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# The Schooling of Forced Immigrant Afghan Youths in Iran: A Study of the Factors Leading to Exclusion La scolarisation des jeunes afghans/afghanes immigré(e)s de force en Iran : une étude des facteurs d'exclusion

Samira Ghasemi-Tafreshi and Gina Lafortune

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Article abstract

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## The Schooling of Forced Immigrant Afghan Youths in Iran: A Study of the Factors Leading to Exclusion

Samira Ghasemi-Tafreshi  
*Université Paris Nanterre*  
samira.ght@gmail.com

Gina Lafortune  
*Université du Québec à Montréal*  
lafortune.gina@uqam.ca

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**The Schooling of Forced Immigrant Afghan Youths in Iran:  
A Study of the Factors Leading to Exclusion<sup>1</sup>  
La scolarisation des jeunes afghans/afghanes immigré(e)s de force en Iran :  
une étude des facteurs d'exclusion**

Samira Ghasemi-Tafreshi, Université Paris Nanterre

Gina Lafortune, Université du Québec à Montréal

**Abstract**

This article presents the results of a qualitative study which aims to better understand the educational paths of young Afghans in Iran. We conducted individual interviews with five child-parent pairs living in Tehran. The participants were invited to describe their families' migratory experiences and the youths' academic backgrounds. The interview data revealed that different intertwining factors led to the exclusion of the youths from school. These factors were tied to immigration policies and the youths' social, familial, and educational environments. The results also showed that the youths were resilient; despite the many obstacles they had faced, they continued their efforts to achieve their academic and professional goals. This research highlights the challenges of welcoming and integrating young refugees in a non-Western context and contributes to the advancement of knowledge about the phenomenon of school exclusion in developing countries.

**Résumé**

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude qualitative visant à mieux comprendre les parcours pédagogiques des jeunes afghans et afghanes en Iran. Nous avons mené des entretiens individuels avec cinq paires enfants-parents vivant à Téhéran. Les participants ont été invités à décrire l'expérience migratoire de leur famille et les antécédents scolaires des enfants. Les données recueillies lors des entretiens ont révélé que différents facteurs entremêlés ont conduit à l'exclusion des jeunes du milieu scolaire. Ces facteurs sont liés aux politiques d'immigration et à l'environnement social, familial et éducatif des jeunes. Les résultats ont également démontré que les jeunes ont fait preuve de résilience; malgré les nombreux obstacles auxquels ils ont été confrontés, ils ont poursuivi leurs efforts pour atteindre leurs objectifs académiques et professionnels. Cette recherche met en lumière les défis de l'accueil et de l'intégration des jeunes réfugiés dans un contexte non occidental et contribue à l'avancement des connaissances sur le phénomène de l'exclusion scolaire dans les pays en développement.

**Keywords:** Afghan children refugees, Iran, educational pathways, formal education, exclusion

**Mots clés :** enfants réfugiés afghans, Iran, parcours pédagogiques, éducation formelle, exclusion

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised and adapted version of Samira Ghasemi-Tafreshi's master's thesis in education under the direction of Gina Lafortune, June 2019.

## **Introduction**

Afghans have a long history of mobility which takes various forms, e.g., to find seasonal employment or make a pilgrimage to Pakistan or Iran (Monsutti, 2009). However, over the past 40 years, Afghans have massively immigrated to Iran due to human catastrophes, political violence, and wars ravaging their country. Approximately 780,000 registered and up to 2 million unregistered Afghans refugees live in Iran (EUAA, 2023). Most Afghans in Iran came from poorer and less educated segments of Afghan society (Hoodfar, 2007), and were deprived of access to schooling in their home country. Iran took in two to three generations of Afghan refugees, who have been living there for more than 40 years with limited support from the international community (UNHCR, 2020).

## ***Living Conditions***

Because of its geopolitical position, Iran has become a temporary and permanent destination country for Afghans, even though it was not traditionally recognized as an immigration country (Amiri, 2009). Faced with this phenomenon, the country has adopted various immigration policies, ranging from open-door to repressive (Amiri, 2009). The open-door approach, launched after the Iranian revolution in 1979, enabled easy integration into civil society through broad social benefits, including uncomplicated and free access to formal Iranian education for children, literacy training courses for adults, medical care, and employment. The policy shifted in the 1990s, when a more repressive approach included a reduction in the social and educational services developed for noncitizen populations, and the refusal to issue refugee cards (most Afghan newcomers became illegal refugees in the 1990s). In addition, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Iranian and Afghan governments devised strategies to return Afghan refugees to their home country after the fall of Afghanistan's Communist regime in 1992 and of the Taliban regime in 2001 (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008). In the following section, we discuss how, although literacy rates and education levels among Afghans have improved after their arrival in Iran (Adelkhah & Olszewska, 2006), the political, social, and economic situations faced by the Afghan community affect its children's formal schooling.

