The shifting geopolitics of vulnerability. Is the protection of skilled Afghan women a turning point in resettlement?

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Introduction

- The sudden evacuation from Afghanistan in August 2021 was unprecedented in size and timeframe – 120 000 evacuees in 14 days

- New focus on protecting skilled women – and situation in Afghanistan has considerably worsened for women since August 2021

- Raises several questions about what type of protection this is. Do we see the development of a new protection category for refugee resettlement?

Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-58346187

Resettlement as humanitarian governance

- UNHCR: evacuations are not linked to the resettlement schemes

- Still- de-facto resettlement, with distributive impacts on existing case loads (with backlogs)

- Resettlement as humanitarian governance: care and control – importance to categorise beneficiaries

Three questions we grapple with in this context
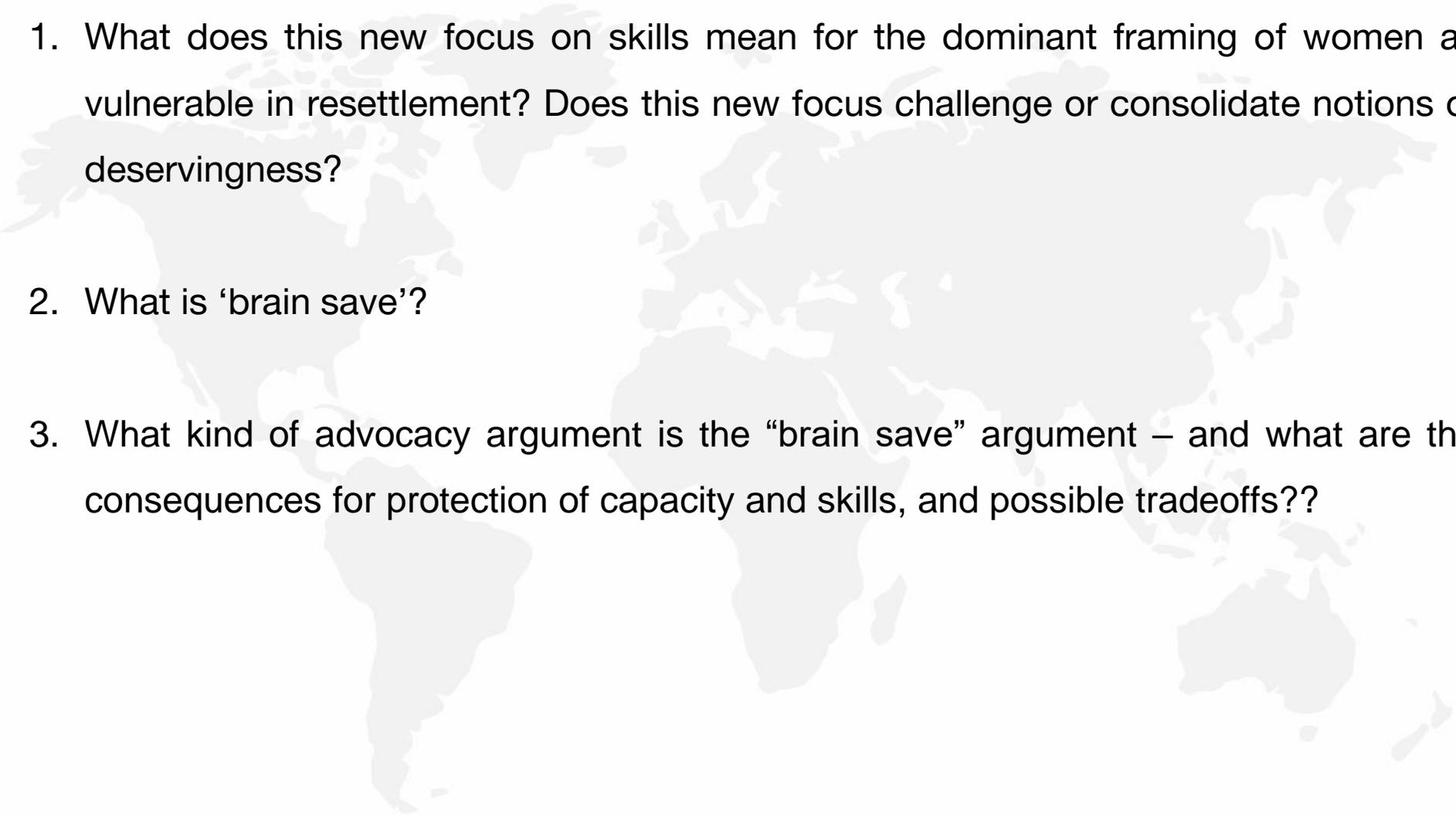
1. What does this new focus on skills mean for the dominant framing of women as vulnerable in resettlement? Does this new focus challenge or consolidate notions of deservingness?

