

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'It hurts my heart': Afghan women in London negotiating family relationships and (im)mobility regimes across borders

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Abstract

This paper aims to contribute new insights into transnational care relationships by drawing on qualitative longitudinal data, to explore the complexities and nuances of Afghan women's dynamic family relations across multiple countries and continents. Rather than treating transnational families as a homogeneous unit, we present rich case studies to explore relationships with particular relatives, such as mothers, sisters and in-laws, to understand the different dynamics within specific familial ties. Paying attention to the specificities of spatial contexts and infrastructures in framing opportunities and obstacles to transnational care, we apply the concept of immobility regimes. Beyond a simple bi-national focus on countries of origin and residence, we explore how the women navigate these regimes, across multiple countries and different visa regimes to arrange in-person visits with geographically dispersed kin. We consider the role of ICTs and the limitations of poor connectivity, especially in countries like Afghanistan, and the gender power dynamics that may limit women's access to technologies.

KEYWORDS

Afghan refugees, ICTs, immobility regimes, transnational care, visits

1 | INTRODUCTION

Transnational families are often regarded through the lens of care (Brandhorst et al., 2020) as sources of mutual support—ranging from practical and financial to emotional (Kraler et al., 2011; Radziwinowiczówna et al., 2018). For newly arrived migrants, in particular, ties to families back in the original country may be stronger and more reliable than new, and more fragile, relationships in the destination society (Speed et al., 2021). Families 'back home' may provide encouragement and motivation to new migrants as they navigate unfamiliar and even hostile environments (Ryan, 2023; Heidinger, 2024).

Of course, in exploring transnational family relationships, it is necessary to pay attention to specificities of place and associated immigration regulations (Speed et al., 2021). Beyond a simple dyad of

countries of origin and residence, for refugees, close relatives may be spread over numerous locations including different continents. Hence, negotiating in-person visits, as well as virtual communication, is necessarily framed by particular contextual factors including visa requirements (Czaika et al., 2017), travel costs and internet connectivity (Alencar, 2020).

In this paper, drawing on rich longitudinal qualitative data with Afghan women in London, we apply the concept of 'immobility regimes' (Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013) to analyse how transnational care relationships are shaped by visa and immigration regulations across multiple countries. Furthermore, we also explore how participants actively negotiate these constraints in their efforts to maintain transnational caring relations with particular relatives.

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Our paper aims to contribute new insights into transnational care relations by exploring the complexities and nuances of Afghan women's dynamic family relations across multiple countries and continents. Drawing on a wider dataset from two research projects and using qualitative longitudinal research methods and rich case studies of five women, in particular, whom we have re-interviewed on numerous occasions over several years, we explore how different transnational relations evolve over time. Building on earlier work by Ryan (2011; 2023), we argue that, rather than treating 'transnational families' as a unified category, it is necessary to analyse different relationships and explore how these change over time. Ties to in-laws or older male relatives may be perceived as controlling, while ties to particular relatives, such as sisters or mothers may be perceived as supportive and caring. Thus, while Afghan women in the United Kingdom may be relieved to get away from negative, controlling transnational relations, simultaneously, they may miss the support and mutual care of other long-distance relationships. In this way, we advance understanding of gender relations and power dynamics within transnational families, especially for refugee women. Moreover, as our participants had relatives scattered over five continents, we consider the constraints of ICTs and poor connectivity, and we offer insights into how these women actively navigated 'immobility regimes' in their efforts to achieve some in-person family visits to provide and receive care. In so doing, we call attention to the significance of specific spatial contexts and infrastructures in framing opportunities and obstacles to transnational care.

In the next section we briefly review the key concepts that inform our analysis. We then look in some detail at the specific context in Afghanistan and gendered family obligations, especially for young married women. This background, we argue, is important in shaping the dynamics, power relations and agency within transnational families. Then, we briefly discuss the return of the Taliban and the mass evacuation from Kabul in 2021. We then introduce our research studies and present our data through the rich case studies of five Afghan women. In the concluding section we summarise our key contributions.

2 | NAVIGATING TRANSNATIONAL CARE AND IMMOBILITY REGIMES

While much has been written in recent decades about how transnationalism is enabled by cheap travel and new communication technology, there is growing awareness of how mobility is stratified by class, age, gender and, of course, immigration status (Czaika et al., 2017; Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Hence, it is necessary to recognise the 'mobility gap' (Shamir, 2005). In this paper, to understand the specificities of refugees' transnational family relations, we draw on the concept of 'immobility regimes' (Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013). In other words, immigration regulations operate in ways that limit and even prevent mobility for particular migrants. As Brandhorst et al note: 'immobility regimes illuminate the limits of transnational care' (2020: 262).

Building on this concept and drawing on our rich qualitative longitudinal data with Afghan women in London, we explore not only how our participants' (im)mobility is managed, but also how close

relatives, who are refugees in other jurisdictions, as well as those still in Afghanistan, are confronting different immobility regimes. In this way, our paper goes beyond a bi-national focus on 'here' and 'there'. Indeed, reflecting the huge dispersal of Afghan refugees, our participants had immediate family in Iran and Pakistan, as well as across European countries, Australia, the United States and even in South America. Therefore, they are negotiating transnational care across 'global regimes of immobility' (Mata-Codesal, 2015). Indeed, the possibility to arrange in-person visits across these varied countries is framed by visas regulations. Visas represent a practical manifestation of immobility regimes.