## ***Between Inclusion and Exclusion in the Formal Education System***

Iran has a national, free public school system that is implemented in all its provinces. Education is compulsory from age 6 to 14. Refugee children can attend state schools alongside Iranian students, free of charge (Nicolle, 2018). The number of Afghan children enrolled in state schools has been on the rise since the 1990s, from 90,000 in 1992 to 113,000 in 1998 and 420,000 in 2018 (348,000 refugee children and 72,000 undocumented Afghan children) (Nicolle, 2018). It is clear that, over time, a growing number of Afghan refugees in Iran found themselves in an environment favouring universal education that included girls (Adelkhah & Olszewska, 2006). However, various systemic political and educational changes, and the abrupt withdrawal of international aid for refugee education in 1992, had major consequences affecting the academic paths of Afghan children. Many were effectively excluded from school, even though they were within the compulsory school age range.

According to statistical data from the Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children, during the 2013–2014 school year, 318,900 young Afghans had access to Iran's national education system. More than 70% of these students were in grade school, and the rest were in high school (Ashrafi, 2014). In Iran, efforts were undertaken to provide data on Afghan refugees' access to education at the national level, but the data is scarce and not representative (Nicolle, 2018). However, based on these statistics, it is clear that the dropout rate is high in this population, as one

can see in the significant difference between the number of students enrolled in grade school and high school for the 2013–2014 school year. This corresponds to the age at which they are expected to start contributing to the family’s income and meet various family needs (Ashrafi, 2014).

According to a departmental order enacted in 2014, Afghan children, both documented and undocumented, could enroll in state schools for free, alongside Iranian students (Boroumand, 2014). However, according to a United Nations report in 2015, 300,000 to 450,000 Afghan children were out of school in Iran. Furthermore, many Afghan children with access to formal education are also likely to drop out of school. A minority of students follow a linear path and receive a general degree. Many children who leave school continue learning in local community centres. Refugees in Iran, both documented and undocumented, can benefit from free social services provided by local community centres destined for the vulnerable segments of society, with a particular emphasis on women and children (Siavoshi, 2022). Vulnerabilities are present before young Afghans begin school, and as they progress through the education system, these vulnerabilities become chronic, preventing many from completing their studies.

### **Exclusion From School in Developing Countries**

Social exclusion is the “denial or non-realisation of civil, political, and social rights of citizenship” (Room, 1995, quoted in Klasen, 2000, p. 1). It touches various spheres of people’s lives, including health, employment, housing, food, recreation, social and cultural life, and schooling. A rights-based approach highlights the role of political, social, and economic arrangements that lead to exclusion, and makes the excluded less responsible for their inability to participate in society (Klasen, 2000). School exclusion among children stems primarily from the social exclusion of their families and their economic status (Klasen, 2000). It is defined by criteria inside schools that determine a pupil’s failure, or criteria outside school, e.g., family, social, or personal factors (Kherroubi et al., 2003). Pupils from socially excluded groups, such as children living in poverty, pupils with special educational needs, and pupils from minority ethnic and refugee communities are more likely to experience school exclusion (Howarth, 2004). Children in developing countries, where resources are still lacking to ensure access to elementary education, are especially at risk of marginalization at school, as opposed to children in Western countries, where the universality of elementary education is a relatively well-established tradition (Grisay 1984). Moreover, children in developing countries undergo a process of gradual withdrawal from the school system, which can be seen in the inequality of access to education (Lange, 2006), absenteeism and irregular attendance up to the end of the school program (Yaro & Dougnon, 2003).

### ***Factors Leading to School Exclusion Among Forced Immigrant Youths in Developing Countries***

The challenges that influence schooling among children from refugee families arise in pre-migratory, migratory, and post-migratory contexts. As Chatty et al. (2005) show in their research on the impact of forced migration on young Palestinian, Afghan, and Sahrawi refugees, the past experiences of forced migration among older generations have an effect on children and youths. Furthermore, during the post-migration phase, asylum policies, reception and integration practices, and the education program in the receiving country are among the main factors that affect the schooling of forced immigrant children. The temporary settlement of refugees in numerous developing countries is also considered as a factor that prevents or limits their access to employment, health services, and education (Hieronymi, 2008). This instability also affects the children of the second generation of refugees, who have only an indirect link with their country of

origin but have not integrated effectively into the society in which they were born (Hieronymi, 2008).

