

Chapter 16: Small agency and precarious residency in Afghan refugee families

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Abstract

This chapter examines agency and ways of enduring suffering in Afghan families in a small Finnish town. Three stories, where the mothers and children have lived in Finland for some years already, but the fathers have arrived during the 2015 large scale migration, are presented and analysed. Ethnographic methods are used in enquiring how family-members endure suffering when they are faced with the threat of deportation of a family member. Our results show that fathers' precarious residency has an impact on family members' agency. First, the informants were enduring alone, and thus the social element, being able to share one's struggles of enduring, was missing. Second, it was not only one type suffering, but instead many kinds of sufferings, which formed the situations that the families had to endure. Third, the families did cope with their suffering by self-making though ethical agency, which provided them with culturally significant ways of being respectable. This ethical agency was shared in the community and provided some spaces for support, although not in the form of disclosing specific details of suffering.

keywords: acts of citizenship, Afghan families, enduring, suffering, precarious residency

Small agency and precarious residency in Afghan refugee families

Introduction

This chapter examines ways of enduring suffering in Afghan families in Finland. We explore three families' stories through the lens of citizenship studies and theoretical discussions on agency. The families all live in a small town. We examine enduring in situations, where the families are faced with the threat of deportation of the father. The mothers and children in the three stories have lived in Finland for some years already, but the fathers have only recently arrived during the 2015 large scale migration.

The mothers and children in this study have initially moved to Finland as refugees resettled by UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees). The fathers are hoping for asylum or residency based on family reunification. However, the families face a harsh reality where the other family members are offered protection, but the fathers are not granted asylum and they are now under the threat of deportation. The different authorities – the UNHCR and the Finnish Immigration Service – do not always evaluate refugee statuses similarly, and the evaluation can seem arbitrary to the families, who are faced with the different systems (Turtiainen, 2012).

In migration studies, the agency of migrants, including people in the circumstances of forced migration, is often theorized in the context of citizenship studies (e.g. Dyck, 2018; Erel and Reynolds, 2018). The focus has often been on what kinds of rights and duties individuals and groups are offered and how they are included or excluded from everyday social life (Lister,

1997). Recently, the symbolical and everyday aspects of citizenship have been stressed alongside the formal aspects, laws, and socio-political regimes (e.g. Isin, 2008; Vuori, 2012). The political agency of migrants have especially been analysed as “acts of citizenship”, the concept that stresses the multiple ways that people may use to expand their agency in the society and aspire new political goals (Erel, 2011; Erel, and Reynolds, 2018; Isin, 2008). In this chapter, we rely on the concept of acts of citizenship, but, at the same time, we take distance from its connotations of rationale, goal orientated and activist-like agency, and instead investigate smaller everyday acts of citizenship related to the family sphere (e.g. Erel, 2011; Hiitola & Vuori, 2018).

The families in this chapter have experienced the hope of getting their family member back into their daily life after a long time of living apart in different countries and in circumstances of forced migration. But quite soon after the father’s arrival, the families are facing the threat of his deportation. The administrative processes leading up to deportation leave very little room for enacting citizenship (see also Leinonen and Pellander in this volume). However, in difficult circumstances and while experiencing suffering, agency may always be found, if one resists the social scientific tendencies to stress the rational choice, or active resistance and rebellion. Marja-Liisa Honkasalo (2009, p.62) conceptualizes repetitive, humble, and sometimes minimal everyday agency as “small”. According to her, this small agency is not equivalent to habitual agency, which is conceived as only maintaining the present situation. In her study of Finnish North Karelian women, Honkasalo finds three different modalities of small agency in the context of suffering, which she describes as “enduring”. First, enduring means structuring and limiting time, living one day at a time. Second, enduring is constituted as ethical agency so that it is shared and valued, and, thus, it gives people the strength they need to accomplish the demands and the tasks indispensable in their life. Third, enduring also has a social dimension and it takes place “in proximity in-between and with others”. Enduring is about investing, struggling ,and achieving (Honkasalo, 2009, p.63.) The idea is close to what Nichola Khan (2013, p.531) analyses as immobility, which she defines as “an extreme measure of self-protection, not of self-destruction. Even when there is ‘no solution,’ life moves in uncharted directions”. In line with these theorists, we analyse the small movement in the non-movement.

Ethnographic fieldwork with vulnerable subjects

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, which was conducted in a small town in Finland by Johanna Hiitola. Early on it became obvious to the researcher that regular interviews would be impossible, since most Afghans in the town wanted to get to know the researcher better before agreeing to be studied. The researcher first had to visit the families’ homes several times for socializing, and answer questions about the researcher’s role.

