

Exploring Migration Aspirations and Pathways of Afghan Youth Living under the Taliban Rule

Ahmad Walid Barlas¹, Abdullah Ammar² & Yazdanali Rezayee³

Abstract

This paper examines the migration aspirations and pathways of Afghan youth living under the Taliban rule. We surveyed 280 youth in Balkh and Samangan provinces of Afghanistan, spanning three weeks in January 2022. The respondents were selected using convenience and snowballing sampling strategies. The findings reveal that 91% of the respondents think of migrating to other countries. Furthermore, they confirmed insecurity, unemployment, dissatisfaction with the Taliban and imposing restrictions on women's activities by the Taliban as the key drivers of their desire to emigrate. Additionally, the employment status of our participants changed significantly, with many losing their jobs after the political change, resulting in a one-third decline in their average monthly income. The majority of the youth surveyed (83%) consider regular migration channels. Even so, 17% of young people think of migrating through irregular channels. This paper recommends that countries should enhance regular migration channels by simplifying visa processes, increasing quotas, and developing specialized programs for at-risk groups, particularly women. In particular, destination countries could establish expedited visa processing centers in neighboring nations for Afghan applicants, prioritizing at-risk groups.

Keywords: Afghanistan; migration aspiration; migration channel; Taliban; Young people.

Introduction

A significant number of the world population desire to migrate to other countries permanently. A Gallup survey of nearly 260,000 adults aged 15 and above across 135 countries revealed that over 15% expressed a desire to move abroad. This interprets to 700 million globally (Esipova & Ray, 2009). In the same vein, another research shows that more than 100 million adults would like to move to the U.S., including 19 million Chinese, 13 million Nigerians, 10 million Indians, 6 million Brazilians and 52 million from other nations (Clifton, 2013). In 2018, Gallup published a report on potential migrants worldwide estimating that 750 million people prefer to leave their country of birth. The U.S, Canada and Germany are three top desired destination countries (Esipova et al., 2018).

Figure 1 presents the percentage of Afghans who would like to move to other countries. According to the data, the share of potential Afghan migrants decreased from 34% in 2008 to 18% in 2012. However, public view towards migration changed again and this figure reached 29% in 2015. One of the major factors that changed public opinion on migrating to other countries was the Chicago NATO summit in 2012. In this summit, NATO announced

¹ PhD researcher, Greifswald University, Germany, ahmadvalidbarlas@gmail.com

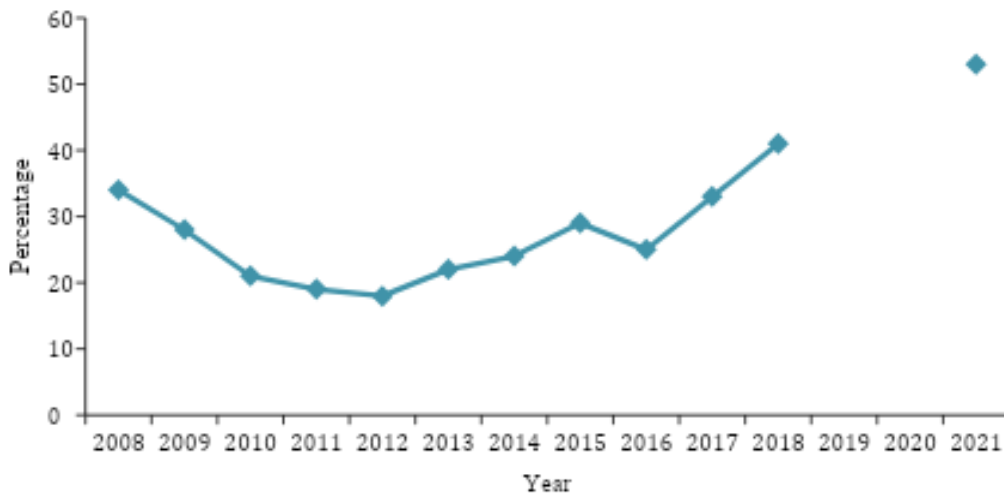
² Research fellow, Center for Conflict Studies, University of Marburg, Germany

³ Lecturer, Economics Faculty, Khaja Abdullah Ansari University, Afghanistan.



the approval plan to handover the lead charge of battle operations to Afghan security forces, and the withdrawal of 130 thousand of their troops from Afghanistan by 2014. (Asia News, 2012; Robinson, 2012; Hlatky, 2012). This was a big political shift for Afghan people, as they could not believe in military force capability and Afghan politicians' honesty in fighting against the Taliban. As a result, a substantial part of the population desired to migrate to other countries in search of safety and better economic opportunities.

Figure 1: Percentage of Afghan people desire to migrate



Source: Ray, 2022

In 2016, the percentage of potential Afghan migrants declined by 4% compared to 2015 (29%). This number increased back to 33% in 2017, and reached 41% in 2019. On 14th April 2021, President Biden confirmed that the USA and its allies would leave Afghanistan in September 2021 (Cordesman, 2021). The Taliban speeded up their military operations resulting in taking control of dozens of districts within a few weeks. Simultaneously, peace negotiation between Afghan authorities and the Taliban has been continuing since 2020 in Doha (The New York Times, 2020). Unfortunately, the negotiation failed and the Taliban seized all provinces including Kabul (CNN, 2021). The violence surged as international troops left the country and the Taliban seized Kabul. The majority of people attempted or desired to leave the country as Ray (2022) found that 53% of Afghan adults wanted to flee. This number is 12% higher compared to their estimation in 2018.

