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**Return aspirations and the life course of refugees in
Germany
Study Report**

**Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung
(DeZIM) e.V.**

Rückkehrbestrebungen und der Lebensverlauf von Geflüchteten in
Deutschland

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Abstract

The dataset consists of 20 biographical-narrative interviews, conducted within the framework of the project “Return aspirations and the life course of refugees in Germany,” implemented by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). The interviews took place in Berlin between mid-2023 and early 2024 and were conducted in Farsi/Dari, Tigrinya, English, or German, with professional translations ensuring consistency. Participants, aged 22 to 48, include 14 Afghan and 6 Eritrean refugees who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2019. Seven interview pairs consist of two adult members of the same household, providing insights into family dynamics in migration decision-making. The study focuses on personal migration experiences, from initial circumstances in home countries and transit phases to settlement in Germany and future aspirations. All interviews have been transcribed, translated into English, anonymized, and are available for scientific secondary analysis.

German Abstract

Der Datensatz besteht aus 20 biografisch-narrativen Interviews, die im Rahmen des Projekts „Rückkehrbestrebungen und der Lebensverlauf von Geflüchteten in Deutschland“ vom Deutschen Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (DeZIM) durchgeführt wurden. Die Interviews fanden zwischen Mitte 2023 und Anfang 2024 in Berlin statt und wurden in Farsi/Dari, Tigrinya, Englisch oder Deutsch geführt, mit professionellen Übersetzungen zur Gewährleistung der Konsistenz. Die Teilnehmenden, im Alter von 22 bis 48 Jahren, umfassen 14 afghanische und 6 eritreische Geflüchtete, die zwischen 2013 und 2019 nach Deutschland kamen. Sieben Interviewpaare bestehen aus zwei erwachsenen Mitgliedern desselben Haushalts, wodurch familiäre Dynamiken bei Migrationsentscheidungen beleuchtet werden. Die Studie fokussiert auf persönliche Migrationserfahrungen – von den Ausgangsbedingungen in den Herkunftsländern und den Transitphasen bis hin zur Ankunft und Integration in Deutschland sowie zukünftigen Perspektiven. Alle Interviews wurden transkribiert, ins Englische übersetzt, anonymisiert und stehen für die wissenschaftliche Sekundäranalyse zur Verfügung.

1 Technical Data

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Funding:	German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ)
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Data:	20 translated, English languaged transcripts of interviews with Afghan and Eritrean refugees
Country:	Germany
Research Areas:	Migration Studies, Integration, Return aspirations, decision-making, Family Studies

2 Concept of the study

2.1 Biographical-narrative interviews with Eritrean and Afghan migrants

This study was implemented by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) as part of the project “Return aspirations and the life course of refugees in Germany”. It received institutional funding from the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The main goal was to understand and investigate the migration and life trajectories of refugees from Eritrea and Afghanistan in Germany from a life course perspective. We sought to deepen our understanding of how the biographical life paths of these migrants, from their countries of origin to their journey to Germany, their lived experiences in Germany and their future aspirations are interconnected. At the heart of this project are biographic narrative interviews with refugees in Germany, a method known for its ability to capture comprehensive life stories and generate knowledge about individuals’ life aspirations (Fischer-Rosenthal, 2002; Rosenthal, 2004; Rosenthal, 1993) increasingly recognized in (forced) migration studies (Müller-Funk & Fransen, 2023; Müller-Funk, Üstübcici & Belloni, 2023).

2.2 Research design and methodology

The project utilises an ex-post facto design that integrates a qualitative phase in which biographical narrative interviews are used to capture detailed accounts of migrants’ experiences. This phase aims to explore different aspects of forced migrants’ lives, including initial conditions in their home countries, experiences during transit, the eventual process of settling in Germany and their future aspirations. Key to this approach is the engagement with both individual narratives and family dynamics, achieved by interviewing two adult members of a household, where possible. This offers insights into the family-related aspects of lived experiences of migrants and the hierarchical processes behind the negotiation of life aspirations (Fischer & Goblirsch, 2007; Rosenthal, 2022). The dataset at hand comprises of 20 biographical narrative interviews – 14 with Afghans and 6 with Eritreans. Participants were selected based on their different experiences, including those who arrived as part of family reunification programmes and others who arrived independently.

