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Getting By after Internal Migration. Scenes from the Life of a Day Laborer Family in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan

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Summary
This article centers around the study of spatial mobility as a response to the uneven distribution of chances and risks. In present-day Afghanistan, moving within the country can be one strategy by which to avoid aggression in certain places and/or to benefit from the better employment opportunities and general life prospects of other locales. The grand strategy of migrating, however, needs to be supplemented by the adoption of certain survival tactics in response to the unexpected, ever-changing mundane realities of day-to-day life in new and unfamiliar surroundings. Whether or not migration will be the key to a better life depends on many different factors.
Based on the example of one migrant family that came to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e Sharif, this article looks into the concrete features of internal migration. The case study shows how people try to get by, which problems come along with their relocation, and in what ways these people represent their migration experience in their narrations.

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Introduction

Spatial mobility is often regarded as an answer to the regionally uneven distribution of chances and risks. Moving can be a strategy for avoiding the aggression found in certain places and/or benefiting from better employment opportunities and the general life prospects of other locales. This is also the case in present-day Afghanistan. Many people are currently fleeing the ongoing or increasing violence in certain parts of the country, and hence come to the cities in the hope of finding work and a stable livelihood. They thus become mobile in order to cope with the ongoing hostilities in Afghanistan.

In this article, I will look into the concrete features of Afghan internal migration. I want to show how poor migrants handle the problems that come along with their relocation to a supposedly better place, and what difficulties may still complicate their lives in a location in which they have set their hopes. The ways in which those on the move represent migration and continuous struggle in their narrations allow

the observer to get closer to their personal outlook on relocating and on the contexts in which they are doing so.

Spatial mobility is understood here as a coping strategy. Moving is in many cases the outcome of conscious and proactive decisions having been taken.[1] On the other hand, people are faced in their day-to-day urban activities with a limited number of options, with insecurity and fast changes, and therefore they often cannot actually pursue their strategic plans, as I will show below — instead they have recourse to "tactics" as opposed to "strategies." Referring to Michel de Certeau (1984), Datta et al. talk about tactics as "reactive, fragmented and fragile" (2007: 425), while Williams describes the ways in which marginal groups employ them in order to make best use of their resources and capabilities (2006: 867). The case I am presenting here can be read as an example of exactly this interplay of strategies and tactics.

Khaled Beg, his wife Gulchin, and their six children[2] had come to Mazar-e Sharif, the busy and booming economic center of northern Afghanistan, about one year before I met them there in the summer of 2012. Before that, the family had lived in Faryab Province, whose capital Maymana is located about 300 km west of Mazar-e Sharif. When we talked about why they had decided to leave their home region, they told me the following:

> **Gulchin:** Why did we come here? There is war there! War!
> **Khaled Beg:** It did not work out there. Our life. It just didn't. It is all desert there.[3] There is no work. There is nothing else. Desert.
> **Gulchin:** The Taliban came to the place where we lived. It was war. Killing. Killing all the time. Besides that, there was nothing.

What is surprising in these few sentences from our first conversation is that Khaled Beg is emphasizing other reasons for their migration than those that his wife offers. Would we not expect the two of them, having lived in the same surroundings and ideally having taken the decision to migrate together, to share when asked similar reasons for this migration and to tell the same stories?

Obviously Khaled Beg and Gulchin's home area is characterized by conditions both of insecurity as well as economic poverty. Parts of Faryab Province have come under the increasing influence of the Taliban movement, which has led to growing unrest and civil war-like conditions in the past few years.[4] At the time the family left the province in 2011, rain-fed agriculture was repeatedly facing big problems due to

1 For similar cases regarding the pragmatic combination of flight and migration in Afghanistan, see Harpviken (2009), Monsutti (2005), and Schetter (2012).

2 Interview recorded in Karta-e Zera'at, on the western outskirts of Mazar-e Sharif (July 8, 2012). Khaled Beg and Gulchin are aliases, used for the sake of anonymity.

3 "Desert" here refers to the intermittently unsuccessful rain-fed agriculture in large parts of Faryab Province. The environs of the provincial capital Maymana are generally known as being a very fertile area.