As Czaika et al. (2017: 5) argue, 'visas, alongside passports, have been key instruments ... to monitor and control population mobility'. However, visa regulations do not apply equally to all travellers. Visas are usually required for people perceived to be potential risks 'in terms of their potential to be asylum seekers or to become undocumented... or perceived as a security risk in terms of their potential to threaten public life as criminals or terrorists' (p. 4). While it may be tempting to assume that visas are primarily imposed by global North countries on those coming from the global South, as Czaika et al note, 'real-world visa regimes may not fit within simplistic 'North-South' schemes' (p. 4). Indeed, as we demonstrate in this paper, visa regimes reflect 'multi-layered hierarchies at the regional level' (p. 4).

Nonetheless, rather than assuming passivity in the face of such immobility regimes, it is necessary to critically interrogate the 'stereotypical views of refugees as "vulnerable" individuals who lack autonomy to rebuild their lives' (Alencar, 2020). Hence, adopting a transnational lens, we contribute to understanding how refugees manage caring relationships across multiple borders and diverse (im)mobility regimes.

ICTs have undoubtedly enabled virtual presence in ways that may compensate, at least in part, for the obstacles to real co-presence (Baldassar, 2008). ICTs are even more significant for those unable to obtain visas for in-person visits. The practice of 'doing family' is influenced significantly by interactions facilitated through ICT (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). In their article, Nedelcu and Wyss (2016) show that 'polymedia environments' lead to the emergence of 'ordinary co-presence' routines that nourish a sense of continuously 'doing family' across distance within transnational families. Moreover, there is burgeoning literature on the use of digital technology by migrants and refugees especially those arriving in Europe (for an overview see Alencar, 2020). While there is a tendency in the literature to focus on the possibilities of ICT, nonetheless, as Alencar (2020) notes, technology is contingent upon contextual factors including costs, literacy and connectivity. Indeed, as we show, the utilisation of ICT platforms is inherently imbued with gender, socio-economic disparities, and geo-political privileges.

Furthermore, rather than being entirely supportive and caring, transnational families, despite their geographical distance, can be a source of control and pressure as they exert influence on migrants (Chikwira & Madziva, 2023). Of course, it is important to note that male migrants may also feel under pressure to conform to gender norms particularly when it comes to providing financial supporting for relatives back in the origin country (Tawodzera, 2024). Moreover, there is evidence that transnational families may exert specific

controls to ensure that female relatives abide by traditional roles and expectations (Parreñas, 2005). However, physical distance and opportunity structures in destination countries, can also enable women to resist transnational pressures, as power dynamics shift and new relations with geographically distant relatives can be asserted over time. Therefore, in this paper, we consider how some Afghan women were keen to break away from particular transnational ties. To understand these dynamics, it is necessary to discuss gender norms and power relations in the Afghan context, as discussed in the next section.

3 | POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN AFGHAN FAMILIES

Existing literature on women's position in Afghan families primarily focused on the complex interplay of cultural and socio-political factors that have shaped the power dynamics within Afghan families across generations. Following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2002, the international community urged the Afghan government to restore women's rights, which had been eroded during Taliban's rule. Nevertheless, the persistent conflict, the legacy of Taliban governance and certain traditional principles continued to impact women's lives in Afghanistan (Blum et al., 2019). This is reflected in the United Nations Gender Inequality Index, which ranks Afghanistan at the bottom of 169 countries, and the Human Development Index, which ranked Afghanistan 172 out of 189 countries in 2014 (Samar et al., 2014). Afrouz et al. (2023) state that Afghan society has maintained a patriarchal system in which gender roles are strictly enforced at domestic level. Deviation from these established behavioural norms puts individuals at risk of social ostracism, with key societal norms serving as a mechanism of control, even in the context of contemporary urbanised environments.

Even before the Taliban retook power in Afghanistan in 2021, domestic violence not only violated women's rights, but also prevented women from exercising their civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights (Nijhowne & Oates, 2008). Girls' dropout rates from education are linked to child marriage and societal norms that result in a lack of parental investment in their daughters' education (Blum et al., 2019). Marriage typically ends a girl's opportunities for further education. Afghan brides move to the groom's house after marriage and usually live with the entire family-in-law (Afrouz et al., 2023).

Hosseini and Punzi (2022) suggest that domestic violence from husbands and in-laws is a significant problem in the lives of many Afghan women. Studies have found a distinct nexus between the way women are treated by their spouses and their respective in-laws (Jewkes et al., 2019). As we will hear later in the story of an Afghan participant, living with in-laws is a leading factor in shaping domestic violence (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022).