2.3 Significance and expected results

The study makes an important contribution to our research on migrants’ aspirations by providing a nuanced understanding of the complex factors that influence the life trajectories of Eritrean and Afghan migrants. By focusing on the narratives of individuals and families, this study hopes to bring a human dimension to the often politicized debates around return migration and return as well as stay aspirations. This personalised approach aims to foster a deeper empathy and understanding of migrants’ experiences, which is crucial for the design of effective and humane migration policies.

More specifically, the study provides detailed accounts on the migration experiences of Eritrean and Afghan individuals, contributing to researchers’ understanding of the complexity

of migrants' life courses. This approach aims to foreground the lived realities of migrants by emphasising the personal, family and community dimensions of migration and their resilience in precarious situations, which are central to understanding migrants' broader life experiences and aspirations.

3 Sampling/selection of samples

3.1 Overview of the Sample

The study's sample consists of 20 participants, comprising 6 Eritrean and 14 Afghan migrants, all of whom arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2019. The participants were aged between 22 and 48 by the time of the interview, with 11 identifying as male and 9 as female. The sample involves seven pairs of two adult members of the same household: six were spousal pairs, and one included a single mother and her adult daughter. These household dynamics were recorded and are identifiable through Case-IDs. This family-based approach was pivotal for exploring the interconnected and hierarchical nature of migratory decision-making processes within families. Household members were interviewed separately.

The inclusion of multiple family members allows the researcher to examine the interplay of gender and age-related dynamics in shaping aspirations and decisions related to migration. This aligns with the view articulated by Bettin et al. (2018), that "moving or staying is not simply an individual decision: it also takes into account the potential effect on the lives of significant others, individuals with whom migrants have strong relationships" (p. 1013).

3.2 Recruitment Strategy

Participants were recruited through a combination of direct contacts, referrals from community organizations, and snowball sampling. NGOs and other civil society organizations were also approached; however, these avenues did not yield any participants. To facilitate the recruitment process, personal networks and community engagement were utilized extensively first. This approach was crucial for fostering trust, which enhanced the reliability and depth of the qualitative data collected during the interviews. Second, information about the study was disseminated at community centres and local events, and connections with colleagues who had previously worked with these communities were leveraged. Invitations were also distributed through emails shared by community organizations and self-help groups working closely with Eritrean and Afghan migrants. The recruitment strategy was designed to ensure a diverse sample, capturing a broad range of experiences and perspectives. By employing trusted communication channels and engaging directly with community members, the study created an environment in which participants felt safe and respected.

3.3 Conduct and Characteristics of the Interviews

All interviews were conducted in Berlin, Germany, during the second half of 2023 and the first half of 2024. The interviews were conducted by a team of one female and two male researchers. Conversations were held in Farsi/Dari, Tigrinya, English, or German, depending

on the language preferences of the participants. For interviews conducted in Farsi/Dari or Tigrinya, professional translation into English was ensured to maintain the accuracy and consistency of the data. The interviews ranged in duration from only 35 to extensive 158 minutes, allowing for in-depth exploration of the participants' narratives. Each interview took place at a location chosen by the interviewee, providing them with a comfortable and familiar environment to share their experiences. This flexibility further contributed to the participants' willingness to engage openly in the research process.

4 Targeted Population

Our study focusses on Afghan and Eritrean refugees, two very important, yet, especially in the case of the Eritrean refugee group, often neglected refugee groups in Germany. Eritreans are the largest population group from sub-Saharan Africa in Germany. Most of the approximately 80,000 Eritrean refugees have been granted protection status, which allows them to live with their families (BiB, 2021). In contrast, the Afghan diaspora in Germany is much larger and numbered almost 400,000 people in 2023. This group has seen a significant increase in refugee migration since 2015, making it one of the fastest growing migrant groups in Germany overall (BAMF, 2023; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023).

