

MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Not My Parents' Choice: Afghan Migrant Youth
and the Marriage Shift in Austria

verfasst von | submitted by
Marie Theres Lehner BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 810

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Ass.-Prof. i. R. Mag. Dr. Gabriele Rasuly-Paleczek

FOR
my Romy jan, who never sleeps.
Writing this thesis in your first year of life, was harder than your birth.
In love, Mama

This thesis exists only because of my social network.

THANK YOU,
to all my respondents, who shared with me the most interesting stories, those about their lives; to their families, and friends and their extended networks, who welcomed me to private celebrations and community events – I still need to work on my ‘shoulder’ dancing skills; to those who came alone, with their families, by bus or over the open sea: you have come a long way; and to those who have become my dear, dear friends– I would never have known anything about your lives.

To Gabi Rasuly-Paleczek, who supported me tirelessly, with ideas, literature, and time. You introduced me to Afghanistan’s history, and you showed the same commitment to understanding its present. You know so much, and you have worked so hard, as a scientist, a teacher, as a mother. Thank you, for your super-vision.

To my dearest friends, my queens, my anthropological colleagues, my sanity circle, you have given me the motivational support to continue writing. To Irene for setting the time straight, when I thought, I was already too late; to Vicki for proof reading, feedback and the emotional power boosts, and to Ria for her ever-soothing words.

To my family, who has grown extensively over the past years and with them the help I have received. Thank you, Iris and Michael, for taking such good care of Romy; Julia, Apo and Ophelia (my transnational network) for your encouraging words as I approached the finish line; Mama for coming to Vienna at weekends and helping me to maintain a good work structure; Papa for his excellent cooking and for keeping the garden so beautiful during the summer holidays that never really happened; and Anna for always being there and looking after your niece – your name comes up constantly in baby babbling.

Thank you, Alex, my love, without you, nothing would have been!

Table of Content

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Outline of Thesis.....	3
1.2 Research Topic, Objectives, and an Anthropological Approach to the Problem.....	5
1.3 State of the Art.....	8
1.4 Methodological Framework and Data Collection.....	13
1.4.1 Field Access and Initial Engagement with the Afghan Community in Austria.....	13
1.4.2 Conducting Interviews.....	15
1.4.3 Participant Observation	19
1.4.4 Data Analysis.....	20
1.5 Definitions and Theoretical Framework	22
1.5.1 A Conceptual Approach to Social Change	23
1.5.2 A Conceptual Approach to Agency (Constraints, Resistance, and Subtle Action).....	25
1.5.3 Anthropological Frameworks of Social Change: Drivers and Actors	26
1.5.4 Migration as Driver of Social Change	29
2. Afghan Society Then and Now.....	35
2.1 Social Transformation of Afghan Society.....	37
2.1.1 Social Transformation from ‘Above’	37
2.1.2 Social Transformation due to War and Migration.....	45
3. The Social Fabric of Afghan Life:	
Family, Roles, Marriage, and Values.....	55
3.1 The Afghan Family as the Foundation of Social Order.....	56
3.2 Gender Roles and Status.....	60
3.3 Meaning and Practice of Marriage.....	62
3.3.1 Legal and Cultural Overviews of Afghan Marriage Practices	62
3.3.2 Stages of Marital Arrangements (Negotiations)	67
3.3.3 Marriage Between Law and Customs	69
3.4 Important Norms and Values.....	74
3.4.1 The Pashtun Tribal Code of Honour.....	74

4. The Afghan Community in Austria	79
4.1 A History of Migration and Flight to Austria	79
4.2 Present-Day Socio-Demographic and Socio-Economic Overview.....	85
4.3 Arriving and Residing in Austria – Challenges to Societal Integration.....	88
 5. Social Change in Marriage Practices Among Afghan Migrants in Austria.....	 92
5.1 Concepts and Idea(ls) in Marriage and Partner Preference – Intergenerational Perspectives	93
5.1.1 The Meaning and Concept of Marriage	93
5.1.2 The Ideal (Marriage) Partner – a Changing Social Construct.....	98
5.2 Locating the Search, Finding a Match: Between Wedding Halls, Instagram, and Family Ties.....	110
5.3 Choosing Change? A Spectrum of Agency in Marriage Practices.....	117
5.3.1 “It was simply all pure tradition” – Constrained or Denied Agency in Partner Choice	118
5.3.2 “I didn’t say anything because I knew her answer” – Subtle and Hidden Agency in Partner Choice	123
5.3.3 “He can kill himself, but not my life” – Overt Agency and Resistance in Partner Choice.....	129
 6. Concluding Remarks	 134
7. References	137
8. Appendix A: Abstract (English)	159
9. Appendix B: Abstract (German).....	160

Preface

When Sohél's¹ engagement was finally broken off, he had already been living in Vienna for two years and had been working at an insurance agency. Despite his broken German, he attracted the most customers and was voted Employee of the Month for the second time in a row. Although he had left war-torn Afghanistan and later his second home Iran for political and economic reasons, it was his impending marriage that kept him in Europe. Back when Sohél was still a young boy in Teheran, a spring visit from his emigrant relatives led to a sudden engagement between him and his second cousin Zara. The marriage, arranged by his Afghan parents and relatives from Austria, was then to be consummated in Vienna a few years later. But when the time came, his soon-to-be-wife refused. She would rather first finish her nursing education, earn money, and, only at a later time, marry a handsome man of her own choosing. Despite his wounded pride, Sohél agreed with her decision, for he too had other plans. His family in Iran, however, did not. The dissolution of the original agreement sparked a dispute between the two families that went beyond Iranian and Austrian borders. Soon after, the international Afghan community discredited the girl and her family for not behaving appropriately and for not respecting gender and cultural norms. "Older people don't understand that we don't live in traditional Afghanistan anymore, things have changed here, we have changed", Sohél informed me. After breaking off his engagement, he secretly began a love life away from the prying eyes of his family. His parents in Iran would certainly disapprove of a non-Afghan partner, but Sohél was determined to change their minds.

¹ This summary preface was taken from the interview with AT5. Names have been changed to protect sensitive information.

1. Introduction

Globalisation and increased international migration have profoundly reshaped patterns of social interaction, resulting in significant changes in the structure and function of families and marriages in different societies. One of the most visible outcomes of these changes is the increasing diversity of marital practices, including the growing number of international and interethnic marriages (Vaughn 2010). Alongside these changes, the process of partner search has also undergone transformational practice. Digital technologies and online dating platforms have significantly expanded the possibilities for meeting potential partners, enabling connections that extend beyond local, national, and even socio-economic boundaries (cf. Potarca 2021; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck-Gernsheim 2011). These social developments have created new spaces in which individuals can engage with alternative forms of intimacy and cohabitation, reflecting a broader societal trend towards personally driven, choice-based approaches to relationships (cf. Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002).

However, such models of partner choice are in stark contrast to Afghan cultural norms, in which marriage is hardly a matter between two individuals; nor is the choice of partner. Entire families are often involved in the strategic decision-making process of selecting a marriage partner, guided by cultural, religious, political and economic principles that vary across Afghanistan's diverse ethnic and social groups. Many of these principles are deeply embedded in tribal and kinship structures, where group affiliation has a high social value. This importance is evident in the widespread custom of arranged, ethnically and religiously endogamous marriage, which represent the most common form among all Afghan groups. Its practice, however, varies and depends on the socio-economic context of family collectives. Therefore, whether *levirate*² marriage is practised, or the bride and groom enter into a love match must be considered in light of the particular circumstances of the families involved.

As the family constitutes the most important social unit in Afghan society, it plays a central role in shaping individuals' lives and relationships, particularly with regard to marriage and partner selection. Decisions in this area are deeply embedded in familial structures, which are governed by age hierarchies and gendered expectations. Authority typically lies with the parental generation, especially elder male relatives, while younger members are expected to comply with established norms.

² Widowed wife marries her husband's brother (see Chapter 3.3.1).

Prevailing gender roles and cultural codes of conduct further define the behavioural imperatives that individuals must navigate according to the social roles they occupy. Yet, these social roles are not static; they are continually changing in response to internal dynamics and external influences within the broader social structure.

Particularly over the past few decades, Afghanistan's social structure has undergone profound and highly visible transformations. The lack of a cohesive family system has repeatedly been exploited by both national and international actors to justify political interventions and to assert control over the Afghan population, imposing particular social ideals and power structures. Efforts to reform marriage practices and enhance the status of women were intended to reshape gender and family dynamics, ultimately facilitating broader societal change. However, these 'top-down' initiatives to 'modernise' existing social norms often produced outcomes that were contrary to the anticipated processes of social cohesion and state-building. This tension is most evident in the deep divisions that continue to characterise Afghan society today. While urban centres, especially Kabul, have acted as the engine of all modernisation efforts, traditional social structures have persisted in rural areas. In addition to regional disparities, the exploitation of Afghanistan's ethnic diversity and diverse expressions of Islamic faith has contributed to continued politicisation and radicalisation. As a result, a prolonged period of conflict and war has forced many Afghans to adapt to local conditions, leading to a restructuring of family life and domestic responsibilities.

In addition, the rise in conflict-driven cross-border migration, particularly to Pakistan and Iran, has contributed to changes in household structures and increasing urbanisation among Afghans. Urban life, coupled with increased access to education and economic opportunities, has fostered a greater awareness of individual rights and social roles, especially among women, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional norms and gender relations (cf. Monsutti 2007; Schetter 2012; Hatch Dupree 1990). While these transformative shifts are significant, they often generate tensions within families and communities. These tensions may become even more pronounced in the context of recent migration to Europe, where contrasting cultural landscapes may further challenge established norms and social expectations.

Following a significant influx of Afghan migrants in 2015 and 2016, Austria has emerged as a key European destination and is now home to the second-largest Afghan community in Europe, with around 50,788 Afghan nationals as of early 2025 (Statistik Austria 2025a). While Afghan migrants come from a variety of ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, recent migration has included new groups from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, many of whom are male minors. Their arrival

has sparked new debates on integration and belonging. In this sense, practices such as arranged and forced marriages, which deviate from Western ideals of individual partner choice, are often used to define ethnic, religious, and moral boundaries within host societies. Such discourses frequently portray Muslim women as passive subjects of patriarchal control (cf. Kofman et al. 2015; Bonjour and de Hart 2013; Eggebo, 2010). In this context, much of the discourse on integration has focused on changes in gender roles and family structures within migrant communities (Grillo 2008; Kofman 1999, 2014). Increasingly, scholars have approached the family as an important unit of analysis, shaped by specific moral logics and culturally embedded frameworks. This perspective has enabled a deeper understanding of the varied processes of adaptation experienced by both older and younger generation of migrants as they navigate their social and structural positioning (see Fischer 2013; Muller 2009). The younger generation often assimilates into the host culture more readily than their parents due to their swift integration into key social institutions, particularly the education system, and their rapid acquisition of language skills and adaptation to local customs. This enables them to navigate complex bureaucratic systems with skill, often leading them to take on the roles of mediator and provider for their families (cf. Vaughn 2010.).

As a result, the extent to which individuals internalise prevailing social norms, values and behaviours has a significant impact on their agency and capacity for decision-making within the family context (Fischer 2013). These shifting roles often lead to intergenerational tensions within families and the wider social sphere. Such tensions can manifest as disputes over issues such as partner choice, dress and employment (Vaughn 2010; Grillo 2008). This dynamic is poignantly captured by 28-year-old Sohel, who reflects: *“They don’t understand that we don’t live in traditional Afghanistan anymore. Things have changed here; we have changed”*.

1.1 Outline of Thesis

As outlined in the introductory chapter, this thesis examines social change within Afghan society in the context of migration, paying particular attention to intergenerational dynamics. Adopting an anthropological approach, it explores how long-standing social structures and traditional marriage practices are negotiated, contested and transformed through migration to Austria.

Chapter 1 gives the central research questions and objectives, situates the study within key theoretical frameworks on migration and social change, and justifies the

use of an anthropological approach. By foregrounding the agency of migrants within broader global structures, the chapter establishes a conceptual foundation for analysing processes of social transformation within the Afghan migrant community.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 2 provides essential background on the historical transformations that have shaped contemporary Afghan society's socio-cultural fabric. It examines internally driven and externally imposed reform efforts, including those related to state-building, modernisation campaigns and foreign interventions. It also considers the impact of prolonged conflict and migration on Afghan social structures and ideologies, whether through internal displacement or exile to neighbouring or Western countries. Returnees, NGOs, and digital technologies such as social media contribute to the shifting of social norms.

The Afghan family unit is the focus of Chapter 3, with a particular emphasis on gender roles and relational dynamics. The chapter outlines the structure of the 'traditional' Afghan household and the relationships within it, including those between spouses, parents and children, and extended kin. While acknowledging variation across ethnic and social groups, the chapter emphasises shared gender and social norms that are shaped by religion, tradition and local customs. It also notes the distinctions between rural and urban settings in this matter. Moreover, the discussion examines marriage practices in terms of the various forms of union, transfer arrangements, prohibitions and preferences, and the stages of marital negotiations, while also outlining state interventions situated at the intersection of law and customs. Finally, it discusses core values such as honour (*nang*), shame (*sharm*) and respect for elders, which form the foundation of Afghanistan's moral and social order. These culturally embedded norms regulate gender roles, intergeneration hierarchies and reinforce kinship-based responsibilities, thereby sustaining social cohesion and continuity amidst broader societal change.

Chapter 4 presents an overview of the Afghan community in Austria. It traces the historical phases of migration, outlines the current social and economic structure of the population and examines the challenges Afghans face upon arrival.

Chapter 5 discusses the empirical findings of my qualitative research among the Afghan community in Austria. This research was based on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. The chapter explores changing marriage practices and partner selection, with a focus on intergenerational dynamics and the tensions between parental expectations and the autonomy of younger Afghans. Section 5.1 discusses the conceptual frameworks that shape attitudes towards marriage, including the values and ideals of different generations. Section 5.2 outlines the three main ways in which young Afghans find spouses: family networks, community gath-

erings and social media. It highlights the coexistence of family-led matchmaking and partnerships initiated by individuals. Section 5.3 analyses the emerging forms of agency among young Afghans as they navigate traditional expectations and assert their autonomy, identifying patterns ranging from conformity to self-determination.

The key findings of the thesis, which emphasise how Afghan marriage practices adapt to social change in the context of migration to Austria can be found in the concluding remarks of Chapter 6. It reflects on the complex interplay between tradition and transformation, illustrating how individuals, particularly young Afghan migrants, navigate their sense of agency within systems deeply rooted in religion, kinship and community expectations. The chapter also highlights the importance of anthropological perspectives in capturing the nuances of these social changes.

1.2 Research Topic, Objectives, and an Anthropological Approach to the Problem

Based on the assumption that migration conditions social change, this thesis explores the transformative effects of migration on marriage practices and partner choice among members of the Afghan community in Austria. Specifically, it examines how ideals, attitudes and practices surrounding marriage are shaped, enacted, and negotiated within intergenerational dynamics – where younger individuals often find themselves navigating between personal preferences and the more traditional expectations held by their parents, extended family, and the wider community. These divergences frequently give rise to tensions around values, gender roles, and decision-making power, particularly in a context where marriage is not only a personal matter but deeply embedded in familial and communal structures.

When examining these changes, I distinguish between two generational groups for analytical purposes: the ‘younger’, ‘marriageable’ or ‘child generation’ and the ‘older’ or ‘parental generation’. This generational distinction is not strictly defined by chronological age, but by social positioning and life stage. The younger generation includes individuals who are at a transitional stage in their lives — typically of marriageable age³, unmarried or newly married, and often without children or with very young ones. In contrast, the older generation consists of individuals whose children are in the aforementioned transitional stage. They typically occupy authoritative positions within the family and play an active role in guiding their children through

³ All interviewees were above the age of 18.

the transition into married life. This generational framework is both relational and situational, reflecting how age, authority and experience are culturally and socially embedded and perceived within the Afghan community.

To better understand these social dynamics, however, it is necessary to pay attention to the changing, social and structural conditions (e.g. access to education, labour market participation, housing, integration policies, availability of support structures such as social network, NGOs and community organisations) that influence intergenerational relations in diasporic settings. In this context, the analytical approach is informed by two core assumptions. First, that children of migrants tend to adapt more rapidly to the sociocultural environment of the host society, particularly through language acquisition, schooling, and peer interaction. Second, that through this accelerated integration, they assume new social roles and responsibilities within the family, contributing to shifting power relations and altered family dynamics (see Fischer 2013; Muller 2009). These changes therefore create a compelling space to explore how young people assert agency in navigating decisions about marriage and relationships—decisions that are often collectively made, heavily gendered, and situated within power hierarchies of age and kinship.

From this, my key research question emerges:

How does migration influence the negotiation of agency and social/cultural norms in marriage and partner choice among young Afghans in Austria – and what broader dynamics of social change can be observed within the migrant community as a result?

Addressing these questions requires careful consideration of key methodological challenges in the study of social transformation. To begin with, one major issue is how to identify and document change as it happens. Social change is rarely immediate visible or easily measurable; more often than not, it only becomes apparent in retrospect, once new patterns have stabilised and can be meaningfully compared with previous conditions (see Chapter 1.5.1). This temporal delay poses a significant challenge for empirical research. Another important concern is how to investigate shifts in norms, values and practices without resorting to fixed dichotomies, such as *traditional* versus *modern*. Relying on such binaries can oversimplify complex processes and obscure the nuanced ways in which transformation occurs and moreover, risk imposing normative hierarchies – implicitly valorising the *modern* as progressive and desirable, while casting the *traditional* as static, regressive, or, in the Afghan context, as inherently tribal (see Rigby 1972; Ortner 1973; Hobsbawm 2012).

Such framing obscures the dynamic process through which norms and practices are continually negotiated. This prompts a significant question for anthropological research: How can we meaningfully describe and analyse long-standing practices and values – without reifying static notions of ‘tradition’?

In this thesis, I use the term *traditional* more as a heuristic category than an ontological statement. I use it to refer to social norms and practices that have gained widespread legitimacy within Afghan society over time. However, as anthropologists have argued, what is taken to be ‘tradition’ is always historically situated and socially constructed (Hobsbawm 2012). Rather than treating tradition as a fixed point of departure, I examine how it is continually rearticulated in response to shifting social, political, and migratory contexts.

To capture this complexity, I adopt a historical approach throughout this thesis. This enables me to trace the changing significance of important social norms, values and practices in Afghan society, particularly in relation to marriage and partner selection. Decades of political upheaval, prolonged conflict, and forced displacement have profoundly shaped family dynamics, moral frameworks, and broader social structures (see Chapter 2). Importantly, this historical perspective is essential for understanding the flexibility of these social structures – defined by patterns of roles, expectations, and hierarchies. Periods of rupture unsettle established norms and create opportunities for reinterpretation, negotiation and change. It is often during these uncertain times that individuals reveal themselves as active agents – not through dramatic or revolutionary acts, but through the subtle, everyday negotiations that gradually reshape social norms and practices (cf. Kanai and Rottmann 2021, Monutti 2007). However, when conducting social research in this area, it is important to recognise that social rules and norms are reflected in everyday actions and interactions, but observable behaviour does not always align with individual intentions or desires. People often navigate and respond to social expectations shaped by influential figures, such as family members, and express their agency in various ways.

Hence, to investigate how individuals negotiate these dynamics, ethnographic methods – such as in-depth interviews and participant observation – are particularly valuable. These approaches enabled me to explore what Afghan migrants do, how and why they make certain choices within the constraints of family and cultural expectations, and the pressures they face. By focusing on lived experience and the nuanced interplay between agency and structure within the context of migration, this thesis uncovers the subtle ways in which individuals adapt to, resist or reinterpret social norms and values in their everyday lives, often employing discreet strategies rather than overt acts (see Chapter 5). From this perspective, social change is un-

derstood as a continuous, negotiated process that unfolds within and across generations, rather than merely a matter of visible transformative outcomes applying to static dichotomies.

1.3 State of the Art

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the state of research relevant to the complex intersection of migration, social change, and the Afghan diaspora. The discussion is structured along several thematic strands, including general scholarship on social change and transnational migration, anthropological studies of the Afghan population in Afghanistan focusing on marriage practices, family structures, and value systems in historical and contemporary contexts, and research on Afghan transnational migration and displacement with a particular focus on diasporic communities in Austria. By highlighting these areas of research, I aim to achieve two objectives: firstly, to contextualise the Afghan population within broader academic discussions in migration and social transformation; and secondly, to draw attention to specific research gaps that this thesis seeks to address.

European migration studies initially concentrated on regional and national contexts, but from the late 20th century onward, increasing mobility and the intensification of cross-border social, economic, and cultural ties prompted a decisive turn towards transnational perspectives (Six-Hohenbalken 2009). This shift encouraged scholars to move beyond nation-bound frameworks and to examine migration within broader global structures, focusing on its reciprocal relationship with processes of social change (Van Hear 2010). Within this perspective, structural approaches have been central to understanding how migration reshapes societies. Portes (2010) conceptualises migration as a form of social change that, while often producing incremental shifts, can lead to profound transformations in less developed sending regions through the transnationalisation of culture, networks, and economic practices. Castles (2010) complements this view by situating migration within broader structural transformations, demonstrating that it both reflects and accelerates shifts in institutions, social hierarchies, and power relations. Building on these frameworks, network and systems approaches have examined the internal dynamics that sustain migration. De Haas and Fransen (2018), for instance, emphasise the importance of feedback mechanisms in both sending and receiving countries, providing an explanation as to why migration systems expand, stagnate or decline. King and Skeldon (2010) further develop this analysis by linking internal

and international migration, return flows, integration, and the migration-development nexus. They demonstrate how migration operates within interconnected social, economic, and political systems.

Beyond highlighting structural and system dynamics, scholars have increasingly emphasised the role of migrants in driving social change. Bakewell (2010), for instance, demonstrates how migrants overcome structural limitations and seize opportunities, thereby actively shaping the social systems they inhabit. In particular, anthropological approaches add an important dimension by foregrounding the cultural and social aspects of transnational migration. Studies in this field emphasise the importance of household, kinship and everyday social networks in explaining how mobility challenges traditional social boundaries and transform individual lives and communities (see Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Studies of ‘classic sending countries’ in the Global South further demonstrate that migration is not a singular event but an ongoing process that drives social and economic transformation over time (cf. Monsutti 2010). Within this context, women’s labour migration has received particular attention, illustrating how women act as agents of social change by challenging gender norms, reshaping households, and influencing broader social and economic structures (cf. Kofman 1999; Bachan 2018). Building on this focus on agency, anthropological research has also turned to the micro-level, exploring the intimate, everyday effects of migration. By analysing transformations in marriage, kinship, and domestic practices, scholars demonstrate how global migration processes are lived and negotiated within households and communities (Vaughn 2010; Six-Hohenbalken 2009). Such studies thereby bridge macro-level dynamics with lived experience, showing that social change unfolds not only through structural forces but also through the daily practices and relationships that sustain social life (see Chapter 5).

A focus on kinship, marriage and family relations is particularly relevant in the Afghan context, since these areas have long been at the heart of anthropological research. Since the mid-20th century, anthropological research on Afghanistan has consistently treated these themes as key entry points for understanding Afghan society. Early fieldwork, focused on improving the understanding of kinship structures, social organisation and value systems, primarily among rural tribal communities and pastoral nomads (Dupree 1973; Barfield 1981; Glatzer 1977). By the 1960s and 1970s, the scope of this research had expanded to include ethnicity (Barth 1998) and gender (Olesen 1982; Tapper & Tapper 1982; Knabe 1977), which were often framed in terms of concepts such as shame, honour and power. However, much of this early scholarship disproportionately focused on Pashtun groups, particularly

nomadic tribes, with Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of conduct, emerging as a central theme (Glatzer 1998, 2000, 2002; Steul 1980, 1981; Rzehak 2011; see also Chapter 3.4.1). This strong emphasis created a notable bias in the literature, leaving the diversity of Afghanistan's other ethnic and social groups comparatively under-explored. From the 1980s onwards, attention shifted towards marriage practices and family dynamics (Tapper 1981; Tapper and Tapper 1982; Anderson 1982; Shalinsky 1980a, 1984, 1989a). Tapper's *Bartered Brides* (1991a) offered a seminal analysis of marriage and gender among nomadic Pashtuns, situating household structures and domestic politics within broader identity frameworks. Her companion work (Tapper 1991b) examined women's power and agency. Other studies have further explored kinship and marriage as instruments of social and political consolidation (Rasuly-Paleczek 1994; Smith 2009; Berrenberg 2002). The scope of research on gender relations was further expanded to address household roles, parent-child dynamics, and women's positions in shifting socio-political contexts (Hatch Dupree 2001a; 2001b, 2002; Shalinsky 1980b, 1986, 1989b; Kreile 1997).

In addition, the political upheavals of the late 20th century broadened the scope of anthropological research in Afghanistan. Scholars increasingly examined the effects of state-building and transformation on Afghan society (Rasuly 1993, 1997; Grevemeyer 1987, 1988, 1989; Nawid 1999; Lee 2022; Sharan 2018; Wilde and Mielke 2013). Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, intensified international engagement fostered new research agendas. The influx of humanitarian and development actors encouraged collaboration between academics, NGOs, and international organisations, often blurring the line between scholarship and applied policy work (Monsutti 2013). While this engagement produced valuable insights into human rights, democratisation, and social change, it also raised ethical questions regarding representation and research practice. Within this context, feminist and development-oriented studies gained prominence, particularly those exploring women's empowerment and shifting gender relations (Abirafeh 2009; Skaine 2008; Echavez 2012; Ahsan 2018, 2021). Abu-Lughod's (2002) critique of reductive portrayals of Muslim women strongly influenced this work, emphasising the agency of women within their own cultural frameworks. At the same time, classical ethnographic approaches grounded in long-term fieldwork have declined, constrained by security issues and broader disciplinary shifts. While these earlier studies offered detailed accounts of Afghan family life, gender roles, and cultural identities, they sometimes leaned toward essentialist interpretations. Contemporary scholarship increasingly adopts discursive or policy-oriented perspectives (e.g. Chiovenda 2020) and inte-

grates insights from migration and integration studies (see sections below), reflecting the evolving methodological and thematic priorities in the field.

The Soviet intervention of the late 1970s marked a turning point for Afghan studies, as large scale-displacement made transnational mobility a central focus of research (cf. Monsutti 2013; Rasuly-Paleczek 2019). As ethnographic fieldwork inside Afghanistan has been severely constrained due to political upheavals and conflict situations, anthropological scholars redirected attention to refugee and diaspora communities. Early studies traced Afghan movements to Europe, North America, and Australia; however, more extensive fieldwork developed in major host countries such as Pakistan, and later Iran (Centlivres-Demont 1994; AREU 2006a, 2006b; Monsutti 2007; Boesen 1990). This body of research demonstrates how migration and exile have generated new forms of social change. Schetter (2012), for example, examined transformations within Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, while Hatch Dupree (1990) focused specifically on changes affecting Afghan women in these settings. Monsutti (2007) analysed the migration of young men to Iran, highlighting it both as a survival strategy and as an empowering, transformative process, whereas Hoodfar (2004) explored the evolving roles of Afghan women in Iran. Together, these studies underscore the significance of migrant networks, gender, and generational dynamics in shaping how displacement reshapes Afghan social life across borders.

The influx of migrants from the Middle East to Europe in the early 2000s stimulated new discussions on social and cultural change, both within academia and European societies more broadly. Driven by a pan-European political agenda emphasising integration, research has focused extensively on the adaptation of migrant groups, particularly in relation to family migration policies that reflect cultural gender norms and ideals of family life (Shaw 2001; Balzani 2006; Beck-Gernsheim 2006a, 2006b). Within this context, marriage practices have been treated as key markers of inclusion and exclusion, delineating ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries within host societies. Scholars such as Eggebø (2010), Bonjour and de Hart (2013), and Kofman et al. (2015) have shown how forced and arranged marriages, perceived as contradicting the EU norm of free spouse choice, have influenced restrictive migration policies and reinforced portrayals of Muslim women as victims of community-based patriarchal structures. Their work underscores how political narratives deploy gender categories to construct distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ thereby contributing to the formation of national identities (see also Beck-Gernsheim 2007).

At the same time, policy-oriented research has highlighted the potential of Muslim migrant women as agents of transformative change—a perspective embedded in various European strategies, including initiatives in Austria. These efforts aim to

enhance women's roles within families and communities while facilitating cultural adaptation and social integration of migrant groups. Framing women as politically significant actors has prompted renewed debate on the interplay between social research, policy agendas, and the broader academic environment (Kohlenberger et al. 2021, 2022). This focus on agency and transformation has also shaped methodological and theoretical developments in contemporary scholarship, including studies on Afghan populations in Austria, where social and cultural change is often analysed through processes of adaptation and integration into host-society norms and values.

Hence, much of the research on the Afghan diaspora in Austria has focused on topics such as labour market integration, asylum and naturalisation processes, social inclusion, educational trajectories, and broader aspects of integration (e.g., ÖIF 2022; ICMPD 2020, 2021, 2022; Kohlenberger et al. 2022; Kuschej and Angleitner 2020; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018). These studies have provided valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of social and structural integration and have informed public discourse and policy development. However, they frequently emphasise measurable outcomes and policy-relevant indicators, often overlooking the complex cultural and social dynamics and the everyday lived experiences that are central to ethnographic inquiry (see e.g. Kohlbacher and Schiocchet 2017; Goritschnig 2021; Kohlbacher et al. 2020).

More recently, research has increasingly focused on family relations, gender roles, and changing social values within the Afghan diaspora in Austria (cf. Kohlbacher et al. 2017). The report discussed in Chapter 1.4.2, *Afghans in Austria – Perspectives on Integration, Inclusion and Togetherness* (2020), provides one of the first comprehensive studies of the Afghan community in Austria, addressing shifts in values and family expectations. Similarly, the Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF), in collaboration with the Austrian Institute for Family Research at the University of Vienna, published '*Integrationsfaktor Familie*' (see Geserick et al. 2019), which examines changes in family structures at the intersection of integration and family life. Other studies on social change in migration contexts emphasize the role of women and their empowerment; for example, Kohlenberger et al. (2021, 2022) explore social inclusion and the roles of refugee women within family structures.

While existing studies provide valuable insights into changing family and gender roles, as well as shifting values, they largely frame their analyses within an integration paradigm. This often results in the deeper, everyday dynamics of family life within the Afghan diaspora being overlooked. In particular, shifts in intergenerational relationships, gender roles and the negotiation of cultural expectations within families are not immediately observable and require in-depth, contextualised analy-

sis. My research addresses this gap by adopting an emic perspective and employing anthropological methods such as in-depth interviews and year-long fieldwork (see Chapter below 1.4). I examine these transformations using marriage practices as a lens. Considering marriage as a key area of social and family negotiation provides a unique perspective on how Afghan migrants adapt to changing family dynamics and gender roles in Austria. By focusing on the lived experiences, everyday practices, and decision-making processes of individuals and families, this approach provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the social changes occurring within diaspora communities. In doing so, my thesis not only contributes to scholarship on the Afghan diaspora, but also to broader debates on migration-induced social change.

1.4 Methodological Framework and Data Collection

This thesis presents the findings of a two-part research process that took place in Austria, primarily in Vienna, between 2017 and 2022. Ethnography served as the primary method to investigate the Afghan migrant community, examining its members, behaviours, and ideas (cf. Knoblauch und Vollmer 2019:599). To collect data, I used qualitative methods, including ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation. Overall, this thesis adopted a multi-method approach, incorporating different types of data such as interview transcripts, field notes and literature to ensure a comprehensive and diverse range of data sources.

1.4.1 Field Access and Initial Engagement with the Afghan Community in Austria

My first encounter with the Afghan community in Austria took place in 2017, when I was seeking interview partners for a research project on refugee integration at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (see Chapter 1.4.2). To initiate contact, I reached out to an Afghan cultural association in Vienna's first district, asking if I could visit and have an informal chat with its members. At the time, the association was offering values and orientation courses for Afghan refugees who had recently arrived, many of whom had come from not only Afghanistan, but also Iran and Pakistan. The participants were of various ages and ethnic backgrounds, including Pashtuns, Hazaras and Tajiks, but they all shared the experience of having arrived in Austria recently.

Most had received little formal education, with some having never attended school at all. Many came from rural parts of Afghanistan and had never been to Kabul, let alone a European country. As newcomers, they were still unfamiliar with Austria's cultural, economic and social norms.

Upon my arrival, I was warmly welcomed and unexpectedly asked to present certificates at the course's closing ceremony. The director, a long-standing member of Austrian society with over 30 years' residency, introduced me as an 'Austrian integration officer'. This title felt unfamiliar to me and was at odds with my self-perception as an anthropologist engaged in participant observation. Yet for many of the attendees, my presence seemed to symbolise interest and recognition from Austrian society.

After the ceremony, I spoke to two women whose stories made a deep impression on me. One of them, a former lawyer in her late forties, had lived in Iran before fleeing to Austria with her seventeen-year-old daughter to protect her from a forced marriage. Her goal was to secure her daughter's right to an education and personal freedom. The other woman, who was in her mid-fifties, had also fled an arranged marriage. Educated and articulate, she hoped to start a new life in Austria with her son and daughter.

This initial encounter marked the beginning of my deeper engagement with Vienna's Afghan community. Over the years, I was invited to numerous events by individuals I had met through my research. Many of these gatherings focused on young Afghans who arrived during the large-scale migration of 2015 and 2016 (see Chapter 4.1) and ranged from sports tournaments and educational workshops to cultural celebrations.

At one such event, a young Hazara woman invited me to her graduation celebration, organized by an association dedicated to promoting educational achievement among Afghan youth in Austria. The ceremony, held annually, publicly honoured over 50 young Afghans for reaching significant academic milestones. Our connection grew into a close friendship, and two years later, she invited me to her wedding.

I also participated in cultural events designed to bring together Afghans from different ethnic groups, such as Pashtuns, Hazaras and Tajiks, with the aim of fostering unity and overcoming the deep-rooted divisions that have long characterised Afghan society (see Chapter 2). These gatherings, often centred around poetry, music, and storytelling, fostered shared cultural spaces that celebrated the idea of *togetherness*—as one event was aptly titled. At one such occasion, I was invited to co-moderate the program alongside a young Afghan Hazara woman. While she presented in Persian, I spoke in German. Together, we symbolically embodied the Afghan and Austrian communities, contributing to a vision of inclusion and intercultural solidarity.

These moments exemplified the dual role I sometimes inhabited during my field-work: while I was positioned as an observer seeking to understand social dynamics and cultural expressions, I was simultaneously an active participant. Through such engagements, my presence therefore extended beyond that of a passive researcher. This approach not only enriched the depth of my ethnographic insight but also facilitated trust-building and reciprocal relationships within the community.

These events, alongside broader interactions, deepened my understanding of the diverse background of Afghans living in Austria (see also Chapter 4) and provided continuous guidance on developing my methodological approach.

1.4.2 Conducting Interviews

The first part of the data collection process, which I also refer to as the initial interview phase, is based on data that has been collected as part of a research project on the Afghan community in Austria, in which I was involved as a research assistant at the Institute for Urban and Regional Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences from 2017 to 2020. In this context, I worked together with Asst. Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rasuly-Palczek and MMag. DDr. Josef Kohlbacher on the first comprehensive study on the values and expectations of Afghan immigrants in Austria, titled ‘Afghans in Austria - Perspectives on Inclusion, Integration and Coexistence’⁴.

This study involves interviews with a total of 65 Afghans⁵, comprising 27 women and 38 men, who were living in Upper Austria, Lower Austria, and mainly Vienna at the time. Care was taken to ensure a diverse representation in terms of the year of arrival in Austria (from the 1970s onwards), age (between 18 and 70 years), ethnicity, education, and occupation. Only persons with a positive decision on asylum, subsidiary protection, or those who had acquired Austrian citizenship were interviewed. In addition, we questioned 13 experts from different organisations that work with Afghans residing in Austria (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:13ff.). It is important to note that the project survey covered a wide range of topics, and only the issue of personal attitudes to marriage and preferences in partner choice was rather loosely covered by respondents (see *ibid.*:154–175).

However, throughout the interviews conducted, in addition to the formal questioning, there were often extensive and personal discussions, especially with the

⁴ In German: „Afghan/inn/en in Österreich – Perspektiven von Integration, Inklusion und Zusammenleben“.

⁵ Only the interviews referenced in Chapter 5 are included in the References section.

younger respondents. These discussions heavily centred around the conflicting expectations that arise from both the host society and the Afghan community in Austria and abroad. These expectations were particularly pronounced in the context of social relationships, especially intimate relationships, which were framed within the constructs of gender and marriage. Participants increasingly viewed partner choice to address issues of self-determination and conformity within marital dynamics. The strong contrast I found in these interviews between the younger 'marriageable' generation and those of their older parental counterparts regarding their attitudes and perceptions of marriage and partner choice was supported by reported conflicts within family structures, both at home and in the broader transnational context. This observation, and the fact that partner choice and marriage seem to be prominent concerns among the younger generation, prompted me to explore this phenomenon in greater depth. Consequently, I have adapted my research question(s) to reflect these findings.

In the subsequent interview phase, also referred to as the key research phase as it provides the main data for this thesis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a selected group of young Afghans who were currently facing or had experienced challenges in marriage and/or partner selection. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, I modified the new questionnaire to align with my adapted research questions.

Interview Sample with a Generational and Migration Focus

The decision to focus on young people, particularly those of 'marriageable' age or who had recently married, was based on the assumption that they could provide more meaningful insights into contemporary marriage practices and partner selection than individuals who had married long ago and where no longer engaged in such processes.

Accordingly, I interviewed five individuals – two men and three women – who had either recently got married or had been involved in the marriage process in some way, such as through engagement. One male participant had recently got married; one young woman was engaged at the time of the interview and got married the following year, by whom I was invited to the wedding; and the remaining three had not been married but had all previously been engaged.

Participants were between 19 and 35 years old, an age range chosen for both its direct relevance to the study of contemporary marriage practices and my ability, as someone in my early thirties, to establish generational proximity and build rapport. I deliberately excluded the older parental generation from the second phase of interviews, as I considered it likely that younger participants would feel more comfort-

able and speak more openly about sensitive topics, such as personal aspirations in partner choice, gender roles, and marriage expectations, without their parents' involvement in the study.

All interviewees were first-generation Afghan migrants who primarily resided in Vienna, Austria. Their length of residence ranged from eight to seventeen years. Although their German proficiency varied, their language skills were generally well developed by the time of the interview. They had acquired these skills either through formal German language courses offered as part of Austrian integration measures (see Chapter 4.3), or through participation in the Austrian education system. Their proficiency in German communication was particularly beneficial, as all interviews were conducted in German.

Most participants stated that they arrived in Austria during the large-scale migration of Afghan refugees in 2015 and 2016. Some came via Pakistan and Iran where they had lived for several years before relocating to Austria. As anti-Afghan sentiments and restrictive measures increased in these countries, they saw themselves forced to try to build a life in Europe. In many such cases, their families had already left Afghanistan during the Taliban era (1996–2001) and attempted to rebuild their lives in neighbouring states (see Chapter 2.1.2). In this context it is important to mention that most respondents self-identified as Hazara, a group historically subjected to hostility under Taliban rule and Pashtun dominance (see Chapter 2). Given the sensitive and sometimes ambiguous nature of ethnic identity in this context (cf. Schetter 2005; Röhm 2024), I did not explicitly inquire about ethnic affiliation; rather, such identification emerged organically throughout the interviews when it seemed important to the respondents to mention it. Other respondents stated to have fled escalating violence in Afghanistan, particularly during the withdrawal of international forces, when living conditions in the country significantly deteriorated (see Chapter 2.1.2).

Two participants arrived through family reunification, joining relatives who had already settled in the country. The other three migrated independently, leaving their families behind, and relied heavily on local social networks for guidance and assistance upon their arrival (see Chapter 4.3). Although deteriorating conditions, persecution and fear in their previous countries of residence, such as Pakistan, Iran or Afghanistan, were often cited as a key motivating factor, this was rarely the only reason for migration. Some participants also expressed a desire for better educational and employment opportunities, with the intention of supporting their families from abroad. Others migrated to fulfil personal obligations, such as marriage, within the Afghan diaspora in Austria (see preface example of Sohel). Given the layered and of-

ten intersecting nature of these motivations (see further Chapter 4.1), it is important to critically question the categories used to define and classify such movements.

While I use the term *migrant* throughout this thesis as an umbrella category to refer to Afghans who have arrived and settled in Austria—encompassing a broad spectrum of legal statuses and lived experiences—a more nuanced differentiation is employed where necessary for contextual clarity. There, a distinction is made between *migrants* and *refugees* to more accurately reflect the diverse trajectories and motivations shaping Afghan mobility (see Chapters 1.5.4 and 4.1). The former refers to individuals who came to Austria primarily in pursuit of education, employment, or improved life opportunities, while the latter designates those who fled Afghanistan or secondary host countries due to conflict, persecution, or threats to personal safety (cf. UNHCR 2019). This distinction has significant implications for legal classification, eligibility for protection, and the type of institutional support available upon arrival (see Chapter 4.3). However, the boundary between voluntary and forced migration is often fluid. Migration decisions are usually influenced by a variety of factors, such as economic hardship, insecurity, family obligations and political instability (Rasuly-Paleczek 2017). This makes it difficult to categorise people strictly as one or the other.

Furthermore, the decision to focus exclusively on young Afghan migrants in the second phase of this research is informed by their greater adaptability to new socio-cultural environments, distinguishing them from older generations (see also Chapter 1.2). This generational distinction highlights their potential as key drivers of social and cultural change, particularly in marriage practices within the migration context. Hence, by concentrating on this group, the study aims to offer deeper insights into the ways marriage norms are negotiated and transformed, placing their experiences at the centre of understanding broader processes of social change.

