.0483) | -0.0357 (0.0515) | -0.097*** (0.0473) | -0.151*** (0.0381) | -0.191*** (0.0381) |
| Educ (high school) | 0.110*** (0.0274) | 0.165*** (0.0624) | 0.0880 (0.0644) | 0.155*** (0.0519) | 0.1218 (0.0430) | 0.121*** (0.0430) |
| Constant | -1.292*** (0.0378) | -1.562*** (0.0825) | -1.336*** (0.0832) | -1.421*** (0.0651) | -1.097*** (0.0666) | -1.097*** (0.0666) |
| Observations | 50,990 | 12,602 | 9,988 | 14,936 | 17,752 | 18,275 |

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

4 Conclusion

This study examined the economic, social, and demographic factors influencing emigration decisions in Afghanistan from 2016 to 2021. Existing empirical evidence on the influence of economic, social, and demographic factors on emigration has yielded inconclusive results. No study has comprehensively examined the collective impact of these factors simultaneously. This research aims to fill this gap by utilizing quantitative methods and large sample sizes to comprehensively analyze these factors on emigration. Additionally, based on the cross-sectional time series data and insights from existing literature, a binary logistic regression model with robust standard error was chosen for the analysis. Diagnostic tests, including multicollinearity (VIF) and model specification and fitness, ensured the regression result and model's reliability.

The logistic model, adjusted with robust standard error, has revealed significant findings. Taking various factors into account, the study indicates that land ownership in smaller portions, livestock ownership, and lower income positively influence the likelihood of emigration in Afghanistan. Conversely, owning large land areas, having substantial livestock holdings, and higher income levels negatively impact the decision to emigrate. Social factors, including political instability, inadequate public services, public dissatisfaction, insecurity, violence, internet usage, and family connections, exhibit a positive and significant correlation with emigration decisions. Furthermore, demographic factors such as youth, education, single status, male gender, urban residence, and belonging to smaller households are positively correlated with the decision to emigrate. Conversely, a negative correlation is observed among individuals with low levels of education.

The research findings hold implications that are expected to be relevant for public policy, academics, and international donor organizations that strive to address challenges associated with migration from developing countries like Afghanistan. To enhance the robustness of future studies, it is advisable to include additional factors and conduct research using a panel of countries.

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