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# Walking with Afghan women: using mobile methods to understand differentiated embedding within different places across England

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## ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon data from research with Afghans who have been recently resettled across varied sites in England. Focusing on the accounts of resettled Afghan women, we seek to advance understanding of how, in the context of resettlement, they navigate embedding in particular places – including large, multi-ethnic cities and smaller, less diverse towns and villages in England. To inform this understanding, we adopt mobile methods, in particular walking interviews, across these different geographical locations. As we walk around their neighbourhoods, the women narrate their everyday experiences and forms of agency within these places. The paper examines the extent to which they feel welcome and supported in their new locations or if they face hostility. Focusing on places as socially constructed through interactions over time, we explore relationality, socio-cultural structures and power dynamics within these localities. The racist riots across various English regions during the summer of 2024 emerge as a specific theme in women's accounts, undermining their feelings of safety and threatening to unsettle nascent embedding. Thus, our paper aims to shed new light on the fragile and processual nature of embedding, but also how it is actively negotiated, through mobilising resources (capital), within specific temporal and spatial contexts.

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## Introduction

How migrants connect and identify with particular places are still not well understood (Ryan et al. 2021; Phillips and Robinson 2015; Schneider 2025). In recent years, there has been growing interest in how refugees,<sup>1</sup> particularly those dispersed to geographical regions not of their choosing, are navigating new, unfamiliar places (Carlbaum 2022; D'Avino 2025; Hui-zinga and Van Hoven 2018; Luimpöck 2019; Speed et al. 2021). In this paper, drawing on our research with recently resettled Afghans in various sites across England, we use walking interviews to advance understanding of how they are embedding in new locations.

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Forcible displacement can result in a powerful sense of ‘rupture’ as people suddenly lose everything associated with their former lives, identities and status (Luimpöck 2019). Moreover, when people have to move quickly and unexpectedly, they not only lose possessions but also interpersonal connections (Perino and Eve 2017). This can be compounded by asylum processes that enforce separation from extended families and friendship groups (Heidinger 2024) as networks become scattered over many countries and continents (Ryan, Lopez, and Rasa 2024). Furthermore, those granted refugee status in receiving countries are often dispersed by state agencies to particular locations, depending on the availability of accommodation and support services, rather than any pre-existing social networks (Carlbaum 2022; Luimpöck 2019; Speed et al. 2021). Hence, refugees arriving in a new area usually need to rebuild networks, local attachments and their sense of identity in unfamiliar places (D’Avino 2025).

Presenting our walking interviews with Afghan women, this paper aims to enhance knowledge of resettlement, especially the Afghan schemes (explained below), through the lens of differentiated embedding. Our multi-sited dataset is particularly innovative by including large, ethnically diverse cities, like London and Birmingham, and smaller, less diverse towns and villages in the north-west and the south-east of England. Applying the conceptual framework of embedding, our analysis reveals multi-layered, differentiated and dynamic processes of forging attachments and belonging, and the opportunities and obstacles afforded within specific spatial and temporal contexts. For example, the racist riots during the summer of 2024,<sup>2</sup> across England, show how nascent embedding can be disrupted or even reversed by unsettling events.

We begin by situating our contribution within existing literature on how refugees encounter and navigate new places, especially when dispersed to unfamiliar locations with no previous connections.

### Navigating new places

Resettlement programmes may relocate people to geographical areas based on resources, such as the availability of housing or the willingness of local authorities to provide support. Hence, resettled persons may find themselves in unfamiliar places with no prior connections. Exploring the experiences of refugees who were dispersed to towns in Northern Netherlands, Huizinga and Van Hoven (2018) argue that it is in local places where belonging emerges and is experienced or, indeed, where everyday obstacles to belonging are encountered. Thus, the extent to which refugees can forge a sense of security and familiarity in their local neighbourhood shapes the sense of feeling ‘at home’ (Huizinga and Van Hoven 2018).

Conducting interviews with refugees who were dispersed to rural Germany, Schneider observed that ‘positive everyday experiences of loose contacts in the neighbourhood could have a significant impact on an individual’s perception of well-being and, consequently, their sense of belonging’ (2025, 10). However, the role of language fluency cannot be under-estimated (Cheung and Phillimore 2017; Morrice et al. 2021), as developing a sense of belonging in local places is mediated through the vernacular (Huizinga and Van Hoven 2018). This is even more significant for people relocated to less diverse geographical areas where few other co-ethnics reside, as noted in Sweden (Carlbaum 2022). Hence, lack of fluency in local languages can seriously reduce the opportunity

to forge new relationships and gain familiarity in new environments (Van der Boor, Dowrick, and White 2022).

Of course, as Massey (1994) reminds us, local places are situated within socio-structural contexts. Wider macro contexts, including anti-migration rhetoric and policies, can fuel distrust or negative stereotyping of particular ethnic or religious minorities, impinging 2025 upon local opportunities for embedding (Speed et al. 2021). Moreover, ‘extreme events, such as racist attacks, can significantly impact respondents’ sense of belonging’ (Schneider 2025, 11). In our research, discussed below, the racist, anti-migration riots that erupted across many English towns and cities in the summer of 2024 emerged as a powerful theme in the narratives of Afghan women. The riots can be seen as ‘unsettling events’ (Kilkey and Ryan 2021), threatening to undermine feelings of security and embedding in local areas.

The conceptual framework of ‘differentiated embedding’ aims to capture complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional processes of belonging and attachments in place over time (Ryan and Mulholland, 2015; Ryan 2018). Although inspired by Granovetter’s (1985) concept of embeddedness, that notion tended to imply a static, achieved state (Ryan 2018). Research with migrants (Ryan and Mulholland. 2015) suggested a process that was more dynamic and even reversible. Therefore, embedding, as a verb, refers to ongoing processes over time.