Handling Sensitive Data

As this thesis deals with highly personal and sensitive topics, protecting the anonymity of all interviewees and ensuring the responsible handling of their data are of the utmost importance to me as the researcher conducting this study. Therefore, quotations from interviews are referenced only by interview number. Potentially identifying information such as year of arrival, age, ethnic affiliation, and other specific characteristics are excluded from the citation brackets. When essential for understanding, these details are provided cautiously. This approach was deliberate, as many interviews addressed personal issues that could have serious social repercussions if the individuals were directly linked to them.

Interview Design and Implementation

To explore key themes and capture the complexities of participants' lived experiences, this study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Guided by pre-formulated questions to ensure thematic consistency and comparability (see Helfferich 2019:675), the interview guide was designed as a flexible framework rather than a rigid script. This allowed participants to respond freely and narratively, sharing specific episodes and reflections—particularly on marriage aspirations, partner choice, and family expectations—thereby adding an episodic dimension to the data (cf. Flick 2014:274f.). Clarity and simplicity in question phrasing were prioritized due to varying German proficiency and length of stay among participants (cf. Helfferich 2019:677). To maintain conversational flow and depth, I adapted the order of questions as needed, revisiting topics later if required. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of participants' realities while keeping the focus aligned with the research objectives.

All interviews were conducted anonymously and in person, predominantly in quiet, private settings chosen by the participants. This helped to create a relaxed and safe atmosphere, particularly given the sensitive nature of the subject matter. On average, interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes.

1.4.3 Participant Observation

Although semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the cultural meanings and linguistic categories employed by the participants (see Knoblauch and Vollmer 2019:609), I recognised the limitations of relying solely on this method. Recognising that reality is not singular, but a shared construct shaped through social interaction and mutual expectations (see Girtler 2001:40), I realised that it is challenging to fully capture cultural typifications and symbolisations through interviews alone.

To address this issue, I complemented the interview data with participant observation, drawing on the methodological traditions of Malinowski and Weber. This approach served not only as tool for data collection but also as a crucial means of establishing trust and rapport within the Afghan community in Vienna. During these interactions, I openly communicated the purpose of my research to legitimise my presence. While maintaining a respectful and non-intrusive stance, I actively listened, posed questions, and engaged in spontaneous conversations (cf. Girtler 2001:60–61). This flexible approach allowed themes to emerge organically, revealing nuanced per-

spectives that might have been overlooked in more structured settings. It also facilitated the iterative refinement of research hypotheses and focus (cf. Girtler 2001:56–57). By focusing on specific aspects, such as social interactions and practical rituals, during observation, I was able to adapt the interview questionnaire to better align with the evolving objectives of the research (cf. Knoblauch and Vollmer 2019: 608).

Instead of following a strict chronological sequence, I alternated between conducting interviews and carrying out participant observation. As observations took also place between the initial project survey and the second phase of interviews, they provided me with deeper contextual insights that informed subsequent interviews and the development of the semi-structured questionnaire. Hence, this combined approach allowed me to contextualise verbal accounts within observed social interactions and behaviours, resulting in a richer, more nuanced understanding of the group's shared meanings and cultural interpretations.

Overall, I conducted participant observation within the Afghan community between 2017 and 2024, albeit on a sporadic basis. During this time, I actively engaged with community members in various social settings, such as intimate family gatherings, cultural celebrations, weddings and everyday communal interactions (see Chapter 1.4.1). This extensive involvement enabled me to develop a profound and nuanced comprehension of the community's social dynamics, cultural practices, and prevailing norms. Furthermore, it provided valuable insight into the challenges faced by young Afghans when migrating to Austria, and how they navigate and address these issues within their social networks and community (see Chapter 4.3).

1.4.4 Data Analysis

To collect my data, I recorded all interviews using an audio device and took detailed notes during informal conversations and fieldwork. I created protocols for each interview to document socio-demographic information, the interview context and key thematic elements. I transcribed the semi-structured interviews using transcription software to convert the audio recordings into written text for in-depth analysis.

The qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti played a central role in managing the dataset and enabled basic coding and the retrieval of text segments. It also supported more advanced analytical techniques, such as semantic network construction and conceptual analysis (cf. Dowling 2008:36–37). These tools facilitated the integration of empirical data with theoretical concepts, enabling iterative movement

between data and theory, the establishment of connections among data points, and the identification of emerging patterns and relationships (cf. *ibid.*).

I then applied qualitative content analysis to the transcribed texts, guided by a predefined coding scheme (cf. Mayring and Fenzl 2019:643). This systematic approach enabled the efficient processing of a large volume of textual data by focusing on relevant material. Throughout the analysis, the coding guide was refined and expanded iteratively. Text passages were assigned to main and sub-codes and interpreted within the context of the theoretical framework (cf. Schreier et al. 2020; Silverman 2014:116).

As this thesis examines the dynamics of social change, it focuses on the transitions between historical ('traditional') and contemporary social practices, ideas, and structures. While ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation provide rich qualitative data on current lived experiences, the study also draws extensively on secondary sources—including academic literature and historical records—to reconstruct historical or 'traditional' practices and frameworks. It is important to emphasize that the term 'traditional' is not used to suggest a fixed or unchanging set of norms but rather denotes social states or structures that have been historically established and widely accepted within a community over an extended period (see Chapter 1.2). Recognizing that social practices are inherently dynamic, this approach highlights their continuous change/transformation over time.

Thus, by placing historical contexts alongside contemporary experiences, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of patterns of continuity and transformation within social structures, while critically engaging with spectrums of agency of individuals across cultural, social, and generational contexts.

Managing information and writing (with AI)

ChatGPT and Perplexity

I used these tools during my writing process primarily to support the structuring and outlining of larger sections of this thesis. They also assisted in summarising extensive texts, for example to evaluate whether particular books or academic papers were relevant to the thematic focus of the study. In some instances, I used them to generate literature suggestions related to specific topics I was working on. Although such recommendations were often limited in number and of only partial usefulness, they occasionally served as a starting point that guided me toward further sources, which I then located through online databases and public libraries. All information

and suggestions provided by the tools were critically assessed and subsequently rephrased, expanded, or discarded.

DeepL

As a non-native English speaker, I mainly used DeepL to support my English writing. The tool provided suggestions for grammar, wording and phrasing, serving as a form of proofreading assistance. I carefully reviewed each translation and, in almost all cases, refined the style. Additionally, as all interview transcripts were originally in German, I used DeepL to translate the excerpts included in this thesis. To ensure compliance with EU GDPR regulations and interview confidentiality, all personal data and identifiable information were removed from all interview sections prior to translation.

1.5 Definitions and Theoretical Framework

When examining phenomena such as migration and social change, several guiding theoretical questions arise that are central to this thesis. What is meant by *social change*, and through which conceptual lens should it be approached when investigating processes of transnational migration? If migration is considered a driver of such change, in what ways and to what extent does it contribute—whether within broader societal structures, through the dynamics of transnational networks, to community and family life? This raises a further question: what role do individual migrants play in these processes, and how do their actions and experiences interact with or challenge collective family dynamics as well as prevailing social and cultural norms?

To address these questions, this chapter situates the discussion within broader debates on migration and social change in the social sciences, with particular attention to anthropological theoretical frameworks. These frameworks conceptualize migration not merely as the movement of people across borders, but as a socially embedded process that intersects with changing dynamics of agency, identity, and structure. This perspective enables an analytical approach that attends both to the structural conditions regulating and constraining processes of social change and to the transformative potentials emerging from migrants' everyday practices and transnational engagements. Building on this conceptual foundation, this chapter offers guidance for understanding the broader historical processes of social transformation discussed in Chapter 2 and the more nuanced dynamics of contemporary social change examined in Chapter 5.

1.5.1 A Conceptual Approach to Social Change

Within the social sciences, *social change* is not a fixed or universally agreed category but rather a contested analytical lens for interpreting shifting patterns of social life. Since definitions of social change are themselves products of particular intellectual traditions and political contexts (see 1.3) it is necessary to situate its meaning within the scope of this thesis.

Broadly rooted in sociology, *social change* can be understood as the transformation of mechanisms within the social structure, manifested through shifts in cultural symbols, behavioural norms, social organisation, or value systems (Wilterdink and Form n.d.). Social change in the broadest sense can therefore be seen as any transformation within the *social relations* of societies.

Social relations form the foundational framework of any society or social group, shaping patterns of interaction. These interactions are structured through social roles, which prescribe expected behaviours while allowing for individual variation, and are embedded within status hierarchies and power relations that determine access to resources and influence (see Linton 1945, Bourdieu 1986), these roles, hierarchies, and interactions constitute the social structure, which organizes and simultaneously constrains individual action. Social change thus occurs when shifts in social relations, roles, or status hierarchies alter these patterns, reshaping the social structure and redistributing power, as illustrated in the experiences of Afghan migrants in Vienna (see Chapter 5).

In social science debates, the term *social change* and *cultural change* are often used interchangeably, making it necessary to clarify the concepts of *society* and *culture*. Here, anthropological distinguish between two main perspectives. In a narrower sense, *culture* refers to the beliefs, ideas, and behaviours of a group, while *society* denotes the social group that shares and reproduces them (Barnard and Spencer 2002:136–140; Viveiros de Castro 2002:514f.). From a broader perspective, the two concepts are treated synonymously, with *culture* understood as the general way of life of social groups that constitute *societies*. This latter approach, however, speaks more to an abstract and general understanding that is rather subject to theoretical argumentations than empirical investigations (Viveiros de Castro 2002:515).

In this thesis, social change is also understood as cultural change, since shifts in patterns of social relations and interactions are always mediated by cultural norms and values. The concept of *culture* employed here thus follows a more holistic perspective associated with the Boasian tradition, in which culture is conceived as an integrated system of symbols, values, and ideas (Barnard and Spencer 2002: 136–

139). Building on this perspective, Kroeber (1917) emphasised the *sui generis* character of culture, arguing that it exists beyond the individual organism and functions as a collective phenomenon that structures and directs human action and behaviour (cf. Barnard and Spencer 2002:136–139).

When analysing phenomena of social change, the related concept of *social transformation* is also frequently addressed. However, the latter has only recently become popular in social science debates, with scholars often denoting social transformation as a more radical form of change with a greater, more far-reaching impetus, occurring on a deeper scale and altering people's ways of life within limited timespans (cf. Vashum 2019). Conversely, social change is used to describe minor, persistent changes to the social organisation or structure of societies, such as changes to family and marriage institutions. Therefore, social transformation suggests fundamental societal change, while social change conceptualises gradual or incremental changes over time (ibid.). However, as the extent, scope, persistence and radicality of change are difficult to determine, both terms are used interchangeably throughout this thesis to address changes in patterns of social relations at a general level. Differences in terms of scope and persistence will be pointed out explicitly.

Moreover, analysing social change presents significant methodological challenges in anthropology because these processes are not directly observable but must be inferred retrospectively through their outcomes (Dwyer and Minnegal 2010). Barth (1967) addresses this by emphasizing the temporal dimension of change, conceptualizing it as an alteration occurring over time within pre-existing constraints. He argues that rather than assuming shifts in values or social categories, scholars should focus on changes in circumstances that make alternative behaviours or resource allocations more advantageous. Social groups, from this perspective, are understood by aggregating individual behaviours into patterned customs, which are themselves inferred from representative examples rather than directly measured. Barth proposes that by quantifying social patterns as distributions of time and resource allocations, these otherwise hidden processes of change can be observed and analysed. This approach reveals how evolving social forms are shaped through individual choices interacting with environmental and structural constraints (Barth 1967).

This dual emphasis on agency and structure remains central to scholarly debates on the nature, causes, and consequences of social change. It highlights the need to account both for how social actors adapt to and transform their environments, and for how broader structural conditions shape and constrain these actions (Hernes 2001). To engage this structure–agency debate, the following section outlines how

agency is conceptualized in this thesis as addressed in Chapter 5.3 and situates this understanding within wider historical anthropological approaches to the term.

1.5.2 A Conceptual Approach to Agency (Constraints, Resistance, and Subtle Action)

The concept of *agency* remains a contested notion in the social sciences, lacking a single systematic definition (cf. Scherr 2013:231). In anthropology, *agency* refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to act, make decisions, and shape the conditions of their lives, though always within cultural, historical, and structural contexts rather than as pure autonomy (CLRN 2024; Encyclopedia Editorial Office 2024; cf. Ortner 2006). In this framework, anthropological approaches emphasise that agency is not an abstract faculty of free will but a socially and culturally situated phenomenon, defined and constrained by wider relations of power, resources, and norms.

Classical social theory addressed the structure–agency problem by emphasizing the enduring tension between systemic constraints and individual action. Bourdieu’s (1979) concept of *habitus*⁶ and Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration advanced the insight that structures are not merely restrictive but also enabling, existing in a recursive relationship with human practice (Scherr 2012:232ff.). From this perspective, agency is never exercised in isolation from power; rather, the capacity to act is always mediated by structures of inequality, access to resources, and institutional constraints (see also *migrant/refugee* discussion below).

While Giddens situates agency within structuration, linking transformative potential to the pervasive influence of institutional power, Sewell (1992) extends this by showing how unequal access to resources shapes who can act and how. Ahearn (2001) further illustrates this relationality by showing how social movements exemplify agency embedded in complex and often contradictory power relations. Building on this, anthropological interest in agency since the late twentieth century has been closely tied to political upheavals and collective mobilizations, which highlighted the capacity of collective action to generate rapid social change. Early feminist and subaltern scholarship often equated agency with resistance, portraying marginalized actors as persistently contesting domination (Abu-Lughod 1990),.

⁶ Human experience is largely shaped by habit, where socialization embeds cultural codes into the body. Through this process, social structures generate *habitus*—dispositions that guide practice and, in turn, reproduce those very structures (Rapport and Overing 2003:2).

sometimes through subtle and everyday practices (Scott 1985). However, this ‘resistance paradigm’ has been subject to critique for. Mahmood (2005, 2006), for instance demonstrated that women in Islamic piety movements exercised agency not by opposing patriarchal norms, but by inhabiting and reproducing them as part of a broader moral project.

Anthropological debates have further broadened the concept of agency by identifying practices that fall outside conventional understandings of overt or oppositional action. Waiting, silence, acquiescence, or yielding are increasingly recognised as meaningful modes of navigating social life, contesting liberal notions that equate agency with assertive choice or control (Mazzarella 2021). While concepts such as ‘patience’ foreground forms of engagement that appear non-agentic or passive, such ideas ultimately extend rather than displace agency as a key anthropological concern. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes relational, distributed, and affective dimensions of agency, exploring how it emerges through networks of interdependence, more-than-human assemblages, and shifting configurations of intention, action, and effect (Verhölter 2024).

This shows that agency is context-dependent and expressed in diverse forms—from resistance to compliance, acquiescence, and subtle negotiation (see Chapter 5). By embedding agency within broader structures yet acknowledging its creative and multidimensional expressions, anthropology highlights how social change emerges not only through overt resistance but also through everyday practices that reproduce, transform, or reconfigure the social world.

1.5.3 Anthropological Frameworks of Social Change: Drivers and Actors

This section outlines key anthropological perspectives on social change. These include top-down models that emphasise modernisation, development and elite influence, as well as approaches that highlight conflict, war and migration as drivers of and outcomes in change. These frameworks provide context for the transformation of Afghan society (see Chapter 2) and inform the analysis of contemporary Afghan diaspora dynamics in Austria (see Chapter 5).

Early anthropological theories were influenced heavily by 19th century evolutionary thought⁷ and Social Darwinism, framing social change as a universal, unilin-

⁷ Classical evolutionary approaches were revived in the 20th century, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, by scholars such as Julian Steward and Leslie White. Steward developed the theory of multilinearity.

ear progression from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilised’ societies⁸ (Horton and Hunt 2004:22; Perry and Perry 2016:41f.). These perspectives assumed a linear model of progress that placed Western societies at the pinnacle of development. Cultural relativism later emerged as a critical response, emphasising the importance of understanding social change within local contexts and rejecting ethnocentric hierarchies. In addition, cultural relativists highlighted the complexity of kinship and ritual systems in non-Western societies, underscoring that change is embedded in diverse ways that do not necessarily conform to Western models (ibid.: 54). This critique of Western-centric progress has resurfaced prominently in development and modernisation debates, challenging the assumption that ‘modern societies’ represent a universal ideal. Such critiques reveal how top-down modernisation approaches often mask and perpetuate global inequalities. This is achieved by prioritising Western historical experiences and imposing Western norms and values on diverse societies, without considering their unique cultural, historical and political realities (cf. Perry and Perry 2016:53) (see Chapter 2.1.1).

By the mid-20th century, anthropological focus shifted towards understanding social systems as interdependent and relatively stable, applying structural-functionalist theories (Wilterdink and Form n.d.). Scholars working within these theoretical perspectives conceptualised societies as systems that maintain equilibrium through the functions of various groups and institutions⁹. Social change was seen as a response to disruption of this equilibrium, often triggered when certain values, practices or structures become dysfunctional. Consequently, social change is considered functional if it promotes a harmonious equilibrium; if it has no impact on society, it is considered non-functional (Horton and Hunt 2004:16f.). Within this framework, change ‘from above’, such as through reforms by political elites or institutions, was understood as a mechanism to restore or improve social balance (see

evolution, arguing that patterns of cultural development differ across regions and subregions rather than following a single linear path. Marshall D. Sahlins and Elman Service sought to synthesize evolutionary theories by distinguishing “specific” and “general” evolution, proposing that evolution proceeds simultaneously in biological and cultural domains. These interconnected processes drive both progress and the emergence of new forms from existing ones (cf. Vashum 2019; Wolf 2010:15).

⁸ As an example, Edward Burnett Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan classified contemporary societies on such evolutionary scale. While Tylor ranked societies based on evolutionary religious ideas: from animism through polytheism to monotheism, Morgan classified societies from ‘savage’ through ‘barbarian’ to ‘civilized’, according to their levels of technology, sources of subsistence, which he connected with kinship systems, assuming that monogamy was preceded by polygamy and patrilineal by matrilineal descent (Wilterdink and Form n.d.).

⁹ See here for instance Talcott Parsons (1937) and Robert Merton (1957).

Parsons 1951). Karl Marx's analysis introduced the idea that social cohesion is the result of power relations, where dominant groups impose their values on subordinate ones. For Marx social change arises primarily through class conflict: struggles over economic control that fundamentally reshape social structures and institutions (Horton and Hund 2004:17). Building on Marx's ideas, contemporary conflict theorists incorporate multiple axes of inequality, including ethnicity, gender, and nationality, framing social life as a continuous negotiation of power and resources. From this perspective, social change emerges not through harmonious adjustment but through ongoing struggles and contestations between groups (ibid.).

Anthropologists and sociologists have further expanded conflict theory to stress the transformative potential of acute crises, such as wars and social upheavals. Such moments disrupt existing orders and expose deep-seated tensions, functioning as critical junctures for social and cultural transformation (Visacovsky 2017). For instance, Victor Turner's theory of *liminality* conceptualises these crises as transitional phases where existing structures dissolve, creating opportunities for new social forms to arise (Turner et al. 1969). In this context, anthropological scholars have empirically demonstrated that social groups do not passively endure conflict situations; rather, they actively engage in resistance, negotiation and cooperation, thereby shaping change as dynamic agents (Visacovsky 2017) (see Chapter 3.2).

While war, conflict, and modernization initiatives imposed by political structures have been recognized as significant drivers of social change in anthropological frameworks, isolating any single causal factor remains challenging. Contemporary anthropological approaches understand social change much more as a complex, multidirectional, and context-dependent process that unfolds across multiple scales. Societies and social groups transform through a dynamic interplay of diverse influences—whether internal or external, planned or unplanned—where processes of change and stability often coexist and are deeply interconnected (Vashum 2019). The drivers influencing social change are diverse and include biological, socio-cultural (such as intercultural contact and diffusion), ecological, technological (innovation), demographic (population growth), economic, ideological, political (e.g., war), and other factors (Wilterdink and Form n.d.). Given this complexity, isolating single causal drivers is less productive than examining the types of changes that occur under specific circumstances and conditions (Dwyer and Minnegal 2010).

1.5.4 Migration as Driver of Social Change

In Chapter 2, I examine how war and conflict in Afghanistan have driven migration, producing transformative effects on Afghan societies both within the country and in diaspora communities. Migration, as Portes (2010) theorizes, can be understood in two interrelated ways: as a form of change and as a driver of broader social transformations. The scale and depth of these changes span multiple levels, from micro-level effects on individuals and families, through meso-level transformations in communities, to macro-level impacts on nation-states and global systems (Massey et al. 1998; Massey 1990; Portes 1999, 2010). While surface-level changes may modify roles, norms, and economic arrangements, deeper transformations can reshape cultural values, social structures, and the distribution of power. To fully grasp the implications of migration for social change, it is essential to situate these processes within anthropological frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of social, cultural, and broader global dimensions.

The study of migration and social change has long debated the appropriate level of analysis. Macro-level approaches highlight the structuring influence of states and global economies, while micro-level perspectives foreground the agency of individuals and families (Portes 2010). Political science and economics often emphasise states, labour markets, and policy regimes, employing migration flow and push-pull models, whereas sociology examines migrant integration, considering how race, gender, and class shape experiences and motivations (Dinneen 2010). These frameworks are useful for understanding the historical, political, and social dynamics of Afghan migration, including adaptation and integration in Austria. Emerging in migration studies in the late 1950s and 1960s, anthropology introduced a holistic perspective, with early research closely engaging debates on social and cultural change.

From the 1950s onward, anthropological studies of migration moved beyond narrow community analysis, increasingly seeking to connect local ethnographic research with wider processes such as urbanisation, labour market restructuring and development. The sheer scale of post-war migration – from European guest worker programmes to Mexican labour migration to the United States, as well as internal rural-urban movements in the Global South – highlighted the profound intersection between migration and rapid social transformation (Kearny 1986). In these debates, migration was understood not only as a response to economic and demographic pressures, but also as a force capable of reshaping both sending and receiving societies. Within this framework, development became the central lens through which migration-induced social change was conceptualised. Migrants were viewed

as active agents who could bring modernising influences to their countries of origin. They were expected to assimilate into the host society and stimulate progress by bringing back innovation, skills and ideas (ibid.). This aligned with broader modernisation paradigms in the social sciences, which assumed a linear trajectory from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies (see Redfield 1941). As Kearny (1986) points out, migration was thus integrated into theoretical and policy discourses primarily as a developmental mechanism, supporting the idea that large-scale mobility could accelerate economic and social transformation. Scholars soon criticised modernization theory for its rigid dichotomies (urban/rural, modern/traditional, developed/underdeveloped) and its Eurocentric assumptions. By the late 1960s and 1970s, empirical studies further undermined its optimism, documenting "urbanisation without development": urban growth often produced unemployment, shantytowns, and enduring rural-urban networks (see Lomnitz 1977; Kearney 1986). These findings challenged the notion of linear progress, demonstrating that migration could just as easily reproduce inequality, precarious livelihoods, and social fragmentation as drive development (Skeldon 1997, 2000).

In response, approaches moved beyond a micro-level focus on migrant agency and situated migration within broader structural-historical and political-economic processes such as labour demand, neo-colonial ties, and global inequalities (Kearney 1986). In this context, dependency theory (see Frank 1967) highlighted how colonial and capitalist structures bound peripheral regions to wealthy cores through exploitative labour and resource flows, while world-systems theory (Wallerstein 2004) extended this analysis globally, situating migration within transnational circuits of capital and portraying migrants as constrained by structural forces (Dinneen 2010). However, these structuralist perspectives were critiqued for portraying migrants as passive victims of national and global structures, arguing again for a more agency- and community centred framework.

Although these functionalist and historical-structural theories may not be helpful when capturing the full complexity of migration and social change by undermining the role of migrants in shaping processes of migration and social change, they have been central to understanding migration in broader societal and historical contexts.

The transnational and global turn

With increased national and international migration and rapid technological advances that intensified global interconnectedness in recent years, existing frameworks of migration and social change were found to be insufficient.

As a result, since the 1980s, migration research has moved beyond nationally bounded perspectives to examine how migration produces multidirectional and transnational forms of social change. The transnational paradigm (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Kearny 1995) conceptualises migration as a process that links sending and receiving societies through enduring cross-border practices (cf. Cohen 2011). Within these transnational social fields, migrants sustain overlapping economic, political, familial, and religious ties that reshape identities and institutions in both contexts (ibid., 1995). Building on this, Levitt's concept of *social remittances* (Levitt 1998, 2001) highlights how migrants transfer not only money but also ideas, norms, and values, which may foster changes in areas such as gender roles, political participation, and religion, though they can also generate conflict or reproduce inequalities (Levitt and Lamba Nieves 2010, 2011).

Complementing this meso-transnational perspective, *networks theories* in anthropology have underscored the collective agency of migrants and communities, showing how networks, both enable migration and shape integration. Networks transmit *cultural capital* – knowledge of opportunities, routes, and practices – and generate *social capital* through family, friendship, and community ties that support not only the migration journey but also support adaptation and integration in the host society (see Bourdieu 2012; Castles 2010) (see Chapter 5.3). Women often play a pivotal role in maintaining and extending these networks, enabling collective strategies that overcome structural barriers and sometimes drive innovation across societies (see Integration of Muslim migrant women as addressed in Chapter 1.3). However, networks are ambivalent: while they can empower migrants and foster social change in both origin and destination contexts, they can also reinforce inequalities and constrain mobility, underscoring their complex role in migration and social transformation (Brettell 2002: 203f.). As dynamic, self-organizing systems, networks structure relationships, transmit culture, distribute power, and drive social, organizational, and global transformations (Ervin 2017:138–141).

In considering this multidirectional process, scholars have conceptualised *return migration* as a dynamic transnational process rather than the end of the migration cycle. Returnees bring financial and social remittances, transferring resources, skills, and cultural practices that can reconfigure local hierarchies, identities, and everyday practices (Fauser and Anghel 2019:1–15). Such returns may generate long-term transformations, through entrepreneurship, lifestyle changes, or religious renewal, but their impact depends heavily on the receiving context (ibid.; see also Tuccio et al. 2019). By focusing on the meso-level of groups, communities, and networks, schol-

ars highlight how return migration produces both incremental and cascading social change, embedding mobility within broader transnational fields.

In conclusion, the transnational and global turn in migration studies has shifted the analytical focus to migrants and their communities as active agents operating through networks that sustain and transform multifaceted economic, social and cultural structures. While this challenges nationally bounded perspectives, scholars such as Castles (2010) emphasise the ongoing impact of nation-states, whose policies influence and frequently restrict the agency of migrants and refugees. Therefore, migration must be understood as an integral component of broader social transformations that link global forces with local life-worlds — what is termed ‘glocalisation’ — rather than as a mere product or cause of social change. It is crucial to recognise that conceptual categories such as ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ remain embedded within complex global, national and institutional frameworks.

Contextualising Migrants and Refugees in Migration Frameworks

Analysing migration as a driver of social change requires moving beyond the descriptive use of the terms *migrant* and *refugee* to consider their analytical and political dimensions, thereby illuminating their significance within migration processes, agency, and broader global structures. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, migration shapes social transformations in both sending and receiving societies at multiple levels—whether by foregrounding migrant agency, exposing structural, historical, and political-economic dynamics, or tracing the influence of transnational community networks.

When investigating ‘conflict migration’ to capture displacement prompted by violence, or enforced migration, typologies of migration have traditionally distinguished between voluntary and forced movement (cf. Brettell 2023:196–199; see Bakewell 2011). Displacement refers to the coerced or involuntary movement of people who, unlike refugees remain within their national borders. While the causes of internal displacement often mirror those of refugee flows, its distinctive features are its involuntary nature and domestic confinement (Cohen and Deng 1998:15f.). A common form is rural-to-urban migration, adopted as a survival strategy in contexts of conflict or instability. As discussed in Chapter 2.1.2, displacement profoundly reshapes social structures in both sending and receiving regions. It alters household composition, disrupts family patterns, and reconfigures gender roles. In rural communities, the loss of agricultural activity and outmigration undermine traditional forms of cooperation, dispute resolution, and leadership, while lawlessness and land encroachment destabilize property rights. Prolonged absence reduces the

likelihood of return and fragments community institutions, creating new social orders in the wake of displacement (ibid.: 25–35).

Refugee migration on the other hand refers to the forced cross-border movement of people fleeing persecution, conflict, or generalized violence, requiring international protection as codified in the 1951 Refugee Convention (UN 1951, Article 1, §2). While this legal category is crucial for access to rights, it reflects political and juridical frameworks more than sociological realities (FitzGerald and Arar 2018). Therefore, the distinction between refugees and migrants remains debated in the social sciences—some stress the importance of acknowledging shared structural drivers of mobility, while others maintain the dichotomic approach for its legal and practical significance (Brettell 2023: 196–199). In general, theories of refugee migration highlight the central role of states and international systems: refugees exist because of borders and legal categories, while host states' foreign policies, domestic politics, and humanitarian discourses determine who qualifies for protection. Global inequalities influence migration flows, with most refugees hosted by the Global South while Northern states externalize border control. Economic factors interact with violence, but households often migrate primarily to manage survival risks rather than solely to increase income. Additionally, social networks, the migration industry, and technology reduce costs, shape routes, and sustain connectivity for refugees during transit (FitzGerald and Arar 2018).

Unlike refugees, there is no formal legal definition of an *international migrant*. Traditionally, the term refers to people who cross borders voluntarily for reasons such as work, education, or family reunion, while still enjoying the protection of their home state. However, it is also used more broadly as an umbrella term to cover diverse movements—temporary or permanent—ranging from migrant workers and students to those whose status is not formally defined under international law (UNHCR 2025).

Migratory flows often involve mixed motivations, with some individuals fleeing violence and persecution, while others move to pursue economic opportunities or reunite with family (see Chapter 1.4) (Linde 2011). Moreover, vulnerabilities often increase along dangerous routes due to criminal activity, lack of resources, and limited access to protection and humanitarian assistance, affecting all migrants regardless of legal status and make the journey itself a critical phase requiring targeted support and protection measures (Van Hear et al. 2009). This complexity challenges traditional 'forced' versus 'voluntary' categories and calls for integrated policy responses that address the 'migration-asylum nexus' and link migration to human development, emphasizing the expansion of capabilities and choices for migrants (ibid.).

Since the 1990s, large-scale refugee movements, particularly from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, have contributed to the formation and transformation of diasporic communities that are increasingly rooted in host countries (Van Hear 2009). Unlike the externally defined categories of *migrant* or *refugee*, the concept of *diaspora* refers to populations that are dispersed or transnational yet maintain a strong emotional and symbolic attachment to a homeland from which they or their ancestors originate. These communities sustain extensive social, economic, and political networks across national borders and commonly self-identify as distinct ethnic groups. Central to diaspora identity are the collective memory of the ancestral homeland and the aspiration—whether symbolic or material—to return. At the same time, diasporic populations often experience marginalization and incomplete acceptance within their host societies (Dinneen 2010). Yet, when viewed as agents of social change, migrants and diasporas play a pivotal role in transforming their countries of origin. Through remittances, political lobbying, and facilitating return migration, they generate both symbolic and material impacts. Additionally, they transmit new ideas and values, contributing to long-term societal transformation (see above). Research on migrant transnationalism examines how diasporic sociocultural institutions adapt across borders, shaping complex processes such as “bifocality”—the maintenance of dual identities and family ties—while negotiating challenges related to identity, citizenship, and political affiliation. Economically, remittances and the establishment of institutions such as hometown associations and microfinance initiatives significantly influence development trajectories in origin communities (Vertovec 2004), highlighting their role in processes of change in transnational settings.

2. Afghan Society Then and Now

To provide essential context for understanding contemporary social dynamics in Afghan society, this chapter outlines its key structural features and the historical processes that have shaped them. Chapters 2.1.1 and 2.1.2 build on this foundation by offering a closer examination of drivers and actors of social transformation processes.

To this day, the Afghan society remains highly heterogeneous, characterised by a complex diversity of ethnic and religious affiliations, social organisations (e.g. tribal structures, patron–client relations, local communities and Sufi networks), and value and legal systems combining Islamic, customary (tribal) and statutory law. The most dominant groups in the country include the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Aimaqs, with Dari and Pashto as official languages. Pashtuns, the largest group, have maintained political dominance since the mid-eighteenth century, securing access to land, resources, and state leadership, while their claim to embody the ‘real Afghanyat’ has long fuelled tensions with other groups¹⁰, particularly the Hazara (Barfield 2010: 24–26).

Around 74% of the population¹¹ (UNESCO 2022¹²) still resides in rural areas (where social life is largely governed by long-standing traditions and local authority figures. This rural demographics has been in stark contrast to a comparatively small Western-oriented urban elite, concentrated in a few relatively developed urban centres, including Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-e Sharif and Kunduz (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:23). This rural-urban divide has long characterised Afghan society. While urban elites, with origins in modernisation projects initiated by Amir Amanullah Khan (1919–1928), sought to centralise the state and impose reformist agendas regarding family life, gender roles and marriage practices, the rural majority often resisted such interventions. Instead, they relied on tribal elders or religious leaders rather than state institutions, whom they saw as corrupt and felt that their interests

¹⁰ Probably the greatest division of cultural and social practices are between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns (i.e., Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara etc.), between tribal and non-tribal, between rural and urban groups (Emadi 2005:166f; Hanifi 1978:47). Tribal societies and their members show greater bonds and identification in relation to kinship structures, which can be traced back to a common shared patrilineal ancestor, contributing to the maintenance of tribal unity. Hereby, family names are sometimes selected by the name of tribes and kinship groups. As a rule, even if tribal members live far away from each other, they continue to follow the customs and traditions of their lineage (Emadi 2005:166f).

¹¹ The general population of Afghanistan is estimated around 40 million according to the UN Population Division 2024.

¹² Accurate data on Afghanistan’s rural-urban population is difficult to obtain, as available figures are largely based on estimates and no comprehensive national census has been conducted since 2010.

were not represented (e.g. fair court proceedings, provision of work and housing, infrastructure etc.) (cf. Barfield 1984; Kohlbacher et al. 2020:18f.).

Decades of war and displacement since the late 1970s have further deepened these divides while also deeply transforming Afghan society. Armed conflict disrupted local communities and social networks, forcing Afghans into new constellations of cohabitation as internally displaced persons or refugees, both within Afghanistan and abroad (cf. Grevemeyer 1988, 1989; Monsutti 2005; Schmeidl 2019). Migration has exposed many Afghans to diverse political, social, and cultural environments, leading to significant shifts in identity and worldview. For some—particularly women—displacement to Iran or Western countries opened up spaces for empowerment and redefined gender roles (Rostami-Povey 2007). In contrast, others—especially in Pakistan—became embedded in conservative religious networks through exposure to Islamist ideologies in madrassas (Giustozzi 2007; Edwards 2017). Simultaneously, interaction with NGO personnel and other transnational actors introduced new discourses on rights, development, and governance. The expansion of digital technologies and the proliferation of (Western) media during the U.S.-led intervention further widened informational horizons, enabling Afghans to maintain transnational ties and engage with different ideas of identity, community, and belonging (Ahadi 2017; Hossaini 2018).

Within this fragmented landscape, an ‘Afghan identity’ remains both contested and multilayered. Although the state has repeatedly sought to promote a unified national identity through constitutions (most recently that of 2004) and centralisation policies, most Afghans continue to define themselves primarily through local and group affiliations (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:18f.). Three factors are particularly important in determining a sense of belonging: *qaum* (affiliation to a we-group that can be defined depending on the context, such as kinship, tribal, ethnic, local, village group etc.), *watan* (homeland) and *mazhab* (religious affiliation, e.g. Sunni or Shiite Islam). These categories structure everyday social life and play a decisive role in partner choice and marital relations (Zulfacar 2006; Rasuly-Paleczek 1999:183) (see Chapter 3).

Moreover, such affiliations provide essential sources of security and solidarity in a context where state institutions are often weak, mistrusted or perceived as corrupt (cf. Rasuly-Paleczek 2020:13f.). At the same time, however, processes of migration and generational change are beginning to reshape these identity dynamics. Afghans in the diaspora, as well as some in the younger generation, are increasingly articulating a broader sense of ‘Afghanness’ that transcends narrow ethnic or trib-

al boundaries. This shift reflects exposure to transnational experiences and aspirations for a more inclusive national identity (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:18).

2.1 Social Transformation of Afghan Society

Over the past century, Afghanistan has experienced profound and rapid transformations that have significantly shaped the lives of the Afghan population. These changes can be traced, on the one hand, to the interventions of both internal and external actors who sought to reform Afghan society under the banners of modernisation and state-building. On the other hand, social transformation must also be understood in light of diverse migration patterns, many of them induced by protracted periods of conflict and war as well as labour migration, particularly to neighbouring countries such as Iran. Additionally, competing and often conflicting ideological currents within Afghan society have played a crucial role in shaping social dynamics.

To illuminate the driving forces behind these processes of social transformation within Afghanistan's social structure, this chapter adopts a historical-analytical approach. It focuses both on political initiatives aimed at modernisation—such as reform policies implemented by successive regimes—and on external influences, including exile experiences in Pakistan, Iran, and Europe. These factors have contributed to notable shifts in family structures, particularly in relation to hierarchical status and role distributions among family members.

2.1.1 Social Transformation from 'Above'

From the late 19th century to the present, Afghanistan's rulers have repeatedly sought to accelerate processes of social transformation and state consolidation by means of reforms imposed from 'above'. These efforts consistently placed family structures and gender relations at the centre of state-building agendas, as Afghan governments recognised the importance of regulating kinship, marriage and women's status for establishing a cohesive national order. However, such measures, conceived and implemented as top-down interventions, encountered profound structural obstacles, including the pluralism of Afghan society in terms of ethnicity, regional traditions and religious interpretations, the rural–urban divide, and the inherent tension between modernist elites advocating reform and those who held traditional authority and perceived such projects as violations of both Sharia law and customary law.

Thus, the trajectory of state-led modernisation in Afghanistan demonstrates a recurring pattern in which ambitious social initiatives are met with resistance and often reversed, provoking violent conflict and reinforcing the social and ethnic divide of the Afghan population.

Early State-Led Modernisation in Afghanistan (1880–1978)

Early efforts at state-led modernisation in Afghanistan began under Abdurrahman Khan (1880–1901), who ruled Afghanistan when it emerged as a nation-state following the Anglo-Afghan War in 1880. He sought to consolidate state authority through a programme of centralisation and legal reform (Shahrani 2018). In addition to restructuring political and military institutions, Abdurrahman promulgated decrees aimed at curbing practices within family life that he deemed contrary to Islamic principles, including restrictions on child and forced marriage, limitations on dowry payments, the prohibition of levirate marriage, and the formalisation of marriage registration with state authorities (Grevemeyer 1987:252; Hatch Dupree 2002, 2004). His consolidation of power relied on the instrumental deployment of Sunni Islam: he violently subjugated the Shi'a Hazara population, systematically weakened local elites in non-Pashtun regions – replacing them with state-appointed officials, typically Pashtuns – and resettled Pashtun tribes in northern Afghanistan and Hazarajat, a practice later described by scholars as a form of 'internal colonialism' (see Olesen 1995). These measures entrenched Pashtun dominance and produced an early ethnic stratification of Afghan society, with lasting effects on interethnic relations and marriage patterns (see Tapper 199a). Yet despite these efforts, the implementation of a unified, religion-based legal system faced major obstacles. Afghanistan lacked a centralised hierarchy and a cohesive body of Islamic doctrine. Interpretations of Islamic law varied across Sunni, Shiite and Ismaili traditions and were further shaped by local and tribal customs. These variations in legal and social norms emphasised the initial challenges of establishing a consistent national legal framework (Grevemeyer 1987:252ff).

Following independence from Britain in 1919, King Amanullah pursued an ambitious program of state-led modernization aimed at rapidly aligning Afghan society with Western models. This included legal reforms, the promotion of girls' education, the advancement of women's rights in marriage, and public unveiling. Urban elites—particularly in Kabul, including Queen Soraya and the king's sister—were presented as exemplars of modernity, intended to inspire the broader population (Poullada 1973; Centlivres-Demont 1994). However, the rapid pace of these reforms provoked strong resistance from tribal and religious authorities, especially among

rural communities and most urban residents outside the capital, who viewed such Westernized ideals as incompatible with Sharia and customary law. The Khost Rebellion (1924–1925) exemplified the tension between elite reformist agendas and the social realities of rural populations, culminating in Amanullah's exile in 1929 and the rollback of most reforms (*ibid.*).

Following World War II, Mohammad Daoud as Prime Minister under King Zahir Shah (1953–1963) and later as Afghan president (1973–1978) implemented a Western-inspired program of modernisation and state-building. This program combined infrastructural, economic, and cultural reforms, with urban areas—particularly Kabul—experiencing the most profound social transformations. The gradual expansion of infrastructure in Afghanistan—particularly through improved road networks and the emergence of a nascent industrial sector in urban areas—stimulated both permanent and seasonal rural-to-urban migration. In addition, labour migration abroad, especially to Iran, became increasingly significant. These migration patterns reshaped family dynamics: while male migrants encountered new urban or foreign environments, women remaining in rural areas took on greater responsibility in managing household and village affairs (Hatch Dupree 2004). Urban modernization also promoted women's public participation through employment, education, and legal reforms—including the 1959 unveiling decree and constitutional guarantees of gender equality—as well as cultural shifts shaped by radio, music, and leisure practices, which influenced urban youth and elite social norms (Grevemeyer 1987:263 ff.; Hatch Dupree 2004).

Outside the cities, however, traditional patriarchal structures remained dominant. The repeal of earlier democratic laws and the introduction of new civil, land, and criminal codes during Daoud's presidency (1973–1978) reinforced male authority within families, limiting women's freedoms and maintaining rural adherence to customary norms (Zulfacar 2006; Hatch Dupree 2004). These reforms, coupled with state-building measures, provoked resistance in rural areas, including Pashtun-settled southeastern regions, where uprisings were forcibly suppressed.

