



Article

The aspirations of Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors before departure and on arrival in the host country

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Abstract

This article explores the perspectives of Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors on their own motives and aspirations and on the motives and aspirations of their family and community context at the moment they left their home country and at arrival in the host country. Interviews and questionnaires were used to measure the aspirations of 52 Afghan unaccompanied refugee minors, soon after their arrival in Belgium. Aspirations at departure and evolutions in aspirations over time were examined retrospectively. Finding security and studying particularly influenced their decision to migrate. These aspirations changed over time under the impact of a diversity of factors, such as their own experiences and the opinions of others (e.g. peers, smugglers). Since motives and aspirations might influence the migration trajectories of unaccompanied refugee minors, migration policies and practitioners should take them actively into account so as to improve support for unaccompanied refugee minors.

Keywords

Afghanistan, aspirations, migration decision-making, migration motives, unaccompanied refugee minors

Unaccompanied refugee minors (UM)¹ – minors migrating to another country without their parents – are considered to be an important group of concern within the overall population of refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2012). The perceived vulnerability of this group is not only due to separation from their parents, but also linked to the overall idea that refugee minors in general, and UM in particular,

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seldom take the decision to leave their home country themselves (Clark-Kazak, 2012; Mann, 2004). They often seem to be pushed by family or community members to look for a better living abroad (Mougne, 2010), although little is known about the specific modalities of this 'forced' migration. A comparative European Union (EU) study (European Migration Network [EMN], 2010) concluded that UM enter European countries for several varied but interconnected reasons, such as seeking protection, family reunification, economic motives, and medical concerns. UM often seem to base their 'motivations' on limited and unrealistic information, in particular, regarding host countries' living environments, influenced by, among others, stories of smugglers (Mougne, 2010).

UM are therefore often defined as 'children at risk'. 'Being at risk' can be interpreted in at least two different ways (Dekker, 2009). First, it can be translated in terms of 'being in danger', referring to their own material, psychological, and educational levels, among others. This focus, however, risks constructing UM as passive and vulnerable individuals, and not as actors in their own right (Wernesjö, 2012). Second, 'being at risk' can also refer to 'being a danger': child mobility and migration is frequently associated with deviance and danger, an interpretation related to images of idealized childhoods in fixed and bounded spaces (Ni Laoire et al., 2010). 'Children on the move' contest these ideas of childhood by virtue of the realities of their 'transnational lives' (Ni Laoire et al., 2010).

A broad contextualization of migration processes is thus needed (Castles, 2010). Castles and Miller's (2003) 'migration systems theory', for example, suggests that any migratory movement should be seen as the result of factors on several levels: 'macro' (e.g. institutional factors, politics, media), 'micro' (e.g. social networks, migrants' beliefs and practices), and 'meso' (e.g. intermediate actors and structures such as immigration officials and smugglers) (Crivello, 2011; Simich et al., 2006). These factors also interact: perceptions of migration shared among families and communities in the home country, for example, can affect individuals' perceptions of migration (Dreby and Stutz, 2011; Rousseau et al., 1998). These perceptions in the home country can also be influenced by the narratives of migrants living abroad, which may then be incorporated into media discourses, in their turn nourishing peoples' 'imagined worlds' (Sladkova, 2007). Moreover, family members often explicitly or implicitly impose, on UM in particular, tasks and obligations such as sending remittances back home or taking care of a younger sibling with whom they migrate (Derluyn and Broekaert, 2008).

This multi-level approach to migration motives and aspirations corresponds to the wider interdisciplinary literature on 'aspirations', which perceives peoples' aspirations as socially and culturally embedded (Appadurai, 2004; MacLeod, 2009). Moreover, aspirations are considered to be dynamic over time, as pre-departure aspirations might change under the influence of particular experiences during the migration journey or in the host country (Crivello, 2011; Van Meeteren, 2012). When discrepancies appear between pre-migration aspirations and post-migration realities (Murphy and Mahalingam, 2006), initial aspirations are often adapted to the post-migration living contexts (Bloch et al., 2009; Riller, 2009). Aspirations are also connected to life course patterns and transitions, as, for example, young migrants' aspirations must be seen in the context of their transition to adulthood (Crivello, 2011; Whitehead et al., 2007).