Though, divorce can be a critical remedy for women experiencing domestic violence; the Global Rights report on Domestic Abuse in Afghanistan indicates that in most cases, women simply want the

abuse to stop and do not want a divorce (2008). Research suggests that divorced and unmarried women are more vulnerable to sexual violence than their married counterparts due to low social status attributed to divorced women in Afghanistan, who are categorised as 'dis-honoured women'. This is also related to the challenges associated with getting a divorce, the lack of a system for dividing marital property after a divorce, and the lack of enforceable legal provisions that might require husbands to financially support their former wives in a situation where women have limited opportunities to pursue careers. Thus, divorce is highly uncommon and almost all women stay in their marriages and continue to suffer violence (Nijhowne & Oates, 2008). It is important to note that Afghan women, as active social participants, have endured decades of war and violence and have sought alternative ways to survive and express their agency within a context of limited resources and restrictive cultural practices (Rostami Povey, 2003).

However, the power dynamics within Afghan families can vary based on social class and ethnic background. There are instances where Afghan men act as allies, supporting women's rights and gender equality (Yousaf & Peacock, 2023).

This background is relevant to understanding how migration can provide opportunities for women to resist family pressures and gender norms. As discussed below, some of our participants are now resisting pressure from transnational relatives, particularly husbands and in-laws back in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

4 | THE AFGHAN EVACUATION

Following the Afghan government collapse and the massive evacuation in August 2021, 2.3 million Afghans registered as refugees in the region, mostly in Pakistan and Iran (UNHCR, 2022). In 2023, at least 8.2 million Afghans were hosted across 103 different countries, becoming the third-largest displaced population globally, after Syrian and Ukrainian refugees (UNHCR, 2023).

The British military evacuated about 15,000 Afghans as part of 'Operation Pitting' and 10,000 more since then. Most were relocated under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) and the Afghan Citizen Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) Pathways (Home Office, 2024). Both programmes aim to assist Afghans who have worked with or for the UK government and/or British armed forces in Afghanistan and those at risk of human rights violations, such as female politicians, women's rights activists and judges (Home Office, 2021). The Home Office has granted 12,874 individuals Indefinite Leave to Remain across ARAP and ACRS (Home Office, 2024), entitling them to access welfare, healthcare, education, the right to work, and to apply for a British passport after 5 years in the United Kingdom.

However, they do not have 'refugee status' and are ineligible to sponsor relatives under the Refugee Family Reunion policies (UK Visas and Immigration, 2021). To be considered for resettlement under the ARAP, relatives must be included in the principal's initial application submitted to the Ministry of Defence. Partners,

dependent children and adult dependent relatives who wish to join an Afghan citizen in the United Kingdom must apply for entry clearance under Appendix FM of the Immigration Rules (Ministry of Defence, 2023). This is made harder by difficult criteria in providing the necessary evidence and the lack of Visa Application Centres in Afghanistan (Refugee Legal Support, 2023).

The ARAP and ACRS are being criticised for underestimating the scale of civilian displacement and for using inconsistent and few clear guidelines, leaving the most vulnerable people behind (House of Commons, 2022). The programmes are also criticised for the high costs of temporary emergency accommodation for Afghans in so-called 'bridging hotels' (British Red Cross, Jesuit Refugee Service, Oxfam & Refugee Council, 2022). In March 2023, the government announced that all bridging hotels would be closed within 3 months, leaving over nine thousand people at serious risk of homelessness (BBC, 2023). In March 2024, 3584 people were still in transitional accommodation (Home Office, 2024).¹

We began our research when most Afghan evacuees were still in hotels and used longitudinal research to follow-up with them through repeated interviews at regular intervals.

5 | OUR STUDIES

This article draws upon research we have been undertaking, over the past 3 years, with Afghans²). The overall aim of the research was to understand the experiences and needs of recently arrived Afghans in London.

The first project, conducted in partnership with two Afghan organisations in London, focused primarily on recent arrivals, including evacuees who arrived in 2021 and were living in temporary hotel accommodation (Ryan et al., 2024). The second project, which is on-going (2023–24)³, focuses on the Afghan Resettlement Scheme and people's experiences as they leave hotels and move into accommodation in London. Across both projects, we have interviewed 59 Afghans (32 women and 27 men) and 15 key stakeholders, including directors of migrant organisations and people involved in resettlement programmes in London local authorities. All interviews and focus groups were recorded, fully transcribed, translated⁴ (where required) and anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Working with Afghan organisations, we recruited and trained four peer researchers who helped to shape the project by assisting with recruitment, facilitating focus groups, providing translation support, contributing to the final report and participating in dissemination activities. To foreground the voices of Afghan women,

this paper is now co-authored by one of the participants, Mursal Rasa, who is herself an evacuee from Kabul.

To understand change over time, we applied qualitative longitudinal methods to undertake follow-up interviews (McLeod & Thomson, 2012). For recently arrived Afghans, whose situation is quite fluid in terms of accommodation, employment, family reunification and adjustment to a new environment, a one-off interview only offers a snapshot at a given point in time. Follow-up interviews provide insights into dynamic experiences and emerging opportunities (see Ryan, 2023). We therefore invited a sub-sample of participants to keep in touch with us on a regular basis as their situation unfolds. Because we were especially interested in the experiences of Afghan women, we asked some women if we could re-interview them every 6 months or so. Five agreed and generously shared their unfolding experiences with us through on-going online interviews. This paper, while situating our discussion against the wider dataset, focuses in particular on these women's stories, as they are especially pertinent in revealing dynamic and diverse transnational caring relationships across numerous geographical contexts and immigration regimes. In so doing, we are able to explore in-depth themes that were also raised by other participants across our wider dataset.

