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Invisible Roads: Afghan Women's Urban Mobility
under Taliban Government

Supervisor: Prof. Chira Rabbiosi

Candidate: Aghele Mohammadi

Registr.number: 2092423

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Abstract

This thesis explores how young Afghan women experience and navigate mobility restrictions in Kabul under the current Taliban regime and its socio-political implications. Through a qualitative approach combining semi-structured interviews and participant-generated drawings, the research uncovers the layered ways in which urban space is regulated by dress codes, checkpoints, and gender norms. These external controls produce not only physical limitations but also emotional landscapes of fear, anxiety, and psychological distress. The study highlights recurring themes such as surveillance, spatial exclusion, loss of independence, and the shrinking of public life. Despite these constraints, Afghan women demonstrate resilience and adaptability by employing strategies such as altered commuting paths or online education. By exploring both the verbal and visual narratives of participants, this thesis contributes to feminist and urban mobility studies by providing insights into how space, gender, and power intersect in conflict settings. The findings call for urgent attention to spatial justice, mental health, and women's rights in authoritarian urban environments.

SOMMARIO ESTESO

Questa tesi esplora come le giovani donne afgane vivono e affrontano le restrizioni alla mobilità a Kabul sotto l'attuale regime talebano e le sue implicazioni socio-politiche. Attraverso un approccio qualitativo che combina interviste semi-strutturate e disegni prodotti dalle partecipanti, la ricerca mette in luce i molteplici modi in cui lo spazio urbano viene regolato da codici di abbigliamento, posti di blocco e norme di genere. Questi controlli esterni producono non solo limitazioni fisiche, ma anche paesaggi emotivi di paura, ansia e disagio psicologico. Lo studio evidenzia temi ricorrenti come la sorveglianza, l'esclusione spaziale, la perdita di indipendenza e la progressiva riduzione della vita pubblica. Nonostante tali vincoli, le donne afgane dimostrano resilienza e capacità di adattamento ricorrendo a strategie come la modifica dei percorsi di spostamento o l'istruzione online. Esplorando sia le narrazioni verbali sia quelle visive delle partecipanti, questa tesi contribuisce agli studi femministi e sulla mobilità urbana, offrendo nuove prospettive su come spazio, genere e potere si intersechino nei contesti di conflitto. I risultati richiamano l'attenzione urgente sulla giustizia spaziale, sulla salute mentale e sui diritti delle donne negli ambienti urbani autoritari.

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Introduction

Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, is a city of profound contradictions: it has historically embodied both the promises of modernity and the entrenchment of patriarchal and fundamentalist control. Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, the city's public space had undergone a radical transformation, becoming a terrain of exclusion, surveillance, and gendered repression. For Afghan women, the rights to mobility, employment, and public life have been curtailed through the imposition of severely restrictive laws.

As Sahill (2023) argues, the Taliban's regime has constructed an "all-male world," where public space is masculinized and women's presence is treated as deviant, requiring justification or concealment. Women have been forced into the private sphere, often without access to education, employment, or public platforms where they can voice their concerns or desires. This ideological project is part of a broader discourse that not only regulates women's bodies through dress and surveillance but also annihilates their spatial and professional agency.

The exclusion of women from the labor market has emerged as one of the starkest indicators of this gender apartheid. As Haidari (2024) documents, post-2021 policies have led to a steep decline in the female labor force, with participation dropping to as low as 6% in some quarters along with the collapse of women-led businesses and the dismantling of prior gains made through two decades of international aid and feminist policymaking. The regime's systematic restriction of women's access to employment, particularly outside of the health and education sectors, has had devastating effects on both household survival and national economic growth, contributing to a 20.7% GDP contraction in 2021 (Haidari, 2024).

Under the Taliban regime, the female body is not only subjected to overt surveillance but is also discursively and materially erased from public visibility. In official Taliban rhetoric, women's role in society is confined to the domestic sphere, framing them as protectors of family honor and bearers of religious virtue. As Sahill (2023) argues, this discourse depicts women not as citizens but as moral objects whose existence in public space is perceived as inherently disorderly or dishonorable. Public statements by Taliban officials reinforce this binary: women who seek education or employment are accused of promoting "Western immorality," while those who stay at home are portrayed as ideal Islamic women, revered for their modesty and obedience.

But these ideas are not merely rhetorical; they translate into tangible spatial and economic restrictions. As Haidari (2024) notes, women have been barred from nearly all forms of

employment except certain narrowly defined sectors such as primary healthcare or girls' education, where they are still subjected to rigid codes of dress, behavior, and male supervision. In December 2022, the Taliban banned Afghan women from working for both domestic and international NGOs, a decision extended to UN agencies in April 2023. These measures resulted in the mass closure of women-led projects and grassroots initiatives across Kabul and other provinces, effectively cutting off tens of thousands of women from their only sources of income and professional identity.

Spatial restrictions such as heavily conditioning women's presence in the public sphere ultimately leads to economic erasure. By denying women access to public spaces without a male guardian (*mahram*), many women cannot even apply for jobs or attend interviews. Haidari (2024) documents that microenterprises once run by women, particularly in handicrafts, tailoring, IT services, and small-scale education, have seen a 60% decline since 2021. This is not simply a result of market forces, but of a gendered political economy designed to make women financially dependent on men and unable to provide for themselves, pursue their own careers and accumulate savings. They are also excluded from decision-making having to do with the management of the household economy or community resources. This produces what may be termed economic immobility, where the denial of movement simultaneously implies the denial of having a livelihood. Not only can women not move freely in the city, their entire social and economic role as citizens is rendered illegitimate. The inability to access income-generating activities, coupled with rising living costs and widespread humanitarian crises, exacerbates women's vulnerability to domestic violence, early marriage, and mental health deterioration. In interviews conducted by UN Women and reported by Haidari (2024), some women describe feeling buried alive, locked inside homes that have become prisons, not sanctuaries.

The Taliban's selective application of Sharia law in public discourse serves to legitimize these exclusions under the guise of moral and religious purity. Yet, as scholars have pointed out, this is less about theological fidelity and more about gendered authoritarianism, i.e., the strategic use of women's bodies and visibility to project state power, enforce ideological conformity, and reinforce a masculinist public order. By tying morality to visibility, and visibility to deviance, the regime ensures that women's participation in public and economic life is always framed as a threat that must be neutralized through confinement for the good of society. This paradox of being both indispensable and yet disposable in the eyes of the state highlights the structural nature of economic immobility in Kabul. Women are tasked with ensuring their

family's survival while simultaneously denied recognition, legal protection, or spatial legitimacy.

Even before the current Taliban rule, women's public lives in Kabul were often shaped by changing gender regimes. Nwe (2023) describes how women professionals navigated patriarchal political shifts by tactically aligning themselves with male protectors, bureaucratic intermediaries, or institutional frameworks that lent them temporary legitimacy. The post-2021 regime, however, has closed even these limited openings with its bans on education and most forms of employment (Haidari, 2024; UN Women, 2023).

In a context where the governing moral discourse frames women's bodies as threats to social order and legitimizes their confinement as a form of moral protection, cities become places where women must negotiate space not as users, but as intruders, with all the negative implications for safety, mental health and the economy that this entails.

Theoretical Framework

Focusing on Kabul as a case study enables a nuanced exploration of how women navigate and adapt to living in a city where intersecting dynamics of space, power, gender, and economy conspire to erase them from the public space. This study, using a feminist qualitative approach and combining interviews with visual representation methods, aims to examine how young urban women in Kabul navigate daily life under conditions of forced immobility and systemic exclusion, while paying special attention to the effective and psychological dimensions of these experiences. Feminist methodology offers a framework for conducting research that is relational, ethically grounded and attentive to power. It emphasizes the value of women's knowledge, the importance of reflexivity, and the need to create space for participants to share stories on their own terms (Fonow & Cook, 2005). It is particularly suited to this study, as it seeks to understand not only what women do to move through restricted spaces but how they feel, adapt and resist in ways that are often invisible or unspoken. Furthermore, one of the most essential aspects of feminist methodology is reflexivity, i.e., the recognition that the researcher is never neutral or invisible. Throughout this research, I remained aware of my own position as an Afghan woman in exile: someone who shares cultural, linguistic and gendered experiences with participants, but who also operates from a space of safety and academic privilege. As an Afghan woman, I shared cultural, linguistic, and gendered experiences with my participants that helped build trust and openness during our conversations. We have all navigated patriarchal norms and the emotional burden of being women in public space, which

allowed for deep and honest reflections. At the same time, I remained aware of the important differences between us. Unlike the women I interviewed, I now live in Europe, away from the immediate dangers, restrictions, and emotional toll of Taliban rule. This distance between safety and risk, between “here” and “there” required constant reflexivity. I continuously asked myself how to honor their voices without overstepping, and how to represent their stories truthfully while respecting their agency and vulnerability. This duality informed not only how I listened and asked questions, but how I interpreted what was shared with me. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling Goodman (1961) , with inclusion criteria focusing on women currently or recently employed in one of four sectors: education, NGOs, healthcare and private business. These fields reflect different levels of public exposure and institutional restriction, allowing for a diverse perspective on how mobility is managed across different occupational settings. All interviews were conducted remotely through voice-only calls using WhatsApp inspired by Khan (2024). This method was chosen for its widespread use in Kabul, its end-to-end encryption, low data requirement and cultural familiarity of participant. WhatsApp offered both safety and flexibility, allowing participants to choose the time and environment that felt most comfortable while also enabling discreet communication in a setting where digital surveillance and public suspicion remain pervasive. Unlike video calls or face-to-face interviews, which can cause discomfort or increase risk, voice-only interviews allow women to speak more freely, without visual exposure, and at their own pace.

To deepen the participants’ engagement and expression, I also invited them to complete a drawing activity after the interview. Each participant was asked to visually represent their mobility experience through sketches, maps or symbols. Among other things, these drawings captured restricted areas, routes taken and emotional responses to space, providing insights that words alone might miss. In several cases, these visual narratives opened up new layers of conversation and connection, helping both the participant and me to reflect more fully on their spatial mobility.

Research questions and Aims of the research

The present thesis aims to understand the extent and nature of mobility restrictions imposed on employed women in Kabul, to identify the coping mechanisms they adopt, and to explore the new strategies they develop for navigating mobility within the city. The focus will be on women who work to examine how they negotiate these restrictions in their daily lives.

Three research questions guide the inquiry:

1. How has the Taliban's rule affected employed women's spatial mobility, particularly in terms of commuting and navigating urban spaces in Kabul?
2. What coping strategies do employed women use to manage these mobility restrictions?
3. How do women perceive and give meaning to their mobility under these constraints, and how do these strategies influence their professional and personal lives?

Expected Outcomes and Contributions

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to a deeper understanding of the gender rights situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, particularly how young women in Kabul experience and manage mobility restrictions. It also sheds light on the broader socio-political dynamics at play, providing valuable insights for policymakers, NGOs, and other stakeholders focused on gender equity and human rights in conflict-affected areas.

Methodological Contribution of this thesis demonstrates the potential of using innovative methods specifically, the combination of voice-only interviews and participant-generated drawings to access lived experiences in highly constrained political and social environments.

AI Tools Reflection

In the interest of professional ethics and transparency, I wish to point out that generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as Sonix.ai have been used to provide support and assistance while writing this thesis. However, as I am aware of the risks involved in the use of these new technologies, especially with regards to the introduction of factual mistakes and accidental plagiarism, I have strictly limited their use to the purposes of helping me to improve the text's readability and to create text outlines to structure and guide the writing process. This has been especially useful for me as a foreign student who only recently started using English in the context of my university studies. Through awareness of the risks and extreme caution, the use of AI in this way has helped me put together a thesis I can consider my own with a much better readability than I could have achieved without the use of these technologies. Additionally, I used ChatGPT to translate the transcripts of the interviews from Dari/Persian into English to obtain more natural-sounding results to include in the thesis. As a native Dari speaker, I was able to compare the translations to the original to ensure their accuracy and adequacy. In short, though AI tool were used for certain parts of the writing of this thesis, the ultimate decision-making and supervision was entirely human.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the relevant literature on feminist theories of mobility, urban fearscape, and Afghan women's rights, identifying key gaps that this study seeks to address. Chapter 2 explains the methodology, including the feminist research design, sampling strategies, and the use of online voice-only interviews and visual elicitation. Chapter 3 presents the urban and policy context after August 2021, the four employment sectors examined, and the rationale for focusing on employed urban women. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, highlighting women's narratives of fear, adaptation, and resilience. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in relation to existing scholarship, situating Afghan women's experiences within broader debates on mobility, gender, and authoritarian rule. Chapter 6 concludes the study by summarizing the results, outlining theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions, and suggesting directions for future research and policy engagement.

In sum, this thesis explores how employed Afghan women in Kabul live through and respond to the restrictions on their mobility under Taliban rule. By foregrounding women's voices and visual testimonies, it seeks not only to fill a gap in the scholarship on gender and mobility in Afghanistan but also to acknowledge the lived realities behind abstract policies and statistics. The study shows that mobility is more than the ability to move through the city: it is about preserving dignity, being recognized as a citizen, and sustaining the right to participate in public life.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Women's spatial mobility in Afghanistan has long been shaped by the rise and fall of different political regimes, cultural norms and security conditions. Since 2001, when the Taliban were first overthrown by the US-led alliance, urban women, especially in Kabul, gained partial access to education, employment and public space. However, the Taliban's return to power in August 2021 reversed these gains. New decrees have severely restricted women's freedom of movement, banning them from most forms of employment and requiring male guardians for navigating public spaces (UN Women, 2024).

While there is a wealth of reports documenting these restrictions, there is limited academic research focusing on how women experience and navigate the significant constraints imposed on them in their daily lives. While most studies address the matter of education or broad human rights violation issues, there is a lack of research into the subjective, emotional and practical dimensions of urban mobility under Taliban rule.