However, we have limited knowledge of the processes behind the migration of UM: the ways in which motives and aspirations relating to migration are established, how the

decision to migrate is made, how UM experience these decision-making processes, and how their pre-departure aspirations change during their flight and after arrival in the host country. Research that acknowledges children's and young people's own perspectives on their lives is, therefore, very important. Children's perspectives can differ from those of adults and contribute alternative ideas and ways of understanding processes of migration (Ni Laoire et al., 2010). This increased knowledge can help to improve care regimes for separated refugee youth in host countries, where they can focus more on how particular aspirations relate to the host countries' realities, and trajectories can be set up to enhance the realization of at least some aspirations. This also touches on the importance of gaining insight into how different conceptualizations of young people's agency work within different contexts of care and support. Leifsen (2013) illustrates how child agency is often thought of as only possible within spaces where 'the vulnerable child' is protected. However, many children circulate out of and beyond these secure spaces. The challenge, therefore, is to capture the complexity of care contexts for UM, which is only possible if we look at the shifting stages these young people went through and the particularities of agency that contributed to generating them (Leifsen, 2013).

In this study, we focus on Afghan UM, – the largest refugee population in the world since the 1990s (Monsutti, 2010; UNHCR, 2012), with a sharp increase in recent years in the number of Afghan UM arriving in Western European countries (Eurostat, 2011). In Belgium, the number of newly arrived Afghan UM rose from 87 in 2005 to 1121 in 2011 (Guardianship Service, 2012). And despite the increasing attention given to this migration phenomenon in political debate and the media (Mougne, 2010), only a few research reports studying this population, mainly using qualitative approaches with small samples, have been published (Boland, 2010; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2010; Mougne, 2010; UNHCR, 2010). These studies also give only limited insight into the pre-departure motives and aspirations of Afghan UM, and how these may change over time. In this study, we will therefore investigate Afghan UM's pre-departure aspirations and possible subsequent changes, based on the perceptions of UM themselves. Due to practical constraints, pre-departure aspirations are measured retrospectively, after arrival in Belgium. Furthermore, studies in this field have paid little attention to the minors' perceptions of their families' and community members' aspirations (Boland, 2010), while the important influence of social networks on the migration decisions of UM is acknowledged (Clark-Kazak, 2012; Derluyn and Broekaert, 2008; Mann, 2004).

Since this research field generally lacks a common conceptual framework, with a range of concepts being used (e.g. motives, motivations, aspirations, expectations) (see, for example, Sladkova, 2007; Van Meeteren et al., 2009), all with different or even vague interpretations, this study opts to use 'aspirations' in the sense of MacLeod's (2009) conceptualization: 'one's preferences or what one hopes to achieve, relatively unsullied by anticipated constraints'. Additionally, as we will illustrate, the conceptual framework also allowed data on 'motives' to be gathered.

Method

Based on Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), we implemented a mixed-methods design using complementary quantitative and qualitative methods in different phases.

Phase 1: simultaneous quantitative and qualitative data collection

We questioned 52 Afghan participants who had recently arrived in Belgium and were living in one of the two refugee centers for newly arrived UM. These centers were the only possible gate through which we could gain access to a sizable group of UM within a short and similar time span after their arrival in Belgium, and living in similar circumstances. Moreover, via this gate we could involve the center's psychologist to assess the UM's emotional vulnerability. The psychologist invited all Afghan UM older than 13 years who arrived in the periods August to October 2009 and September 2010 to March 2011 to participate. Eight minors did not consent. For those who consented, a meeting with the researcher was arranged at which the researcher began by giving a general description of the research's aims and stressing the freedom not to participate, not to answer certain questions or talk about certain topics, the confidentiality and anonymity of the information supplied, and the independence of the research from the migration authorities' decisions. As we knew that UM are a group at high risk of developing emotional problems (Vervliet et al., 2013), we also stressed the opportunity to ask the researcher for more information or emotional support (formal agreements for referral were made before the start of the study, among others with the psychologist in the center). The participants signed an informed consent form, which also included the researcher's contact details. A socio-demographic questionnaire was administered to obtain details of participants' age, ethnicity, familial background, education, and migration journey.