Embedding in new places requires time, energy and commitment (Ryan, et al. 2021). However, that is not to suggest that embedding in places is entirely agentic. It is necessary to pay attention to contingency and the factors that may impede or deter embedding. Here, we need to consider the specificities of particular places. The localities in which migrants are embedded are not static, but are continually made and remade (Grey and O’Toole 2020), including by migrants (Massey 1994). Socially determined opportunity structures within those places, such as housing infrastructure, language classes, statutory and voluntary support systems, but also anti-migrant attitudes, may create opportunities or obstacles for embedding. Moreover, the concept of differentiated embedding underlines the multidimensionality of attachments and belonging as migrants are negotiating embedding across different domains and scales. Thus, embedding is differentiated in levels, forms and effects within diverse contexts (e.g. the local neighbourhood, workplace, educational settings, kinship and friendship ties and the wider structural context), and over time. Therefore, differentiated embedding may be defined as inherently processual, dynamic and contingent social practices through which migrants develop, maintain or withdraw relations and attachments both in and across time and space (Mulholland and Ryan 2023). While this concept was initially developed in the context of economic migrants, its applicability to refugees has been noted (Speed et al. 2021). In this paper, we apply the embedding framework to explore how resettled persons are navigating new and unfamiliar locations across England.

Adopting walking interviews, we see how processes of embedding vary according to the women’s different forms of capital (social, cultural and economic) and how these are activated within particular places (see Ryan et al. 2025). Whilst our focus is on the local context, the transnational lens is important, and our participants had networks of family and friends in other countries. However, in this paper, we want to understand their navigation of local places where they currently reside.

We return to these issues later in the paper. Next, we present a short summary of the policies for Afghan resettlement.

## UK Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes

Afghans represent one of the largest refugee populations in the world due to conflict, violence and poverty. With the security situation rapidly deteriorating since 2021, the number of people fleeing has continued to rise: 10.9 million Afghans are displaced, almost all within the country or in neighbouring countries. Iran and Pakistan host 7.7 million displaced Afghans – more than 1.6 million of whom have arrived since 2021 (UNHCR 2025).

The collapse of the NATO-backed Afghan government in August 2021 triggered a massive humanitarian emergency. The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) aimed to provide relocation and assistance to individuals who had worked with or for the UK government and/or the UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan, along with their families. This scheme was also open to vulnerable Afghan nationals.<sup>3</sup> The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) was set up to relocate Afghans most at risk of human rights abuses, including women and girls, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and LGBT + people (Sturge 2025; see also Ryan et al. 2024). By September 2025, approximately 40,000 people had received settlement under schemes for resettling Afghans, and these schemes were closed to new applicants.<sup>4</sup>

Under the schemes, people are entitled to access welfare, healthcare, education and the right to work. They can also apply for British citizenship after five years in the UK. Local authorities are funded to provide support to resettled Afghans voluntarily, including through accommodation support, dedicated caseworkers, English language classes and welfare and employment advice. Many Afghans were initially accommodated in so-called 'bridging hotels' or on Ministry of Defence sites, often waiting months to be housed. Local authorities pledged accommodation based on the availability of housing within their boroughs. As a result, Afghans are widely dispersed across the country. Despite being well funded, the schemes have been criticised for underestimating the scale of civilian displacement and for employing inconsistent and unclear guidelines. The high cost of temporary emergency accommodation for Afghans in 'bridging hotels' has also been criticised (British Red Cross, Jesuit Refugee Service, Oxfam & Refugee Council 2022; House of Common 2022).

## Our study and sample description

We began researching Afghan resettlement in 2022 (see Ryan, Lopez and Dalceggio 2024). In 2024, we commenced a new project funded by the Nuffield Foundation with colleagues<sup>5</sup>. Our walking interviews with women were part of this broader project, including a large-scale survey, and other methods, with male and female participants, as well as a youth contingent, designed to generate multiple perspectives on resettlement processes. The project also involved 20 Afghan peer researchers who were hired and trained to administer the survey in relevant languages. For this paper, we are not presenting the wider dataset, as that is beyond our scope here and will be discussed elsewhere.

The walking interviews were designed to generate rich data with Afghan women who had been resettled across different locations in England. Walking interviews are becoming firmly established in the social science toolbox (O'Neill 2024). For migration scholars,

walking interviews enable insights into migrants' everyday experiences and encounters 'within new social landscapes and power configurations' (Sun and Zhu 2024). The participant can be regarded as 'an expert guide' who decides on where, how long and what route the walk will take to share a specific experience or understanding of the local context with the researcher (Kinney 2017). Participants talk about the place, whilst walking, thus enabling researchers to hear people's interpretations of that locality, under the multisensory stimuli of the surrounding environment (Evans and Jones 2011; Peyrefitte 2012).

Walking interviews allow researchers to gain deeper insights into 'migrants' emotional dynamics, life experiences, and self-identification within new social landscapes and power configurations', affording understanding of 'the interaction between micro-experience and macro-structure' (Sun and Zhu 2024, 1). Thus, through this method the dynamic and multi-layered processes of spatial and temporal embedding can be explored in rich detail (Ryan, et al. 2021). Nonetheless, walking interviews also pose some challenges, including the question of positionality. As Pink (2008) notes, researchers do not stand outside these places as neutral observers but are entangled in place-making processes, as discussed later in the paper.