6 | TRANSNATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS: CARE, GUILT AND CONTROL

Across both studies, many participants shared with us their mechanisms for carrying out caring responsibilities in geographically dispersed contexts, subject to different regimes of immobility and visa regulations; and how these constraints impact on their lives in the United Kingdom. Participants expressed how restrictions on cross-border mobility have limited their ability to provide care and receive support from transnational families. In addition to severe travel restrictions, many mothers shared how the lack of practical help with childcare from geographically dispersed family network left them feeling isolated and lonely. Amongst our participants, all the women with young children were full time mothers and not engaged in paid employment, though several were studying English language part-time.

Begum is a full-time mother of two young boys, married to an Afghan-born British citizen. When we first interviewed her in 2022, her main concern was for her widowed mother and the safety of her sisters, who were human rights activists in Kabul.

My sisters, the first time when the Taliban came back in Afghanistan, they took over, two of them participate to protests... But after that, the Taliban tried it to find who participate the protest. Then it was a very bad situation for them.

Under the Taliban, these women were also targeted because they belonged to the minority Hazara community (Hakimi, 2023).

¹For more information about the ARAP and ACRS, see also Ryan et al. (2024).

²For more information about the research projects see <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research/centres-groups-and-units/global-diversities-and-inequalities-research-centre/projects-and-partners/afghan-migrants-in-london/>

³For more detail on the second study see <https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research/centres-groups-and-units/global-diversities-and-inequalities-research-centre/projects-and-partners/an-evaluation-of-the-syrian-and-afghan-resettlement-programmes-in-islington/>

⁴Farzana Adell, a Master's student at London Metropolitan University, supported us with translation on the second project.

Being physically separated from her sisters and mother increases Begum's feelings of isolation and loneliness in the United Kingdom (see also Heidinger, 2024). She contrasted her situation with that of her European migrant friend, who has fewer travel restrictions and therefore more opportunities to enjoy the support of her transnational family in caring for the children.

Even yesterday, I spoke with my friend. We are in playground and usually she shares her feeling with me. She said 'I have my husband's family here, but I don't have no one from my own family, but I like to have my sister, my family'. But... I said 'I don't have family even in Europe.' Yeah, but I said 'no worry. If they, if they be safe...'⁵

Ultimately, Begum prioritises her family's safety over the emotional toll of being forcibly separated. She explains her strategies to mitigate her sadness.

I accept this is the life.... I usually make myself busy. I go to park, and I meet my friend, I go another place and busy with children and studying. I don't make time to think about the negative thing.

Despite the physical distance, Begum's emotional connection and care for her family remain much stronger than those with her new friends in London. As discussed below, follow-up interviews revealed Begum's efforts to visit her mother and sisters in person.

Across our two studies, several participants shared feelings of guilt about having access to education, work, or living in a safe environment while relatives in Afghanistan do not. This is because, as noted in the literature, physical separation often places migrants in a difficult moral position regarding their obligation to care for family back in the origin country and can provoke a sense of 'guilt' (Baldassar, 2015: 2). This is clearly illustrated by Dilaram, a young, single student. Her educational progress and plans in the United Kingdom are overshadowed by thoughts of her family's precarious situation in Afghanistan. Having successfully completed her Master's degree, she described her feelings of guilt when she recently enrolled at a UK university to start her PhD, thinking that her sister in Afghanistan could not even go to school.

today when I started my PhD, I posted on Twitter that I've started my PhD, but how I can be happy when my sister even could not finish school?... Or my family would congratulate me for starting my PhD when my dad and mom see my sister is sitting at home, not been able to finish school.

Dilaram applies the same transnational lens when it comes to money. She believes that if her family in Afghanistan had the money it costs her to go out to dinner, they could buy a week's worth of food.

if I'm paying £30 or £40, if I send it to my family, they would be able to eat for 2-3 nights. That sense is always with me. Honestly, I cannot go outside, I cannot enjoy, I cannot.

As evidenced in the literature, it is apparent that guilt has a gendered component that exacerbates women's transnational family care responsibilities, particularly in relation to caring for elderly parents (Baldassar, 2011; Zontini, 2007). This is the case for Liloma, a young woman who was a journalist and women's rights activist in Afghanistan. Liloma was in conflict with her estranged husband in Afghanistan over custody of their young son. As noted above, divorce has many negative consequences for women in Afghanistan (Nijhowne & Oates, 2008). When she was evacuated in August 2021, she had to leave behind her son (then 12 years old) and her elderly mother:

For a long time, I was really confused. I was just crying for around two months. I was just crying for one hour or two hours a day because my mother is in Afghanistan and she's alone and an old woman. I don't know how I can support her. It's a really difficult situation for me because of my son, because of my mother... My mother won't talk to me. She told me, "I'm alone. What should I do here? I can't go out..." This makes me really confused and still I don't know.