The participants were then asked to talk freely about their aspirations at the moment they left their home country. They proceeded to answer the first part of the Aspirations Scale for Refugees and Migrants (ASRM) (Derluyn et al., 2010), a self-report questionnaire which enquired first into 11 different aspirations (e.g. studying, finding a good job, finding a secure environment) that the minors might have had at the moment they left the home country, using a three-point Likert scale (none – little – much). Participants could also add aspirations not mentioned in the list. Second, following the same procedure (semi-structured questions and a self-report questionnaire), the participants were asked which aspirations they thought their family had for them when they left the home country ('perceived aspirations from family'). Third, semi-structured questions addressed the perceived aspirations of the community in their country of origin for them or for young people like them who migrate. For this latter part, we did not use the self-report questionnaire, since a pilot had indicated that measuring the perceived aspirations of the community with the questionnaire was too complicated.

The same procedure (self-report questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions) was then followed to ascertain the aspirations the participants had now, and the currently perceived aspirations for them of family and community members.

Finally, a debriefing took place at which the participants were asked how they had experienced the meeting. Participants in need of further emotional support were referred to the center's psychologist. After each referral, a follow-up contact between researcher and psychologist took place. All documents (informed consent form and questionnaires) were translated into Dari and Pashtu, and an interpreter was always present.

Phase 2: separate and independent analysis of each data set

First, socio-demographic characteristics and the prevalence of aspirations as measured by the ASRM were analyzed with descriptive analyses using SPSS 19.0. For the ASRM, we analyzed both whether an aspiration was present or not (yes/no) and its intensity (none, a little, much), viewed from the four investigated perspectives (own aspirations and the perceived aspirations of family, both at departure and now). Second, the qualitative data were transcribed literally and analyzed using QSR International's NVivo 9 software.

Phase 3 and 4: merging of the two results sets and interpretation

Both qualitative and quantitative results were merged during the data analysis phase by identifying content areas in both data sets and by comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing the results. The conclusions are formulated in the 'Results' section below; themes only covered by qualitative data are presented throughout this section, in addition to the different quantitative results. In the 'Discussion' section, the merged results are summarized and further interpreted. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University.

Results

Participants' background

All participants were male, which is currently the case for almost all Afghan UM (Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum seekers [Fedasil], 2012; UNHCR, 2011). The participants' self-declared mean age at arrival in Belgium was 15.96 years (standard deviation [SD] = 0.84, range = 13–17). All applied for asylum soon after arrival in Belgium. Most participants (35, 67.3%) originated from southeastern Afghanistan, relatively close to the Pakistani border, and, according to the UN Security Council (2012), the most insecure region in Afghanistan. The majority of the participants had a Pashtun ethnic background (31, 59.6%); the others were Tadjiks (12, 23.1%) or Hazara (5, 9.6%).

The participants were mostly the first- or second-born child (26, 46.2% and 13, 25.0%, respectively); almost all had one or more sibling(s), most of whom were younger. Most participants (29, 55.8%) had lost one or both parents: for 22 minors, only their mother was still alive, for one only his father, and six were orphans. The participants' fathers had diverse occupations, such as farmer and/or shepherd (21, 40.4%), seller/trader (9, 17.3%), imam (2), employee of a foreign non-governmental organization (NGO) or army (2), and soldier in the Afghan army (2). Several fathers were active in the Taliban (6, 11.5%). Almost half the participants (23, 44.2%) had never attended school; only a minority (12, 23.0%) had gone to school for more than 5 years in total. Most participants had also worked, often together with their father (32, 61.5%), as a farmer or shepherd (15), in a shop or factory (7), as a cleaner (2), in the construction industry (2), or as a driver (1). With some exceptions, the socio-economic status of most participants'

families was rather low: large families, headed by one parent or child-headed, with limited financial means and few educational opportunities.

A lengthy preamble

The participants described a range of contextual factors in which the causes or reasons for their migration were rooted and which contributed significantly to their migration decision-making process. We will call these factors 'motives' for migration.