Although we intended to interview 25 women, in the course of recruitment, we were put in touch with one non-binary person who was keen to participate. Therefore, we had 26 participants (25 women and one person who identified as non-binary). Participants were recruited through case workers, from Resettlement Teams within local authorities, NGOs working with Afghans and the peer researchers. With these research partners, we aimed to recruit a wide diversity of Afghan women across age, marital and parental status, educational background, English language fluency, occupational status, ethnic background and varied geographical locations. Table 1 summarises these characteristics whilst careful to protect anonymity and not reveal information that might disclose identity. In addition to helping with the recruitment of participants, three peer researchers, who were employed in survey administration, volunteered to take part in the walking interviews. Thus, of the 26 interviewees, 3 were known to us already as peer researchers on the wider project.

Participants were invited to take part in the walk at a time and date of their choosing. Translation, where needed, was provided by Mursal, who is Afghan and speaks English, Pashto and Dari fluently. Interviews usually involved two members of the team, e.g. either Louise or Maria, along with Mursal. The interviews were logistically complex to arrange and had to be negotiated around participants' childcare, school drop off and collections, and language classes, as most Afghans attend English as a Second Language classes (ESOL) as part of the resettlement programme, and other college courses, as well as some job commitments. Informed consent, translated into the relevant languages, was negotiated in advance. Participants were given £20 gift vouchers.

The walks took place during autumn 2024 and varied in length. Some were relatively short and involved only a stroll around the immediate neighbourhood. Other participants were keen on longer walks and took us on a tour of their town. Of course, the weather was a factor, and some walks had to be curtailed because of rain. As well as walks, we also undertook seated interviews. Although we audio-recorded all but one walk (see below), busy streets could result in ambient noise. Hence, seated interviews, in a quiet location, either at the start or end of walks, helped with audio sound quality. Sometimes, depending on the weather, seated interviews took place outdoors in a park. On other occasions, we went to quiet cafés, but in most cases, interviews

**Table 1.** Table of Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Current marital status?	Number of children	Date of arrival in England:	Your job in Afghanistan	Employment in the UK
Marya	18–24	Never Married	0	14/10/2023	Student	Full time job nursery worker and Student
Layla	35–44	Never Married	0	21/08/2021	Women's rights Activist	Post graduate Student
Wazhma	25–34	Married	3	15/12/2023	Housewife	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Nooria	35–44	Married	1	11/07/2023	Teacher	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Tamana	35–44	Married	2	24/08/2021	Teacher: Primary School	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Zamira	25–34	Married	6	22/08/2021	Housewife	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Nazanin	35–44	Married	1	27/08/2021	Teacher	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Paymana	35–44	Never Married	0	22/01/2022	Teacher	Student
Mina	45–54	Widowed	7	29/10/2021	Housewife	Disabled
Breshna	18–24	Widowed	2	29/10/2021	Housewife	Full-time Carer
Malalai	35–44	Married	7	25/08/2021	Housewife	Disabled
Mashal	18–24	Never Married	0	28/10/2021	Broker/Sales Assistant	Personal Assistant
Jaheda	25–34	Married	0	05/05/2022	Mid wife and teacher	Student
Sadia	25–34	Never Married	0	05/05/2022	Internship in Court	Student
Safia	35–44	Married	three	28/ 12/2023	Housewife	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Gulshan	35–44	Married	4	22/08/2021	Teacher	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Farida	25–34	Never Married	0	03/09/2022	Teacher	Student
Zainab	Above 65	Widowed	10	03/09/2024	Housewife	Retired
Masooma	25–34	Never Married	0	03/09/2024	Housewife	Student
Shabnam	25–34	Never Married	0	03/09/2024	Student	Student
Hasina	25–34	Married	1	11/11/2023	Housewife	Full-time Carer
Malika	35–44	Married	6	18/11/2023	Housewife	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Muzhda	35–44	Married	4	08/03/2021	Director of Finance	Full-time Business Support Officer and Student
Sarah	18–24	Never Married	0	29/12/2023	Student	Student
Zakia	35–44	Married	4	11/11/2023	Housewife	Full-time Carer and ESOL
Madina	35–44	Widowed	3	04/12/2024	Housewife	Full-time Carer

took place in participants' homes. It is noteworthy that the non-binary person requested that the walking part of the interview was not audio-recorded as they did not want to attract attention from Afghan neighbours whilst walking around with Louise (see discussion below). Thus, we were always flexible to accommodate participants' preferences as they led the walk, chose the route and duration. Young children were sometimes present, and interviews were paused to attend to babies or toddlers. On average, the combined walk and seated interviews took between 60 and 90 min.

All data were fully transcribed by a professional transcription company, then read and checked by the three authors. The preliminary coding tree was devised based on our initial research aims and the relevant literature, as discussed earlier, while also allowing us to identify new themes in the analysis process. Transcripts were then coded in Nvivo.

Although we are interested in embedding in particular places, we are mindful of ethical issues around anonymity. Like Peyrefitte (2012), we face the challenge of how much to reveal about specific locations and what to anonymise. So, we mention big cities like London and Birmingham but conceal the identity of smaller cities, towns and villages. Instead, we mention the region, e.g. North-West or the South-East of England. Participants' names are replaced with culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

In the next sections, we present key findings organised around specific themes.

### ***'Suddenly everything changed' (Jaheda) – dis-embedding from familiar places***

It is important to acknowledge that most participants had recently arrived in their neighbourhoods. The longest residents arrived in 2021, 3 years before the interview. For example, Muzhda, her husband and 4 children were among the first families to arrive in the North-West in August 2021, and had been rehoused quickly, after a brief stay in temporary accommodation.

However, in most cases, participants had been accommodated for protracted periods in hotels before being housed in their current neighbourhoods. When we visited Malalai in London, she had recently moved to her flat, along with her husband and 7 children, after spending 2 years in 3 different hotels. Similarly, Mina and her widowed daughter Breshna had been rehoused in London only 8 months before our interview, having previously spent over 2 years being moved between several different hotels. Nazanin, in the South-East, had also lived in 3 different hotels.