Given the very vulnerable position of the informants, their anonymity is carefully protected. All of the names have been changed to acronyms and some other details, which are not essential to analysis, have been changed to avoid identification. The researcher has discussed the aims and practices of the research carefully with the participants in order to get informed consent. The main ethical principle has been the “do no harm” principle following the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre’s (2007) guidelines. In line with the recent refugee studies scholars, there is an ethical dilemma in furthering one’s career based on vulnerable migrants’ stories. Therefore, researchers suggest that researchers should “bring about reciprocal benefits for refugee participants and/or communities” (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007).

Hiitola, who collected the data, has engaged in reciprocal relationships with the informants in various ways, which have benefitted the community through grant money, job opportunities, and organizing events. In addition, guiding those in need of more extensive help to relevant services has been a high priority throughout the fieldwork. However, this type of reciprocal relationship with the researcher brings about other ethical considerations, such as increased power imbalances between the informants and the researcher. Thus it has been especially stressed that participation to the research is voluntary.

The overall data includes field notes from meetings, discussions, and other encounters with the Afghan community which consists of around 150 people (mostly large families). The fieldwork was conducted during 2016-2018¹, and it includes 57 pages of field notes (notes from visits to families' houses, celebrations such as weddings and birthdays) and 18 group and individual interviews concerning 22 informants, eight men and 14 women. Three informants have been interviewed twice. Ten interviews were done with an interpreter in Dari. These interviews were transcribed from the recordings by Hiitola. One interview was translated by a research assistant from the recording directly. Other interviews, as well as the interaction with the informants, happened in Finnish or English.

Although the ethnographical study concerned several families, this article is primarily based on three families' stories, where the fathers' residency was uncertain when the study started. Nonetheless, the information derived from all interviews and field notes from two years of fieldwork has been essential in formulating the analysis and interpretation. The interviews from the three families' stories used in this article were conducted in Finnish and one in Dari. Thematic analysis is combined with theoretical insights stemming from citizenship studies and discussions on suffering and agency described above, and carried out in the form of descriptions of how different family members talk about their experiences during the demanding situation (e.g. Falzon, 2012; Geertz, 2008).

Most of the Afghan families in the town belong to the Hazara minority, which is a large Afghan refugee group due to the long history of discrimination (Saikal, 2012, pp.81-82). They are Shi'ite Muslims. The families had often lived in exile in Iran in poverty and without citizenship rights for ten to 20 years before moving to Finland. Thus, many young Afghans were born in Iran and many did not describe having strong ties to their ethnic background.

In the Finnish system, the applications for asylum and for family reunification are separate from each other, so if a person's asylum claim is processed, the possibility for obtaining residency based on family ties is not evaluated in the same process. The separate family reunification application is complicated and expensive to submit. In addition, currently there are high income requirements for forced migrants receiving residency based on secondary protection, or compassionate grounds. Income requirements also apply, if a person with a refugee status submits the application after three months of receiving the status. The requirement for families with two adults and two children exceeds the average Finnish salary. Finnish citizens are exempt from these requirements. There is also very little help available for the process, since the process has to be started by the family living abroad.

At the time when this article was written, the family reunification processes in these families are at different phases, and thus, our analysis stays open-ended. Suffering and enduring are temporal social processes: they never have a clear ending, clear borders or simple consequences.

Daughters enduring alone

In the first family, the father Alireza and the mother Fovsia have two adult daughters, Fatemeh and Ghazaala, and a 10-year-old younger son. Fovsia and the children, at the time all minors, had been selected as refugees in Iran in 2012, but like many refugees' family members, the father was missing at the time and thus the mother was considered as a single mother by the UNHCR. The single status of the mother is significant in the process of selecting the most vulnerable refugees, which the UNHCR resettles through their programme. Thus, the family might not have been selected if the father had been present.

Later the father's absence in Iran influenced the Finnish Immigration Service's views on whether or not the father should be able to obtain a residence permit based on family ties in Finland. In similar cases in the study, the decision was most often negative, if the family had not mentioned an on-going relationship with the father in the initial refugee status interviews. The fact that they had not spoken about the father is understandable in the light of the quota refugee selection procedures, which prefer single mother families. However, often family-members do not know if the fathers are still alive or, for example, imprisoned. In the Immigration Service's evaluation the fact that the family currently lived together in Finland was insignificant, and the case was decided based on whether or not the father or the mother was perceived to have given misleading information in the selection process.