4 On this, see for example: http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=3006 (accessed: 2013-08-27).

too little rainfall.[5] We have no way to find out the propositional "truth" about their decision to move, or the degree of veracity of their respective stories. Instead of asking too much about why they had actually moved, I thus concentrate instead here on how they were living in town when I met them — and on the ways in which they both explained their situation.

Making a living under difficult conditions

At the time of the interview, as noted the family lived in Mazar-e Sharif. The city is the capital of Balkh Province and the most important commercial hub in the north of Afghanistan. It is a very important location for trade with the post-Soviet Central Asian states, even more so since being connected up to the railway system of Uzbekistan in 2012. The *rauza* in the city center, allegedly the shrine of Ali, Prophet Mohammad's cousin and son-in-law, is an important place of pilgrimage. The city has many large bazaars, numerous schools, universities, hospitals, luxurious hotels, and many leisure facilities. The sizable international military camp Marmal is located on the eastern outskirts of the city. The security situation in town was at the time of my research (2011–2012) good as compared to other regions in the country, which has led many international organizations and NGOs to establish their offices there. Simultaneously, many Afghans from other parts of the country are moving to Mazar-e Sharif because of the good living conditions to be found there.

Khaled Beg's family found accommodation in Karta-e Zera'at. The neighborhood is located on the western outskirts of the city, along the busy main street that leads from the city center to the nearby town of Balkh. Along that street, there are many shops, fuel stations, transport companies, markets, and storage areas for all kinds of goods that are traded in the city. The distance to the city center is around 4 km. All streets in the neighborhood are unpaved and wide, straight, dusty and bumpy, and partly covered with various kinds of waste. The courtyards there are enclosed by brick walls and most buildings are simple one-story brick-built houses. Dotted sporadically are luxurious newly built houses with several storeys, rich decoration, and large windows. Long-time city residents regard this part of town as dirty and dangerous.

Khaled Beg highlights that the area is safe and a good place to live. The main reason for his positive assessment is that many people from his home province live there, his *hamwatanha* "fellow countrymen, compatriots." The family's relationships with immigrants from other regions as well as with long-established resident families are presented as being good. Khaled Beg's family lives in one room of a two-room brick house. The other room is inhabited by another family from the same home region. The house is located in a dusty walled courtyard. An outdoor kitchen and a toilet at

5 More details at: http://www.fews.net/docs/Publications/Afghanistan_Alert_2011_06.pdf (accessed: 2013-08-27).

the far end of the courtyard have been constructed from brick, wood, and plastic. There is a sporadic electricity supply, and water is fetched by the children from a public well approximately 500 meters away. I asked if the house belongs to them:

> **Khaled Beg:** (Laughs) Noooo, if this were our house we would live a life of kings.
> **Gulchin:** If we had a house of our own, we would not stand here like this.
> **Khaled Beg:** It belongs to a rich man from Maymana. He wanted 5,000 Afghani for rent. Make it less, I said, 5,000 is much too much. Help us a little bit. We sat down; we were in Maymana, in front of him, the landlord (*bay*). Take a smaller rent from us, we said.
> **Gulchin:** It is one thousand. 500 for every family. It belongs to somebody from our region (*watandar*).
> **Khaled Beg:** He could take more for this house. 2,000 or 3,000.
> **Gulchin:** We sat there and said: please, lower the price.

The family's share of the rent, 500 Afghani per month (equivalent to US$ 10 at the time of our conversation), is really cheap and can be regarded as a good deal — as Khaled Beg did not fail to proudly point out. These circumstances illustrate the importance of a personal network in finding affordable accommodation. It also shows that the relocation was arranged in advance and migration was obviously not a spur-of-the-moment decision, having a strategic dimension to it instead.

In our initial conversation, Khaled Beg emphasized the poor economic prospects in his home region. Mazar-e Sharif, on the other hand, is a booming city that offers many options for making an income. How far the hope for a better livelihood, to which the decision to migrate was certainly attached, has come true for the family will now be examined. Khaled Beg occasionally works as an unskilled day laborer on construction sites or in depots. To get this kind of employment, he goes to well-known central places in town that are called *karegari* or *karbazar*. Mostly located at busy crossroads, these are the places where potential workers and employers meet. Those looking for work arrive very early in the morning and wait for their chance to get a job. The employers stop by and explain what kind of work needs to be done, what salary they offer, and the number of people needed. Wages start from 200 Afghani (US$ 4) per working day. The labor market is very competitive and certainly does not provide work to all those seeking jobs.