Most frequently mentioned (16 of 52), especially by Pashtun participants (14 of 16), was the danger of being forcibly recruited by the Taliban, in particular to participate in the jihad, often as a suicide bomber. Five participants described how the Taliban had recruited them and how they had escaped. Among them was Fahad, whose father was a driver for the international armed forces and rejected pressure from the Taliban to work rather for them. As a consequence, Fahad was abducted by the Taliban and finally recruited, since his family could not pay the ransom: 'They tried to brainwash me to prepare me for a suicide attack, they tried to persuade us that you go straight to paradise and get everything you want [...]. But I said I was afraid to die'. They taught Fahad how to drive and 1 day, on the road, he saw his chance to escape:

I drove flat out, I lost my way [...] and I arrived at my aunt's place. I called my mother and she said that the Taliban came and took my little brother and they had said that if I didn't return within 24 hours, they would behead my brother with a knife.

On his way back, Fahad was stopped by the police and imprisoned for 2 months. When his father found him, he said that the Taliban had beheaded his brother and had thrown his body in front of their house.

Several other participants (10 of 52) said that they had received death threats from the Taliban, mostly because they or their family members worked for the international armed forces, in an international NGO, or for the Afghan authorities. Many other participants (12 of 52) indicated that their lives were in danger, although they did not always detail the specific conditions. Five Pashtun participants felt that they were at risk of becoming a victim of blood revenge.

Four participants mentioned financial problems and the lack of educational and job opportunities. Among them was Reza:

My father died and my brother was handicapped [both because of a suicide attack in their village] and my other brother was studying. I worked [in a bakery] but the money was not enough because my mother was ill and I always had to take care for her. And I didn't have the chance to study. (Reza)

The moment of decision

The decision to migrate was made in different ways. For the majority of the participants (39 of 52), the decision was first made by one or more family members, mostly one or both parents, eventually together with another family member, usually an uncle. Most

participants said they had agreed with this decision, but it seemed to us unclear to what extent they had consented. In some cases, the decision to leave seems to have been taken entirely without consultation of the minor. Seven other participants explicitly mentioned that their mother (3), father (3), or mother and uncle (1) took the decision against their will. Pamir, for example, had never thought about leaving Afghanistan and did not feel it was necessary. But his father insisted that he went. He had the strong conviction that Pamir, as a young boy, was too attractive for the Taliban and that they would take him away. Pamir had told his father, 'No, I want to stay at home, I don't want to go abroad because I don't know how far away I will be from you and where I will stay'. But his father said that he had to go abroad (to Europe) because there he would study and be safe.

Three participants said that they made the decision to migrate together with a family member, while seven others explained that they made the decision alone, although six of them consulted their family or asked for their permission. One interviewee did not seek any permission as he felt in danger of being killed by his father.

Leaving with aspirations

Finding a secure environment was the most frequently indicated aspiration at the moment these minors left their home country (Table 1), which is close to how they described their migration motives (cf. *supra*):

When I left, I only had one thing in my mind: to be safe. I wanted to save my life from the danger that was threatening me at that time [blood revenge]. (Nabas)

Additionally, minors left their country with high aspirations related to educational and job opportunities, reflecting an already long-existing desire. The motive of finding security was thus often the direct trigger for the decision to migrate, and was supported by other aspirations such as studying. For some UM, these educational aspirations were primary in their decision. Adil's father, for example, worked as an engineer for the Afghan government. Adil went to a government school, although it was often closed because of threats by the Taliban. The school also did not provide sufficient learning materials, rendering it difficult to study. When the Taliban killed his parents and his brother also disappeared, Adil fled with the support of his uncle. He said,

If there wasn't a reason I wouldn't have left, but there was a reason [the Taliban] why I was forced to leave. [...] But I definitely had an interest in going to school because I didn't have the possibilities there. [...] And one thing was certain, if I were to go abroad, then I had to study. (Adil)

An intense aspiration is 'ensuring that relatives could come to Belgium', which is in most cases related to finding safety for themselves and their family. Dawar explained, 'I wanted to bring my life in safety, but not only my own life, also the lives of my family'. The perceived aspirations for them of family members at the moment they left the home country, as indicated on the ASRM, are comparable to the minors' own aspirations (Table 1). This could be ascribed to the important and determining role of family members in the migration decision-making process, which can enhance the internalizing by minors of their families' aspirations. However, some interviewees made clear distinctions here:

Table 1. Aspirations as indicated on the Aspirations Scale for Refugees and Migrants (ASRM).