Some informants had even lost their refugee status due to submitting a family reunification application with different information from what they had given in the interviews. The families' positions were thus extremely precarious: they did attempt to exercise their rights and enact citizenship, but without any legal assistance these attempts brought more difficulties to the families. It was only during the appeal stages of the refused family reunification application that the applicant residing in Finland could get legal aid. At that stage, however, it is usually too late, if the initial application has resulted in unforeseen other consequences.

Alireza had joined the family in Finland later during the 2015's large migratory movement and applied for asylum. At the time of writing this article, he had just received a negative response to his asylum appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court, which was his last hope for securing his residency in Finland. Their family reunification application was in the process, but since Fovsia was unable to fulfil the income requirement and had not gained Finnish citizenship, which would have exonerated her from the income requirements, the application had little chance.

Alireza's and Fovsia's two adult daughters expressed that both the family separation before their father joined them in Finland, and the situation when they heard about his future deportation, had influenced their learning in school. They had suffered from anxiety, sleeping problems and depression. They, like all the families with whom Hiitola worked with in this study, described that they had endured the suffering alone. One of the daughters of Alireza and Fovsia, Ghazaala, describes this in an interview:

Sometimes I pray to God to help us. But I think that if I talk to my mother or sister about wanting our father to be here, they become more sad than I am. I can't tell them. And if I tell others [outside the family], what can they do? They just listen. You have to hold on to the sorrow by yourself. You can't tell anyone, just wait and see what happens.

In their interview, both Ghazaala and her sister expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation, which were common in all the families where a family member's residency and safety was uncertain. In addition to their own grief, many informants in this study have expressed that they wanted to protect their family-members by not sharing any difficult feelings with them. As the young women narrate, the burdens also isolate them from others both within and outside the family. Isolation from others is a well-known effect of traumatic experiences in psychological literature (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2015). All of the informants in the larger data narrated that the isolation was also connected to the fear of being judged by the Afghan community in the town. Being respectable (e.g. Skeggs, 1997) in the eyes of the community was a strong norm. Ghazaala and Fatemeh described how the community judged daughters without fathers, whose "*mother cannot discipline them*". For many of the informants, the fear of judgement caused them to hide their problems, such as the fear of their father being under the threat of deportation. Thus, unlike in Honkasalo's (2009) study, enduring did not have a social element to it, which undoubtedly intensified the experience of isolation.

Alireza and Fovsia's family-members express that they do not only worry about family separation, but the possible future deportation could also lead to their father's death, since the security situation in Afghanistan is poor. The father had had a substance abuse issue in the past and his family-members worried that he would not survive alive in Kabul without any support networks or money, and with very unstable mental and physical health. The father was also unable to read and write in any language and had never attended school. It was obvious that his chances for survival would be weak after deportation.

The daughters described how they had "*not one but many problems*" from dealing with past trauma to struggling with the Finnish higher education system, which demands advanced level of Finnish to be able to enter into it.

Fatemeh also felt that when her father came to Finland as an asylum seeker and settled to live with the family, her own world had expanded, since she could go out with her friends more freely. She explained that this was related to a specific cultural context:

In our culture it's more difficult when a woman doesn't have a husband and she is a young girl. The mother should know who she is talking to, where she goes and who her friends are and who comes to the house for a visit. All these things have to be taken care of by the mother... Also you need to take note of what you are wearing, is it too short and sexy or long. Do you put on a lot of make-up? Everyone thinks, okay, here are two girls and they are young. They came here with no father and their mother cannot tell them anything.

Fatemeh along with her sister described how they felt more safe and social after their missing father had joined the family. "*When my father came, I could put make-up on and dress as I want. I was able to meet my friends again, this also brought me joy.*" Fatemeh said. These narrations of joy and increased freedom, which the father's presence had offered the young women, were over-shadowed by the current situation of the father. The family faced being apart from him again.

Enduring as an ethical agency

Mohammed and his wife Ensia had two children, who were born in Finland after the father had joined the family in Finland during 2015. The mother had moved to Finland already in 2011. The father and the mother had married in Turkey after the mother had been selected as an UNHCR refugee, so family reunification was not possible without fulfilling the very high income requirement.