This thesis specifically addresses that gap by exploring how working women in Kabul cope with mobility restrictions, the strategies they use and the meanings they assign to movement. By centering their lived experiences, the study contributes to feminist and mobility literature and provides significant insights into gendered urban life in authoritarian contexts. It aims to highlight not only the limits imposed, but also the agency and resilience of women who continue to work and move under repressive conditions.

1.1 Working Socio-Special Mobility

The concept of mobility has long been central to the study of human societies, from early nomadic movements and trade routes to contemporary patterns of migration, commuting and digital connection. Historically, mobility was viewed in physical terms by people moving from one geographic location to another. However, with the emergence of the "mobilities turns" in the early 2000s, scholars began to underscore how movement need not be merely geographic, but can also be social, political and symbolic (Sheller, M., Urry, J., 2006). This paradigm shifts reframed mobility as a condition of modern life embedded in systems of power, access and inequality.

The concept of socio-spatial mobility has roots in classical sociology, with thinkers like Marx, Weber and Durkheim acknowledging the role of spatial dynamics in social life, a notion later embraced by the Chicago School, which emphasized the idea that people move in pursuit of better opportunities (E. Recchi, A. Flipo, 2019). This perspective highlights that individuals

make a series of moves throughout their life course to align housing, employment and personal satisfaction (Clark, W. W. A., & Dieleman, F. M., 1996). This focus on personal trajectories has been paralleled by attention to the role of place in structuring social mobility, especially through government efforts to engineer “communities of opportunity” urban spaces that offer access to jobs, education, housing and social services (Maarten van Ham, David Manley, 2010).

Interest in mobility, including the movement of people, goods and information, has intensified in the past two decades across disciplines. Geographers have embraced the “mobilities turn” to explore who/what moves and under what conditions (E. Recchi, A. Flipo, 2019). Movement is now understood to be embodied, always tied to the physical and social body, regardless of geographic scale (Sheller, M., Urry, J., 2006). Studies of everyday mobility such as commuting, errands, or social visits now coexist with research on global supply chains, migration routes and transportation infrastructure (Merriman, 2020). Temporal variations are also acknowledged: mobility is now seen to differ in speed, frequency, duration and predictability (Cwerner, 2001; Spurr, 2004; Baas & Yeoh, 2020).

Socio-spatial mobility, in this expanded framework, can now be understood to refer to the interrelation between individuals' movements and the spatial arrangements they navigate, such as cities, infrastructures, borders and institutions (E. Recchi, A. Flipo, 2019). It involves not just movement, but the social and political meanings embedded in that movement. It is profoundly shaped by one's social position, gender, class, race and age, all of which can determine who can move where, when and under what conditions (Hanson, 2010; Cresswell, 2010).

To better understand the concept of social-spatial mobility, we must turn to Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of “field”, “capital” and “habitus” explored throughout his career in a framework known as “theory of practice” from a relational perspective (Bourdieu, 2013). This means analyzing how objective social structures (social fields) interact with internalized structures (habitus), as Bourdieu argues that all human behavior has an inherently dimension that must be explained socially. Individuals don't act randomly or without reason; every decision about moving, whether it be traveling, relocating, or how one moves follows a social logic. This logic is shaped by an internalized interest that drives people to act or participate in the social fields (García Jerez, 2016). Bourdieu calls this internalized interest “*illusio*” or libido: the belief that participating in these fields is a game worth playing, and that the stakes involved are meaningful. Illusion is what makes individuals commit to participating in social life, to strive

for things society values. This interest creates a space of conflict and competition, but this space only exists because individuals occupy different social positions, which give them access to desirable resources or opportunities (García Jerez, 2016).

1.2 Feminist Mobilities Studies

The feminist mobilities discourse began to gain traction in the 1980s, focusing on women's roles in migration and mobility decisions. Feminist mobilities studies emerged as a critical response to the dominant mobility discourses that often-assumed universal access to space and movement, while ignoring gendered power relations. Traditionally, mobility was treated as a neutral and technical concept concerned with transportation systems, infrastructure and logistics. Mobilities scholars, however, reframed mobility as embodied, experienced and contested, emphasizing how gender, race, class and other social categories deeply shape one's ability to move (Sheller, 2008; Cresswell, 2010). This way of understanding mobilities resonates with feminist thinking, both in the attention given to embodiments (which was already at the core of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, 1949), and then at the core of Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1993) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

One core aspect of mobilities research is the recognition that the freedom to move is unevenly distributed (Sheller, 2018). Feminist geographers argue that space is not equally open to all: some bodies are policed, monitored, or excluded, while others are granted authority and presence (Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). This perspective challenges the idea that mobility is a universal right and instead reveals how it operates as a form of social privilege. The concept of “power geometries,” introduced by Doreen Massey (1994), is especially influential within mobilities thinking. Even if it was not elaborated within the mobilities scholar's arena it captures the idea that people occupy unequal positions within networks of mobility: some control the flows, others are passively moved by them, and some are excluded entirely (Massey, 1994). This approach moves beyond the binary of mobile/immobile and instead interrogates who controls movement, who benefits from it and who is marginalized by it.

Feminist mobilities research also focuses on the emotional and symbolic dimensions of movement: fear of harassment, cultural taboos and internalized shame can restrict women's mobility just as much as physical barriers do (Koskela, 1997; Uteng & Cresswell, 2008). In the early 2000s, Hanson (2010) emphasized that women's mobility patterns reflect their disproportionate role as caregivers with their consequent overreliance on less autonomous

forms of transport, such as walking or buses. This in turn reinforces gendered spatial inequalities.

Furthermore, postcolonial feminist scholars, like Mohanty (2003), critique Western feminist discourses that assume agency equals free movement. They argue that agency must be understood through cultural, historical and material conditions (Mohanty, 2003). More recently, Castañeda, Soliz and Sheller (2024) introduced the idea of feminist mobility justice, arguing that unequal access to movement is deeply tied to broader care responsibilities and structural injustices such as race, class, and colonialism. They contend that reproductive labor, migratory constraints and the feminization of caregiving all conspire to create a gendered mobility regime (Castañeda, & A. Soliz (Eds.), 2024).

Other key principles identified by feminist mobility scholars include a) gender identity mobility, referring to the fluidity of gender identities and their impact on social structures, in turn promoting inclusivity (Sun, n.d.); b) embodiment, i.e., mobility as experienced through gendered, racialized and classed bodies that encounter fear, stigma or surveillance differently (Preston et al., 2024); and c) intersectionality, referring to when gender intersects with other social categories that shape movement. For instance, race, age, class and religious identity all influence who can move, when and with what consequences (Castañeda, & A. Soliz (Eds.), 2024).

The significance of feminist mobility study lies in its ability to challenge traditional narratives and advocate for a more equitable understanding of mobility. However, some argue that feminist perspectives still struggle for recognition within broader migration studies, indicating a need for further integration and dialogue in the field (Nawyn, 2010).

1.2.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as a feminist framework, allows for an analysis that is systemic, historical, and multi-scalar. As Thornton-Dill et al. (2007) note, it positions gender within broader ideological, political, and economic systems alongside race, class, religion, nationality, and age. It provides tools to analyze not only individual experiences but also local, national, and global power structures that shape women's agencies. One of the most influential critiques of second-wave feminism emerged from Black feminists, who challenged the universalizing assumptions embedded in dominant white feminist narratives. Writers such as bell hooks (year), argued that feminism must be grounded in the lived experiences of those at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. This line of critique led to the development of

intersectionality, a concept coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Originally formulated to explain the unique discrimination faced by African- American women, intersectionality reveals how systems of oppression racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and others interact and overlap, creating complex and often invisible forms of marginalization (Nwe, 2022).

As a methodological tool, intersectionality foregrounds lived experience and complexity, resisting the reductive binaries and essentialist categories that have historically plagued both liberal and Western feminist frameworks. Rather than separating identity markers into isolated analytical units, intersectionality invites us to consider how structures of power converge at multiple levels individual, institutional, and systemic. For the purposes of this research, intersectionality provides a more grounded and flexible analytical framework than transnational feminism. While transnational feminism has generated critical insights, it has also, particularly in neoliberal and development contexts, been co-opted into a global aid discourse that reduces women of the Global South to one-dimensional poster figures. As Hester Eisenstein (2017) critiques in her work on “hegemonic feminism,” neoliberal forms of women’s empowerment often replace liberation with vague notions of inclusion, masking the structural roots of inequality (Nwe, 2022).

Afghan women’s lives have frequently been analyzed through such Western liberal or neoliberal lenses, often unconsciously shaped by international development narratives. Intersectionality offers a more inclusive and rigorous lens, capable of capturing the layered realities of Afghan women’s lives where gender interacts not only with ethnicity and class, but also with militarism, religion, dependency on foreign aid, and the state’s fragile legitimacy. Collins and Bilge (2016) emphasize that intersectionality is not confined to academic theory in the Global North. It is, and has long been, used by activists and scholars in the Global South often without being named as such to address systemic inequalities and overlapping structures of oppression (Nwe, 2022). Crenshaw (1991) argues that women from immigrant or marginalized communities are often made vulnerable not solely by gender or race but by the interlocking effects of social and legal systems such as immigration laws that fail to recognize their specific situations. While many of the women whose mobility experiences are shared in this thesis may not identify as feminists in the political or ideological sense, this research does not aim to label them as such. Rather, it employs a feminist and specifically Afghan feminist lens to interpret their everyday mobility practices from “home” to “work” and spatial negotiations in public space. The aim is not to speak for them, but to understand how their lived

experiences reflect broader gendered power dynamics, and how agency is expressed within constraints. By grounding this analysis in Afghan feminist thought, the study seeks to avoid the universalizing tendencies of liberal feminism and instead highlight the nuanced, context-specific forms of resistance and resilience that shape women's mobility under Taliban rule.

1.2.2 The Intersection of Gender and Working Mobilities

Mobility has historically reshaped gender roles in different cultural contexts, such as the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Bernardi, T., & Bruzzi, S, 2023).

In the pre-industrial world, women's labor was primarily confined to the domestic or agrarian sphere, with mobility largely tied to the household or family units (Moghadam, V. (Ed.), 2007). Yet women's access to such roles was controlled and often conditional on marital or familial status (Bradley, 1989). Despite participation in wage labor, women remained spatially restricted, often walking long distances or residing in employer-provided accommodations, which limited their autonomy (Walby, 2013). Today, in the era of globalization and urbanization, women's mobility is still contested, in many urban areas, particularly in conservative or unstable contexts, women's movement continues to be mediated by male guardianship, gender norms and fear of public exposure (Peters, 2013; Tiwari, 2020). These historical legacies continue to shape how women work, travel and participate in public life.

In many contexts, especially in the Global South, women's mobility is fragmented, insecure and shaped by both cultural norms and infrastructural limitations (Uteng & Cresswell, 2008; Chant, 2013). Men are generally afforded greater freedom to navigate public and economic spaces, while women's movement is often monitored, restricted or made contingent upon male permission or accompaniment (Peters, 2013). Public spaces and transport systems are frequently designed without women's safety and care responsibilities in mind, reinforcing male-centric mobility structures (Peters, 2013). Public transport can be a space of exclusion and harassment, contributing to what scholars describe as the "feminization of immobility" (Koskela, 1997; Tiwari, 2020). Harassment, lack of personal security and unpredictable infrastructure lead many women to avoid or reduce their use of public transport. This often results in a self-regulation of movement, as women choose limited routes or avoid traveling altogether to guarantee their safety (Fenster, 2005; Koskela, 1997).

Gendered restrictions become even more visible in the realm of employment. Women's access to professional spaces is not only influenced by their qualifications or job availability, but by their ability to reach and participate in workplaces. Time poverty, domestic responsibilities and

societal expectations are often translated into occupational segregation, where women are disproportionately employed in informal, local or home-based sectors that require less mobility (turner, Fouracre, 1995) Moreover, cultural stigmas and fear of public visibility can prevent women from seeking work that involves long commutes or male-dominated environments (Uteng, 2013).

Theories of gender and working mobility are essential for understanding labor market inequalities as well as the dynamics of migration, as they provide insights into how gender shapes experiences and opportunities in a variety of contexts (Marga Torre, Jerry A. Jacobs, 2021). it also impacts and influences other key life aspects such as mental health, workplace adaptation and educational pathways, with higher mobility correlating with better outcomes (Islam, Jaffee, 2023)

These working mobility constraints are especially pronounced in conservative or conflict-affected settings like Afghanistan, where employed women must navigate intersecting layers of restrictions, be they self-imposed, such as feelings of insecurity; circumstantial, such as inadequate infrastructure; or externally imposed, such as patriarchal controls and political repression. Their ability to travel to and from work becomes a politically loaded act, governed by a combination of institutional policies and social scrutiny. Jennifer Fluri advances this discussion by introducing the idea of corporeal and spatial security in conflict zones, emphasizing that mobility in such contexts is not merely about movement, but about the ability to safely navigate spaces marked by surveillance, gender norms and militarization (Fluri, 2011).

In Afghanistan, this means that employed women are made to continuously negotiate a risk-laden terrain during their work-related mobility. Fluri argues that these layered constraints converge on the female body, which becomes a corporeal site of negotiation both visibly regulated through dress code such as the chadori (burqa), and symbolically constrained by norms of honor, morality, and kinship expectations. Thus, women's daily journeys to and from work become politically charged acts of navigation and resistance, shaped by institutional restrictions and informal norms, often requiring the presence of a male guardian (mahram) for safety and legitimacy (Fluri, 2011). In such contexts, even the decision to pursue employment becomes a politicized negotiation of space, safety, and dignity. As Fluri notes, the very capacity to “appear in public” is governed by spatial codes that feminize immobility and render women's mobility conditional. These constraints directly undermine women's right to the city, making

participation in urban labor markets contingent on their ability to perform respectability, avoid risk, and remain visible without transgressing social boundaries.