It has been over three years since the Taliban took control of the country. Thousands of people fled to other nations, in search of safety and better economic opportunities. However, millions of people currently live in the country and struggle with a number of issues including poverty, unemployment, insecurity and anxiety. Educated young individuals are one of those vulnerable groups which have been affected the most in the last three years. They lost their jobs, left their studies, and are living in a dark future. This study attempts to evaluate the opinion of those educated youth who reside under the Taliban regime, towards migration. In particular, this paper states the following research questions:

- 1) What factors play an important role in their desire to flee?



- 2) What migration pathways do youth consider to take in their pursuit of leaving the country?

This study makes three important contributions to the literature on migration, particularly in the context of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Firstly, it provides novel insights into the migration aspirations of Afghan youth in the current socio-political and economic context, capturing the unique challenges posed by insecurity, unemployment, and Taliban-imposed restrictions. Secondly, unlike earlier studies that focus on male migrants, this study adopts a gender-inclusive perspective, highlighting how bans on women's education and employment disproportionately affect their migration aspirations. Finally, it concentrates on Balkh and Samangan provinces, highlighting regional contexts whose ethnic and political structures differ from those typically linked to Taliban influence.

Determinants of migration aspirations

Understanding the determinants of migration aspirations is essential for analyzing broader migration patterns and developing effective policies. The severity of violence and conflict plays a critical role in shaping migration aspirations. Bohra-Mishra and Massey (2011) demonstrate a nonlinear relationship between violence and migration: low to moderate levels of violence may suppress movement, while high-intensity violence significantly increases the likelihood of migration, particularly over long distances. This finding is reinforced by Conte and Migali (2019), who highlight that exposure to conflict violence in origin countries correlates strongly with asylum-seeking behavior, especially in cases of large-scale casualties. Similarly, Torfa et al. (2021) identify persecution, violent conflict, and instability as primary drivers of migration among Afghan and Syrian respondents, with nearly 50% citing these factors as motivators. Even the second generation of Afghan diaspora perceives that the country is plagued by militancy and war (Ahsan Ullah & Chatteraj, 2024).

Economic instability is another dominant factor influencing migration aspirations. Aslany et al. (2021) link dissatisfaction with personal finances and lower household assets to heightened migration intentions, a pattern observed in the EUMAGINE project. This aligns with Franc et al. (2019), who find that GDP per capita and youth unemployment in destination countries significantly shape migration flows within the EU. In the Afghan context, recent IOM Flow Monitoring Reports (2024a, 2024b, 2025) underscore the prominence of economic motivations, with close to 60%, 65% and 65% of surveyed Afghan migrants citing economic pressures as their primary reason for crossing into Iran. These findings are further corroborated by Khawari and Saqid-Khawari (2023), who identify unemployment and income inequality as key motivators for both internal and international migration.

Beyond economic and conflict-related factors, threats to personal security and political repression also drive migration aspirations. Moore and Shellman (2004) and Giménez-Gómez et al. (2017) emphasize that human rights violations significantly increase migration flows as individuals flee repression. Davenport et al. (2010) further show that state and dissident threats to personal integrity have substantial effects on migration decisions. Similarly, de Haas and Fransen (2018) find that higher levels of authoritarianism correlate with increased emigration, highlighting how governance failures and repression push people to leave.

Migration aspirations are also sustained and reshaped by social and cultural influences. Mogiani et al. (2024) illustrate how Afghan migrants in Pakistan navigate legal

precarity while relying on social networks to sustain migration intentions. Vervliet et al. (2015) further demonstrate that aspirations among Afghan refugee minors evolve over time, influenced by resilience and social feedback. Meanwhile, Abbasi and Monsutti (2021) reveal how Afghan youth in Europe use social media to cultivate idealized perceptions of life abroad, with platforms like Facebook reinforcing transnational networks and aspirational narratives. This is supported by Hamid (2024), who underscores migration as a coping mechanism, shaped by personal ambitions and societal expectations. Afghan mobility has historically operated as an adaptive survival mechanism in situations of prolonged displacement, thereby challenging clear-cut categorizations that separate forced from voluntary migration (Crawley & Kaytaz, 2022).

Choices of migration pathways

One of the key challenges facing both national governments and international governance institutions today is the effective management of international migration. A significant portion of migration occurs outside regular channels, either through unauthorized border crossings or by individuals who enter legally but remain or work irregularly in the destination country (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019).

Several factors influence individuals' decisions to migrate or remain in a country irregularly. One major factor is border control—strict enforcement often pushes migrants toward informal and riskier routes to reach their destination (Sirkeci & Martin, 2014; Triandafyllidou et al., 2019; Papademetriou & Sommerville, 2014; Düvell, 2011). Additionally, restrictive immigration policies actively contribute to the growth of irregular migration pathways (Vickstrom, 2014; Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; Simon et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021). Czaika and Hobolth's (2016) analysis of asylum and immigration policies in 29 European countries during the 2000s highlights the link between restrictive policies and increased irregular migration. Their findings suggest that a 10% increase in asylum rejections correlates with a 2–4% rise in apprehended irregular migrants. Visa restrictions, in particular, reorient migrants toward irregular channels, as legal pathways become increasingly limited (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019; Czaika & Hobolth, 2016; Simon et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021).

Other factors such as individual characteristics and the economic and political situation in migrants' countries of origin also shape migration pathways. Economic pessimism, for instance, has been found to increase the likelihood of emigrating without legal documentation (Dennison, 2022). Additionally, young individuals without higher education degrees are more inclined to migrate through irregular channels (Dennison, 2022; Singh et al., 2021).

