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Do Afghan Youth Think of Migrating to other Countries under the Taliban Regime?

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Abstract

Migration of Afghans, particularly the young generation made headlines, when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. Many countries including the USA, Germany, UK, Canada and Australia brought major changes in assessing documents of Afghan asylum seekers at risk. This paper studies the opinion of Afghan youth migrating under the Taliban regime. We surveyed 280 youth in Balkh and Samangan provinces of Afghanistan. The respondents were selected using convenience and snow balling sampling strategies. The administrated questionnaire consisted of three main segments such as demographic characteristics, financial condition and migration. The findings expose that 91% of the respondents think of migrating to other countries. Furthermore, they confirmed insecurity, unemployment, dissatisfaction with the Taliban and exposing restrictions on women activities by the Taliban as the key drivers of their desire to emigrate. The majority of the youth surveyed (83%) consider regular migration channels in particular family reunion, study visa, humanitarian and labor visas. Even so, 17% of young people think of migrating through irregular channels. A significant proportion of the respondents (40%) selected Germany as a desired country of their destination among other options. This paper makes recommendations for improving the job market and providing better security services to discourage young people from leaving the country.

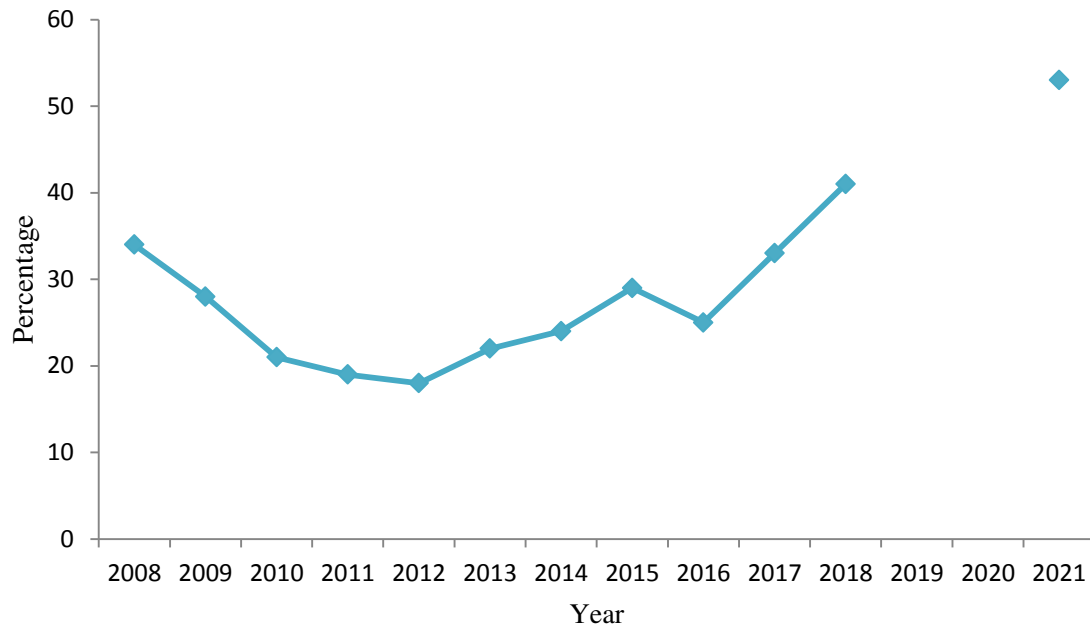
Keywords: Young people, migration factor, migration channel and the Taliban regime

Introduction

A significant number of the world population desire to migrate to other countries permanently. Gallup surveyed nearly 260,000 adults' aged 15+ in 135 countries from 2007 to 2009. The results revealed that over 15% of the world's adults have a tendency to migrate to other countries. This interprets to 700 million globally (Esipova & Ray, 2009). In the same vein, another research shows that more than 100 million adults would like to move to the U.S. This includes 19 million Chinese, 13 million Nigerians, 10 million Indians, 6 million Brazilians and 52 million from other nations (Clifton, 2013). In 2018, Gallup published a report on potential migrants worldwide estimating that 750 million people prefer to leave their country of birth. The U.S, Canada and Germany are three top desired destination countries (Esipova, Pugliese, & Ray, 2018).