1.2.3 Gender, Space and Right to the City

Feminist geography has long emphasized that space is not a neutral or objective construct, but rather a socially produced domain shaped by power, identity, and exclusion. Within this framework, scholars have critically examined how gendered power relations structure spatial access, visibility, and participation in urban environments. Public spaces, rather than being universally accessible, are often organized around male-centered norms, rendering women's presence in these spaces conditional or contested. One influential concept in spatial theory is Henri Lefebvre's (1968) notion of the "right to the city." This framework argues that all urban residents should have the right to inhabit, access, use, and shape the city. Feminist scholars have extended this concept to highlight that women's restricted access to public spaces due to safety concerns, surveillance, and patriarchal norms amounts to a denial of this "right", the "right to the city", when reframed through a gendered lens, is not only about inclusion, but about spatial justice, recognition, and participation (Mukwidigwi, T., & Naidu, M, 2024).

In patriarchal contexts like Afghanistan, women's access to the city is highly conditional (Fluri, 2011). The Taliban's rule has exacerbated these restrictions through a series of decrees that directly target women's movement, visibility, and presence in public life. Since their return to power in 2021, over eighty edicts have been issued by Taliban leadership that drastically curtail women's rights. These include bans on women's education at the secondary and university levels, restrictions on employment in NGOs and public offices, the dismantling of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and stringent mahram (male chaperone) rules for accessing transport, healthcare, and public services (UN Women, 2024). These policies are not isolated administrative decisions but part of a larger spatial discourse that effectively erases women from public urban life. For example, prohibiting women from driving, walking unaccompanied, or entering public baths amounts to a systemic removal of their right to the city a right not only to inhabit urban space but to co-produce and reshape it through social, economic, and political participation.

1.2.4 Intersection of Fear, Fearscape and Coping

In recent years, fear has emerged as a key analytical concept across disciplines including psychology, anthropology, political science, and geography yet its spatial and gendered dimensions remain under-theorized. Feminist and emotional geographers have begun to explore how fear is not only felt but also embedded in landscapes, especially in post-conflict

or militarized contexts. As Taussig (1992) argues, systems of domination and inequality operate like a social nervous system, embedding trauma through cycles of threat and control. Chronic exposure to stress whether through direct violence or “daily stressors” such as structural poverty and surveillance can lead to embodied fear with long-lasting psychological and even epigenetic effects (Trogisch, 2022).

The term “fearscape”, originally derived from behavioral ecology to describe threat-induced avoidance patterns, has been applied by geographers like Tuan (1979) and Tulumello (2017) to examine how imagined or real threats shape spatial experience. In these landscapes, fear becomes topographically and emotionally structured, leading individuals especially women to avoid certain spaces or alter their behavior within them. This concept has also been extended to urban geography, highlighting how fear transforms cities into segmented and controlled environments, reinforcing social exclusion along gendered and racialized lines (Trogisch, 2022).

Scholars such as Nordstrom (1997) and Richards (2005) refer to these spaces as “warscapes” environments scarred by violence, where fear persists long after conflict has officially ended. These landscapes shape people’s livelihood strategies and limit spatial agencies. Women often adapt through “tactical agency” (Utas, 2005), shifting between compliance, avoidance, and subtle forms of resistance to survive. Theorizing fear as a spatial and emotional force contributes to our understanding of coping, which differs from overt resistance. Drawing from psychological theory, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as a cognitive and behavioral response to stress that seeks to reduce internal threat. This framework, aligned with Selye’s (1976) general adaptation syndrome, allows scholars to analyze how individuals especially women in conflict-affected settings develop daily strategies of emotional regulation, behavioral modification, and spatial adaptation in response to fear. In this way, fear is not only an emotion but also a structuring condition one that informs survival strategies, constrains access to space, and reinforces or reshapes social roles (Trogisch, 2022).

Applying this interdisciplinary lens helps move beyond binary readings of victimhood and resistance, and instead centers the nuanced, embodied ways in which fear and space co-produce experience and action. In Afghanistan, the physical terrain of daily life from checkpoints to transport hubs is imbued with layers of threats. Women navigating these fearscape often employ “tactical agency” (Utas, 2005), subtly shifting between conformity, avoidance, and calculated resistance. Fluri (2011) further contextualizes this by showing how women's bodies become the literal site of regulation, security, and contestation. Their ability to participate in

urban life is constantly negotiated through clothing, accompaniment, and visibility. Integrating these interdisciplinary insights helps shift the discussion beyond simplistic binaries of victimhood and resistance. Instead, it highlights how Afghan women's working mobility is deeply embedded in spatial, emotional, and socio-political structures revealing how power operates through space, fear, and the body.

1.2.5 Home as a Safe Space or Control

The idea of home is often romanticized as a space for comfort, belonging, and emotional refuge. However, feminist geographers and critical theorists have long challenged this sentimental portrayal, arguing that home is not merely a fixed, safe space but a dynamic and deeply political site shaped by power relations, gendered norms, and historical inequalities. Blunt and Dowling (2006) offer a foundational framework for rethinking home, emphasizing that it is simultaneously material, imagined, and practiced. Rather than a stable entity, home emerges through everyday routines, emotional attachments, and spatial arrangements that reflect broader social hierarchies. Their perspective reveals how home can be both a site of belonging and one of exclusion, particularly for women whose domestic roles are often naturalized and invisible (Brickell, 2012).

Similarly, Doreen Massey (1994) conceptualizes space, including the home as relational and fluid, always constituted through interaction and never sealed off from the wider world. She argues that spatial practices within the home are shaped by cultural expectations and gendered power, making home a site where broader social processes such as patriarchy and capitalism are reproduced and negotiated (Brickell, 2012).

Building on this critique, Brickell (2012) introduces the idea of "unmaking home", showing how domestic spaces, while often idealized as nurturing, can also be spaces of violence, estrangement, and surveillance. Her work draws attention to how experiences such as domestic abuse, forced marriage, or economic dependency can dismantle the emotional security associated with home, particularly in contexts where women's presence is regulated through patriarchal authority. Iris Marion Young (2005) further complicates the notion of home by linking it to the structural devaluation of reproductive labor. She argues that the privatization of care within the home confines women to unpaid domestic work, rendering their contributions both invisible and indispensable. In this view, the home becomes a key site for understanding how gendered divisions of labor are maintained across generations (La Caze, 2014). Yet not all theoretical engagements with home are entirely pessimistic. bell hooks

(1990) offer a more nuanced reading, seeing home as a potential space of resistance and self-recovery for marginalized groups. While acknowledging the contradictions and constraints within domestic life, she also highlights how home can serve as a site of healing, memory, and empowerment, especially in the face of external racial, colonial, or gendered violence. Together, these scholars help reframe the home as a contested terrain, a space where comfort and coercion coexist, and where the boundaries between private refuge and public regulation are constantly negotiated (Brickell, 2012).

This theorization is especially pertinent in patriarchal and conflict-affected societies like Afghanistan, where the home is not only a gendered space of protection but also one of control, surveillance, and restricted mobility. In Afghanistan, the boundary between the home and public space remains a deeply symbolic and protected zone. Domestic spaces and kinship networks form a critical part of the civilian security system, particularly for women. These networks offer both emotional and spatial geographies of protection, but also operate as mechanisms of surveillance, discipline, and control. As Kandiyoti (2007a) and Monsutti (2006) note, these systems stretch beyond the home to include transnational kinship support, essential for household survival in displacement and economic precarity. Within that typically governs Afghan households, the concept of *namus* (honour) plays a central role, shaping norms of virtue, familial loyalty, and male authority over their female kin. Marriage marks a key transition in women's domestic positioning: they typically leave their natal homes and enter their husband's family household, where the new *mahram* assumes responsibility for their honour and mobility. However, power and status within this household are gained only gradually, often through biological reproduction, age, and social ties. As such, younger women are more likely to face verbal and physical abuse, both from husbands and extended family members (Fluri, 2011).

Despite often being imagined as places of shelter, domestic spaces can simultaneously be sites of intense vulnerability, where women experience violence, surveillance, and alienation. In fact, domestic violence increases during periods of political conflict, revealing the permeability of public and private boundaries. In such cases, women may rely on non-abusive household members for support or seek escape altogether, which introduces new layers of insecurity and social stigma. Conflict and displacement have disrupted what Kandiyoti (1988) calls "classic patriarchy" in some Afghan communities. But in many areas, conservatism has hardened, producing backlashes against those who challenge traditional gender roles. Ultimately, Afghan women inhabit a precarious domestic terrain where security and violence coexist, shaped by

patriarchy, war, kinship, and geopolitics (Fluri, 2011). Understanding the home as a gendered and contested space rather than a static refuge is crucial to unpacking the spatial and emotional dimensions of their lived experience.

1.3 A Feminist Afghan Perspective

Afghan feminism has a long and complex history shaped by the comings and goings of progressive reform and political backlash. Its roots can be traced to the early 20th century during the rule of King Amanullah Khan and Queen Soraya Tarzi, who promoted women's education, unveiled women in public life and many legal reforms for gender equality during the 1920s. These early efforts, however, sparked fierce backlashes from conservative clerics and tribal leaders, and were reversed following Amanullah's exile in 1929 (Barakat & Wardell, 2002; Saikal, 2004).

In the 1960s and 70s, Afghanistan experienced a second wave of feminist progress, particularly in urban centers such as Kabul. Women began entering universities, working in public administration and engaging in national dialogues on legal and social reform (Moghadam, 2002) (samar, 2019). The 1978 communist coup institutionalized some women's rights, such as compulsory literacy campaigns for girls, but these reforms were often implemented with authoritarian tactics, which provoked resistance among rural populations and conservative religious groups (samar, 2019).

The 1980s rise of the mujahideen and the 1996 Taliban regime led to a sharp reversal of feminist gains. Women were removed from public education and employment, and subjected to severe restrictions regarding movement, dress and public presence (samar, 2019). Despite these setbacks, many Afghan women resisted the change by operating underground schools, health clinics and advocacy networks, particularly from exile communities in Iran and Pakistan (Afkhami et al., 2023; Latonero et al., 2022) (Afkhami et al., 2023). After 2001, Afghan feminism reemerged with renewed institutional vigor. Women like Sima Samar and Habiba Sarabi played key roles in rebuilding governance and civil society, leading institutions such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (samar, 2019). While these efforts made substantial progresses, especially in urban education and legal reform, they also faced internal backlash and external donor constraints (Abirafeh, 2009) (AbiRafeh, 2009).

During the first Taliban regime but also again since the Taliban resurgence in 2021, Afghan women have faced a severe rollback of their rights to mobility, work and education. Women

have been banned from traveling without a male guardian, barred from working in most sectors and excluded from universities and public life. As Habiba Sarabi recalled, even in the relatively progressive Bamiyan province, her visibility as a female governor was repeatedly challenged and criminalized as un-Islamic (Afkhami et al., 2023) (Afkhami et al, 2023). Today's feminist resistance against Taliban rule continues this legacy of struggle. It is rooted in a century-long trajectory of reclaiming dignity, visibility and agency in the face of systemic exclusion and violence (Afkhami et al., 2023; Samar, 2019).

As Samar (2019) documents, the politicization of Afghan women has historically functioned as a rhetorical tool used both by domestic regimes (from the Communists to the mujahideen to the Taliban) and by international actors to justify intervention. Yet, these same forces have often excluded women from peace negotiations and leadership, rendering their bodies visible but their voices silent. Feminism in Afghanistan must therefore be understood not simply as equality rhetoric but as a political demand for full, secure participation in public life.

Feminist Afghan thought thus insists on grounding mobility in embodied, lived struggles, what Samar calls "fighting for your mother's rights" from childhood. It recognizes that mobility is not simply a right to move, but the right to appear, to work, to speak and to exist with dignity in contested public spaces. This view resonates with Doreen Massey (1994)'s idea of "power geometries" to show how Afghan women are not equally positioned in networks of movement and representation. A feminist Afghan perspective thus brings two critical contributions to mobility theory: a) it shows how violence and patriarchy are spatially enacted through travel bans, erasure of institutions and urban fear, and b) it shows how agency persists even under constraints, through everyday resistance, sorority and transnational advocacy. As Samar (2019) writes, "my crime would be giving girls pencils and paper, a crime I was willing to be hung in public for." This courage defines feminist mobilities in Afghanistan: rooted in risk, solidarity and the refusal to disappear.

The lens of feminist mobilities gains profound meaning when applied to the lived realities of Afghan women, whose access to public space, education, work and voice has been repeatedly shaped and denied by conflict, displacement and patriarchal repression. Afghan feminist scholars and leaders, including Sima Samar, Habiba Sarabi and many others, offer powerful, situated perspectives on how Afghan women's mobility reflects more than just movement: it reflects resistance, survival and the struggle to remain visible under regimes that seek to erase them (Afkhami, Obaid & Horowski, 2023) (Afkhami et al, 2023)

Chapter 2: Methodology

The empirical foundation of this research is based on twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with employed women in Kabul, Afghanistan, between November 2023 and February 2024. The study explores how women's spatial mobility is shaped, constrained and emotionally experienced when commuting from home to work under Taliban rule, framed within a feminist methodology. This research centers on participants lived experiences, emotional geographies and everyday strategies of navigation and resistance.

2.1 Feminist Methodologies

Feminist methodology is not defined by a fixed framework of tools, but by a commitment to inquiry that is relational, reflexive, and grounded in feminist theory and ethics. It emphasizes not only what we study, but how, why, and with whom. As Kaplan (1995) cautions, it would be limiting even dangerous to assume a single feminist methodology. Instead, multiple feminist approaches exist, shaped by theory, context, and a shared political commitment to amplifying marginalized voices and challenging systems of oppression. This flexibility is anchored in a key distinction outlined by Sandra Harding (1987), who separates methods (data collection techniques) from methodology, which refers to the broader theoretical and ethical framework guiding the research process. In feminist inquiry, methods such as interviews, ethnography, autoethnography, and visual techniques are selected not only for technical effectiveness but for their alignment with values like care, trust, participation, and justice (Nwe, 2022).