Certain studies argue that the absence of legal status is a key factor in the precarious position and exclusion of individuals within the receiving society (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Bolzman, 2001). Chopra and Dryden-Peterson's (2020) research on young Syrian refugees displaced to Lebanon shows that at the same time as the host nation-state expands spaces of inclusion, such as access to formal education, it also imposes exclusions such as on the labour market or legal status. Kenyan-born refugees face similar situations (Bellin & Dryden-Peterson, 2019): They have few chances of obtaining citizenship, even after living in the country for 7 consecutive years, and their access to systems that facilitate their full integration into society is limited. Furthermore, despite the provisions made by host countries to enable refugees to access social services, the actions and behaviours of the host country's citizens can create additional barriers (Chopra & Dryden-Peterson, 2020). As one can see in the case of Afghan refugees in Iran integrating the school system; both documented and undocumented children must have free access to Iran's public schools. However, some schools appear reluctant to implement this policy (Boroumand, 2014) and require Afghan families to pay registration fees.

For their part, school policies play a crucial role in improving the well-being of refugee children. Several factors affect their schooling, such as bureaucratic obstacles to the issuing of diplomas and certificates to refugees (Seker & Sirkeci, 2015), and the lack of degree recognition of their previous studies, in particular for those with higher education (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2010; Seker & Sirkeci, 2015), forcing some students to start their studies from scratch (Chelpi-den Hamer, 2010). Chelpi-den Hamer's research (2010) on Liberian refugee children in Côte d'Ivoire shows that they do not follow a linear academic path. They move between formal and informal school systems or drop out to go to work and resume their studies later. Hoodfar (2010), in her research on young Afghan refugees in Iran, emphasizes the importance of formal education in the integration and settlement of refugee children in the receiving country.

While refugees in developing countries do not form a homogeneous group, whatever their origin and wherever they seek refuge, they are faced with numerous impeding factors on arrival in the receiving country. They settle in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, find it difficult to obtain the social and economic benefits to which they are entitled, and experience professional downgrading. Seker and Sirkeci (2015), in their research on Syrian refugee children attending school in Eastern Turkey, show that risk factors associated with the social and familial environments include the parents' low levels of education, as well as their inability to help their own children due to their limited language skills. Hieronymi (2008), for his part, stresses the need to ensure refugee families' economic security, so their children can grow up into "ordinary" adult members of their receiving communities. According to Chatty's (2007) research on refugee youths in the Middle East (including Afghan youths in Iran), many school-age children take on informal work outside school.

The studies on Afghan refugees in Iran have shown how the school environment can also push these children out of the educational system (Chatty, 2007; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008; Hoodfar, 2007). These authors emphasize the need to make school environments aware of these children's presence and needs, with a view to reducing bullying, prejudice, and discrimination.

The literature review presented above shows that the issue of schooling among forced immigrant children and the factors that compromise it are multidimensional. These factors influence the children's ability to learn, as well as their psychosocial well-being and academic needs. The review sets the foundation for a better analysis of the situation of young Afghans in Iran who are forced to leave school because of the social exclusion experienced by their families.

In the context of Iran, to our knowledge, there are few studies on the experiences of young Afghans in state schools, and few studies on their experiences with school exclusion. The present article describes the migration and school experiences of young Afghan refugees in Iran. We then identify the challenges and obstacles that the refugees faced along their educational paths. In doing so, we analyze how school-related, social, and family factors contributed to exclusion from school, specifically at the high school level. The following section presents the methodological approach that we used to attain our research objectives.

## **Methodology**

This exploratory qualitative research was based on semi-structured individual interviews with young people of Afghan origin (aged 12 to 22) and their mothers. Each interview lasted between 1 hour and 1 hour and 45 minutes. The data was gathered between March and April 2018. The lead author recruited the participants through one local community centre in Tehran<sup>2</sup>. The interviews with the youths (2 boys and 3 girls) took place outside of their homes without the influence of adults when obtaining the data. Interviews with mothers took place in community centres or at their home, without the presence of their spouses. It will be noted that it was more difficult to meet with male interviewees because of the wave of illegal immigration of Afghans from Iran to Europe in 2015, which resulted in the departure of many Afghan boys. The young Afghans participating in our research, labelled as “second generation,” were born in Iran or arrived there at a young age (before age 6). Below is a table of the young participants’ characteristics.