During this period, a clear division emerged within Afghan society between two opposing groups: the urban elite, who largely embraced modernising reforms and greater emancipation for women and young people, and the rural population, who resisted these changes by clinging to traditional values and social norms. The deepening divide in values and interests across ethnic, religious and social lines intensified social fragmentation and contributed to political instability, ultimately resulting in the 1978 coup that overthrew Daoud (*cf.* Knabe-Wohlfarth 1972).

From Communist Rule to Taliban Return (1978–present)

The Saur Revolution of 1978, which put the DRA¹³ (Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) in power, introduced the most radical attempt at transforming Afghan society. Between 1978 and 1992, the communist rule enforced sweeping reforms (something neither Amanullah nor Daoud had succeeded in doing), including land redistribution, literacy campaigns (involving all children and adults, males and females), and Decree No. 7 prohibiting bride price and forced marriage, aimed at dismantling ‘feudal’ structures¹⁴ and enforcing gender equality (cf. Tapper 1984; Centlivres-Demont 1994; Grevermeyer 1987:353). Yet, the aggressive and coercive enforcement of these reforms provoked strong opposition, especially in rural areas, where they were perceived as an assault on Islamic tradition. This disjuncture between state-led modernisation and social acceptance ignited a *jihad*¹⁵ (holy war). Opposition to the Marxist regime was not limited to men; women also took to the streets of Kabul in protest¹⁶ (Emadi 2005:185–188). The Soviet invasion of December 1979, intended to secure Afghanistan’s communist government, resulted in heavy bombing and rural fighting, which in turn triggered the first large-scale refugee exodus, primarily to Pakistan and Iran. Over the next 13 years, resistance forces led by local mujahedin commanders waged jihad against the regime, gradually reducing the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan’s control to major cities—ultimately Kabul—until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 (Hatch Dupree 2004). This period also brought a transformation of rural leadership structures: traditional local elites lost influence, while younger mujahedin commanders rose to prominence, reshaping authority in the countryside (cf. Grevermeyer 1989) (see Chapter 2.1.2).

¹³ Also referred to as PDPA: The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which was founded in 1965 and represented themselves as Marxist, Leninist–leftist organization. Soon the party split in two factions: The People’s (Khalq) and Banner (Parcham) parties.

¹⁴ The Taraki government’s land reform sparked widespread resistance, even among its intended beneficiaries (e.g. agricultural workers, tenant farmers and small farmers), who joined traditional village elites against Kabul. The Soviet intervention intensified opposition, now framed as a fight against foreign occupation. In response, traditional leadership gave way to new military-political elites, while exiled Islamist parties mobilised rural populations through new ideological frameworks. Although this enabled some regional coordination, the resistance remained fragmented along political, religious, and ethnic lines (Grevermeyer 1987: 128–130).

¹⁵ The Afghan jihad applies to the main concept of resistance against an external enemy, which goes beyond the tribal warfare and takes the whole Islamic community as its ultimate reference (Harpviken 1997).

¹⁶ RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan) for instance, a female grass roots resistance movement, fought for gender equality and liberation of Afghanistan from its authoritarian regimes (against the Marxist regime, the Islamic fundamentalist regime in 1992, and the Taliban regime in 1996) (cf. Emadi 2005:185–188).

Following the Soviet withdrawal, the mujahedin (1992–1996) captured Kabul and proclaimed Afghanistan an Islamic state, a move initially welcomed by many Afghans who hoped for peace and a return to normal family life. Yet internal divisions soon surfaced, as rival factions fractured along ethno-linguistic, tribal, sectarian, and personal lines (Saikal 2006:208f.). Two groups emerged as dominant: *Jamiat-e Islami*, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Massoud, which drew primarily Tajik support and advocated a moderate Islamist program rejecting Western influence; and *Hezb-e Islami*, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, rooted in Ghilzai Pashtun networks, backed by Pakistan, and pursuing a more radical Islamist vision (ibid.). The anti-Soviet jihad had also reshaped Afghanistan's ethnic power balance, weakening long-standing Pashtun dominance and elevating new, male-dominated forms of political authority (Roy 1990:223 ff.). While younger men gained visibility, women were increasingly marginalized under restrictive Islamic gender norms, though education for girls and women's teaching roles persisted in some contexts, sustaining a degree of female self-confidence (Centlivres-Demont 1994). The role of women thus became a contested arena within competing Islamist agendas. As factional violence escalated, fuelled by external backing from states such as Pakistan and the United States, hopes for stability quickly collapsed, paving the way for the rise of the Taliban (Hatch Dupree 2004).

The Taliban emerged in 1994 and captured Kabul in 1996, presenting themselves students of Islam, committed to restoring order through the establishment of a 'pure' Islamic state. Their ideological project rested on an idealised vision of the Afghan family as the core unit of social regulation, shaped by Pashtun tribal codes and a strict interpretation of Islam (Goodson 2001: 132; Hatch Dupree 2004). By rejecting earlier state-led reforms, the Taliban sought to erase the legacy of modernisation and enforce what they framed as a return to cultural authenticity.

In practice, this agenda translated into radical restrictions on everyday life. Women were banned from employment and education¹⁷, compelled to wear the burqa, and prohibited from appearing in public without a male guardian (*mahram*). Men were subjected to equally rigid codes—such as enforced beard length—and barred from recreational practices like kite flying, music, or cinema (Zulfacar 2006; Goodson 2010). These measures reshaped family dynamics in profound ways: male providers lost professional positions, many being pushed into unskilled labour, while

¹⁷ The banishment of women from the workplace had devastating effects for the society, as women played a significant role in Afghanistan's main institutions – they constituted 40% of physicians, 70% of teachers, and 50% of civil servants. Furthermore, the withdrawal of women from the education sector (many were trained during the communist period) also had the boy's education in distress (Zulfacar 2006).

women—excluded from formal work—resorted to begging. The erosion of traditional roles destabilised sources of dignity and authority within families, producing an identity crisis for men and heightened vulnerability for women (Hatch Dupree 2004).

The Taliban's system of surveillance further strained familial relations. Male relatives were expected to monitor and discipline female family members to prevent any actions that might be perceived as dishonourable, such as leaving the house unaccompanied. In some cases, adolescent boys, empowered through militia recruitment and possession of weapons, were encouraged to publicly reprimand or physically punish their elders for violations such as improper dress or failing to attend prayers (*ibid.*). This inversion of generational hierarchies highlighted broader changes in family dynamics, with young men asserting their authority through state-sanctioned violence (Goodson 2001: 126).

These gendered repercussions were not confined to urban centres. Over time, enhanced access to radio and other media expanded rural women's awareness and aspirations, too. Many now recognised the value of education and healthcare and wanted better futures for their children. These desires clashed with the Taliban's restrictive policies (Hatch Dupree 2004). At the same time, the experience of refugee camps during the 1980s and 1990s had left deep imprints on Afghan social expectations. In exile, many Afghans—particularly women and youth—had encountered schooling, healthcare, and NGO-led initiatives, which broadened aspirations for social mobility. When large numbers of refugees returned in the early 1990s, they brought these new expectations with them, often intensifying dissonance with Taliban-imposed restrictions. The regime's rigid model of social order thus collided with a society already reshaped by migration, displacement, and exposure to alternative norms (*cf.* Monsutti 2007).

While the Taliban restored a degree of order after the chaos of the mujahedin years, they did so by worsening existing issues—such as collapsed infrastructure, economic paralysis, and systemic repression. Many families were already fragmented by displacement, leading to poverty and the breakdown of traditional social obligations (such as dowry or intergenerational care). Flight and economic hardship further undermined family structures and roles, resulting in deep social distress. This, in turn, drove widespread internal displacement and international migration (see section 2.1.2).

In response to global concerns over 'international terrorism' and the 'oppression of women', the U.S. and NATO intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, removing the Tal-

iban and al-Qaida¹⁸ and installing a moderate Islamic transitional government under Presidents Hamid Karzai and later Ashraf Ghani¹⁹ (Mather 2003; Hatch Dupree 2004; Kabeer & Khan 2014). This marked a shift from traditional kinship-based governance toward centralised legal and institutional frameworks. While initially welcomed by many Afghans, especially in urban areas, anti-terror operations—particularly in Pashtun-dominated southern and eastern regions—resulted in high civilian casualties, widespread displacement, and violations of local norms, including restrictions on entering women’s quarters (cf. ICG 2003:12f.).

During this period, Afghanistan experienced significant transformations, largely driven by both national initiatives and international support. Notable developments included the expansion of education, particularly for girls, and improved access to healthcare (cf. Esser 2013). In parallel, the emergence of media in post-Taliban Afghanistan revolutionized public access to information and discourse. The rise of a free press—via radio stations, TV channels, and newspapers—enabled engagement with political, social, and cultural issues that had been previously suppressed. Private media outlets (i.e. distribution of Western ideas of foreign media and TV stations) played a crucial role in introducing diverse perspectives, sparking critical debates on topics such as women’s rights, governance, and human rights, creating new spaces for dialogue and political participation (Hamidi 2020). This transformation was further amplified by the rapid growth of digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, which allowed Afghan youth and women to voice their opinions, engage in global conversations, and contribute to the country’s evolving socio-political landscape (Hossaini 2018).

The exposure to modernization efforts and the return of IDPs and refugees, especially to urban centres like Kabul, fostered a growing sense of female self-awareness²⁰ and youth empowerment. This contributed to the emergence of a young, ed-

¹⁸ While the U.S. quickly ousted the Taliban from power, it failed to defeat them due to Pakistan’s continued covert support. Despite receiving U.S. aid, Pakistan maintained ties with the Taliban to serve its own strategic interests. The Taliban and Al Qaeda retreated into remote areas, regrouping across the Afghan-Pakistan border. Meanwhile, U.S. focus shifted to the war in Iraq, diverting attention and resources from stabilizing Afghanistan (Saikal 2018).

¹⁹ After 9/11, the U.S. allied with Afghan warlords and tribal factions to defeat the Taliban. These groups quickly gained wealth and political power, embedding themselves within the government. Warlords and tribal leaders have operated through a ‘networked state’, competing for influence by securing strategic government and civil society positions, allowing them to maintain power and access to resources amid ongoing conflict and instability (Sharani 2018).

²⁰ For example, in March 2007, a new formal marriage contract was approved by the Afghan Supreme Court, empowering women’s legal status after marriage, which was strongly supported by women’s rights organ-

educated demographics with heightened socio-political consciousness, intensifying the generational divide, particularly in urban areas. Especially Kabul, became home to a highly heterogeneous population, characterised by diverse levels of education, professional skills, and social backgrounds (cf. Akbar 2017; Banerjee 2016; Larson and Coburn 2009).

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime, ethnic minorities, such as the Hazara, gained significant political and social visibility, contributing to a more diverse socio-political landscape (Shahrani 2018). However, the return of influential political elites led to the revival of patronage networks, which played a key role in the expansion of the cross-border drug trade and empowered a new class of warlords. This situation was exacerbated by the U.S. implementation of a decentralizing strategy in 2009, which involved arming and training tribal leaders, an approach that conflicted with Kabul's efforts to centralize power, thereby further complicating Afghanistan's political dynamics (Barfield 2010:333f.).

Despite publicly backing the international war on terror, regional powers like Pakistan and Iran covertly supported the Taliban's resurgence by offering safe havens to insurgents (Shahrani 2018). With the withdrawal of a large portion of foreign troops and the worsening security situation, which reduced the activities of international NGOs, Afghanistan's economic conditions deteriorated sharply, marked by an increasing collapse of state institutions, rising unemployment, loss of livelihoods, and severely limited opportunities for the population.

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Afghanistan has witnessed a significant reversal of social and gender reforms. Sharia-based laws have reintroduced strict segregation, male guardianship, and dress codes, severely restricting women's education, employment, and public participation (Farid and de Silva de Alwis 2023). Additional measures, such as bans on NGO employment, the closure of beauty salons, and invalidation of divorce cases, have further marginalized women from economic and public life (United States Institute of Peace 2023; Qazi Zada & Qazi Zada 2024). As a result, social isolation has escalated, with 18% of women reporting no external contact and 8% knowing someone who attempted suicide since the Taliban's takeover (UN Women 2025, 7 August). Despite a 2021 decree that nominally banned forced marriage and granted some rights to widows, the lack of enforce-

izations, such as Medica Mondiale (Smith 2009:2). During the period of international occupation, many women's non-governmental organizations operated in Afghanistan, including: the Afghanistan Women's Network, the Afghanistan Women's Education Centre, and the US-based "Women for Afghan Women", which belonged to the "advocacy NGOs" as opposed to the "developmental or reconstruction NGOs" (Shahrani 2018).

ment and failure to address harmful practices like *baad* and polygamy (see Chapter 3.3.1), combined with widespread corruption and ongoing economic hardship, have allowed these practices to persist and even exacerbate the prevalence of child marriages (Safi et al. 2024). Nonetheless, in the face of these severe restrictions, women continue to resist by engaging in clandestine education and utilizing online learning platforms (ibid.).

2.1.2 Social Transformation due to War and Migration

The Soviet invasion of 1978 set off decades of conflict and displacement in Afghanistan, leading to a massive wave of internal displacement as people fled to urban centres. Many, unable to remain, sought refuge abroad—initially in Pakistan and Iran, and later in Western countries following the 2001 U.S. invasion. Over the course of these forty years²¹, shaped by ongoing war and economic decline, migration profoundly impacted Afghan society, particularly in terms of family structures and social dynamics. These transformative processes, both within Afghanistan and among diaspora communities, are explored in this chapter.

Afghan Migration – A Cultural History

Although times of war have significantly increased national and transnational migration movements, the migration of Afghan people is not a recent phenomenon. Historically, Afghans have registered high degrees of spatial mobility within and outside the country that manifested levels of mobility as part of their cultural landscape ever since (cf. Monsutti 2008:60).

Since the 19th century, Afghanistan has been a hub of significant mobility, driven by its position along major caravan routes of the Silk Road, where nomadic groups, such as peripatetic and mobile pastoral communities, migrated seasonally across the country (cf. Rao 1986, 1996). More populated, urban areas, such as Kandahar, Herat, and Kabul, functioned as key trading centres, where agricultural and pastoral goods were exchanged. These cities also hosted diverse ethnic communities—Greeks, Armenians, and Jews—who played central roles in transcontinental trade networks, which continued into the 20th century (Schetter 2012; Monsutti 2008). These ex-

²¹ During that period, the country repeatedly suffered from natural disasters (including drought, floods, storms, and earthquakes), which further contributed to a mass displacement within Afghanistan (cf. Schetter 2012; Monsutti 2008).

pansive trade networks, which stretched beyond Afghan borders, have long been integral to the country's economy (cf. Marsden 2015, 2022). Even today, people from rural mountain areas visit urban centres to trade their self-produced goods, contributing to the economic survival of their communities (Schetter 2012). While many former nomadic groups have transitioned to modern livelihoods, such as in the transport industry, others, like the Kuchi, continue seasonal migrations with their herds in search of better pasture (de Weijer 2007; Ker and Locke 2010).

Cross-border mobility, especially to Pakistan and Iran, has been facilitated by open borders, allowing Afghans to maintain strong familial and patronage networks, which have been crucial for their economic survival over generations (Schetter 2012). Labour migration became increasingly important for Afghans both within the country and abroad. From the 19th century, Hazara from the Hazarajat region began seasonal migration to Kabul for work, and over the 20th century worsening conditions pushed many to cities in Afghanistan or abroad, particularly to Quetta and Mashhad, forming a growing Hazara diaspora. Migration also expanded in other regions, such as the cotton-growing areas around Kunduz, attracting seasonal and permanent workers, and from the 1970s onward, Afghans of various ethnicities—including Pashtuns and Tajiks—sought employment in neighbouring Iran, Pakistan, and the Gulf states (Rasuly-Paleczek 2019:72f.).

While labour migration has been the predominant form of movement, religious and social factors have also played a significant role. Pilgrims (*hadsch*), *malangs* (hermits), and *tablighis* (itinerant preachers) continue their travels within the country, while medical treatment is often sought in Pakistan, Arab countries, or the West when possible. Furthermore, children from wealthier families have traditionally been sent abroad for education, primarily to Pakistan, the U.S., or Europe (Schetter 2012). Thus, Afghan mobility has long been integral to their way of life, shaped by both internal and external experiences. Over time, Afghans have adapted various forms of migration—whether for social, economic, or educational purposes—making migration a deeply embedded and essential aspect of their culture.

War Induced Displacement

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1978 marked the beginning of extensive displacement, as the ensuing conflict prompted large-scale migration over the next four decades (EASO 2020; Halliday and Tanin 1998; Monsutti 2008; Bizhan 2016). By the early 1990s, an estimated 7.5 million people were displaced, with 3.2 million refugees in Pakistan and 2.4 million in Iran, alongside 2 million IDPs (Harpviken 2009).

Following the 1992 fall of the PDPA regime²², repatriation efforts, supported by the UNHCR, facilitated the return of 3.84 million refugees by 1996.

However, migration flows continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with refugee numbers rising again during the Taliban era (1996–2001) and further displacement caused by the U.S.-led coalition’s intervention in 2001²³. Despite international efforts to repatriate refugees, including over 5 million returns, Afghanistan’s political instability persisted, and conflict-induced displacement remained high (cf. Groenewold 2006:2ff; Monsutti 2008; Donini et al. 2016; Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005:10f.). By 2016, the number of IDPs reached a record high, with 94,498 displaced in October alone²⁴ (IDMC 2021; OCHA 2021). The withdrawal of international forces in 2014, coupled with worsening security and ongoing insurgencies, continued to drive displacement (UNAMA 2015). Between 2012 and 2021, over 3.3 million people fled their homes due to conflict (OCHA 2021).

The changing border policies of traditional host countries, Pakistan and Iran, have further complicated the situation. Both nations, once offering open borders, tightened their refugee strategies in response to increased displacement and reduced international aid (Ruiz 2002). Nevertheless, Pakistan continued to host over 1.4 million Afghan refugees in 2020 (UNHCR 2021). These restrictions, combined with deteriorating conditions in both host countries and Afghanistan, drove many Afghans to seek refuge in Europe, particularly in 2015 and 2016 (Scalettaris et al. 2019; Hakimi 2016). Migration to the West has thus been shaped by a complex mix of factors, including security concerns, economic instability, and limited opportunities for refugees in initial migration countries (see Chapter 4.1).

War and Social Transformation in Afghan Society

While processes of social transformation and modernization in pre-war Afghanistan—particularly from the 1950s onward—were primarily shaped by a western-oriented urban elite, often composed of individuals from privileged backgrounds (in-

²² Najibullah served as the leader of Afghanistan from 1986–1992.

²³ Although Afghanistan has received considerable financial, military, and humanitarian support since the backlash of the Taliban regime in 2001, desired stability and construction of a viable Afghan state have not been achieved. Instead, the security situation has continued to deteriorate due to increased violence by non-state armed groups, including the recurring Taliban and ISIL - Stands for: “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant” and is often referred to as DAESH by the local people - affiliates, and counterinsurgency operations by the Afghan army and international security forces (cf. Hakimi 2016).

²⁴ However, IDPs figures must be viewed with caution as records in the previous years are scarce and for some periods non-existent. In addition, numbers tend to be underestimated as IDPs in urban areas are often dispersed among economic migrants or the urban poor and therefore difficult to identify (see Bjelica 2016a).

cluding members of the royal family) who had studied or lived abroad and brought new ideas back to the country, these changes largely remained confined to urban centres. In contrast, the war-driven period from 1978 onwards introduced fundamentally new dynamics that accelerated and broadened social change. This era was marked by conflict-induced displacement, both internal and transnational, which profoundly altered Afghan society. To understand these transformations, it is crucial to consider both the shifts occurring within Afghanistan due to prolonged conflict and the social influences emerging from migration and exile experiences abroad.

Significant transformations in Afghanistan's social structure began in 1978 with the Saur Revolution, when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power²⁵. The armed resistance that followed the Soviet intervention in 1978 catalysed deeper changes, particularly in rural Afghanistan, which became the heartland of the anti-communist struggle. To counter the Soviet-backed regime's military advantage, traditional rural authority structures—based on lineage, land ownership, seniority, or religious status (e.g., village elders, khans, mullahs, and Sufi leaders)—were increasingly displaced by new actors. These were often younger men with military experience, referred to as commanders or warlords, who derived legitimacy from armed leadership, organisational capability, and transnational alliances rather than inherited status (Saikal 2006:208; Goodson 2001:97–99). Their emergence marked the rise of a new elite linked to Islamist parties, foreign state actors (notably Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States), and international aid channels.

This reconfiguration extended rural power structures beyond the local and tribal level, embedding them in wider ideological and geopolitical frameworks. The result was the militarisation and politicisation of rural society and the disruption of long-standing village-based autonomy (Grevemeyer 1987:128–130). These new hierarchies also intensified internal divisions: resistance networks became increasingly fragmented along ethnic, sectarian, and ideological lines. The shift of authority to younger militant actors further eroded traditional norms of leadership based on age or class (Grevemeyer 1987:354–367).

Simultaneously, the war triggered large-scale internal displacement. Fighting in rural areas forced many inhabitants to flee to urban centres such as Kabul, Jalalabad, and Mazar-e-Sharif, contributing to rapid urbanisation²⁶. The growing urban popu-

²⁵ Although earlier in the 1970s Kabul had already witnessed tensions between leftist and Islamist student groups, these dynamics had limited impact beyond the university sphere.

²⁶ In addition to war-related displacement, high birth rates also contributed to urbanisation (Roy 1990:227). Many mujahedin, however, fearing state surveillance or persecution, avoided Afghan cities altogether, instead relocating their families to Pakistan while continuing to fight at the front (This is a note from field-

lation deepened social and ideological divides between long-time urban residents—many of whom had remained in Kabul or experienced exile in cities like Tehran or Peshawar—and newly arrived rural populations shaped by the experience of armed resistance. These differences in lifestyle, education, and political outlook would later influence the fragmented nature of post-war Afghan politics (EASO 2017b:58ff.).

Against the backdrop of war and displacement, gender roles also underwent significant changes. With many men either engaged in combat or killed in the conflict, women increasingly took on caretaking and household leadership roles. In displaced or urban refugee settings, women were often responsible for maintaining family cohesion, navigating aid systems and securing livelihoods in difficult and precarious circumstances (cf. Monsutti 2007)

Migration to Pakistan and Iran – Social Transformation in Exile

Due to geographic proximity, historical ties, and cultural familiarity, many Afghan refugees—particularly from lower-income urban populations and rural communities—sought refuge in Pakistan and Iran following the outbreak of war in 1978. For many middle-class and educated Afghans, however, these neighbouring countries often served only as temporary transit points en route to destinations in Western Europe or North America (cf. Monsutti 2006).

In Pakistan, cultural and linguistic affinities facilitated the movement of predominantly Pashtun populations²⁷, who comprised roughly 85% of Afghan refugees in the country. Iran, in contrast, received a large number of Hazara refugees²⁸, many of whom fled persecution and sought to reconnect with earlier Hazara diaspora networks, formed notably during the deportations under Abdur Rahman Khan in the late 19th century (Hatch Dupree 1990:126; Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005:10,16).

Supported by the UNHCR and various NGOs, more than 300 refugee camps were established along the Afghan Pakistani border. Pakistan's initial open-door policy generated free movement within the country and refugees were able to gain in-

work Rasuly-Paleczek 1991/1992).

²⁷ Along the Afghan Pakistani border, the Durand Line divides a region traditionally inhabited by Pashtun tribes, who have historically rejected this political boundary. The area is predominantly Pashto-speaking and Sunni Muslim. In contrast, Afghan migrants in Iran are primarily Shia Hazaras—an ethnic group long marginalized within Afghanistan under Pashtun dominance (Kaura 2019).

²⁸ The Shia pilgrimage of Afghans to Iran is a long-established practice with historical roots reaching back several centuries. One of the earliest recorded movements occurred in the 1850s, when around 5,000 Hazara households migrated across the border. This enduring transnational link was significantly reinforced during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989), which led to the displacement of approximately 2.6 million Afghans to Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005: 10, 16).

come through work outside the camps, establish businesses and subsist by farming. Tent camps were soon replaced by houses and some refugee areas transformed into “villages with small city characters (cf. Schetter 2012; Colville 1998). These camps further became important transit points in Afghans’ network society and served as a locus of resistance against the Soviet regime²⁹ (cf. EASO 2020:14). Within Pakistani refugee camps, the limited space created tight and overcrowded living quarters for Afghan families, where the inactivity of male members led to daytime contact between men and women. In addition, neighbours were no longer family or kin, as in Afghanistan, but often strangers, exposing Afghan families to a new context of interethnic diversity, insecurity, and poverty (Centlivres-Demont 1994). The presence of administrative staff, visiting experts and other external stakeholders and the feeling of loss of control over one’s life, dominated the everyday life experience within these camps. Therefore, increased respect for traditional norms and values was seen as an important means of regaining one’s own dignity and that of the family. To preserve the cultural and ethnic nucleus and to fight off the “outsider’s gaze”, increased attention was paid to compliance with social *purdah* for the protection of daughters, sisters, and wives (ibid.).

Within family households, the social role of family members changed. As men were off to war or looking for work in Pakistani cities, women became the primary caretaker of the family. It was not uncommon that compounds contained a more complex mixture of kin-related women (married and widowed daughters and daughters-in-law), which was run by female elders or matriarchs (Hatch Dupree 1990:127). To maintain the family order and keep its members well without the full-time help of men, women saw themselves compelled to generate income, such as by working in local NGOs (urban educated women) or by becoming carpet producers and selling their products on the markets in Peshawar and Quetta (Centlivres-Demont 1994). International organizations offered large-scale education for girls and boys³⁰ and

²⁹ These refugee camps further were controlled by different mujahideen parties and served as hot spots in the politics of militant Islamization, where *jihād* became the leitmotiv of Afghans in exile. Financially supported by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (shaped and guided objectives and activities of the Afghan resistance), these revolutionary Islamic parties, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani (Tajik) and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (belonged to Pashtu clan of the Gilzai), rejected Marxism and Westernism and aimed to establish a government on Islamic principles and values (cf. Schetter 2012; Siddiqi 1989).

³⁰ In the refugee camps two parallel school networks were present, one led by UNHCR, the other by Afghan resistance parties. Because Communist ideology was a thorn in the side, secular schooling was widely rejected by the Afghan population. Hence, schools set up by the resistance, called *madrasas*, were more popular among the Afghan population, which insisted on compulsory education according to Islam and the separation of boys’ and girls’ classes (Centlivres-Demont 1994).

health care training courses for men and women. In addition to the money earned, these programs enabled contact between women from rural and urban areas, forming new networks that were central to the basic survival of refugee families (Cenlivres-Demont 1994; Hatch Dupree 1990:126).

The social role of women in exile was double-edged. On the one hand, the expansion of managerial horizons within family compounds, contributed to a greater confidence and independence in decision-making among rural women. Urban, educated women on the other hand, felt more secluded and limited in their space of action due to the stronger social control (*purdah*) exercised within these camps (Hatch Dupree 1990:129).

In Iran, Afghan refugees experienced a different dynamic. Iran had long been a destination for Afghan labour migrants, particularly Hazara, since the 1970s. Many refugees built on pre-existing networks established through earlier migration flows, including historical links rooted in past forced displacements (Rasuly-Palczek 2019:82ff.). Unlike Pakistan, fewer than 3% of Afghan refugees in Iran resided in camps, primarily due to limited international support—stemming from Iran’s strained relations with Western and Gulf donors³¹ (Colville 1998; Monsutti 2007).

Integration into the Iranian labour market was shaped by national needs, particularly during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), when Afghan men replaced conscripted Iranian workers in low-skilled jobs. Afghan migrants were often confined to unskilled and semi-skilled labour in construction, agriculture, and small industries (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2012; Abbasi 2015). Women contributed to household incomes through informal work, often conducted from home or in women-led community networks, which also shielded them from police scrutiny (Hoodfar 2004).

Educational access—particularly for documented migrants—was generally better than in Pakistan. In Iranian cities, education was seen as a religious and civic responsibility, leading to increased female literacy and educational attainment. This exposure contributed to a growing awareness among Afghan girls and women of their rights and roles within both family and society (Hoodfar 2004).

The experience of urban life in Iran, especially among younger and second-generation refugees, fostered critical re-evaluations of traditional values, gender roles, and family practices (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2012; Hoodfar 2004). Monsutti (2007) describes how migration functioned as a form of social initiation for young Hazara men,

³¹ In 1979, the Islamic revolution put a fundamentalist regime in power. In the course of such governmental change, radical Iranian students seized the US embassy and took dozens of US citizens hostage. Consequently, the US and its allies were reluctant to fund any refugee programs in Iran and Teheran rejected any Western agencies within the city (Ruiz 2002).

whose journeys between Afghanistan and Iran signalled their transition to adulthood. These young men relied on kinship networks to navigate hardship, achieve economic self-sufficiency, and eventually return to Afghanistan to marry—illustrating the fluid boundary between refugeehood and labour migration (see Chapter 1.5.4) (Monsutti 2006:23ff; 2007). In many cases, remittances sent back home by these young men became a vital source of income for families who remained in Afghanistan (Monsutti 2007).

After 2001, many refugees returned to Afghanistan, encouraged by the international community's reconstruction promises. However, return to rural villages was often not feasible due to a lack of resources or because their land was occupied by others (Rasuly-Paleczek 2017:61; Pro Asyl 2016). Many opted to settle in urban areas, having adjusted to urban life during exile. Iranian cities, in particular, had offered greater security, access to education, and improved living standards—especially for women, who experienced broader public participation and legal protections relative to Afghanistan. These expectations significantly influenced post-return perspectives on gender justice and social norms (Kabeer and Khan 2014).

Exile significantly transformed Afghan social structures, particularly in terms of gender roles, family organisation, and intergenerational dynamics. Displacement and urbanisation—especially among rural populations—introduced new experiences of wage labour, mobility, and civic engagement, leaving lasting effects on Afghan society (Roy 1990:226f; Monsutti 2007).

Migration to Europe (and the West) – Social Transformation in Exile

Although small numbers of Afghans—primarily from the urban upper and upper-middle classes—had migrated to Western Europe and North America for education and professional development since the 1960s and 1970s, large-scale Afghan migration to Europe was primarily driven by conflict beginning in the late 1980s when the Soviet occupation and subsequent civil war triggered broader war-induced displacement, prompting many to flee persecution and violence. (cf. Rasuly-Paleczek 2019: 83f.) (see also Chapter 4.1). While neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan initially served as primary destinations, restrictive refugee policies and worsening conditions in those host states increasingly pushed Afghans—particularly political refugees and persecuted minorities—to seek asylum in Europe (ibid.).

The most significant influx of Afghan migrants to Europe occurred during 2015 and 2016, amid broader geopolitical instability and tightening refugee policies in traditional host countries such as Iran and Pakistan. These more recent migration

flows differ markedly in terms of socio-economic background, ethnicity, and educational levels from earlier cohorts (Donini et al., 2016; Rasuly-Paleczek 2019:83f.).

Three broad categories of migrants can be identified:

1. Young men from rural areas in southern and eastern Afghanistan, often displaced by ongoing conflict between insurgent groups and government forces;
2. Urban families and individuals fleeing targeted threats, including persecution based on sexual orientation, professional affiliations, or values associated with modernity and international engagement in the wake of the withdrawal of international troops;
3. Unaccompanied minors and young adults, many of whom are second-generation refugees born or raised in Pakistan (especially in cities like Peshawar and Quetta) or Iran (e.g., Tehran), with tenuous or no direct connection to Afghanistan. Many among this group are Shiite Hazara, who face growing sectarian violence in Afghanistan and systemic marginalisation in both Iran and Pakistan (Donini et al., 2016).

These young migrants, predominantly male, are often expected to assume the role of family breadwinners, placing them under significant pressure to succeed in Europe (ibid.).

While Afghan refugees in Europe initially benefited from more generous protection regimes, the increase in asylum applications in recent years has led to a tightening of policies and a rise in rejected applications. Afghan asylum seekers frequently face prolonged waiting periods during the asylum process, which hampers social and structural integration and complicates long-term settlement (Donini et al. 2016) (see Chapter 4.1).

Migration to Europe also triggers fundamental shifts in family structures and gender roles. As families adapt to new legal frameworks, cultural norms, and social expectations, traditional hierarchies within the household are often reconfigured. This can result in changes to decision-making authority and the social status of individual family members (cf. Fischer 2013; Muller 2009). Although Afghan families in Europe are increasingly shaped by processes of individualisation and nuclearization, kinship and community networks continue to play a vital role. These networks offer both support and constraints, influencing opportunities and trajectories of individual migrants and family units (Fischer 2013).

The evolving dynamics between first- and second-generation migrants constitute a central element of these broader social transformations. Children and adolescents often adapt more rapidly to the host society than their parents, particularly through their engagement with the educational system, acquisition of language skills, and exposure to new cultural norms. This accelerated integration can create generational tensions, as differing understandings of appropriate behaviour, gender roles, and familial authority emerge within households (Fischer 2013). These shifts not only challenge established hierarchies but also influence core social institutions such as marriage and family formation. Chapter 5 examines how such inter-generational dynamics are reflected in changing marriage practices among Afghan migrants in Austria, drawing on empirical data to analyse the reconfiguration of expectations, partner choice, and marital roles in the migration context.

3. The Social Fabric of Afghan Life: Family, Roles, Marriage, and Values

Over the last century, Afghan society has experienced profound social transformations driven by both state-led modernization efforts and the enduring impacts of conflict and migration. While government reforms targeting family structures and women's rights primarily resonated with urban elites, they often faced significant resistance in rural areas, thereby deepening the urban-rural divide. The political upheavals beginning with the 1978 communist coup and subsequent Soviet occupation in 1979, followed by decades of war, have destabilized traditional social hierarchies, empowered new military and political elites, and triggered widespread displacement and urbanization. These processes have fundamentally altered gender roles, household dynamics, and community relations.

The large-scale displacement of Afghans to neighbouring countries—primarily Pakistan and Iran—and later to Europe accelerated these social shifts. In exile, Afghan refugees, especially women and youth, encountered new social norms, expanded educational and employment opportunities, and developed more egalitarian attitudes toward gender and family life. However, these changes often clashed with traditional values upon return to Afghanistan, generating tensions within families and communities. Young male returnees, in particular, frequently found themselves economically dependent after depleting resources during migration, entering arranged marriages as a means to reaffirm cultural belonging and social status (van Houte and Davids 2018; cf. Ismail et al. 2025). Those who adopted more liberal or 'Western' lifestyles abroad—regarding marriage, sexuality, and gender roles—often faced social exclusion or familial conflict when reintegrating into Afghan society.

Women returnees face pronounced challenges due to strict social restrictions on female mobility and independence. Living alone is generally stigmatized and equated with immoral behaviour, while societal expectations enforce male guardianship in public spaces (EASO 2017a:49). Afghan women with higher education or public profiles, especially in urban centres like Kabul, are frequently perceived as 'Westernized', exposing them to social sanctions and even violence from conservative elements. Women active in public life or non-traditional employment roles are particularly vulnerable to harassment and marginalization, highlighting the enduring patriarchal control embedded in Afghan society (ibid.:85).

These intersecting dynamics illustrate how conflict, migration, and return journeys continuously reshape the social fabric of Afghan life. The tension between new experiences and entrenched cultural norms underscores ongoing transformations

in family roles, marriage practices, and gender relations. Building on this understanding, the following sections explore the Afghan family as a central social institution, examining its structure, functions, and the roles and status of its members. They also consider the cultural meanings and practices of marriage, alongside the core values that shape social life.

3.1 The Afghan Family as the Foundation of Social Order

The family constitutes the most important social and economic unit in Afghanistan. Although nuclear family models have been gaining popularity within the last decades, predominantly in the country's city areas (i.e., Kabul) where agricultural economy is less prominent and external ('Westernized') influences (i.e., media, returnees, social exchange between different social groups etc.) have greater prevalence, the traditional and most fundamental unit of Afghan society is the extended family. In rural areas, extended families share production and consumption on land and animals and distribute their productive outcomes (might also be income) among all family members according to their needs and social positions (Hanifi 1978:49ff).

In general, the traditional extended Afghan family includes parents, children, and patrilineal kin up to the third degree—such as uncles, aunts (typically unmarried and without children), and cousins. A household might further include the man's unmarried, widowed, or divorced sisters, and his brother's orphaned children. Family affiliation hereby determines the identity of individuals. As socialization is primarily taking place within the family household, cultural knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next, keeping the traditions and customs of family systems alive (ibid.; Emadi 2005:166f.).

Although household structures might differ between rural (i.e., agricultural - extended family) and urban settings (i.e., wage labour – nuclear family), the roles and status of family members show certain similarities. In general, the Afghan household and family is patriarchally structured, where the head of the family (usually eldest male) holds most authority and decision-making power and is responsible for all family members (Hahn 1972). As highest authority, he represents the family outside the household compound and makes major family decisions, such as over the type of education and profession of his children as well as over (financial) arrangements in relation to their marriage partner selection. In upper-middle classes as well as educated families (mainly in urban areas), however, such decisions are usually made in consultation with other family members (Emadi 2005:168).

Although females are generally regarded as subordinate to males within Afghan society, the eldest woman—typically the wife of the household's eldest male—often wields considerable authority over other female members and children within the household (E.g. in polygynous households, the first wife frequently holds a special status; for example, among the Uzbeks, this position is recognized by the specific term *katta khatun*). This hierarchical arrangement is further reinforced by the patrilocal residence pattern characteristic of Afghan family life, where married sons remain within their father's household, and their wives are expected to obey the directives of their mother-in-law (Hahn 1972). Social relations within the household are thus organized primarily along the male lineage, as women are affiliated through marriage and defined in relation to men. This kinship structure confers upon male family members a collective responsibility to protect and uphold the honour of their female relatives (Hanifi 1978:51).

Hence, the Afghan family adheres to hierarchy structures in relation to gender and age, where (intergenerational) ties are directed by authority and prestige (elders) as well as obedience and deference (younger generation). In this regard, the next section gives a brief insight into the most important relations within traditional Afghan families, that again differ between urban and rural settings but show some similar features among all ethnic and social groups.

Relationship between Husband and Wife

In traditional (particularly rural) Afghan families, where endogamy and arranged marriages are prevalent practices (see 3.3.1), the marital relationship is primarily grounded in social, economic, and political considerations concerning the two families involved. While love marriages and romantic relationships do occur – particularly among urban, well-educated, upper-middle-class groups – they remain exceptions rather than the cultural norm (Hanifi 1978:52). Broader societal norms, especially the strict segregation of the sexes, typically prevent premarital interaction, and in most cases, spouses become acquainted only after marriage, unless they were raised as close kin within the same extended household (*ibid.*).

Expressions of affection or companionship between husband and wife are generally considered inappropriate in public, and the spousal relationship is largely defined by economic cooperation and the reproduction of offspring. Consequently, the success of a marriage is not evaluated based on emotional intimacy between partners, but rather on the presence of children – particularly sons – who are culturally regarded as essential to familial continuity and social status (Hanifi 1978:52).

Relationship between Parents and Children

Children are considered indispensable assets within Afghan families. They play a crucial role in maintaining family lineages and ensuring the continuation of family property, as well as providing social and economic support for elderly relatives. The preference for male offspring is deeply rooted in Afghanistan's patrilineal and Islamic social structures. Sons inherit the family name and property equally, while daughters are usually married into other families (Emadi 2005:168,177). Although Islamic law stipulates that daughters should inherit half of what sons inherit upon their father's death, in practice, landed property is usually transferred to male heirs only (Centlivres-Demont 1994).

However, gender preference varies according to social and environmental contexts. For example, in agrarian communities where land is owned, sons are often favoured because they are able to perform the physically demanding labour required to sustain the family (Emadi 2005:168). At the same time, daughters play vital roles in other social groups, contributing economically through tasks such as processing milk, handling wool, and weaving carpets, and socially by supporting their mothers and helping to establish or reinforce political and economic alliances.

In rural areas, strict gender segregation from early childhood shapes parent-child relationships. Fathers primarily take on an educational role with their sons, teaching them culturally appropriate male behaviours and agricultural skills. Sons are expected to respect their fathers and eventually take on their responsibilities as heads of the household. Although adult sons typically make household decisions, the father's authority persists, including in decision-making regarding his children's marriages, and he continues to provide guidance throughout his old age (Hanifi 1978:53).

By contrast, daughters tend to have a less direct relationship with their fathers due to gender segregation, which leads them to form stronger bonds with their mothers. This bond is reinforced through the transmission of female household roles, such as childcare, from mother to daughter. The importance of motherhood is emphasised from an early age, with older sisters often caring for younger siblings and internalising the goal of motherhood rather than wifehood (Shalinsky 1980b). This close mother-daughter relationship, nurtured through shared domestic responsibilities, is abruptly altered when daughters marry into other households, typically in their late teens. Nevertheless, these bonds often endure through regular contact, such as visits (Hanifi 1978:53).

Relationship between Siblings

In early childhood, Afghan siblings are raised together within the family compound, engaging in shared play until gendered social roles lead to a gradual separation into father-son and mother-daughter spheres. By the age of nine or ten, boys may begin to exert authority over their sisters – an authority generally accepted without parental mediation, even if the sister is older or involved in the boy's upbringing (Hanifi 1978:54f.). As children mature, interactions between the opposite-sex siblings diminish due to their diverging social roles and spatial separation. Nonetheless, if they reside in the same household, brothers bear the responsibility of safeguarding their sister's honour, a duty later transferred to the husband upon marriage. In case of marital conflict, the brother may act as a protector and intermediary, thereby assuming paternal role (*ibid.*).

Same-sex sibling relationships tend to be marked by closeness and mutual reliance. Brothers often share a lifelong bond grounded in equality and cohabitation, while sisters develop strong connections through shared household responsibilities and preparation for future marital roles. These ties, particularly among sisters, may persist after marriage, depending on the geographic proximity of their new households (Hanifi 1978:54f.).