Theoretical framework

Migration aspirations among Afghan youth under Taliban rule can be understood through an integrated theoretical lens that combines push-pull theory (Lee, 1966), the aspiration-capability framework (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021), and structural violence theory (Galtung, 1969). Push-pull theory provides a foundational framework for analyzing migration motivations by distinguishing between factors that expel individuals from their home country (push factors) and those that attract them to destination countries (pull factors) (Lee, 1966). In the context of Afghanistan, push factors are particularly salient, including insecurity (Torfa et al., 2021; Jurat, 2022; Khawari and Saqid-Khawari, 2023), economic collapse (UNDP, 2021; CNBC, 2021; Tolo News, 2022), widespread food insecurity and malnutrition (Borst, 2022),



and political repression, such as bans on women's education (The Guardian, 2024; UNESCO, 2023) and employment (World Bank, 2022b; Barlas et al., 2024). These conditions create a powerful impetus for migration, as evidenced by the 91% of surveyed youth expressing a desire to leave.

The aspiration-capability framework posits that migration is not merely a function of desire but also of capability. Capabilities depend on access to resources such as financial means, social networks, and legal pathways (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021). The Taliban's takeover has severely eroded capabilities such as income per capita has declined (Tolo News, 2022), legal migration channels are restricted due to embassy closures (The Washington Post; The Financial Times, 2021), Afghanistan holds one of the weakest passports in the world (Henley and Partners, 2024), women face additional barriers to movement and access to services (UN Women et al., 2024a; GIWPS and PRIO, 2023) and access to identification documents is limited (IOM et al., 2023). This framework explains that only 17% of respondents consider irregular migration pathways despite the overwhelming desire to leave, a reflection of the stark disparity between aspiration and capability.

Structural violence theory refers to social structures—economic, political, and cultural—that perpetuate inequality and harm marginalized groups (Galtung, 1969). Women in South Asian countries are marginalized primarily due to the strict patriarchal and cultural norms (Rahman & Tiwari, 2024; Taukeer, 2023). The Taliban policies institutionalize the exclusion of women from public life, denying them education, employment, and freedom of movement. These policies not only amplify push factors for women but also constrain their capabilities to migrate, as seen in the higher barriers they face in accessing legal pathways or traveling without male guardians (UN Women et al., 2024a). The theory thus underscores how migration aspirations are not merely individual choices but responses to institutionalized repression.

The fall of Kabul and its aftermath: Human rights violations, economic collapse, and mass population movement

Immediate evacuation and mass population movement

The two-decade conflict between the Taliban, the Republic of Afghanistan, and its international allies reached a sudden and dramatic conclusion in August 2021, when the Taliban seized control of nearly all provinces—including Kabul. The collapse of the government triggered widespread panic and chaos, with thousands desperately rushing to Hamid Karzai International Airport in hopes of escape. On August 14, 2021, international forces launched one of the largest emergency evacuations in modern history, airlifting approximately 124,000 civilians (Kessler, 2021). Prioritizing their own nationals, local staff, and vulnerable Afghans—such as journalists, women's rights activists, minorities, and researchers. Germany evacuated over 5,300 people, while the UK resettled 18,000 (BBC, 2022a). Similarly, Canada and Australia extracted around 3,700 and 4,100 individuals, respectively (Reuters, 2021). Policy analyses at the time warned of a potential new refugee crisis, estimating that hundreds of thousands could be displaced internally and across borders depending on the Taliban's governance trajectory (Sayed, Sadat & Khan, 2021).

Yet these evacuations represented only a fraction of the displacement crisis. Subsequent migration governance initiatives, particularly through EU funding mechanisms, have been characterized by migration management priorities that often privilege European interests over

Afghan mobility needs (Sayed, 2025). Simultaneously, thousands of Afghans fled through both regular and irregular channels into neighboring countries. Experts estimate that an average of 12,000 Afghan citizens migrate to other nations each day (Augustova & Karimi, 2021), reflecting the urgency and scale of the crisis. Neighboring countries bear the brunt of this exodus: over one million Afghans fled to Iran between October 2021 and January 2022 alone (Goldbaum & Akbary, 2022), while approximately 300,000 crossed into Pakistan—nearly 70% without valid documentation (Gul, 2021). Turkey also recorded 45,820 irregular Afghan entries in just the first five months of 2022 (Turkish Interior Ministry, 2022). A recent UNHCR (2025) estimate underscores the protracted nature of this crisis, revealing that around 11 million Afghans remain displaced, including 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Human rights violations

The Taliban have implemented increasingly repressive policies that have systematically eroded basic freedoms, with women and girls suffering the most severe consequences. One of the regime's first and most devastating actions was the destruction of educational opportunities for females, banning approximately 1.2 million girls from secondary schools (The Guardian, 2024), and barring over 100,000 women from university education (UNESCO, 2023). This targeted exclusion has created a generation of young women deprived of futures, with studies showing profound psychological impacts including rising rates of depression, anxiety and despair among affected students (The Washington Post, 2023; Neyazi et al., 2023).

The Taliban's oppressive measures extend far beyond education into nearly every aspect of women's daily lives. A survey of 745 Afghan women across all provinces revealed disturbing trends: more than half report feeling unsafe leaving home without a male guardian (mahram), severely restricting their mobility and independence. Women's participation in decision-making has collapsed catastrophically, with only 1 percent now reporting any influence at community levels - a dramatic drop from 17 percent in early 2023 (UN Women et al, 2024a). International assessments confirm Afghanistan's precipitous decline in human rights. The country now ranks 167th in the Democracy Index with a score of just 0.26, classifying it as an authoritarian regime (EIU, 2024). On the Women, Peace, and Security Index, Afghanistan sits at 177th position with a score of 0.286, making it one of the most dangerous and oppressive countries in the world for women (GIWPS and PRIO, 2023). These institutional restrictions, particularly those affecting women, help explain the gendered differences observed in migration motivations in our findings.