Our qualitative research focuses on these two distinct refugee groups and aims to explore their unique and shared experiences. The comparison holds valuable, personal insights into their journeys, from their countries of origin to their current lives in Germany. The selection of these groups offers a broad perspective on the challenges and aspirations that characterise the experiences of refugees in Germany. As such, these interviews can not only facilitate an understanding of individual narratives, but also favour broader conclusions on the social, cultural and political integration of refugees into German society.

5 Methodology & description of the data collection

5.1 Biographic Narrative Interviewing

The method of data collection in this study was biographic narrative interviewing (BNI), a qualitative approach that invites participants to share their life stories in their own words (Fischer-Rosenthal, 2002; Rosenthal, 2004; Rosenthal, 1993). We take inspiration from Wengraf's (2001) Biographic-Narrative-Interpretive Method (BNIM), a method that emphasizes the reflexive and individual-centered nature of storytelling through minimal researcher intervention. Focusing on the participants' life stories, this method avoids the imposition of external agendas, enabling an authentic exploration of experiences and interpretations within the interviewee's meaning-structures, not the researcher's (see also Schütze, 1983). BNI is particularly well-suited for migration studies, as it enables a nuanced understanding of how biographies are socially constructed and shaped by cultural and social contexts (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007). This conception is also informed by our view that biographic narratives are not

merely reconstructions of past events but also reflections of present circumstances and future aspirations (Ruis, 2019). Narratives highlight agency, decision-making, and meaning-making processes, particularly in the context of displacement and migration. Stories about past experiences are always colored by present realities and future objectives, offering rich insights into the lives of forced migrants. Biographic narrative interviewing is particularly powerful for exploring the role of biographies in shaping social identities and processes. It hence allows for the examination of migratory decisions and aspirations within the context of familial and social relationships.

5.2 Data Collection Approach

The interviews were conducted using an open and minimally structured format, which allowed participants to narrate their life stories freely and without interruption. The process began with a broad, open-ended question:

“I want you to tell me your life story, all the events and experiences which were important for you, up to now. Start wherever you like.

Please take the time you need. I'll listen first, I won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes for after you've finished telling me about your experiences.”

This initial question encouraged participants to share their experiences in a way that they deemed significant, ensuring that the data reflected their priorities rather than being shaped by the researcher's agenda. Follow-up questions were used sparingly and were designed to clarify or deepen understanding of specific aspects of the narrative. Examples of areas explored in follow-up questions included:

- Early life and the decision to leave Eritrea or Afghanistan.
- Experiences en route to Germany, including during transit and in countries of first asylum.
- Life and integration experiences in Germany, as well as aspirations for the future.

5.3 Practical Implementation of Biographic Narrative Interviews

The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants to ensure a relaxed and familiar environment. Many interviews took place in cafés where participants could enjoy tea or coffee, fostering an atmosphere conducive to open and honest storytelling. Given the sensitive nature of the topics, this environment played a crucial role in creating a safe space for participants to share their often-traumatic experiences. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language – Farsi/Dari, Tigrinya, English, or German – to ensure comfort and ease of communication. When conducted in Farsi/Dari or Tigrinya, professional translation into English was carried out to maintain data accuracy.

5.4 Conduct and Characteristics of the Interviews

The research team received specialized training from Prof. Dr. Nicole Witte and the QuaText Institute e.V. This training prepared the researchers to approach the interviews with the required sensitivity and methodological rigor.

6 Evaluation procedure

The interviews were recorded using audio equipment and then transcribed by native speakers. The transcripts were then translated by professional translators. All translations were again checked by a native speaker. The interview material can be assessed by means of various methods and tools, including qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis or grounded theory. Discourse analytical tools are not recommended, due to the fact that the interviews were conducted in different languages, with different linguistic characteristics, and translated by different translators. To capitalize on the personal depth and richness of (most) of the interviews, the researchers recommend biographic case reconstruction:

6.1 Biographic case reconstruction

The biographic case reconstruction method (Fischer-Rosenthal & Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal, 1993; Witte & Rosenthal, 2007) involves several concrete steps, including, but not limited to, the following: First, the data is collected and systematically examined according to chronological accounts of the respondents' lives. Second, a thematic field analysis, identifying which main topics are addressed at which point and what that may say about the interviewees' interpretation of these topics, is sketched. Third, building on the previous two, a reconstruction of the individual "case" starts from thinking about the individual meaning of the major events for the overall biography. Fourth, specific text passages that stand out are assessed to, fifth, carefully align and contrast the narrated life history and the life events experienced by the interviewees. Finally, typologies or regularities are developed based on the research question.