Relationship between In-laws

From an early age, Afghan girls are brought up with the understanding that they will eventually live with their future mother-in-law. This relationship is central to marital stability, as the two women usually share domestic responsibilities. In this dynamic, the mother-in-law often assumes a position of authority, issuing directives that the daughter-in-law is expected to follow respectfully. This compliance is crucial for the daughter-in-law's social integration and acceptance into her husband's family (Hanifi 1978:55).

However, the quality and nature of the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law can vary significantly depending on several factors, including individual personalities, the relative social status of the bride's natal and marital households, and differences in ethnic or cultural practices (*ibid.*). Tensions may arise from divergent views on household management or emotional dynamics involving the son/husband. In more extreme cases, such power struggles may extend to controlling aspects of the couple's private life. For example, in Uzbek communities in northern Afghanistan, it has been documented that a mother-in-law may restrict sexual relations between a married couple to assert dominance (Shalinsky 1989b).

Similarly, the relationship between a wife and her husband's brother (brother-in-law) is governed by obligations and social expectations. A wife is expected to show respect to her brother-in-law and offer him assistance, particularly in domestic matters. In turn, the brother-in-law is responsible for protecting her during her husband's absence. In some cases, particularly in instances of widowhood, he may also marry her in a levirate marriage (Hanifi 1978:56).

3.2 Gender Roles and Status

Gender roles and social status vary significantly across Afghan ethnic and social groups. While religion and tradition largely shape gendered behaviour in the country, notable differences exist between rural and urban populations, where local customs and Islamic practices are observed to varying degrees. Nonetheless, certain overarching practices and behavioural ideals prevail throughout Afghanistan, which will be explored in the following.

As an Islamic society, shared gender ideals in Afghanistan are rooted in interpretations of the Qur'an that have been transmitted across generations and embedded within the social practices and local customs of its people. Being a good Muslim entails acting in accordance with the will of God; consequently, appropriate gender conduct is strongly emphasized and modelled on the exemplary lives of both men and women (Göçek 2001). Religious texts address critical aspects such as marriage conditions, dowry, divorce, and inheritance rights, prescribing the obligatory behaviour within marriage and the complementary roles of spouses (ibid.). While these gender ideals are broadly accepted, their specific interpretation is frequently mediated by traditional local customs—particularly in rural tribal communities—where Islamic norms may be both embraced and contested (cf. Echavez et al. 2016:45).

Within Afghan families, gender roles and responsibilities are typically rigidly divided. Men are viewed as the providers (*nafaqah*), protectors, and progenitors. They bear the responsibility for fulfilling the economic and social needs of the family, including financial support and security, and represent the family in the wider social sphere, exercising authority accordingly. Failure to meet these expectations often results in profound dishonour (*be-ghairat-i*) and shame (Echavez et al. 2016:44). Public spaces are generally gender-segregated, with men dominating these arenas and women subject to varying degrees of restriction, which differ across ethnic groups and regions. For instance, Hazara Isma'ili women experience greater freedom of movement, as strict gender separation from unrelated men is not practiced, a pat-

tern similarly observed among some Durrani Pashtun women. In contrast, most rural and tribal communities enforce strict gender segregation, often excluding women entirely from public participation (Emadi 2005: 170).

Women primarily oversee the domestic sphere, managing household affairs and caring for family members such as children and daughters-in-law. Due to the prevailing age hierarchy within families, elder women also possess significant authority in household management (Centlivres-Demont 1994). Women's social status is closely tied to their reproductive role, encompassing both physical and social reproduction. Young women's marriage is often formalized through the transfer of goods from the husband's family to the bride's, reinforcing social alliances. It is through childbirth that women attain full social status and fulfil their expected role as mothers (*ibid.*).

The nature of women's work and the degree of submission to male authority vary considerably across Afghanistan, reflecting a pronounced rural-urban divide. In rural areas, family life is characterized by mutual segregation and interdependence. Men engage primarily in heavy agricultural labour and control major household resources, while women perform domestic duties and lighter agricultural tasks. This shared cultivation of land supports the survival of extended families and results in greater mobility for rural women³² (Hanifi 1978: 51).

In urban areas, the emergence of a wage labour economy contributed to a clearer division between productive and domestic spheres. While this often reinforced women's dependency and deepened gender segregation (Centlivres-Demont 1994; Emadi 2005: 170), from the 1960s onward, growing numbers of urban women—particularly in professions such as teaching and medicine—entered the workforce, challenging traditional gender roles. Nonetheless, structural inequalities persisted, particularly for women outside the educated elite. Among younger, well-educated urban upper-middle classes, traditional norms have increasingly been questioned, and aspirations toward greater gender equality have gained traction (Echavez et al. 2016: 45).

As discussed in Chapter 3.1, political reforms in recent decades have sought to transform normative gender roles, while the consequences of ongoing conflict have further catalysed social change. Despite these shifts, traditional gender norms and values largely persist among the broader population, often to the detriment of Afghan women.

³² Women from poorer rural strata, such as tenant farmers, often exhibited greater mobility than women from wealthier rural families.

3.3 Meaning and Practice of Marriage

Marriage forms the foundation of family life in Afghanistan, symbolizing the ideal form of partnership and way of living. It is closely tied to expectations of childbearing, with larger families enhancing a couple's social standing. More than a bond between two individuals, marriage serves as a formal alliance between families, reflecting the deeply embedded nature of individuals within extended kinship systems (Saboory and Yassari 2005:16). Understanding Afghan marriage practices therefore requires insight into the broader social structure, where ethnic, tribal, and kinship networks influence not only familial relations but also political and economic cooperation (see Chapter 2). As such, marriages often function as strategic alliances, with their significance varying by region and social group (Schütte 2014). In the following, I provide a brief overview of key factors shaping marriage in Afghanistan (3.3.1), including dominant marriage forms, legal and customary prohibitions, exchange practices, stages of marital negotiation (3.3.2), and the role of state regulations (3.3.3).

3.3.1 Legal and Cultural Overviews of Afghan Marriage Practices

In general, marriage practices in Afghanistan are shaped by three overlapping normative systems: local custom, Islamic law (sharia), and state law, each influencing marital practices to varying degrees depending on region and social context (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012:18). In rural areas, customary norms dominate, reinforced by strong family authority, while sharia law provides religious legitimacy. State law, such as the 1977 Afghan Civil Code, formalizes processes such as engagement and marriage registration, but remains secondary in practice—gaining more relevance in urban areas influenced by legal reforms (see Chapter 2.1.1). These frameworks underpin a variety of marriage practices, many of which—though widespread across ethnic groups—are widely acknowledged to harm women, often resulting in abuse and violence, and frequently contradict Islamic teachings (see Smith 2009; Landinfo 2011:11).

Arranged and Endogamous Marriage

In Afghan society, arranged marriage continues to be the most socially esteemed and prevalent form of union, encompassing variations such as *cradle marriage*³³, *par-*

³³ *Cradle marriage* (also known as *ghōraghi wakhte*) refers to a customary Afghan practice where children, of-

celled marriage³⁴, and formal matchmaking³⁵. These arrangements are typically guided by considerations of ethnic, religious, and social compatibility, and serve multiple functions—economic, political, and symbolic. Economically, such marriages help retain property within patrilineal families, especially when the bride is a relative, or consolidate landholdings to improve household production. Politically, and socially, they function to establish or reinforce alliances, resolve conflicts, and demonstrate loyalty through reciprocal exchanges of daughters (Emadi 2005:172ff).

Although the selection process and criteria for suitable marriage partners vary between ethnic and social groups, as well as in rural and urban settings, endogamy—marriage within one’s ethnic, religious, and social group—is strongly preferred (Sa-boory & Yassari 2005: 11ff.). While reliable marriage statistics for Afghanistan are scarce, some surveys suggest that approximately half of all marriages involve closely related individuals (Landinfo 2011:6). Cousin marriage is thus very common and culturally ideal, particularly within the patrilineal kin group (Rasuly-Paleczek 1994: 197; cf. Centlivres 1975: 35). These practices reflect broader norms of isogamy (marriage within the same social class) and alignment with the *qaum*—one’s ethnic or local community. Spouse selection, therefore, typically begins within the extended kin group and expands only when necessary (Shalinsky 1980a: 270f).

These marital practices are also deeply gendered. While men may marry women of lower social status (as in accordance with Islamic law), daughters are expected to marry isogamously (same social rank) or hypergamously (a man of higher social status), marrying a daughter into a lower-status household is considered shameful (*sharm*) (Olesen 1982; Rasuly-Paleczek 1994: 197f; Bourdieu 1979: 132). Among the Durrani Pashtuns³⁶, such boundaries are particularly strict, with prohibitions on

ten infants, are promised to each other in marriage, typically within the extended family. This form of marriage intends to preserve property, honour, and alliances. This arrangement excludes the consent of those involved, violates both Islamic and Afghan civil law and is thus considered a form of forced marriage. Although this form is declining throughout Afghanistan, it still occurs in rural areas (cf. Landinfo 2011:6).

³⁴ Since the 1990s, *parcelled marriages* have become increasingly common, typically arranged between Afghan men living in Western countries and brides residing in Afghanistan or refugee communities in Pakistan or Iran. In these cases, the prospective groom sends a photograph and financial support to the bride’s family, who view the marriage as an opportunity for their daughter to secure a better future (Emadi 2005: 173).

³⁵ *Matchmaking* refers to marriage arrangements between unrelated families, more common in Afghan urban areas. Typically, when a boy is interested in a girl, he informs his parents, who then send a *ruybar* (mutual friend or mediator) to approach the girl’s family with a proposal. If the girl’s parents agree, the two families meet formally. In more educated families, negotiations often take place directly between the families without a *ruybar*. In most cases, the prospective bride and groom already know each other and have mutually agreed to marry (Emadi 2005:173).

³⁶ According to Tapper (1984), the greatest difference in marriage practices is between Pashtuns and non-Pa-

marrying non-Pashtuns (e.g. Farsiwan) serving to maintain claims of superior descent and exclusive access to resources (Tapper 1984:302–303).

In tribal contexts, marriage frequently serves long-term strategic purposes. Affinal ties between households are often sustained over multiple generations or through repeated intermarriage within the same kin groups (Rasuly-Paleczek 1994: 197f.; Shalinsky 1980a: 270f.). These patterns are shaped by systems of inheritance and property transfer: in regions where patrilineal norms dominate, women's rights are absorbed onto their husband's family, divorce is rare, and bride prices are high. In areas where Islamic inheritance law is more influential—granting daughters partial inheritance rights—exogamy may be more tolerated, and the economic stakes of marriage less rigid (Tapper 1984: 303f).

According to Islamic law, marriage is prohibited between close blood relatives due to the incest taboo. This includes one's mother, sister, aunts (maternal and paternal), stepmother, and the daughters of one's siblings, as well as one's mother-in-law, son's wife, or two sisters simultaneously. However, marriage to women of the same generation—such as cousins—is permitted, including the daughters of one's uncles and aunts (Rasuly-Paleczek 1994: 197).

Polygamy (polygyny)

Polygamy in Afghanistan is practiced across ethnic groups and is shaped by social, cultural, and economic factors, as well as Islamic legal principles. Legally, Afghan civil and Islamic law permit a man to marry up to four wives, provided he can ensure equal treatment among them and meet financial obligations such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care (Coulson and Shamsy n.d.). Justification for polygamy commonly include infertility or absence of male offspring from the first wife, the duty to marry a brother's widow (*levirate*), dissatisfaction with an arranged or forced first marriage, or delayed engagements (Smith 2009:60–61). In some cases, polygamy serves as a socially acceptable alternative to divorce, which is highly stigmatised for women and may result in social exclusion or loss of economic security. Conse-

shtuns (i.e., Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazara etc.), who differ by form of social organization, language, custom, and (in case of the Hazara) religion. Since the relationship between Pashtuns (Durrani) and non-Pashtuns (Farsiwan) has historically been characterized by interethnic competition, based on Pashtun "claims to religiously privileged descent, implying superiority to all other ethnic groups" (Tapper 1984:302), the strict ban of hypogamy (prohibition of women's 'down marriage' – other than Pashto speaking, such as the Farsiwan) depicts "an effective means of preventing Farsiwans from gaining access to Durrani resources and identity" (Tapper 1984:303).

quently, many women tolerate their husband's additional marriages (such co-wives are called *ambagh*) (Landinfo 2011:4, 14).

While polygamy may be associated with wealth, it is not limited to affluent men and remains a socially accepted practice across class and ethnic groups. Nonetheless, it often results in unequal treatment, emotional hardship, and intra-household conflict between wives, although in some instances co-wives develop supportive relationships (Smith 2009:54ff.). Widows who remarry within their deceased husband's family may retain contact with their children, but they rarely attain equal status to the first wife. Moreover, polygamy is sometimes driven by dissatisfaction from the husband or his family—especially the mother-in-law—when the current wife fails to meet expectations related to household duties (Smith 2009: 58).

Exchange Marriage (*badal*)

Badal remains a prevalent practice in Afghanistan whereby families exchange daughters in order to marry off sons without having to pay high bride prices (see below). This practice is primarily driven by economic hardship and social pressures (particularly in poor regions affected e.g. by conflict or drought). Although widely accepted, *badal* is also recognised as harmful, often perpetuating cycles of retaliatory violence between families. This is because the mistreatment of one exchanged woman frequently leads to the abuse of her counterpart (Smith 2009:41–46). Women involved in these arrangements are typically deprived of agency, with their well-being closely linked to the status of the relative they have been exchanged for. Despite being aware of its un-Islamic nature and its detrimental long-term effects, families continue to rely on *badal* due to financial constraints and a perceived lack of alternatives. This entrenches gender inequality, prioritising the marriage of sons over the welfare of daughters and often resulting in early and forced marriages (ibid.).

Compensation Marriages (*baad/badd*)

In cases of serious disputes, blood feuds or debts, compensation marriages may be practised as a means of resolving conflict. In this traditional Afghan practice, girls from the family of the perpetrator are married into the family of the victim as compensation for serious crimes such as murder or accidental killing. These arrangements are typically decided by local councils (*jirgas* or *shuras*) and are most common in rural Pashtun communities, though they are not universally practiced across all ethnic groups or regions. While *baad* is declining in some areas like Kabul, Bamyan, and Nangarhar, it persists even in urban centres. The practice is widely condemned as a violation of Afghan law, Islamic principles, and human rights—particularly

women's rights—yet some still view it as a means to restore peace and social cohesion. However, research indicates that *baad* often fails to achieve these intended outcomes (Landinfo 2011:13f.).

Levirate Marriage

When a widow is expected to marry a close male relative of her deceased husband—typically his brother—this is known as levirate marriage. Rooted in traditional norms surrounding family honour (*nāmus*) social protection, and the preservation of patrilineal property, this practice is particularly common among Pashtun and other rural communities in Afghanistan. It aims to ensure that the widow and her children remain within the deceased husband's family, thereby safeguarding inheritance, family assets, and social ties. While levirate marriage may serve economic and social purposes, it often ignores the woman's consent, thereby violating both Afghan law and Islamic principles, which require mutual agreement in marriage. Although less prevalent in urban areas, it remains widespread in rural regions (Landinfo 2011:15f.).

Other, less common forms of marriage in Afghanistan include *temporary contract marriages*, which are occasionally practised within some Shia communities (prohibited in Sunni Islam) and are often influenced by Iranian custom. In these unions, the duration is agreed upon (ranging from a few hours to a specified number in years) in advance for pragmatic or economic reasons. This practice became more common after the Taliban fell in 1996, with many returning from Iran (Landinfo 2011:18).

Transfers related to Marriage

Marriage transactions in Afghanistan reflect a complex interplay of religious obligations, customary norms, and socio-economic conditions. Despite widespread awareness of their potentially harmful effects—such as the commodification of women, financial burdens on the groom's family, and increased risk of abuse for brides—these practices remain deeply entrenched, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas (Smith 2009: 46–49).

*Mahr*³⁷ as prescribed by Islamic law, is a mandatory gift from the groom to the bride, becoming her personal property. It typically consists of two parts: an immediate payment (often gold jewellery presented on the wedding day) and a deferred portion payable in case of divorce or the husband's death. The *mahr* amount is stip-

³⁷ Dowry, distinct from *Mahr*, refers to the assets or gifts a bride brings from her family into her new household; in Afghanistan, this practice – once a marker of marital preparedness – has become a source of financial and emotional strain, delaying marriages, creating family tensions, and stigmatising brides without it (Hasht e Subh Daily 2025).

ulated in the marriage contract and is meant to ensure the bride's financial security (Saboory and Yassari 2005:12).

In contrast, *bride price* (also known as *walwar*³⁸ in Pashtun regions and east and southeast Afghanistan), is a customary payment (including cash, livestock, grain, and sometimes firearms) made by the groom or his family to the bride's father (cf. Ahmad 2023). This transfer, prevalent during marriage proposal (*khāstgarī*) process, is framed as compensation for the bride's upbringing and as a symbol of her purity and honour. The amount of *bride price* is negotiable and depends on multiple factors, including the bride's physical appearance, virginity, education, skills (e.g. carpet weaving), and family status etc. (Saboory and Yassari 2005:12f.; Emadi 2005:175; Hahn 1972). In practice, the groom's social and educational background also plays a role. Better-educated men, especially from affluent families, may pay lower or no *bride price* (Olesen 1982). In contrast, in poorer rural and tribal communities, where illiteracy and economic hardship are common, the *bride price* becomes a crucial source of income for the bride's family and is therefore a central focus during negotiations (Saboory and Yassari 2005: 12ff.; Emadi 2005: 175). In some districts of Afghanistan, such as Mandol, *bride price* expectations may reach up to 200,000 Afghanis (~US\$2,900), accompanied by 100 goats or sheep, two cows, over 500 kg of grain, and firearms (Ahmad 2023). These high costs delay marriages, push young men into long-term debt, and lead many to migrate in search of an income (e.g. Iran). These practices are increasingly criticised as un-Islamic and harmful, with religious leaders calling for reform and government-imposed limits (e.g. Taliban) proving difficult to enforce (ibid.).

Moreover, the widespread use of *badal* (exchange marriage) serves as a strategy to circumvent *bride price* entirely, as families agree to exchange daughters in marriage, often without monetary transactions (Smith 2009: 40) (see Section above).

3.3.2 Stages of Marital Arrangements (Negotiations)

Selection of a Spouse

The selection of marriage partners in Afghan society is largely shaped by familial authority, with decisions typically made once children reach marriageable age. However, the preferred age varies across ethnic and social groups, being influenced by the economic, political and social interests of the families involved. Traditional com-

³⁸ Also referred to as *toyana* (central Afghanistan), *qalin* (north and northwest), or *shir baha* (western areas) as expressions used vary throughout different parts of Afghanistan (cf. Saboory and Yassari 2005 12f.).

munities tend to endorse earlier marriage ages than urban areas, where education and aspirations, particularly for men, are often prioritised (Emadi 2005:172–174). In some cases, marriage arrangements are made for children as young as one year old, effectively binding them from infancy (see above *cradle marriage*) (Landinfo 2011:6).

As marriage is primarily viewed as a family responsibility rather than an individual one, elders, particularly parents, hold decisive authority, especially in rural settings where age-based hierarchies dominate (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012:18). Although the groom's family usually starts the marriage negotiations, older women, such as mothers or grandmothers, often oversee the selection of a spouse, as is commonly seen in urban Uzbek-Tajik households. These women assess potential brides based on their domestic skills and family reputation, discreetly initiating contact through trusted intermediaries (Shalinsky 1989b).

Although there may be variations according to participation and agency in the selection process, children, especially girls, are generally expected to accept a marriage arranged by their families. When parental decisions take precedence over informed consent, marriages may be classified as forced (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012:18). This practice is more prevalent in conservative rural regions, whereas urban and more educated families, especially those who have returned from abroad, are more inclined to support love marriages and choices of partner beyond kinship ties (Saboory and Yassari 2005:14). Engagements are consequently formalised only once both families agree; if the bride's family declines, the process typically ends.

Marriage negotiations (*khāstgarī*)

Once the bride's family has accepted the initial marriage proposal, formal negotiations (*khāstgarī*) will begin, typically at the bride's home. These negotiations usually centre on the financial and material agreements to be made between the two families, including the *mahr* and the *bride price* (see Section 3.3.1 above) (Muzhary 2016). While decisions on general wedding expenses may be made quickly, discussions over *mahr* and *bride price* are often prolonged and contentious. These negotiations are primarily conducted between the parents and exclude the prospective bride and groom (*ibid.*). Once an agreement has been reached between the two families, details about the immediate and deferred *mahr* will be included in the marriage certificate (see 3.3.3) (Saboory and Yassari 2005:11f.).

Engagement Period

Following the agreement, the couple is formally engaged. The length of this engagement period varies, with most weddings occurring within a year. However, finan-

cial burdens, particularly the high costs associated with weddings, often delay ceremonies by several years (Landinfo 2011:6). These expenses can even lead to family bankruptcy, thereby prolonging the engagement and increasing the average age at marriage (Emadi 2005:175).

According to Article 65 of the Afghan Civil Code 1977 (see for English translation: ALEP 2014: 22f.), which remained in force under the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004 – 2021), an engagement is defined as a mutual promise to marry, and either party has the right to annul it. In cases of annulment, claims can be made for the return of gifts or their monetary equivalent (ibid.: 5). However, in practice, annulments are strongly discouraged and socially condemned.

When an engagement is dissolved, the stigma usually falls on the woman and her family, who are perceived as having lost prestige. It is commonly believed that a fiancé would not terminate an engagement if the woman were to maintain good morals and chastity. Consequently, a broken engagement can leave a woman feeling socially vulnerable and uncertain about her future, particularly given that the bride price is usually returned to the man. By contrast, men face little to no social penalty in such circumstances (Saboory and Yassari 2005: 14).

Nevertheless, if both families honour the initial arrangements and the couple adheres to these decisions, the marriage will proceed, resulting in the bride joining her husband's family and a consequent reorganisation of gender roles and social status.

3.3.3 Marriage Between Law and Customs

Afghanistan's political history has seen repeated attempts to reform marriage and family law—such as Decree No. 7—as part of broader nation-building projects (see Chapter 3.1). These reforms, however, have largely failed to gain societal acceptance, reflecting not only the cultural divide between rural and urban populations but also the plural and often contradictory nature of the Afghan legal system. This system draws simultaneously on customary (tribal) law, and Islamic law (*Shari'a* – *Hanafi* school³⁹), which serves as base of the statutory law (Swenson and Sugerman 2011).

³⁹ The *Hanafi* school is one of the four Sunni schools of religious law and represents the dominant form of Islam in Afghanistan. Although it acknowledges the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (narratives concerning the Prophet Muhammad's life and sayings) as primary sources of law, *Hanafi* doctrines have always been considered among the most flexible and liberal in Islamic law, as for instance, when addressing treatment of individual freedom, marriage, and guardianship, as well as property rights (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica n.d.; Oxford bibliographies 2013).

Statutory provisions, most notably the Afghan Civil Code of 1977 (see for English translation ALEP 2014), provide a codified framework for regulating marriage, kinship, guardianship, and family obligations. Article 56 of the Code defines the family as a unit based on kinship ties—direct (e.g., parent–child) or indirect (e.g., siblings) (ALEP 2014:21)—while Article 59 extends indirect kinship to include relations between a wife and her husband’s relatives (ALEP 2014:22). Nevertheless, the family as a collective does not hold legal personality or property rights; only individuals do (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012: 26).

Despite this codification, uncoded Hanafī law remains the dominant source of authority, reinforced by limited legal education, widespread illiteracy, and judges’ reliance on flexible interpretations—often disadvantaging women, particularly in divorce (Rastin-Tehrani 2012: 14). In addition, customary norms continue to shape family life in rural and tribal areas. Among these, the Pashtun code of conduct (*Pash-tunwali*) exerts particular influence by prescribing gender roles, women’s duties, and sanctions for transgressions, thereby structuring social and familial relations in rural Pashtun communities (Saboory and Yassari 2005: 9).

The following section explores key legal rights and regulations on marriage and examines how these interact with the diverse practices of Afghanistan’s social and ethnic groups.

Validity of Marriage

In Afghanistan, marriage is primarily regarded as a contractual arrangement between families rather than a personal or emotional bond, often serving political, economic, or social purposes (Landinfo 2011: 5). Legally, the Afghan Civil Code (AfgCC 1977)⁴⁰ stipulates that only a valid marriage contract creates enforceable rights and obligations, with Article 60 defining marriage as a union legitimizing family life and related duties (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012: 27). Engagement⁴¹ is widely treated as a binding commitment, though it is legally concluded by the marriage contract itself.

⁴⁰ See for English translation: (ALEP 2014) in Reference List of thesis.

⁴¹ Although the law allows for the annulment of marriage agreements – occurs only rarely – higher repercussions for woman: be without assurance for her future and without esteem she held prior to first engagement – risk that she will remain unmarried – man on the other hand can easily get remarried – social perception that: when girl and her family are honourable – annulment of engagement won’t happen (Landinfo 2011:5f).

For validity, the Civil Code requires:

- Offer and acceptance in one session, expressed by the couple or their guardians/proxies, with the parties being of marriageable age, legally competent, and consenting. In practice, however, consent is frequently absent—an estimated 60–80% of marriages occur without free agreement, often linked to poverty, exchange practices such as *badd* or *por*, or coercion by armed groups (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012: 32). Although the Penal Code criminalizes forced and underage marriages, enforcement is weak, and such practices remain widespread, especially in rural areas (Landinfo 2011: 6).
- Witnesses with legal capacity and the absence of permanent legal obstacles (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012: 27).

To be a consensual agreement, offer and acceptance must correspond in terms of its content, such as the agreement on the bride price. The conclusion of the contract is then expressed, usually in wording as used in customary law; silence is not considered as a valid agreement. Once such declaration has been expressed by both parties, the marriage should have immediate effect and may not be subject to conditions or time limits (Article 67 CC) (ibid.:30).

Although Article 61 requires marriage registration, implementation is minimal: only around 5% of marriages are officially recorded, leaving the vast majority—especially in rural areas—unregistered (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012: 51; Landinfo 2011: 2). In such contexts, marriages may lack formal contracts altogether, weakening women’s ability to claim legal protections such as minimum age, consent, or rights upon divorce.

The legal effects of marriage impose reciprocal obligations, though these are asymmetrical. While both spouses are instructed to respect one another and raise children jointly⁴², women are bound by stricter duties, including obedience to their husbands and residence in the marital home, whereas men are responsible for financial maintenance and the dower, the latter however is not subject to any legal allegations (Rastin-Tehrani and Yassari 2012: 56).

⁴² In Afghanistan, children’s legal status in matters of guardianship, maintenance, and inheritance depends on legitimacy. A child is legitimate if presumed conceived within lawful wedlock. While a mother always has a legal tie to her illegitimate child, a father must publicly acknowledge paternity for a legal relationship to exist. Guardianship over children and their property lies with the father or another male agnate, whereas custody (*haḍānah*) of young children after divorce or separation is typically granted to the mother or other maternal relatives (Coulson and Shamsy n.d.).

In practice, most Afghans—especially in rural areas—remain unaware of their formal legal rights. Courts, concentrated in urban centres and often staffed by madrasa-trained judges, tend to rely on flexible applications of uncodified Hanafī jurisprudence rather than statutory provisions. In rural communities, dispute resolution is more commonly handled by *jirgas* or *shuras*, while many family conflicts never leave the household. Consequently, customary law and Hanafī practice dominate everyday life, frequently clashing not only with statutory law but also with alternative interpretations of Islamic law, including those promoted by the Taliban. This plural and often contradictory system leaves women with severely limited access to enforceable legal protections (Saboory and Yassari 2005:6–10).

Divorce

As described in Chapter 2.1.1 efforts to reform family law in Afghanistan have historically aimed to improve women’s access to marriage rights, including divorce, though with limited success. To this day, the dissolution of a marriage is not common practice and carries social stigma in the Afghan society. However, it may occur in extreme situation when the couple developed irreconcilable differences, or the woman hold legal grounds for a judicial divorce (*tafrīq*). According to Article 131 of the Afghan Civil Code, a marriage may be dissolved by annulment (*faskh*), unilateral repudiation by the husband (*ṭalāq*), mutual consent (*khol*), or judicial divorce (*tafrīq*)—the latter requiring legal grounds such as failure to fulfil marital obligations (Rastin-Tehrani 2012:71–82). In practice, however, divorce is usually initiated by men and does not require the wife’s consent. While Islamic and civil law formally permit women to request divorce on grounds of mistreatment or dissatisfaction, the process is onerous: it requires her husband’s approval and the testimony of two male witnesses. Moreover, for a woman to appear in court is considered dishonourable, often damaging the reputation of both families involved (Emadi 2005:179).

In cases where the marriage has been consummated, women face significantly greater social and economic disadvantages than men upon divorce. If the husband initiates divorce, he forfeits the *mahr*, but typically retains custody of older children, while the mother only keeps custody of infants until they reach an age deemed no longer requiring maternal care. Fathers are responsible for financial support and retain visitation rights, whereas mothers lose custody entirely if they remarry and are often barred from visiting their children. The children are then cared for by the father’s family until he remarries (Emadi 2005:180).

Due to the economic burden and fear of social shame, many men avoid formal divorce, though women face even harsher consequences. Their financial depend-

ence and the loss of honour often lead to social exclusion, limited support from their natal families, and little chance of remarriage—except through levirate marriage (ibid.; Boesen 1983:112; EASO 2017a:46). These constraints can push women toward desperate measures, including life-threatening or fatal actions (Bohn 2018; EASO 2017a:48).

Marriage Age

There have been various attempts in Afghan politics to regulate and raise the legal age of marriage, including the Afghan Civil Code of 1977, Decree No. 7 under the Daoud regime, and post-2001 reforms aimed at reducing child marriage and promoting girls' education, while the Taliban's regime (1996–2001 and after 2021) imposed strict restrictions on women that indirectly affected early marriage practices (see Chapter 2.1.1).

Although Article 70 of the Afghan Civil Code (AfgCC, 1977) sets the legal marriage age at 16 for girls and 18 for boys, in practice, marriage often occurs much earlier, particularly in traditional and rural communities where unions serve economic or political purposes. While urban families may delay marriage to prioritise education or careers, girls generally marry much younger than boys, often upon reaching puberty, and rarely remain unmarried past the age of 20 (Saboory and Yassari, 2005: 16ff). As *Hanafi* law marks the reaching of puberty as a capable age of first marriage, tradition and actual practice make such decisions rather on the physical changes of a child, which are subject to different interpretations and traditional practices⁴³. In some rural areas (of i.e, Bamiyan, Badakhshan, Kandahar, Kunduz, and Ningarhar) minor girls are married as young as eight years and might even be promised to a boy and his family at birth. Such practice of child marriage nevertheless contradicts Islamic principles and is consequential to old cultural traditions without any legal recognition (Saboory and Yassari 2005:16ff). Despite child marriages predominantly affect girls, child grooms are not excluded, as poverty and displacement of families in war have contributed to an increased attribution of economic value to children and to the importance of preserving the family line (cf. Synovitz and Jalalzai 2019).

In general, it is primary weak economic conditions of families that lead to early child marriages, with families resorting to customs such as *badal* (the exchange of girls), *baad/badd* (the giving of girls as compensation), early engagements, and the

⁴³ In the Northern provinces of Afghanistan for instance, such as in the Mazar-e-Sharif region, the age of puberty is defined by the practice of *kolāh zadan*, where a girl is hit with a hat. If she withstands the throw, she will be considered at a marriage age, if she falls, she will be regarded as a minor and still needs time to grow (Saboory and Yassari 2005:16f).

payment of a bride price. These practices have even been documented in Kabul (Saboory and Yassari 2005: 17f; Synovitz and Jalalzai 2019).

Despite the severe consequences, including maternal mortality and long-term trauma, these marriages persist due to a lack of effective legal enforcement, as minors are often unaware of their right to annul such unions (Saboory and Yassari, 2005: 18f).

3.4 Important Norms and Values

Afghanistan's social structure is organized around family roles and statuses, upheld by culturally embedded codes of conduct that sustain kinship cohesion and social stability (Emadi 2005: 166; see also Chapter 3.1). These norms, shaped by Islamic principles, tribal conventions, and longstanding customary practices, vary across ethnic and regional groups and have been transformed over the recent years in response to government reforms and prolonged conflict (see Chapter 3). While changes in the formal and organisational aspects of Afghan social life, such as the authority of elders, decision-making roles as well as the social role of women may be more easily observed, shifts in underlying values are less apparent and best understood contextually within each community.

Despite the heterogeneous nature of the Afghan population, there are broadly similar patterns of behaviour and family practices that shape gender relations, define family responsibilities, and enforce social sanctions for deviations (Rzehak 2011: 3; Hahn 1972; Rasuly-Paleczek 2021). Understanding Afghan family life therefore requires an examination of these principles that govern interactions between men and women, parents and children, and wider kinship networks across different communities. The following section presents these principles in more detail.

3.4.1 The Pashtun Tribal Code of Honour

Rather than a universal standard, the Pashtun tribal code of conduct⁴⁴ (*Pashtunwali*⁴⁵) offers a well-documented illustration of Afghan social norms and values. Al-

⁴⁴ Supported by the military and political strength of Pashtun tribes, Ahmad Shah Durrāni was appointed as the first king of Afghanistan in 1747. Followed by exclusively Pashtun successors, a number of political privileges have been granted to Pashtun groups, which contributed to the nation-wide prominence of the *Pashtunwali* (Rzehak 2011: 5f).

⁴⁵ The *Pashtunwali*, extending beyond a purely legal framework, defines the ideal Pashtun and serves as a com-

though it is extensively codified, many of its core principles, such as honour and shame, generosity, hospitality and the regulation of gender relations⁴⁶, also apply to the social lives of other ethnic and regional groups in Afghanistan (Rzehak 2011:9; Kakar 2004:3). Their application, however, varies across socio-economic, urban and rural contexts. The underlying logic of linking individual behaviour to communal reputation, remains pervasive, making the *Pashtunwali* a valuable reference for understanding Afghan family values and social conduct more broadly.

Honour and Shame

Honour (*izzat*) is the cornerstone of Pashtun social structure and is held to be the highest value both socially and morally. It encompasses two primary dimensions: *nanga*, which refers to tribal or collective pride; and *nāmus*, which is the honour associated with the conduct and chastity of female household members (Rzehak 2011:10). In Pashtun society honour is relational and must be continuously defended and reaffirmed through one's actions in response to perceived threats or insults. Maintaining *nāmus* is the specific responsibility of male relatives, who are socially obligated to ensure the integrity, modesty and seclusion of their female kin, including wives, daughters, sisters and widows (*ibid.*).

The social status of women in Afghanistan is shaped by the patrilineal structure of families, where relationships between men and women are defined by descent or marriage. Male family members are responsible for providing protection, shelter and support to their female relatives, including wives, daughters and unmarried or widowed sisters. They must ensure their modesty, respectability and conformity to *Pashtunwali*, the tribal code of conduct (Rzehak 2011:15).

Any perceived transgression by a woman, or any violation of her honour (*nāmus*) by an outsider, constitutes a dishonour (*sharm*) to the entire family. In such cases, the male guardian is under social pressure to restore the family's reputation by taking revenge (*badal*). This obligation is tied to the concept of *ghairat* — a man's sense of honour and virility. A man who fails to defend his family's honour risks being la-

prehensive code of norms and conduct, encompassing both societal values and individual behaviour. It regulates what Pashtuns must do or avoid, guiding social cohesion, preserving the community, and functioning as a key marker of ethnic identity and distinction (cf. Rzehak 2011; Kakar 2004).

⁴⁶ Particular norms and values might vary among Pashtun groups and have further been adapted throughout the years of war (i.e., out of dramatic economic conditions for Afghan families or close contact with international agencies). Such deviation could relate, for example, to the computation of the amount of blood money, but not to the mechanism of conflict resolution (Chioyenda 2018; Rzehak 2011:17).

belled *be-ghairata* and losing his status as a respectable Pashtun or *nar* ('manly' man) (Chiovenda 2018).

However, the enactment of revenge is neither uniform nor automatic; it varies according to contextual factors such as the families' economic standing, social prestige, and local power dynamics. In some cases, the desire to avoid prolonged blood feuds, which may persist for generations, leads families to conceal the offence. This is largely due to the communal nature of *sharm*, which is shaped not only by the act itself, but also by how it is recognised and circulated within the social group (Rzehak 2011:10).

Honour-related violence, including honour killings, is a direct consequence of this rigid framework. Such killings are usually carried out by male relatives in an attempt to avenge perceived transgressions by female family members, such as suspected premarital sexual activity or disobedience. In rural Afghanistan, women are subject to strict behavioural expectations; being seen in public without a male escort, for example, can result in accusations of immorality and violent repercussions. Violations of *nāmus* often result in domestic abuse, public shaming, divorce or murder, and such acts are widely tolerated and underreported (EASO 2017a:42). While the 1976 Afghan Penal Code prescribes lighter sentences for honour killings than for premeditated murder, most cases remain unreported and unpunished (*ibid.*).

Purdah (gender segregation) functions as a protective boundary to uphold *nāmus* by preserving women's privacy and limiting their visibility in public. Although gossip and speculation within the community are often feared more than women's actual conduct, the enforcement of *purdah* varies among Pashtun subgroups. Nomadic groups such as the Kuchi, for instance, are relatively lenient, with women often unveiled and engaged in public affairs. In contrast, landowning agricultural groups (*qalang*) enforce strict seclusion, with women rarely appearing outside the domestic sphere and veiling being mandatory (Glatzer 1998; Kakar 2004:5).

Such restrictions can severely limit women's access to education, healthcare and public life. This is particularly true when families live among unfamiliar groups rather than extended family networks, as was the case during the displacement caused by civil conflict and mass migration to refugee camps in Pakistan (Glatzer 1998). Despite the patriarchal hierarchy, women can assert agency within the domestic realm. They often establish intra-household hierarchies by allocating labour, forming alliances, and influencing social outcomes, particularly through marriage arrangements and kinship ties (Kakar 2004:9).

At the communal level, male governance tends to operate through representative and egalitarian councils (*jirgas*). However, within the family, authority, wheth-

er held by men or women, is hierarchical and grounded in honour, age and lineage (Kakar 2004: 9). Thus, while the public domain is predominantly male, women's social agency is not entirely absent; it is exercised in more private, relational ways within the household.

Respect for Elders

In Pashtun society, the ideal of male equality is encapsulated by the proverb, 'Every Pashtun is a whole man; there are no half-men among them' (Rzehak 2011:12). This expression reflects the principle of *musāwat* — equality among men — which extends beyond mere social parity to include equal honour and mutual respect. *Musāwat* plays a foundational role in shaping interpersonal relationships, particularly among male relatives, and reinforces values of modesty, discipline and mutual deference.

Social relations within Pashtun families are structured according to gender and age. While all individuals eventually progress through age-based social ranks, one's status is not determined by age alone. Marital status, household size, number of children, land ownership and economic capacity all contribute to one's social position (Rzehak 2011:12). From an early age, children are taught to be disciplined and show deference to their elders. The age-based hierarchy demands submission from younger members to their elders, and disciplinary measures are often used to enforce conformity to family and societal expectations. Children typically begin to assume adult responsibilities at the onset of puberty, although in extreme contexts such as war-time displacement, this may occur at an even younger age — sometimes as young as 10 or 12 (Emadi 2005: 178).

Respect for elders is a fundamental aspect of social order. However, only those who demonstrate leadership ability, knowledge of tribal customs and life experience are recognised as elders and accorded elevated status within the group (Rzehak 2011:12). Two categories of elders are traditionally distinguished among them. The first includes powerful figures such as *khāns* or *maliks*, whose authority stems from economic resources, land ownership and military or political influence. These leaders often act as intermediaries between tribal groups and state institutions, relying on the support and loyalty of their followers in the villages. Sometimes they compete with rival leaders for influence (Rzehak 2011:12f.).

The second group are the *spinzhiri* ('white-bearded men'), who are respected not for material power, but for their personal integrity, deep knowledge of Pashtunwali and expertise in tribal customary law. They are frequently consulted for advice and arbitration in both private and communal matters (Rzehak 2011:13). Their authority is closely tied to moral standing and intellectual credibility, with their advisory

roles being linked to their respected status. At the community level, this authority is institutionalised in the *jirga*, a local council convened to resolve disputes, including familial and criminal cases. In line with *musāwat*, *jirga* decisions are made by consensus and are considered binding for those involved (Rzehak 2011:13 f.).

Despite successive governments introducing legal reforms aimed at modernising family and marriage law (see Chapter 2.1.1), the continued plurality of statutory, Islamic, and customary systems has limited their effectiveness. Consequently, traditional norms remain deeply entrenched, particularly in rural regions where patriarchal authority, strict gender roles, generational hierarchies, and honour codes continue to structure social life. The family thus remains the central institution of Afghan society, providing stability, identity, and cohesion in contexts where state institutions have often failed to do so. Endogamy continues to dominate marriage practices, with limited agency for those directly affected. At the same time, decades of war and conflict in Afghanistan have led to increased urbanisation and migration. This exposure has brought more Afghans into contact with education and new ideas, gradually reshaping family structures and household dynamics—primarily in urban centres such as Kabul and in transnational contexts. Nevertheless, for most Afghans, the family remains the central institution, providing stability, security and continuity in all areas of life and across borders.

Thus, when Afghans migrate to Austria, they bring family-based traditions and values into a context governed by different expectations of gender equality and individual autonomy. To better understand the changing attitudes and practices surrounding marriage, partner choice, and family life, examined in depth in Chapter 5, it is first necessary to situate the Afghan diaspora in Austria within the broader context of migration, socio-cultural diversity, and contemporary living conditions.

4. The Afghan Community in Austria

Although Afghans have been present in Austria since the late 1960s, a sizeable community only began to form through successive phases of war-related migration, mirroring patterns seen in other European countries (cf. Leimsidor 2014; Donini et al. 2016). These migration phases have contributed to a steadily growing community marked by diverse migration histories, family structures, educational backgrounds, and ethnic and religious affiliations (see 4.1). The Afghan population in Austria grew particularly rapidly between 2015 and 2016, more than doubling from 16,799 to 35,618. Currently, approximately 50,788 Afghan nationals reside in Austria, excluding those who have already obtained citizenship (Statistik Austria 2025a).