Others had arrived in the country more recently after spending time in transit countries, awaiting permission to enter the UK. For example, Wazhma and her husband, who worked for the military, arrived in the UK less than one year before our interview, having waited in Turkey for over two years. Marya had been in India whilst her UK application was processed.

Indeed, Marya, a young student, had been living in her north London neighbourhood for less than a year when we met for the walking interview. Having set off enthusiastically towards a local park, after about 5 min of walking and talking, Marya checked Google Maps on her phone to realise she was leading us in the wrong direction. We then turned around and headed back the way we came. This short but revealing incident indicates her newness and lack of familiarity with the locality. Her experiences contrast with Muzhda who, as noted above, lived in a small city in the North-West for three years. Muzhda exhibited 'mastery' (Trąbka 2019) of her locality, and indeed the wider county, as she named all the towns she had visited across the region. This was partly because her son played in a local football team and Muzhda, who recently passed her driving test, drove around the county to support the team. As discussed below, transport was a recurring theme in how participants navigated places.

In addition to their newness in neighbourhoods, all participants emphasised that they never expected to move to England. Their departure from Afghanistan, whether directly to the UK or via a transit country, had been hurried and unprepared. Zamira and her military husband fled with their 5 children and spent 3 days queuing and waiting in the chaos of Kabul airport. She explained that they were not prepared for the journey and had not packed extra clothes. In the confusion at the crowded airport, some of the children lost their shoes. She added that they arrived 'with nothing, literally nothing'.

The speed of the Taliban takeover in Kabul and the fall of the government was clearly an 'unsettling event' (Kilkey and Ryan 2021) that completely changed people's life trajectories. As Jaheda stated: 'Suddenly everything changed'. Many participants emphasised the unexpectedness of sudden departures: 'I wasn't expecting to come here' (Nooria). Similarly, Zamina stated: 'I didn't expect to come here'.

Muzhda added that she had a good life and a job she enjoyed in Afghanistan, but ‘we had to leave, by force’. This meant leaving everything behind: ‘[I] locked my house with everything (inside) and left’. In addition to leaving her possessions, Muzhda underlined her deeper sense of loss: ‘I lost everything, my position, my career, my identity everything’. This powerful quote illustrates the process of rapid and forced dis-embedding from home, possessions and identity. Participants are now at various states of embedding in new, unfamiliar contexts in locations across England.

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was rebuilding their lives, from scratch, in completely new environments. Gulshan explained the effort required to adapt to a system that is so different from Afghanistan: ‘The house is different, the people are different. The rule, everything is different’.

As we walked around her new London neighbourhood, Marya told us that she had ‘no idea how to live here’ and was ‘starting my life from zero’. In Birmingham, Jaheda, who had been a midwife in Afghanistan, also mentioned starting from zero and, given her former occupation, she used an apt metaphor that she and her family were ‘starting like newborn babies here’.

Layla went further and stated that she started ‘below zero’ and had to work hard to get even to zero. As we walked along the beach, on a windy autumn afternoon, in the seaside town where Layla now lives with her parents and siblings, she talked about how the trauma of evacuation still haunted her. Thus, starting ‘below zero’ meant rebuilding her mental well-being and overcoming the depression that affected her since arriving in England. However, after recently gaining university admission, Layla stated:

now I’m really happy, the thing that helps me a lot to become healthy mentally (is) when I succeed in university. So, because I feel very happy and my dream become true and when I walk into university, I feel something else, joy. (Layla)

Evacuation also meant separation from extended family networks in Afghanistan. Whilst the participants were enormously relieved to escape the Taliban, they were deeply worried about relatives left behind. As discussed elsewhere (Ryan, Lopez, and Rasa 2024), resettled Afghans are investing immense emotional energy in sustaining transnational ties with relatives in Afghanistan and those relocated elsewhere. Paymana spends hours every week chatting on WhatsApp to her mother in Afghanistan and her sister in Germany. She explained that kinship networks were vital to her and that in Afghanistan, in contrast to the UK, one is ‘never alone’.

We mention this context because it is necessary to understand that participants were not simply embedded in new and unfamiliar environments but also processing the loss of their former lives, including the trauma of events in Afghanistan. Rebuilding lives takes time, as several interviewees mentioned: ‘it takes time to heal and settle in’ (Nazanin).

Safety emerged as a priority for the participants as they evaluated new localities in terms of how safe they felt.

### *‘I feel safe’ (Wazhma): navigating embedding in new places*

In contrast to the dangers of Afghanistan, participants continually emphasised how safe they feel ‘here’, but it was apparent that this perceived safety varied by geographical scale. Sisters Jaheda and Sadia echoed many participants when they

described the UK as a safe country and expressed their gratitude to the UK government for evacuating them.

In her quiet suburban neighbourhood in the Midlands – Gulshan told us that she feels ‘very safe’. Similarly, in London, Zamina, after the traumatic evacuation from Kabul, said, ‘We can sleep peacefully in our beds’. Also in London, Mina noted: ‘Now we know how life can be.’ Wazhma simply asserted ‘I feel safe’. In the North-West, we walked around Ministry of Defence properties where many Afghans were housed, including Hasina, whose husband worked with the military in Afghanistan. As we strolled around rows of identical terraced houses, on a frosty morning, Hasina remarked that she felt very safe: ‘security is good’.