Aspiration: Wanting (to) ...	Period	Own aspirations		Aspirations of family	
		'Yes'	Intensity	'Yes'	Intensity
		N (%)	Mean (SD)	N (%)	Mean (SD)
Study	Dep.	46 (88.5)	1.67 (0.68)	36 (69.2)	1.75 (0.63)
	Now	46 (88.5)	1.89 (0.31)	20 (38.5)	1.90 (0.31)
Obtain a diploma	Dep.	42 (80.8)	1.61 (0.73)	31 (59.6)	1.58 (0.79)
	Now	44 (84.6)	1.85 (0.47)	17 (32.7)	1.72 (0.57)
Find a good job	Dep.	37 (71.2)	1.27 (0.89)	30 (57.7)	1.32 (0.88)
	Now	41 (78.8)	1.59 (0.69)	15 (28.8)	1.50 (0.79)
Earn money for oneself	Dep.	29 (55.8)	0.84 (0.82)	25 (48.1)	0.95 (0.90)
	Now	35 (67.3)	1.24 (0.80)	13 (25.0)	1.29 (0.85)
Earn money for family in country of origin	Dep.	27 (51.9)	0.90 (0.90)	19 (36.5)	0.83 (0.93)
	Now	29 (55.8)	1.14 (0.90)	10 (19.2)	0.94 (0.94)
Find a secure environment	Dep.	51 (98.1)	1.90 (0.36)	46 (88.5)	1.96 (0.21)
	Now	40 (76.9)	1.72 (0.69)	20 (38.5)	1.90 (0.44)
Live with relatives or friends	Dep.	15 (28.8)	0.53 (0.86)	10 (19.2)	0.45 (0.83)
	Now	21 (40.4)	0.78 (0.90)	8 (15.4)	1.00 (1.00)
Obtain legal residence documents	Dep.	42 (80.8)	1.60 (0.80)	32 (61.5)	1.55 (0.81)
	Now	45 (86.5)	1.87 (0.45)	34 (65.4)	1.94 (0.24)
Ensure relatives can come to Belgium	Dep.	33 (63.5)	1.42 (1.65)	22 (42.3)	0.97 (0.90)
	Now	37 (71.2)	1.50 (0.76)	12 (23.1)	1.24 (0.90)
Start a family	Dep.	23 (44.2)	0.78 (0.92)	20 (38.5)	0.97 (0.96)
	Now	25 (48.1)	1.05 (0.94)	12 (23.1)	1.47 (0.83)
Get to know new people	Dep.	34 (65.4)	1.24 (0.92)	25 (48.1)	1.16 (0.92)
	Now	41 (78.8)	1.61 (0.62)	13 (25.0)	1.44 (0.81)
Something else	Dep.	14 (26.9)	1.32 (0.89)	8 (15.4)	1.08 (0.95)
	Now	16 (30.8)	1.30 (0.80)	4 (7.7)	1.00 (0.89)
Something else	Dep.	2 (3.8)	0.40 (0.55)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.00)
	Now	3 (5.8)	0.80 (0.84)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.00)
Total mean (SD)	Dep.	7.60 (2.69)	13.98 (5.23)	6.61 (3.40)	12.09 (6.21)
	Now	9.00 (2.30)	16.26 (4.43)	7.71 (3.21)	14.14 (5.89)

SD: standard deviation; Dep.: aspirations at the moment of departure from the home country; now: aspirations at arrival in the host country.

When I left, the only aspiration from my parents was that I should build my future. [...] They didn't have specific aspirations, but I feel that I have the responsibility to help them with money or care. I feel responsible because I am their son and I have to help them. (Sabir)

Moreover, in the process preceding the migration, family members sometimes explicitly 'appointed' one or more aspirations for the UM, such as studying, obtaining residence documents, rendering it possible for the family to migrate, or sending remittances back home. Khalid's father died, and when his mother was forced to marry another husband,

he lost all contact. He then lived for 3 years in exile in Iran, together with his grandmother and three younger sisters, and worked as a street trader to contribute to the household. One day, his grandmother said, 'I don't know how long I will live. It is better that you go [to Europe] and once you're there you can bring your three sisters'.