2. What is 'brain save'?

3. What kind of advocacy argument is the "brain save" argument – and what are the consequences for protection of capacity and skills, and possible tradeoffs??

Historical Context: Resettlement of women

The development of the women-at-risk category

UN Global Compact advocates for more support for the 'specific needs' of 'women-at-risk'

So what about the vulnerable professional women?

Skilled and educated women vulnerable because of who they are?

How will a shift from weakness to strength challenge the views of the vulnerable refugee woman?

- From a traditional view of vulnerable refugee women (lack of male protection), to assessing female vulnerability due to position, education and influence.
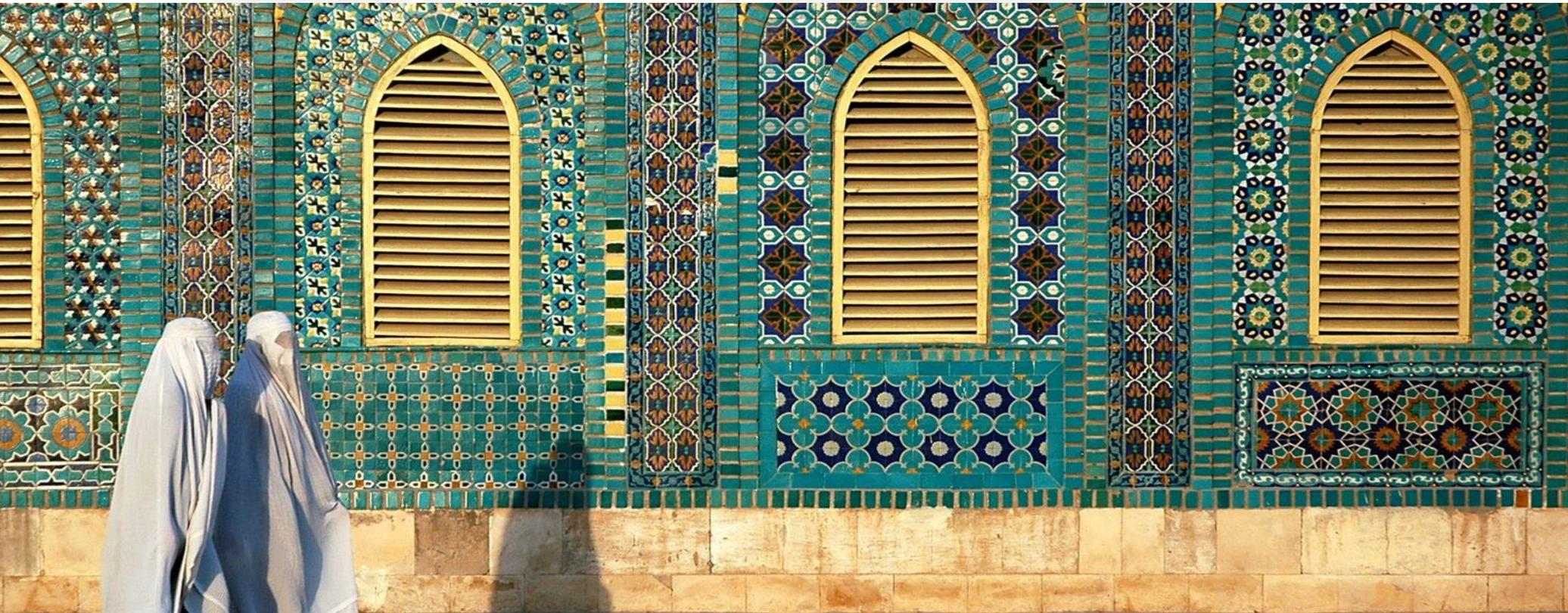
Four examples

- The Afghan Girls Robotic Team - "Afghan Dreamers"

- Zohra all women orchestra

- Afghan women's national football team

- Afghan female legal professionals

What is brain save?

- Linked to, but not the same as, brain drain

- wanted vs unwanted by the authorities

- Linked to, but not the same as, cherry picking

- top-down vs bottom-up argument

Protection of capacity and skills - what are possible tradeoffs?

- The linkage between education and skills and deservingness represented a new advocacy argument in refugee resettlement

- If slots allocated to Afghan refugees are re-allocation of already assigned slots, what kind of justice and equity considerations arise?

- What is the possible distributive impact for women at risk with no education or professional skills?

Takeaways

The emergent category of skilled refugee women can be problematic, but it can also create a legacy where women will be construed as candidates for resettlement equally with men.

Gender now plays a role in discussions of 'brain save' and resettlement cooperation in a way it did not prior to the Taliban takeover.

Will the agency of skilled refugee women play a greater role in future policy formulation?

Future research agenda

Can we apply the brain save arguments to other refugee (or forced migrant) populations?

What about the role of age, class and professional networks in selection criteria and practice?