A limitation to consider relates to the in parts strongly diverging "capacities to narrate" of our interviewees: The capacity to narrate relates not only strongly to the interviewees' general openness to share, but also their "capacity to narrate" their lives, a skill that people acquire differently and that is interpreted differently across cultures as well (Schütze et al., 2016). Finally, it also depended on the interviewers' capacity to act as a good counterpart.

7 Data protection and data security

In line with ethical research practises, all personal data has been anonymised and pseudonymized before being archived through the Qualiservice research data centre for qualitative social science research data. Amongst other, the names of the interviewees, their

jobs, study programs, or the specific districts in which they live(d) were anonymised and replaced by general placeholders, e.g. [*borough in Berlin*].

The interview study was approved by DeZIM-institute's ethics committee (procedure code EK05/2023).

8 The contextual framework of the study

In our study, we examine the lived experiences of Afghan and Eritrean migrants, two groups that have not yet been comprehensively addressed in biographical narrative research in Germany. These communities represent a significant part of recent migration flows to Europe, with many members having arrived since 2015 due to escalating conflicts and deteriorating conditions in their home countries.

The biographical narrative interviews conducted as part of this study aim to capture the full range of experiences from these people's countries of origin, their journeys to countries of asylum, their subsequent migration to Germany and their current lives here. These narratives offer insights into the complex layers of their migration experiences, including the challenges they faced during their flight, the dynamics of their stays in the first countries of asylum and their integration processes in Germany.

In addition, this study pays close attention to the hopes and future plans of these migrants. Understanding their hopes for the future and their continuing ties to their cultures of origin offers valuable perspectives for their integration and identity in German society. By focusing on these personal stories, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuanced and multi-layered nature of migration and integration, beyond the political and societal challenges that are often emphasised in the media and research. This approach allows for a more comprehensive exploration of how personal stories and societal contexts intersect in the lives of migrants.

9 Reusability potential of the interview transcripts

The interview transcripts generated in this study hold significant potential for future research in migration, integration, or family studies. Given the focus on two major yet underrepresented refugee groups in Germany—Eritreans and Afghans—these interviews provide valuable comparative insights into forced migration experiences. The open-ended, interviewee-driven nature of biographical narrative interviews makes them especially valuable for reuse in other research contexts, as they are not confined to a single research agenda but instead capture authentic, self-structured accounts of lived experiences. As such, the material is highly relevant for research on social adaptation, intergenerational dynamics, and the broader societal incorporation of forced migrants in Germany. Capturing the full life span of refugees, from their countries of origin to their settlement and integration in Germany, the narratives offer a rich basis for analyzing biographical trajectories and decision-making processes. The interviews also shed light on reception practices, including the role of legal pathways such as family

reunification and the impact of social policies on refugees' lives. Furthermore, the dataset allows for an in-depth exploration of family roles and constellations among newly arrived migrants, particularly through the inclusion of multiple household members. This offers a unique perspective on how migration decisions and integration experiences are negotiated within families.

10 Publications from the project

Fuchs, L.M., Rischke, R., Yanasmayan, Z. (in preparation). Opportunity or Crisis? A Mixed-Methods Assessment of how Previous Migration Experiences Shape Return and Re-migration Aspirations of Afghan Refugees in Germany.

Rock, J., Hagos, S.Z., Fuchs, L. (in preparation). Displaced in Berlin: A Comparative Analysis of Afghan, Eritrean, and Ukrainian Communities. In İçduygu, A., and Zapata Barrero, R. (eds.), *Cities and Forced Displacement: Challenges, Governance, and People's Voices in the Middle East and Beyond*. Liverpool University Press.

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