Figure 1 presents the percentage of Afghans who would like to move to other countries. According to the data, the share of potential Afghan migrants decreased from 34% in 2008 to 18% in 2012. However, public view towards migration changed again and this figure reached 29% in 2015. One of the major factors that changed public opinion on migrating to other countries was the Chicago NATO summit in 2012. In this summit, NATO announced the approval plan to handover the lead charge of battle operations to Afghan security forces, and the withdrawal of 130 thousand of their troops from Afghanistan by 2014. (Asia News, 2012; Robinson, 2012; Hlatky, 2012). This was a big political shift for Afghan people, as they could not believe in military force capability and Afghan politicians' honesty in fighting against the Taliban. As a result, a substantial part of the population desired to flee to other countries in search of safety and better economic opportunities.

Figure 1: Percentage of Afghan people desire to migrate



Source: Ray, 2022

In 2016, the percentage of potential Afghan migrants declined by 4% compared to 2015 (29%). This number increased back to 33% in 2017, and reached 41% in 2019. On 14th April 2021, President Biden confirmed that the USA and its allies would leave Afghanistan in September 2021 (Cordesman, 2021). The Taliban speeded up their military operations resulting in taking control of dozens of districts within a few weeks. Simultaneously, peace negotiation between Afghan authorities and the Taliban has been continuing since 2020 in Doha. Unfortunately, the negotiation failed and the Taliban seized all provinces including Kabul in less than two weeks. The violence surged as international troops left the country and the Taliban seized Kabul. The majority of people attempted or desired to leave the country as Ray (2022) found that 53% of Afghan adults wanted to flee. This number is 12% higher compared to their estimation in 2018.

Evacuation operation and migration figures under the Taliban regime

The international troops began their evacuating operations in Kabul on August 14, 2022. The Taliban took control of almost all provinces, including the capital, a day later. Thousands of people rushed to Hamed Karzai International Airport as anxiety increased in the country. Over 124,000 people were evacuated by the US forces and its allies within 15 days (Kessler, 2021). The majority of countries attempted to transfer their citizens, local staff and those Afghans who

are at high risk, such as journalists, civil society activists, minorities and academic figures. More than 5,300 people were relocated by German forces. Similarly, British troops resettled 18,000 individuals, including 6,000 British citizens and 12,000 Afghans (BBC, 2022). Roughly 3,700 and 4,100 people were evacuated by Canada and Australia, respectively (Reuters, 2021). The evacuation operation is currently ongoing in Kabul and neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan.

On the other hand, thousands of Afghans fled to the neighboring countries through regular or irregular channels. A recent estimation by the New York Times revealed that from October to the end of January more than one million Afghans migrated to Iran (Goldbaum & Akbary, 2022). Similarly, Pakistani authorities stated that over 300,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan, whereas, about 70% of them do not have official traveling documents (Gul, 2021). Experts projected that on average nearly 12,000 people migrated to other countries every day (Augustova & Karimi, 2021). The Ministry Interior of Turkey (2022) reported that 45,820 Afghans entered Turkey “irregularly” in the first five months of 2022.

Statement of the problem

It has been six months since the Taliban control the country. Thousands of people fled to other nations, in seek of safety and better economic opportunities. However, thousands of other people currently live in the country and struggle with a number of issues including poverty, unemployment, insecurities and anxiety. Educated young individuals are one of those vulnerable groups which have been affected the most in the last months. They lost their jobs, left their studies and are living in a dark future. This study attempts to evaluate the opinion of those educated youth who reside under the Taliban regime towards migration. In particular, this paper states the following research questions:

- 1) Do Afghan youth think of migrating to other countries?
- 2) What factors play an important role in their desire to flee?

Methods

This study relied on primary data. The data was collected from 280 young people in Balkh and Samangan provinces. A questionnaire was developed containing three major parts. The first part

explored family and demographic characteristics of the respondents such as age, gender, marital status and education level. The second section dealt with the financial and employment status of the participants, including employment conditions, monthly income and type of organization. The last part covered specific issues on migration such as migration factor, migration channel, country of destination and others. The researchers selected a team of voluntary surveyors to collect the data in Balkh and Samangan provinces. They trained and practiced with mock questionnaires before starting the fieldwork. The data collection process began on January 3rd, 2022 and ended on January 22nd, 2022. The surveyors completed 20 questionnaires through face to face interviews with respondents. However, they observed a number of insecurity issues while conducting interviews, specially, with female respondents. Then, we decided to obtain the data following phone calls and sending Google forms to targeted young people.