> **Khaled Beg:** For work, I go to the city. I work as a day laborer (*mard-e kari mikonim*). One day there is work, one day there is not. Every work I find I will do. [...] In Afghanistan — do you understand — one will not succeed to find work. In our family, we are also tailoring. […] There should be some work for us; some help. Our arrival here was one year ago. But the same story here: there is no support. No one is helping us. Every place you go: no support.

When I went to the *karegari* with Khaled Beg one day, he was again complaining all the time. Indeed, he received no offer of employment that day.

> **Khaled Beg:** I do every work I can find. I have done every kind of work. But [in town, compared to the countryside] there is not enough work either. I have now been here for one year but I have not found a good job. I only find work on two or three days a week. Sometimes even less. The government should really help us.

In wintertime or Ramadan the chances to find work are even fewer. Another problem is that there are costs to get to the *karegari:* "I spend 20 Afghani to get here and will pay 20 Afghani to go back home again. Even if I get a job, what is left over does not even make for bread and oil."

Sometimes Khaled Beg is directly hired for work on construction sites through an acquaintance from back home in Faryab Province. This he regards to be much better because he is not spending time waiting in uncertainty, and he can be sure of getting paid. Two or three times he worked in other informal employment situations and did not receive his due earnings, which — in his opinion — would not happen among people from the same area. At another time, when Khaled Beg was bemoaning the employment situation once again, the aspect of work for men and women was raised:

> **Khaled Beg:** There is no work. The state should really help us.
> **Mrs. A**[6]**:** For men and women the state should give work.
> **Gulchin:** Not for women! We know how to spend our time. There is lots of work for us to do.
> **Mrs. A:** Right. Us women, we are working. We make bread. We cook food.
> **Gulchin:** No, every work we — men and women — can find, we are doing. Of course we are.

Khaled Beg seems to face great difficulties in competing in the labor market. According to him, he is trying everything he can but the conditions are too difficult for him to succeed; only support from outside could help him to overcome this situation. The only major success he can boast of so far seems to be the arrangement of their accommodation, which, as becomes clear from his words quoted above, he understands as a big achievement owed to his talent in negotiating. As we can see from his wife's interjections, she follows his words closely and is not hesitant to bring in her own view of matters. Her refrain also reveals that in her opinion she is working more than enough, and maybe one can sense certain personal accusations directed at her husband in these seemingly general comments about the work of men and women. After this forwardness, however, she backs down by meekly adding that she would of course accept any work offered to her.

Gulchin indeed contributes to the family income in various different ways. Besides the housework, she tailors simple children's dresses with a rented sewing machine. These are sold in the main bazaar of the city by a woman who acts as a broker. This woman provides the materials and buys up the finished clothes. Gulchin explained, "For the dresses I get 20 or 30 Afghani." Khaled Beg added, "What is left is little-little. Less; every time less. Cheap, cheap, they are saying all the time." Gulchin is also earning some extra money by cleaning and helping out in slightly better-off households in the neighborhood. I happened to be present when she once got into an

6 Mrs A. was an occasional female visitor from the neighborhood. Her family had a fate similar to Gulchin's. They had also moved from Faryab Province to Mazar-e Sharif.

argument with the woman she had worked for about the size of a large carpet that she had cleaned. Agreeing on a salary acceptable for both sides was difficult because of the relationship between the two women. Gulchin's employer is a respected woman among the immigrants in the neighborhood. She has good relations with state officials in the Department of Repatriation of Refugees (DoRR) and helped Khaled Beg's family to acquire official "refugee" status at the DoRR, which entails the receipt of a so-called "card" — an official refugee registration document that entitles the family to a certain amount of basic food provisions. This woman represents the interests of migrants in dealing with state officials and international donors. Although it was not clear in advance if — or when — her continuous efforts to claim support for this very loose and mixed community would be successful, it still seemed advisable for Gulchin to maintain good relations with this — at least compared to others — influential person. Thus, she had to be moderate and polite in negotiating her salary.