For some participants, these family members' aspirations were only passed implicitly or formulated vaguely, such as 'that I'd take care for myself', 'that I'd build my life', or 'that I'd succeed in life'.

Overall, the families' will to let the youngsters migrate seems to have been very strong, which was, among other ways, expressed in the considerable financial efforts many families made (e.g. selling their house) to pay for the costs of the journey.

Concerning the perceptions of the local community toward migrating to Europe, the participants' stories revealed that in various communities there were people who were rather positive toward migration, imagining Europe as a place to find human rights, democracy, safety, protection, and study and work opportunities. This opinion seems to have been inspired by the media and the stories of migrated community members now living in Europe:

They don't say it in your face, but you hear that, if someone is recognized [as a refugee] in another country and if he works there and makes money, that he is a good son. They praise this person. (Emal)

These opinions are, however, not always shared by all community members, as some considered Europe to be a place of atheists where one could be led astray, or when migrating was considered to be an act of disloyalty and betrayal toward the home country.

In transit

When the participants left Afghanistan, all started a usually long journey in several phases before ending up in Belgium. Europe was not always the initial destination. Six participants originally fled with the intention to live in a neighboring country (Pakistan or Iran); three of these first migrated with family members, and then, after some years, traveled further alone, while the other three started out alone. Four participants already lived in Iran and initially wanted to stay there, but decided to leave for Europe because of increasing constraints on their living conditions (e.g. discrimination, no chance of acquiring resident status, danger of being deported, or no legal right to work). All other participants (46 of 52) left Afghanistan with the intention of heading for Europe: most left alone (41 of 46), one left with his father, whom he lost on the road in Turkey, one left together with his father and brother, and three cousins migrated together.

When leaving for Europe, five interviewees already had Belgium as the country of destination, while seven UM headed for another destination: Norway (1), Sweden (1), United Kingdom (2), and Greece (4):

Everybody knows that the support is better for migrants there [in Norway] than anywhere else in Europe. Everybody around me [in Iran] said so and the smugglers too. They said there is much work, you can have a job, and it is easier to obtain recognition [as a refugee]. (Ahmed)

The first four did not continue their journey to these countries after arrival in Belgium because of a lack of money, countrymen telling them that Belgium is ‘a better country’, and because of exhaustion and fear of traveling again as stowaway. Those participants who initially planned to stay in Greece were confronted with disastrous living circumstances and therefore decided to continue further. A large group (18 of 52), however, did not have any idea where they would be brought by the smugglers, who organized most of their journey for large sums of money. The decision about the country of destination was thus often made on the road, mainly based on stories they heard and advice they received from smugglers, peers, and countrymen. Badar’s mother and uncle, for example, decided, against his will, that he had to go to Europe, but said that he could choose himself to which country, stating, ‘Where you receive recognition [as a refugee], you stay’. He did not know where he wanted to go when he left Afghanistan: ‘I stayed for three months in France and there I spoke a lot with the other young people and they recommended Belgium to me: “Belgium is good, if you go there, you can stay and study”’.

New place, new aspirations?

Comparing the participants’ aspirations shortly after arrival in Belgium, while living in the refugee center for newly arrived UM, with their pre-departure aspirations revealed some changes (Table 1). Although ‘finding a secure environment’ was still significant, studying and obtaining residence documents now became the most important aspirations. The interviewees’ stories revealed that these two aspirations were still connected, although they now felt safer, since the immediate dangers that were present in their home country and along the road had now become less prevalent, they focused on the need to obtain residence documents and/or to reunite with their family in order to feel ‘really safe’. Minors thus expressed a strong desire not only for physical safety, but also to feel emotionally safe. Overall, new aspirations started to emerge and already existing aspirations were becoming more concrete, partly because they had picked up stories and information about life in Belgium along the way:

There is a difference [in my aspirations]: I want to stay here and live with a residence permit. In Afghanistan I didn’t think about that, but now I do a little. Because I am always with my friends [other UM in the center] and they constantly talk about documents and the future, and that’s why I also start to be concerned about that. (Jamal)

Moreover, several participants now described sequences within their aspirations, explaining how a particular aspiration could not be realized when another had not yet fulfilled:

I want to study, because when I have studied I can find certainly work. If I have work, then I have money. And if I have money then I can build my life in a good way. I can send the money to my mother and brother. And if I do that, I can also let them come to Belgium. (Kabir)

Overall, the participants’ desire to stay in Belgium and realize their other aspirations was very strong. And whereas some participants were full of hope about their future life and about realizing their aspirations, for others this hope was far more constrained:

On the road I only thought about arriving somewhere where I could ask for asylum. I didn't know if it would be easy or not to have that [legal residence documents]. But when I came here and I saw all those people lying stacked up there, in Brussels, [refugees living on the streets in the capital], then I thought it would be very difficult. (Fahad)

The perceived aspirations of family members showed only small changes compared to the pre-departure aspirations, probably since most participants had not yet had the opportunity to contact their families.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that the processes of making decisions on whether or not Afghan UM should migrate to Western European countries are highly complex and influenced by a variety of interacting factors on macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. A variety of 'motives', both across cases and in single cases, and embedded in a macro-context of political instability, insecurity, and socio-economic constraints, influenced the decision to migrate (Mougne, 2010). While some motives grew out of long-lasting difficulties, such as the continuous suffering bound up with living in an unsafe environment or in financial hardship, other motives were rather immediate consequences of a particular event originating in this context. Specific 'triggers' initiating the final decision to leave the home country are thus not always present in the process of making a decision whether or not to migrate (Boland, 2010). In all participants' pre-migration processes, at least one element created both a 'motive' and an 'aspiration', such as wanting to flee an insecure situation (motive) and hoping to find security (aspiration). But mostly the UM left with far more aspirations, which were not always directly linked to the motive(s) influencing the decision to migrate. However, in many stories, it is unclear to what extent particular aspirations are related to migration motives, or what aspirations took shape later in the migration process.

Family members generally played an important role in both the migration decision-making processes and the aspirations the UM developed. It was in particular interesting that often the oldest son is 'sent' away to Europe. We could relate this to 'masculinity' since in Afghan families, when the father dies, the eldest sons are usually perceived as the head of the family and responsible for the family income (Hoodfar, 2008). The migration of these sons is often seen as a way to fulfill this responsibility, especially within the macro-context of political instability and armed conflict, which impacts severely on the families' daily living conditions (Monsutti, 2010). Aspirations, therefore, seem to be influenced by cultural and parenting practices, and the latter might be influenced by these large macro-level factors (Chuang, 2009; Hoodfar, 2008). Above, the results demonstrated the influence of macro-level factors of instability and armed conflict on the children's living conditions (e.g. no safety, limited educational possibilities) and how these conditions influenced the motives and aspirations related to the migration (e.g. finding safety, going to school). The involvement of the family is also reflected in the large financial investments required of family members for the minors' migration journey. Furthermore, stories and perceptions shared on a meso-level by community members and other actors, such as smugglers, influenced how minors and their families evaluated undertaking the migration to Europe (Rousseau et al., 1998; Sladkova, 2007).

We need to acknowledge that the impact of minors themselves on the migration decision-making process is itself quite considerable (Clark-Kazak, 2012); they clearly develop their own aspirations, which differ from those of their families. UM appear as capable, as actors in their own right, particularly when exploring coping strategies, resilience, and adaptation. This picture of agentic UM challenges earlier more passive images of this group (Boland, 2010; Mougne, 2010; UNHCR, 2010).

These findings also deconstruct or question dominant views of UM: since UM are often constructed as ‘children at risk’, and, as a consequence, mainly approached as ‘refugees’ (instead of minors), key actors and public discourses often experience difficulties in seeing ‘the child’ behind the label. Our results show how UM have aspirations related to their ‘being on the move’ (outside the idealized ideas of childhood and secure and stable child environments), as illustrated, among others, in their longing for a secure environment. But the interviews also reveal how these young people have multiple, intersecting identities, beyond just being ‘a refugee’ (Vervliet et al., 2013): they are also man, son, brother, friend, or student, and this too influences their aspirations. Some aspirations (e.g. about educational and job opportunities) are thus more related to gender, age, or familial position than to their ‘refugee’ status.