Feminist methodology critically examines how knowledge is produced, who is included or excluded, and how gender, power, and positionality shape research relationships and outcomes (Burns & Walker, 2005; Hekman, 2007; Letherby, 2011). Rather than privileging detachment or neutrality, it embraces subjectivity, emotion, and lived experience as valid sources of insight. Reinharz (1992) emphasizes that feminist research challenges dominant paradigms by promoting social change and interrogating the assumption of researcher objectivity. The researcher is understood as an active participant in meaning-making, whose identity and presence shape the research process (Nwe, 2022).

2.1.1 Rationale for Combining Interviews and Visual Methods

In seeking to explore a fuller range of women lived experiences, this research combined semi-structured interviews and participant-generated drawings. While interviews are a core method in qualitative inquiry valued for their ability to elicit detailed, language-based narratives (Kvale

& Brinkmann, 2009), they also have inherent limits. Human experience is often layered, emotional and complex, and as Eisner (2008) reminds us, not everything meaningful can be captured through words alone. Sometimes, experiences remain unspoken, not for lack of willingness, but because language does not always suffice. Visual methods, particularly those involving drawings created by participants, offer a way to access these deeper, more symbolic layers of meaning. Silver (2013) points out that visual methods assume there is more to human experience than words can express and that this non-verbal dimension deserves scholarly attention. Bagnoli (2009) (Bagnoli, 2009) similarly highlights how drawing and other non-verbal forms of communication can bring insights and emotions to surface that may otherwise remain hidden in conventional interviews.

From a neuropsychological perspective, Harper (2002) (Harper, 2002) offers a compelling explanation: the brain's visual processing centers are evolutionarily older than those governing language, meaning that images can evoke more instinctive, visceral responses. Indeed, Kearney and Hyle (2004) observed that the act of drawing often helps participants tap into feelings they might otherwise struggle to articulate, making it easier to share and reflect during the interview itself. The value of visual methods becomes even more apparent in contexts marked by trauma, marginalization or political repression. As Guillemin and Westall (2008) emphasize, drawings can provide a safe, non-threatening avenue for expressing painful or sensitive experiences. In my study, the drawing exercise created a space for participants to represent feelings of restriction, fear and resilience often in ways that felt more personal and secure, particularly given the constraints of voice-only interviews. Moreover, drawings proved to be more than just personal reflections; they became powerful prompts for further dialogue. Many participants expanded on their sketches, using them as starting points for deeper storytelling. Ellis et al. (2011) and Silver (2013) note that such visual tools often act as catalysts for richer verbal engagement, enhancing the depth and quality of the data collected. Additionally, combining visual and verbal data offered opportunities for triangulation, helping to cross-validate findings and enhance analytical rigor (Bagnoli, 2009).

To integrate both verbal and visual methods in a coherent and participant-centered way, I adopted the post-interview approach proposed by (Brailas, 2020). This strategy allowed me to conduct the semi-structured interview first, followed by the drawing activity, and then engage participants in a reflective dialogue about their drawings. This three-step process not only deepened the participants' engagement but also enriched the data by creating space for both spoken narratives and visual expressions to inform the analysis.

2.2 Research Participants

2.2.1 Participant Characteristics

This study engaged twelve women residing and working in Kabul, Afghanistan. All participants were employed at the time of data collection or had recently experienced employment within the socio-political climate following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. The selection criteria focused on women working in sectors with varying degrees of public exposure and institutional regulation, specifically in education, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), healthcare and private business. The participants comprised a diverse age range, from early twenties to mid-forties and various degrees of experience in their professional roles. Although efforts were made to capture diversity in socioeconomic background and work experience, the final sample naturally reflected constraints related to access, trust and participants' willingness to be involved in a study under heightened gender-based surveillance. The selection of participants from different occupational sectors was intentional, as it allowed for capturing a broader spectrum of mobility experiences shaped by the demands and risks associated with different forms of employment. For example, healthcare workers are often required to move across districts, while NGO staff and businesswomen must navigate both institutional and societal barriers that can affect their mobility. The sample thus aimed to reflect the layered nature of women's spatial mobility in a politically restricted and gendered urban environment.

Figure 0. Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Job Status
Zohre	22	Single	Private company staff
Zargol	27	Married	NGO
Sara	29	Married	Medical technology
Sarvnaz	25	Single	IT specialist
Samira	31	Single	General practitioner

Arezoo	28	Single	English Teacher
Fatima	25	Single	Entrepreneur
Maryam	35	Married	Psychologist at NGO
Marjan	23	Single	English Teacher
Nahid	27	Single	NGO staff
Salima	28	Single	English Teacher
Soraya	22	Single	Entrepreneur

2.2.2 Sampling Methods

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy (Patton 2002), a non-probability sampling method widely used in qualitative research for the deliberate selection of individuals with specific traits relevant to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015) (Palinkas. et al, 2015). This approach enabled the study to target women whose lived experiences could offer rich insights into the impact of mobility restrictions in Kabul. Given the sensitive context, snowball sampling was also applied to reach participants who might have been otherwise inaccessible due to political risk, surveillance concerns or personal safety issues. Snowball sampling, also known as chain-referral sampling, is commonly used to access hard-to-reach populations by leveraging trusted social networks (Noy, 2008), This method allowed for a secure and ethical recruitment process, grounded in existing networks.

2.3 Data Collection: The Post-Interview Approach

2.3.1 The post-interview approach

To integrate semi-structured interviews and visual methods, this study adopted the post-interview approach proposed by Brailas (2020) (Brailas, 2020). This method involves three sequential steps: (a) conducting a verbal qualitative interview, typically semi-structured and guided by open-ended questions; (b) inviting the participant to produce a drawing related to

their experiences; and (c) holding a short follow-up dialogue where participants reflect on their drawing and elaborate on its personal significance. The initial verbal interview serves not only as a primary data source but also as a rapport-building exercise, creating a space where participants can gradually grow to feel comfortable sharing sensitive aspects of their lived experiences. The drawing phase is then introduced with clear, non-judgmental instructions, encouraging participants to express their feelings, thoughts or perceptions freely, without concern for artistic skill. Finally, the follow-up reflection provides an opportunity for deeper insight, allowing participants to interpret and explain their visual representations in their own words

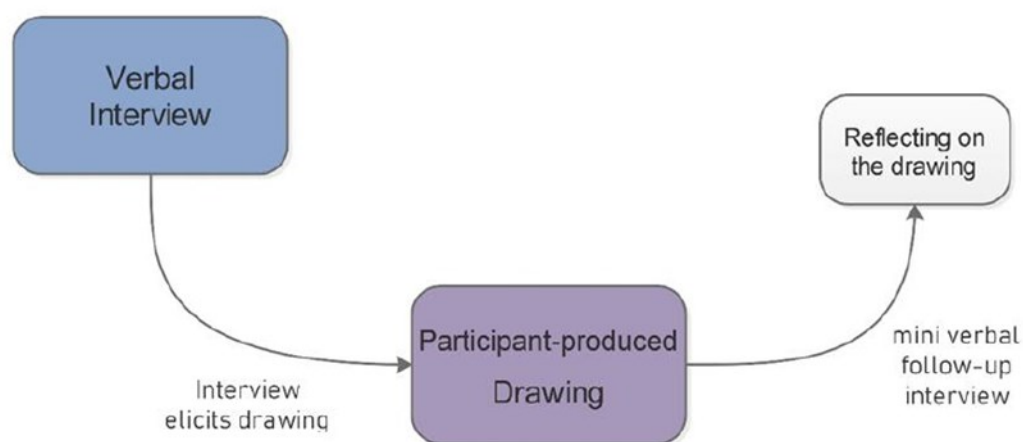


Figure 1, The post-interview approach, Brailas, A. (2020). Using Drawings in Qualitative Interviews: An Introduction to Practice. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(12), 4447-4460.

This approach effectively transforms a traditional verbal interview into a multimodal research process. As Brailas (2020) notes, one of the advantages of this strategy is its flexibility: if a participant chooses not to engage with the drawing activity or does so minimally, the verbal interview still stands as a valuable and complete data set. the application of the post-interview approach helps to ensure the methodological rigidity of the study yet creating the inclusive and reflexive research setting that stays coherent with the principles of feminist methodology.

Before beginning the formal data collection, I conducted a pilot test with an employed Afghan woman in Kabul to evaluate the feasibility and ethical suitability of combining voice-only interviews with a participant-produced drawing activity. The purpose of this pilot was to refine the interview approach, assess the participant’s comfort with the drawing component, and

ensure the method aligned with the cultural and security context of Afghanistan. Feedback from this pilot informed minor adjustments to the interview script and drawing instructions like increasing the time of the interview and ensuring both clarity and cultural sensitivity. This reflexive practice strengthened the methodological framework and confirmed the appropriateness of the post-interview approach adopted in this study.

Throughout the data collection process, participant safety, confidentiality and informed consent were strictly adhered to. Verbal consent was recorded before beginning each interview, pseudonyms were used for the written results, and all materials were securely stored.

The data collection process thus began with a semi-structured verbal interview, lasting between 45 to 75 minutes, conducted in Dari through voice-only WhatsApp calls can help us overcome gender barriers and reach a difficult-to-access population. Voice-only interview space entails embodied effects that direct and redirect the flow of communication between the interviewer and the interviewee. Unlike in broader online virtual space, where the adoption of multiple identities allows for a distinction between the corporeal and virtual body (Taylor, 1999), in voice-only interviewing, the virtual body reflects and extends the corporeal body embedded within its everyday social realities (Khan, 2024). These interviews followed a flexible script of open-ended questions, allowing participants to share personal narratives in their own words. This initial phase also served to build rapport and establish a trusting environment, which is crucial when discussing sensitive topics related to mobility, surveillance and fear.

Table 1

Interview

Section	Content
Introduction to Participants	Hello, thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. My name is Aghele Mohammadi, and I am conducting this research as part of my master's thesis. The purpose of this study is to explore women's experiences with mobility and work in Kabul. In this interview, I will ask you to share your experience and to reflect on your personal drawings. I assure you that your information will be kept secure and you are free to stop the interview or skip any question you don't feel comfortable answering. To make sure I capture everything accurately, would it be okay if I record this conversation?

Opening Question – Self-Introduction	Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? For example, your work, daily life and anything else you'd like to share?
Theme 1: Spatial Mobility	- Can you describe your typical commute? What challenges do you face? - How have recent restrictions affected your ability to travel for work or daily errands?
Theme 2: Coping Strategies	- What steps do you take to ensure safe movement? - Do you rely on others, like family or colleagues, for mobility assistance?
Theme 3: Perceptions of Mobility	- How do you feel about your current ability to move freely? - What does mobility mean to you in your personal and professional life?
Theme 4: Impact on Professional and Personal Life	- How have this mobility challenges influenced your career progression? - Has your role within your family or community changed due to mobility restrictions?
Conclusion	Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Before we finish, is there anything else you'd like to add? If not, we'll now move to the drawing part. There's no need for artistic skill it's just a way to reflect visually on your experience of mobility. I'll guide you through it step by step.

The Drawing Script

Following the verbal interview, participants were invited to draw a picture reflecting their experience of spatial mobility. The drawing exercise was introduced with open and reassuring language, encouraging participants to represent feelings, thoughts or spatial realities in any form they found meaningful, emphasizing that artistic skill was not required. The invitation aimed to foster creative expression while minimizing performance anxiety, in line with Brailas' (2020) recommendation that visual expression can unlock aspects of experience that remain implicit in verbal accounts. Additionally, great inspiration for the prompts and reflective questions was drawn from the artistic ethnographic project by Misha Myers (Misha, Myers , 2004), "Way from Home" (2004), which explored the sense of belonging among newcomer

communities through walking and creative documentation. Myers' methodology inspired not only the visual component of this study but also the formulation of reflective questions aimed at deepening participants' engagement with their spatial experiences.

Figure 2. Myers, Misha (2004) “way from home”, Performance Research: On the Page, Vol 9, No 2, pp 90-91 and DVD supplement, London: Routledge.

Drawing Guidelines for Participants:

1. Home

Start by marking your home or the place you consider your central starting point.

This represents your starting position for most of your daily journeys.

2. Special Place:

Think of your workplace and draw a line or path connecting your home to this place.

Reflect on the frequency and purpose of your visits to this place.

3. Landmarks:

Think about and indicate any key landmarks you encounter along the route from your home to the workplace.

These may represent moments when you pause, interact with others or feel challenged.

4. Barriers:

Identify obstacles or challenges you encounter along the route.

Use symbols to represent areas where you face mobility restrictions.

5. Reflection Points Along the Way:

As you draw, think about:

What feelings does your workplace elicit? Is it significant to you? Why?

How do societal, cultural or political factors influence your mobility?

What emotions do you associate with specific locations or journeys?

6. Coping Strategies:

Indicate any strategies or adaptations you use to navigate mobility barriers.

7. Final Step:

Use the drawing to tell the story of a typical journey. Add arrows, words or symbols to highlight movements, emotions and key experiences.

Instructions for Submitting Your Drawing:

Once you have completed the map, take some time to review it and reflect on its meaning.

Feel free to add written notes around the map if that helps clarify your experiences.

Take a picture of your drawing and send it to me as a file document in what's app.

After the drawing was completed, we conducted a brief follow-up dialogue. Participants were asked to reflect on their drawing, explain its elements and elaborate on any thoughts or feelings

it evoked while they were working on it. This interview allowed participants to deepen their narrative and offered further insights into the symbolic and emotional dimensions of their spatial experiences.

2.3.4 Thematic Analysis for Interview

Thematic analysis (TA) is one of the most widely used methods for analyzing qualitative data, offering a structured yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within a dataset, since its inception (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the Braun and Clarke six-phase framework has been extensively adopted across disciplines, including health research, education, and social sciences. The method emphasizes researcher reflexivity and the importance of theoretical transparency to ensure rigor and credibility in qualitative research.

