# The precarious lives of young Afghan returnees from Europe

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# A RESTRICTIVE POLICY ENVIRONMENT UPON RETURN

Migration categories have created new dynamics around inequality and social change in Afghan society.

**Refugees** and **returning refugees** are assisted as recognizable categories deserving protection. **Returnees from Europe** are not part of Government's plans under the President's leadership. "No sympathy for Afghan migrants", "They should return and stay to rebuild the country" (Ghani BBC 2016).

**Returnees from Europe do not fit in the bureaucratic categories of the vulnerable**. **They face various forms of exclusion through which a precarious life is maintained**: exclusion from assistance (protection), from policy frameworks (legal assistance), from the job market (economic) and from their communities or families (social).

# PRECARITY AS A CONSTRUCT

**Illustrated in:**
1. An increasingly restrictive policy and environment circumscribing the rights of Afghan migrants
2. A situation of vulnerability and insecurity - employment, social entitlements, political and civil rights, as well as migration status
3. A feeling of entrapment in Afghanistan leading to re-migration.

**Why the concept of precarity?**
An expansive definition (beyond job insecurity)
- Ettlinger 2007: **uncertainty** and unpredictability
- Butler 2006: **social constructs**, attachments between bodies, human vulnerability heightened with governmentality
- Khosravi 2017 : **the changing faces and treatment of people**: stigmatised, marginalised, a burden in the public discourse.

# METHODS: ASSESSING POST-RETURN OUTCOMES

**A longitudinal migration assessment (LMA)** looking at two cohorts (35 in 2016, 30 in 2017) with whom Afghan researchers held bi-monthly conversations. Including

- Men and women
- Afghans in transit, at destination and upon return
- Across a range of European destination, and background

**Preliminary findings and Structure of this paper.**

1. **Uncertainty:** exclusion is reinforced, made permanent through return
2. **Struggle for autonomy** constrained by social and legal factors
3. **Disorientation**. "what is left of me? Who have I become?"

# TWO STORIES

**MARZIA, 20, Pashtun, F**
Born in Iran, as a refugee. Married with two children, they left as a family unit and got **separated along the way**. Her husband and one of their daughters were **deported**; she made it to Germany and lodged an asylum claim, but left before it was done, **under pressure** by her husband and **against the advice** of legal counselors. She had to return.

*Interviewed in Iran.*

**MOHAMMAD, 21, Tajik, M**
Born in Ghor, Afghanistan. **Left relatives behind** and **against the family's will**. He is a student, has skills as a mechanic and a construction worker. His target destination was Germany but he stopped in Austria where he had family. He **did not follow the legal procedures** and was **taken off the list** of a refugee camp. He had to return through a voluntary return program.

*Interviewed in Afghanistan.*

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# UNCERTAINTY AND TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

The hope that exclusion can be turned into a temporary state – for one's children, for one's parents. A cyclical young people intend to disrupt, for a collective good, and through migration.

**MARZIA, 20:** "first, Iran is not offering us work. Second, my children would remain illiterate, the Iran government didn't let them to study school. Third, we didn't have a card in Iran, our future was uncertain. Fourth, I thought if we go somewhere else, we might be able to treat my husband's eye as it was harmed. Since we don't have life insurance, we can't pay for his treatment."

**MOHAMMAD, 21:** "I did not tell my mother. She counted on me to stay as my father left us. I worked as a mechanic when I was in school. Then my father left and I left school to work in construction. But I was 14 and did not earn enough. It was very hard and I did not know if I could ever earn enough in Afghanistan. Economically we were under pressure, and mentally I was under pressure because I left my mother alone. But I didn't have a choice."

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# STRUGGLE FOR AUTONOMY

Struggle for autonomy but demands imposed by living in the world of beings who are physically – and legally – bound to each other. (Butler) The "I" is connected to the family, to the context – migration does not break that attachment. <u>The realisation that family ties can make them lose individual opportunities:</u>

- **Connected to family:** *Mohammad:* When I arrived to Austria I went to my cousin house. I spent some time with him and then I came to the refugee camp for one week and later on I came back to my cousin house for two weeks. (…) They didn't allow me to re-enter the camp and they said your name is deleted from the list because you left the camp. I was really ashamed."

- **Separated from family:** *Marzia:* "Our problems are not getting solved. When I was abroad, I was not free from such thinking. As my daughter was not with me, I was thinking about her. My husband was mad at me for having continued on my own. He threatened to divorce me and to not let me see my daughter."

# DISORIENTATION AND ENTRAPMENT

"What is left of me? Who have I become?" Coping with loss and navigating structures at "home":

- **(Restricted) rights in Iran**: Mohammad: *I returned to Iran due to economic problems. I have received a document by local authorities for work when police ask me about my permit I show them they let me go. I was **arrested several times** but when I showed them my permit they left me. We can work only in our area, **we cannot go out** from this area.*

- **Restricted family life:** Marzia
    - **Out of school children:** *The age of one of them is grew young, two years have passed from his school age, but the government of Iran don't registering her in school.*
    - **Domestic problems**: *My husband said he would divorce me if I did not return. He would not speak to me for two months after I returned. Heis allowed to go out, I **cannot leave my home** or else I might get deported to Afghanistan.*

**Butler - *Precarious Life*:**
**"Our collective responsibility (…) as part of an international community (…) requires that we ask how those conditions came about »**

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## PRECARITY AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONSTRUCT

- **Mechanisms of exclusion across all stages of migration**
- Family decision / Family rejection upon return
- Exclusion from camp settings and legal procedures in Iran, in Germany and upon return

## MOBILISATION

- **Gap in assistance** – presence for return, not for integration: *They returned me in two weeks. The UN paid for my ticket but I didn't receive any support. (Mohammad)*
- **Gap in mentoring** – *I requested they return me back. Currently I am like a prisoner because we are living in a camp. My husband has documents, he can go from our home. If I go out, the government will deport us because we are undocumented. (Marzia)*

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# Q&A

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