Moreover, Liloma is worried about her sister who fled Afghanistan with her husband and now lives in Iran: 'my sister can't go back to Afghanistan because Taliban will kill her husband'. However, the situation for refugees in Iran is very harsh, as we heard from many Afghan participants (see also Lopez & Ryan, 2023). Her sister is desperate to leave Iran but Liloma is unable to help her: 'they can't live in Iran because of the Iran situation. I don't know. And they always ask if you can help to just come to other countries to be safe. But...I can't do anything for them.' As noted, people may feel 'helpless' when they cannot meet requests for support from transnational relatives in difficult situations (Brandhorst et al., 2020).

When we first interviewed Liloma in 2022, she explained that her ex-husband had refused to allow her even to speak to her son.

Unfortunately, I spoke with him around two months ago and now his father didn't want me to talk with him and he told me, "You left your son and you can't speak to your son because if you want your son, you wouldn't leave your son." I don't know what I should do right now.

⁵All of the five women quoted in detail in this paper were interviewed in English by Maria Lopez and Louise Ryan. Hence, we use their actual words here to reflect their voices.

Liloma's ex-husband reproduces traditional normative gender ideals (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022) that can transcend geographical distance and limit the autonomy of Afghan women. This example also reveals the power dynamics around virtual communication and ICTs, which is discussed below, as her husband refused to allow the boy to speak on the phone with Liloma. Today, Liloma is still trying to reunite with her son, who remains in Afghanistan. As the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, her ex-husband is willing to let the boy move to the United Kingdom to join Liloma. However, she is now facing difficulties with the UK Home Office in obtaining a visa for her son, as will be explained below.

As noted earlier, it should not be assumed that all transnational relations are positive and supportive, as Liloma's conflict with her husband illustrates. Gendered power dynamics within Afghan society are especially apparent in the relations between married women and their in-laws (Jewkes et al., 2019). Another participant, Hamida, had a particularly difficult relationship with her in-laws in Afghanistan. As a young bride, she lived with her in-laws and endured a difficult time. They prevented her from continuing her studies and restricted her ability to go outside the family home: 'I was in Afghanistan, they torture me, they used bad words to me, but I can't forget. I can't forget all the things that they did with me'.

For Hamida, one of the best aspects of being evacuated to London in 2021 was getting away from her controlling in-laws. How her relationship with them evolved over time will be discussed in a later section on transnational visits.

6.1 | Negotiating immobility regimes: Visas and in-person visits

Amongst all 59 interviews we conducted, across both studies, people were desperate to be reunited with close relatives. Their own feelings of safety in the United Kingdom were often undermined by constant worries about ageing parents, siblings or adult children in Afghanistan or living as refugees in other countries (see Ryan et al., 2024).

The women, whom we have been following longitudinally, have been sharing with us their active negotiations of immobility regimes (Glick-Schiller & Salazar, 2013) as they attempt to engage in transnational care through visits to close relatives in diverse geographical locations. All the women have indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom but they do not yet have British passports, so they travel on Afghan passports. Their status means that they can leave and return to the United Kingdom for specific periods of time. However, as members of globally scattered refugee families, their ability to travel to other countries to meet their relatives or to invite relatives to visit them in the United Kingdom is circumscribed by a complex array of immigration regulations across multiple borders.

Dilaram, who left Afghanistan in 2020 to study in the United Kingdom on a scholarship, is now enrolled in a PhD programme, as mentioned above. All her family lives in Afghanistan. Her mother is in poor health and Dilaram wants to see her, but she is unable to return

to Afghanistan, so the only option to meet in-person is by organising a visit to a third country. Her mother has applied for a medical visa to go to Pakistan for hospital treatment. Dilaram had hoped to travel to Pakistan to be reunited with her mother and support her through her treatment. However, despite her best efforts, she was repeatedly denied a Pakistani visa. She was informed that the Pakistani authorities were wary of Afghans living in Europe visiting Pakistan, because there had been numerous incidents of immigration fraud and illegal copying of European travel documents. As Czaika et al. (2017: 4) note, 'visa regimes reflect complex geopolitical relations and multi-layered hierarchies' across different global regions. Despite having indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom, Dilaram was denied a Pakistani visitor visa and, thus, has been unable to reunite with her mother.

I couldn't get visa for Pakistan so. Unfortunately, Pakistan put lots of restriction on Afghans passport holders, so it's very difficult to get a visa, have been trying for almost six months still I did not give the visa. There is another possibility to get the visa but it's very expensive. For example, if you use private companies. They ask for \$2000 for a visa.

As a student, Dilaram cannot afford such a large fee. She described the emotional toll of enforced separation: 'I haven't been able to see my family... very hard. Yeah. Of course, I miss them a lot... it's too difficult'. Moreover, as discussed in a later section, the intermittent internet connections in Afghanistan made even virtual communication difficult and infrequent.