This study followed the six-phase guide proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), as outlined below:

Familiarization with the data: I transcribed all interviews and repeatedly read through the transcripts to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences and language.

Generating initial codes: I identified and systematically labeled significant features of the data to begin organizing relevant segments.

Searching for themes: The initial codes were reviewed and grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring ideas and patterns in the participants' narratives.

Reviewing themes: I ensured that the themes accurately captured the meaning of the coded data and worked cohesively within the dataset.

Defining and naming themes: Each theme was refined to clearly reflect its underlying meaning and connection to the research questions.

Producing the report: Finally, vivid and relevant excerpts were selected to illustrate each theme, linking the findings to the broader analytical framework of the study. In addition to offering structure and clarity, Thematic Analysis aligns well with feminist research principles. It supports the centering of participant voices, recognizes emotion and embodiment as valid forms of knowledge and allows for a critical analysis of how structural power relations shape lived experiences. Notably, it also promotes reflexivity encouraging researchers to be aware of their own influence in the process of interpreting and presenting the data (Yip, 2023).

Thematic Analysis thus allowed me to approach the data inductively, letting themes emerge from the participants' own narratives, while also remaining sensitive to the theoretical aims of

the research. This dual approach supports a deeper understanding of women's mobility that considers both personal meaning-making and broader socio-political dynamics.

Although some scholars have raised concerns that the flexibility of TA can lead to inconsistent applications or lack of rigor (Thompson, 2022), this was addressed by following a clear methodological process and maintaining transparency in coding and theme development. Triangulating the interview findings with visual data further enhanced the credibility of the analysis. In conclusion, Thematic Analysis provided a systematic yet flexible framework that proved to be apt for exploring how women in Kabul experience, interpret and respond to restrictions on their mobility. It offered an effective way to capture the complexity of their realities, while remaining consistent with the feminist methodological approach that underpins this research.

2.3.5 Visual Analysis for Drawings

The visual data in this study comprising participant-generated mobility drawings were analyzed through a multimodal lens that combined content analysis, semiotic-symbolic interpretation and narrative integration, as outlined in Rose's (1996) influential visual methodologies framework. This analytical structure allowed for a nuanced and reflexive reading of the visual materials, situating them within both participants' own meaning-making and the broader socio-political landscape of Taliban-controlled Kabul (Rose, 2007).

Visual analysis is particularly well suited to feminist and qualitative research traditions because it expands beyond verbal accounts to give room for affect, embodiment and symbolic communication dimensions often marginalized through conventional (Mannay, 2015). In contexts of political repression, where fear and silence often constrain speech, visual expression can serve as a safer, more expressive medium for communicating complex or emotionally charged experiences (Guillemin et al., 2016).

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a foundational method in visual analysis that involves the systematic identification and categorization of visual elements within an image. In qualitative research, it enables researchers to detect recurring spatial patterns, symbolic features or structural elements through close and repeated observation (Rose, 2022). Unlike quantitative content analysis, this approach focuses on the richness of meaning and the relationships between visual features and the participant's lived experience.

In this study, content analysis was applied to the participant-generated drawings to identify key components such as “home,” “commuting routes,” “barriers,” “checkpoints,” “significant places,” and “religious or public landmarks.” These elements were recorded and compared across multiple drawings to examine common spatial logic and visual motifs. For example, many participants consistently drew extended, curved or indirect routes suggesting the need to avoid unsafe or heavily monitored areas. Similarly, barriers were often clustered around government buildings or busy intersections, highlighting zones of tension or surveillance. The frequent depiction of these long detour paths, as well as unmarked “safe zones,” or multiple barriers between home and workplace illustrated how spatial limitations are internalized and navigated in everyday life.

While often considered a descriptive technique, in this study, content analysis was also used interpretively to track recurring spatial structures and motifs that reflected constrained mobility. This step offered a valuable entry point for deeper symbolic and narrative interpretation.

Symbolic Interpretation

Symbolic interpretation is one of the most complex yet insightful stages of visual analysis, drawing on semiotics, cultural studies and feminist theory. It considers that visual elements can function as “signs” carrying both denotative (literal) and connotative (implied) meanings (Barthes, 1977). This type of analysis asks: Why was a certain color used? What does the shape or thickness of a line suggest? What does spatial arrangement reveal about lived reality?

In feminist visual research, symbolic interpretation is particularly important for surfacing emotional and political meanings that are not easily verbalized, especially in contexts shaped by repression, fear or trauma. In this study, drawings were analyzed for how participants encoded experiences of fear, resistance, surveillance and resilience. In this way, specific patterns were seen to emerge:

Color: Red lines frequently marked “danger zones” or checkpoints.

Line weight: Thick or jagged lines often indicate tension or fear.

Spatial positioning: Checkpoints placed close to “home” suggested a sense of permanent threat or surveillance in what should be a private or safe space.

Absence: The complete omission of public places like parks or schools reflected could be seen to reflect either a sense of emotional withdrawal, exclusion or avoidance.

Symbolic interpretation also enabled the mapping of emotional geographies, i.e., how feelings such as fear, stress or resistance is embedded within or molded by everyday spaces. These were not only physical places but also emotional landscapes, shaped by women lived encounters with risk and power. Visual expression thus became a way of documenting what might have otherwise remained unspeakable in verbal interviews (Mannay, 2015).

Narrative Integration

Narrative integration is a participant-centered analytic approach that anchors the interpretation of visual materials in the creator's own words. Rather than treating images as autonomous objects for analysis, this method emphasizes dialogue and shared meaning-making. It is grounded in feminist epistemology, which highlights the value of co-constructing knowledge, recognizing the agency of participants and challenging hierarchical researcher subject dynamics (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Lather, 1991). In this study, after the initial drawing activity, participants were invited to explain the meaning behind each element in their drawings. These follow-up conversations revealed personal stories, contextual background and emotional significance that might not have been evident from the image alone. For instance, a participant might use thick lines to show a route, and only later reveal that this route was associated with a traumatic memory or a repeated act of surveillance.

This process ensured that the interpretation of each drawing was shaped primarily by the participant's voice rather than the researcher's assumptions. It also enriched the data by layering verbal and visual insights, allowing drawings to be understood not merely as representations but as visual narratives embedded in personal and political realities (Brailas, 2020).

2.4 Research Ethics: Consent, Confidentiality and Participant Safety

Ethical considerations were central to the design and implementation of this research, given the highly sensitive context in which it was conducted. The political repression in Afghanistan, especially concerning women's rights and public visibility, required careful attention to issues of consent, confidentiality and participant safety. Before each interview, participants received a clear and transparent explanation of the study's aims, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Verbal informed consent was obtained and recorded before proceeding with the data collection. Participants were assured that they could withdraw at any point or decline to answer any question without explanation or consequence.

To protect participants' identities, all data were anonymized. Pseudonyms replaced real names in transcripts, notes and any publication of findings. Audio recordings, transcripts and visual materials such as participant-produced drawings were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Given the context of political surveillance and the risk of repercussions, interviews were conducted exclusively through voice-only WhatsApp calls. WhatsApp was selected for its end-to-end encryption, wide accessibility in Kabul and participants' familiarity with the platform. This method minimized visibility and allowed participants to choose safe, private settings for the interviews. Throughout the research process, the safety, dignity and autonomy of participants remained the highest priority. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee, adhering to recognized standards for research involving vulnerable populations and conflict-affected contexts.

2.5 Researcher's Positionality

As a female Afghan researcher in exile, my positionality occupied a complex space between insider and outsider perspectives. On one hand, I shared with my participants a common cultural, linguistic and gendered experience. This insider perspective allowed me to approach the interviews with cultural sensitivity, empathy and an intuitive understanding of the subtle ways Afghan women navigate social restrictions. It facilitated rapport, trust-building and meaningful engagement in conversations often marked by vulnerability and fear. On the other hand, my position as a researcher based outside of Afghanistan introduced a distinct layer of distance. While I was deeply connected with the emotional and cultural realities participants described, I was not subjected to the same risks, surveillance and oppressive conditions they face daily.

This positioned me as both an empathetic insider and a critical outsider different from a foreign researcher unfamiliar with Afghan society, yet also not entirely embedded in the lived experiences of my participants. This dual positionality enriched the research process in meaningful ways. It allowed me to listen with sensitivity and cultural awareness while maintaining the reflexive distance required for critical analysis. Moreover, this position encouraged continuous reflection on the ethics of representation and the responsibility of narrating stories shared in trust. I engaged in ongoing reflexivity, critically examining how my perspectives, experiences and social location influenced my research approach, from framing interview questions to interpreting participant narratives. I maintained reflective notes throughout the process, acknowledging moments of shared understanding and instances where

cultural distance became apparent. By embracing both my insider knowledge and outsider perspective, I sought to honor the voices of the women who entrusted me with their experiences. This reflexivity aligns with feminist methodological commitments to transparency, relational ethics and accountability in knowledge production, particularly when working with marginalized or vulnerable populations.

2.6 Challenges and Limitations

2.6.1 Accessibility of Participants

The socio-political climate in Afghanistan posed significant challenges to participant recruitment and engagement. The pervasive atmosphere of fear, surveillance and social control under Taliban governance created substantial barriers to accessing women willing to speak about sensitive issues related to mobility, autonomy and employment. The use of snowball sampling, while effective in facilitating trust-based connections, naturally limited participant diversity due to its reliance on personal networks. To address this, I proactively sought introductions through a variety of community networks and professional circles, ensuring that referrals came from different contexts and backgrounds. Selecting participants from distinct occupational sectors including education, NGOs, healthcare and private business was another deliberate strategy to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Despite these efforts, logistical challenges such as unstable internet connections, power outages and the limitations of remote communication complicated interview scheduling and depth of engagement. Conducting voice-only interviews, while ethically appropriate and protective of participant safety, also reduced the ability to observe non-verbal cues, an important dimension in qualitative inquiry.

2.6.2 Reliability of Self-Reported Data

Even when participants were accessible, the reliability of their self-reported narratives was influenced by the high-risk environment they inhabit. Fear of surveillance or repercussions could lead participants to censor sensitive details or avoid certain topics altogether. Furthermore, conducting voice-only interviews restricted my ability to observe non-verbal cues, potentially limiting the depth of insight into participants' emotions and experiences. The participants' subjectivity, shaped by trauma, stress or social expectations, also affected the accounts shared. While these factors are known limitations, they also reflect the complex reality of researching under oppressive conditions, more so from a distance, and underscore the importance of reflexivity in interpreting participant narratives.

While this research came up against inevitable challenges having to do with access to participants and the reliability of self-reported data arising from political risks, social control and the constraints of remote interviewing, several strategies helped enhance the study results' credibility. Aware of the potential shortcomings of snowball sampling, special efforts were made to diversify the participants' recruitment networks and occupational backgrounds, which broadened the range of perspectives included.

Additionally, the combination of visual methods with verbal interviews offered methodological triangulation, strengthening the depth and reliability of the findings. Reflexivity remained a consistent practice throughout the process to ensure critical awareness of the researcher's influence on the process and interpretation. Though shaped by contextual limitations, this study nevertheless provides meaningful insights into Afghan women's mobility experiences, contributing to the understanding of gendered agency, restriction and resilience within conflict-affected environments.

Chapter 3 – Case Study: Kabul

Kabul is Afghanistan's largest city, with a metropolitan population estimated at over 4.5 million people before 2021, and today still the country's most densely urbanized area. It is built within a valley surrounded by the Hindu Kush mountains at an altitude of 1,790 meters. The city spreads outward from a dense historic core into multiple districts that combine old bazaars, residential quarters, government complexes, and sprawling informal settlements that expanded rapidly due to migration and displacement during decades of conflict. Kabul's urban growth has been largely unplanned, producing stark contrasts between fortified government zones, wealthier residential enclaves, and overcrowded hillside settlements lacking basic infrastructure. This fragmented urban construction makes movement both essential and difficult, as residents must traverse narrow streets, congested traffic arteries, and securitized zones to reach schools, workplaces, or hospitals. The urban landscape of Kabul has long reflected shifting regimes of power, conflict, and modernization, but under the Taliban it has become a site of intense surveillance and gendered control. Mobility once a fragile avenue through which women could access education, employment, or civic participation is now tightly regulated by security infrastructure and moral policing that extend deep into the fabric of everyday life.

3.1 A brief historical overview and the status of women in post-2001 Afghanistan

From the 1960s onwards, Kabul became the epicenter of Afghan women's participation in public life, education, and formal employment. The 1964 Constitution marked a significant turning point, granting women the right to vote, run for office, and work in public service. During the reign of King Zahir Shah (1963–1973) and later under President Daoud Khan (1973–1978), urban reforms, expanded education, and state-led modernization encouraged women's visible presence in the workforce. Women in Kabul took up roles as teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, and even ministers. By the early 1990s, women made up most teachers, half of government employees, and around 40% of medical staff (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

These gains were, however, largely concentrated in urban areas like Kabul and often benefited women from middle- and upper-class families. Women in rural and conservative communities remained constrained by strict gender norms, limited mobility, and restricted access to education. The Soviet-backed government (1979–1989) and subsequent communist regimes maintained policies supporting women's education and employment, particularly in state sectors. However, the concurrent conflict drove mass rural-to-urban migration, swelling

Kabul's population and straining infrastructure. Civil war in the early 1990s devastated the city and rolled back many of these advances, though some women continued to work in health, education, and humanitarian sectors under extreme risk (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003).

The Taliban's first regime (1996–2001) brought one of the most repressive periods for women's participation in public life. Women in Kabul were banned from most forms of employment, from leaving the house without a male guardian (mahram) and required to wear the all-covering chadori (burqa). Exceptions were rare, limited mostly to female medical staff treating women and girls. This period entrenched severe mobility restrictions, with women being allowed in public only for essential needs such as medical emergencies or attending funerals (Nwe, 2022).