The five young interviewees attended public schools in disadvantaged areas of Tehran and experienced exclusion at the high school level. Generally, Iranian students start high school at age 12 and get their diplomas at 18. However, some Afghan children start school later, while others discontinue their studies and return after a few years; this explains why the average age of the participants is higher. We developed two different but complementary interview guides. The first was for the parents, to help us understand their perception of their children’s school experiences, of their own role in their children’s schooling and of their aspirations for their children. The second interview guide, for the youths, gathered information about their migration paths, their life spaces (familial, academic, and social environments), and their interactions with their peers and teachers. The interviews were conducted in Persian, a language spoken by the participants and the researcher, the exchange was audio-recorded and transcribed in Persian prior to being translated into French, the language of the master’s thesis. The authors then conducted a thematic analysis of the data (characteristics of the youths, immigration to Iran, school, social and familial environments). Each child-parent pair constituted a case crossing the young person’s and the parent’s perspectives of the educational path. The information gathered made it possible to identify the elements of convergence and divergence between the cases, and to highlight what makes them similar and different from each other.

## **Research Findings**

The research results highlight the complexity and uniqueness of each young respondent’s school trajectory and family situation. However, these different stories share common elements. The following sections present some of the elements of convergence and divergence between the academic paths of the young interviewees.

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<sup>2</sup> The lead author is Iranian and she worked as a volunteer with this local community centre from 2005 to 2010.

**Table 1**  
*Youth profiles*

Pseudonym	Age	Place of birth or age upon arrival in Iran	Grade level	Duration of formal schooling	Duration of informal schooling	Profile of interviewed parent (mother)
Setareh	22	Afghanistan Arrived in Iran approximately 1 year after birth	Upper secondary year 3 (studied at informal schools from primary school to upper secondary year 2)	2 months at the public school and approximately 6 months in public formal education for adults	10 years	Age: 43 Level of schooling: Took a few literacy training courses in Iran Date of arrival in Iran: 1996 Married and lives with father Number of children: 4
Fereshteh	19	Afghanistan Arrived in Iran approximately 40 days after birth	Lower secondary year 1	6 years	3 years	Age: 46 Level of schooling: Illiterate Date of arrival in Iran: 1999 Married and lives with father Number of children: 7
Arezoo	17	Iran	Lower secondary year 3	6 years	2 years	Age: 33 Level of schooling: Took a few literacy training courses in Iran Date of arrival in Iran: Born in Iran Married and lives with father Number of children: 3
Bahram	17	Iran	Upper secondary year 1	9 years	-	Age: 42 Level of schooling: Took a few literacy training courses in Iran Date of arrival in Iran: 1985, at age 9 Married and lives with father Number of children: 3
Maher	16	Afghanistan Arrived in Iran at age 5	Lower secondary year 1	6 years	-	Age: 42 Level of schooling: Illiterate Date of arrival in Iran: 2008 Married and lives with Maher's stepfather Number of children: 4



### ***The Families' Migration Experience***

Four of the five mothers we interviewed (one of the mothers was born in Iran) told us that their childhoods in Afghanistan were very difficult, characterized by poverty, a lack of support, a lack of access to education, as well as the loss of one or more family members during the civil war. The husbands of four out of five women had already immigrated to Iran in pursuit of work before meeting them, and then returned to Afghanistan to marry them. The mothers' comments revealed traumatic pre-migratory journeys marked by war, persecution or harassment, threats of violence by the Taliban, especially directed at girls and women, which pushed their families to take refuge in Iran. As one mother explained, "Neither the children nor I dared to go out alone. I would not even let my children play in front of the house ... the Taliban would kidnap children. It was terrifying." (Arezoo's mother). These families also faced serious economic difficulties. They had to abandon everything they owned to flee, spend all their savings to pay smugglers and make long, dangerous, and frightening journeys. Another mother said,

The smugglers loaded us into a van and drove along bumpy roads at great speeds ... We had four children, and I was holding Fereshteh, who was 40 days old, in my arms ... If the Iranian police had stopped us, they would have sent us back to Afghanistan. (Fereshteh's mother)

Several family members of the young interviewees suffer from physical and neurological issues as a result of traumatizing situations in their country of origin. They have also faced lifelong economic difficulties, from childhood to the time of the present study. These findings confirm how vulnerabilities and traumatic experiences can last a lifetime (Bacqué, 2006). This is particularly the case for people having migrated to developing countries who continue to face unstable living conditions (Neuner et al., 2008). The data we collected showed us that the adversities in which the parents had lived were very detrimental to their children.