Hence, to better understand these dynamics, Chapter 4.1 gives an overview of the historical phases of Afghan migration to Austria, offering insights into the diverse backgrounds and migration trajectories that have shaped the community as it exists today.

Chapter 4.2 presents current socio-economic and demographic data on the Afghan community in Austria. Key indicators, such as employment rates, educational attainment and family structures, highlight both progress and ongoing structural barriers, particularly affecting women and younger individuals, within the broader context of societal integration and daily life in Austria.

Building on this, it is important to consider the challenges Afghan migrants face upon arrival and throughout their settlement process. At the institutional level, migrants must navigate an increasingly complex set of integration requirements imposed by the Austrian state. Over the past decade, public discourse has frequently portrayed Afghans as a ‘problem group’ in terms of social integration and inclusion in Austria (see Kohlbacher and Rasuly-Paleczek 2023), shaping policy responses and everyday social interactions. Chapter 4.3 therefore examines the structural and social factors that either facilitate or impede Afghan migrant’s full participation in Austrian society, highlighting the role of social networks in the settlement process.

4.1 A History of Migration and Flight to Austria

The history of Afghan migration to Austria is characterised by a variety of distinct migration patterns that reflect wider changes in global mobility and geopolitics (see Chapter 2.1.2).

While the earliest Afghan migrants to Austria – primarily Pashtun and Tajik students from Kabul – arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s to pursue higher education (Kohlbacher et al. 2020: 59), large-scale migration to Austria (and Europe) only began in the late 1970s and 1980s. This was driven by war and conflict following the communist coup of April 1978, which triggered a marked increase in refugee arrivals. However, these numbers were still relatively low compared to those in the following phases. Among these arrivals were members of the PDPA⁴⁷, most of them male, and a group of young men (Hazara and Tajik) from the Panjshir valley. Most of them received asylum status, started an education in Austria and were partly married to Afghan women, coming from Afghanistan, Iran, or Pakistan (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:59f.). Another group of Afghans who arrived in Austria during the 1980s were family members of those who had come in the 1960s and 1970s. While the initial number of asylum seekers was declining after 1983, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the late 1980s triggered a new influx of refugees, including officials or sympathisers of the communist regime (ibid.:61).

When the traditionally oriented mujaheddin gained power in Afghanistan in 1992, the number of asylum applications in Austria began to rise, reaching a new peak in 1996 with 766 applications submitted. Among the refugees were government officials, individuals in senior administrative roles under the communist regime, and professional women who felt threatened by the mujaheddin government and the Taliban's takeover in Kabul (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:61).

Refugee numbers reached a new peak in Austria during the Taliban's rule between 1996 and 2001. It is estimated that the 12,955 asylum applications in 2001 were particularly from Shiite Hazaras, who were persecuted by the Taliban (Sunnis), and members of the educated middle class who opposed the prohibition of education and women in employment (ibid.:62).

Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan at the end of 2001 and the beginning of 2002, after international forces intervened, refugee numbers declined rapidly. They reached their lowest point in 2006, with only 699 asylum applications submitted in Austria (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:62f.) However, due to the Taliban's resurgence and the subsequent deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, refugee numbers began to grow steadily again in 2009. In addition, worsening living conditions in neighbouring host countries such as Pakistan, Iran

⁴⁷ The PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan), known in German as the DVPA (Demokratische Volkspartei Afghanistans), was Afghanistan's main communist party. Founded in 1965, the party came to power following the Saur Revolution of 1978, which led to the establishment of a socialist government backed by the Soviet Union.

and Turkey resulted in record-breaking refugee numbers (*ibid.*). According to Statistics Austria, 25,563 Afghans applied for protection in 2015⁴⁸ (BM.I 2015:7). From 2016 onwards, however, refugee numbers declined, with only 3,137 Afghans applying for protection in Austria in 2020 (BM.I 2020:11).

Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, the Taliban returned to power. While previous refugee numbers were primarily caused by conflict-related violence between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the most recent increase is linked to the formation of the Taliban regime and its policies. These include the imposition of severe restrictions on women's rights and freedom of speech (*cf.* HRW 2022). Since then, asylum applications have steadily risen in Austria. Between August and December 2021, 5,469 Afghans applied for asylum (BM.I 2021:11). Most of these applicants were male (*Die Presse*, 01/03/2022). Asylum applications from Afghans peaked at around 25,000 in 2022, making them one of the largest groups of asylum seekers that year and highlighting Austria's ongoing status as a popular destination for people fleeing instability in Afghanistan. In 2023, applications declined to around 8,600, with Afghans remaining the second-largest group after Syrians (*Statistik Austria* 2024: 35). That year, 1,700 Afghan nationals received a positive asylum decision, which was slightly fewer than the 1,900 approvals granted in 2022 (*ibid.*: 36). Among the recently arrived Afghans many hold a pro-Western view and feel threatened by the Taliban.

Overall, the asylum recognition rate for Afghan applicants in Austria has varied considerably over the years. Prior to the significant migration influx of 2015–2016, Afghan asylum seekers were more likely to receive favourable decisions. However, in 2016, the recognition rate dropped sharply to just 25% - the lowest since 2008. In subsequent years, this figure gradually improved, reaching around 50% by 2019. However, in 2020, it declined again with only 40.3% of applicants being approved, while 43% were denied (*Medien-Servicestelle Neue Österreicher/innen* 2016, BM.I 2015–2020).

Compared to other major refugee groups, such as Syrians, Afghan applicants consistently have a lower recognition rate and are more frequently granted subsidiary protection status (*ibid.*). While this status allows full access to the labour market, it is legally and socially less secure than asylum. For instance, individuals under subsidiary protection receive only basic social welfare support if they are unemployed, and they are excluded from certain family benefits, such as childcare and maternity payments (*Madner* 2021).

⁴⁸ 25,563 Afghans (29% of total asylum applications) applied for protection in 2015, followed by Syrians (24,547 applications, or 38%) and Iraqis (13,633 applications, or 15%) (BM.I 2015: 7).

Additionally, lengthy asylum procedures and a high number of pending cases present significant challenges, particularly for Afghans. These delays hinder access to essential, state-supported integration measures, such as language courses and vocational training, which are vital for entering the labour market and participating more widely in society (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:71f.). The uncertainty surrounding these lengthy procedures can be demotivating, heightening fears of rejection and possible repatriation to Afghanistan. This is particularly problematic for individuals with limited support networks, such as unaccompanied minors or those who have spent most of their lives in Iran or Pakistan⁴⁹ and have no connections to Afghanistan (ibid.) (see Section 4.3).

Social Backgrounds and Reasons for Migration/Flight

When comparing migrant groups from different phases of migration, significant differences emerge in terms of socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Migrants who arrived during the 1980s and 1990s primarily came from urban, middle- or upper-middle-class families and generally had access to good education and professional training (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:63). In contrast, many recently arrived Afghans have little or no formal schooling or vocational training and mostly originate from rural areas, where economic hardship shapes daily life (ibid.).

Although recently arrived groups were far from homogenous, many share similar life trajectories. A significant number had already experienced multiple forms of displacement before reaching Europe. Some were internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Afghanistan, while others had spent years, or even their entire lives, as (second-generation) refugees in neighbouring Pakistan or Iran (see Chapter 2.1.2). While there is no statistical data on their ethnolinguistic background, it is estimated that recently arrived Afghans in Austria represent all major ethnolinguistic groups, though Hazara seem to be particularly prominent. As Shia Muslim minority in a predominantly Sunni country, the Hazara have long faced systemic discrimination, political exclusion and periodic violence, most notably under the Taliban in the late 1990s, when mass killings and forced displacement intensified. This differs from the initial group of asylum seekers, which mainly consisted of Sunni Dari speakers such as Tajiks, Kabulis⁵⁰, and Iranianised Pashtuns (Kohlbacher et al. 2020: 65).

⁴⁹ There is no official statistical data whether an asylum seeker comes directly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Iran to Austria.

⁵⁰ Inhabitants of Kabul are often called Kabuli, independent of their ethnolinguistic background. Pashtuns, who live in Afghanistan's urban areas (i.e., Kabul and Herat) often have abandoned their language Pashto, in favour of the predominant local Dari.

In addition, a significant proportion of Afghans who have recently arrived in Austria are unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and young adults, the vast majority of whom are male. While some migrated directly from Afghanistan, many came from exile communities in Pakistan and Iran, often with little or no personal connection to Afghanistan itself. Although arrivals peaked in 2014 and 2015, with 5,609 UAMs representing 68 per cent of all unaccompanied minors in Austria, Afghans have consistently constituted the largest group of unaccompanied minors in the country in recent years (see Migration – Info & Grafik 2025; Koppenberg 2014).

This predominantly male migration in recent years reflects cultural expectations and practical considerations. Families often send young men on the dangerous journey to Europe because migration routes are physically demanding and particularly hazardous for women. These young men are expected to establish stable lives abroad by securing legal residency, an education and employment, with the aim of supporting their families back home and eventually enabling family reunification (Donini et al. 2016). This gender imbalance is a defining feature of Afghan migration to Austria and is evident in the male-dominated Afghan population within the country (see Section 4.2).

The diverse background of migrant groups arriving in Austria across different migration phases are matched by equally varied motivations for their journeys to Europe, and Austria in particular. Migrants who arrived in the late 1960s and 1970s were largely driven by the pursuit of higher education and professional opportunities, fitting the profile of migrants in the conventional sense (see Chapter 1.5.4). In contrast, later phases were predominantly shaped by displacement caused by conflict, persecution, and political instability. These arrivals are more accurately characterised as refugees fleeing war, oppression, and precarious conditions both within Afghanistan and in secondary host countries. Their decisions to leave are often influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including widespread security concerns, direct experiences of violence, economic hardship, and personal circumstances. These personal factors may include escaping intolerable domestic situations, avoiding capital punishment for violating social norms (e.g. AT3), fleeing forced marriages (a situation frequently affecting unaccompanied minors), or reuniting with a spouse or fiancé abroad (e.g. AT5) (Rasuly-Paleczek 2017; cf. Koppenberg 2014).

Moreover, these drivers may differ between ethnolinguistic and sectarian groups. While Pashtuns and other Sunni communities primarily leave due to escalating violence and suicide attacks, Hazaras and other Shiites are often persecuted by the Tali-

ban and, more recently, *Daesh*⁵¹, who do not recognise Shia Muslims as true believers (ibid.; Maley 2021). Another high-risk group includes women (particularly widows), orphans from ethnic or religious minorities, and individuals who have worked for Afghan government bodies or foreign organisations. Such individuals may be persecuted for refusing Taliban infiltration of their workplace or threatened for collaborating with *kufr* ('unbelievers'), a term used by the Taliban for foreigners (ibid.). Vulnerability is also heightened for women, especially widows and orphans from ethnic or religious minorities. Beyond threats within Afghanistan, increasing discrimination in countries of first refuge (e.g. Iran and Pakistan) or along migration routes (e.g. Turkey) also motivates secondary migration to Europe and Austria (Rasuly-Paleczek 2017).

Importantly, these flight motives are often shaped by strong social obligations. As Afghan cultural norms emphasise responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of family and kin, extending beyond the nuclear family to wider networks of relatives, friends and colleagues, such networks are crucial for survival in a context of decades-long conflict and weak state infrastructure (cf. Harpviken 2009: 3). However, their resilience has been affected by prolonged violence, displacement and economic strain.

The obligation to protect and provide therefore involves not only securing one's own safety but organising the escape of at-risk relatives or sending family members abroad to pursue better educational and occupational opportunities. Such undertakings typically rely on the mobilisation of personal and kinship networks to secure financial resources, identify reliable smugglers and maintain contact throughout the migration process. Support often continues en route, with family members sending remittances to finance onward travel or connecting migrants to trusted intermediaries in transit and destination countries (Rasuly-Paleczek 2017). These networks continue to play a crucial role after arrival, helping newcomers to secure housing,

⁵¹ *Daesh*, also known as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), is a Sunni extremist militant organisation that originated from the Islamic State movement in Iraq and Syria. Unlike the Afghan Taliban, who adhere to Deobandi Islamic traditions rooted in South Asia, *Daesh* promotes a transnational caliphate ideology that aims to unify Muslims globally under a single leadership (Maley 2021). ISKP was established in Afghanistan around 2015, partly due to internal division within the Taliban and the influx of Pakistani Taliban militants displaced by military operations in Pakistan. Although ISKP has conducted numerous high-profile attacks, particularly targeting Shia communities, it has not established a significant political presence or territorial control in Afghanistan. The group's relationship with the Taliban is characterised by both rivalry and occasional tactical cooperation. The organisation's influence fluctuates in response to regional developments, including the decline of *Daesh*'s core territories in the Middle East and leadership losses, such as the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (ibid.).

food and other necessities until they become financially independent. Thus, social obligations shape not only migration and flight decisions, but also settlement and integration processes, which are sustained through extensive transnational support structures, as discussed further in Section 4.3.

4.2 Present-Day Socio-Demographic and Socio-Economic Overview

To better understand the lives of Afghans in Austria today, it is helpful to look at the current social structure of their community. This structure is shaped by distinct demographic, educational and socio-economic characteristics reflecting both their migration histories and the ongoing complexities of societal integration and inclusion.

As of early 2025, around 50,788 Afghan nationals⁵² live in Austria. Nearly half of them, 47% (24,103 Afghan nationals) are concentrated in Vienna, which serves as the main hub for the Afghan population. Other significant communities are in Upper Austria (15.1%), Styria (10.0%), and Lower Austria (7.1%), with smaller groups spread across the remaining federal states (Statistik Austria 2025a⁵³). After receiving asylum and subsidiary protection, many Afghans move to Vienna, attracted by better job opportunities, a stronger support network, and greater access to infrastructure and social services. This trend is underpinned by the city's comprehensive integration programmes, such as the 'Start-up Support' system that assists newcomers in securing housing, schooling, healthcare, and other essentials immediately upon arrival (City of Vienna n.d.a).

Overall, the Afghan community is relatively young and male-dominated, with two-thirds being men. This gender imbalance highlights a predominantly male-heavy migration pattern (Statistik Austria 2025a). The largest age group is 25–34-year-olds (31%), followed by 18–24-year-olds (24%) and 35–49-year-olds (16%). This youthful demographic significantly influences birth and mortality trends.

In 2024, Afghans in Austria had a notably high birth rate of 24.0%, which was more than three times the national average of 8.0%. Their mortality rate was also

⁵² This figure accounts solely for individuals holding Afghan citizenship. However, it does not include people who were born in Afghanistan but may not hold Afghan citizenship, as e.g. many spent substantial periods of their lives in countries such as Pakistan or Iran. The total number of people residing in Austria who were born in Afghanistan is slightly lower, amounting to 48,074 (Statistik Austria 2025a).

⁵³ Bevölkerung zu Jahresbeginn nach detaillierter Staatsangehörigkeit seit 2002 – Afghanistan (Wien, Vorarlberg, Tirol, Steiermark, Salzburg, Oberösterreich, Niederösterreich, Kärnten, Burgenland).

very low at 0.8%, which reflects their predominantly young population and the influence of factors such as naturalisation after years of settlement in Austria as well as return migration later in life (Statistik Austria 2025b:28). On average, Afghan women had 3.30 children, which was significantly higher than the Austrian average of 1.31. They also tended to start families earlier, with an average age at first birth of 26.2 years, compared to 30.4 years for women born in Austria (ibid.). Consequently, Afghan households were larger, with an average of 3.1 people compared to 2.0 in the general population (Statistik Austria 2025b:15). These households often include young children and may also feature multi-generational living arrangements or extended family members, particularly in the early stages of settlement. It is to assume that such structures are influenced by both cultural norms and practical considerations, such as economic constraints, housing availability, and social support within the community.

To access the Austrian labour market, a positive asylum decision must be present. Following the population growth of Afghans in 2015 and 2016, more than half of accepted asylum beneficiaries were engaged in an activity that is subject to social insurance contributions. However, these jobs were often insecure and low-paid, typically in the tourism, service and auxiliary sectors⁵⁴ (Höller 2018). Despite some progress in recent years, Afghan migrants continue to face significant challenges in integrating into the labour market. These systemic challenges include frequent non-recognition of foreign qualifications, limited translation of prior work experience into equivalent employment opportunities, and the necessity for many to change career paths. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with workplace norms and cultural differences also make it difficult to access stable and meaningful employment (cf. City of Vienna n.d.b.; Statistik Austria 2022).

In 2024, the employment rate for Afghans in Austria was significantly lower than that of the general population. While the employment rate was 76% for 15- to 64-year-olds without a migration background and 69% for those with a migration background, Afghans, alongside Syrians and Iraqis, had an employment rate of just 44%. This dis-

⁵⁴ Those who are still in the asylum procedure are usually not admitted to the labour market but can earn “pocket money” under certain conditions (i.e., auxiliary work in seasonal labour) (cf. Höller). In July 2021, the Constitutional Court has overturned the ruling that asylum seekers have no access to the labour market or apprenticeships (except harvest workers in agriculture or seasonal labour – Bartenstein Decree). The newly enacted access, however, only applies to asylum seekers after three months in the asylum process and if no qualified citizen can be found from within the country or from other EU countries (cf. Szigetvari 2021).

parity highlights ongoing labour market disadvantages, despite a general post-pandemic recovery in employment across all groups (Statistik Austria 2025b: 54).

The situation is particularly acute for Afghan women, who face even more pronounced obstacles. In 2024, only around 24% of Afghan women in Austria were employed, substantially lower than women with (64%) and without (74%) a migration background. This low participation rate is among the lowest of all migrant groups and is likely due to a complex interplay of structural and socio-cultural factors. These include limited access to education and vocational training, language proficiency issues, traditional gender roles within the community and difficulties balancing work with family responsibilities (Statistik Austria 2025b:54).

Similarly, Afghan youth face considerable disadvantages when entering the labour market. In 2024, the unemployment rate among 15- to 24-year-olds from Afghanistan was 24.9%, which is markedly higher than the national average of 6.8% and that of Austrian nationals (5.7%). This highlights the persistent obstacles they face in achieving economic integration (Statistik Austria 2025b:60). Unlike some other migrant communities in Austria, the Afghan population has yet to establish a significant ethnic economy. This is primarily due to limited financial resources, as many Afghan migrants come from lower-middle-class backgrounds and arrive with few financial reserves, having often exhausted their savings during the migration process. Where entrepreneurial activity does exist, it is usually confined to small businesses such as restaurants, food import shops, and carpet trading (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:89).

Although comprehensive data on the educational attainment of Afghans in Austria remains limited, distinct generational differences can be observed. Early Afghan migrants, particularly those who arrived in the 1960s and 1970s, were often well-educated urban elites who came to Austria primarily to study at university (Kohlbacher et al., 2020: 85). By contrast, those who arrived more recently, since the mid-1990s, have predominantly been refugees from rural backgrounds. Many of these refugees had limited or no formal education and had previously resided in Pakistan or Iran (ibid.). Despite these significant challenges, educational participation among Afghan youth has improved markedly over the past decade. The proportion of 15- to 19-year-olds engaged in education increased from 38% to 55% in the last ten years, despite the substantial expansion of the Afghan community in 2015. Nevertheless, this rate remains notably lower than that of Austrian-born youth (80%) and other migrant groups (61%) (Statistik Austria 2025b:44).

In the 2023/24 school year, 69% of Afghan 10th-grade students were enrolled in non-Matura school types, while only 31% attended schools leading to the Matura qualification. By comparison, 50% of Austrian students in the same year group pur-

sued the Matura qualification. This disparity in school type choice highlights the ongoing barriers to higher educational attainment faced by Afghan youth (ibid.).

During my field research, I met many young Afghan migrants who placed great value on education. However, financial pressures often force them to prioritise generating an immediate income over achieving their long-term educational goals, particularly when they lack the support of an extended family. Although social services provide some assistance, many feel obliged to send money to relatives in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, which further limits their ability to pursue education. Some young men take on precarious, low-paying jobs not for vocational advancement, but to save for significant cultural life events such as weddings⁵⁵. This situation highlights the complex interplay between cultural expectations, economic necessity and individual aspirations.

4.3 Arriving and Residing in Austria – Challenges to Societal Integration

Upon arriving in Austria, Afghan migrants, most of whom entered the country as refugees during recent migration phases (see Section 4.1), find themselves facing a range of challenges as they try to build a new life in the country. The first essential step is to apply for international protection (asylum), which provides the legal basis for remaining in Austria (cf. Republic of Austria 2005). If the Austrian authorities determine that Austria is responsible for examining the claim, the substantive asylum procedure begins (cf. BFA 2017). Over the past few decades, acceptance rates for asylum or subsidiary protection have fluctuated considerably (see Section 4.1). Many Afghan applicants have endured prolonged waiting periods accompanied by significant uncertainty about whether they will ultimately be permitted to remain in Austria.

For those individuals granted secure legal status, such as asylum or subsidiary protection, or a long-term residence permit, the next step is usually to participate in state-mandated integration measures, as set out in §4 of the Austrian Integration Act (Republic of Austria 2017). Participation in and completion of these measures, such as German language courses, values and orientation programmes, and employment-related initiatives, is a prerequisite for obtaining social assistance and needs-

⁵⁵ During my fieldwork, I have heard about a young man who had spent five years juggling multiple precarious jobs in order to afford the bride price demanded by his father-in-law.

based minimum benefits. While these requirements establish clear benchmarks for integration, they also reveal structural inequalities embedded within the broader integration framework.

When comparing migrant groups, it is evident that recently arrived Afghans face significantly greater challenges in integrating into the Austrian society. Many have limited formal education or qualifications that are not recognised in Austria, which makes entering the labour market particularly difficult. Moreover, many come from rural, conflict-affected areas with little to no prior exposure to Western societies (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:85). This cultural unfamiliarity often contributes to social exclusion and marginalisation, a challenge that is compounded by the fact that individuals perceived as Muslim migrants frequently experience discrimination in employment, housing, and education (cf. Schönherr et al. 2019). A recent study by Kohlbacher and Rasuly-Paleczek (2023), titled *Critical Analysis of the Social Integration of a So-Called 'Problem Group' in the Urban Space of Vienna*, offers an in-depth examination of these challenges. The authors report that Afghan migrants frequently face multidimensional discrimination from state authorities and the wider Austrian population. This discrimination affects both public and private spaces, particularly when seeking employment or housing (ibid.: 139f.). The limited availability of affordable, family-sized rental properties, especially within unregulated market segments, significantly hampers access to suitable housing (Kohlbacher 2020). As a result, many newly arrived migrants depend heavily on support from state institutions and NGOs, which are most accessible in urban centres, particularly in Vienna.

However, establishing a life in a new country relies not only on structural factors such as securing housing and employment but also critically on the ability to build meaningful social connections, which are fundamental to successful social integration. For many Afghans, especially those newly arrived, forming relationships with Austrian residents is seen as essential for improving language skills, learning local customs, gaining access to important information, and fostering a genuine sense of belonging (Kohlbacher and Rasuly-Paleczek 2023:51–105).

Yet, such relationships are often impeded by limited language skills, cultural differences and entrenched negative stereotypes. Everyday experiences of racism, coupled with the stigmatisation of Afghans as a 'non-integrable' group – reinforced by public debates on Muslim dress codes, particularly concerning Afghan women (see Kohlenberger et al. 2022), and media portrayals of conflicts and violence involving young Afghan men – further hinder opportunities for meaningful interaction between Austrian locals and migrant newcomers (Kohlbacher and Rasuly-Paleczek 2023:51–105).

In this context, many Afghan migrants rely heavily on their social networks, which, are rooted in strong social obligations and offer financial, social, administrative, and other forms of support. Therefore, having close or extended family members in Austria can significantly facilitate the arrival and integration processes by providing temporary accommodation, food and valuable employment connections. Those without such familial support must rely more heavily on broader community networks to meet these needs. Since the 1990s, alongside a growing Afghan community, numerous organisations have emerged. Primarily situated in Vienna, these organisations target specific groups of Afghan migrants such as women, students and unaccompanied minors, and engage in activities including offering language and orientation courses, promoting education, preserving cultural traditions and fundraising for projects in Afghanistan (Kohlbacher et al. 2020:87). Despite their importance, substantial gaps remain in our understanding of their overall scale, membership and activities. It is generally assumed that transnational linkages exist only in isolated cases, such as the engagement of the Hazara community with global networks like the Hazara World Council (ibid.).

Although (trans)national networks and community organisations offer crucial support to Afghan migrants during arrival and integration processes, they can also create complex social dynamics, especially around financial dependencies. Many migrants/refugees accumulate substantial debts to finance their journeys, including high payments to smugglers, leaving them financially vulnerably upon their arrival in the destination country. Consequently, as state aid often fails to cover all essential needs—and considering that families and support networks in the country of origin have already contributed to financing the journey—additional financial assistance frequently comes from close or extended family members who have already established themselves in Austria. While this support is vital, it often leads to imbalanced relationships characterised by long-lasting obligations and power imbalances. These dynamics often extend beyond the individual, implicating entire families in networks of reciprocity and social indebtedness. For instance, 28-year-old Sohél's (introduced in the preface text) dependence on financial assistance from his prospective father-in-law, who had been residing in Austria for several years, resulted in years of unspoken yet constant social pressure. Over the years, Sohél was regularly called upon to assist with personal and business matters, often at short notice and regardless of inconvenience. If he resisted or failed to meet these expectations, his future father-in-law would complain to his family in Iran, who would then pressure him to comply. This dynamic persisted for years and intensified whenever Sohél became financially stable. After he and his fiancée ended their engagement, her

father suddenly increased the perceived debt by adding accumulated interest, from which Sohel could only escape by taking out loans from various banks. This example illustrates how social obligations can undermine migrants' autonomy by reinforcing hierarchical structures within diaspora communities that often mirror familiar patterns from their countries of origin.

Given the current instability in Afghanistan and other transit countries such as Pakistan and Iran, returning to these regions is no longer a viable option. This has made the long-term, if not permanent, residence of Afghan migrants in Austria an increasingly common reality. In this context, establishing a stable and fulfilling life in Austria becomes paramount.

While securing housing, employment and education remains essential for structural integration, long-term inclusion also depends heavily on social and emotional factors (cf. Lehner and Röhm 2019). Developing friendships, establishing professional and community connections, and most importantly having family in Austria, play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and stability. For many Afghan migrants I have encountered, finding a suitable partner or raising children in a safer, more supportive environment are central aspirations. These goals extend beyond personal well-being; they are also considered vital steps towards creating better opportunities and smoothing the way for future generations, emphasised by strong social obligations to family.

5. Social Change in Marriage Practices Among Afghan Migrants in Austria

While Chapter 4 introduced the Afghan community in Austria, highlighting its varied migration experiences, ethnic and religious diversity, educational and professional backgrounds, and the challenges of arrival and integration, as well as the vital role of community networks, this chapter presents the empirical findings from my qualitative research within this community. Based on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic fieldwork (see Chapter 1.4), it examines changing practices and attitudes concerning marriage and partner selection. Particular attention is paid to intergenerational dynamics, especially the tensions and negotiations between parental expectations and the desires and actions (choices) of younger, 'marriageable' Afghans. The chapter focuses on how migration reshapes social norms and marital practices.

Chapter 5.1 looks at the conceptual frameworks that influence attitudes towards marriage, highlighting the values, assumptions and ideals expressed by both older and younger generations. These frameworks often form the basis for expectations and decisions long before they are enacted in practice.

When asked about the different ways to search for, meet and connect with a potential marriage partner, respondents highlighted three main ways: family networks, community gatherings and social media platforms. Chapter 5.2 explores these in detail and outlines how they create two main pathways to marriage: family-led matchmaking and independently initiated partnerships. These dynamics demonstrate the growing complexity of agency and 'individual' choice in a post-migration context where traditional expectations are becoming increasingly intertwined with new social possibilities.

Chapter 5.3 shifts the focus to the growing sense of individual agency within changing marriage dynamics, which are shaped by life in Austria. It explores how young Afghan migrants balance traditional expectations with asserting varying degrees of autonomy in partner selection. Three distinct negotiation patterns emerge, ranging from conformity and constraint to subtle adaptations and overt acts of self-determination. By framing agency as a relational process influenced by institutions, religion, family and cultural norms, the analysis reveals how young Afghans actively engage with, adapt to and, at times, challenge established community expectations.

5.1 Concepts and Idea(ls) in Marriage and Partner Preference – Intergenerational Perspectives

For Afghans, marriage is much more than a private agreement between two individuals: it is a deeply rooted social institution, shaped by cultural norms, family expectations and communal traditions. Similarly, the selection of a spouse is not viewed as a matter of individual preference alone, but as a collective concern influenced by shared ideals of desirability and social appropriateness (see Chapter 3.3). However, within the Afghan diaspora in Austria, these long-standing norms are increasingly being transformed. The conditions of migration, ranging from new legal frameworks to broader access to education and employment – particularly for young women – introduce alternative ways of life and changing priorities. These developments raise important questions: How do these traditional ideas about marriage fit into a life marked by growing opportunities and individual aspirations? How do established gender roles and ideas about marriage and partner preference change when encountering new societal frameworks?

Based on my empirical findings, the following sections explore the values, assumptions and ideals that influence perceptions of marriage and partner preferences within the Afghan community in Austria. By incorporating the viewpoints of parents and young migrants, the analysis focuses on the conceptual frameworks underlying attitudes and expectations, which often inform decisions and actions.

5.1.1 The Meaning and Concept of Marriage

This section highlights the contrasting perceptions of marriage held by the parental and child generations, revealing the ongoing influence of gender norms and cultural expectations on attitudes towards marriage. At the same time, however, these attitudes are increasingly being negotiated, challenged and redefined in the context of migration. Particular focus is placed on generational differences in life priorities and aspirations, as well as the different meanings people attribute to marriage as both a personal commitment and a social institution.

“Marriage is always the goal”

When I asked about the meaning and concept of marriage within the Afghan community in Austria, a consistent theme emerged: marriage is “*simply part of life*” (AT4). All interviewees emphasised that life without marriage was difficult to imagine.

Consequently, relationships are almost exclusively entered into with the intention of eventually getting married. The idea of an informal phase of getting to know each other without marriage being the clear goal does not correspond with this: “You always work your way towards marriage; a relationship is never just ‘Ok, let’s see’ ... marriage is always the goal” (AT4). In addition to being goal-oriented, marriage is also ascribed a symbolic function: it signifies both availability and ownership. A married person is considered “no longer available”, which is a particularly important aspect in the context of female sexuality. Sexual intercourse is clearly restricted to the marital context. Even the Islamic promise of marriage ‘*nikah*’ does not always offer sufficient protection from moral condemnation, particularly in the case of female pregnancy: “If you enter into this *nikah*, then according to Islam you may have sex, but pregnancy, would still be a disgrace. You should officially get married and only then get pregnant” (AT4). These statements illustrate the strong interweaving of marriage, sexuality and honour, especially female honour. Moreover, it highlights the extent to which the behaviour of young women is subject to social scrutiny, and how closely notions of ‘respectability’ are tied to marriage prospects and the family’s social reputation (see 5.1.2).

For many young people, particularly girls and women, the expectation to marry ‘at the right time’ is deeply rooted in traditional beliefs about gender roles and expected life paths (see 5.1.2). A 31-year-old interviewee, who has lived in Austria for 12 years, has achieved considerable economic success – including owning her own apartment in Vienna and running multiple businesses – describes the persistent pressure she receives from her mother, who lives in Pakistan, to get married. Despite her autonomous lifestyle and accomplishments, her mother continues to view marriage as essential – not only for her daughter’s well-being, but also for her own peace of mind.

“Even as recently as the day before yesterday, my mother wouldn’t give up. But my father gave up a long time ago. He says I don’t have to get married; not everyone has to marry. He tells me to get a pet instead – he has changed. He lives in Australia now. But my mother won’t let it go. She believes that if I get married, my life will be better, and she will finally be able to sleep peacefully” (AT3).

This narrative highlights how marriage is still seen as a vital milestone in a woman’s life, even when she has achieved independence in both her personal and professional life. The pressure here is both gendered and temporally charged, intensifying once a woman reaches the age at which marriage is considered appropriate, and diminishing only once she is perceived to have exceeded this socially sanctioned window. As the same respondent puts it: “They say: ‘She has to marry now, or she is already too

old to get married” (AT3). Thus, while migration may transform socioeconomic conditions and lifestyles, it does not automatically dissolve deeply rooted gendered expectations surrounding marriage. In the described case, the father, having migrated to Australia, appears to have adapted to a different cultural environment, revising his views on life goals and individual desires, particularly with regard to his daughter. By contrast, the mother is steadfast in her traditional beliefs and persistently urges her daughter to marry year after year. For her, a respectable and fulfilling life is inextricably linked to marriage, which she considers to be the ultimate measure of personal and social success.

While there seems to be a discernible generational shift in perceptions of what constitutes a ‘successful life’, parents often equate the status of being married as successful and desirable. By contrast, younger generations of Afghan migrants state placing greater emphasis on the quality of the marital relationship itself, prioritising values such as mutual respect etc. (see also 5.1.2). In this context, a central tension between generations emerges from their differing perspectives on the nature and duration of marriage and relationships. While parents often envisage marriage as a lifelong commitment, guided by the belief that love and compatibility will grow over time (see Gerlich 2014), young Afghan migrants are more likely to prioritise emotional compatibility from the outset. For them, the ability to form a deep connection in the present is essential. As one 21-year-old engaged woman explains: “My mum asks, ‘Can you imagine living with him until the end?’, But you don’t have to stay together until the end – you can also get divorced. Hopefully not, but it’s possible” (AT1). Adding to this, I15, a young Afghan woman states: “In our culture, once you get married, it stays that way, and there is no divorce. That’s what I thought when I first met my boyfriend. But now, I believe it is important that you feel comfortable in the relationship. If you don’t get along with the person, then it doesn’t matter whether you get a divorce or not – that’s how I think now”.

These statements highlight how young Afghans in Austria are developing new understandings of marriage and partnership, where separation is considered a legitimate – if not necessarily desired – option. By contrast, the older generation and wider Afghan community still view marriage as an unbreakable lifelong commitment. This generational difference is particularly evident when young people consider the different legal and cultural contexts of their host country.

As AT1 further observes: „Here in Austria, I think many marriages don’t have to last that long, but for us, if we get married, we have to stick together, through all the difficulties, no matter what” (AT1). Within this framework marriage retains a deep symbolic significance, representing not only personal commitment, but family cohesion and social status. Hence, despite divorce being legally accessible in Austria, it remains a strong

cultural taboo within the Afghan diaspora. Many interviewees note that divorce is largely absent from their social circles: “That doesn’t exist among us... I don’t know anyone who has got divorced” (AT3). For those young people, who experience marital dissatisfaction, there is often considerable pressure to uphold their parents’ and the wider community’s ideal of a lifelong union. As I7 describes, this pressure often leads to deep internal conflict, leaving her feeling torn between her parents, who are constantly trying to persuade her to stay in the marriage, and her own desire to divorce her unfaithful husband (I7).

“I don’t want to be like my mother, at home, looking after seven children”

The great significance of marriage within the Afghan community is closely tied to the ideal of a ‘complete family’. For many parents, their children’s marriage represents a personal milestone and the fulfilment of social and generational expectations, particularly the desire for grandchildren. A stable, long-lasting union is traditionally associated with fertility and the continuation of the family line. Children are seen as a sign of a family’s success, stability and honour. These expectations are particularly strong for daughters, whose life trajectories are often shaped by gendered norms and the anticipation of their future roles as wives and mothers. As one young woman reports: “None of that matters – the biggest goal for parents is for the daughter to get married. It doesn’t matter if she finishes school or not, even if you want to study further or work – that’s not even a question. If you want to study, the way they think is: why study if you’re going to get married and have kids anyway? You won’t be able to use it; you won’t be able to work – you must get married. In our culture, women are there to build a family, not to work outside the home” (AT3). However, in the context of migration, these traditional expectations of women’s roles, which centre their lives around marriage, motherhood and domestic care, are increasingly being questioned. Many of the young women I interviewed expressed a strong desire for education, independence and a family life of their own choosing, which is often in contrast to the experiences of their mothers or other female relatives. One interviewee articulates this shift clearly: “I don’t want to be like my mother, staying at home and taking care of seven children. I just want two kids, and later I want to help them with their homework, even their German lessons” (AT1). Together with her husband, she emphasises their wish to share parenting and household responsibilities equally. This understanding of marriage and family life has been articulated by many of the young men and women I interviewed, showing a shift towards a strong desire to have a marriage and family life adapted to new realities: Smaller families where children are not just raised but actively supported – especially in the education system of the host country – and where household and financial duties are shared.

Additionally, the increasing emphasis on education among young female migrants reflects a notable shift in life priorities within the context of migration. Many young women I spoke with, both formally and informally, explicitly stated that they wish to complete their academic or vocational training before marrying or having children.

“My fiancé and I have been discussing this, and I’ve told him that I don’t want to cook every day. We’ll share the tasks and make a schedule. I definitely won’t be doing it every day, and I’ve told my mother that too. It wasn’t like that before; I used to cook and clean the apartment every day, but now I’m telling her that I won’t be doing that every day anymore because it’s not good. Sometimes my mother gets angry, sometimes she understands, depending on how she feels, but I certainly don’t want to clean the apartment and kitchen every day. I’m in training. And my fiancé and I talk about it, and he says, ‘we’ll do everything together.’ I don’t do anything alone; I told him that from the beginning” (AT1).

“I would like to go to work. I can’t check every day how much money he has in his bank account; that’s not okay with me. Many women do that in our culture, even in Austria, here in Vienna. I know many women who don’t go to work after marriage, who say that they discussed it from the outset—that the man would work and the woman would stay at home—but I don’t like that. Then you argue every day, because our people aren’t like that. A family can’t live on a basic education alone, on a two- or three-year program, depending on the case” (AT1).

As girls pursue education in Austria—through school, university, or vocational training—the distribution of household responsibilities also changes. Their engagement in education and employment partially frees them from traditional domestic duties. In many families, daughters adopt a provider role alongside their studies, often taking on additional jobs to support the family, as they acquire German more quickly and adapt faster to the Austrian system. This shift also influences expectations for future relationships: an ideal partner is increasingly seen as one who respects gender equality and participates fairly in household responsibilities (see below).

Importantly, parents in Austria are increasingly acknowledging, if not fully embracing, these changes. Many support their daughters’ educational and professional aspirations, recognizing the value of occupational and financial independence—opportunities that were often unattainable in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

However, this support often remains conditional and embedded within traditional frameworks. In many cases, parental backing for education is granted with

the understanding that marriage will eventually follow. Concerns around premarital relationships, pregnancy, and early marriage continue to influence parental attitudes and expectations.

In this context, the engagement period is taking on a strategic and culturally sanctioned role that extends beyond its traditional function. Rather than being merely a formal prelude to marriage that grants couples limited social permission for intimacy, engagement in the host country increasingly serves as a transitional stage that helps young people navigate conflicting societal expectations. It offers a socially acceptable framework, especially for girls and young women, to pursue educational and employment ambitions. Furthermore, it provides couples with valuable time to work towards financial independence – a crucial step for those aspiring to establish their own households after marriage, a goal which remains challenging and time-consuming for many young people. As one respondent explains: “At first, we talked about getting married, but then we realised that we weren’t ready for that yet. First, we need to finish our education and get jobs. Otherwise, it would be too stressful” (AT1). In this way, engagement acts as a buffer, delaying the binding commitments of marriage, such as having children, and allowing traditional ideals to be negotiated in light of new socio-economic realities and generational aspirations.

5.1.2 The Ideal (Marriage)Partner – a Changing Social Construct

Perceptions of what constitutes a ‘suitable’ (marriage) partner differ significantly between parents and their children, reflecting distinct generational experiences and social positions within the Afghan diaspora in Austria. These perceptions are shaped by notions of family, cultural belonging, social status, gender roles, age differences and emerging ideals of emotional and lifestyle compatibility. The following section explores how these contrasting views and values are expressed, negotiated and discussed in everyday life.

“It wasn’t so much important that I was married, but to WHOM”

Family affiliation, ethnic origin, religion, culture, social status and age, all play a crucial role in shaping expectations regarding marriage partners. These factors significantly influence parental preferences, particularly when it comes to the future spouses of their children. Most participants report that parents generally prefer partners who share the same ethnic, religious, and cultural background as their own family.

“My mother says I can choose myself, but if I were to bring my Afghan boyfriend now, they say ‘no’ (...) he is Pashtun, and I don’t know why, but my mother is against Pashtuns, although she says that I can decide. So, I am allowed to say ‘no’ to anyone, but I’m not allowed to say ‘yes’ to just anyone. That’s frustrating, really. When he was at our place, my mother said, ‘No, he must never come again!’. But she doesn’t know he is my boyfriend (...) she spoke very badly about him” (I6, Tajik).

“The main points that really upset my parents was religion – yes, religion was a big issue – but also cultural background and heritage. That my wife doesn’t wear a headscarf, that she doesn’t understand how family life works back home in Afghanistan – that was hard for my parents. Because for us Afghans, family is incredibly important” (AT2).

“The first thing they asked was who I was married to, because for us, it’s extremely important who you marry. You don’t just marry a person; you marry their whole family too. Both families are heavily involved. They also care about a person’s social background, such as what kind of family they come from and what social status they have. That matters a lot. The first reaction was, ‘Boom! She is not from Afghanistan’. Then: ‘She doesn’t pray; she is not a Muslim’. That opened up a whole set of questions. They were totally against it” (AT2).

Marriages outside the community, defined here in terms of ethnicity, religion and shared cultural identity, are often viewed with scepticism. Many respondents emphasise the cultural importance of marrying within the *qaum*, a concept that encompasses ethnic and religious commonality, as well as a sense of trust and familiarity rooted in a shared cultural heritage (see Chapter 2). At the heart of these parental preferences lies the role of the family as a moral and social unit. Marrying within the *qaum* is thus seen as a means of preserving cultural continuity and ensuring that core values are passed down through the generations. As AT2 further puts it: “Older generations want to pass on the idea that you should marry within a known family”.