Along with Khaled Beg and Gulchin, the eldest of their six children — an eleven-year-old son — has to contribute his share to the family's overall income. He works from early morning until late afternoon in a small factory that produces chocolate confectionary. Contact between the family and the owner of the factory had been arranged by the influential woman mentioned above. The description of their son's job again caused disagreement between Khaled Beg and his wife.

> **Khaled Beg:** One [of the kids] is working. The big son is working.
> **Gulchin:** He is not big. He is small.
> **Khaled Beg:** One neighbor has a chocolate machine. A machine that makes chocolate. He is a rich man.
> **Gulchin:** The poor boys are working for this rich man. What else can they do? They just have to.
> **Khaled Beg:** He gets 50 Afghani a day. That makes 1,500 a month. We get the money once a month. Then we buy everything we need. But it is not much.

Husband and wife emphasize different aspects: while Khaled Beg first highlighted how much the boy earns, Gulchin stressed that he was actually too young for a job like this and that they have no choice but to make him work there.

Several observations can be drawn from these examples. First, it is difficult to assess if the family's relocation from rural Faryab into the city has really improved their economic situation a great deal. Khaled Beg complains about the general circumstances in which he finds no decent employment, by which he implicitly means a regular job. He evidently had been expecting better economic opportunities; disappointed and frustrated, he is constantly yearning for external support. Even though he is dissatisfied with his situation so far, he repeatedly stated that he cannot imagine going back home.

Second, their income — although achieved by the constant struggle of the whole family — is considered insufficient to meet their needs. The family income is diversified, which means that it is accumulated from a variety of different sources.

This is different to the situation in rural areas, where the demand for labor depends mainly on the seasonal agricultural cycle and where crop failure in the dry season leads to overall unemployment. The family has achieved this economic diversification — a common risk mitigation strategy — through spatial mobility. In particular, the fact that Gulchin and the eldest son have found opportunities to contribute more or less regularly to the family's livelihood depends on the specifics of their urban locale and would not be possible like this in their rural home region. Therefore, regardless of whether the family's migration was mainly induced by economic or by security concerns, their relocation has ultimately led to an improvement of their economic prospects — even though, as noted, these may still not be sufficient to cover their needs. The World Bank and UNHCR joint report on Afghan internally displaced persons (IDPs) in urban settings also underlines this reality: "Economic incentives [...] act as important pull factors towards urban centres. Over 90 percent of IDPs in the study came from a rural community of origin. This reflects the intersection of forced migration paths with urbanization in Afghanistan" (2011: 7).

Third, the case study shows the crucial importance of personal networks in the very process of migration and also for the ensuing daily life of the family. Preexisting contacts enabled the family to arrange affordable housing. Connections with others from their home region helped them to obtain a foothold in the city and to meet everyday demands there. Relocation mixes up social settings completely; many migrants have to find a new basis for cooperation. In Mazar-e Sharif, it often is a shared geographical origin that creates commonality. By speaking of *watandar* or *hamwatanha*, Khaled Beg refers to solidarity between members of such a group. These symbolic ties (Faist 1999: 5) are crucial for the management of many everyday challenges that those moving face. Given the instability and informality to be found especially in work life, as described above (for similar observations in other Afghan cities, see also Schütte 2009), it becomes obvious that the *watandar* connection might be the only — albeit minimal — security that some people can discover in their current precarious situation. Interestingly, Khaled Beg did not mention to me that most of the people he is in contact with belong to the same ethnolinguistic group, the Uzbeks, even though ethnic belonging is often otherwise commonly regarded as one of the central grounds for cooperation in Afghan society. Solidarity cuts both ways. The family's social ties pay out in cheaper or better access to important resources for everyday life, for access to work, and for benefits of various sorts. However, these contacts also ask for "payback," like I showed with the example of the carpet cleaning incident. Gulchin has done a piece of work for a person to whom she owes a lot. Therefore, she cannot reasonably request as much money as she might actually be entitled to for that work (which, however, did not hinder her from expressing her view on this).