The walks show varied levels of familiarity in place. Layla was striding around her seaside town, guiding us through shortcuts, taking us to her favourite café on the sea-front. Interestingly, although the interview was finished, she insisted on leading us back to the train station, at the opposite end of the town, in case we got lost. By contrast, others were less sure-footed as we walked around. Hence, it would be simplistic to assume that all participants feel familiar with and confident in their new locations.

The walking interviews also revealed places where women felt unsafe. In a quiet suburb of Birmingham, we met sisters Farida, Shabnam, Masooma and their mother Zainab. As we approached the house, we encountered a cul-de-sac with 12 semi-detached houses, accessed through a quiet lane. When walking around with two of the sisters, Maria noted how unsafe they felt as dusk approached. There was no lighting in the lane, so visibility was limited. Dogs could be heard barking very loudly somewhere nearby. The young women told us that men, with dogs, often hang around the lane at night. They suspected that the men were selling drugs. After a few minutes, it was clear the sisters wanted to return to the safety of their house, so the walk was curtailed, and the interview continued inside. The sisters explained that they avoid going out after dark, which on that autumn afternoon was around 4.30 pm, and ensure to return from their college classes before dusk. This impacts their ability to find part-time jobs as they do not want to work evening shifts.

A few women mentioned specific incidents involving racist or Islamophobic encounters. For example, Gulshan described how a woman in a supermarket, in her suburb of Birmingham, was abusive: ‘One lady said I should take off headscarf. She was shouting ... I was very scared’. In most cases, the participants described these as isolated occurrences associated with a rude or unpleasant individual. However, the events that could not be dismissed as isolated individuals were the racist riots of 2024.

Conducting walking interviews in autumn 2024, we had not expected to focus so much attention on the riots. Indeed, initially, we deliberately did not mention them. Thus, we were interested to note that during an early interview, Layla introduced the riots: ‘we were all afraid’. Whilst travelling from college by bus, she observed protesters and was terrified: ‘in the evening, I left college to come home I see some people ... they have some signs ... using bad words to refugees’. Similarly, in the North-West, Hasina took a bus into town to bring a home-cooked lunch to her husband, who worked part-time. She saw a crowd of people gathered in the town centre, with banners, and immediately caught a bus back to her house. However, most participants had not observed any actual protests but relied entirely on social media and news outlets for information. Several mentioned seeing videos of rioters on TikTok. In many cases,

participants described remaining at home and not leaving their houses while the riots took place: ‘more than one week I stay at the house ... I feel maybe someone attack me’ (Sadia). Participants expressed profound shock at seeing attacks on buildings housing refugees:

Surprise, shock ... we came from my homeland to here to be safe, now people here are saying: ‘we don’t want you here, you should go’. (Jaheda)

Interestingly, this fear was pervasive even in areas that experienced no riots. For example, in London, Malalai described how terrifying the riots had been and how unsafe she felt as buildings around ‘London’ were attacked. She said: ‘London was not safe’. In fact, there were no riots in London. But she perceived the whole country to be implicated in the violence. It is noteworthy that her local councillors and ‘someone from the parliament’ visited many Afghan families resettled in that borough, to reassure them they were safe. Nonetheless, Malalai and her children stayed at home until order was restored. She echoed many participants in expressing surprise that something like this could happen in England: ‘very shocking, we didn’t expect it’.

Hence, the unsettling impact of the racist riots, not only in affected areas but for all refugees across the country, cannot be underestimated. For those fleeing violence, processing the trauma of evacuation, and in nascent stages of embedding in new places, the violence of summer 2024 was not only profoundly shocking but also undermined the sense of safety they expected in England.

However, reasons for feeling unsafe can vary. Mashal, aged in their early 20s, identified as non-binary and had been evacuated from Afghanistan along with 30 or so LGBTQI+ people. Thus, their arrival in the UK was associated with a strong sense of safety and security. After some time in temporary accommodation in the Midlands, Mashal was offered a flat by a London local authority and was delighted to move to the capital, where they looked forward to becoming active in LGBTQI+ networks. However, upon arrival, Mashal was stunned to discover that many Afghan families had been rehoused in the same building. Mashal changed their clothes and appearance to attract less attention:

it’s really hard for me ... Every time I walk out of my flat, I have to put this fake mask on ... I dress completely different. It’s quite different (*pointing to their simple, dark clothing*). Not this ... it would be more colourful, yeah. I would mess around with my hair, nail polish. (Mashal)

Instead of feeling safe, Mashal felt watched and judged by other Afghans. This was apparent during our interview when Mashal did not want to be recorded whilst walking around. So, we agreed to undertake the recording in a quiet café and then stroll in the neighbourhood and chat, but not audio-record that part of the interview. Walking around the busy and vibrant London streets, with Louise, Mashal pointed out lots of other Afghans among the passers-by. Clearly, Mashal was mindful of their presence and wary of being conspicuous and judged.

For some Afghans, especially those who choose to defy what might be regarded as cultural and religious norms, feelings of being safe and free varied within particular settings. Paymana, a former teacher, is a single woman in her late 20s who chooses not to wear the hijab. She was rehoused, with a sibling, in a small town in the South-East of England. The town is largely white British and, Paymana explained, appealed to her because she did not

feel judged. As we walked around the town, she contrasted the freedom she feels there with her experiences in a London borough where she visits relatives. She said that many 'Pakistani and Afghan people' live in that borough, and she felt judged for not covering her hair. Although she had the option to live with relatives in that borough, she declined.

As noted in this section, most participants moved to particular areas because they were allocated housing by local authorities. As discussed below, their evaluation of accommodation varied enormously and impacted their sense of embedding and feeling at home in new neighbourhoods.

### *'It is our home' (Breshna): embedding in domestic spaces*

Whilst participants were relieved to leave temporary but protracted hotel accommodation, their experiences of housing and embedding in new localities varied.