### ***The Families' Lives in Iran***

Three of the five families have voluntarily returned to Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, hoping to rejoin their relatives and rebuild their life in their country. They subsequently again returned to Iran when the households' fathers couldn't find work. Other causes were poverty and the Taliban-caused insecurity which still prevailed in the country, especially for women and girls. As one mother said, "The Taliban carried out a suicide attack twice near Setareh's school." According to Monsutti (2007), return to Afghanistan does not necessarily mean the end of the displacements. This cross-border movement of Afghans is a way to seek work, to escape drought or to flee war (Monsutti, 2007). The mothers' remarks revealed the difficulties that the families faced as foreign nationals in Iran, such as financial problems, unemployment, and health problems. First, even though the young people in our study were either born in Iran (2/5) or arrived at a young age (3/5), none had a permanent legal status in the country; they only had temporary resident permits, which were attached to their Afghan passports. Because the cost of renewing their permits and passports was high for their families, they sometimes became undocumented in Iran. The lack of legal status also forced the fathers to have undeclared and unstable jobs, e.g., shoe shiner, street vendor, or construction worker. The mothers did seasonal work at home. Families in these conditions have limited access to common resources, such as formal education and public health services. We will discuss the young people's learning paths further on, but we can already point out the effects of the lack of legal status on schooling: Without a doubt, the inability to obtain an identification card was an obstacle to enrollment in the receiving country's state-run schools (Hoodfar, 2007; Chatty, 2007; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008). Because they were unable to renew their status, Setareh and Arezoo had no choice but to continue their schooling in an informal setting,

at a self-directed Afghan school<sup>3</sup> or the local community centre. Furthermore, to receive an attestation of equivalence of their studies in order to enroll in state schools, they must pass a ministry exam, which also requires that they submit legal documents. It is worth noting that our young participants attended school between 2003 and 2017, a period of repressive policies where they encountered obstacles to enrolling in public schools, obtaining a passport or a refugee card.

This adverse situation forces families to make use of their children's productive capacity by sending them into the labour market. Our young interviewees noted that, from a very young age, they had to work as street vendors, in shoe shops, at hair salons, in sewing shops, or at automobile repair shops. They described these low-wage jobs as tiring and cold in the winter, explaining that they were also afraid of municipal officers, because they were working on the streets without the required permits. If these young people were to stop working, their households could become more vulnerable, as a significant portion of their family income comes from the children's jobs. This study has shown that the socioeconomic integration problems experienced by our young participants' parents have an impact on their school life; they are living in the same conditions as their parents.

According to Chatty (2007), many children of refugees link their status to a sense of marginality and exclusion from their original homelands and, at times, from full legal, social, and civil participation in the communities that host them. Our interviews also revealed that even if the young people, and sometimes their parents, were born in Iran and grew up there, and adopted the customs and behaviours of their Iranian peers, they were not accepted as citizens by Iranian society:

I'm not sure how to describe myself. Iranian or Afghan? ... everyone sees me as Afghan ... based on my place of birth and my parents' country of origin, I'm Afghan, but I grew up in Iranian culture, so I have an Iranian identity ... in Afghanistan [she returned to Afghanistan at age 10] I felt like a foreigner ... I wanted to come back to Iran. (Setareh)

I don't really like the idea of leaving Iran, like my brother did, because, um ... for example, here, I know everyone, we have a common language ... But if Afghanistan were to become a safe country again one day, I would choose to go there, because Afghanistan is my country of origin. (Bahram)

The participants described this situation as a feeling of exclusion by the dominant society and a feeling of not belonging in their country of origin. They found it difficult to define themselves as Iranian and presented an ambiguous identity. However, most of the young people did not wish to return to Afghanistan, believing that their future was in Iran. They wished to remain there, despite the hostilities they endured especially the girls, who feared losing many basic freedoms if they returned to Afghanistan, particularly the right to an education (Chatty, 2007). They appreciated the freedom of expression, dress, and movement that girls had in Iran as opposed to in Afghanistan. As one participant said, "In Iran, I can tell someone, 'It's none of your business!' But over there [Afghanistan], I could never speak like that ... I've always wanted to be independent, go to university and work, but in Afghanistan, it's not possible [for the girls]." (Setareh) The mothers also wanted to stay in Iran and raise their children there, despite the obstacles they faced. Arezoo's mother related, "I want to stay in Iran just because here, we can stay alive, in a way, and here the education situation is much better than in Afghanistan." The data shows some important gains obtained for young girls and their mothers, such as the increase in the level of education, the visible presence of women in public and the ability to work outside of home for girls. Despite this, the

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<sup>3</sup> Afghan women who obtained a certain degree of literacy in Iran and were determined to offer their children a basic education, turned their homes into informal neighbourhood schools (Hoodfar, 2007).

girls and mothers told us about the patriarchal culture that still dominates the lives of Afghans, and they contrasted their family situation with those of Iranians.