All the circumstances seemed to play against this family's possibilities to stay together. The father had applied both for family reunification and asylum based on persecution in Afghanistan. All the different applications and appeals had been rejected by the Immigration Service, Administrative court, and Supreme Administrative court, that did not accept the appeal to be processed. The family was hanging by a thread when Hiitola first visited them. The father, Mohammed, had just received rejection of his appeal on asylum as well as family reunification. It was like a "*bomb that hit the table and destroyed everything*", Ensia said. She continued: "*I was like a dead. I was dead, all of my feelings were dead. All the world became dark to me.*"

Ensia had become very close to Hiitola during the fieldwork. She often grasped her by the arm and said, "*oh how we women suffer*", referring to her burdens of bringing up all the children by herself, if the husband were deported. The content of the suffering, as Ensia understood it, could only be grasped by someone who was a woman herself.

Although the details of enduring different pains were not shared with the community, enduring was, however, a norm among Afghan refugees. Especially women narrated how they, as women, were born into a life full of suffering, but still managed to go on. These narrations can be analysed as constructing ethical agency (Honkasalo, 2009), an identity considered proper and respectable. It gives people the strength they need to accomplish the tasks indispensable in their life. Ensia describes how she endured as follows:

I was feeling shattered every time negative results were coming. I was feeling that I got broken inside. But in front of my child, I was saying it is going to be solved. Maybe I was crying, but very little [in front of her]. But for the deep crying, I was going to the beach. There was sea. I was talking to the sea alone, I was crying alone. All of my troubles were shared with the sea. When I was coming back, some nights the children and my mother were sleeping. They wouldn't recognize that I have left and come back.

While enduring suffering was often described as being lonely and isolated, the informants, such as Ensia, also constructed an identity where survival was at its core. Suffering in its many forms was a shared cultural heritage strengthened by Afghan phrases, such as "*if you don't experience any pain, you would gain no treasure*". Ensia especially referred to her inner abilities to bear pain and suffering.

When I was a child my father was telling that I have special energy. All my friends and family were later saying the same thing. Even though I fall down and get crushed, I thank God, I stand up again. I give energy to myself. I talk to myself that the situation is like this and you should fix this. It means that I don't get disappointed and think that it is not possible. Maybe it takes two or three days and then I will stand up again.

First, we understand that Ensia's description refers to self-making in a way, which emphasizes strength in facing difficulties. This process is also linked to the culture of enduring, knowing that other refugee families also suffer. Second, we see that self-making

through enduring, as Ensia and many other participants described, is done alone and often even in isolation from other family-members.

However, it was socially shared to understand a life full of suffering. An interviewee, who was not part of the three families in question, described to the researcher that the Afghan community had a custom of giving loans “*as much as you can*” to other members of the community when they needed to travel to see family-members, pay high family-reunification fees or have a marriage ceremony, for example. The loans would be paid back “*if they can afford*”. The interviewee described that since they all understood what a life as a refugee without family networks and safety meant, and they felt obligated to help whenever they could. This practice also guaranteed that they themselves would be helped in a time of need. Thus it would be incorrect to say that the social component of enduring was completely missing from the community altogether. Rather, there was a strong need for saving face, a fear of appearing non-respectable, which seemed to hinder especially women to disclose their husband’s precarious situations.

Mohammed and Ensia’s family was torn apart during the research period. After being denied asylum and family reunification, Mohammed left the country to look for more humane asylum policies elsewhere.

Unforeseen consequences of enduring

The third family of Rahmaan and Aziza was formed after Aziza had moved to Finland as a refugee with her mother and older sister. Both Aziza’s and Rahmaan’s families came from extreme poverty. None of them had had any schooling and all were non-readers. Rahmaan and Aziza were married during Aziza’s visit to Iran, where Rahmaan at the time lived as an undocumented forced migrant with his mother and younger brothers. They had believed that Rahmaan would be able to join his wife after the marriage, but were faced with fact that Rahmaan could not even get a passport, which was needed for applying for family reunification. Also Aziza’s possibilities for fulfilling the high income requirement were slim, since she had not mastered the Finnish language. As a consequence, Rahmaan also came to Finland during 2015 as an asylum-seeker and started his asylum process while living with his wife. They had three children after Rahmaan moved to Finland.

Rahmaan and Aziza described how praying was helpful for them. They described how their daily prayers were the sources of strength when nothing else seemed to help. Aziza said: “*Every day I prayed and said: God, please help Rahmaan to get a residence permit.*” Rahmaan told Hiitola that he had often turned to her mother for advice, when facing difficulties. His mother, who was herself living in Iran, also advised him to pray. Other than praying, the family had very few resources to influence their lives.

As the process went further, the Immigration Office and Administrative court denied his asylum and ruled for Rahmaan’s deportation to Afghanistan, which he had not visited since his family fled to Iran when he was a toddler. Now the family reunification was the only option for Rahmaan to secure his residency, However, the social workers in the town did not assist the family in their family reunification application because they did not see it as their responsibility.