Following the U.S.-led intervention in late 2001, the Bonn Agreement and the 2004 Constitution reinstated formal guarantees of gender equality. Kabul once again became a hub for women's employment, especially in education, healthcare, civil service, NGOs, and the media. International aid programs and donor-funded initiatives expanded professional opportunities, while universities enrolled unprecedented numbers of female students. The increase in women's working mobility translated into daily commutes across the city navigating checkpoints and negotiating gender norms that still imposed some restrictions on movement and dress. Between 2001 and 2021, employed women in Kabul played visible roles in politics, media, business, and civil society. Many became primary breadwinners in their households, demonstrating their resilience in the face of persistent harassment, insecurity, and cultural resistance. However, access to such opportunities was uneven and often precarious, with security threats, including targeted assassinations, affecting women in public roles. Since the Taliban's return to power on 15 August 2021, life for Afghan women, particularly in Kabul, has been transformed in ways that are both immediate and profound. In just over three years, the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, has issued more than 80 formal edicts, of which 54 directly target women and girls (UN Women, 2024). These carry the authority of law under the Taliban's rule and encompass nearly every aspect of women's public and private lives.

About two dozen of these edicts directly restrict women's mobility, imposing mahram requirements, banning the unaccompanied use of public transport, forbidding women from driving, and prohibiting them from travelling more than 72 kilometres without a male guardian (UN Women, 2024). A further 15–18 edicts remove or severely limit women's access to work, including bans on employment in NGOs, the UN, most government ministries, and women-

run businesses such as bakeries and beauty salons (Amnesty International, 2023). The dismantling of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its replacement with the Ministry of Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice encapsulates this shift, transforming an institution once dedicated to women's empowerment into one that polices their behaviour and restricts their presence in public life (Sahill, 2023).

But the scope of these decrees goes even beyond work and movement. There are edicts that prohibit women from attending or teaching at universities, closed secondary schools for girls, banned women from parks, gyms, and public baths, restricted access to health centres without a male chaperone, and, in some cases, forbidden women from speaking, reciting, or singing in public (International Crisis Group, 2023). These measures not only violate Afghanistan's obligations under international human rights law, including CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, but also contradict Islamic principles that encourage women's education and public participation (United Nations General Assembly, 1979, 1989).

The impact has been deeply felt at the level of everyday life in Kabul. For employed women, once among the most visible actors in the city's professional and civic landscape, these rules have erased both their livelihoods and the socially sanctioned mobility that work once afforded. The effect is cumulative: losing a job often means losing the ability to justify travel, which in turn reinforces isolation and economic dependency. Beyond the material consequences, these restrictions have produced an overwhelming sense of fear and psychological distress. UNAMA (2024) records multiple cases in which women were detained for travelling without a mahram, including female health workers en route to their jobs. Surveys by BISHNAW show that nearly 68% of respondents knew a woman or girl suffering from mental illness linked to these restrictions. In a striking example of the erosion of protective mechanisms, cases of gender-based violence now often result in women being sent to prison "for their own safety" rather than to shelters or support services (Safi, Rivas, 2023).

The combined effect of these edicts is the systematic erasure of women from Afghanistan's public life, what scholars have called the "dehumanisation" of women and girls through the removal of their right to agency, visibility, and existence. In Kabul, this process is not only legal and administrative but also spatial and symbolic: checkpoints, morality patrols, and the visual erasure of women from the city's cultural landscape collectively signal that women's presence in public is no longer legitimate. For many women in the capital, stepping outside the home has shifted from being a matter of routine to an act of negotiation and, increasingly, defiance. The Taliban's intertwining restrictions on movement and work have turned Kabul

into a city where women's mobility is neither expected nor welcome, where the struggle to move through space is inseparable from the struggle to participate in society at all.

3.2 Taliban Checkpoints and the Ministry of Virtue and Vice

Since the Taliban's return in August 2021, checkpoints have multiplied across Kabul's arterial roads, residential districts, and around government compounds, being especially numerous along main transport arteries and near sensitive political and military zones. While such infrastructure previously served counterinsurgency purposes, the Taliban now use them to monitor insurgent threats and to discipline civilian movement. At these checkpoints, vehicles are routinely stopped and inspected, and women passengers may be scrutinized for dress code violations drivers risk punishment for playing music or transporting women without a male guardian. In this sense, checkpoints function as spatial choke points where the Taliban's moral and political authority is enacted at street level, embedding control into the city's circulation routes.

The Ministry of Virtue and Vice and moral policing

These practices are directed from and coordinated through the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, reinstalled in 2021 to replace the Ministry of Women's Affairs. This department of government enforces its regulations through morality police patrols and checkpoint officers, who enforce strict dress codes, regulate public behavior and sanction what are deemed "immoral" activities according to the government's codes of conduct. Reports document mass detentions for "immoral behavior," crackdowns on men without beards, and bans on cultural practices such as music. For women, the controls and limitations on their public behavior and presence are severely limiting and converge to render urban spaces a site of constant risk, where visibility can trigger punishment and one must appear to be immobile or invisible to ensure one's safety.

3.3 Previous Research on Afghan Women's Mobility in Afghanistan

Although Afghan women's rights and history have been widely studied, there remains a striking absence of research dedicated specifically to their socio-spatial mobility. Much of the literature addresses women's education, employment, or political participation, with mobility emerging only as a secondary theme. This absence is itself telling, given that questions of movement whether to school, to work, or through the city have long been at the heart of Afghan women's struggles for visibility and autonomy.

Scholars have emphasized that Afghan women's mobility cannot be understood in isolation from the broader historical trajectories of reform, resistance, and conflict. Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) warns against the temptation to read women's history in simplistic "before and after the Taliban" terms. Instead, she situates women within a century of alternating reformist and reactionary politics: Amanullah's unveiling and education campaigns in the 1920s, Daoud Khan's modernization in the 1960s and 1970s, and the PDPA's socialist reforms. Each of these moments briefly expanded women's public roles in Kabul, yet each provoked fierce backlash from tribal and religious elites. In her analysis, Kabul emerges as both a laboratory of reform and a stage for its undoing, where women's presence in public life was repeatedly politicized as a symbol of progress or betrayal.

Other research has underlined the intersection between class, poverty, and mobility. Schütte's (2009) (Schütte, 2013) life-story interviews in Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad reveal that women from low-income households face compounded barriers. Without resources for safe transport, they are more vulnerable to harassment and often dependent on male relatives for permission and accompaniment. Her work captures the paradox of home as both a shelter and a prison: a space of safety but also of confinement within patriarchal hierarchies.

Conflict and militarization have also fundamentally reshaped Kabul's urban landscape.) (Fluri, 2011) demonstrates how decades of war and international intervention transformed the city through blast walls, checkpoints, and fortified compounds. These new "geographies of security" fragmented the urban fabric, restricted movement, and produced forms of exclusion that fell especially hard on women. Even the presence of international actors, intended to "empower," often reinforced segregation by limiting direct engagement with Afghan women (Fluri, 2011).

More recent policy analyses highlight the heterogeneity of women's spatial practices across Afghan society. The Gender Country Profile of Afghanistan (2022) notes that ethnicity, kinship, and marital status shape women's everyday mobilities in different ways. For example, Tajik and Hazara women have historically engaged in trade or charitable travel, while purdah remains more strictly enforced in conservative Pashtun communities. In such contexts, the burqa operates in complex ways not only as a tool of seclusion but also, paradoxically, as a means of moving through public space with a degree of anonymity.

Employment has historically offered one of the few legitimate pathways into public life. Haidari (2024) (Haidari, 2024) documents how jobs in education, healthcare, NGOs, and media

enabled women in Kabul to travel independently and claim space in public institutions. Yet even these movements were fragile and conditional, constantly negotiated through strategies such as timing commutes to avoid danger, relying on trusted escorts, or managing workplace segregation and cultural policing.

Feminist voices have consistently highlighted how exclusion from public life undermines women's broader rights. Samar (2019) argues that women's absence from peace processes and political forums perpetuates cycles of violence. In her view, mobility is not only a question of access to space, but also a prerequisite for sustainable peace.

The literature documenting the period after August 2021 points to an even sharper contraction of women's mobility (Sumitra, Hakimy, & Rokba, 2023). , 2023) describe how the closure of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and its replacement by the Ministry of "Enjoining the Good and Forbidding the Evil" symbolized the deliberate erasure of women from public institutions. Women's protests under the slogans "Bread, Work, Freedom" capture the convergence of movement, livelihood, and dignity. These observations echo Haidari's (2024) concept of economic immobility, in which women are deprived not only of the right to move but also of the social and economic rationales that once legitimized their presence in public life.

Finally, Nwe's (2022) doctoral research provides one of the closest parallels to this study. Drawing on life stories of professional women in Kabul during 2011–2013, she shows how women negotiated shifting patriarchal and political regimes to maintain careers and visibility in public life. Her use of feminist theory highlights agency in conditions of constraint: Kabul women were never passive, but rather developed strategies of adaptation, compromise, and resistance.

Taken together, these works reveal that women's mobility in Kabul has always been more than a question of physical movement. It is historically contingent, shaped by cycles of reform and repression; stratified along lines of class, ethnicity, and family; and embedded in the infrastructures of war and governance.

3.4 Rationale for Focusing on Employed Women

The decision to centre this research on employed women in Kabul is both analytically strategic and empirically grounded. Before August 2021, Kabul hosted the highest concentration of women in formal employment in Afghanistan, particularly in sectors such as education, healthcare, public administration, the media, and non-governmental organizations (World Bank, 2020; UNDP, 2021). These roles required women to navigate multiple urban

geographies daily commuting to offices, schools, clinics, courts, media outlets, or field sites, making them a high-visibility group in public life. Their movements were not incidental but structurally embedded in the functioning of the city, meaning that the newly imposed restrictions on their mobility have a disproportionately large impact on both their personal agency and Kabul's social fabric (Haidari, 2024).

Employment has historically functioned as one of the few socially sanctioned justifications for Afghan women to be physically present in public spaces (Schütte, 2009; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). In a context where cultural norms often discourage women's public visibility, work has served as a legitimate pretext to cross neighborhoods, districts, and even provincial boundaries. This makes employed women an ideal population through which to examine the intersection of spatial and economic rights, and how the ability to work is inseparable from the ability to occupy and navigate public space. Focusing on employed women also reveals different experiences of mobility shaped by class, ethnicity, and occupation. While women from middle-class backgrounds may have greater access to private transport and networks that facilitate safer movement, low-income employed women such as market vendors, domestic workers, or NGO field staff are more likely to rely on public transport or walking, making them more vulnerable to harassment, checkpoint scrutiny, and delays. These variations highlight the stratified nature of mobility in Kabul, where both structural barriers (e.g., Taliban decrees) and everyday risks intersect to produce uneven geographies of access.

The post-August 2021 context adds urgency to this type of investigation. The Taliban's sweeping employment bans targeting female staff in NGOs, international organizations, and most state institutions have not only stripped women of income but have also removed many legitimate pretexts for being in public. Women who once moved independently across the city to fulfil professional obligations now face enforced confinement, or must rely on male relatives for accompaniment, thereby erasing years of spatial autonomy. As a result, the loss of employment is also a loss of public citizenship, whereby women's presence in the city is rendered irregular, conditional, or invisible. This choice of focus also has economic and social resilience dimensions. In Afghanistan's urban poor households, especially female-headed households, women's income has often been crucial for survival, particularly when male relatives are absent, disabled, or unemployed (Sumitra, Hakimy, & Rokba, 2023). , 2023)

In these cases, women's work enables not only economic sustenance but also the maintenance of social networks and access to informal credit systems.

The collapse of women's employment under Taliban rule has thus had a cascading effect, deepening poverty, eroding social capital, and further marginalizing women's position in the household and community.

employed women's mobility in Kabul, this research addresses an additional gap in the literature: while existing scholarship has explored Afghan women's rights, rural–urban divides, and the cultural politics of veiling and seclusion, far fewer studies have traced how the rhythms of women's professional mobility (its routes, timings, modes, and purposes) are reconfigured under authoritarian spatial governance. This study therefore offers an updated, post-2021 account of how spatial control, gender norms, and labor market exclusion intersect to redefine the possibilities and limits of women's movement in Afghanistan's most politically charged city.

Chapter 4: Finding

Introduction

This chapter explores the lived experiences of Afghan employed women navigating mobility restrictions within urban settings, particularly in Kabul. Based on qualitative interviews and participant-generated map drawings, the findings reveal how employed women's movements through the city are shaped by external controls, psychological barriers, and adaptive strategies to avoid or navigate these constraints. The themes discussed here are interconnected, reflecting how space, policy, social norms and mental health converge in everyday life.

4.1 Restricted Mobility and Urban Checkpoints

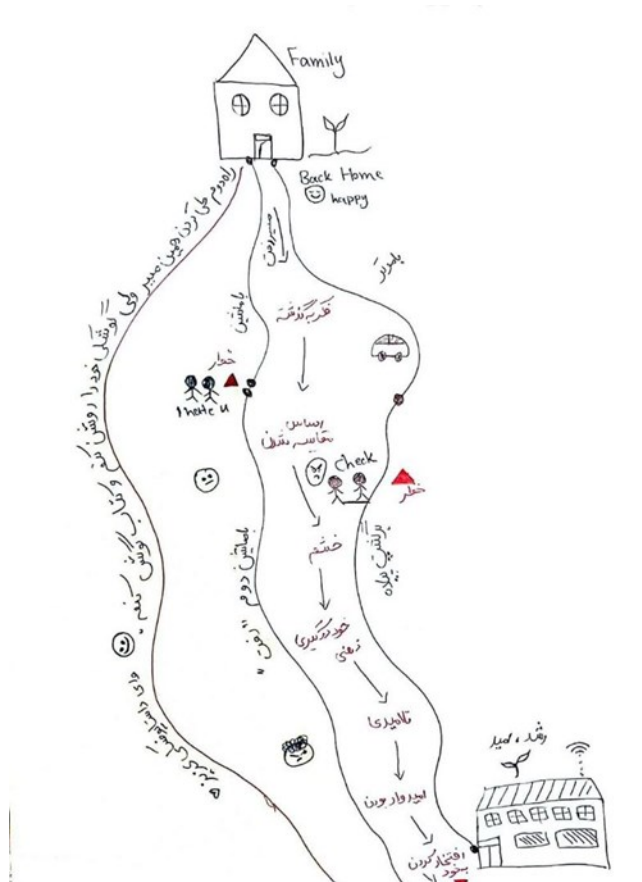
Ever since the Taliban takeover in 2021, many women perceive urban spaces in Kabul to be marked by a sense of constant surveillance and, in some cases, even danger. Most participants described government checkpoints (where they are checked to see if they comply with the dress code and are questioned if they are seen without a male escort) not as mere control points but as a psychological barrier that affects not only their physical movement through the city but also their sense of security and wellbeing.