Economic collapse and humanitarian consequences

Afghanistan's economic collapse following the Taliban takeover in 2021 created a devastating humanitarian crisis with severe consequences for the population. According to IMF estimates, Afghanistan's GDP contracted by approximately 30% in 2021 (CNBC, 2021), shrinking to \$14 billion—a figure lower than the country's 2010 GDP (\$15.86 billion) and erasing more than a decade of economic progress. This dramatic contraction slashed per capita income to just \$350 regressing to 2007 levels (\$360) (Tolo News, 2022). By mid-2022, an additional 1 million people had lost their livelihoods (ILO, 2022). Educated females suffer the most, as a survey showing only 9 in 10 female university graduates from agriculture and economics faculties found unemployment (Barlas et al., 2024).



The World Bank conducted a series of three Private Sector Rapid Surveys (PSRS) between 2022 and 2024 to assess the private sector. Their findings paint a grim picture: in the immediate aftermath of the transition, 33% of Afghan businesses were forced to suspend operations completely. Those enterprises that remained open had to make drastic cuts, eliminating nearly 60% of their workforce on average. The surveys particularly highlighted how small businesses and women-owned enterprises bore the brunt of these economic shocks, facing disproportionate challenges compared to larger or male-owned businesses (World Bank, 2022b).

As the economy collapsed, 97% of Afghans fell below the poverty line (UNDP, 2021), creating desperate conditions where 24 million people required urgent humanitarian assistance in 2022. Food insecurity became widespread, with malnutrition affecting 4.7 million people by the end of 2022 (Borst, 2022). These dire circumstances forced families into extreme coping mechanisms, particularly impacting vulnerable groups- female-headed households saw child labor rates jump from 19% (2021) to 30% (2022) (Save the Children, 2023), while rising child marriages led families to withdraw daughters from school and marry them off for bride prices (SIGAR, 2023). These macroeconomic conditions provide important context for understanding why unemployment and income loss emerged as central migration drivers among surveyed youth.

Method

This study relied on primary data. The data was collected from 280 young people in the Balkh and Samangan provinces. A questionnaire was developed containing three major parts. The first part explored family and demographic characteristics of the respondents such as age, gender, marital status and education level. The second section dealt with the financial and employment status of the participants, including employment conditions, monthly income, and type of organization. The last part covered specific issues on migration such as migration factor, migration channel, country of destination and others.

Respondents were selected through snowball and convenience sampling—methods frequently employed when a sampling frame is unavailable (Kirchher & Charles, 2018). Without a sampling frame, individuals in the population of interest do not have the same probability of being included in the final sample as those in a random sample. Consequently, findings from a snowball sample are not generalizable (Kirchher & Charles, 2018; Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method, often selects participants who are readily available at a specific location. This approach is popular due to its cost-effectiveness, time efficiency, and simplicity. However, convenience sampling carries the risk of limited cases or poor participation rates (Stratton, 2021).

The researchers selected a team of voluntary surveyors to collect the data in Balkh and Samangan provinces. They trained and practiced with mock questionnaires before starting the fieldwork. The data collection process began on January 3rd, 2022 and ended on January 22nd, 2022. The survey was conducted by targeting young people among researcher's reference groups such as colleagues, friends and relatives. The surveyors completed 20 questionnaires through face-to-face interviews with respondents. However, they observed a number of insecurity issues while conducting interviews, specially, with female respondents. Then, the researchers decided to obtain the data following phone calls and sending Google forms to targeted young people. 160 questionnaires were completed through this method. Then, we

requested participants to share contact information of a number of their friends who ranged in age from 18 to 35 years and live in Balkh or Samangan provinces. 120 additional questionnaires were completed following this strategy.

Findings

Respondents' characteristics

The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 35 years old. They are classified into three categories, with the first group accounting for over 35% of the youth in Balkh province and 40% in Samangan province. Balkh province has nearly half of the respondents aged 24 to 29, while Samangan has almost 44%. The third class covers 14% and 16% of the respondents in Balkh and Samangan provinces, respectively. Both provinces have different gender contributions. Nearly 80% of respondents in Balkh province are men, whereas 20% are women. In Samangan province, young girls make up 60% of the entire sample, while men make up 40%. Marital status of the young people considered as single, engaged and married. According to the data, the majority of the Balkh's youth (61%), and Samangan's young (47%) are single. In both provinces, engaged status has a minor share, contributing 8.4% in Balkh and 18.2% in Samangan.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Categories	Balkh		Samangan	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-23	52	36.4	55	40.1
	24-29	71	49.7	60	43.8
	30-35	20	14.0	22	16.1
Gender	Male	113	79.0	55	40.1
	Female	30	21.0	82	59.9
	Single	87	60.8	65	47.4
Marital status	Engaged	12	8.4	25	18.2
	Married	44	30.8	47	34.3
	High school	23	16.1	16	11.7
Education level	Bachelor	93	65.0	109	79.6
	Master	27	18.9	11	8.0
	PhD	0	0.0	1	0.7
Total per province		143	100	137	100
Total observation		280			

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

The education level for surveyed young individuals is divided into four categories, including high school, bachelor's degree, master's degree and PhD. The obtained data illustrate that almost 65% of the respondents in Balkh province and nearly 80% of youth in Samangan province have a bachelor's degree. In Balkh province, 1 out of 5 respondents has a master's degree, while this ratio is close to 1 out of 10 in Samangan province. There is only one participant with a PhD in Samangan province.