Begum, as mentioned earlier, feared for the safety of her activist sisters who had engaged in protests against the Taliban. When we re-interviewed Begum in 2023, she told us about her recent visit to Iran, where she had been reunited with her mother and sister, who had moved to live in that country. This was the first time she had met them in person for 5 years. Begum emphasised that she had only been able to see her family because they had left Afghanistan: 'If my mom was in Afghanistan, never, I never. I had no chance to meet again'. Begum managed to get a visa to visit Iran: 'I have my Afghan passport, that's why I was able to go... It was easier than British passport'. Meanwhile, her other sister, who had also fled to Iran, managed to get a student visa to go to Australia, which Begum described as 'like a dream for her'.

While she is not providing 'hands-on care' (Baldassar, 2008) for her mother or sisters, Begum does provide a high level of emotional care, which manifests itself in worry and anxiety for their safety. In previous interviews she cried whilst describing the threats faced by her sisters in Afghanistan. She is now enormously relieved that her activist sisters are safely out of Afghanistan. However, she remains concerned about her sister and mother in Iran, where she emphasises that Afghans face enormous discrimination: 'in Iran, their situation, they are refugees, they can't buy even the SIM card. They can't create a bank account. If they go for a bread, they say 'bring ID card'... many different things.'

As discussed earlier, Liloma is desperate to be reunited with her son, who lives with her ex-husband in Afghanistan. She has made numerous applications to the UK Home Office to obtain a visa for her young son. But so far, all her applications have been refused: 'they told me, we can't do anything for now. And you have to wait. I don't know how long more'.

Because her job is not permanent and she does not have a suitable place to live, since leaving the temporary hotel accommodation, she cannot demonstrate her ability to support a child. Thus, financial obstacles are compounding immigration barriers. It is now over 3 years since she last saw her son. As noted, those evacuated under ARAP and ACRS do not have automatic rights to family reunion. Hence, immobility regimes are preventing Liloma from being reunited with and caring for her son in the United Kingdom. Moreover, Liloma has not seen her sisters or her mother for years; she worries about them and misses being close to them. She put it powerfully but succinctly – 'it hurts my heart'.

While most of the participants across the combined dataset from our two studies have parents who live very far away, Malala's mother actually lives relatively nearby in Europe, but again we can see how immobility regimes prevent them from meeting in-person. Malala's mother and three younger siblings are refugees who have been living in Belgium since 2018. However, Malala and her sisters were denied visas to join their mother because they were over 18. Therefore, the sisters remained in Afghanistan until the Taliban regained power in 2021, when they were evacuated to the United Kingdom.

Upon arrival in London, the prospect of a train journey to Belgium on the Eurostar appeared very feasible and they were optimistic about visiting their mother and siblings. However, the complex interplay of Brexit and immigration policies rendered this endeavour exceedingly challenging and, up to now, impossible:

I spent £3,000 from my student stipend for a certificate of travel application, ticket purchases, and appointment fees, yet our visas were denied, with the singular justification provided being the absence of adequate documentation to substantiate the purpose and conditions of our intended stay. It was shattering for all of my family. (Malala)

Moreover, current immigration regulations in Belgium preclude her mother from applying for Belgian citizenship until she accrues a minimum of 1 year of employment. However, the mother is in her 50s, has little education and finds it difficult to learn the local languages. Her ability to find a job is therefore severely limited. Consequently, the only viable avenue for Malala to visit her mother is to obtain a British passport. However, this process can take up to 5 years. Furthermore, her mother has health problems but cannot afford adequate care:

My mother is getting older, we just heard she lost all her teeth and needs serious dental care which is very

expensive. I hope I can send her money or take her in countries where she can receive cheaper dental care.

Once again, in this example, we see how socio-economic factors intersect with gender and age to exacerbate immobility regimes and undermine the ability of Malala and her mother to meet in Belgium or the United Kingdom. When we caught up her again in 2024, Malala had still not managed to visit her mother.

The ways in which families living across Europe, the Middle East and other far-flung destinations have to navigate diverse immobility regimes are also clear in the case of Hamida. When we first met Hamida, she was living with her husband and two young children in a hotel in central London. A year later, the family was relocated to a flat in a city in Yorkshire. We kept in touch to see how she was getting on. In 2023, she told us about a recent family reunion in Iran.

Hamida's family is truly international. All 6 siblings live in different countries. Three sisters live in different European countries. One sibling lives in Afghanistan, while another lives with their widowed mother in Pakistan and one sister lives in North America. Because of visa requirements, it is very difficult for the three sisters in Europe to meet each other. For example, one sister living in a European country does not yet have secured status and so could not get a visa to visit the United Kingdom. However, they could travel to Iran on their Afghan passports. Initially the eldest sister, who lives in a Scandinavian country, had suggested that they all meet in Turkey, but this proved difficult due to visa issues:

she said that 'I make a meeting programme in Turkey and then we will meet together in Turkey'. My mom and my sister, living in Pakistan (and) in Afghanistan, they couldn't get the Turkey visa. And then my sister said that it's better we will meet in Iran so everybody can get the visa and everybody come to see together.