Narrations of a hard life, of threat, and of mobility: a tactical supplementation?

In the introduction to this article, I presented an excerpt from an interview that raises questions due to contradictions between the stories of the two narrators. The reasons given by Gulchin for the family's migration to Mazar-e Sharif were similar to many others I heard during my field research there in 2011 and 2012: many people fear the increasing influence of the Taliban in rural areas. By moving away from such places and migrating to major cities, they try to escape from immediate violence, imposed punishments, and the economic claims such as road tolls or other material demands being brought up on the basis of far-fetched arguments, or for no just reason at all. People also fear the possible influence of radicals on their children. The danger caused by the insurgents is not described as always being of the same intensity, but anyway it poses a constant risk. The threat is by many explained to originate from foreign influences, from southern Afghanistan, or from Pakistan. Radicals are described as being able to gather together and disperse swiftly due to modern means of communication; they can reach places quickly by motorcycle and then they leave them again just as fast.

Not only do the insurgents cause security problems, but people also describe the dangers of being accidentally caught in the middle of fighting between state forces and their international partners and the Taliban, without themselves actually being part of the conflict. In such situations, seeking temporary asylum in safer areas of the country is quite common. Taking refuge is often facilitated through personal networks.

The other key set of reasons put forward by respondents concerns the economic risks and hardships that prevail in remote areas. Khaled Beg was mainly talking about his difficulties to feed his family while relying on his own small plot of rain-fed land, or toiling for wealthier landowners. In his description, their migration to the city did not completely work out as expected. In contrast to his wife, he only mentioned the Taliban casually in passing, but it is still noteworthy that he did that at all:

> My brother — he is in Faryab. He is in Gurziwan; it is a place in the mountains. There are also Taliban there. He is living there, but at different places, moving around. You cannot find work there either. Life is a problem there.

Gulchin in turn also added further explanations that make her initial picture appear less absolute:

> There is nothing else to do but harvesting wheat, threshing it, and taking it to the market on the back of the donkey. That is the (only) kind of work you have over there. When there was no rain, there was no wheat. But food was distributed (only) to the poor and landless in the city. There was a place where the state built a school; people

> got money, wheat and oil.[7] With the arrival of the Taliban all this work has been stopped. Once they also burned down a hospital. The poor people packed their belongings and left for Mazar.

The security situation and economic vulnerability — especially of the poor — are closely intertwined: where people are reliant on state support, they lose an important part of their livelihoods if the agents of that state stop working. Therefore, even if the presence of the Taliban did not bring about any immediate personal threat, it directly negatively influences the situation of the poorest by way of the economic disruption caused.

Thus, we have essentially two narratives about the migration to town, which are factually intertwined yet being told separately from each other. To avoid being lost in this seeming antagonism, we have to be clear about the nature of narration:

> Past experience is always remembered and interpreted in the light of the present, as well as by the way that the future is imagined. What is remembered and told is also situational, shaped not least through the contingencies of the encounter between narrator and listener and the power relationship between them. [...] Thus, stories cannot be seen as simply reflecting life as lived, but should be seen as creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present. (Eastmond 2007: 249f.)

This aspect is important for, among other things, the controversial debates about claims to asylum. In Mazar-e Sharif, some material support is given to legitimized IDPs once they are registered with local authorities. One could conclude that the stories told by refugees about why they left their homes are tactical self-depictions and worth nothing in a situation determined by the well-known expectations of donors. Rather than sharing this kind of apprehension, I suggest, again following Eastmond, that surface contradictions in narration can actually benefit a deeper and more adequate understanding of the protagonists' view on their situation: "As representation, rather than documentation of reality, narratives become methodologically more complex, but also open up theoretically more interesting possibilities: [...] they make room for a more dynamic view of the individual as subject, acting in the world and reflecting on that action" (Eastmond 2007: 250).

What does this mean for our case? Both protagonists were — of course — curious about the situation that they were brought into by my presence. I emphasized that no support was to be expected from me, but since the couple did not have any experience with foreign researchers they first linked me — like other foreigners they had encountered — with the support apparatus active in town. Their assumptions were even more understandable since I enquired about their tough daily lives. On top of everything, my contact with the person who introduced me to the family had been established through DoRR staff.