Employment and income

The employment status of the respondents is considered as employed, unemployed and student. Table 2 compares employment status and monthly income of respondents before, and after the Taliban regime. The collected data reveal that there is a major change in employment status before, and after the Taliban regime. For instance, the number of employed persons decreased from 84 to 54 in Balkh province, while the number of unemployed persons increased from 15 to 63. Similarly, 40% of employed young people lost their jobs in Samangan province since the Taliban took power, while the total number of unemployed persons increased from 20 to 77. The International Labour Organization (ILO) published a rapid assessment report on the unemployment crisis in Afghanistan in early 2022. They estimated that 500,000 lost their jobs as the government changed in August 2021. They also predict that this figure may increase to nearly 900,000 by mid-2022 (ILO, 2022). This surge in economic deterioration is largely attributed to the blocking of international financial transactions, the collapse of the banking system, and sanctions imposed by the United Nations and the United States, which severely hampered trade and remittances (Clark, 2023).

Table 2: Comparing employment status and monthly income before and after the Taliban regime

Variable	Before the Taliban regime		After the Taliban regime	
	Balkh	Samangan	Balkh	Samangan
Employment status				
Employed	84	81	54	49
Unemployed	15	20	63	77
Student	44	36	26	11
Total	143	137	143	137
Organization				
Government	40	45	25	24
Int. Org	4	3	1	0
Private	29	31	18	23
Self employed	11	2	10	2
Total	84	81	54	49
Mean-monthly income (AFN)	20,791	21,580	14,001	14,217

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

The data also reveal that a significant number of surveyed youth left their studies as a result of the Taliban regime in both provinces. The total number of students decreased from 44 to 26 in Balkh and from 36 to 11 in Samangan. Following the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, higher education has faced significant setbacks, as detailed in numerous reports. The Taliban announced extensive changes in higher education institutions, which included curriculum reviews, the implementation of gender-segregated classrooms, and mandates for full body covering for female students (Akhtar & Ranjan, 2021; Ahmadi M. H., 2022). These measures created an environment where many female university students felt unsafe returning to their studies (Owen, 2022). On December 20, 2022, the Taliban further escalated these restrictions by imposing a complete ban on women attending universities (BBC, 2022b). This stringent

policy has led to the exclusion of over 100,000 female students from higher education institutions, severely impacting women's access to education in the country (UNESCO, 2023).

Additionally, many lecturers at public universities have abandoned their positions and sought refuge in other countries (Marouf, 2022). For students, particularly those banned from attending educational institutions, there has been a notable rise in mental health struggles (The Washington Post, 2023; Neyazi et al., 2023). Enrollment numbers have plummeted dramatically since the Taliban's takeover, driven primarily by the ban on women attending universities, economic hardship, and the mass departure of students (SIGAR, 2023). Additionally, the financial strain and these restrictive policies have forced several private educational institutions to shut down (Kawa, 2023).

The employed young people reported their organizations as governmental, international, private organizations and self-employed. The obtained data show that a significant number of respondents who work for governmental, international and private organizations lost their jobs. The total number of individuals working for government organizations declined from 40 to 25 in Balkh province, while in Samangan it decreased from 45 to 24. In Balkh province, 3 out of 4 persons working for international organizations lost their occupations, while this figure is 3 out of 3 in Samangan province. In Balkh and Samangan provinces, about 40% and 26% of young people working for private companies became unemployed, respectively. According to the Afghanistan Welfare Monitoring Survey conducted in 2022, there has been a significant decrease in public sector employment. This decline is primarily attributed to the reduction in jobs within the armed forces, police, security services, and other administrative roles (World Bank, 2022a). Similarly, the Afghanistan Private Sector Rapid Survey of 2022 highlights the severe impact on the private sector, with surveyed firms reporting that they laid off about three-fifths of their staff on average. The crisis has disproportionately affected women-owned businesses, with 42% of these enterprises having already temporarily closed, compared to 26% of male-owned firms (World Bank, 2022b).

However, we do not see a substantial change in employment status of self-employed youth. This resilience is particularly notable in small and home-based businesses, which have become crucial lifelines for many people, especially women (UNDP, 2024). Supporting this, a research surveying university graduates indicates that 44% of female graduates from the economics faculty are engaged in small, and home business (Barlas et al., 2024).

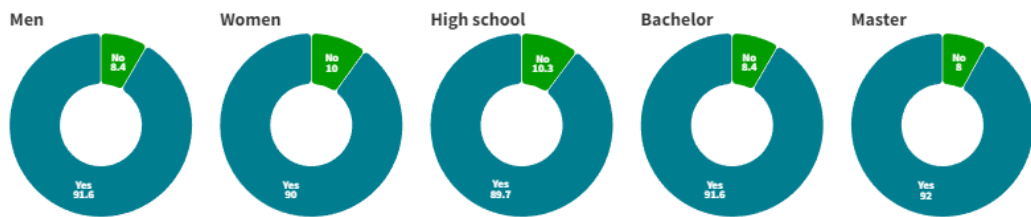
Following the Taliban takeover, respondents' average monthly income declined in both areas. In Balkh, the average monthly income dropped from 20,790 AFN (USD 260) to 14,000 AFN (USD 175), a 33 percent fall. In Samangan province, the mean monthly income declined from 21,580 AFN (USD 270) to 14,217 AFN (USD 178), a reduction of roughly 34%. This finding is in line with recent reports of international organizations warning on the humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan. According to UNDP (2022), more than 97% of the whole population will be living in poverty. Furthermore, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) warns that Afghanistan is facing a tsunami of hunger and widespread starvation. This report also states that 95% of Afghans confirmed a drop or substantial drop of incomes in 2021 (SIGAR, 2022). A recent estimate by the World Bank (2022c) discovered that per capita incomes declined by one-third in 2021 in Afghanistan.