The preference for endogamous marriage is not only a matter of tradition, but also a social strategy believed to foster stability, protect family reputation, and minimise the risk of conflict (cf. Geserick et al. 2019). When families are already familiar with one another, the likelihood of marital breakdown is considered lower. The notion of closeness between families is therefore central in Afghan marriage practices. Within this framework, choosing a marriage partner is more about preserving family honour and reaffirming shared moral and cultural values than individual preference. As such, parental preferences tend to prioritise cultural familiarity and

social continuity, ensuring that prospective partners align with established expectations of respectability and communal identity. However, these preferences are not only practical but also deeply emotional, reflecting parents' desire to pass on cultural identity and preserve a sense of belonging across generations through marriage. As one respondent explains, even when a non-Afghan in-law is well-liked, the emotional resonance and sense of pride associated with marrying within the community can be noticeably absent: "I think parents prefer Afghans – especially for their first child. My dad would be overjoyed if my husband were to be Afghan. He would think: 'My son-in-law!' He is very nice to my Austrian brother-in-law; they get along really well and he's really sweet. But there is never that feeling of pride like: 'Wow, that's my son-in-law'. XY just doesn't understand what my dad wants to say" (AT4).

Concerns about future familial harmony and social standing can result in certain families being excluded as potential in-laws, even if they share the same ethnic and cultural background. In such cases, a family's perceived shortcomings may be given more weight than the personal qualities or merits of the prospective spouse. As one respondent recounts, her partner's family was deemed entirely unsuitable due to their internal conflicts and openly hostile behaviour. "It was really extreme – Afghan men are often very dependent on their families. The family is everything. And on top of that, this was a very dysfunctional family. My mom said: 'there is no other word, that family was crazy'. They insulted each other openly, used serious swear words. They even referred to me – not by my name – but called me 'slut'. They'd say to each other: 'Is your slut with you?' Really rude" (AT4, female). The belief that marriage joins not only two individuals, but also their families, reinforces the idea that a partner from an 'undesirable' or unstable family background could affect emotional well-being, family unity, and social status. Consequently, such unions are often dismissed, regardless of personal compatibility.

When a shared ethnic background is absent or less emphasised, religious affiliation often becomes the defining criterion when assessing the acceptability of a prospective partner. For many families, especially those with strong religious convictions, the faith of the prospective partner—particularly the prospective husband's Islamic identity—is seen as essential for the integrity of the marriage and the spiritual future of the children.

"My mum is very religious. She believes that if my husband isn't a Muslim, our children won't go to the same paradise as her – and for her, that's extremely painful" (AT3).

This dynamic also explains why parents often adopt a more critical stance when evaluating potential partners for their daughters. Several respondents highlight gender

differences in parental expectations for their children's spouses, noting that sons are generally afforded greater autonomy and flexibility, while daughters face more rigorous scrutiny. This is particularly evident when the prospective partner is not of Afghan origin or does not share the Muslim faith. This discrepancy is often attributed to the belief that children typically adhere to their father's religion, thereby perpetuating an essential cultural and religious lineage through male descendants (see Chapter 3.3.1).

"Yes, he (future husband of daughter) must be Muslim because I don't want the culture we have to disappear" (I58).

"I have no problem if my son marries a girl who does not come from our country or is not Muslim. However, I am stricter with my daughter. I would not allow that for her (...) if my son marries a non-Muslim, he can introduce her somewhat to our culture and religion, but I would not allow this for my daughter" (I57).

"And whom do they marry then? Iranian women, Turkish women, or Christian women. The other way around is a bit more difficult, because a Muslim man can also marry women of different faiths, since they follow a patrilineal system and the children are therefore not taken away from Islam. But if the mother is Muslim and the father not, then their logic is that the children are lost to Islam because it follows the father's line" (E1, University of Vienna).

Respondents also note that family members living in Afghanistan and Pakistan tend to hold more conservative and traditional views than those in the European diaspora. Consequently, priorities regarding partner selection can vary significantly within the same family. For example, AT2 explains that his deeply religious father, who resides in Pakistan, expects his future daughter-in-law to stay and work at home and wear a headscarf when she goes out. In contrast, his mother, who lives in London with his siblings, has much more liberal views on the matter (cf. AT2).

However, parents' preferences regarding their children's partners' backgrounds vary depending on how long they have lived in Austria and how religious they are. Parents who are more open to their children choosing a partner independently tend to be more tolerant of partners who are neither Muslim nor of Afghan origin. Furthermore, parents who are well acquainted with other Afghan families in which children have non-Afghan or non-Muslim partners are also more accepting. In these cases, the happiness of the children is usually given the highest priority.

„If they are happy, they can follow any religion. I really feel that way (...) I have also told my children, if they are happy, I don't care where their partner comes from. Okay, we used to have a strict mindset that we should only marry Afghans or only Muslims. But by now, many of our relatives and acquaintances are married to people of different religions. And they are happy too” (I32).

“My eldest son married an Austrian woman (...) and they live together, have two children, but they are not married. And the others – my daughter has a boyfriend who is also Austrian (...) and my second son is also not married, he has a partner from Germany, and the youngest (child) has no boyfriend (...)” (I30).

This concludes that, although parental expectations for marriage partners are primarily shaped by family, ethnicity, religion, culture, social status and age, these preferences can vary. While parents generally favour partners, who share their ethnic and religious background, factors such as how long they have lived in Austria and how religious they are influence how open they are. Parents who are more open-minded and familiar with intercultural unions tend to be more accepting of partners from outside the Muslim faith and Afghan ethnicity, often prioritising their children's happiness over traditional norms.

Degrees, Documents, and Desirability

Ideals regarding a suitable marriage partner are also closely tied to status markers such as educational attainment and legal residence status. Expectations are high for young men, especially those of marriageable age: a good education and the ability to provide financially are seen as essential traits. Parents often emphasise the importance of a secure legal status, such as asylum or residence, since this grants access to the labour and education markets. This is viewed as essential for ensuring long-term stability for the daughter and the wider family. However, many young men – particularly those with limited formal education or qualifications that are not recognised in Austria – find it difficult to live up to these ideals. These difficulties are exacerbated by precarious legal statuses and lengthy waiting periods for asylum decisions, particularly for those who migrated via Iran or Pakistan. Consequently, they are often excluded from vocational training and employment opportunities, and many are forced to take low-skilled, insecure jobs to support themselves. These limitations affect not only the individual's prospects in the labour market, but also their perceived marriageability within the Afghan community.

Respondents frequently emphasise that stability and self-sufficiency are crucial criteria when evaluating a potential spouse, especially in the eyes of parents or extended family. Even when individuals navigate these challenges successfully, such as by securing basic employment or state support, the absence of formal training and high-status professions can still be viewed critically. As AT1 explains about her then-fiancé: “My fiancé now gets unemployment benefit from the AMS because he has already worked. That’s good, also because you don’t get money from the MA40 for the asylum decision. He’s done well for himself. It’s a good option if you want to live here in Austria, but of course some Afghans think, ‘OK, he’s been here for five or six years, but he hasn’t done any training. That’s not possible”. AT1’s parents were initially opposed to her relationship with a man in his mid-twenties who had no formal education and was only working in basic labour jobs. They were concerned about his ability to support a family in the future. However, to gain their approval for the marriage, the couple agreed to postpone their wedding until they had both finished their studies. As AT1 further recounts: He’s now completing his compulsory schooling. He wanted to start vocational training, but it wasn’t possible because the certificate from Pakistan wasn’t recognised, even though we had it translated. He used to work in a kebab shop to support himself due to his visa situation; he didn’t want to claim benefits. And now he’s finishing school” (AT1).

This also signals a shift in perceptions, with the daughter’s education now playing an increasing role in evaluations of marital readiness and future family success (see also Chapter 5.1.1).

Across the Afghan community, education — particularly in prestigious fields such as law or medicine — has become an important attribute in the ideal partner, enhancing social standing within the diaspora in Austria. “All young Afghans think that they have to study medicine or law to be somebody” (AT5). Furthermore, many individuals in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran view marrying someone already established in Europe as highly desirable. Such a partnership offers the prospect of migration and access to better living conditions, as well as the opportunity to support relatives in the country of origin. This contributes not only to individual mobility, but also to familial advancement.

Although educational and residence status are increasingly important factors in determining social status, particularly for Afghan men, traditional ideals surrounding age and maturity continue to influence partner preferences. These ideals often intersect with gendered expectations, especially when assessing the ‘right’ time to marry. Generally, the community prefers a modest age gap in which the man is slightly older than the woman, reinforcing the assumption that men achieve maturity and economic stability later in life, more so in the context of migration (see below access

to labour market – legal status). Furthermore, a smaller age gap increases the likelihood of shared life goals and mutual development, fostering a more ‘successful’ lasting union and thus ensuring family continuity through childbirth and long-term stability. In this sense, the ideal age for women to marry is perceived to be in their early twenties, while the late twenties are considered optimal for men. This expectation is deeply rooted in cultural beliefs about fertility and gender roles, reflecting similar ideals commonly held in countries of origin (cf. Chapter 3). However, this normative framework might also lead to the marginalisation of women who fall outside the ‘ideal’ age range. As one respondent explains, by reaching her early thirties, she is no longer considered a ‘desirable’ marriage candidate: *“At thirty-three, I am already far too old to receive any serious marriage proposals from the community”* (AT3). Her experience highlights how perceptions of a woman’s ‘marriageability’ are closely tied to her biological clock and assumptions about her fertility. Even highly educated or independent women may find their desirability diminished if they are viewed as having surpassed the ideal childbearing age. This illustrates how marriage preferences continue to be influenced by deeply gendered expectations, in which women are primarily valued for their youth and reproductive potential, while men are granted a broader temporal window due to their expected role as providers.

The “Good Girl” vs. “Independent Girl” Ideal

Much like in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, the ideal image of a daughter-in-law is often defined by modesty and obedience, with a tendency to avoid public visibility. In this context, the distinction between a ‘good girl’ (*dokhtare khoob*) and a girl who is considered ‘too confident, independent, or socially visible’ is crucial in determining marriage preferences and acceptability (see chapter 5.2. Social Media Visibility). Respondents repeatedly emphasise that the more traditional and conservative the family, the greater the pressure to meet such normative gender ideas. As one young woman informs me: *“The other girl is also from Afghanistan, and Afghan families always prioritise safety. They want a girl they can control. They are so backward – I was always too confident for them. In their world, you should be home by six or seven in the evening. You never go out at night or to parties. This other girl was like that, so she was perfect for them”* (AT4).

Similarly, signs of Western social integration, such as partying, dressing revealingly or having a public online presence, are often viewed as red flags. This can result in tensions between personal choice and familial control, particularly for young people who find themselves caught between their own preferences and their family’s expectations.

“His parents didn’t want me at all. They’re very conservative. He’s a smart guy, a trained engineer with bachelor’s and master’s degrees. He goes out dancing with me, but his parents live in Pakistan, where they are very traditional and go to Mecca every year. Then they told him, ‘That girl is visible online; that’s unacceptable’. That’s when the real fight started” (AT4).

Trustworthiness is also closely associated with a woman’s family background, virginity and previous relationship history. Girls who come from ‘respectable families’ (*khanewade-ye khoob*), have not previously been engaged and are perceived as sexually ‘pure’ are favoured within the community. A broken engagement is often viewed as a severe social blemish for both the woman and her prospective future husband, resulting in pressure from extended family members to end the relationship.

“His parents called him constantly and demanded that he leave me. It wasn’t acceptable. They had already gathered information about me: ‘She was engaged before,’ and that alone is seen as shameful, totally unacceptable. He told them, ‘I know,’ but our men are not the type to say, ‘That’s enough. This is my life. I decide.’ No – even his sisters had influence over him. And in the end, it all fell apart” (AT4).

Although traditional gender expectations remain particularly prevalent in relation to Afghan women, the everyday realities experienced by many young respondents diverge significantly from these ideals. AT4, a woman in her late twenties who runs her own business and lives independently, is a prime example of this. After two broken engagements, she found herself in conflict with parental and community gender expectations, but she also gained a clearer idea of the qualities she wants in a partner. Identifying as self-determined, she articulates her vision for an ideal partner who embodies traditional masculinity alongside modern emotional support. This person should be assertive yet respectful of her independence, confident enough to match her strong character and supportive of her professional goals. *“I’ve firmly decided – no man will come between me and my career. If he tries, he’s out”*, she states. Physical appearance also plays a role in her ideal type, with a preference for height, good grooming, and a self-assured presence. She values emotional intelligence, expressed through responsibility, initiative, and sincere affirmation, as essential markers of strength. In one sentence, she concludes:

“I want a man who can bang his fist on the table, but I am the one who calls the shots!”

While parents often prioritise family background, cultural and religious affiliation when looking for a life partner for their children, empirical results show that young Afghan migrants tend to focus on personal compatibility and shared values. They see these as the foundation of a successful marriage. Those who have spent a significant part of their lives in Austria, attended school, completed vocational training, and achieved a degree of social and professional integration, emphasise *mutual independence* when forming relationships. They are looking for partners who will value and support their increasingly independent lifestyle. Many of the individuals I have spoken to describe themselves as modern and liberal, and express a distinct fear of falling back into traditional patterns – particularly when considering partners from conservative family backgrounds, where they perceive familial control to be strong. For AT3, who was under pressure to follow a traditional path and only managed to escape an arranged marriage at the last moment, the idea of marrying someone with an ‘Afghan way of thinking’ is out of the question, as she states: “Even if I don’t find a husband and the last person left on this earth is an Afghan man with an Afghan mentality, I would not marry him” (AT3). Moreover, AT2’s conception of an ideal spouse emphasises values such as independence, mutual support, and compromise. He articulates a clear preference for a partner who is self-reliant and not bound to traditional gender roles. As he explains: “If a woman doesn’t wear a headscarf, that would be okay; if she works every day, that would be okay. For me personally, the ideal woman is independent, not dependent on me, and I support her wherever she needs support... she’s not reliant on me. So, the ideal woman – saying ‘okay, we never have any conflicts and are always on the same wavelength’ – that doesn’t exist, because every person is different. But the person should be willing to compromise on certain things” (AT2). Others, like AT1, have managed to reconcile their cultural heritage with egalitarian ideals. She describes her relationship with her Afghan husband as rooted in shared values – mutual support for each other’s professional goals and an equal division of household responsibilities. These shared values were key criteria in her search for a life partner.

Besides mutual independence, respect is a particularly crucial value in the search for a partner, especially among young Afghan women. Those who have spent a significant portion of their lives in Austria frequently emphasize the importance of being treated with respect in a relationship. In their narratives, traditional patriarchal structures – often experienced in their countries of origin or within their families – are described as disrespectful, particularly in terms of the social role and treatment of women. These experiences often lead to a desire to distance themselves from such relationship models. A widespread concern among female respondents is that their

future spouse will adopt behavioural patterns they observed within their own families. Under this concern, AT3, who has been living in Austria for 12 years, explicitly rejects the idea of being in a relationship with an Afghan man, citing a lack of respect she associates with traditional family dynamics – contrasting it with her experience with European partners: “I have also been with European men, and I know what I value: respect. That you are asked – something you’re not used to from our men. That’s something learned from the family. As a child, you see how the father treats the mother. I was never in a relationship with an Afghan man, but you can feel how they treat you at home. And when you’re with an Austrian or a European, they ask, they follow up, they consider your wishes. There is respect – and that is something to be valued” (AT3).

Moreover, cultural and social differences, particularly divergent socialisation experiences, play a significant role in shaping the partner preferences of young Afghan migrants. AT2, the eldest sibling in his family, provides a compelling example of how these differences influence partner preference and marriage decisions; he is married to a European woman. Having observed the experiences of others in his community, he advises his younger siblings, who have lived in London for most of their lives, to consider the potential challenges of transnational marriages when choosing partners. “I told them”, he explains, “that there are examples, especially among men, of people who married someone from Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran, and in many cases, it didn’t end well — they ended up getting separated. I shared these stories and told them: ‘If possible, choose someone you know well, ideally someone from the country where you live’. That was also a clear criterion for me: I absolutely did not want to marry someone from Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran.” Firstly, it’s difficult to bring someone here. Secondly, you might not really know this person – you’d only get to know them once they arrive. They don’t speak the language, so for the first few years, you’d basically be their interpreter. You might also end up living with someone whose worldview is shaped by an entirely different upbringing – and that’s something I wanted to avoid” (AT2).

Building on AT2’s argument about the importance of marrying someone who lives in the same country, a shared lifestyle becomes as essential in this regard. For many young Afghan migrants, especially those who have grown up or spent a significant time in Austria, everyday compatibility is seen as central to a successful partnership. As one participant explains:

“I will not marry an Afghan woman, but someone from here, from Europe. Firstly, I want to build my life here, and it is easier here. We who live here, slowly step by step adopt their traditions and values. There is a saying: ‘If life doesn’t accommodate me, then you have to accommodate life’. I am adopting to her traditions and culture; I would like to marry an Austrian woman” (I56).

This shift in partner preference also reflects changing attitudes toward traditional behavioural taboos – such as drinking and going out socially – which are increasingly viewed through a more liberal lens. While these practices may still carry stigma within the community, particularly for women, individuals who engage in them tend to seek partners who either share or genuinely accept this lifestyle. Accordingly, the ideal marriage partner is one who respects individual choices and supports a way of life characterized by personal freedom and mutual understanding. Compatibility, therefore, is defined not only by shared values but also by the capacity to live authentically without fear of judgment or restriction. Central to this ideal is the rejection of gendered double standards and the cultivation of relationships based on equality.

This nuanced understanding of compatibility reflects the complex position of many respondents, who have spent several years living in Austria. They often describe themselves as navigating between two worlds, striving to maintain a delicate balance between the cultural expectations of Afghan society and Austrian societal norms. Consequently, when envisioning their ideal partner, many emphasise the importance of someone who is comfortable embracing both Afghan traditions and Austrian ways of life. However, achieving this balance is difficult, as illustrated by AT5: *“I would like to marry an Afghan girl who understands my upbringing, so that I don’t have to explain myself all the time. But I don’t want that level of family involvement, so consequently I see myself more with someone from Europe who shares my values and recognises the importance of family, but not with that level of family control”*. This statement highlights a common dilemma: partners from a European or Austrian background may lack an understanding of Afghan social and family dynamics, while those from an Afghan background often come from families where decisions are influenced – or even dominated – by extended kin. Consequently, finding a partner who truly bridges both worlds remains a complex and ongoing challenge for many.

Although notions of personal compatibility and shared lifestyles are becoming more important to young Afghan migrants in Austria when choosing a partner, these factors often have to be balanced with personal experiences in the host society and long-standing family expectations. This tension is evident in the case of I16, a young Afghan man who has lived in Austria for several years. He reflects on the emotional impact of his relationship with an Austrian partner: *“I was in a relationship for about one and a half years with my girlfriend in Austria, in Vienna (...) and we were of course very happy, but I don’t know what happened and she just, well, I’d say she really broke my heart. And because of that, I can no longer trust a woman so easily. There is no reason to break a heart like that (...) she was Austrian (...)”*.

Negative experiences, such as heartbreak and intercultural differences, can increase young migrants' reluctance and caution toward engaging in intercultural or interethnic relationships, even when initial openness exists. The case of I16, whose former partner was Austrian, underscores the emotional vulnerabilities inherent to such relationships. These complexities are further intensified by the necessity of navigating divergent cultural expectations, both within the family setting and the broader societal context. This tension is particularly pronounced for individuals with strong family and kinship ties, where partner preferences are deeply intertwined with broader aspirations to maintain familial cohesion and ensure cultural continuity. In this context, aligning with parental expectations – especially in regard to family background, as well as cultural and religious affiliation – often assumes heightened importance.

The "Parent-Understander" Ideal

Among young migrants, a potential partner with an Afghan background is particularly valued when the relationship between a partner and the parents is considered very important. This preference is most evident in families where parent-child relationships are strong, or/and when children – often the eldest siblings – feel a distinct sense of responsibility to fulfil their parents' wishes (see AT4, AT3, and AT2). This importance underlies the assumption that the ability to truly 'understand' the family, facilitated by a shared language and cultural context, is considered much more likely with an Afghan partner. As AT4, who is the eldest of 5 siblings, puts it: "I am very family-oriented, we fully support each other, we see each other almost every weekend, and we really enjoy our time together. I genuinely wish for an Afghan husband who will become part of our family. My Austrian brother-in-law S. is really sweet and speaks a little Persian, but it's awkward when we all sit together because he only understands half of what's being said. My father can't really communicate with him the way he would like to..." (AT4). As she further reflects on the diversity of opinions in this regard within her family: "We talk openly about these things now, but I'll say this: another Afghan family might not discuss such topics so openly. My siblings are actually against me marrying an Afghan, and they hope I won't, but I only want to marry an Afghan" (AT4). Others than her siblings, for AT4, a cultural and linguistic understanding within the family is not just a preference in regard to a potential marriage partner, but a deeply held ideal that shapes partner choice and reflects the importance of familial closeness in Afghan communities.

In conclusion, the experiences of young Afghan migrants highlight a significant change in the expectations and ideals associated with partners and marriage. There is a growing emphasis on shared values such as autonomy, independence, self-de-

termination and equality, as well as on compatible lifestyles, mutual respect, emotional intimacy and an equal distribution of household duties. This shift is evident in the responses of both male and female migrants. However, these contemporary ideals coexist alongside a strong sense of family and communal ties. Many young migrants feel as though they are living between two worlds, trying to adapt to their new lifestyle while managing the expectations of their parents and the wider Afghan community, whose views on marriage and family roles are often more traditional.

As discussed in Chapter 5.1, family remains a central pillar in the lives of these young people. They place considerable importance on maintaining strong relationships with their parents, and in this context, they hope to find a future spouse who can integrate harmoniously into their family. Given that many Afghan families live in extended households, where married women typically join their husband's family home, the ability of spouses to understand and navigate complex family dynamics is especially significant. In this sense, a shared cultural background is regarded as essential. The importance of compatibility therefore extends beyond the couple to include relationships with in-laws and other household members. Consequently, young migrants might prioritise qualities in a partner that promote familial cohesion and minimise potential conflicts.

5.2 Locating the Search, Finding a Match: Between Wedding Halls, Instagram, and Family Ties

This section explores the social and spatial dynamics involved in how young Afghan migrants in Austria form connections with potential marriage partners. The main methods are identified, with two primary pathways in the process of searching for a partner being highlighted: one shaped by family-led matchmaking and embedded community networks, and the other driven by the individual initiatives of the young people themselves. In most cases, these pathways are not mutually exclusive but intersect and influence each other, shaped by Afghan cultural norms, generational and gendered expectations, and the lived realities of migration. While families remain highly influential – both locally and transnationally – in initiating and managing potential matches, many young Afghans are increasingly engaged in their own partner searches at the same time. Community events, public and private meeting spaces, social media platforms, living conditions and gendered expectations all have a critical role to play in shaping where and how people interact – mediating between traditional structures and the new possibilities (and limits) of diasporic life.

(Trans)local search through family and community networks

In traditional Afghan culture, the process of partner search is largely driven by families and embedded within kinship, economic, and community networks (see Chapter 3.3.1). The family of the son typically initiates the search and reaches out to the family of a potential bride once they have identified a suitable candidate. Compatibility is initially assessed not through the individuals themselves but through the reputation, social standing, and perceived morality of the extended family. In many cases, this search takes place within the immediate or extended social network. Endogamous marriages – such as cousin marriages – are common and often preferred, as the families already know each other and trust has been established. For example, I7 described how her parents sought a partner for her in the immediate kinship circle, where familiarity and predictability shaped the search. Similarly, in the case of Soheli, his father's business partnership with the father of his then-fiancée facilitated the match, demonstrating how economic ties can also serve as practical starting point for marriage arrangements.

While both mothers and fathers are involved in the search process, gender roles often shape how the search is initiated. Many respondents note that it is typically the mother who identifies potential matches through her social networks, while the father becomes more involved in the later stages when marriage negotiations take place (see 3.3.2). Beside community events and weddings, casual encounters in public and private spaces often become informal matchmaking platforms. One young woman recounts:

“If my mother sees someone her age, they talk once in the subway or somewhere, and then they're like best friends (laughs). With us, it's very easy (to network)” (AT1).

That these spontaneous interactions often lead to deeper networking for the purpose of finding a suitable marriage partner for their children is evident in the next statement:

“My mother always immediately gives out her number and then writes the other mothers – and of course, they talk about us children, whether something could work” (AT1).

In another case, a male informant who had a high level of trust in his mother's ability to identify a suitable partner, recounts how his mother and his Afghan girlfriend had initially met and connected at a community event in Vienna. This allowed the

two women to engage in informal conversations and build rapport, and they ultimately became good friends despite the age difference.

In this way, Afghan mothers in diaspora settings function as relationship brokers, using their embeddedness in the (trans)local Afghan community to initiate potential matches. In addition to this gendered search process, parental or family location also determines who searches for a potential spouse. If one parent lives abroad or in the country of origin while the other lives in Austria, the parent living with the child tends to be more involved. This not only reflects practical considerations (such as proximity and knowledge of the child's social life), but the local parent or family members are often seen as better able to understand the realities of life in Europe and therefore to judge the suitability of a partner accordingly. In this context, parents living abroad may reach out to trusted intermediaries living in Austria or Europe – such as uncles, aunts, or family friends – who collect information about potential spouses and facilitate contact. As AT2 explains:

“Yes, the search is hard here in Austria, it's hard. Traditionally, it goes through parents in Afghanistan, and here through weddings... For older people, there are also cases where someone else mediated. They said: ‘Okay, I know someone who's also single,’ and then they invited both for a meal so they could meet” (AT2).

At the same time, extended family members or acquaintances living abroad – in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, or other migration hubs – continue to play a vital role in the search. This is especially true for young migrants who have not been successful with finding a suitable partner themselves, such as for instance formerly unaccompanied minors or socially isolated men in Austria who lack access to robust local networks. In such cases, families in the country of origin often take the lead in identifying potential spouses through their own social and familial connections.

“And somehow my brother said, ‘Yes, I would like to meet someone now’, but when he tried here (in Austria) it didn't quite work out. So, he said, ‘Mom, do you know someone?’ Then my mother started telling around among all the Afghan women. And my (...) well, one of my mother's best friends, it was her daughter (note: in Pakistan). So not a cousin, my mother was very close friends with this woman. We also lived in their house once, paying rent and so on. Because of that, they knew each other, and my mother knew they were really great people. Then my (...) my mother's friend gave the number of her daughter, and then my brother and sister-in-law exchanged numbers, started writing a little, and then they fell in love and yes” (I12).

During my fieldwork, I also met an Afghan man in his late thirties who had been living in Austria for nine years and openly reflected on the emotional and practical difficulties he faced in his prolonged and unsuccessful search for a marriage partner in Austria. He expressed frustration with what he perceived as a mismatch between his expectations and the life realities of European women, while also noting that Afghan women of marriageable age were relatively rare in Austria. His sense of social isolation and growing disappointment eventually prompted him to involve his parents in Afghanistan in the partner search process. Drawing on their local networks, his family found a suitable young Afghan woman and arranged an initial meeting between the potential couple. The man then travelled to Afghanistan, approved the match after their initial meeting, and, following customary practices and family visits, the marriage was eventually formalised and celebrated there.

These cases show that, despite having lived in Austria for several years, young Afghans continue to rely on (transnational) family networks, which remained crucial for finding a partner, especially for those experiencing social isolation or limited opportunities in the host country.

Ultimately, the success of finding a suitable partner is closely tied to the extent to which parents and extended families are embedded within the Afghan community networks. These networks – both local and translocal/transnational – serve as key social infrastructures through which information circulates, reputations are assessed, and introductions are facilitated. The strength and reach of these connections can significantly impact the range of potential matches and thus suitable marriage candidates, especially in migration contexts where traditional matchmaking structures are reshaped across borders.

Community Events and Gatherings

“We met at a wedding, in Belgium, from relatives, he is also a distant relative of ours and I was totally in love with him for five years, I thought I would marry this man, he was the man of my dreams (...)” (AT4).

Weddings, engagement parties, cultural celebrations, and community events play a central role in the partner search among young Afghans in Austria. These gatherings serve not only as important social occasion but also as structured opportunities for matchmaking, social screening and familial observation. Within such settings, family members – particularly, parents, aunts, and uncles – carefully observe the behaviour, appearance, and interactions of young people deemed to be of marriageable age.

“They then look at the families to see ‘how many daughters does the family have, who is the eldest daughter, we saw her once at a wedding, at an event, she’s this old, ok’...” (AT3).

In this context, formal and informal inquiries into potential marriage candidates takes place. Families exchange information about their children’s age, education, professional aspirations, and assess whether the prospective in-laws’ social background is considered “appropriate” or “respectable” (see chapter 5.1.2). This process is often carried out subtly, especially through conversations among mothers and other female relatives, who informally evaluate the eligibility of potential spouses based on family reputation and social presentation. While family members actively assess the perceived “matchability” of a potential couple, direct interaction between the young individuals is typically limited or altogether absent. Gender segregation – often reinforced by separate seating arrangements and implicit behavioural expectations – severely restricts social contact between the sexes, especially for the unmarried.

During my fieldwork, I attended two Afghan weddings in Vienna⁵⁶: one in July 2020 and one in September 2024. Through these experiences, I observed how gendered spatial divisions manifest in subtle yet significant ways. For young women, spaces of relative privacy are often found behind closed doors. Shared female bathrooms for instance, become informal zones where female cousins and friends gather to freshen up and chat in private, away from the community’s watchful eyes. In contrast, the social space afforded to young men is markedly more public. They often occupy outdoor areas to smoke or chat in groups, greet arriving guests and, most notably, take to the dance floor. At wedding celebrations, dancing emerges as a highly visible and performative element of the event, functioning as a stage on which individuals can assert their presence. Through movement, posture and style, both young men and women engage in performances that embody socially recognised forms of masculinity and femininity. The structure of the dancing however, often reflects the traditional orientation of the host family. In less conservative settings, young men and women may dance together in mixed circles. In more traditional contexts, gender-segregated dancing is more common, with male and female groups taking turns on the dance floor. Regardless of the setting, it is usually the men who initiate the dancing, dominating the dance floor more frequently and visibly throughout the event. These dynamics reflect broader patterns of gendered social freedom. While

⁵⁶ See further: Kamran, N. (2008) *Die afghanischen Hochzeitsriten in der Diaspora am Beispiel tadschikischer Migranten in Österreich und Deutschland*. Master’s thesis. Universität Wien.

young women are generally more constrained by cultural expectations of modesty, discretion and restraint, young men enjoy comparatively greater freedom to express themselves physically and socially within communal settings. Although social interaction between two young individuals of the opposite sex is short and subject to familial and community surveillance, the large dynamic nature of Afghan social gatherings, particularly wedding celebrations, can create brief and subtle opportunities to slip past familial observation. A fleeting glance in a corridor, a subtle smile across the room, or a moment of eye contact during a group activity can all be interpreted as discreet gestures of interest. In this context, appearance, dress and body language become powerful tools of social signalling. Hence, it is important to look attractive, confident and respectable in these settings.

Moreover, digital media is playing an increasingly important role alongside these face-to-face interactions. It has become common practice to share photos taken at such gatherings and community events — moments when individuals are dressed to impress — across social media platforms. These images are liked, reposted and commented on. This provides a subtle and indirect way of showing interest or attraction, offering an alternative to direct confrontation, as outlined in the following section.

Social Media

“Well, they (men) contacted me on Instagram, so I don’t contact men (laughs). We wrote and wrote and this one (in Austria), we talked for ages, for weeks, about meeting up and then we met up and it went so well that he booked a hotel right here (in Vienna) and stayed overnight (laughs) (AT4).”

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp are becoming increasingly central to the partner search process among young Afghans in Austria. These digital spaces provide opportunities for initiating contact and getting to know potential partners outside familial supervision, making them especially appealing to young individuals seeking greater autonomy. As one female respondent (AT4) notes, social media platforms facilitate informal interactions – likes, comments and direct messages – which can ultimately lead to more sustained communication and even a romantic relationship. In this context AT4 described how she met two Afghan men via Instagram – one living in Iran, the other in Austria – and maintained contact with both, illustrating how social media expands the spatial boundaries of the search and enables parallel, translocal exchanges:

“But what I have at the moment, it’s kind of going full on, I met a model through Instagram and a second guy as well (laughs). One of them is in Iran, lives in Iran, is a model, 2m tall, is so cute, so it’s amazing, I would say I’m totally in love with him, but it’s crazy. And I have a model here, he lives in XX (note: place name not given), so I’m spoiled for choice, who do I take (laughs), I don’t stress myself, I’m in contact with both of them” (AT4).

While these social platforms offer a private space in which to initially connect with (multiple) potential partners, they also serve as virtual extensions of offline encounters. This allows individuals to resume private communication or develop and deepen initial connections made at events such as weddings and community celebrations. For AT1, who met her now-husband at a cultural event, their brief encounter there led to an exchange of social media profiles. This online contact then evolved into a more intimate exchange involving the sharing of poems and personal stories, enabling the couple to connect on a deeper, more personal level beyond the constraints of public or family-monitored settings.

However, these social platforms not only create private spaces for one-to-one communication among young people, but they also serve as public domains where self-presentation is constantly observed and evaluated. What is shared publicly – photos, comments, or lifestyle expressions – is not only visible to peers, but also subject to scrutiny by translocal/transnational audiences, including family members and community figures abroad. For young Afghans embracing a more liberal lifestyle in Europe, their online visibility may be assessed according to cultural and gender norms, determining whether they are suitable marriage candidates. As AT4 recounts, her potential fiancé’s family in Pakistan perceived her Instagram presence as too liberal, ultimately leading to her rejection as a future wife for their son:

“They exerted a lot of pressure over the phone. He kept getting calls, kept getting suggestions for women ‘look at her, she’s a great girl, with a headscarf, everything is covered, she’s not on social media, why don’t you marry her, she’s much prettier’. They didn’t care what the son wanted...” (AT4).

“We then broke up completely within a month (...) because of his parents. I wasn’t allowed to have Instagram, for example, they controlled and manipulated him so much that he no longer trusted me. When I was asleep, he opened my phone with my finger and controlled what I posted online ...” (AT4).

Moreover, during her second engagement, AT4's publicly visible online presence became a catalyst for unexpected transnational entanglements. She was contacted via Instagram by a young woman living in Iran, who disclosed information suggesting that her fiancé was simultaneously involved with another woman:

"We were already talking about moving in together when some girl wrote to me on Instagram that she really needed to talk to me. I thought 'ok, maybe it's about a job' and I gave her my number. She calls me and asks me if I am seeing XY, and I am like 'yes, I'm engaged (to him) (...) she was crying 'ah, he's been with me for four years'. And this man made the most beautiful proposal on the beach, he booked a five-star hotel in Croatia, beautiful, made the most beautiful proposal and then I find out after three days that he is already in an intact relationship (...)" (AT4).

This revelation led not only to the final breakdown of the engagement but also highlights once more the complex and often unpredictable consequences of digital visibility. Clearly, these social media platforms have a dual nature in the context of partner search and intimate relationships. On the one hand, they offer young people — particularly young Afghan women in Austria — seemingly private and secure spaces for communication that are beyond the reach of direct familial oversight. However, these same platforms also function as public domains where online behaviour is subject to social scrutiny and moral judgement, extending across familial, communal and transnational boundaries. Navigating these overlapping digital and social spheres is fraught with tension, as young people must carefully balance visibility and discretion while trying to keep a sense of agency when searching for and connecting with a partner.

5.3 Choosing Change? A Spectrum of Agency in Marriage Practices

As discussed in previous chapters, migration to Austria can bring significant changes to the lives of young Afghan migrants. Exposure to a new social and cultural environment, a different legal system, and expanded opportunities for education and employment contribute to a reshaping of social roles and family dynamics. In this changing context, young migrants are increasingly expressing ideals around marriage and partner preference that differ from those of their parents or communities. While families still play a role in the partner search, this process is now increasingly

shaped by individual initiative, with social media becoming a significant influence. Consequently, decisions about whom and when to marry become deeply intertwined with these changing life circumstances, putting the notion of choice to the forefront.

Based on this framework, this chapter examines how the younger generation of Afghan migrants navigate changing life circumstances in relation to the traditional expectations upheld by their parents. Drawing on empirical findings, three distinct patterns of negotiation are identified that illustrate the diverse ways in which agency and choice are expressed in the context of marriage and partner selection. These range from constrained or denied agency to subtle negotiations and overt acts of self-determination. By conceptualising agency as a relational process influenced by wider social structures, such as family, culture, religion and institutions, the chapter examines how young migrants interact with, adapt to and sometimes resist established norms. These findings provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of social transformation within migrant communities.

5.3.1 “It was simply all pure tradition” – Constrained or Denied Agency in Partner Choice

In contexts of migration, the anticipated transformation of social roles and cultural norms is often complicated by the enduring influence of gender and generational hierarchies. Despite geographical relocation, many families continue to exercise strict control over marriage practices. This is often reinforced by long-standing marriage promises made prior to migration and the fear of losing cultural values, particularly with regard to the protection of daughters from ‘Western’ moral decline. Mechanisms such as long-distance surveillance and the active involvement of (transnational) family networks serve to maintain or even intensify traditional expectations around marriage and gender roles. Drawing on qualitative research, this section examines how the agency/autonomy of young Afghan migrants in Austria is sometimes limited or negated when it comes to marriage and choosing a partner. Based on the lived experiences of respondents, the analysis reveals that certain social expectations and normative frameworks surrounding marriage are not only maintained, but also actively reinforced through (transnational) family networks in a migratory context.

A central theme that emerges from the respondents’ accounts is that of experiencing external control in marriage and partner selection. Several interviewees report having no influence over the choice of their future spouse and say that the de-

cision to become engaged or married was made without their involvement. In these cases, the selection of the spouse was usually made by the parents (or other elderly family members). Although the level of familiarity between couples prior to marriage can vary significantly – for example, I6’s husband was her cousin, and they grew up together – interviewees also reported having little to no prior acquaintance with their partner before becoming engaged or getting married. Consequently, there was typically no communication between the individuals beforehand.

Age emerges as a central factor in justifying early and arranged marriages, particularly within the cultural logic employed by many Afghan families. Several interviewees highlight that older generations equate youth with immaturity, emotional instability and a lack of foresight – characteristics that are considered disqualifying when it comes to making weighty and enduring decisions such as marriage. Consequently, young people – especially girls – are often excluded from meaningfully participating in the selection of a life partner. This presumption of incompetence due to age legitimises strong parental/familial involvement and even unilateral decision-making. The AT4 narrative illustrates the common practice of young women being married off, as well as stark age disparities between the couple. Recalling her engagement in Austria at 15 to a man nearly twice her age, she remarks: “He was 28 at the time and I was 15, but I mean, in Afghanistan 11-year-olds are married to 70-year-olds, so it’s all quite normal”.

In these contexts, decisions made by parents/families were not usually open to discussion or negotiation. Instead, they were imposed unilaterally, reflecting adherence to cultural and social norms and reinforcing age-based hierarchies within family structures. The ways these decisions were implemented reveals a deliberate restriction of autonomy and agency of those young people affected. A particular example is provided by the account of AT3, who describes a staged surprise wedding. The young female respondent was taken to another city under false pretences, where she was to be married immediately after the arrival – without her knowledge and without prior contact to the groom:

“The second time was a trap, they said that they were all going to this city by car because they had to transport a lot of things, because we always flew to another city during the summer vacation and then we spent two months of summer vacation there. And this time they said that they’re all going by car because they have to carry a lot of things and I’m supposed to come with my cousin on the plane a week later. I had just finished my A-levels and they gave me a lot of money so that I could buy myself something nice, so they told me to go shopping because there was going to be a wedding in this town,

it's always a wedding with the Afghans, and also because I did so well in my A-levels and I believed them. Even when I was still on the plane. My cousin hadn't told me anything until then, she knew, all my relatives knew, only I didn't know. 15 minutes before the plane landed, my cousin asked me 'Do you actually know who's getting married' and I said 'No, but there's always someone getting married because there are a lot of Afghans in the city' and my cousin said 'No, it's you who's getting married' and that was a shock for me" (AT3).

In this case, the family intentionally precluded their daughter from participating in or resisting this decision, presenting her with a *fait accompli*. However, the motivations underlying arranged or forced marriages are complex and vary widely depending on the families and context (see also Chapter 3.3.1). In AT3's case, her second arranged/forced marriage took place in Pakistan, where she lived with her parents and four siblings before migrating to Austria. Her parents' decision to arrange her marriage at the age of 18 was primarily driven by concerns about maintaining cultural and social order. They saw her as a rebellious and difficult-to-control daughter, having already managed to evade her first arranged marriage. *"I have always been a bad and rebellious child. I had to change school three times because I was so rebellious"* (AT3). They feared that they would be unable to provide her with a stable and morally guided life. Consequently, they considered the *ad hoc* marriage to be a means of reasserting their authority, safeguarding familial, societal and cultural norms, and maintaining their standing in the Afghan community in Pakistan. Importantly, such forms of social control are deeply gendered. While sons may enjoy comparatively greater freedom, daughters are often subject to greater surveillance and control, as their behaviour is more directly linked to the family's honour and reputation. In this respect, early and arranged marriage serves as a mechanism to regulate female autonomy and sexuality, reflecting broader patriarchal structures that seek to discipline and contain young women's agency.