Some were happy in their homes and liked their neighbourhoods. We visited Mina and her daughter Breshna in their newly furnished, bright and airy flats in London. The two women, both widows, and their children, were housed by the council in adjoining flats and during our visit we spent time in each home. The weather was wet, so we walked around the block and visited the lovely garden where Mina proudly showed us the flowers, vegetables and herbs she planted. Through gardening, Mina had met some British neighbours, and although she could not communicate with them in English, through body language, smiling and pointing, they managed to forge a connection around shared love of plants. She told us how they exchanged seeds and cuttings. Mother and daughter were pleased with the accommodation and the neighbourhood. Breshna stated: 'I am very happy with the Government for giving us the houses that we wanted'.

By contrast, Tamana, who lived in the same borough, was frustrated in her 4th-floor flat, with no lift. Her husband worked long hours as a security guard, so Tamana had to carry the toddler, new baby, pushchair and shopping up four flights of stairs. There was no garden for the children to play. Neighbours complained that the children made too much noise inside the flat. Tamana expressed her surprise and disappointment at UK housing, which she perceived as old, small and dark. In Afghanistan, their house was bigger.

This was a common theme in interviews. Most participants noted that their houses in Afghanistan had been larger, with space to entertain. Many were surprised that British houses and flats were so small, dank and cramped. As Madina told us, she had 'expected life to be more comfortable here'. Having perceived Britain to be a wealthy country, these women expected higher standards of living.

Zamira, her husband and 6 children have been rehoused in a basement flat. She explained that the flat was dark and too small for 8 people. Moreover, as part of the support provided by local authorities through the Resettlement Scheme, Zamira had connected with other recently arrived Afghans in her borough. However, this led to comparisons about housing. Zamira expressed frustration that some Afghan families had been rehoused in nice, big, newly refurbished flats. Indeed, visiting participants in their homes, we observed different types and standards of accommodation even within the same borough. Experiences of embedding in their new homes varied according to how comfortable people feel within these dwellings.

Interestingly, while some participants were disappointed with their accommodation, they were happy with their neighbourhoods, indicating differentiated levels of embedding.

### ***'No halal shops ... no Aldi or Lidl' (Nazanin): differentiated embedding in neighbourhoods***

In terms of the character of a neighbourhood, a theme mentioned by almost all participants was the proximity of halal shops. Describing her neighbourhood in London, Wazhma spontaneously mentioned 'a lot of halal shops'.

As noted elsewhere in the literature (Huizinga and Van Hoven 2018; Van der Boor, Dowrick, and White 2022), in contexts of disrupted lives, people seek out familiarity. Halal shops, as well as being religiously significant, can also provide familiar spaces where people feel comfortable. But that is not to suggest that newcomers aren't also adapting and forging new shopping habits. Interestingly, while halal shops were regarded as essential for meat, for other groceries, participants had discovered a new resource – low-cost supermarket chains. Nooria emphasised that she used 'halal shops' for meat but buys other produce 'in Aldi or Lidl'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, along with halal shops, Aldi was probably mentioned above any other amenity. The extent to which a neighbourhood had easy access to Aldi became a marker of its identity.

Differentiated embedding in place is clear in the case of Tamana. As noted earlier, she felt trapped in her 4th-floor flat without a lift and two young children to carry upstairs. However, having been in temporary hotel accommodation in the same borough, she already felt familiar and confident in the neighbourhood. During our interview, she asserted her local knowledge or 'mastery' of the area (Trąbka 2019), which is a key aspect of spatial embedding. She knew all the shops in the neighbourhood – 'Iceland, Aldi, Lidl' and the 'Turkish halal shops'. She had discovered all the parks and playgrounds for the children. So, while unhappy with the flat, she liked the neighbourhood and wanted to remain there.

Nowhere was the contrast between embedding in a house and embedding in a neighbourhood more apparent than in the case of Sarah, a young student. The spacious semi-detached house, which we visited, was part of a brand-new housing development located in a village in the North-West of England. Walking around, it was obvious that the developers had built houses before any infrastructure was in place. There were no shops, schools, cafes or social spaces. Transportation was limited. Sarah's younger brother walked for almost one hour to the nearest secondary school. The bus to the city, where Sarah attended college, only travelled once per hour, requiring careful coordination with the bus timetable. Sarah became upset as she described her loneliness and isolation. Although she spoke fluent English, she had no friends in the village and, given the absence of amenities, no opportunities to meet new people.

I feel very lonely because there's no friends of mine, so no one is here, because it's very difficult if you don't have any friends, relatives or any neighbours just to come to their home or interact with them, yes, it's very difficult. (Sarah)

She and her family wanted to move into the city to be near college, schools, job opportunities, halal shops and the mosque. They were aware that moving to the city could mean swapping their spacious, newly built house for something smaller, older and

probably less well insulated. But Sarah asserted that she would prefer to have a worse house in a more dynamic and diverse area.

As noted, refugees are often relocated by local authorities to areas based on housing availability (Schneider 2025) and so may find themselves in locations without any prior migration history. Nazanin, her husband and young child had been rehoused in a small town in the South-East of England. The town is affluent, predominantly white and English. The affluence of the area is underlined by the types of shops. Nazanin and her friend Paymana suggested that we meet in a café near the station. Interestingly, the café was part of a huge Waitrose<sup>7</sup> supermarket. As noted earlier, we need to be mindful of positionality. As researchers, we are also entangled in place-making processes and do not stand outside these places (Pink 2008). Thus, whilst Waitrose was viewed by us as a pleasant and convenient place to meet the two women, and they suggested it because of its proximity to the station, for them, it underlined the wealth of the town. They talked about this during both their interviews.