Migration aspirations

Respondents were asked about their desire to migrate to other countries. The collected data illustrate that youth are not satisfied with the current situation and think of leaving the country. As illustrated in Figure 2, 90% of young respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Do you think of migrating to other countries?", while only about 10% responded "no". Importantly, the responses showed no significant differences based on gender or education level, indicating a widespread and uniform desire to leave the country across different demographic groups. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Rahimi and Joya (2023) in Kabul, where their findings indicated that 85% of the respondents expressed a desire to leave the country.

Figure 2: Do you think of migrating to other countries?



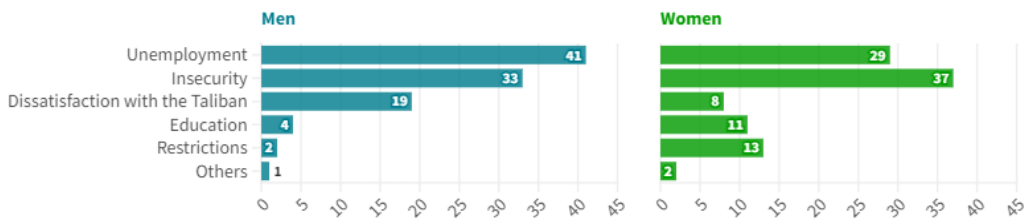
Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

In contrast, our finding is much greater in comparison to the Ray (2022) outcomes. We believe that the obtained data has two major characteristics which could affect the desire for migration of individuals. Firstly, the majority of the respondents have a higher education degree, resulting in seeking better economic opportunities in neighboring countries and beyond. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing that higher education levels are positively correlated with increased migration (Schewel & Fransen, 2018; Malamud & Wozniak, 2012). Secondly, Balkh and Samangan provinces are located in the north of the country and composed mainly of non-Pashtun ethnicities (Mansfield & Alcis, 2024). These communities do not consider themselves as part of the Taliban regime attempting to leave their home. The country has been led by the Taliban Rahbari Shura (leadership council) and the majority of ministries are the Pashtun ethnic group (Maizland, 2023). A new report highlights that 87 out of 1,137 leaders and high-ranking officials of the Taliban are non-Pashtuns (Mohammad, 2024).

Consistent with Lee's (1966) push-pull theory, the data reveal that push factors (e.g., insecurity, unemployment, Taliban repression) dominate migration aspirations. A majority of female participants (37%) identified insecurity as their primary motivation for considering migration, compared to 33% of male participants. This finding is consistent with the research by Torfa et al. (2021), Jurat (2022), Khawari and Saqid-Khawari (2023), Conte and Migali (2019), and Bohra-Mishra and Massey (2011). This result shows that insecurity is still a major concern in Afghanistan, and that young people are fleeing the country due to insecurity. In particular, vulnerable people like women and girls are at high risk, and do not feel safe when leaving their house without a male guardian (UN Women et al., 2024a; 2024b; Global Friends of Afghanistan, 2022). Similarly, International Spiegel reported on the irregular migration of Afghans to Iran, stating that this choice is the last option for many Afghans to escape the Taliban, poverty and anxiety. However, not everyone could make it due to associated costs and risks (Reuter & Busch, 2022; Loschmann & Siegal 2013).

Unemployment is another important determinant for Afghan youth considering migration, which over 40% of the male participants confirmed unemployment as a crucial cause for leaving the country, while this ratio is about 30% for the female respondents. The findings correspond with the results of Jurat (2022), Franc et al. (2019) and Khawari and Sadiq-Khawari (2023), which emphasize that higher unemployment rates significantly increase the likelihood of migration. In Afghanistan, administrative changes resulted in an increase in poverty rate, enormous job losses, income reductions, and a decrease in the growth rate (SIGAR, 2022; World Bank, 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). In particular, thousands of people have lost their jobs since the Taliban re-gained power (ILO, 2022). Furthermore, the International Organization for Migration published two reports in 2024 on mobility dynamics at Afghanistan's borders. Their findings revealed that over 60% of Afghans moving to Iran cited economic motivations as the primary reason (IOM, 2024a; 2024b). Figure 3 presents migration factors in more detail.

Figure 3: Migration factors



Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

A significant number of participants reported dissatisfaction with the Taliban and imposing restrictions on activities by the Taliban as key factors driving the desire to migrate. Nearly 20% of male respondents confirmed dissatisfaction with the Taliban as an important driver, but only 8% of female participants. On the other hand, Galtung's (1969) structural violence theory is evident in the Taliban's gendered policies, which systematically exclude women from education, employment, and mobility. 13% of young women cited imposing restrictions on activities as an important cause for the desire to migrate, while this figure is only 2% among young men. A disparity that aligns with Moore & Shellman's (2004) finding that human rights violations disproportionately increase migration among targeted groups. Specifically, gender discrimination pushes women to seek migration (Hossain, 2022). This gendered effect reflects de Haas & Fransen's (2018) observation that authoritarian regimes amplify emigration pressures by systematically excluding subgroups from public life. From a structural violence perspective, these institutionalized gender restrictions represent systemic barriers that simultaneously generate migration aspirations and constrain women's mobility options (Galtung, 1969).