The respondents were selected using both convenience and snowballing sampling approaches. They began conducting interviews by targeting young people among researcher's reference groups such as colleagues, friends and relatives. 160 questionnaires were completed through this method. Then, we requested participants to share contact information of a small number of their friends who ranged in age from 18 to 35 years and live in Balkh or Samangan provinces. 120 additional questionnaires were completed following this method. The collected data was analyzed with the assistance of statistical package and presented in figures and tables.

Findings

The responders ranged in age from 18 to 35 years old. They are classified into three categories, with the first group accounting for over 35% of the youth in Balkh province and 40% in Samangan province. Balkh province has nearly half of the respondents aged 24 to 29, while Samangan has almost 44%. The third class covers 14% and 16% of the respondents in Balkh and Samangan provinces, respectively. Both provinces have different gender contributions. Nearly 80% of respondents in Balkh province are men, whereas 20% are women. In Samangan province, young girls make up 60% of the entire sample, while men make up 40%. Marital status of the young people considered as single, engaged and married. According to the data, the majority of the Balkh's youth (61%) and Samangan's young (47%) are single. In both provinces, engaged status has a minor share, contributing 8.4% in Balkh and 18.2% in Samangan.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Categories	Balkh		Samangan	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-23	52	36.4	55	40.1
	24-29	71	49.7	60	43.8
	30-35	20	14.0	22	16.1
Gender	Male	113	79.0	55	40.1
	Female	30	21.0	82	59.9
Marital status	Single	87	60.8	65	47.4
	Engaged	12	8.4	25	18.2
	Married	44	30.8	47	34.3
Education level	High school	23	16.1	16	11.7
	Bachelor	93	65.0	109	79.6
	Master	27	18.9	11	8.0
	PhD	0	0.0	1	0.7
Total per province		143	100	137	100
Total observation			280		

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

The education level for surveyed young individuals is divided into four categories, including high school, bachelor's degree, master's degree and PhD. The obtained data illustrate that almost 65% of the respondents in Balkh province and nearly 80% of youth in Samangan province have a bachelor's degree. In Balkh province, 1 out of 5 responders has a master's degree, while this ratio is close to 1 out of 10 in Samangan province. There is only one participant with PhD recognition in Samangan province.

The employment status of the respondents is considered as employed, unemployed and student. Table 2 compares employment status and monthly income of responders before and after the Taliban regime. The collected data reveal that there is a major change in employment status before and after the Taliban regime. For instance, the number of employed persons decreased from 84 to 54 in Balkh province, while the number of unemployed persons increased from 15 to 63. Similarly, 40% of employed young people lost their jobs in Samangan province when the

Taliban took power, while the total number of unemployed persons increased from 20 to 77. The International Labour Organization (ILO) published a rapid assessment report on the unemployment crisis in Afghanistan in early 2022. They estimated that 500,000 lost their jobs as the government changed in August 2021. They also predict that this figure may increase to nearly 900,000 by mid-2022 (ILO, 2022).

Table 2: Comparing employment status and monthly income before and after the Taliban regime

Variable	Before the Taliban regime		After the Taliban regime	
	Balkh	Samangan	Balkh	Samangan
Employment status				
Employed	84	81	54	49
Unemployed	15	20	63	77
Student	44	36	26	11
Total	143	137	143	137
Organization				
Government	40	45	25	24
Int. Org	4	3	1	0
Private	29	31	18	23
Self employed	11	2	10	2
Total	84	81	54	49
Mean monthly income (AFN)				
	20,791	21,580	14,001	14,217

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

The data also expose that a significant number of surveyed youth left their studies as a result of the Taliban regime in both provinces. The total sum of students decreased from 44 to 26 in Balkh and from 36 to 11 in Samangan. A number of reports that confirm the higher education setbacks since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. For instance, the Taliban announced a wide range of changes at higher educational institutes, including reviewing curriculums, gender-segregated classrooms and full body covering (Akhtar & Ranjan, 2021; Ahmadi M. H., 2022). In addition, a new report shows that female university students do not feel safe going back to university (Owen, 2022). As a result of the administration and academic changes, a large number of lecturers in public universities left their jobs and fled to other countries. The BBC conducted a

research in three large Afghan universities to estimate the total number of academic staff who left their careers. They found that nearly 230 Afghan lecturers left their occupations in Kabul, Herat and Balkh universities and fled to neighboring countries and beyond (Marouf, 2022).