### ***The Learning Path of Young People in Iran***

*School entry and progression.* Because of their families' financial instability, some of the young participants (2/5) started school late, at age 8, and attended self-directed Afghan schools, which were far less expensive than state schools. Refugee relocations also impose forced breaks in children's education (Seker & Sirkeci, 2015). The voluntary return of certain families to Afghanistan followed by a return to Iran forced some of the young people (2/5) to interrupt their schooling, which they had to resume (Setareh) or redo (Arezoo) in Iran. According to Chelpi-den Hamer (2010), the learning paths of displaced children are marked by complexity and fluidity. The accounts revealed that the young interviewees did not follow a linear educational path, but one that included periods of formal and informal education, interruptions to go to work, and finally a definitive discontinuation of their studies. Arezoo, for example, went to school in Afghanistan, then to a self-directed Afghan school in Tehran and to public school in Tehran, dropped out of school to work, then resumed her studies in adult education. Setareh, who had been working since age 6, went from self-directed Afghan school in Tehran, to school in Afghanistan, to the local community centre in Tehran, then to public school in Tehran. She temporarily discontinued her studies at age 19, then decided to return to school in order to obtain her high school diploma. She left school again, then tried to resume her studies in adult education a year later. Fereshteh had a similar path, attending a state school, dropping out, then, a few years later, returning to informal studies and finally choosing formal adult education.

The young participants were independent, doing their homework on their own, or with the help of siblings who had gone to public or informal schools in Iran, or with neighbours and classmates. They avoided being absent and received very good grades (Arezoo, Bahram), average grades (Setareh, Fereshteh), or failing grades (Maher). The accounts of the mother-child pairs allowed us to understand that, in general, the parents were unaware of their children's school experiences. Even if they had high education aspirations for their children, the mothers found it difficult to provide them with academic support due to their own low level of schooling. For their part, most of the fathers (4/5) had almost no contact with their children's schools (four out of five fathers are illiterate and one father reached the fourth grade of elementary school in Afghanistan). These findings converge towards the observations made in certain studies (Naseer et al., 2011; Seker & Sirkeci, 2015) underscoring how the educational level of parents significantly influences their children's school experiences. However, some of the participating parents, the mothers in particular, saw school as the best way for their children to reach a better standard of living. The mother of Maher, who had several learning and behavioural difficulties, noted that keeping Maher busy at school was better than leaving him in a state of idleness. As regards the parents' contact with their children's schools, it was limited to parent-teacher meetings, enrollment, and the distribution of report cards (mothers were more involved with respect to school).

In terms of social relations at school, even though our participants arrived in Iran at a young age or were born there, they were not easily accepted by their peers of Iranian origin. When asked about this, most of the young people indicated that they had not been able to develop relationships with Iranian students. The Afghan students expressed a preference for peers of the same nationality as them. In this regard, in their research on Afghan refugees in Iran, Abbasi-Shavazi et al. (2008) and Adelhah and Olszewska (2006) showed that some young Afghans experienced negative attitudes towards them by Iranian students. However, Iranians' treatment of Afghan students differed from one school to the next (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008). Setareh, Fereshteh, and Maher

had more serious school integration problems than Bahram and Arezoo. Arezoo was the only participant with mostly Iranian friends.

Um, my worries were different from theirs [her classmates] [silence] ... I had to work, and I had to think about how I would pass my exams with all the tasks I had to do ... One of the reasons I couldn't form friendships was because my Afghan friends and I had to do our homework at school during the break, while the other children would go in the schoolyard and play, talk, and spend time together. (Setareh)

Because we lived in the same neighbourhood and we knew each other well, the Iranian children didn't bother us; we played soccer together, there were no conflicts between us at school [silence]. But ... um ... in high school, um... [searching for the right word] the Iranian children had different food and clothes, and that ... for me ... [silence] um ... it bothered me. (Bahram)

The young people's interviews confirmed Seker and Sirkeci's (2015) observation that some refugee students feel alienated and alone at school (and in the wider environment), because the values conveyed there are different from those of their families.

Most of the young participants reported that they were more or less comfortable with school staff except Maher, who was humiliated by the staff at his school. According to Bahram, all the school staff had a positive attitude towards him. Maher believes that most of the teachers had a negative attitude towards Afghan students: "I've always had to argue with my teachers about Afghanistan." According to Arezoo, the teachers were nice, except for the fifth-grade teacher, who would treat Iranian and Afghan girls differently:

She didn't let us participate a lot in class, but I didn't worry about it! ... I loved studying. I didn't feel alone at school. We did silly things, we played, we studied... I liked everything about school. Nothing bothered or discouraged me. Um... I had a goal: to become a lawyer!