When Hiitola first met the family, Rahmaan described his situation, gasping for breath: “*I can’t bear to be around other fathers, who exactly share my situation, but who are allowed to stay with their families. Why am I not allowed to stay?*” In the small town community, families would get together in different celebrations and Rahmaan would feel isolation and grief for their precariousness.

Towards the end of the research, Rahmaan and Aziza’s family was successful in securing the father’s residency, unlike the other two families described in this chapter. Aziza had acquired Finnish citizenship during the family reunification process and this exempted the family from the high income requirements. The residence permit was, however, a complete coincidence of first the family getting to know an activist, who helped with the family reunification application and the application fees, which secured Rahmaan from deportation when his asylum claim was rejected. Second, Aziza was helped by the activist to apply for citizenship as exemption from the language requirement – something which is possible only for those who have never attended school. Had the family relied only on the help of the local social workers and family welfare professionals in the town, the father would probably have been deported.

Although Rahmaan and his wife Aziza finally received a residence permit for Rahmaan, the suffering did not end. The family members described that the two-year waiting period and the fear of deportation resulted in Rahmaan developing a gambling problem. He wasted the family’s money in slot machines:

Aziza: But [then] Rahmaan steals all my money and uses it for slot machines. (...) Before he was using maybe 5 euros one day, but then maybe 50 euros, 200 euros.

Rahmaan: When my residence permit did not come, I thought, what will I do. I started to gamble away all my money.

Aziza: He goes and lends money from friends, 500 euros. And we fight so much about this. I call and beg his friends not to lend him money. But then everyone gets angry with me and tells me I’m not a good woman.

At the time of the interview, Rahmaan’s gambling problem was continuing although he had now secured his residency.

Thus, the long period of waiting itself seemed to bring about unforeseen consequences for Rahmaan and Aziza’s possibilities to settle and build a new life. They had very little money: Rahmaan only got 260 euros per month from the reception centre and Aziza received small social benefits for herself and the children. According to our interpretation, in the financially tight situation with limited possibilities to influence whether or not one can stay with one’s family, small hopes of winning may constitute agency. Although with severe negative consequences for the family as a whole, it was one of the few things that Rahmaan could do himself. Thus the gambling problem could be viewed as a response, or a cry for help to gain agency, in a situation of extreme suffering. Rahmaan’s gambling also had gendered effects on Aziza, who, desperate to save their financial situation, tried to limit the other Afghan men from lending money to her husband. However, her actions to control her husband’s spending were interpreted as unfit for a woman.

Conclusion

By analysing how three different families endured suffering and were able to continue with their daily lives while the fathers faced deportation and precarious residency, we identified aspects of enduring suffering specific to the Afghan community in a small Finnish town. We investigated “small agency” (Honkasalo, 2009) and thus small everyday acts of citizenship (e.g. Erel, 2011), which were possible for the informants.

First, we found that the informants were enduring alone, and thus the social element, being able to share one’s struggles of enduring (Honkasalo, 2009), was missing. Furthermore, isolation appeared to be gendered: women, both mothers and adult children, described how they did not want to disclose any of their sorrows related to their fathers’ precarious residency to outsiders due to the fear of losing respectability in the eyes of the Afghan community. This aspect of women’s suffering in isolation probably surfaced since the majority of the close relationships during Hiitola’s fieldwork were made with women. Although men attended interviews and also engaged in research, their specific ways of enduring could not be detected in similar detail.

Second, the families experienced many kinds of suffering. They had often suffered since birth, and during their stay in Finland they continued face insecurity on many different levels. It was not only one type suffering related to the fear of deportation, but instead “sufferings” in the plural (Honkasalo, 2009), which formed the situations that the families had to endure. It was also often stated that the decisions on who was able to stay and who was deported did not follow any logic or rationale the families themselves could have followed. All of the informants had difficult experiences as forced migrants, but only some were granted protection based on what seemed like a random coincidence or luck. Furthermore, while enduring the long waiting periods, new types of suffering, such as addiction issues, surfaced as the ways of enacting small agency.

Third, by examining the ways of enduring, we found that the families did cope with their suffering by self-making through ethical agency, which provided them culturally significant ways of being respectable. This ethical agency was shared in the community and provided some spaces for support, although not in the form of disclosing specific details of suffering.

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¹All the data was collected by Hiitola. 13 interviews and the fieldwork have been conducted during the project *Social Empowerment in Rural Areas* (SEMPRE) and 4 interviews were

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