The employed young people reported their organizations as governmental, international, private organizations and self-employed. The obtained data exposes that a significant number of respondents who work for governmental, international and private organizations lost their jobs. However, we do not see a substantial change in employment status of self-employed youth. The total number of individuals working for government organizations declined from 40 to 25 in Balkh province, while in Samangan it decreased from 45 to 24. In Balkh province, 3 out of 4 persons working for international organizations lost their occupations, while this figure is 3 out of 3 in Samangan province. In Balkh and Samangan provinces, about 40% and 26% of young people working for private companies became unemployed respectively.

Following the Taliban government, respondents' average monthly income decreased in both areas. In Balkh, the average monthly income dropped from 20,791 AFN to 14,001 AFN, a 33 percent fall. In Samangan province, the mean monthly income declined from 21,580 AFN to 14,217 AFN, a reduction of roughly 34%. This finding is in line with recent reports of International organizations warning on humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan. According to UNDP (2022), more than 97% of the whole population will be living in poverty. Furthermore, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) warns that Afghanistan is facing a tsunami of hunger and widespread starvation. This report also states that 95% of Afghans confirmed a drop or substantial drop of incomes in 2021 (SIGAR, 2022). A recent estimate by the World Bank (2022) discovered that per capita incomes could fall by one-third in 2021 in Afghanistan.

Table 3: Do you think of migrating to other countries?

Variable	Yes %	No %
Gender		
Male	91.6	8.4
Female	90	10

Education level			
	High school	89.7	10.3
	Bachelor	91.6	8.4
	Master	92	8
Province			
	Balkh	92.3	7.7
	Samangan	91.2	8.8
Total		91	9

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

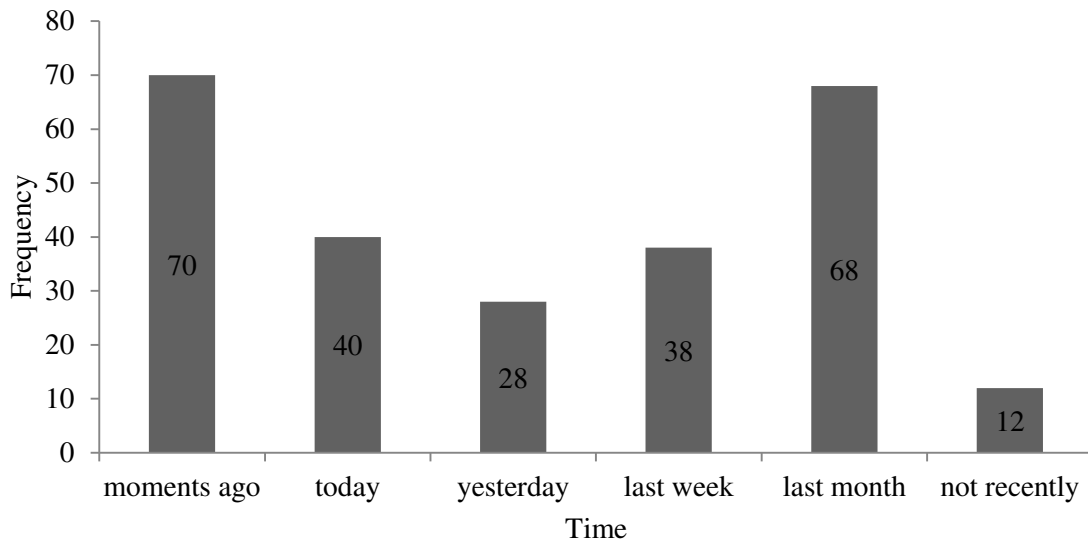
The respondents expressed their opinion on migrating to other countries. The collected data illustrate that youth are not satisfied with the current situation and think about leaving the country. Table 3 depicts that 91% of the young people replied yes to our question “do you think of migrating to other countries?”, while 9% said “no”. 90 percent of female respondents confirmed their willingness to migrate, compared to nearly 92% male participants. Young people with a higher education background have a larger desire to leave the country, according to the education level of those surveyed. For example, over 90% of those with a high school diploma want to move, but 91.6% of those with a bachelor's degree and 92% of those with a master's degree would like to flee. The difference between the two provinces is not significant, with 92.3% for Balkh and 91.2% for Samangan.