In the context of migration, a clear pattern has emerged from the data affecting young Afghan women and girls in particular: the immediate arrangement of marriage upon arrival in Austria. This practice is often motivated by family concerns about protecting daughters from the perceived dangers of Western norms and values, such as greater personal freedom, exposure to liberal gender roles, and the risk of premarital relationships or pregnancy. This rationale becomes particularly evident in the case of AT4, a young Afghan woman living in Vienna, who recounts her experience of a near-forced marriage:

“Well, I also went through a forced marriage, an almost marriage, so I was engaged, I didn’t even know him, my father sort of promised me, I was in Pakistan, and when I came to Vienna he said ‘So, this is your husband, you are marrying him (...) I wasn’t pleasantly surprised (laughs), I imagined a more handsome man and a taller one (laughs)(...) and because he was very good with my father, he was a well-educated person, calm, my father said that in the end he meant well, and what made my father do something like that, because the community said ‘watch out, when S. comes here, she’s 15, she wants to see the world, she’ll lose her virginity, she’ll have a boyfriend, so you’d better do it’. That was the reason why my father did it before I see anything (the world)” (AT4).

In this regard, immediate marriage upon arrival serves as a means of both control and protection, employed strategically to uphold family honour and reinforce traditional cultural and moral frameworks within a diaspora setting. The wider community’s encouragement and counsel further solidified the father’s resolve, highlighting his adherence to communal expectations and the significant reputational consequences that any deviation from these norms could have for the family within the Afghan community. Respondent AT4’s narrative vividly illustrates the normalisation of constrained agency within this context. Reflecting on her own experience of an arranged marriage, she explains:

“At first, I was shocked, but I thought this was just part of life. You don’t know anything else, so I told myself ‘Well, you just do it’. I thought, ‘Okay, we’ll get married’, no matter we got along or not. We didn’t enjoy each other’s company; we just argued. But it was clear that I would marry. It’s not really traumatic or anything; it’s just part of the culture, and you just do it” (AT4).

“(...) he was an Afghan who lived in Austria and we were then officially engaged, because in the family they had already discussed it over the phone ‘ok, ok’, so then we had this great engagement, I don’t know, €20,000 invested, it was a huge wedding hall in the 11th district, a Turkish hall and I was dressed up like a princess with a huge dress and there was live music and everything, there is also a video of it, but I can’t watch it now (laughs), and you just stand up there and put on a show. But you could tell, I hardly laughed, then my uncles walked past and said, ‘have a laugh’ and I was like ‘oh go on’. But then you do it and you get through it” (AT4).

This account highlights how deeply embedded these social and cultural norms are. To the extent that restrictions on personal choice are not necessarily perceived as an

infringement of rights, but rather as an expected part of life. For young migrants, especially those raised in strongly community-oriented societies, alternative forms of partner choice are often not perceived as viable options upon their immediate arrival in Austria. However, with prolonged residence in the country, and increased exposure to different social norms and legal frameworks, awareness of individual rights may gradually expand – potentially reshaping attitudes toward agency in matters of marriage (see Chapter 5.3.2 and 5.3.3).

When young people find out about their parents' plans to arrange their marriage and disagree with the decision, they may try to negotiate, delay or resist it. However, interviews and informal conversations reveal that emotional blackmail is often used by parents to reassert control and override their children's autonomy, ensuring compliance with familial and cultural expectations. Respondent AT3 offers a vivid account of such dynamics. She recalls how, after spending 18 years studying medicine in Australia, her eldest brother returned home to be told that he was to marry his cousin. Despite his objections, based on concerns over consanguinity and personal incompatibility, his father insisted, '*No, I have already given my word; you must marry*'. When her brother asked to postpone the marriage, their father escalated the situation by declaring: '*Then I will kill myself*'. Faced with this emotional pressure, the brother relented. "*So he said, 'Okay, don't kill yourself,' and got married*" (AT3).

Similarly, AT4 recounts how her romantic relationship ended due to emotional pressure. Although her partner wanted to marry her and had even proposed, he deferred to his parents, especially his mother, overriding his personal intentions in the process. "*He always said, 'I have to ask my mother'*", she explains. Later, when his mother fell seriously ill, she made her dying wish known: that he marries a girl of her choosing. '*And then you can't do anything anymore,*' says AT4. '*Just like that, a five-year relationship was gone*'.

Such examples illustrate the significant emotional leverage that parents can exert, often presenting compliance as a moral obligation tied to family loyalty, honour, or even their own emotional wellbeing. This reaffirms the structure of power within the family and significantly curtails the child's ability to make independent decisions about their marriage life.

5.3.2 “I didn’t say anything because I knew her answer” – Subtle and Hidden Agency in Partner Choice

This section examines the subtle and adaptive strategies employed by young Afghan migrants to navigate traditional expectations surrounding partner selection. Migration creates “grey zones” in everyday settings such as schools, training programmes and workplaces — semi-private spaces that are removed from direct family oversight. Living independently, particularly when families remain abroad, further expands these opportunities. In these contexts, participants carefully negotiate greater personal autonomy in romantic matters without directly challenging parental authority. These discreet practices enable them to balance personal desires with cultural norms, exercising agency while maintaining family harmony.

„I didn’t tell my mum, though. I said I was meeting a female friend. You don’t always have to be so honest. What do you expect from my mum? That she’d say, ‘Ok, have a good time, all the best, go ahead’ (laughs). Certainly not. I didn’t say anything because I knew her answer” (AT1).

AT1’s relationship with her now fiancé began with a meeting at an Afghan community event. Exchanging their Facebook profiles allowed the couple to get to know each other more discreetly. Private online chats soon led to private meetings for two. The organisation of these meetings demonstrates how migration can open up new possibilities for social interaction between the sexes: Parks, restaurants, and meeting up after school or work become social spaces that would not have been so accessible to AT1 in her countries of origin. Having grown up in Afghanistan and Pakistan, she had barely experienced life beyond the confines of her home. Although she completed her primary education, she rarely took part in public life outside school. Since moving to Austria with her family, she has been sharing an 80-square-metre apartment in Vienna with her parents and six siblings. In such confined circumstances, there are few opportunities for privacy or getting to know people beyond the wider family.

„We always meet outside, in cafés, in restaurants, to go for a walk (...) It depends on how long I’m at work or school and also from his schedule, so if we’re off at 2pm, for example, then we see each other more often during the week (...) but because I have different working hours, I can’t say that exactly, so this week I work 10 hours, but when I was still working at the hospital, we only didn’t meet on Wednesdays, otherwise every day“ (AT1).

Moreover, she explains that meeting outside the family home enables her to express herself more freely, away from the constant presence of her relatives, making it easier to connect with the man she likes. In her words:

“I was so shy (when her husband visited her family at home), now I’m shy even when my family is with me, then I’m so shy, so quiet, I just listen, but when we meet as a couple in private, it’s different” (AT1).

While AT1 operated within a national context, using local urban spaces in Vienna as sites of hidden agency, AT4’s ability to travel for work introduced a transnational dimension to her situation. Regular business trips abroad enabled her to establish temporary zones of freedom that were physically and symbolically distant from the oversight of her family and the Afghan diaspora community. These transnational spaces functioned as discreet islands/refuges of intimacy, enabling her relationship to evolve beyond the scope of cultural surveillance. As AT4 reflects:

“We met at a wedding in Belgium, through relatives – he is also a distant relative. I was in love with him for five years, always thinking I would marry him; he was my dream man. We had great times together, but kept it secret from our families at first, always meeting elsewhere – he was living in Belgium, I was here in Austria. We never met in our home countries, but rather, for example, in Mallorca, turning it into a vacation. We had the best sex and did everything we weren’t supposed to do (laughs)” (AT4).

These two cases demonstrate that participation in institutions such as the education system and the Austrian labour market enables young Afghan migrants, particularly those living with their families, to temporarily circumvent familial supervision at home. School and workplaces thus create zones of temporal and spatial privacy and autonomy, effectively transforming transnational and public spaces into sites of significant, self-determined romance and intimate connection.

For young migrants whose families reside abroad or outside Austria, secret dating may be logistically simpler. However, even when living independently, deeply internalised social and cultural norms and the anticipated judgement of family members – despite their physical absence – continue to influence how these young people navigate their private and romantic lives. As a result, secrecy often becomes a necessary strategy for reconciling personal desires with the enduring influence of familial expectations. This is evident in the case AT2, who lives in Vienna while his family remains in Pakistan and England. Initially, he shared an apartment with a European

woman in a roommate arrangement. Over time, their close daily interactions developed into a romantic relationship, ultimately leading to marriage. However, AT2's family was not involved in the engagement or wedding and was unaware of his intention to marry a European partner. He informed them only after the fact, introducing her retrospectively as his wife.

"I only told them when I got married. They weren't there, and I knew that if I wasn't married and I told them that I was planning to get married, they would do EVERYTHING to stop it (...) I only told them afterwards" (AT2).

His decision to keep the relationship and marriage decision hidden reflects his clear awareness of his family's expectations – that he would marry an Afghan woman of their choosing. *"As I said, it wasn't so much important to them that I had married status, but who I was married to (...) there were language barriers between my parents and European wife (...) I also have the feeling that my parents blame themselves, that it would have been their task to choose the partner, but they couldn't fulfil it".*

By delaying disclosure until after the marriage, AT2 effectively prevented any potential family veto and secured his choice of partner free from external interference. This act of self-determination depended crucially on the structural context of his migration trajectory. Having arrived in Austria alone at the age of twelve, AT2 had to learn to navigate everyday life, education and major decisions independently. The absence of direct familial oversight throughout his teenage and young adult years created a spatial and emotional distance from traditional authority structures, gradually fostering a more pronounced sense of individual responsibility and agency. *"Had my family been here, they would have had a more direct influence on my choices, but they weren't. In all these situations, I was alone, so I had to make decisions by myself".* Therefore, his relatively independent life decisions did not emerge through open defiance, but rather through the quiet necessity of self-reliance in a context where familial oversight was limited by circumstance. Unlike individuals with closer familial ties, such as by AT1, AT2's life developed in an environment where normative expectations were more flexible.

The fact that decisions that contradict the expectations of the family of origin are not without social consequences is exemplified by the reaction of AT2's family: *"They were very unhappy about it for a short time, didn't speak to me for a while – but now they've come to terms with it".* However, AT2 was able to anticipate this family's reaction and consciously integrated it into his strategy: *"That was my plan – that I would only tell them*

afterwards, when there was no longer any possibility of intervening. That they would be presented with a *fait accompli*”.

Moreover, AT2’s choice to marry someone without an Afghan or Muslim background also contravened the dominant communal norms. As he explains, while relationships with non-Afghan partners did exist within the Austrian Afghan community, they were usually hidden from public views. Unlike others who kept such relationships secret, however, he opted for a more visible affirmation of his partnership. He was among the first to openly bring his European wife to community gatherings, thereby challenging prevailing norms through an act of social visibility.

When I asked him whether he feared communal judgement, AT2 acknowledges the gossip culture within diasporic circles: “Yes, people in the community talk about what someone did or what happened (...) I know exactly what I was going into. I think I was one of the first to make it public”. Although he was aware that people might speak about him behind his back, he was not confronted directly by any community members. Reflecting on the broader dynamics, he remarks: “It’s not just an issue here in Austria, but in Pakistan and Afghanistan – even in Australia. But I don’t care. People talk for a while, then move on and forget”.

Although living away from his parents enabled AT2 to develop and eventually marry his European partner, he intentionally concealed their relationship and its beginnings, knowing his family would disapprove not only of her non-Afghan background, but also of their unmarried cohabitation, which is culturally unacceptable. Despite believing that his mother might be more open-minded because of her experiences abroad, AT2 feared the social and moral judgement of his religious father and grandparents in Pakistan.

“They didn’t know, because man and woman can’t live together (before marriage). My father is very religious, as are my grandparents. My mother is more open now – she’s lived in Turkey and England and seen more of life – but my father and grandparents are very strict, they live in Pakistan” (AT2).

AT2’s case illustrates how agency operates along a continuum. Initially, he exercised covert agency by hiding his relationship in order to navigate cultural expectations and avoid confrontation. By only disclosing his marriage after it had taken place — a *fait accompli* strategy — AT2 asserted his personal autonomy while navigating traditional family expectations. This retrospective disclosure reflects the delicate balance between cultural loyalty and individual agency, enabling him to preserve familial connections while retaining control over his life choices.

Courting Consensus: The Role of Engagement in Social Legitimacy

In Afghan families, deep-rooted cultural expectations regarding modesty and gender relations often make it inappropriate for young men and women to meet privately or develop romantic/intimate relationships before becoming formally engaged. As one female respondent puts it: *“Because of our culture and our families, it’s difficult for our parents or brothers if we’re just friends and want to meet up or go to a party together. It’s all very difficult if you’re not engaged. In our culture, it’s not common to be boyfriend and girlfriend”* (AT1).

These cultural norms result in highly limited opportunities for young Afghans to exercise autonomy in choosing a potential life partner. Initial meetings between prospective spouses are usually arranged or overseen by family members, either through formal matchmaking or at broader social gatherings, such as family dinners, celebrations or community events such as weddings of religious holidays (see Section 5.2). Such settings ensure that the process of ‘getting to know’ one another is firmly embedded within a framework of social oversight and legitimacy. In some cases, especially in more traditional or rural contexts, marriages are arranged without any prior contact between the bride and groom, which further curtails individual agency in partner selection. Some interviewees recall being promised to relatives or family friends from an early age, resulting in relationships defined more by familial obligation than personal connection (see I6).

However, among young Afghans growing up or living in Austria, these practices are changing. Respondents who have spent a large part of their formative years in Austria report a move away from strict adherence to traditional matchmaking and arranged marriages without personal acquaintance. Instead, they describe the gradual emergence of new patterns around dating and partner selection – patterns that strike a balance between the desire for personal freedom and the need to protect the family’s reputation.

In this transitional landscape, engagement has become a critical institution/period. Acting as culturally sanctioned mechanism, it reconciles the competing pressures of the young person’s wish to experience meaningful interaction and romantic exploration with the family’s concern for social legitimacy and adherence to communal norms. It provides a legitimate and protected context in which couples can interact more freely in both private and public spaces, while also signalling to the wider community the seriousness and propriety of the relationship.

For instance, AT1 explains that, although she had been secretly in a relationship with her future husband for a year and had developed strong feelings for him, openly admitting to the relationship was out of the question due to fears of social censure, family disapproval and the potential damage it could cause to her family’s rep-

utation. Instead, she sought to legitimise their relationship by embedding it within the culturally accepted framework of the traditional ‘application process’ for marriage (see also Chapter 3.3.2).

„I didn’t tell my mum that he was coming, I gave him my mum’s phone number so he could call her and pretend we hadn’t met. I was never scared when other suitors came to us, but when he came, I was scared that she would see us together and realise that we already knew each other. I was nervous when he arrived, I couldn’t leave my room, I stood in front of my room door for about an hour or more, should I go out, should I not go out (laughs). Yes, it was difficult. He came many times (to apply). My mum noticed that I liked him (...) she was a bit shocked and angry because she realised that we already knew each other, she also asked me how I knew him, but I didn’t tell her anything“ (AT1).

The engagement itself was marked by extensive negotiations between the two families. This event not only conferred formal approval but also granted the couple a social ‘licence’ to appear together and cultivate their relationship more freely.

“That was good, the conversation lasted a whole day ... My father said, ‘It’s also okay for us if you wait two years, no pressure about school or anything.’ But then my fiancé said, ‘No, it’s better for us to be engaged now, so we can meet and get to know each other in peace before we get married in two years.’” (AT1)

For many young Afghans in Austria, the engagement period is a gateway to a more independent style of relationship-building. Once engaged, social controls relax and couples are permitted — and even expected — to spend time together, develop emotional intimacy, and sometimes postpone marriage for practical reasons, such as education or employment. This fosters a gradual transition towards greater personal autonomy, even though it remains embedded within collective expectations.

Another respondent, AT4, encapsulates this dynamic in a brief statement: “Engagement offers certain freedoms: getting to know the other person, having romantic dates – and without supervision (...) With engagement, the younger generation is granted more freedom (...), because it practically represents the beginning – the permission – for the dating phase” (AT4).

Thus, in the Austrian context, engagement can be seen as a valuable framework through which young Afghans can balance personal autonomy with collective expectations. Although migration introduces alternative ways of intimacy and relationship models, traditional cultural norms still influence perceptions of honour

and community belonging. Operating within this tension, young people often exercise subtle agency by working within established cultural practices, such as formal engagement, to create socially acceptable opportunities for intimacy and self-determination. This strategic negotiation enables them to delay marriage, pursue education and develop relationships without directly challenging family or community norms. Thus, agency emerges not from outright rebellion, but from the subtle reshaping of tradition, blending individual desires with the demands of social legitimacy in a diaspora setting.

5.3.3 “He can kill himself, but not my life” – Overt Agency and Resistance in Partner Choice

Interviews and informal conversations reveal that young Afghan migrants are increasingly challenging traditional expectations around marriage, both in terms of who to marry and when, as part of a broader renegotiation of intergenerational power dynamics. While these acts of defiance may seem personal, they are deeply rooted in social contexts and frequently entail risks such as family conflict, shame, or social exclusion. However, many are supported by peers, siblings or progressive family members whose emotional and practical backing enables this resistance.

This chapter emphasises that agency is not exercised in isolation, but rather as a relational process shaped by, and negotiated within, the structures of family and community. These acts not only redefine personal life paths but also contribute to the gradual transformation of family norms and social expectations within Afghan diaspora contexts.

“The engagement takes place so that the woman doesn’t run away, so you’re reserved and it’s also, nowadays it’s like that, so in the past it was strictly forbidden to break off an engagement, like I broke off my engagement, I was the worst girl ever, a total slut and really bad, really bad, so I was the top topic (in the community) (laughs)” (AT4).

AT4’s story shows how personal choices can challenge and change the rules about family, community and gender that apply in arranged marriages. Despite the risk of serious family and social repercussions, she openly rejects a future defined by traditional expectations and chooses to pursue her own aspirations instead: studying medicine in Austria and living independently. Her fiancé’s expectations that she adopts a life of domesticity (‘You don’t need to learn German; just have two or three

wonderful children and stay at home') only strengthens her resolve. She continues to socialise with friends in public and assert her autonomy, even in the face of physical violence from her fiancé and father.

Importantly, AT4's resistance is not enacted entirely alone. Her ability to defy the arranged marriage is supported by key social ties, particularly her aunt in the United States, whom she describes as 'open-minded'. During a family holiday, she confided in her aunt: "I told her, 'Yes, I'm deeply unhappy.' We were on vacation—I'd always go on holidays with my family—and I finally found the courage to talk to her. I said, 'I'm going to marry this man, but I actually hate him. I hate even the space he's in. I can't feel any love for him.' Then she said, 'You don't have to. You don't have to marry him.' I replied, 'But I can't do that to Dad—he'd look so bad.' And she said, 'I'll take care of it.'"

Following her niece's revelation and desires, this aunt offers vital emotional support and assumes a key mediating role within the family, directly confronting both the father and fiancé during a visit to Vienna.

"(...) my aunt called him (the fiancé) and said 'you, come tonight' and he came to us and my aunt said to him 'you think you're a man, you're not a man at all, you're beating my child, you should be happy that you're still keeping your head (...) that's why she won't marry you, because a man doesn't beat a woman, fuck off' (laughs) and I was like 'wow, was that just a dream' (laughs)" (AT4).

The social position of her aunt – living abroad and being the elder sister of AT4's father – grant her a unique authority within the family, enabling her to intervene in ways other family members cannot.

"(...) Nobody dared to say anything, not even my father, that's the older aunt, my father just sat there and looked down and the fiancé asked, 'what happens now' and my aunt said, 'as I tell you, take the fucking ring and go' and then he left" (AT4).

This act of resistance, however, came at a significant cost. After calling of the engagement, AT4 was subjected to ongoing surveillance, intimidation and threats of violence from her former fiancé – sanctions aimed at reasserting control and enforcing traditional gender norms. These threats even occurred in public spaces and illustrate how everyday mobility, such as attending school, can become fraught with danger for young Afghan migrant women when they defy normative expectations. As AT4 recounts: "I was always so panicked that he would stab me from behind. I deliberately started

going to school with friends. At the time, I had a very close friend from Serbia – she was tall and strong – and she would say, ‘Come on, I’ll handle it if he shows up.’”

Similarly, for ATX⁵⁷’s story highlights the important role that supportive social networks play in empowering individuals to challenge cultural expectations and assert their personal agency. After migrating to Austria with her fiancé’s family, N. ended the engagement, explaining that she viewed him more as a brother. The resulting backlash was considerable: her parents severed all ties, she was compelled to depart from her fiancé’s family residence and seek refuge in a shelter, and she confronted stigma and judgement from the Afghan community in Austria.

However, it was the support of AT1’s mother, a mid-40-year-old woman from Afghanistan, that proved transformative. By welcoming N. into her home, offering emotional and practical support, and encouraging her to rebuild ties with her parents, AT1’s mother became a crucial ally. Over time, ATX regained contact with her family, became financially independent through work, and gradually reclaimed her place within her family and wider community.

The cases of ATX and AT4 illustrate how overt acts of agency, particularly in relation to rejecting arranged marriages, are often deeply relational and rely on supportive social networks to be both possible and sustainable. Their experiences demonstrate that resistance to traditional gender roles and family expectations does not occur in isolation, but rather is facilitated by connections based on trust, such as with open-minded relatives or empathetic figures within the diaspora.

In both cases, rejecting an engagement led to significant personal and social consequences, including isolation, surveillance and being judged by the community. However, these challenges were mitigated by the emotional and practical support of others: AT4 received support from her influential aunt, while N. received support from AT1’s mother. These allies provided shelter and advice and helped the young women to reclaim control over their lives. Over time, they were able to reintegrate into family and community life on their own terms. As AT4 reflects: ““During the engagement, I felt terrible. I never gained weight — I was 50 kilos at 173 cm. I was in bad shape. After a year, people finally noticed I was gaining weight again. I thought I’d never recover — I wasn’t really living.”

As described by many respondents, the explicit rejection of normative expectations around marriage and partner choice often leads to serious social repercussions,

⁵⁷ Note: In the text, interviewees from the second interview phase are usually referred to as AT1, AT2 etc. The designation ATX is used to refer to a young woman I met during my fieldwork that time of interviews. No formal recorded interview was conducted with her; the account is based on an informal conversation.

as seen in the above cases. These range from loss of status within the community – often affecting the reputation of the entire family both locally and transnationally – to more direct consequences such as being cut off from contact, as in ATX’s case, and experiencing physical violence, as AT4 did.

Beyond these overt forms of sanctions, many young migrants (here: women) also face more ‘subtle’ social strategies employed by parents under pressure to preserve family honour and avoid reputational damage. As illustrated by AT3, an older sister of three siblings, these tactics often take the form of guilt-tripping, emotional blackmail or suggesting that younger siblings’ futures are ‘at risk’ due to the daughter’s refusal to comply. Parents frame their disappointment as personal suffering, claiming illness, sleeplessness or even suicidal thoughts as a way to compel obedience without resorting to direct coercion.

“(…) That’s when they tried the emotional route: what did they do wrong? Was it their fault that they let me go to school? Was it their fault that they gave me a good life? (...) When I say ‘no’, they start the emotional blackmail — they try a different approach. My mother then says, ‘I’m getting sick because of you, I can’t sleep, it’s a burden that you don’t want to get married. What will people say? What will others think?’ (...) Then my father tried the same thing through my mother. He said, ‘Your mother is sick and unwell because of you.’ And on his side, he said that he would kill himself because I had brought so much shame to the family. And I answered, ‘Well then, go ahead and kill yourself — you can’t kill me’” (AT3).

“No threat worked on me, and before it was ‘too late’ — meaning so that my two younger sisters wouldn’t turn out like me — that’s why I was allowed to leave, to go out and work. I was the only woman in the whole extended family who was allowed to leave the house and work at a bank. And because I kept insisting on following my own path, they ended up sending me away. It became impossible for me to stay in Pakistan, and so I was allowed to come to Europe — to Austria” (AT3).

Despite their emotional intensity, such strategies do not always succeed. For some, like AT3, defiance becomes a turning point toward greater agency/autonomy, especially when met with greater opportunities in the transnational context. Since arriving in Austria, she has continued her education, built a career as a businesswoman and now lives independently. She is unmarried and actively pursues her own life goals, while her Afghan family remains in Pakistan. She states that her parents have seemingly reached a state of acceptance with her decision, although her mother con-

tinues to nurture the hope that she might eventually enter into matrimony – perhaps this time with a man of her daughter’s own choosing, ideally of Afghan origin (see Chapter 5.1.2).

6. Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this thesis, Sohel's observation— "*They don't understand that we don't live in traditional Afghanistan anymore; things have changed here, we have changed*"— encapsulates the central tension explored throughout this research: the profound transformations within intergenerational dynamics caused by migration. Directed at his parents' generation, this statement highlights the ongoing negotiation between tradition and adaptation that defines the lived experiences of Afghan youth in the diaspora.

As this thesis sets out to understand how migration drives such processes of social change within Afghan migrant communities, it takes marriage practices and partner selection as analytical entry points. In doing so, it recognises the (extended/transnational) family as the central social, cultural, and economic unit of Afghan society (see Chapter 3.1) and thus as a decisive factor in these processes. Through ethnographic engagement, including semi-structured interviews and year-long fieldwork in the Afghan diaspora in Vienna, this work has traced how Afghan first-generation migrants navigate the interplay of tradition, adaptation, and negotiation in the important life phase of finding and choosing a suitable (marriage) partner while also responding to the structural and normative pressures of a new sociocultural environment. Exposure to new legal frameworks, integration into educational and employment settings, rapid acquisition of the German language, and encounters with different gender norms all contribute to greater adaptation among Afghan youth. At the same time, kinship networks, transnational ties and established collective norms continue to shape their daily lives.

In navigating these tensions, young Afghan migrants exercise a flexible and multifaceted agency that manifests along a continuum ranging from constrained compliance and discreet tactics to acts of open resistance. This is evident, for example, in their experiences of early arranged or forced marriages, which particularly affect young Afghan women. These marriages are often justified by parents as a way of safeguarding cultural tradition, family honour, and protecting their daughters from perceived risks in Western contexts. According to respondents, this practice was most prevalent in the period immediately following their arrival in Austria.

Some young migrants employ nuanced strategies to assert greater autonomy in partner choice, such as establishing and maintaining private or secret relationships through social media, independent living arrangements, or by leveraging their educational and professional pursuits to create personal space. These practices often function as a form of negotiation with family expectations and broader social norms,

allowing youth to exercise agency while minimising direct conflict with parents or community standards.

Others engage in more explicit forms of resistance. These include openly rejecting marriage arrangements or dissolving engagements, often with the support of familial and peer networks to withstand anticipated social sanctions from families or (transnational) communities.

While these practices are gradually adapting to the migration experience of individual migrants, the meaning and function of marriage itself also signals generational shifts. Extended engagement periods, for example, serve as culturally sanctioned transitional spaces in which young people can cultivate relationships and pursue personal goals while maintaining legitimacy within the family and community.

When seeking a suitable partner, digital platforms provide discreet alternatives to parental-led arrangements, while weddings and community gatherings in Austria and Europe continue to serve as key venues for matchmaking, enabling both young people and their families to evaluate potential partners. Local and transnational family networks remain particularly influential when young migrants encounter difficulties finding partners independently or when shared cultural and religious backgrounds are considered essential. Nonetheless, the younger generation increasingly prioritizes shared lifestyles over traditional markers such as family background, religion, or ethnicity. Emotional compatibility, mutual respect, gender equality, and shared decision-making have become central values guiding contemporary marital choices and partner preferences. Young migrants' social status is increasingly defined through educational attainment and financial independence, contributing to the postponement of marriage for both young men and women. Within these shifting landscapes, gender emerges as a particularly salient axis of both continuity and change, as young Afghan women navigate profound transformations in their forms of agency while simultaneously remaining constrained by enduring community, cultural, and social norms.

These changes influence intergenerational dynamics in both local and transnational contexts. As children increasingly exercise greater agency in the migration context—pursuing higher education, financial independence, entrepreneurship, or intimate relationships on their own terms—they challenge established parental expectations and traditional authority structures. Although these shifts often generate initial tension and social repercussions, ethnographic findings suggest that parental acceptance tends to grow over time, reflecting a negotiated recalibration of familial norms. This process is especially pronounced among parents residing in Austria or elsewhere in Europe and those with social networks that include fami-

lies undergoing similar transitions, as these contexts collectively seem to reduce community-based scrutiny.

To conclude, this research has broad implications for anthropology and policy by challenging reductive assumptions of assimilation, cultural loss, and simplistic before-and-after narratives. It shows that social change in migrant communities arises through situated, 'in-between' practices that creatively reshape family dynamics and communal expectations. Migration is thus a dynamic space of possibility, where incremental shifts transform family structures from within. Future research should take a comparative and longitudinal approach to trace how such processes unfold across multiple generations and in different contexts. This will shed light on the changing patterns of marriage, family and social norms in an increasingly interconnected world that is shaped by migration.

7. References

- Abbasi, K. (2015) 'Young Afghanistani refugees in Iran: Professional training, work and perspectives'. In Centlivres-Demont, M. (ed.) *Afghanistan: Identity, society and politics since 1980*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., pp. 275–278.
- Abbasi-Shavazi, M.J., Glazebrook, D., Jamshidiha, G., Mahmoudian, H. and Sadeghi, R. (2005) *Return to Afghanistan? A Study of Afghans Living in Tehran*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU). Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/areu/2005/en/27823> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- Abbasi-Shavazi, M.J., Sadeghi, R., Mahmoudian, H. and Jamshidiha, G. (2012) 'Marriage and family formation of the second-generation Afghans in Iran: Insights from a qualitative study'. *International Migration Review*, 46(4), pp.
- Abirafeh, L. (2009) *Gender and international aid in Afghanistan: The politics and effects of intervention*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (1990) 'The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women'. *American Ethnologist*, 17(1), pp. 41–55.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2002) 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others'. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), pp. 783–790.
- ALEP – Afghanistan Legal Education Project (1977, transl. 2014) *Civil Code of the Republic of Afghanistan*. Translation produced by Afghanistan Legal Education Project, Stanford Law School. Available at: <https://law.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Civil-Code-of-Afghanistan-ALEP-Translation.pdf> (Accessed: 6 September 2025).
- Ahadi, A. (2017) 'The impact of media on society in post 9/11 Afghanistan'. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 5(1), pp. 397–402.
- Ahearn, L. (2001) 'Language and agency'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, pp. 109–137. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.30.1.109>
- Ahmad, A. (2023) 'Burdensome dowries in Nuristan prompt calls for change and price caps'. *Rukhshana Media*, 21 December. Available at: <https://rukhshana.com/en/burdensome-dowries-in-nuristan-prompt-calls-for-change-and-price-caps/> (Accessed: 1 September 2025).
- Ahsan, S. (2018) 'Engendering the Taliban'. In Shahrani, N. (ed.) *Modern Afghanistan: The impact of 40 years of war*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 201–212.
- Ahsan, S. (2021) *Pious peripheries: Runaway women in post-Taliban Afghanistan*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Akbar, S. (2017) 'How millions of Afghan women are fighting to transform their lives'. *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*, World Economic Forum, 16 May. Available at: <https://www.equitydiversityinclusion.com> (Accessed: 30 August 2025).
- Anderson, J.W. (1982) 'Cousin marriage in context: Constructing social relations in Afghanistan', *Folk*, 24, pp. 7–28.

- AREU – Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (2006a) *Afghans in Peshawar: Migration, Settlements and Social Networks*. Case Study Series. Kabul: AREU
- AREU – Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (2006b) *Afghan transnational networks: Looking beyond repatriation*. Synthesis Paper Series. Kabul: AREU.
- Bachan, A. (2018) 'An exploration of the gender-migration-development nexus: The impact of labor migration on women's empowerment'. *Consilience: The Journal of Sustainable Development*, 20(1), pp. 1–22.
- Bakewell, O. (2010) 'Some reflections on structure and agency in migration theory'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(10), pp. 1689–1708. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2010.489382.
- Bakewell, O. (2011) 'Conceptualising displacement and migration: Processes, conditions, and categories'. In Koser, K. and Martin, S. (eds.) *The migration-displacement nexus: Patterns, processes, and policies*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 14–29.
- Balzani, M. (2006) 'Transnational marriage among Ahmadi Muslims in the UK'. *Global Networks*, 6, pp. 345–355.
- Banerjee, N. (2016) 'Women's development in Afghanistan: Ensuring sustainable gains'. Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) Analysis, 29 February. Available at: <https://www.cips.uottawa.ca> (Accessed: 30 August 2025).
- Barfield, T.J. (1981) *The Central Asian Arabs of Afghanistan: pastoral nomadism in transition*. University of Texas Press.
- Barfield, T.J. (1984) 'Weak links on a rusty chain: Structural weaknesses in Afghanistan's provincial government'. In Shahrani, N.M. & Canfield, R.L. (eds.) *Revolutions and rebellions in Afghanistan*. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, Research Series No. 57, pp. 170–183.
- Barfield, T.J. (2010) *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton University Press.
- Barnard, A. and Spencer, J. (2002) 'Culture'. In Barnard, A. and Spencer J. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 136–142.
- Barth, F. (1967) 'On the study of social change'. *American Anthropologist*, 89(6), pp. 661–669.
- Barth, F. (1998) *Ethnic groups and boundaries: the social organization of cultural difference* (Reissued). Waveland Press.
- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2006a) 'Transnationale Heiratsmuster und transnationale Heiratsstrategien: Ein Erklärungsansatz zur Partnerwahl von Migranten'. *Soziale Welt*, 57, pp. 111–129.
- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2006b) 'Turkish brides: a look at the immigration debate in Germany'. In Bodemann, Y.M. and Yurdakul, G. (eds.) *Migration, Citizenship, Ethnos*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 185–194.
- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2007) *Wir und die Anderen: Kopftuch, Zwangsheirat und andere Missverständnisse*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

- Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2011) 'The marriage route to migration: Of border artistes, transnational matchmaking and imported spouses'. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 1(2), pp. 60–68.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) *The normal chaos of love*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage Publications.
- Berg Harpviken, C. (2009) *Social networks and migration in wartime Afghanistan*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berrenberg, J. (2002) *Eine Sache der Ehre: Über die Grundlagen sozialer Prozesse bei den Pashtunen Pakistans und Afghanistans anhand ihrer Heiratsformen*. Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag.
- BFA – Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl (2017) *Infografik Asylverfahren in Österreich – Deutsch (V20170206web)*. Vienna: Bundesamt für Fremdenwesen und Asyl. Available at: https://www.bfa.gv.at/403/files/Infografiken/Infografik_Asylverfahren_in_Oesterreich-Deutsch_V20170206web.pdf (Accessed: 11 August 2025).
- Bizhan, N. (2016) 'The effects of Afghanistan's political evolution on migration and displacement', *Migration Policy Practice*, 6(3), pp. 4–9.
- Bjelica, J. (2016a) 'Over half a million Afghans flee conflict in 2016: A look at the IDP statistics, Afghanistan Analysts Network. Available at: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-admin/post.php> (Accessed: 27 December 2016).
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2015) *Asylstatistik 2015*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2016) *Asylstatistik 2016*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2017) *Asylstatistik 2017*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2018) *Asylstatistik 2018*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2019) *Asylstatistik 2019*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2020) *Asylstatistik 2020*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- BM.I – Bundesministerium für Inneres (2021) *Vorläufige Asylstatistik 2021 – Dezember 2021*. Vienna: Bundesministerium für Inneres.
- Boesen, I. (1983) 'Conflicts of solidarity in Pashtun women's lives'. In Utas, B. (ed.) *Women in Islamic Societies: Social Attitudes and Historical Perspectives*. Curzon Press, Humanities Press, pp. 104–127.

- Boesen, I. (1990) 'Honour in exile: continuity and change among Afghan refugees'. In Anderson, E. and Hatch Dupree, N. (eds.) *The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism*. London: Pinter Publishers, pp. 160–176.
- Bohn, L. (2018) "'We're all handcuffed in this country.' Why Afghanistan is still the worst place in the world to be a woman'. *Time*, 8 December. Available at: <https://time.com/5472411/afghanistan-women-justice-war/> (Accessed: 6 September 2025).
- Bonjour, S. and de Hart, B. (2013) 'A proper wife, a proper marriage: Constructions of "us" and "them" in Dutch family migration policy'. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(1), pp. 61–76.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital'. In J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood, pp. 241–258.
- Bourdieu, P. (2012) 'Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital'. In Bauer, U., Bittlingmayer, U.H. and Scherr, A. (eds.) *Handbuch Bildungs- und Erziehungssoziologie*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, pp. 229–242.
- Brettell, C.B. (2002) 'The individual/agent and culture/structure in the history of the social sciences'. *Social Science History*, 26(3), pp. 429–445.
- Brettell, C.B. (2023) 'Theorizing migration in anthropology: The cultural, social, phenomenological, and embodied dimensions of human mobility'. In Brettell, C.B. and Hollifield, J.F. (eds.) *Migration theory: Talking across disciplines*. New York: Routledge, pp. 194–231.
- CLRN – California Learning Resource Network (2024) 'What is agency in anthropology?'. California Learning Resource Network. Available at: <https://www.clrn.org/what-is-agency-in-anthropology/> (Accessed: 6 September 2025).
- Castles, S. (2010) 'Understanding global migration: A social transformation perspective'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26(10), pp. 1565–1589.
- Centlivres-Demont, M. (1994) 'Afghan women in peace, war, and exile'. In Weiner, M. and Banuazizi, A. (eds.) *The politics of social transformation in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan*. New York: Syracuse University Press, pp. 333–365.
- Centlivres, P. (1975) 'Les Uzbeks du Qattaghan'. *Afghanistan Journal*, 2(1), pp. 28–37.
- Chiovenda, A. (2018) "'The war destroyed our society": Masculinity, violence, and shifting cultural idioms among Afghan Pashtuns'. In N. M. Shahrani (ed.) *Modern Afghanistan: The impact of 40 years of war*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, pp. 179–199.
- Chiovenda, A. (2020) *Crafting masculine selves: Culture, war, and psychodynamics in Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- City of Vienna (n.d.a) *Services for refugees and displaced persons*. Vienna: Municipal Department 17. Available at: <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/social/integration/arriving/refugees.html> (Accessed: 10 August 2025).

- City of Vienna (n.d.b) Nostrification of foreign university degrees. Available at: <https://www.wien.gv.at/english/living-working/nostrification.html> (Accessed: 10 August 2025).
- Cohen, J.H. (2011) 'Migration, remittances, and household strategies'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40(1), pp. 103–114.
- Cohen, R. and Deng, F.M. (1998) *Masses in flight: The global crisis of international displacement*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Colville, R. (1998) 'Afghan refugees: Is international support draining away after two decades in exile?'. *Refuge*, 17(4), pp. 18–20.
- Coulson, N.J. and Shamsy, A.E. (n.d.) 'Shari'ah'. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shariah> (Accessed: 25 May 2022).
- de Haas, H. and Fransen, S. (2018) 'Social transformation and migration: An empirical inquiry'. IMIn Working Paper Series, Paper 141, January. University of Amsterdam.
- De Weijer, F. (2007) 'Afghanistan's "Kuchi" pastoralists: Change and adaptation'. *Nomadic Peoples*, 11(1), pp. 9–37.
- Dinneen, B.M. (2010) 'Migration and globalization'. In Birx, H.J. (ed.) *21st century anthropology: A reference handbook*, Volume 1. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, pp. 856–864.
- Donini, A., Monsutti, A. & Scalettari, G. (2016) *Afghans on the move: Seeking protection and refuge in Europe*. "In this journey I died several times; in Afghanistan you only die once". Global Migration Research Paper, No. 17/2016.
- Dowling, M. (2008) 'ATLAS.TI (software)'. In Given, L.M. (ed.) *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.
- Dupree, L. (1973) *Afghanistan*. Princeton, New Jersey, University Press.
- Dwyer, P.D. and Minnegal, M. (2010) 'Theorizing social change'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16(3), pp. 629–645.
- EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2017a) 'Afghanistan: Individuals targeted under societal and legal norms'. *Country of Origin Information Report*, December 2017.
- EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2017b) 'Afghanistan: Key socio-economic indicators, state protection, and mobility in Kabul City, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Herat City'. *Country of Origin Information Report*, August 2017.
- EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2020) 'Pakistan: Situation of Afghan refugees'. *Country of Origin Information Report*, May 2020.
- Echavez, C. (2012) *Gender and economic choice: What's old and what's new for women in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Echavez, C.R., Mosawi, S.M. and Pilongo, L.W.R.E. (2016) *The other side of gender inequality: Men and masculinities*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
- Edwards, D.B. (2017) *Caravans of Martyrs: Sacrifice and Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

- Eggebo, H. (2010) 'The problem of dependency: Immigration, gender, and the welfare state'. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 17(3), pp. 295–322.
- Eggenhofer-Rehart, P., Leitner, S. and Reiter, F. (2018) 'Refugees' career capital welcome? Afghan and Syrian refugee job seekers in Austria'. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 105, pp. 31–45.
- Emadi, H. (2005) *Culture and customs of Afghanistan*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.) 'Hanafi school'. Encyclopaedia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hanafiyah> (Accessed: 24 May 2022).
- Encyclopedia Editorial Office (2024) ,Agency (Sociology)'. Encyclopedia. Available at: <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/53651> (Accessed: 6 September 2025).
- Ervin, A.M. (2017) *Cultural Transformations and Globalization: Theory, Development, and Social Change*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Esser, D. (2013) 'The political economy of post-invasion Kabul, Afghanistan: Urban restructuring beyond the North–South divide'. *Urban Studies*, 50(15), pp. 3084–3098.
- Farid, N. and de Silva de Alwis, R. (2023) *Afghanistan under the Taliban: A state of "gender apartheid"? Policy Brief*. Princeton: Afghanistan Policy Lab, Princeton University School of Public and International Affairs. Available at: https://spia.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2023-02/SPIA_NaheedRangita_PolicyBrief_07.pdf (Accessed: 21 July 2025).
- Fauser, M. and Anghel, R.G. (2019) 'Introduction: A meso-level approach to linking transnational return and social change'. In Anghel, R.G., Fauser, M. and Boccagni, P. (eds.) *Transnational return and social change: Hierarchies, identities and ideas*. London and New York: Anthem Press, pp. 1–21.
- Fischer, C. (2013) *The (changing) role of family among Afghan communities in Britain and Germany*. Draft paper, THEMIS International Migration Conference: Examining Migration Dynamics – Networks and Beyond.
- FitzGerald, D.S. and Arar, R. (2018) 'The sociology of refugee migration'. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 44, pp. 387–406.
- Flick, U. (2014) *An introduction to qualitative research*. 5th edn. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington, DC: SAGE Publications.
- Frank, A.G. (1967) *Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America: historical studies of Chile and Brazil*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gerlich, J. (2014) *Die Liebe kommt: Heirat, Ehe und romantische Liebe in der afghanischen Diaspora in Wien und Graz*. Master's thesis. Universität Wien.
- Geserick, C., Buchebner-Ferstl, S., Dörfler, S. and Kapella, O. (2019) *Integrationsfaktor Familie: Das Familienleben von Flüchtlingen aus Syrien und Afghanistan*. Vienna: Österreichischer Integrationsfonds (ÖIF).
- Giddens, A. (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Giddens, A. (1992) *The transformation of intimacy: Sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Girtler, R. (2001) *Methoden der Feldforschung*. 4th edn. Wien, Köln and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag (UTB für Wissenschaft Soziologie).
- Giustozzi, A. (2007) *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst Publishers Ltd.
- Glatzer, B. (1977) *Nomaden von Gharjistan: Aspekte der wirtschaftlichen, sozialen und politischen Organisation nomadischer Durrani-Paschtunen in Nordwestafghanistan*. (=Beiträge zur Südasien-Forschung. Südasien-Institut Universität Heidelberg. Band 22). Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Glatzer, B. (1998) 'Being Pashtun – being Muslim: Concepts of person and war in Afghanistan'. In *Essays on South Asian society: Culture and politics II*. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Arbeitshefte 9), pp. 83–94.
- Glatzer, B. (2000) 'Zum Pashtunwali als ethnischem Selbstportrait'. In Best, G. and Kößler, R. (eds.) *Subjekte und Systeme: Soziologische und anthropologische Annäherungen*. Festschrift für Christian Sigrist zum 65. Geburtstag. Frankfurt: IKO Verlag, pp. 93–102.
- Glatzer, B. (2002) 'The Pashtun tribal system'. In Pfeffer, G. and Behra, D.G. (eds.) *Concept of tribal society*. New Delhi: Concept Publishers (Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies, Vol. 5), pp. 265–282.
- Glick Schiller, N., Basch, L. and Blanc-Szanton, C. (1992) 'Transnationalism: A new analytic framework for understanding migration'. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 645(1), pp. 1–24. doi:10.1111/j.1749-6632.1992.tb33484.x.
- Glick Schiller, N., Basch, L. and Blanc-Szanton, C. (1995) 'From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration'. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68(1), pp. 48–63.
- Goodson, L.P. (2001) *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
- Goodson, L.P. (2010) 'Perverting Islam: Taliban social policy toward women'. *Central Asian Survey*, 20(4), pp. 415–426.
- Goritschnig, S. (2021) *Auf dem Weg der Selbstbestimmung: Zur Integration junger afghanischer Frauen in Österreich*. Master's thesis. Universität Klagenfurt.
- Göçek, F. M. (2001) 'Islam and Gender'. In Smelser, N.J. and Baltes, P.B. (eds.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*. Pergamon, pp. 7913–7916. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-043076-7/03967-X>
- Grevemeyer, J.-H. (1987) *Afghanistan – sozialer Wandel und Staat im 20. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: Express Edition GmbH.
- Grevemeyer, J.-H. (1988) 'Modernisation from below: The Afghan resistance movement between the fight for liberation and social emancipation'. In Huldtt, B. and Jansson, E. (eds.) *The tragedy of Afghanistan*. Stockholm, pp. 121–147.