Describing the town, Nazanin explained: 'My problem is shops, expensive, no halal shops ... no Aldi or Lidl'. Paymana concurred 'we don't have Aldi'. The women needed to travel to another town by bus for shopping. Nazanin was keen to relocate to somewhere more affordable – i.e. which not only has a halal shop but also an Aldi supermarket. While we sat drinking coffee in Waitrose, it was apparent that the women would never shop there. During our conversation, an interesting exchange occurred. Louise mentioned that she did all her grocery shopping at Aldi. The women expressed surprise as they expected that Louise would shop 'in Marks and Spencer'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, they associated shopping habits with class positionality. As newcomers living in a wealthy, largely white town, they assumed that only poor migrants shopped in low-cost supermarkets.

Discussions about cheap supermarkets underline the financial insecurity of most participants. Whilst seeking safety and security, their arrival in England often resulted in financial insecurity, at least in the short term. As discussed elsewhere (Ryan et al. 2025), most had experienced a significant loss of status and financial security. In Afghanistan, many of their husbands/ fathers had had good military jobs, whilst many of the women had been full-time mothers, or students in the case of the younger participants (Marya, Sarah, Sadia). But several had careers as teachers (Paymana, Gulshan, Nazanin), midwives (Jaheda), working for large international NGOs (Layla) or administrative jobs (Muzhda). Thus, forced migration transformed living standards. This was clearly narrated by Safia, who told us that in Afghanistan she had been well off, lived in a nice house, and had a cleaner, childminder and a cook. Now her family is surviving on benefits, whilst her husband looks for a job and she attends ESOL classes. Summarising all their bills for rent, utilities, food and clothes for the children, she said that after 20 days each month their money is gone and they struggle to manage 'til the next payment arrives.

Access to resources, including economic and cultural capital (Carlbaum 2022), can shape how refugees experience embedding in the same area. For example, Hasina and Muzhda lived in the same locality in a small northern city. Hasina, who spoke no English and had very limited economic resources, described many challenges in accessing amenities and services. By contrast, Muzhda, who spoke fluent English and was

financially secure, since both she and her husband worked full-time, described all the local services and amenities as good and easy to access.

Given their varied levels of economic and cultural capital, it is apparent that social capital, in the form of networks of support, can be crucial to enable relational embedding in new places (see also Speed et al. 2021).

### ***'We are lucky, we have Afghan neighbours' (Malalai): relational embedding***

Through the resettlement scheme, Afghans are receiving support from local authorities and assigned caseworkers to support arrival and initial settling into boroughs (Ryan, Lopez, and Dalceggio, 2024). Urban councils often house Afghans in ethnically diverse areas with access to amenities such as halal shops, mosques, women's groups and ESOL classes. Moreover, resettlement schemes can result in several Afghan families being housed in proximity to each other. This ready access to Afghan networks was valued by many participants. Wazhma told us that 12 Afghan families were housed in her London neighbourhood: 'I am so happy . . . we can easily communicate'. Their children attend the same school. For Wazhma, who speaks little English and was interviewed with Mursal interpreting, the proximity of other Afghans is crucial to her social life. The women meet in a local park, where the interview took place and where other Afghan families were clearly visible. Moreover, the women regularly visit each other's houses to chat over refreshments. Hence, Wazhma is embedded relationally in her local friendship network of Afghan women.

Similar experiences were described by women we met in other parts of London. Tamana, as mentioned earlier, is alone all day with two young children, whilst her husband works full-time. She told us how lonely she felt and how much she missed her extended kinship network in Afghanistan. However, she felt lucky to have local Afghan friends. These are people she met in temporary hotel accommodation and who have been housed by the council in the same neighbourhood. She told us that without these friends she would 'go crazy here'.

Malalai, a middle-aged woman who doesn't speak English, has a disability resulting in limited mobility and spends most of her time in her flat. She and her family live in an area of London where many other Afghan families were resettled by the council. During our visit, we observed that several Afghan neighbours popped in to chat or exchange food. Malalai explained that neighbours are important: 'according to our culture and religion, neighbours are very important to us'.

However, ethnically diverse neighbours were not necessarily regarded as welcoming spaces. Farida, her sisters and mother, Zainab, live in a quiet suburb of Birmingham. Many of their neighbours are 'Indian' but the women told us they felt little commonality with Indian culture, religion or language. Indeed, they complained about all the noise and fireworks during Diwali,<sup>9</sup> which took place just before our visit. Zainab, in her late 60s, does not speak English and is alone at home during the day, whilst her daughters attend college. Unable to communicate with neighbours, she feels isolated and lonely. The family is keen to move to another city where they have relatives so that their mother will not be alone. Similarly, Madina, who was resettled in a small town, did not speak English and could not communicate with neighbours. She craved companionship, but 'there is no other Afghan family around'.

While language can be a significant barrier to relational embedding in neighbourhoods (Morrice et al. 2021; Speed et al. 2021), as indicated by Madina and Zainab above, this is not necessarily a straightforward issue. Malalai and Wazhma, despite speaking little or no English, were happily embedding in their neighbourhood surrounded by Afghan neighbours and friends. Moreover, speaking English fluently is no guarantee of embedding in a locality. As noted earlier, Sarah speaks fluent English but found no opportunities to make new friends in her isolated village. Paymana, who also speaks English confidently, noted that despite cordial exchanges with British neighbours – saying ‘hi, hello, how are you?’ – this never developed into deeper connections. She invited some to visit. However, unlike Afghanistan, where family and friends often visit, she finds that in England everyone is busy: ‘no one comes to your house.’