Our finding is much greater in comparison to the Ray (2022) outcomes. We believe that the obtained data has two major characteristics which could affect the desire for migration of individuals. Firstly, the majority of the respondents have a higher education degree, resulting in seeking better economic opportunities in neighboring countries and beyond. Secondly, Balkh and Samangan provinces are located in the north of the country and composed of mainly of Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara ethnicities. These communities do not consider themselves as part of the Taliban regime attempting to leave the country.

The participants also responded to our question “When was the last time you thought about migration?” According to the data, 70 people said “moments ago”, the following 40 replied “today”, 28 responded “yesterday”, 68 answered “last month” and 12 said “not recently”. This

implies that more than 95% of the surveyed young people thought about fleeing the country within the last month. Figure 2 represents the output of the survey in more detail.

Figure 2: When was the last time you thought about migration?



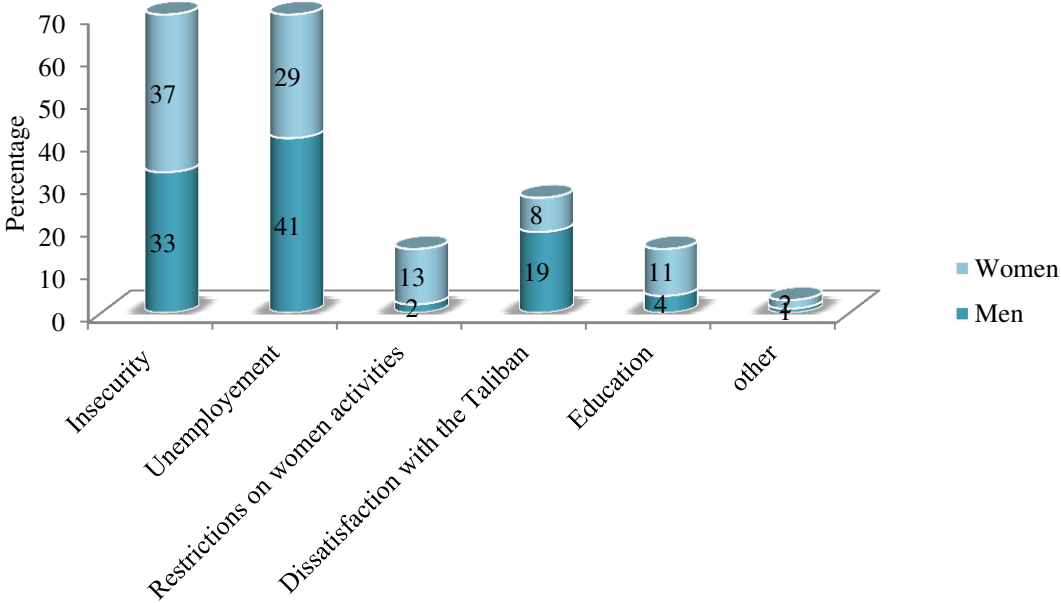
Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

The responders cited insecurity, unemployment, dissatisfaction with the Taliban, imposing restrictions on women's activities by the Taliban and education as main migration drivers. Majority of the female participants (37%) reported insecurity as a pushing factor, but only 33% of male participants. This shows that insecurity is still a major concern in Afghanistan, and that young people are fleeing the country due to anxiety and fear. In particular, vulnerable people like women and girls are at high risk and believe that migration is the last way to escape the Taliban and reach a safe destination. The Global Friends of Afghanistan (2022) published a report on women issues under the Taliban regime. They claimed that Afghan women do not feel safe with the current situation. Similarly, International Spiegel reported on the irregular migration of Afghans to Iran. They stated that this choice is the last option for many Afghans to escape the Taliban, poverty and anxiety. However, not everyone could make it (Reuter & Busch, 2022).

Unemployment is the second most important determinant for Afghan youth considering migration. Over 40% of the male participants confirmed unemployment as a crucial cause for leaving the country, while about 30% of the female respondents. In Afghanistan, administrative

changes resulted in poverty to increase, enormous job losses, income reductions, and a decrease in the growth rate (SIGAR, 2022; World Bank, 2022). In particular, thousands of skilled youth lost their jobs since the Taliban re-gained power. These educated individuals would leave the country in search of employment opportunities in other countries. Figure 3 presents migration factors in more detail.