Furthermore, in certain developing countries, the lack of qualified teaching staff, corporal punishment and poor attention towards students with learning difficulties make it challenging for students to fit in at school and may push them to drop out (Naseer et al., 2011). As Maher explained,

I would object when they said negative things about Afghanistan ... The Iranian children would say, '... why are you here [Iran] ...' and it would make me mad, so then we would fight ... Every day, after school, I would hit everyone who was harassing me [with emphasis], [...] we, the Afghans, we would beat up our Iranian classmates ... Then, the school would ask to see my mother ... They treated my mother well, but they were mean with me and punished me [laughs].

Mothers noted that the school staff mostly had a positive relationship with them. However, some schools exerted pressure on them to pay the full tuition amount while others accepted payment in monthly installments. These findings agree with the observations made by Bellino & Dryden-Peterson (2019), who highlight how schools perform a dual process of "welcoming-unwelcoming," which both invite immigrant youth into the school community and simultaneously "unwelcome" them through acts of exclusion.

Finally, it's above all in community centres that the young participants, especially the girls, were able to find a sense of belonging in the Iranian community. Setareh, Fereshteh, and Arezoo felt that the Iranian teachers and social workers at these centres had a very important impact on their lives. For their part, the mothers also talked about the various forms of support (educational, health, financial) received from these social centres.

*Circumstances leading to dropping out.* To help their families overcome insecurity, four out of five respondents had to work outside of school, which made it difficult for them to continue their studies. Because they were taking on more responsibilities, either inside or outside the home, the young people were unable to do their schoolwork. As result, their grades dropped, or they failed their courses. This was the case for Bahram, who had very good grades until the first year of lower secondary school. In the second and third year of secondary school, his grades dropped, and in the first year of upper secondary, he had failing grades: “My brother immigrated to Europe, my father was alone, I had to help him ... I was working and didn’t have enough time to study ... I was worried about the high cost of living and school fees.” We can see that the young participants were forced to drop out of school to work full time and help meet the family’s needs. Setareh explained that 2 months after she started public school in Iran at the beginning of the school year, she had to discontinue her studies. She said that she was forced to make this decision: “It was the last year of school, and the pressure from the courses was very high ... I was working very hard at home, and I didn’t have time to study ... I wasn’t as motivated, I wasn’t trying like before.” Fereshteh also left school after the first level of lower secondary school, for similar reasons:

I really lost my motivation. The courses were hard, and I no longer enjoyed studying ... There was a lot of pressure on me, from school, from work and from my family ... Everything was crashing down on me at the same time, and I thought that dropping out of school might be better for me.

According to Kobiané (2006), even though some children who work also go to school, work and school are often incompatible. Work had a negative effect on our young interviewees’ schooling. These results reveal that the children put in effort to stay in the school program but in many cases, the obstacles they encounter alongside their academic pursuits lead to demotivation.

Some fathers were reluctant to let their children, especially their daughters, continue their education, particularly at the end of lower secondary school, that is, once the children had learned enough to read and write. There was a belief among fathers that getting a diploma would have no impact on their children’s future, especially in the labour market of the receiving country. As Setareh said, “...his [the father’s] opinion was that knowing how to read and write for girls was enough ... We always had conflicts because of this ... When I left school, the first person who was happy was my father because then I would be able to work all day.” Arezoo shared her father’s opinion about schooling: “you are wasting your time if you go to school ... instead of going to school, you should learn hairdressing or sewing.” These findings are consistent with Adjiwanou’s (2005) observation that household poverty forces parents to immediately make use of their children’s productive capacity on the labour market. However, unlike most of the fathers of our young respondents, even though he was illiterate, Bahram’s father encouraged his son to stay in school: “My father would say, ‘I want you to study, because I never had this opportunity.’” In short, it appears that the higher the proportion of time these children spend doing housework or working outside their home, the greater the likelihood of dropping out (Sabates et al., 2010).

Our findings clearly show that dropping out was not a voluntary decision. On the day Fereshteh and her mother went to the school to announce that she would be dropping out, a teacher asked her mother not to pull Fereshteh out of school, but her mother was silent. Fereshteh had a bad feeling that dropping out of school meant working full time. Arezoo explained she was so sad about not being able to continue her studies that she would cry at night and was depressed for 2 years. Bahram said that the day he left school still haunted him: “I really liked school, being with my classmates and learning new things. It was very good. I was happy.” Even Maher, who experienced significant challenges at school, was upset about dropping out.

After leaving school, four children out of five tried to return, but again, the cost of living, tuition fees, and obstacles placed by the Ministry of Education (in the case of adult education) prevented them from enrolling. It should be noted that, for the girls, their fathers' objections also made it difficult for them to resume their studies. Nevertheless, Fereshteh, unlike Setareh and Arezoo, chose to quit her job in order to study full time: "I always put others first... I told my parents and my brothers that I would no longer work from now on! ... I want to study."