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7 Gulchin is here alluding to a work-for-food construction project of the type that was common in the early post-Taliban years.

Khaled Beg stressed the family's neediness in their home region as well as in the city, and lamented the absence of support from the state and other possible donors. His wife however, by making strong reference to the Taliban and their atrocities, is evoking a different picture of her family's fate — one which brings out the dependence of neediness on politically motivated violence more prominently. One could argue that Gulchin is more experienced in dealing with the humanitarian apparatus. She has indeed had more contact with official bodies than her husband has. She might have observed — or even have been told — which kind of narrations prove more successful in the acquisition of outside support. The argument that their personal migration was forced upon them by fear of violence would be fully in line with the international concept of "refugee," which might have encouraged her to give greater emphasis to this aspect of their story. In Gulchin's perception there was no support scheme for people who were "just needy," while as forced migrants — that is, victims of violence — they would at least be entitled to some benefits.

The representation of mobility as a forced reality makes sense in the surroundings in which the family now lives. Due to the good security situation in Mazar-e Sharif and large parts of Balkh Province many humanitarian organizations and NGOs are now present there. Their working radius had for some time been mainly restricted to the city area and has become even more strictly limited to it over the last few years. The international organizations are well aware of the difficulties arising from the limitation of their mandate to "safe" areas. Where exactly to undertake meaningful practical work has been hard for them to identify, since they cannot go to where the problems are but have to wait for people to come to them instead.[8] The respective definitions and categories of persons entitled to support might not correspond to the actual conditions on the ground (see also, Bakewell 2011), thus tempting people into giving their narrations a particular tinge so as to fit with the prevalent norms (Wenzel 2013).

The representations of lives and fates, and the tactical use of certain descriptive categories by migrants, may not tell us too much about their "real" stories — but they can still help observers to understand the broader context in which people act and try to use whatever options they have available to them. Strategies of mobility become thereby visible as complemented by tactics of their representation.

"You take the donkey to the load or the load to the donkey"

While Khaled Beg is mainly complaining about the dire employment situation and the lack of support provided by state and international actors, his wife and their eldest son are busy contributing their share to the family's livelihood. Part of this struggle to make ends meet was Gulchin's attempt to represent her family as victims of the increasing violence perpetrated by the Taliban in their home region.

8 Interview with a UNHCR employee in Mazar-e Sharif (September 1, 2011).

I attributed this to her skillfulness in adapting to the discourses of her new surroundings and her aptitude in dealing with potential supporters such as state agencies and NGOs. To reduce her efforts to mere adaptiveness would, however, to be to cover only one aspect of her struggle, as we can witness from the explanations that she gave me when her husband was not present one day. From her point of view, the miserable situation of her family is shaped by two main factors. The first is indeed the bad general living conditions in present-day Afghanistan:

> You know, people here always say to [foreigners like] you: bring us food, bring us water, bring us oil, bring us clothes. All this talking. People abroad are also working from childhood till old age. They are getting along. They all have one or two kids at home. And here? How is it here? Unemployment is very high. A man is working. But look — in his house there are ill people, in his house there are children, in his house there are blind persons. What shall he do? If he is working five hours a day, how can he get along? The people in foreign countries, their number of kids is less there and their life is better. But the people in Afghanistan, they are just like a chicken-breeding machine. They say: God is generous. […] Less offspring, your life is better. My mother gave birth to twelve children, by the name of God. Nine girls and three boys, till the earth took her. That's all. Finish. […] They say, the world belongs to the young ones. But in this world [here]: what are they doing, the young ones?!