These psychological barriers are embedded in the very texture of the city, in such a way that commuting from one place to another becomes not only a physical journey, but also a mental and political one, with women being forced to question their appearance and behaviour differently in different spaces. This entails a degree of mental exertion that makes navigating urban spaces a taxing and often degrading experience. In other words, the presence of these checkpoints makes the simple act of commuting become a daily negotiation of space, identity, and safety. Sahar stated: "I feel like a prisoner every time I step outside. I must plan my route carefully, ensuring I avoid areas with heavy surveillance."

Notice the peak of fear described by Sakina as she passes a checkpoint: "Well, on the route from my house, we pass the bus station where we get on, and then at the last stop, we get off. Sometimes, there are checkpoints there. When I see those people, I feel scared. After passing them, we head to school, and then I feel more relaxed since there's nothing to worry about anymore."

In one drawing (map -1) a participant illustrates her route from home to work passing multiple checkpoints, marked with stick figures labelled "Taliban" and signs that say "danger" and

“fear.” Each checkpoint is associated with feelings of panic; therefore, she must choose the back road to avoid facing by Taliban check point.



Map-1 Zohre

Because of all the above, the city becomes an obstacle course. These physical limitations translate into a fragmented urban experience with conditional and/or limited access to certain areas. Women avoid certain streets, neighbourhoods and transit points, and in so doing end up constructing their very own personal geographies of exclusion, being naturally drawn to those areas where they feel safer and freer from supervision.

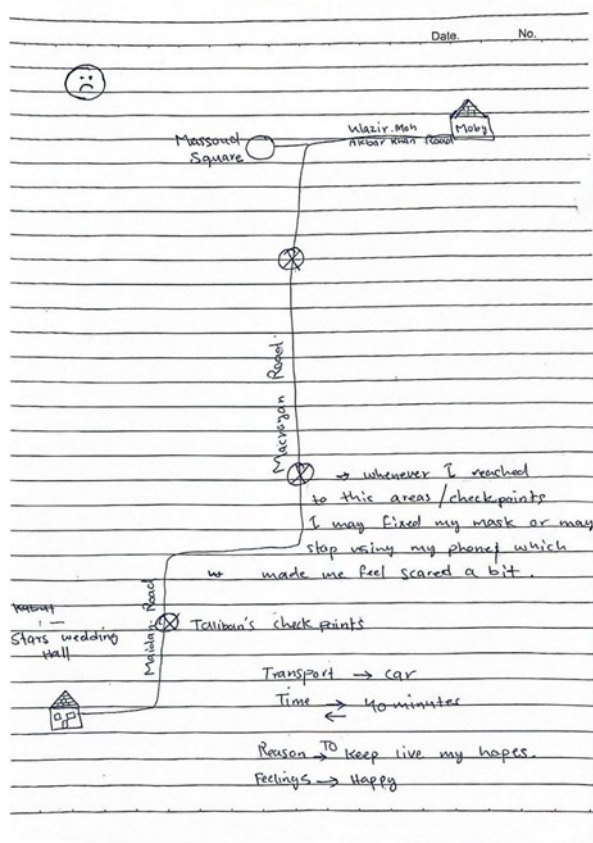
4.2 Dress Code as Spatial Regulation

Dress code enforcement is first and foremost experienced by many women as a limitation of personal freedom (e.g., Maryam: “When I dress conservatively, I feel sad inside because I can’t wear what I want”), but it extends beyond that. These dress codes are reshaping women’s relationship with the city. What you wear is directly tied to where you can safely go, without fear of harassment, punishment or arrest. Maryam recalled: “Once a morality officer stopped me just because I was wearing a yellow dress despite it was long enough, they were threatening

punishment, if I didn't dress properly.” In many interviews, dress was mentioned as a key factor determining whether a woman could enter public space at all.

Many women describe wearing long clothes and a mask in advance if they know they will pass a checkpoint to avoid confrontation, as these are the elements the Taliban mostly look out for. This means they have to consider the urban layout and the areas they will cross even before they leave the house, in order to determine how to dress most appropriately for the physical and psychological obstacles they will encounter.

Another participant's drawing (map-2) includes emotion icons like sad faces and “X” marks in areas where she was scolded for improper clothing, showing how even street-level geography becomes saturated with rules and fear which demonstrated by the subject's behaviour such as fixing a mask or stopping use of a mobile phone. It also shows how a traumatic experience can change one's perception of the urban layout, as the location of the incident will always be associated with the memory of what happened there. Sad memories are often described as humiliating, frustrating, upsetting and frightening. As an additional observation, Sarvnaz chose to write notes on her map in English instead of Dari. She isn't the only participant who did this, and this phenomenon is probably since English is widely used in the professional world in Afghanistan. In Sarvnaz's case, she is also an English teacher, meaning the use of English comes naturally to her in a professional context.



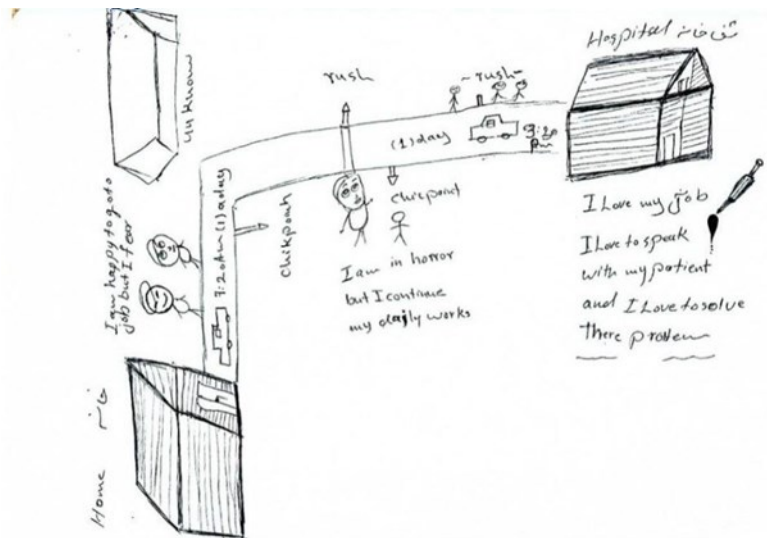
Map-2 Sarvnaz

Dress codes thus add a new dimension to women's spatial regulation when navigating the city. The conditioning is not only dependent on geography, but also on appearance, further disempowering women's ability to move confidently and freely.

4.3 Fear, Anxiety, and the Emotional Landscape of the City

Fear is the invisible architecture of the city. For women like Sara, "Every morning, I wake up with the fear of being stopped or harassed just for going to work." This anxiety is mapped onto the city itself. Public spaces, markets, roads, checkpoints are not neutral; they are emotionally charged.

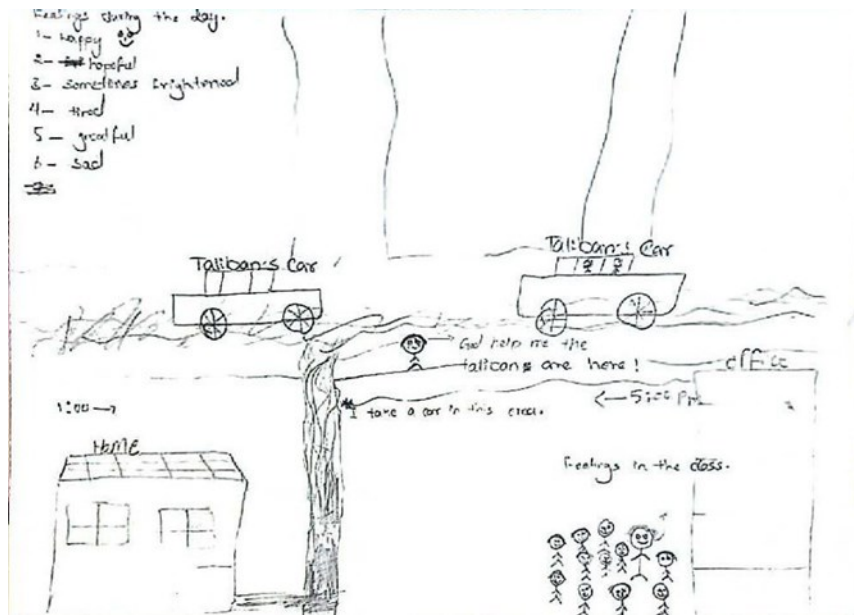
Several drawings show divided paths one marked with warnings like "danger" and another with calming words like "safe" or "home." One map depicts ghost-like figures representing Taliban law enforcers, haunting the path to work. Emotions such as "horror," "panic," and "sad" were written directly onto several of the interviewee's routes. When women must leave the house early, before dawn, the darkness and quiet streets add to the fear and psychological stress. One interview described the constantly thinking about the next commute, be it to work or home, as "a never-ending cycle of fear."



Map-3 Sara

One particularly illustrative account came from Sana map 4, who described a disturbing encounter with a Taliban patrol while walking to a class. She was wearing a long coat over pants and reading from her phone when a Taliban vehicle approached. Though she attempted to adjust her clothing discreetly, she was still stopped, questioned, and publicly shamed by a group of men including the driver and other passengers who claimed she had no right to be outside dressed as she was. While she initially tried to brush off the experience, she later admitted to staying indoors for several days afterward, fearing she had been followed.

“Still, I tried to stay calm and kept reading, thinking it was just a misunderstanding. I reminded myself it wasn’t my fault. These confrontations have become so common that they almost feel normal now. I stayed quiet until I got off the vehicle but for the next two or three days, I didn’t leave the house. I was terrified they had followed me or were watching. I kept peeking through the curtains, checking if anyone was outside. After that, I began wearing loose, long black clothing with a hijab-style chador. This was before the dress codes became strictly enforced. Back then, they only warned girls not to attend courses or universities, and people didn’t take it as seriously. But now, I’m much more cautious.”



Map-5 Salima

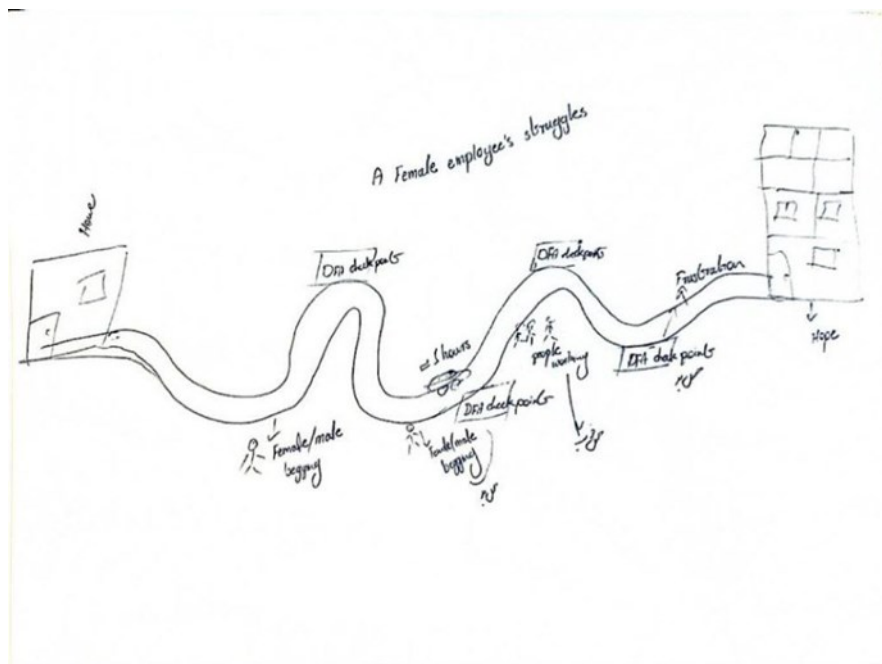
These psychological barriers severely limit the public space for women, who cannot navigate it freely, whereas men are able to access all parts of the public space without being subjected to the same level of scrutiny. The result is a public space that isn't truly public, as women are only allowed in certain areas, and even in those areas they choose to only navigate the parts of them where they feel safer.

4.4 Career Disruption and Social Repositioning

Restricted mobility directly impacts women's economic lives. In the case of Afghanistan, the Taliban takeover has negatively impacted or simply put a stop to their careers. Many women have been forced to change careers due to the increased difficulty the Taliban checkpoints impose on their commutes. In other cases, women's professional lives were cut short without notice, a nationwide mass layoff that naturally had a severe impact on the social makeup of the public space, where women's mobility was drastically reduced to the few who still retained jobs.: Zohre was a teacher, and her school was shut down from one day to the next, without warning. This deeply impacted on her, and the memory continues to trouble her. As a result of this new situation, many women's families are deciding to get them married, regardless of whether they want to pursue a career or not. Maryam had enrolled in a master's program at the International Islamic University of Afghanistan, but that door has now been closed to her. With the inability to study, women can't pursue many careers, leaving even more spaces devoid of their presence in the city.