At the time of the interview, Fereshteh was working very hard on her upper secondary year 2 lessons hoping to integrate a state vocational school for adults to study art, and then to continue studying art in university. She painted and took English and theatre classes at the community centre, activities that she hid from her brothers and father. At the time of the interview, Setareh had been working in a tannery for 3 years. She was participating in the social activities offered by an association for women's rights and she was taking a free photography course at the community centre. Arezoo was doing mending jobs at her neighbourhood community centre and at home. She was still hoping to return to school. In the evening, after fulfilling her sewing orders, she studied her upper secondary year 1 lessons. Bahram would like to be a professional mechanic and have his own garage, and not have to move from job to job. When we asked Maher about his life plans, he responded, "I have no plans for the future [indifferent smile]." Nevertheless, he told us that he wanted to go back to school and work at the same time: "I would have returned to school if I hadn't been expelled and I would have studied until the end [of high school]." According to our findings, various socioeconomic and administrative constraints force young people to leave school, even though most yearn to study. The data shows a strong association between poverty, the precariousness of households (Maurin, 2002), and school exclusion for the young participants in our study; it is a gradual process related to the accumulation of adverse conditions and not a deliberate decision.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to describe the migration and school experience of young Afghans in Iran and determine and analyze the factors contributing to their school exclusion. In addition to the influence of generally well-documented social and familial factors (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2008; Hoodfar, 2007; Chatty, 2007), the participants' responses highlighted the role, at a more macro level, of immigration and education policies, which had a direct impact on the youths' family and school situations. In this regard, fairer asylum and school integration policies are needed to improve young people's educational paths.

Furthermore, the comments revealed traumatic pre-migratory journeys and difficult living conditions faced by families in exile. These difficult living conditions force children to contribute to household incomes, which reduces schooling rates. Other obstacles, such as the difficulties in acquiring passports or refugee's cards, or the payment of registration fees, are factors preventing young Afghans from enrolling in state schools. The low level or lack of education among parents, and the limited interest—of certain fathers in particular—in their children's education also negatively influences the social and educational paths of young Afghans in Iran.

The results of our research show some positive experiences that work against exclusionary forces in formal education. But, in certain cases, the hostile attitude of some Iranian classmates and some school staff members towards the Afghan students caused frustration with school. Considering the above, increased awareness of the presence of refugee children in schools in developing countries and of their specific needs, as well as systemic measures to counter

discrimination, could help improve the hostile attitude towards them. We believe school staff could be particularly useful in implementing such a change.

We can see that young Afghans are gradually pushed out of school because of difficulties in entering the formal education system in the receiving country and irregular attendance, culminating in a definitive exit, in particular when students go from lower to upper secondary school. Indeed, the combination of social, familial, and academic factors (intraschool and extracurricular causes) weakens the students' academic performance and leads progressively to school exclusion. Our research draws attention to the difficult living conditions of refugee families in developing countries and how these conditions lead to the gradual exclusion of young people from school. In this respect, the international community could play an important role in supporting the education of refugee children in developing countries.

Young Afghans remain hopeful about the future, but they are also aware of the numerous obstacles preventing them from moving forward. Solidarity networks and the relationships they've developed in local community spaces have helped them build resilience, allowing them to break their isolation and encouraging them to work towards their educational and professional goals (especially the girls).

In closing, we would like to acknowledge one of the limitations of this exploratory research. Because we used purposive and voluntary sampling, our results cannot be generalized. They are nonetheless important. By giving a voice to the young participants and their mothers, this study made it possible to document the challenges and obstacles that the young people and their families have encountered throughout their lives and along the young people's educational paths. Considering the nonlinear educational paths of our young participants, who have moved between formal and informal systems and whose schooling has been frequently interrupted, it would be important that new studies examine the educational and social paths of young Afghans over the medium and long term, focusing on the important role of local community centres in these paths.

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**Samira Ghasemi-Tafreshi** is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education Science at the University of Paris Nanterre. Her primary research interests include the migration and socio-educational paths of unaccompanied minors, especially young Afghans; their resilience and social mobility; and educational opportunities and measures for their protection in Europe and France.

**Gina Lafortune** is a professor in the Department of Specialized Education and Training (DEFS) at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Her research interests focus on the social and academic experience of young people from immigrant and ethnocultural minority backgrounds. She is also interested in school-family-community relations in multiethnic settings, the challenges of addressing discrimination and racism, and the consideration of ethnocultural diversity in educational settings.