

No longer a child: from the UK to Afghanistan

Catherine Gladwell

Young Afghans forced to return to Kabul having spent formative years in the UK encounter particular risks and lack any tailored support on their return.

Muhibullah arrived in the UK as a 15-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking child, sent to the UK at just 13 by his family, who hoped he would be able to make a better future away from the conflict and poverty of Afghanistan.¹ After his eighteen-month-long journey, he arrived in the UK, made friends and started to build a future. But when he turned 18, Muhibullah was told he would not be allowed to stay, and was forcibly returned to Afghanistan. On arrival in Kabul, Muhibullah contacted one of our staff team who had supported him in the UK, sending a text saying: “I’m in Kabul. I don’t know where to go. Who like you is here? Can you still help me?” So began Refugee Support Network’s research into what happens after the forced removal of young people who have spent formative years in the UK care system as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.²

In 2012, 1,168 unaccompanied minors claimed asylum in the UK, with Afghanistan being the most common country of origin. Under international and domestic law, the UK is prohibited from returning children to their countries of origin unless there are adequate reception facilities to return them to. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has

stated that a child should not be returned to the country of origin where there is a ‘reasonable’ risk that return would result in a violation of the child’s fundamental human rights. Unaccompanied minors can be granted Discretionary Leave to Remain (DLR) for three years, or until the young person is 17½ years old, whichever is the shorter period. When their DLR expires, they have the right to apply for an extension of their leave to remain but few such applications are successful, meaning that the overwhelming majority face the possibility of detention and forced removal to their countries of origin when they reach 18 and are no longer considered children.

Over the last eighteen months, we have tracked young people sent back to Kabul against their will, interviewed professionals working with young returnees in Kabul, and supported young people facing the possibility of forced return to Afghanistan in the UK. Several key difficulties emerged for forcibly returned youth, including:

Difficulties re-connecting with family networks: All of the young people tracked returned to Afghanistan in debt. Their families had paid an average of \$10,000 per young

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person to people smugglers, and young people spoke of the fear of returning empty-handed, and the shame of being unable to repay this debt. One Afghan professional explained “I know one Afghan boy who arrived in the UK as a minor, who got returned. Before he left his father sold the house so he could leave, and now he comes back with nothing. It’s important to understand how this works in Afghanistan. In my country if a father has a house and he dies, they split the house between the sons. So when this father sold the house all because of one son so he can go to London, the other brothers and sisters have been waiting for the money to come back from London for their marriages, etc. If he comes back with nothing, they will be so angry that he has done nothing for his family.”

Psychosocial impact of insecurity and poverty in Afghanistan: The general insecurity and acute poverty prevalent in Afghanistan are well documented; less researched is the impact of being suddenly returned to such conditions having spent formative years in a peaceful, affluent society. The boys we tracked all suffered from anxiety and depression. One boy experienced panic attacks, and another had threatened suicide.

Lack of education and employment opportunities: Young asylum seekers in the UK often describe education as one of the most positive and important things in their lives, and worry about the lack of opportunity they will have to continue their education and find employment if forced to return to Afghanistan. In a context of high unemployment and few opportunities, returnees face two specific additional problems: lack of appropriate school records, and low literacy rates in Dari or Pashtu. One Afghan professional said: “[the boys] come back with some English (often fairly basic and with lots of slang)



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but no good written Dari or Pashtu – so how can they work in a good place?”

‘Westernisation’ of returnees – actual and perceived: A quarter of the boys tracked had experienced harm or difficulties as a result of being viewed as ‘Westernised outsiders’. Some were mugged due to a perception that returning from Europe must mean returning with money. One boy was kidnapped and held to ransom until his family sold additional land to finance his release. Several boys encountered difficulties due to being seen as having lapsed in their practice of Islam.

Re-migration: Over half of the young people tracked had attempted to leave again, often by increasingly risky means, and some had reached Greece or Turkey and then been forced back to Afghanistan once again.

These challenges appear to be exacerbated by two over-arching issues. Firstly, in the UK unaccompanied minors are considered children to be looked after one day and failed adult asylum seekers with extremely limited rights the next. This abrupt transition has a negative impact on young people’s mental health, leaving them with little support at one of the most uncertain and frightening stages of their migration journey. Secondly, it is increasingly evident that there are not enough

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functional connections between the UK-focused refugee and asylum support sector, and the international development sector. This means that the majority of staff with whom returned young people are remaining in contact in the UK have little knowledge of the contexts the young people now find themselves in or of the organisations that could help them. As a result, there is very little support provided to forced returnees once they have left the UK, and they are largely left to fend for themselves.

In response to these issues, and the ongoing requests of young people returned to Kabul, in February 2013 we launched a new programme, Youth on the Move³. We are drawing on our staff's experience in both the international development/emergency response and refugee support sectors to ensure that young people facing deportation are no longer cut adrift. We are working to help them to explore all possible means to remain in the UK, and to provide a safety net of support for the possible eventuality of forced return.

We also recognise that better, more reliable information about what happens to

forcibly removed young people is needed. Over the course of the coming years, we are committed to documenting real and nuanced outcomes for all the young people we work with, including examining the extent to which young people attempt to re-migrate. We hope that this information will contribute to creating an increasingly robust body of evidence enhancing collective understanding of the real risks and opportunities young people face if they are returned, and thus help to inform decision making and 'best interest determination' for young people applying to extend their Discretionary Leave to remain at 17½.

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1. Not his real name.
2. See Catherine Gladwell and Hannah Elwyn 'Broken Futures: Young Afghans in the UK and on return to their country of origin' <http://tinyurl.com/RSN-Broken-Futures-2012>
3. www.refugeesupportnetwork.org/content/youth-on-the-move