- Grevenmeyer, J.-H. (1989) *Afghanistan nach über zehn Jahren Krieg: Perspektiven gesellschaftlichen Wandels*. Berlin: Express Edition.
- Grillo, R. (2008) 'The family in dispute: Insiders and outsiders'. In Grillo, R. (ed.) *The family in question: Immigrant and ethnic minorities in multicultural Europe*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 15–36.
- Groenewold, G. (2006) *Millennium development indicators of education, employment and gender equality of Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Country report*. The Hague: Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute.
- Hahn, H. (1972) 'Die traditionellen Lebensformen'. In Kraus, W. (Hg.) *Afghanistan: Natur, Geschichte und Kultur, Staat, Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft*. Tübingen and Basel: Horst Erdmann Verlag, pp. 195–256.
- Hakimi, H. (2016) *Understanding the Drivers of Migration to Europe: Lessons from Afghanistan for the Current Refugee Crisis*. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs.
- Hamidi, K. (2020) 'The media revolution in Afghanistan'. *European Journalism Observatory (EJO)*. Available at: <https://en.ejo.ch/specialist-journalism/the-media-revolution-in-afghanistan-part-1> (Accessed: 30 August 2025).
- Hanifi, J.M. (1978) 'The Family in Afghanistan'. In Bardis, P.D. & Das, M.S. (eds.) *The Family in Asia*. New Delhi: Vikas Publications, pp. 47–69.
- Harpviken, K.B. (1997) 'Transcending traditionalism: The emergence of non-state military formations in Afghanistan'. *Journal of Peace Research*, 34(3), pp. 271–287.
- Harpviken, K.B. (2009) *Social Networks and Migration in War Time Afghanistan*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave and Macmillan.
- Hatch Dupree, N. (1990) 'A socio-cultural dimension: Afghan women refugees in Pakistan'. In Anderson, E. and Dupree, N.H. (eds.) *The cultural basis of Afghan nationalism*. London and New York: Pinter Publishers, pp. 121–133.
- Hatch Dupree, N. (2001a) 'The family during crisis in Afghanistan'. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 35(2), pp. 311–331.
- Hatch Dupree, N. (2001b) 'Afghan women under the Taliban'. In Maley, W. (ed.) *Fundamentalism reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*. London: Hurst and Company, pp. 145–166.
- Hatch Dupree, N. (2002) 'Cultural heritage and national identity in Afghanistan'. *Third World Quarterly*, 23(5), Taylor and Francis Ltd., pp. 977–989.
- Hatch Dupree, N. (2004) 'The family during crisis in Afghanistan'. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 35(2), pp. 311–331.
- Helfferrich, C. (2019) 'Leitfaden- und Experteninterviews'. In Baur, N. and Blasius, J. (eds.) *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, pp. 669–686. doi:10.1007/978-3-658-21308-4_44.
- Hernes, G. (2001) 'Social change: Models'. In Smelser, N.J. and Bates, P.B. (eds.) *The international encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*. Oxford: Pergamon, pp. 14229–14233.

- Hobsbawm, E. (2012) 'Introduction: Inventing traditions'. In Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Canto Classics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–14.
- Hoodfar, H. (2004) 'Families on the move: The changing role of Afghan refugee women in Iran'. *HAWWA: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, 2(2), pp. 141–171.
- Horton, P.B. and Hunt, C.L. (2004) *Sociology*. 6th edn. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hossaini, S.A. (2018) 'How social media is changing Afghan society'. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. Available at: <https://www.boell.de/en/2018/02/07/you-are-what-you-share-how-social-media-changing-afghan-society> (Accessed: 30 August 2025).
- Höller, C. (2018) 'Arbeitsmarkt: Afghanen finden leichter einen Job', *Die Presse*, 21 August. Available at: <https://www.diepresse.com/5483700/arbeitsmarkt-afghanen-find-en-leichter-einen-job> (Accessed: 13 July 2021).
- HRW – Human Rights Watch (2022) *World Report 2022 – Afghanistan: Events of 2021*. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/afghanistan> (Accessed: 1 March 2022).
- ICG – International Crisis Group (2003) *Afghanistan: The problem of Pashtun alienation*. ICG Asia Report No. 62. Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.
- ICMPD – International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2020) *Prozesse der Arbeitsmarktintegration von Geflüchteten in Österreich*. Vienna: ICMPD. Available at: <https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/58194/file/FIMAS%252BINTEGRATION2%2520-%2520Forschungsbericht%2520Welle%25203.pdf> (Accessed: 2 September 2025).
- ICMPD – International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2021) *Arbeitsmarktintegration junger Geflüchteter in Österreich: Ergebnisse des Forschungsprojekts FIMAS+YOUTH*. Vienna: ICMPD. Available at: file:///C:/Users/Queen%20M/Downloads/fimas_youth_forschungsbericht_jugend.pdf (Accessed: 2 September 2025).
- ICMPD – International Centre for Migration Policy Development (2022) *Arbeitsmarktintegration von geflüchteten Frauen in Österreich, Deutschland und Norwegen – auch Erfahrungen afghanischer Frauen*. Vienna: ICMPD. Available at: https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/57782/file/FARIM_Report%25202022.pdf (Accessed: 2 September 2025).
- IDMC – Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2021) *Afghanistan*. Available at: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/afghanistan> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- Kabeer, N. and Khan, A. (2014) 'Cultural values or universal rights? Women's narratives of compliance and contestation in urban Afghanistan'. *Feminist Economics*, 10(3), pp. 1–24. doi:10.1080/13545701.2014.926558.
- Kakar, P.L. (2004) *Tribal law of Pashtunwali and women's legislative authority*. Available at: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Tribal-Law-of-Pashtunwali-and-Women%E2%80%99s-Legislative-Kakar/e6dd9e8624fa9311fe3569dc069ffe77bdb-43c4a?sort=is-influential> (Accessed: 25 May 2022).

- Kamran, N. (2008) *Die afghanischen Hochzeitsriten in der Diaspora am Beispiel tadschikischer Migranten in Österreich und Deutschland*. Master's thesis. Universität Wien.
- Kanal, M. and Rottmann, S.B. (2021) 'Everyday agency: Rethinking refugee women's agency in specific cultural contexts'. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.726729.
- Kaura, V. (2019) 'Implications of Afghan–Pakistani clashes along the Durand Line'. BESA Center Perspectives Paper, 1355, 26 November. Available at: <https://besacenter.org/afghanistan-pakistan-clashes/> (Accessed: 19 July 2025).
- Kearney, M. (1986) 'From the invisible hand to visible feet: Anthropological studies of migration and development'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 15, pp. 331–361.
- Kearney, M. (1995) 'The local and the global: The anthropology of globalization and transnationalism'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, pp. 547–565.
- Ker, M. and Locke, J. (2010) 'Singing in the wilderness: Kuchi nomads in modern Afghanistan'. *Cornell International Affairs Review*, 3(2). Available at: <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1260/singing-in-the-wilderness-kuchi-nomads-in-modern-afghanistan> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- King, R. and Skeldon, R. (2010) "Mind the Gap!" Integrating approaches to internal and international migration'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(10), pp. 1619–1646.
- Knabe-Wohlfahrt, E. (1972) 'Gegenwärtige Tendenzen sozialen Wandels'. In Kraus, W. (ed.) *Afghanistan: Natur, Geschichte und Kultur, Staat, Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft*. Tübingen: Erdmann, pp. 257–266.
- Knabe, E. (1977) *Frauenemanzipation in Afghanistan*. Meisenheim am Glan: Hain.
- Knoblauch, H. and Vollmer, T. (2019) 'Ethnographie'. In Baur, N. and Blasius, J. (eds.) *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, pp. 599–617.
- Kofman, E. (1999) 'Female "birds of passage" a decade later: Gender and immigration in the European Union'. *International Migration Review*, 33(2), pp. 269–299.
- Kofman, E. (2014) 'Reviewing theories of gender and migration: Perspectives from Europe and North America'. In Battistella, G. (ed.) *Global and Asian Perspectives on International Migration*. Global Migration Issues, vol. 4. Cham: Springer, pp. 119–137.
- Kofman, E., Saharso, S. and Vacchelli, E. (2015) 'Gendered perspectives on integration discourses and measures'. *International Migration*, 53(4), 77–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12102>
- Kohlbacher, J. (2020) 'Frustrating beginnings: How social ties compensate housing integration barriers for Afghan refugees in Vienna'. *Urban Planning*, 5(3), pp. 127–137.
- Kohlbacher, J. and Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (2023) 'Kritische Analyse der sozialen Integration einer sogenannten „Problemgruppe“ im Wiener Stadtraum: Die Community aus Afghanistan'. *ISR-Forschungsberichte*, 58. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

- Kohlbacher, J. and Schiocchet, L. (eds.) (2017) 'From Destination to Integration – Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi Refugees in Vienna'. *ISR-Forschungsberichte*, 45, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Kohlbacher, J., Lehner, M. and Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (2020) 'Afghan/inn/en in Österreich – Perspektiven von Integration, Inklusion und Zusammenleben'. *ISR-Forschungsberichte*, 52. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Kohlbacher, J., Rasuly-Paleczek, G., Hackl, A. & Bauer, S. (2017) *Wertehaltungen und Erwartungen von Flüchtlingen in Österreich*. Wien: Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äußeres (BMEIA).
- Kohlenberger, J., Heyne, S., Rengs, B., and Buber-Ennser, I. (2021) *Women's Integration Survey – Inklusion, Teilhabe und Enablement geflüchteter Frauen in Österreich*. Wien: AMS Österreich, August 2021.
- Kohlenberger, J., Heyne, S., Rengs, B., and Buber-Ennser, I. (2022) *Soziale Inklusion geflüchteter Frauen – Zur Rolle der Familie und Familienarbeit*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag.
- Koppenberg, S. (2014) *Unaccompanied Minors in Austria – Legislation, Practices and Statistics*. International Organisation for Migration (IOM).
- Kreile, R. (1997) 'Zan, zar, zamin – Frauen, Gold und Land: Geschlechterpolitik und Staatsbildung in Afghanistan'. *Leviathan*, 25(3), pp. 396–420.
- Kroeber, A.L. (1917) 'The superorganic'. *American Anthropologist*, 19(2), pp. 163–213.
- Kuschej, H., and Angleitner, B. (2020) *Delinquenz afghanischer StaatsbürgerInnen in Österreich: Indikatoren und Kontextbedingungen im Vergleich. Schwerpunkt: Sexual- und Drogendelikte*. Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies. Available at: <https://irihs.ihs.ac.at/id/eprint/5588/1/ihs-report-2020-kuschej-angleitner-delinquenz-afghanischer-staats-buergerinnen.pdf> (Accessed 2 September 2025).
- Landinfo. (2011) *Marriage Practices and Kinship in Afghanistan*. Oslo: Landinfo. Available at: https://landinfo.no/asset/1852/1/1852_1.pdf (Accessed 19 July 2025).
- Larson, A., and Coburn, N. (2009) 'Youth mobilization and political constraints in Afghanistan'. United States Institute of Peace Special Report. Available at: <https://www.usip.org> [Accessed 30 August 2025].
- Lee, J.L. (2022) *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present*. London: Verlag Reaktion Books.
- Lehner, M. and Röhm, M. (2019) 'Integrationsherausforderungen und die Bedeutung sozialer Netzwerke'. In J. Kohlbacher and M. Six-Hohenbalken (eds.) *Die lange Dauer der Flucht — Analysen aus Wissenschaft und Praxis*. *ISR-Forschungsberichte*, 49, Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 209–229.
- Leimsidor, B. (2014) 'The Recent Afghan Migration to Europe'. In Hahn, S. and Nadel, S. (eds.) *Asian Migrants in Europe: Transcultural Connections*. Göttingen: V&R unipress GmbH, pp. 129–156.
- Levitt, P. (1998) 'Social remittances: Migration driven local-level forms of cultural diffusion'. *International Migration Review*, 32(4), pp. 926–948.

- Levitt, P. (2001) *The Transnational Villagers: Life Stories of Mexican and Dominican Immigrants in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levitt, P., and Glick Schiller, N. (2004) 'Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society'. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), pp. 1002–1039. doi: 10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x.
- Levitt, P. and Lamba-Nieves, D. (2010) "It's not just about the economy, stupid": social remittances revisited'. *Migration Information Source*, 21 May. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/its-not-just-about-economy-stupid-social-remittances-revisited> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- Levitt, P., and Lamba-Nieves, D. (2011) 'Social remittances reconsidered'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(1), pp. 1–22.
- Linde, T. (2011) 'Mixed Migration – A Humanitarian Counterpoint'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 30(1), pp. 89–99.
- Linton, R. (1945) *The cultural background of personality*. n.p.: D. Appleton-Century company
- Lomnitz, L. (1977) *Networks and Marginality. Life in a Mexican Shantytown*. New York: Academic Press.
- Madner, M. (2021a) 'Von holpriger und erfolgreicher Integration', *Wiener Zeitung*, 13 July. Available at: <https://www.wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/2112208-Von-holpriger-und-erfolgreicher-Integration.html> (Accessed: 16 July 2021).
- Mahmood, S. (2005) *The politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Maley, W. (2021) 'Terrorism and insurgency in Afghanistan'. In Izarali, M.R., & Ahlawat, D. (eds.) *Terrorism, Security and Development in South Asia: National, Regional and Global Implications*. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 140–156.
- Margrit Schreier, M., Janssen, M., Stamann, C., Whittal, A., & Dahl, T. (2020) 'Qualitative Content Analysis: Disciplinary Perspectives and Relationships between Methods – Introduction to the FQS Special Issue "Qualitative Content Analysis II"'. *FQS Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(1), Art. 9.
- Marsden, M. (2015) 'From Kabul to Kiev: Afghan trading networks across the former Soviet Union'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 49(4), pp. 1010–1048.
- Marsden, M. (2022) 'Global Mobile Afghanistan c. 1900–Present'. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, 21 December. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-702> (Accessed 30 August 2025).
- Massey, D.S. (1990) 'Social structure, household strategies, and the cumulative causation of migration'. *Population Index*, 56(1), pp. 3–26.

- Massey, D.S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., Pellegrino, A. and Taylor, J.E. (1998) *Worlds in motion: understanding international migration at the end of the millennium*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mather, D. (2003) 'Afghanistan: Foreign Intervention And Social Transformation'. *Critique*, 31(3), pp.91–116. doi: 10.1080/0301760030949468.
- Mayring, P., and Fenzl, T. (2019) 'Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse'. In Baur, N., & Blasius, J. (eds.) *Handbuch Methoden der empirischen Sozialforschung*. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, S.633–648. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-21308-4_44
- Medien-Servicestelle Neue Österreicher/innen (2016) *AfghanInnen – größte asiatische Community*, 3 March 2016. Available at: http://medienservicestelle.at/migration_bewegt/2016/03/03/afghaninnen-groesste-asiatische-community/ (Accessed 24 July 2018).
- Merton, R.K. (1957) *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Revised Edition, Free Press, New York.
- Migration - Info & Grafik. (2025) *Asylstatistik Österreich 2025*. Available at: <https://www.migration-infografik.at/at-asylstatistiken-2025/> (Accessed 12 August 2025).
- Monsutti, A. (2005) *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Monsutti, A. (2006) *Afghan Transnational Networks: Looking Beyond Repatriation*. Synthesis Paper Series. AREU.
- Monsutti, A. (2007) 'Migration as a Rite of Passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran'. *Iranian Studies*, 40(2), pp. 167–185.
- Monsutti, A. (2008) 'Afghan migratory strategies and the three solutions to the refugee problem'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 27(1), pp. 58–73.
- Monsutti, A. (2010) 'The Contribution of Migration Studies to the Anthropological Debate: A Critical Perspective'. In Audebert, C., & Dorai, M.K. (eds.) *Migration in a Globalised World: New Research Issues and Prospects*. Amsterdam & Manchester: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 107–125.
- Monsutti, A. (2013) 'Anthropologizing Afghanistan: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42, pp. 269–285.
- Muller, P.H.A.M. (2009) *Scattered families: Transnational family life of Afghan refugees in the Netherlands in the light of human rights-based protection of the family* [PhD thesis]. Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht.
- Nawid, S.K. (1999) *Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan 1919–29: King Aman-Allah and the Afghan Ulama*. Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers.
- OCHA (2021) *Humanitarian response: Afghanistan – internal displacement due to conflict (as of 06 June 2021)*. Available at: <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/afghanistan/idps> (Accessed: 7 June 2021).
- ÖIF – Österreichischer Integrationsfonds (2022) *Integration in Zahlen 2022: Afghanische Bevölkerung in Österreich (Zahlen, Daten und Fakten zu Arbeitsmarkt, Asyl und Einbürgerungen)*. Vienna: Österreichischer Integrationsfonds. Available at: <https://www.integra->

- titionsfonds.at/fileadmin/user_upload/OEIF_Laender_Factsheet_Afghanistan.pdf (Accessed 2 September 2025).
- Olesen, A. (1982) 'Marriage Norms and Practices in a Rural Community in North Afghanistan'. *Folk*, 24, pp. 111–141.
- Olesen, A. (1995) *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Ortner, S. (1973) 'On key symbols'. *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 75(5), pp. 1338–1346.
- Ortner, S.B. (2006) 'Power and projects: Reflections on agency'. In *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 129–154. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hppcg.10>
- Oxford Bibliographies (2013) 'The Hanafi School'. In: *Oxford Bibliographies in Islamic Studies*. Available at: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0082.xml> (Accessed: 24 May 2022).
- Parsons, T. (1937) *The structure of social action*. New York: McGrawHill.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The Social System*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Perry, J.A. and Perry, E.K. (2016) 'Culture: Product and guide to life in society'. In Perry, J.A. and Perry, E.K. (eds.) *Contemporary society*. 14th edn. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 37–58.
- Portes, A. (1999) 'Immigration theory for a new century: some problems and opportunities'. In Hirschman, C., Kasinitz, P. and DeWind, J. (eds.) *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, pp. 21–33.
- Portes, A. (2010) 'Migration and Social Change: Some Conceptual Reflections'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 26(10), pp. 1537–1563.
- Potarca, G. (2021) 'Online dating is shifting educational inequalities in marriage markets'. *Demography*, 58(5), pp. 1977–1999.
- Poullada, L.B. (1973) *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan, 1919–1929: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pro Asyl (2016) *Afghanistan: Kein sicheres Land für Flüchtlinge. Eine Recherche zur politischen und ökonomischen Situation im Land, zur Sicherheitslage und zur Situation der Flüchtlinge*. Available at: https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/PROASYL_Afghanistan_Broschuere_Jul16.pdf (Accessed 5 September 2025).
- Qazi Zada, S., and Qazi Zada, M.Z. (2024) 'The Taliban and Women's Human Rights in Afghanistan: The Way Forward'. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 28(10), pp. 1687–1722.
- Rao, A. (1986) 'Roles, status and niches: A comparison of peripatetic and pastoral women in Afghanistan'. *Nomadic Peoples*, 21/22 (Special Issue on Peripatetic Peoples), pp. 153–177.
- Rao, A. (1996) 'Peripatetics of Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey'. In *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, vol. 9: Africa and the Middle East. Macmillan Reference USA, pp. 274–276.
- Rapport, N. and Overing, J. (2000) 'Agent and agency'. In *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1–9.

- Rastin-Tehrani, K. (2012) *Afghanisches Eheerrecht – mit rechtsvergleichenden Hinweisen*. Schriften zum deutschen und ausländischen Familien- und Erbrecht. Band 6. Frankfurt am Main: Wolfgang Metzner Verlag.
- Rastin-Tehrani, K. and Yassari, N. (2012) *Max Planck manual on family law in Afghanistan*. Amended 2nd edn, July 2012. Heidelberg: Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law.
- Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (1994) 'Verwandtschaft und Heirat als Mittel zur Festigung von Macht und Einfluss. Ein Fallbeispiel aus Nordost-Afghanistan'. In Fragner, B.G., & Hoffmann, B. (eds.) *Bamberger Mittelasienstudien, Konferenzakten*, Bamberg 15.–16. Juni 1990 (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, Band 149). Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, pp. 193–216.
- Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (1999) 'Kollektive Identitäten und ihre Transformationen am Beispiel Afghanistans'. *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, 129, pp. 175–187.
- Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (2017) 'Many reasons for leaving Afghanistan: Social obligations in times of protracted violence'. In Kohlbacher, J. and Schiocchet, L. (eds.) *From destination to integration – Afghan, Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Vienna*. ISR-Forschungsberichte, 45. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 57–83.
- Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (2019) 'Mobilität als Überlebensstrategie: Die lange Fluchtmigration der Afghan/inn/en'. In Kohlbacher, J. and Six-Hohenbalken, M. (eds.) *Die lange Dauer der Flucht – Analysen aus Wissenschaft und Praxis*. ISR-Forschungsberichte, 49. Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (ÖAW), pp. 69–105.
- Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (2020) *Themenbericht der Staatendokumentation zu Afghanistan: Die aktuelle sozioökonomische Lage in Afghanistan*. BFA Staatendokumentation. Available at: https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2038971/2020-09_THEM_AFGH_Die+aktuelle+sozio%C3%B6konomische+Lage+in+Afghanistan+%28Rasuly-Paleczek%29.pdf (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- Rasuly-Paleczek, G. (2021) 'What Is Afghan Culture? Some Reflections on a Contested Notion'. In Hosseini, B.S. (ed.) *Temporary and Child Marriages in Iran and Afghanistan: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Issues*. Singapore, Springer Nature; pp. 87 – 108. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4469-3_5
- Rasuly, S. (1993) *Politischer Strukturwandel in Afghanistan*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag.
- Rasuly, S. (1997) *Die politischen Eliten und ihre Bedeutung für die Gestaltung des politischen Systems in Afghanistan*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag.
- Redfield, R. (1941) *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Republic of Austria (2005) *Asylgesetz 2005*. Federal Law Gazette I No. 75/2007 (consolidated version as of 3 March 2025). Available at: <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=Bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20004240> (Accessed: 11 August 2025).

- Republic of Austria (2017) Integrationsgesetz – IntG. Bundesgesetz zur Integration rechtmäßig in Österreich aufhältiger Personen ohne österreichische Staatsbürgerschaft. BGBl. I Nr. 68/2017, as last amended by BGBl. I Nr. 36/2022. Consolidated version as of 10 August 2025. Available at: <https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/GeltendeFassung.wxe?Abfrage=bundesnormen&Gesetzesnummer=20009891> (Accessed: 11 August 2025).
- Rigby, P. (1972) 'The Relevance of the Traditional in Social Change'. *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs*, 2(2), pp. 309–321.
- Rostami-Povey, E. (2007) 'Afghan refugees in Iran, Pakistan, the U.K. and the U.S. and life after return: A comparative gender analysis'. *Iranian Studies*, 40(2), pp. 241–261. doi: 10.1080/00210860701269576.
- Roy, O. (1990) 'Cultural Patterns and Changes in Society: An Assessment'. In Roy, O. *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 215–227.
- Röhm, M. (2024) 'An exploration of practical reflexivity: Navigating categories in research encounters', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 25(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-25.3.4218> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- Ruiz, H.A. (2002) 'Afghanistan: Conflict and Displacement 1978 to 2001'. *Forced Migration Review*, 13, June, pp. 8–10. Available at: <https://www.fmreview.org/september-11th-has-anything-changed/ruiz> (Accessed 10 June 2021).
- Rzehak, L. (2011) *Doing Pashto: Pashtunwali as the ideal of honourable behaviour and tribal life among the Pashtuns*. Thematic Report 01/2011. Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network.
- Saboory, M.H., and Yassari, N. (2005) *Family Structures and Family Law in Afghanistan. A Report of the Fact-Finding Mission to Afghanistan, January–March 2005*. Hamburg: Max Planck Institute.
- Safi, M., Browne, E., Kamninga, T., and Khan, A. (2024) *Changing Social Norms Around Age of Marriage in Afghanistan: Data on Repression and Resistance Under the Taliban*. London: ODI. Available at: <https://media.odi.org/documents/Afghanistan-full-report-final.pdf> (Accessed 21 July 2025).
- Saikal, A. (2006) *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Saikal, A. (2018) 'Afghanistan: A Turbulent State in Transition'. In: Shahrani, N.M. (ed.) *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War*. Indiana University Press, pp. 21–36.
- Scalettari, G., Monsutti, A. and Donini, A. (2019) 'Young Afghans at the doorsteps of Europe: the difficult art of being a successful migrant'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2019.1618250.
- Schetter, C. (2005) 'Ethnicity and the political reconstruction of Afghanistan'. ZEF Working Paper Series, No. 3. Bonn: University of Bonn, Centre for Development Research (ZEF).

- Schetter, C. (2012) 'Translocal lives: Patterns of migration in Afghanistan'. *Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series*, 2.
- Scherr, A. (2013) 'Agency – ein Theorie- und Forschungsprogramm für die Soziale Arbeit?'. In Graßhoff, G. (ed.) *Adressaten, Nutzer, Agency*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, pp. 229–242. Available at: https://doi-org.uaccess.univie.ac.at/10.1007/978-3-531-19007-5_14
- Schmeidl, S. (2019) 'Vier Jahrzehnte afghanischer Flucht und Vertreibung'. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 10 January. Available at: <http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/283689/vier-jahrzehnte-afghanischer-flucht-und-vertreibung> (Accessed 5 September 2025).
- Schönherr, D., Leibetseder, B., Moser, W., and Hofinger, C. (2019) *Diskriminierungserfahrungen in Österreich: Erleben von Ungleichbehandlung, Benachteiligung und Herabwürdigung in den Bereichen Arbeit, Wohnen, medizinische Dienstleistungen und Ausbildung. Endbericht*. Wien.
- Schütte, S. (2014) 'Living with patriarchy and poverty: women's agency and the spatialities of gender relations in Afghanistan'. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 21(9), pp. 1176–1192. doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.832661.
- Scott, J.C. (1985) *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sewell, W.H. (1992) 'A theory of structure: Duality, agency, and transformation'. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98(1), pp. 1–29.
- Shahrani, N.M. (2018) 'Introduction: The Impact of Four Decades of War and Violence on Afghan Society and Political Culture'. In Shahrani, N.M. (ed.) *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War*. Bloomington-Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–18.
- Shalinsky, A.C. (1980a) 'Group Prestige in Northern Afghanistan: the Case of an Interethnic Wedding'. *Ethnic Groups*, 2(4), pp. 269–282.
- Shalinsky, A.C. (1980b) 'Learning Sexual Identity: Parents and Children in Northern Afghanistan'. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, XI(4), pp. 254–265.
- Shalinsky, A.C. (1984) 'The Battle for the Bride – The Wedding as Rite of Passage in Northern Afghanistan'. *The Eastern Anthropologist*, 37(1), pp. 1–13.
- Shalinsky, A.C. (1986) 'Reason, Desire and Sexuality: The Meaning of Gender in Northern Afghanistan'. *Ethnos*, 14(4), pp. 223–243.
- Shalinsky, A.C. (1989a) 'Talking about Marriage. Fate and Choice in the Social Discourse of Traditional Northern Afghanistan'. *Anthropos*, 84, pp. 133–140.
- Shalinsky, A.C. (1989b) 'Women's Relationships in Traditional Northern Afghanistan'. *Central Asian Survey*, 8(1), pp. 117–129.
- Sharan, T. (2018) 'Web and Spiders: Four Decades of Violence, Intervention, and Statehood in Afghanistan (1978–2016)'. In Shahrani, N.M. (ed.) *Modern Afghanistan: The Impact of 40 Years of War*. Bloomington-Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp. 102–120.
- Shaw, A. (2001) 'Kinship, cultural preference and immigration: consanguineous marriage among British Pakistanis'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 7, pp. 315–334.

- Siddiqi, M.I. (1989) 'Afghan Conflicts and Soviet Intervention – Perception, Reality and Resolution'. *GeoJournal*, 18(2), pp. 123–132.
- Silverman, D. (2014) *Interpreting Qualitative Data*. 5th ed. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Six-Hohenbalken, M. (2009) 'Transformationen von Familienstrukturen durch Migration'. In Six-Hohenbalken, M. and Tošić, J. (eds.) *Anthropologie der Migration: Theoretische Grundlagen und interdisziplinäre Aspekte*. Wien: Facultas, pp. 229–246.
- Skaine, R. (2008) *Women of Afghanistan in the post-Taliban era: how lives have changed and where they stand today*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co.
- Skeldon, R. (1997) *Migration and Development: A Global Perspective*. 1st ed. Harlow: Longman
- Skeldon, R. (2000) 'Trends in International Migration in the Asian and Pacific Region'. *International Social Science Journal*, 52(165), pp. 369–382.
- Smith, D.J. (2009) *Decisions, Desires and Diversity: Marriage Practices in Afghanistan*. AREU – Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Issues Paper Series, February.
- Statistik Austria (2022) A quarter of migrants with difficulties in finding a job. [PDF] Available at: <https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/announcement/2022/12/20221201ArbeitsmarktsituationMigrantinnenEN.pdf> (Accessed: 10 August 2025).
- Statistik Austria (2024) *Statistisches Jahrbuch, Migration & Integration 2024*. Available at: https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Migration_und_Integration_2024.pdf (Accessed: 12 August 2025).
- Statistik Austria (2025a) *Bevölkerung zu Jahresbeginn nach detaillierter Staatsangehörigkeit seit 2002 – Afghanistan* (Wien, Vorarlberg, Tirol, Steiermark, Salzburg, Oberösterreich, Niederösterreich, Kärnten, Burgenland), p. 7.
- Statistik Austria (2025b) *Statistisches Jahrbuch, Migration & Integration 2025*. Available at: https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/publications/Migration-Integration_2025.pdf (Accessed: 10 August 2025).
- Steul, W. (1980) 'Pashtunwali und Widerstand – Stammesgesellschaft im Staat: Die Pashtunen in Paktia'. In Berliner Institut für vergleichende Sozialforschung (ed.) *Revolution in Iran und Afghanistan* (Mardom Nameh – Jahrbuch zur Geschichte und Gesellschaft des Mittleren Orients). Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat Autoren- und Verlagsgesellschaft, pp. 250–263.
- Steul, W. (1981) *Pashtunwali – Ein Ehrenkodex und seine rechtliche Relevanz*. Vol. 54. Beiträge zur Südasienforschung, Südasien-Institut, Universität Heidelberg, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Swenson, G. and Sugerman, E. (2011) 'Building the rule of law in Afghanistan: The importance of legal education'. *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 3, pp. 130–146. T.M.C. Asser Press.
- Synovitz, R. and Jalalzai, F. (2019) 'Boys with brides: Afghanistan's untold dilemma of underage marriages'. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 August. Available at: <https://>

- www.rferl.org/a/boys-with-brides-afghanistan-untold-dilemma-of-underage-marriages/30106032.html (Accessed: 24 May 2022).
- Szigetvari, A. (2021) 'Jobzugang für Asylwerber: Höchstgericht hebt Einschränkungen auf', *Der Standard*, 14 July. Available at: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000128174346/jobzugang-fuer-asylwerber-hoechstgericht-hebt-einschraenkungen-auf?fbclid=IwAR1uMxi-VmGeORt1Ssw1IFLdevkDvIVQKyuijGQpEL2kCL-hmQW9SDmpIHqc> (Accessed: 14 July 2021).
- Tapper, N. (1981) 'Direct Exchange and Brideprice: Alternative forms in a Complex Marriage System'. *Man*, New Series, 16(3), pp. 387–407.
- Tapper, N. (1984) 'Causes and Consequences of the Abolition of Brideprice in Afghanistan'. In: Shahrani, N.M., & Canfield, R.L. (eds.) *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan. Anthropological Perspectives*. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, pp. 291–305.
- Tapper, N. (1991a) *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tapper, N. (1991b) 'Women and Power: A Perspective on Marriage among Durrani Pashtuns of Afghan Turkestan'. In Akiner, S. (ed.) *Cultural Change and Continuity in Central Asia*. London, pp. 181–197.
- Tapper, R., and Tapper, N. (1982) 'Marriage Preferences and Ethnic Relations among Durrani Pashtuns of Afghan Turkestan'. *Folk*, 24, pp. 157–177.
- Tuccio, M., Wahba, J., and Hamdouch, B. (2019) 'International migration as a driver of political and social change: evidence from Morocco'. *Journal of Population Economics*, 32(4), pp. 1171–1203.
- Turner, V., Abrahams, R., and Harris, A. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge.
- UN General Assembly (1951) *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*. United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 189, p. 137, 28 July 1951. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/agreements/unga/1951/en/39821> (Accessed: 25 August 2025).
- UN Women (2025, 7 August) FAQs: What it's like to be a woman in Afghanistan in 2025. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/faqs/faqs-afghan-women-three-years-after-the-taliban-takeover> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- UNAMA (2015) *Afghanistan: Annual Report 2014, Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*. Kabul: UNAMA. Available at: <https://unama.unmissions.org/protection-of-civilians-reports> (Accessed: 7 June 2021).
- UNESCO (2022) *Demographic and socio-economic (full dataset): Afghanistan – rural population (% of total population)*. Available at: <http://data.uis.unesco.org/> (Accessed: 25 February 2022).

- UNHCR (2019) 'Migrant definition'. UNHCR Emergency Handbook. Available at: <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/legal-framework/migrant-definition> (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- UNHCR (2021) Afghan Refugee Population in Pakistan since 2002. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/pak> (Accessed: 6 September 2025).
- UNHCR (2025) UNHCR Master Glossary of Terms - Migrant. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/glossary?utm_source=chatgpt.com (Accessed: 5 September 2025).
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2024) World Population Prospects 2024: Total population, both sexes combined (thousands) – Afghanistan. UNData. Available at: <https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=afghanistan&d=PopDiv&f=variableID%3A12%3BcrID%3A4> (Accessed 1 September 2025).
- United States Institute of Peace (2023) 'Two Years of the Taliban's "Gender Apartheid" in Afghanistan'. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/09/two-years-talibans-gender-apartheid-afghanistan> (Accessed: 21 July 2025).
- Van Hear, N. (2009) 'The rise of refugee diasporas'. *Current History*, 108(717), pp. 180–185.
- Van Hear, N. (2010) 'Theories of migration and social change'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36(10), pp. 1531–1536.
- Van Hear, N., Brubaker, R., and Bessa, T. (2009) 'Managing mobility for human development: the growing salience of mixed migration'. *Human Development Research Paper (HDRP)*, 20.
- Van Houte, M., and Davids, T. (2018) 'Narrating Marriage: Negotiating Practices and Politics of Belonging of Afghan Return Migrants'. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 25(6), pp. 631–649.
- Vashum, R. (2019) 'Unit 12: Social Change and Transformation'. In *Introduction to Sociology-II*, BSOC-103. New Delhi: IGNOU – The People's University, pp. 164–181.
- Vaughn, L.M. (2010) 'Marriage and the Family'. In Birx, H.J. (ed.) *21st Century Anthropology: A Reference Handbook*, Vol. 1. SAGE Publications, pp. 162–172.
- Vorhölter, J. (2024) 'Agency'. In Cantave, R. (ed.) *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Available at: <http://doi.org/10.29164/24agency> (Accessed: 6 September 2025).
- Vertovec, S. (2004) 'Migrant transnationalism and modes of transformation'. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), pp. 970–1001.
- Visacovsky, S.E. (2017) 'When Time Freezes: Socio-Anthropological Research on Social Crises'. *Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 46(1), pp. 6–16.
- Viveiros de Castro, E. (2002) 'Society'. In Bardard, A. and Spencer J. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 514–522.
- Wallerstein, I. (2004) *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Wilde, A., and Mielke, K. (2013) 'Order, stability, and change in Afghanistan: from top-down to bottom-up state-making'. *Central Asian Survey*, 32(3), pp. 353–370. doi: 10.1080/02634937.2013.843309.
- Wilterdink, N., and Form, W. (n.d.) 'Social change'. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-change> (Accessed 15 June 2022).
- Wolf, E.R. (2010) *Europe and the People without History*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Zulfacar, M. (2006) 'The pendulum of gender politics in Afghanistan'. *Central Asian Survey*, 25(1–2), pp. 27–59.

Interviews from First Interview Phase (2017–2020)

I6: 17.07.2017, female
I12: 14.08.2017, female
I15: 14.08.2017, female
I16: 16.08.2017, male
I30: 07.08.2017, male
I32: 21.08.2017, female
I56: 18.08.2017, male
I57: 08.08.2017/female,
I58: 11.08.2017/female
E1: 02.07.2017, University of Vienna

Interviews from Second Interview Phase (2022)

AT1: 3.01.2022, female
AT2: 15.09.2022, male
AT3: 10.10.2022, female
AT4: 12.10.2022, female
AT5: 17.09.2022, male

8. Appendix A: Abstract (English)

This thesis examines social change among young Afghan migrants in Austria through the lens of marriage practices and partner choice in the migration context. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Vienna, it explores how norms, values, and family roles are negotiated between sociocultural expectations and personal autonomy. Migration particularly expands opportunities for self-determination among young women, while power relations and partner preferences shift dynamically between generations. Young migrants develop diverse strategies to reconcile personal aspirations with family expectations. Empirically, the thesis analyses the role of agency within transnational family structures and situates these negotiations in a historical comparison with broader social transformations of the Afghan diaspora, to which it seeks to contribute.

9. Appendix B: Abstract (German)

Die Arbeit untersucht den sozialen Wandel unter jungen afghanischen Migrant*innen in Österreich anhand von Heiratspraktiken und Partnerwahl im Migrationskontext. Auf Grundlage ethnographischer Feldforschung in Wien wird gezeigt, wie Normen, Werte und Familienrollen zwischen soziokulturellen Erwartungshaltungen und persönlicher Autonomie ausgehandelt werden. Migration eröffnet dabei insbesondere jungen Frauen erweiterte Möglichkeiten der Selbstbestimmung, während sich Machtverhältnisse und Partnerpräferenzen zwischen den Generationen dynamisch verschieben. Junge Migrant*innen entwickeln vielfältige Strategien, um individuelle Wünsche mit familiären Erwartungen in Einklang zu bringen. Empirisch analysiert die Arbeit die Rolle von Agency in transnationalen Familienstrukturen und verortet diese Aushandlungsprozesse in einen historischen Vergleich umfassender sozialer Transformationen innerhalb der afghanischen Diaspora, zu denen sie selbst einen Beitrag leistet.