This example illustrates that despite immobility regimes, in this case Turkey, denying visas, the sisters asserted their active agency in finding a solution. Thus, refugees should not be seen as passively accepting immigration barriers (Alencar, 2020). Nonetheless, the sister living in North America is awaiting her citizenship and is therefore unable to travel. As a result, five of the six siblings were able to travel to Iran, where they rented an apartment and stayed for 6 weeks. Clearly, the family had sufficient economic resources to pay for flights and accommodation. It was the first time they had been reunited in over 7 years. The mother saw grandchildren she had never met in person, cousins met for the first time. Her mother lamented that her children were scattered across the globe:

my children, they are very far away from me, very far away from each other. You cannot visit your sister, your brother. My all children are in different countries, far away from me, far away from each other. (Hamida citing her mother)

However, as noted in the literature, family reunions do not necessarily mean that everything can be shared openly. In a bid to protect older relatives or preserve cordial relations, some stories cannot be shared (see also Ryan, 2008; Baldassar, 2008). As Sampaio (2020) notes, there may be important silences during these visits. Hamida told us about a family tragedy—the death of a grandchild—that was kept secret from the grandmother during the reunion. The grandmother repeatedly asked about the grandchild, and everyone said he was fine. The emotional toll on the boy's mother, to mask her feelings and keep his death a secret from the grandmother is unimaginable, and it is fair to say that all the researchers shed a tear as they listened to the story.

Hamida's story also had a fascinating twist. As mentioned earlier, she had a difficult relationship with her in-laws. Interestingly, her sister-in-law had also left Afghanistan and is now reside in Iran. During Hamida's family reunion, her husband asked her to visit his family. Initially Hamida did not want to see them and was reluctant to agree to his request. However, he persisted and she eventually agreed, but she ensured that her own sisters accompanied her on the visit. Hamida described how her in-laws' attitude towards her was now markedly different. They were welcoming and courteous. Her sister-in-law, who had been particularly unkind to Hamida when they lived in Afghanistan, was now warm and hospitable, even offering to take Hamida shopping in Tehran and show her around the city – which Hamida politely declined. In our interview, Hamida offered her own interpretation of this shifting relationship. Whereas in Afghanistan they had perceived her as 'a servant' with no rights, now in the United Kingdom, they realised she had rights and could even divorce her husband if she chose: 'because now I'm independent, I can do anything here because I have support here'. So now they treat her with respect.

This story reveals the ways in which relationships and power dynamics within transnational families can shift over time. As noted above, transnational families should not be regarded as necessarily caring, positive and supportive. As noted by Ryan, (2023), it is important to differentiate between kinship ties, including so-called 'negative ties', and not generalise across the 'transnational family'. As Hamida clearly illustrates, even within the same migrant network, some transnational relationships are loving and caring, while others are defined by disdain and resentment, while silences may also mask painful realities (Sampaio, 2020).

Given the challenges of arranging in-person visits, most participants across our studies relied on ICTs to maintain transnational relationships. However, the specific challenges of internet connectivity placed limits on this communication, as discussed in the next section.

6.2 | ICTs, Wifi, gender and access to smart phones

There are many positive narratives about the impact of ICT and new communication technologies (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Amongst our 59 participants from both studies, many people mentioned new

technologies as a tool to bridge the physical distance with their transnational families. For example, we heard from some participants who rely on advice and information about caring for their new babies from far-flung female relatives via WhatsApp. Nonetheless, the lack of internet connectivity with Afghanistan was a recurring theme. Moreover, as we discuss in this section, the practice of familial engagement through ICTs in the specific context of Afghanistan is shaped by gendered and privileged aspects of technology access, leading to distinct challenges and limitations in maintaining transnational family connections.

Malala's experience is especially interesting in revealing gendered access to smartphones.

When we were in Afghanistan, my 14-year-old brother was living in Belgium as a refugee, and we did not own a smartphone to contact him. We were dependent on my stepbrother's smartphone. Thus, our communication with him was restricted to once every two weeks or, at times, a month. We found it hard to express our feelings under my stepbrother's gaze. Neither my brother could express the difficulties he went through due to limited time for conversation. He was hospitalised and could not attend school for an entire year due to illness. He could only talk about it to my mother when they reunited in Belgium several years later.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, the use of smartphones, and other ICTs, depends on literacy skills. Malala's mother struggles with literacy: 'My mother cannot use a mobile phone independently. So, she is waiting for my siblings to arrive from school to initiate contact, thereby enabling our conversations.'

In both these examples, gendered and intergenerational relations shape access to ICTs. Malala's access to a smartphone was controlled by her stepbrother, and now her mother's access to technology is mediated through her tech-savvy children.

Moreover, even for those who do have access to smartphones, communication is shaped by local infrastructure. The lack of internet connectivity in Afghanistan places limits on transnational communication and the ability to provide emotional support and care, as Dilaram explained:

I'm only able to communicate with my family 2 times a week or once a week. Sometimes there is no Internet... most of the time there is no electricity... the mobile does not charge. Sometimes if they have charged, they do not have Internet.