Figure 3: Migration Factors

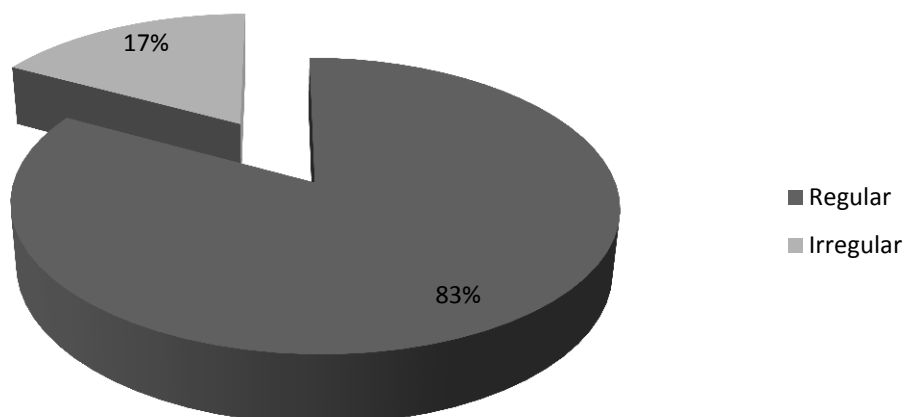


Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

A significant number of participants reported dissatisfaction with the Taliban and imposing restrictions on women’s activities by the Taliban as key factors to desire for migration. Nearly 20% of male respondents confirmed dissatisfaction with the Taliban as an important driver, but only 8% of female participants. On the other hand, 13% of young women cited imposing restrictions on women’s activities as an important cause for the desire to migrate, while this figure is only 2% among young men. The Taliban have imposed numerous restrictions on women and media issues since August 2021 (Stancati & Amiri, 2022; HRW, 2022; JURIST, 2021; Niazman & Roorzai, 2021; Harrison, 2021; Ahmadi & Ebadi, 2022; O’Donnell, 2022). Afghan young people are dissatisfied with the current situation and believe that migration is an option to escape from this restricted administration and reach a destination to be free. 11% of

young women also confirmed that education is an important factor for their willingness to move, but this number is only 4% for young men.

Figure 4: Migration Channels



Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

Figure 4 depicts the responses of surveyed young people to migration channels. According to the data, the majority of the respondents (83%) desire to migrate through regular channels. This includes a study visa, labor visa, family reunification visa, local staff visa, humanitarian visa, Special Immigration Visa (SIV) and others. Still, 17% of participants would like to flee via irregular channels. This result reveals that educated youth desire to migrate through regular channels. However, complicated and restricted procedures of regular channels resulting in fleeing via irregular channels in practice. Pakistani authorities reported that over 300,000 Afghans fled to Pakistan since August 2021, whereas nearly 70% of them crossed the border irregularly (Gul, 2021). Similarly, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) stated that from 4,000 to 5,000 Afghans cross into Iran every day since the Taliban took over Kabul (ALJAZEERA, 2021).

Table 4: The desire country of destination

Country	Frequency	Percentage
Germany	100	39
USA	40	15.6

Canada	40	15.6
Turkey	28	11
UK	14	5.5
France	9	3.5
Saudi Arabia	6	2.3
Iran	6	2.3
Belgium	1	0.4
Netherlands	1	0.4
Italy	1	0.4
Others	10	4
Total	256	100

Source: Fieldwork data, 2022

The respondents also stated their desired country of destination, listing Germany, the USA and Canada on top. Nearly 40% of participants selected Germany as a most desired country, following 15.6% the USA and 15.6% Canada. Turkey is also an attractive country among Afghan youth, and 11% of surveyed people mentioned it as a wanted destination country. A small number of respondents (0.4%) selected other European countries such as Belgium, Netherlands and Italy as their preferred destination countries. In the same vein, a recent survey by Gallup's Migration Research Center found that Afghans would like to go to Turkey, Germany, Canada and the USA (Ray, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the opinion of Afghan educated young people towards migration under the Taliban regime. The primary data were collected in Balkh and Samangan provinces. The participants were selected adopting convenience and snowballing sampling methods. The obtained data were analyzed and presented in statistical figures.

Our results suggest that educated young people are not satisfied with the current situation and are thinking of migrating to other countries. The majority of them cited insecurity and unemployment as key drivers for their desire to flee. Migration of educated people is defined as "brain drain", causing to cut down the stock of human capital in developing countries. This

implies that origin countries may experience fiscal losses and growth rate reduction (Docquier, 2014). We recommend both improving the job market and providing satisfying security services to discourage Afghan educated youth from leaving the country.

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