The Taliban have imposed numerous restrictions on people, particularly women since August 2021 (Stancati & Amiri, 2022; HRW, 2022a; JURIST, 2021; Niazman & Roorzai, 2021; Harrison, 2021; Ahmadi & Ebadi, 2022; O'Donnell, 2022). UN Women, IOM, and UNAMA held online and in-person group consultations and conducted individual telesurveys, reaching 888 Afghan women across 33 provinces. The results showed that 80 percent of these women had not interacted with local authorities during the past three months. Only 2 percent of the women reported having "good" or "full" influence on community decision-making bodies,



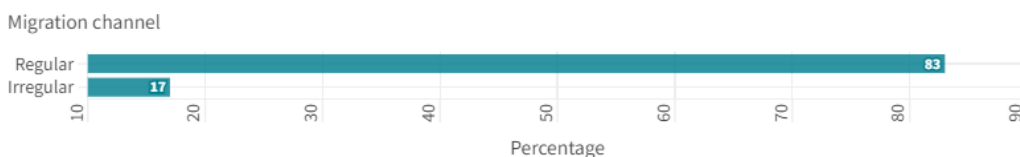
and 64 percent felt "not at all " safe leaving their homes alone (UN Women et al., 2024b). In line with this, the latest global democracy index classifies Afghanistan as an authoritarian state (EIU, 2024).

Notably, only 11% of young women identified education as a key factor for their willingness to move, compared to a mere 4% of young men. This discrepancy is deeply rooted in the current situation, where the Taliban's restrictive policies have severely impacted access to education for girls beyond the 6th grade. As a result, over 1.2 million girls are currently out of school (The Guardian, 2024), and more than 100,000 female students are unable to attend University (UNESCO, 2023). A recent survey of 280 youth who live in Afghanistan revealed that over 90% are not interested in pursuing further education or obtaining another degree (Barlas et al., 2024), primarily because of restrictions, migration, and economic instability (SIGAR, 2023). These findings highlight that insecurity, restriction and economic challenges are the predominant factors influencing the desire to migrate.

Figure 4 depicts the responses of surveyed young people to migration channels. According to the data, the majority of the respondents (83%) desire to migrate through regular channels. This includes a study visa, labor visa, family reunification visa, local staff visa, humanitarian visa, Special Immigration Visa (SIV), and others. Still, 17% of participants would like to flee via irregular channels. This result reveals that educated youth desire to migrate through regular channels and aligns with Carling's (2002) aspiration-capability framework. Despite these preferences, according to the latest report by Henley & Partners (2024), Afghanistan holds the weakest passport in the world, and the complicated and restricted procedures associated with regular channels have led many Afghans to seek irregular channels for fleeing the country (Garrote-Sanchez, 2017; Jurat, 2022). Visas, along with passports, have been essential tools for monitoring and controlling the movement of people. However, visa requirements are not uniformly applied to all individuals. Typically, visas are mandated for individuals who are viewed as potential risks, particularly those who might seek asylum or become undocumented (Czaika et al., 2017). This pattern reflects the aspiration–capability framework, where strong migration aspirations coexist with limited structural opportunities for safe and legal mobility (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021).

The challenges faced by Afghans are further underscored by reports from neighboring countries. Pakistani authorities reported that over 300,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan since August 2021, whereas nearly 70% of them crossed the border irregularly (Gul, 2021). Similarly, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) stated that from 4,000 to 5,000 Afghans cross into Iran every day since the Taliban took over Kabul (ALJAZEERA, 2021). With the rise in irregular migration, the demand for smuggler services has surged, leading to an increase in the fees charged by migrant smugglers from USD 200-300 in 2021 to USD 300-400 in 2022 (Khoruk, 2024).

Figure 4: Migration channels

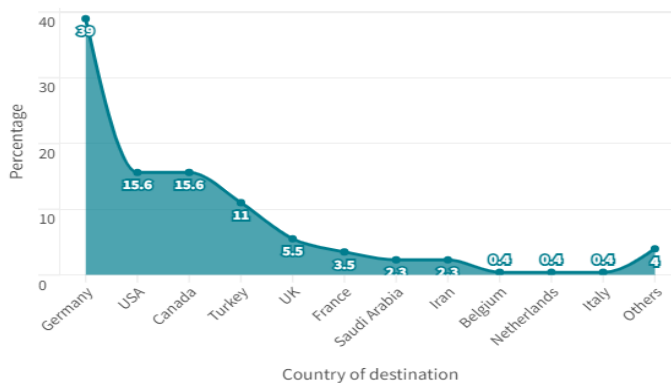


Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Irregular migration routes are often perilous. The Missing Migrants Project (MMP) documented over 63,000 migration-related deaths in the past decade. In Asia alone, 2,138 deaths were recorded in 2023, an increase from the 2,070 documented in 2022 (Black, 2024). Specifically, there were 1,181 deaths on migration routes from Afghanistan in 2023, up from 733 in 2022, which marks the highest number of Afghan national deaths recorded in the past decade. The majority of these deaths (1,068) occurred during movements from Afghanistan to the Islamic Republic of Iran, a key route to Turkey and Europe (Black, 2024). In addition, the lack of official travel documents leaves many Afghan migrants vulnerable to forced deportations, with thousands being expelled from Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan (HRW, 2022b; ALJAZEERA, 2024; DRC, 2024). Pakistan alone has forcibly deported over 500,000 Afghan refugees in the first phase of the repatriation plan, with more than 800,000 Afghans expected to be expelled in the second phase (ALJAZEERA, 2024).