Muzhda was unusual amongst our participants in that she and her husband had bought their own home. Both partners were highly educated professionals, spoke fluent English and were employed full-time since arriving in the region. When we visited her house, Muzhda told us about some advice from a British colleague. When moving to the suburban neighbourhood in a small northern city, he advised them to introduce themselves to neighbours.

on the first day that we moved here, me and my husband we both went and knocked all my neighbours’ doors, and we say that we are Afghan, we move here. We came through the scheme, my husband said: ‘I served for the British Army’. (Muzhda)

It is noteworthy that Muzhda’s husband emphasised his work with the British forces in Afghanistan – perhaps as a way of underlining a connection with British culture and society. While their relationship with their mostly white British neighbours was cordial, so far, the only neighbours who invited them to visit for a meal were the other Afghan family on the street.

Thus, relational embedding in neighbourhoods is a two-way process, requiring reciprocity, such that neighbours are also motivated to forge friendships with newcomers (Ryan and Mulholland 2015).

## Conclusion

In this paper, drawing upon mobile methods and the conceptual framework of embedding, we have presented insights into how recently resettled Afghan women are navigating new neighbourhoods and forging relational ties within different localities across England. Therefore, our research provides insights into how people resettled from the same origin country to the same receiving country, during the same period of time, can have markedly different experiences.

The embodied experience of walking around with participants, visiting their homes and neighbourhoods, seeing how they traverse local contexts and use amenities, as they described and explained these locations to us, is immensely informative. As noted, ‘walking interviews afford insights into how migrants exercise agency in shaping, challenging, and negotiating their lived environments and societal circumstances’ (Sun and Zhu 2024, 17). We observed how some were confidently striding around their neighbourhoods whilst others were hesitant, less sure-footed, uncomfortable and sometimes even fearful in particular places.

Applying the conceptual framework of embedding provides insights into complex, multi-dimensional, dynamic and contingent processes through which the women are navigating resettlement spatially and temporally. As resettled persons, they have secure immigration status and thus have the possibility of embedding into society and planning their future lives. Upon arrival, following their forced flight from Afghanistan, their primary concerns were safety and security. However, as time goes by, and especially after leaving hotels and being rehoused, other forms of insecurity, including economic insecurity and loss of their previous living standards (Ryan et al. 2025), are being confronted as they navigate embedding in new residential places.

Our analysis reveals how participants are negotiating embedding across different scales and domains of society – residentially, relationally, economically and culturally. Thus, we see the opportunities but also the obstacles afforded within specific geographical locations. Despite their agentic efforts and the evident success of some in ‘mastering’ their local areas, our analysis also shows how embedding can be circumscribed by local conditions, such as ethnic composition and available amenities.

Of course, these women are still at early stages of resettlement. Many had lived in their neighbourhoods for less than two years. Moreover, in this early phase, many were still receiving support from local agencies, including borough councils. Thus, it will be important to undertake follow-up research to understand how their experiences unfold over time and especially after that initial resettlement support is gradually withdrawn.

Our analysis shows how women are mobilising different resources (social, economic and cultural capital) to negotiate localities. For example, vernacular proficiency can be immensely valuable cultural capital in forging familiarity in new places (Carlbaum 2022). Forging new networks can generate crucial social capital (Speed et al. 2021), but, as shown in our paper, this can take different forms. Personal preferences and identifications shape how these diverse Afghan participants perceived and were embedding relationally within neighbourhoods. Some appreciated opportunities to forge local Afghan networks, for friendship and emotional support, while others were keen to avoid co-ethnic neighbours due to concerns about judgement and pressure to conform to ‘traditional’ values. Consequently, the same neighbourhood may be experienced very differently.

Of course, local places are not neutral backdrops. Far from being self-evident, places are socially constructed through layers of interaction over time (Grey and O’Toole 2020). Furthermore, local places are nestled within wider geopolitical contexts (Massey 1994). This was apparent when discussing the racist riots of summer 2024. Even in areas where no riots occurred, participants described being frightened to leave their homes for fear of attack. The violence, widely reported on social media, impacted perceptions of safety, undermining nascent and fragile embedding. This points to the dynamic and contingent aspects of embedding – which can be disrupted and undermined by ‘unsettling events’ (Kilkey and Ryan 2021).

Thus, rather than simply assume that people will settle over time, this paper has contributed to understanding the conditions that support or hinder processes of embedding, but also the extent to which enabling resources (capital) can be actively mobilised within specific local contexts.

## Notes

1. We use the term ‘refugee’ here to mean displaced people who have sought sanctuary in a different country. We recognise that there are different legal routes to gain settlement rights in the UK. The Afghans included in this paper are formally defined in the UK context as ‘resettled persons’.
2. Following a fatal stabbing incident in Southport in August 2024, racist, anti-migration riots erupted in many towns and cities, fuelled by misinformation on social media that incorrectly blamed a refugee for the stabbing <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/ckg55we5n3xo>.
3. [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications-single-page&utm\\_source=f42bc52f-e91e-4061-aad9-5d20e531e145&utm\\_content=immediately](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications-single-page&utm_source=f42bc52f-e91e-4061-aad9-5d20e531e145&utm_content=immediately).
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data/afghan-resettlement-programme-operational-data>.
5. Caroline Oliver (PI), Mustafa Raheal, Mursal Rasa and Olga Cara (University College London), Louise Ryan and Maria Lopez (London Metropolitan University), and Janroj Keles (London Middlesex University).
6. Low cost supermarket chains.
7. An expensive shop associated with high quality, luxury produce.
8. Another expensive shop associated with luxury food.
9. A Hindu festival.

## Author contributions

CRedit: **Louise Ryan:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft; **María López:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Mursal Rasa:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – review & editing.

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