Liloma has been experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety about not being reunited with her son and misses the emotional care and support she would receive from her mother and sisters. But the lack of reliable internet connectivity means she cannot talk to them when she feels sad and lonely: 'And I always miss that because I can't

talk with them every time that I want or they can't talk with me every time that they want... they don't have any Internet connection.'

Meanwhile, one of Liloma's other sisters, along with her husband and children, has been offered asylum in a South American country:

when I talked with them, they said yeah, it's better than Iran and Afghanistan, of course, because they are safe and, at least, a government help them a bit and they can just rebuild their life... it takes time, I know, but they have to rebuild. But at least they are safe and no one tells them to go out from our country or torture them.

Interestingly, Liloma is able to communicate regularly with that sister on WhatsApp because the internet connection in that country is much stronger and more reliable. Her contrasting communication between South America and Afghanistan underline the salience of geographical location and connectivity when we consider transnational relations and the ability to give and receive emotional care.

The role of place is also illustrated by interviewees who have relatives living in Iran. Around the time of women's rights protests in 2022–23, the Iranian government blocked communications. Begum described how she waited for weeks to speak with her mother and sister and check that they were safe and well: 'after the protest starting Iran... internet is not working... some of the app even is not working in Iran... The government blocked.'

These observations highlight the specificities of place and challenge the assumption that ICTs make communication easy and accessible to everyone, everywhere.

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper is based on our two projects with Afghans in London. Given that participants have recently arrived in the United Kingdom and their experiences are highly transitional, longitudinal research is vital to go beyond the snapshot of a one-off interview. We are very grateful to the five women who have allowed us to follow their stories so intensely as their lives in the United Kingdom unfold. It is also noteworthy that one of those participants has co-authored this paper and her own, anonymised, personal story has played a key role in informing the analysis.

We use the concept of 'immobility regimes' (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) and explore how these operate through particular visa restrictions that block visits and reunions. As Czaika et al. show: 'visa regimes are structurally embedded in global inequalities' (p. 34).

Drawing on our rich dataset, we contribute several new insights.

Firstly, given the geographical dispersal of participants' family networks, our analysis has gone beyond a simple bi-national lens (e.g., origin and destination country) to explore how immobility regimes across multiple countries, and even continents, shape the ability to give and receive transnational care. Although our participants had the right to travel from the United Kingdom, their ability to get visas to

visit other countries, such as Turkey or Pakistan, remained limited. Thus, beyond a simple Global North-South dichotomy, visa requirements shape mobility opportunities within and across specific geographical regions (Czaika et al., 2017).

Secondly, while recognising the limits imposed by immobility regimes, we also highlight active agency as some participants who had the right to travel, and the money to do so, mobilised their resources to try to navigate these regimes and meet their relatives in person. Unable to return to Afghanistan, they tried to arrange meetings in other countries instead. Our data reveals how immobility regimes across various countries in Europe and within the Middle East intersect with other factors such as gender, age, physical well-being and socio-economic factors to enable or constrain in-person visits. Nonetheless, while visits are extremely important as a way of giving and receiving care, that does not mean that all experiences can be shared—there may be silences as difficult experiences are too painful to discuss (Ryan, 2008; Sampaio, 2020).

Thirdly, our work also contributes to understanding feelings of 'guilt' and 'helplessness' (Baldassar, 2008) as our participants are unable to provide specific kinds of the care and support that their transnational relatives require (hands-on, physical care, but also financial support). Moreover, although all participants in our wider dataset expressed gratitude for being given refuge and safety in the United Kingdom, they feel guilty about leaving relatives behind in dangerous situations. In addition, as the women we follow longitudinally demonstrate, they tend to apply a transnational lens, comparing their own opportunities in the United Kingdom with the lack of opportunities available to their female relatives still in Afghanistan.

Fourthly, building on Ryan's earlier work (2011), we show that transnational relations are both dynamic and diverse—not all ties are positive—indeed some transnational family ties can be abusive (Ryan, 2023; Chikwira & Madziva, 2023; Parreñas, 2005). The specific gender norms in Afghanistan are relevant to this analysis (Afrouz et al., 2023; Hosseini & Punzi, 2022). Leaving the country has enabled some women to break away from negative, controlling influences, while others are still struggling to overcome these enduring power dynamics with husbands or in-laws in Afghanistan.

Finally, and underlining the importance of place, we have contributed to understanding the role of ICTs in long-distance care relations. While there is often a celebratory tone in the literature (for a discussion see Alencar, 2020) about the importance of ICTs, our data reveal the limits. Poor connectivity in Afghanistan makes communication slow, unreliable and frustrating. Moreover, as we have shown, access to ICTs is framed by gender and intergenerational power relations, as well as practical issues like cost and literacy. Some female relatives, especially older relatives like mothers, simply cannot use smartphones without assistance from other relatives. Furthermore, as in the case of Iran, the availability of the internet cannot be taken for granted but can be curtailed for political reasons.

Overall, our ongoing research with recently arrived Afghans, especially our longitudinal research with women, adds rich understandings of the complexities and dynamics of transnational caring relationships.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was given by London Metropolitan University research ethics committee in 2022 (no protocol number was used at that time).

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