The respondents also stated their desired country of destination, listing Germany, the USA and Canada on top. Nearly 40% of participants selected Germany as a most desired country, following 15.6% the USA and 15.6% Canada. Turkey is also an attractive country among Afghan youth, where 11% of surveyed people mentioned it as a wanted destination country. A small number of respondents (0.4%) selected other European countries such as Belgium, Netherlands and Italy as their preferred destination countries. In the same vein, a recent survey by Gallup's Migration Research Center found that Afghans would like to go to Turkey, Germany, Canada and the USA (Ray, 2022). Similarly, recent analyses of Google search data reveal interesting trends in global relocation interests. According to experts, more than 1.5 million searches related to relocating to Canada were conducted over the past year, highlighting its appeal as a top destination for prospective immigrants. Germany also ranks prominently, with over 750,000 relocation-related searches, securing its place among the top 10 most sought-after countries for immigration (Court, 2024). Afghan refugees envisioned Germany as more compassionate, human friend, migrant friend and caring than Iran. However, in Germany, they were granted limited rights, which were only available after meeting substantial conditions (Lenehan, 2022).

Figure 5: The desire country of destination



Source: Fieldwork data, 2022



Many factors influence the selection of the route and destination country among Afghan migrants. According to MMC (2022), smugglers, safety, family, and friends play a crucial role in determining the route for Afghan migrants fleeing to Turkey. Similarly, Torfa et al. (2022), who studied Afghan refugees in Germany, identified additional factors affecting destination choices, including information from social media, expectations for refugee recognition, socio-economic opportunities, high living standards, and educational opportunities for their children.

Limitation

While this study has some limitations, it provides valuable insights into the migration aspirations of Afghan youth and can help inform policies and future research. By surveying educated young people in two provinces, we gain a better understanding of their motivations and the factors influencing their desire to migrate within a complex social and political environment. Although the study focuses on a specific group, its findings offer a useful starting point for policymakers and humanitarian organizations to develop programs that address the needs and aspirations of Afghan youth. Additionally, this research highlights the importance of studying migration trends in Afghanistan and sets the stage for future studies that could include a wider population and explore the resources needed to turn migration aspirations into reality.

Conclusion

This study highlights key findings on the employment status, migration aspirations, and preferred migration pathways of Afghan youth under Taliban rule. The political changes in Afghanistan have profoundly impacted the youth surveyed, with many experiencing job losses and a consequent one-third decline in their average monthly income. As a result, 91% of respondents are considering migration to other countries, citing economic motivation as a significant factor driving their desire to migrate. The findings align with warnings from international organizations about the economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan since August 2021 (UNDP, 2021; SIGAR, 2022; World Bank, 2022a; 2022b). Furthermore, the International Organization for Migration conducted surveys in two phases, involving over 12,000 people moving to Iran in 2024, with more than 60% citing economic aspirations as a key determinant for their migration decisions (IOM, 2024a; 2024b).

In addition to unemployment, insecurity, dissatisfaction with the Taliban, and restrictions on women's activities were also indicated as driving factors for their desire to migrate. Persecution, violent conflict, and instability have been reported by Torfa et al. (2021) and Khawari and Sadiq-Khawari (2023) as pushing factors for migration among Afghan people. However, freedoms and stability have deteriorated since August 2021. Afghanistan's ranking in the Fragile States Index for 2023 plummeted to 6th place from its 9th position in 2020, signaling a notable decline in stability (The Fund for Peace, 2023). Moreover, in the Democracy Index for 2023, Afghanistan scored 0.26 and is ranked 167th, indicating an authoritarian government system. This represents a stark contrast to the democracy score of 2.85 recorded in 2020, reflecting a significant regression in democratic governance within the country (EIU, 2024). These findings align with push-pull theory, where insecurity, unemployment, and political repression function as dominant push factors shaping migration aspirations (Lee, 1966).

These instability and restrictive measures push people, including women, to leave the country and seek safety abroad. Our findings reveal that 9 out of 10 of our male and female participants confirmed their desire to migrate, marking a shift from actual movement that highlighted Afghan migrants as predominantly male (IOM, 2019; MMC, 2020; Jurat, 2022). The barriers to women's migration are considerable, particularly due to the lack of access to identification cards. Afghanistan has the widest gender gap in ID possession, with 52% of women lacking IDs compared to only 6% of men (World Bank Group, 2019). This issue is even more severe in rural areas and for internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Livani & Haddock, 2020). Since August 2021, obtaining an identification card has become increasingly difficult due to higher fees, the closure of offices, a more complex application process, and restricted travel (IOM et al., 2023).

In addition, Afghan women are more likely than men to use air travel, as it is considered a safer option for them. However, their ability to travel by air is now severely restricted, as they cannot travel without a male guardian. Additionally, the closure of many foreign embassies in Afghanistan has further hindered their access to visas and legal travel options (MMC, 2022). Even if women want to leave through irregular channels, they face higher charges for their journey, as they have to rely upon expensive smugglers (McAuliffe & Iqbal, 2022). Importantly, many of the women remaining in Afghanistan seem to have limited information about migration (Majidi et al., 2022).

Notably, 8 out of 10 Afghan youth express a preference for migrating through regular channels. However, due to the lack of official travel documents, the closure of embassies, and complicated visa processes, the majority of Afghans are compelled to flee through irregular channels (MMC, 2022; Gul, 2021; ALJAZEERA, 2021). Opening regular migration channels could send a strong signal to migrants considering irregular migration, potentially altering their perception of opportunities and costs. If regular migration becomes more accessible and realistic, migrants may be encouraged to invest in improving their chances of qualifying for these channels, such as by acquiring new skills or learning new languages (Belmonte et al, 2019).

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