At a later point, however, she talked about the other reason for her family's lowly condition, which is an individual one. Quite openly, she shared her husband's inability to care for the family due to his drug problem:

> See, he is leaving in the morning. He is far from my eyes. I cannot see what kind of business he is doing, who is there. Hashish smokers. Junkies. And what he is not doing? I do not know. It has been sixteen years now. We have been to hospital. Two months he was in hospital. *Powder*,[9] he was taking *powder*. He stopped that. Now it has been six months that he is taking *naswar*.[10] *Naswar* he is taking and taking [...] and other things like that became obvious. Yesterday he again went to a place to work. He came back, his eyes red, burning. "Where have you gone?" — "I have gone nowhere." I understood. He turned away, but I said nothing. He slept. He needs to be controlled twenty-four hours a day. This kind of man is he. When we got married, he was not a human being at all. With respect (*dur az kalimijish*), he was not smelling like a human, he was not talking like a human. They cheated me. It is like this. After that, I said that I protect our honor, so that no one should say, this husband is taking *powder*, is smoking *hashish*. People talk a lot. They say: Is he in hospital? Get well soon [...].

She goes on:

> An Arab *haji* said: the man is the honor (*nang*) of his wife and the woman is the honor of her husband. When the man is not in a good condition, it is my honor [that is also affected]. It is my honor. Or as somebody else put it: the wife is a burden for the man and the husband is a burden for the woman. You bring the donkey to the load or the load to the donkey. There is no choice. I have to carry the load.

9 "Powder" is used here as a neologism for a drug in powder form. This might be opium or cocaine. Both drugs are available in Afghanistan, but the use of opium is far more widespread.

10 A mixture of green tobacco, quicklime, spices, and possibly other intoxicating materials that is widely consumed in north Afghanistan, sometimes as a substitute for heavier drugs.

These words partly explain the tension that was tangible even from my very first conversation with the couple. Gulchin was listening very carefully and was always trying to correct the statements and narrations of her husband. In parts of the discussion, they were almost struggling for the sovereignty to represent their situation. What had been indicated before was now made explicit: she is carrying the load. She did not openly accuse her husband about his inability to take care of the family though. Instead, she explained why it was her job to take his task over. This is not denying or refuting what was said above, but it further stresses why Gulchin is applying whatever resourcefulness she has to make a living for her family. Of course, one could also assume that these later comments are similarly aimed in the direction of securing potential support. With due reserve, I have three reasons to believe that this part of the story is nevertheless true: First, by this point (some time after our first meeting) she had probably realized that no help was to be expected from me. Second, she became really furious when talking about her husband. Third, her descriptions fit the overall impression I formed of her husband (without knowing him more closely).

Of course, the migration of the family could not possibly become a "success story" in a situation like this. Their personal misery did not originate from the place where they lived before, nor from where they are living now. The question of whether in this individual case migration has improved the situation through economic diversification in a location that offers many income options or if it might actually have even worsened things due to loss of control in the urban space cannot be ultimately resolved here.

Conclusion

We can conclude that moving proves to be an important strategy for people to cope with the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan. It offers an opportunity to leave dangerous and disadvantageous areas. The city as a destination offers a very special context, being a genuine space of opportunity. It provides possibilities for economic diversification and access to external support. Nevertheless, these opportunities do not come for nothing. Life in the city is very tough and highly competitive for the poor. Along with diligence and industriousness, one needs information and contacts to find and take existing chances. Therefore, "coping" is not accomplished by the mere step of entering a new geographical setting. Just the contrary in fact: the struggle continues in the daily necessities of finding work, forging alliances, using contacts, and fathoming new opportunities.

The difficult situation of the family of Khaled Beg and Gulchin was explained differently by husband and wife. While Khaled Beg rationalized his inability to care for the family merely as being the result of the difficult circumstances prevailing in the city, his wife added another dimension by conceding that he has a drug problem. Because of the latter, Khaled Beg's chances to earn more money in town are very

limited and the migration might not have paid off in this respect. On the other hand, it has created new chances for his wife to compensate for her husband's inability to provide. The extra income earned by her and the family's eldest son is, however, achieved at a high price. Gulchin is trying really hard to bring the donkey and the load together, like she said. In this constant struggle, the way in which she represents the reasons for the family's decision to migrate has itself become a tactical response to the conditions of their new surroundings — which are strongly shaped by the influential presence there of the international assistance apparatus and its specific angles on things. The fact that they come from an area commonly regarded as dangerous has, as such, turned into an important resource in the family's claim for external support.

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