Aspirations are not only constructed in a complex, multi-leveled manner, they are also dynamic in nature (Crivello, 2011). Already shortly after arrival, the UM express a changed pattern of aspirations compared to those pre-departure, with different aspirations, other priorities, and less vagueness. These changes emerged during the transit period and were influenced by a range of factors that also influenced the journey itself: the minor’s own experiences on the road and at the moment of arrival, the stories of peers, countrymen, and smugglers, and their or others’ decisions about the course of the migration journey. Moreover, after their arrival, there is an interesting variety in whether minors adapt their aspirations to stories about life in Belgium and their own perceived capabilities: while most do not temper their aspirations, some do.

Since motives and aspirations are found to be connected with the actions migrants take and how they express their agency, most likely these pre-departure processes and travel journeys, including the motives for migration and the aspirations developed, will influence how Afghan UM set out their further trajectories in Belgium or elsewhere, and deal with their current living circumstances (Van Meeteren, 2012). An in-depth understanding of the lives and actions of UM is therefore of crucial importance to both migration policies and practitioners, as, on a policy level, it could lead to a better adaptation of current support structures to the needs and wants of UM, and practitioners could adjust their support more to the individual trajectory of each UM. We need thereby to challenge adult conceptions and constructions of care with UM’s views and experiences. Involved actors should therefore invest in broadening their knowledge of the complexity of motives and aspirations lying behind the migration processes of Afghan UM, both before their arrival in Belgium and as they continue their trajectories in the host country. This would create larger spaces in which the voices of young people are an absolute prerequisite for setting up appropriate support structures.

Finally, further in-depth studies, using multi-level approaches and focusing on these youngsters’ trajectories, could be valuable. We especially recommend measurements in

the different migration stages and comparisons between the perceptions of UM and those of family and community members.

Assessing the reasons why minors leave their home country to migrate to Europe is challenging (Mougne, 2010), and the limitations of this study therefore need to be considered. First, due to practical constraints such as the often unknown migration trajectory and country of destination, migration journeys that last several years, and financial constraints, it was impossible to question the same UM before departure, in transit, and after arrival in Belgium. Consequently, pre-departure aspirations had to be ascertained retrospectively, after arrival in Belgium. The data might have been influenced by a recall bias (McKelvey and Webb, 1996) and are possibly colored by what happened in transit and at arrival. Moreover, limited trust and emotional difficulties with talking about certain topics might also have influenced what the UM chose (not) to tell the researcher (Kohli, 2006).

Furthermore, the aspirations of family and community members were only investigated through the lenses of the UM themselves, since a person's perceptions of others' aspirations for him-/herself might be more influential than the factual aspirations.

Second, we only included Afghan UM living in a refugee reception center. Because of a lack of opportunity to gain access, we could not reach UM staying in other housing facilities (e.g. hotels or in families). Moreover, being 'institutionalized' in a reception center organized by the Belgian migration authorities might also have influenced participants' trust and openness.

Third, although translations of the questionnaires were available and an interpreter was always present, language and cultural barriers might still have influenced the data collection (Ahearn, 2000). Finally, despite the efforts to clarify the study's aims and the researcher's independence from the asylum authorities, there still might have been distrust of the study and the researcher, influencing participants' openness in expressing opinions and views (Kohli, 2006).

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Note

1. We use the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' interchangeably, with both referring to persons who (have) migrate(d) to another country, unlike their specific migration motive(s) (e.g. political persecution, war, family reunification, economic hardship) (Derluyn et al., 2009) or the person's legal procedure or residence documents. The term 'refugee' is thus not restricted to persons with a refugee status according to the Geneva Convention or to persons applying for asylum (Derluyn and Broekaert, 2008). In accordance with Belgian policy, the term 'unaccompanied' refers to minors not accompanied by their biological parent or legal caregiver (Derluyn and Vervliet, 2012).

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