Arezo's testimony as an English teacher ties together issues of independence, mobility and career: "Right now, I'm teaching in a nearby centre, so commuting isn't a major problem. But if I wanted to teach elsewhere or start learning a new language, it would be challenging because there aren't many educational centres nearby. Traveling to distant locations or another part of Kabul or even another province would be difficult without a male companion. This limits my ability to grow."

Movement through the city is often a prerequisite for employment. Without freedom of movement, professional identity erodes. Women described feeling like their social roles had reverted. Women who used to be active, independent professionals are now made to feel dependent, isolated and silent. This is well visualized in map-6, in which a participant places her workplace in a "hope" box but surrounds the path to it with barriers like checkpoints and signs reading "blocked."



Map-6 Zargol

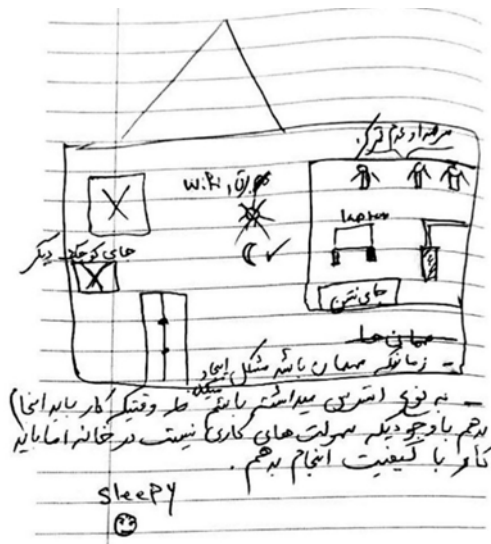
4.5 Adaptive Strategies and Acts of Resilience

Despite these constraints, the interviewed Afghan women have demonstrated resourcefulness, inner strength and adaptability to retain a degree of freedom and insofar as possible advance their careers. Sahar takes longer routes to avoid checkpoints, trading off her time for an increased sense of security and wellbeing, whereas Samira has opted to study online and network with other professionals virtually. In general, digital spaces including different forms of online work and education seem to be growing in popularity among Afghan women. As the

physical space of the city rejects them or limits their movement, they find freedom in digital spaces not tied to the city's geography or the Taliban rule.

The same can be said for informal social support systems like private social media groups which are also emerging as new "spaces" where women can enjoy freedom of movement and autonomy.

Significantly, one participant drew (map-7) a straight line from "home" to a laptop labelled "online work," skipping all the external obstacles. But one can never fully disconnect the freedom of the digital world from the context of the city they are in, as Sahar Wrote, "I continue my daily work, but I am in horror."



Map-7 Nahid

Conclusion

The findings reveal how Afghan women's experience of urban space is governed by fear, control, and adaptation, and these feelings in turn leads women to reimagine the urban space and come up with routes, even if they are longer and impractical, where they feel less threatened and supervised.

The city is not experienced uniformly, it is navigated strategically, with caution and emotional stress. Insofar as women adapt their routes when navigating the city in order to avoid those areas that can be most dangerous or emotionally troubling for them, a gender-segregated city emerges, with only a fraction of the city's streets being used regularly by women, who naturally

gravitate towards the “safer” areas. These “safer” areas end up creating “safer” routes, as women will inform each other in private conversations of the location of Taliban checkpoints, to better help each other navigate the city, the prohibition of studying, with the subsequent closure of women’s education spaces, and their prohibition of working in certain fields further limits Afghan women’s experience of the public space and their role within the city, which they feel to be shrinking, irrelevant and humiliating.

In this movement logic, one sees home as a refuge, workplace as the beacon of hope or need, and street as the scene of harassment or intimidation. This is a sharp contrast between what is public space and what is private space, and this aspect plays to the other interpretations of how the Taliban have remade the mobility of women and also literally how they feel and sense the spaces of the built environment. Where physical geography of Kabul has increasingly become both fragmented and curtailing to women, the appearance of virtual spaces provides an avenue of agency albeit limited. The freedom of women to study and work exclusively online, use personal networks of support at a distance, is a type of spatial and emotional resilience. This digital turn is both a survival response and are characterization of movement within limitation. These layered experiences must necessarily inform future discussions on urban planning, in Kabul specifically, but more generally in any city where women’s rights are limited. Such limitations on women’s freedom of movement and dress codes can severely harm the population’s mental health, as the city becomes a mirror in which they are always forced to self-scrutinize and made to see themselves as inferior and worthless in public space.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Discussion of Similarities and Differences

Due to the lack of existing research on women's working mobility in Afghanistan, the findings of this study shed light on a previously unexplored aspect of life under Taliban rule, though these findings both confirm and expand on existing notions put forward by or that could be inferred from the existing body of research touching upon broader though related subjects such as the changing role of women in Afghanistan over time or women's mobility in other patriarchal or conflict-affected societies. Consistent with feminist mobility studies (Sheller & Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2010), the participants' narratives highlight how moving through the city is not simply a physical act, but also one that is deeply social, political, and embodied. Like previous research (Fluri, 2009; Kandiyoti, 2007), this study reveals how checkpoints, dress codes, and surveillance reinforce Kabul's status as a gendered and segregated city, where women's access to public space is conditional, negotiated, and often humiliating. The emotional geographies of fear mapped by participants strongly resonate with the concept of "fearscapes" (Tulumello, 2017; Pain & Smith, 2008), showing that urban mobility is shaped as much by psychological stress as by material obstacles.

However, this research also diverges from earlier findings in important ways due to the political circumstances of the present moment. Unlike post-2001 studies, which described a gradual expansion of women's access to education and employment, these findings clearly document the sharp contraction of rights that has been experienced by Afghan women since the Taliban's return in 2021 through first-person testimonies. Moreover, the use of visual methods adds a novel layer of analysis: participants' drawings not only traced restricted routes but also inscribed fear, humiliation, and hope onto the urban fabric. These visual accounts make plain how women individually reconstruct the city through their own personal geographies of exclusion and resilience. This thesis demonstrates the potential of using innovative methods specifically, the combination of voice-only interviews and participant-generated drawings to access lived experiences in highly constrained political and social environments. In contexts such as Taliban-controlled Kabul, where surveillance, fear, and cultural norms limit women's capacity to speak freely or be physically present, traditional research methods may fall short. By contrast, the integration of drawing not only made participation more accessible, but also revealed layers of emotional and spatial experience that verbal interviews alone may not have captured. As one participant noted, the act of drawing allowed her to express what she "couldn't put into words." Far from being a secondary or decorative addition, the drawings became visual

narratives deeply reflective, symbolic, and in some cases therapeutic. The use of this method challenges the assumption that visual methods are simplistic or mundane, and instead positions them as powerful tools for feminist and participatory research, especially in contexts shaped by trauma, restriction, and fear. This expands the literature on embodied mobility and adds novel insights into the affective dimension of urban life.

5.2 Comparative Reflections with Other Contexts

Though Kabul under Taliban rule may be an extreme case, the findings of this research resonate with women's mobility experiences in other conflict-affected and exclusionary urban contexts. Parallels and contrasts can be drawn with Trogisch's (2023) study of women in Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mukwidigwi & Naidu's (2025) research on women in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

Afghanistan and Eastern DRC: Fearscales and Coping

Both Afghan and Congolese women navigate what Trogisch (2022) terms "fearscales", i.e., landscapes saturated with fear that shape one's movement and survival strategies. In Kabul, checkpoints, dress codes, and surveillance produce an "invisible architecture of fear," turning everyday commuting into a psychological as well as a physical negotiation. Similarly, women in Eastern DRC live within violent conservation–conflict environments, where threats from armed groups, park rangers, and kidnappers make mobility fraught with danger. Fear becomes both a barrier and a compass: Afghan women reroute their commutes to avoid danger spots or shift to online work, while Congolese women employ strategies such as bartering with militias or performatively aligning with NGOs. In both contexts, women demonstrate tactical agency (Utas, 2005), not resistance in the classic sense, but subtle survival maneuvers that allow them to take some measure of control within the fear-inducing constraints. Yet the nature of restriction differs. In Afghanistan, limitations are centrally imposed through Taliban decrees that legally and systematically erase women from public life. In contrast, in Eastern Congo, women face fragmented restrictions emerging from overlapping armed actors, conservation policies, and lawlessness. Afghan women's exclusion is bureaucratized and institutional, while Congolese women's is negotiated daily in violent uncertainty. What appears to be common to both is women's tactical and adaptive response to navigate these hostile environments.

Afghanistan and South Africa: Right to the City and Embodied Exclusion

The Afghan case also echoes Mukwidigwi & Naidu's (2025) findings on embodied exclusion in South African cities. In KwaZulu-Natal, women often practice self-imposed exclusion,

avoiding unsafe parks, bus stops, and beaches due to crime, harassment, or poor infrastructure. Afghan women similarly alter their mobility to avoid checkpoints, modify their dress, or limit their routes to evade Taliban scrutiny. In both contexts, women's urban presence is conditioned by intersecting power dynamics, patriarchal norms, socio-economic inequalities and feelings of fear and danger that regulate which spaces women feel comfortable navigating.

The contrast lies in degree and legitimacy. In South Africa, while gendered inequalities persist, women retain formal rights to education, employment, and mobility; their restrictions stem from fear of violence, crime, and systemic neglect. In Kabul, however, mobility is institutionally curtailed: women's right to education and employment is legally denied, making exclusion not only lived but codified. Afghan women's "right to the city" is not merely undermined but explicitly revoked.

By observing the cases of Kabul, Eastern Congo, and KwaZulu-Natal, we can see three distinct patterns emerge:

- Fear as Spatial Architecture: Fear rearranges women's everyday geographies through acts of avoidance, rerouting, and withdrawal.
- Conditional Mobility: Women's ability to move is contingent on third parties (Taliban, militias, male escorts, criminals, etc.).
- Coping as Agency: Women develop adaptive strategies such as turning to online work, bartering, or altering their routes, all actions that show constrained but nevertheless real agency within hostile conditions.

Taken together, these patterns highlight how women's mobility under hostile conditions can be both an act of exclusion and of resilience. While Kabul represents one of the most extreme forms of institutionalized gendered immobility, the comparative lens underscores how embodied fear, conditional access, and tactical coping are recurring dynamics that end up shaping or determining women's right to the city.

5.3 Socio-Political Implications

The restriction of women's mobility in Kabul has profound socio-political consequences that touch upon individual rights, social status, and economic life. At its core, the enforced dress codes, mahram requirements, and bans on education and employment constitute a direct assault on women's fundamental human rights, particularly the right to freedom of movement, the right to work, and the right to education. Women's "right to the city", as defined by feminist geography Fenster (2005), is severely undermined, as women are excluded from shaping and

even inhabiting large swathes of public space. Socially, participants' testimonies show how even women's identities can be redefined by surveillance and exclusion. Being forced to stay home or to move only under male supervision diminishes women's self-esteem and autonomy and reinforces patriarchal norms of dependence. Several participants described feeling invisible, excluded, or "like a prisoner," which aligns with Kandiyoti's (1988) notion of "classic patriarchy", where women's social roles are confined within domestic boundaries. This shrinking of women's social status contributes to broader processes of gendered exclusion, where women are systematically erased from public and political life. Economically, the erosion of women's mobility exacerbates cycles of poverty and dependency; by preventing women from participating in the labor force, the Taliban not only undermine individual careers but also weaken household and national economies. This resonates with feminist mobility justice (Castañeda et al., 2024), which highlights how mobility restrictions reinforce structural inequalities across gender, class, and care responsibilities. In Kabul, women's forced immobility both reflects and reproduces socio-political hierarchies that position them as dependent and subordinate.

5.4 Impact on Employment

Employment emerged as one of the most visibly disrupted domains in the findings. The testimonies reveal three main effects of mobility restriction on women's work since the return to power of the Taliban in 2021. First, job loss and exclusion became widespread; women reported being dismissed from positions overnight, particularly in schools, NGOs, and universities that were shut down or made inaccessible. This aligns with Fluri's (2011) argument that women's employment in Afghanistan is not only about labor but about negotiating security, visibility, and dignity. Second, those who retained their jobs experienced reduced productivity and professional opportunities for career advancement. Daily negotiations with checkpoints, long detours, and fear of harassment consumed ever greater amounts of time and energy, which consequently lowered their focus and efficiency at the workplace. Participants described commuting as a "never-ending cycle of fear," which not only disrupted their professional identity but also their psychological wellbeing. This echoes broader scholarship on gendered mobility, where limited transport and safety constraints result in occupational segregation and diminished advancement opportunities (Turner & Fouracre, 1995; Chant, 2013). Third, shifts to remote and informal work emerged as adaptive strategies. Some women turned to online teaching, digital freelancing, or social media networks to sustain careers. While digital mobility offers new possibilities, it also deepens isolation, limits collaboration, and fails

to replace the broader benefits of physical presence in professional spaces. This reflects Utas's (2005) notion of "tactical agency," where women navigate oppressive structures by finding alternative, albeit constrained, routes of participation. Thus, mobility restrictions not only deprive women of employment but also transform the very meaning of work in Kabul from a public, professional identity to a fragmented, digital, or hidden form of survival

5.5 Limitations

While this study offers novel insights in the field of women's working mobility in Afghanistan, it is important to acknowledge the limitations faced while gathering the information:

- **Scope of participants:** The research focused on a small sample of employed women in Kabul. Their experiences may not reflect those of women in rural areas or different socio-economic groups, where mobility patterns and constraints may vary.
- **Translation bias:** Interviews were originally conducted in Dari/Persian and later translated into English, with AI assistance followed by full human supervision of the results. While care was taken to preserve nuance, some translations may fail to fully convey certain emotional subtleties or culturally specific terms with no direct equivalent in English.
- **Researcher positionality:** The researcher's identity as an Afghan woman based abroad may have influenced participants' responses, potentially fostering trust but also introducing a certain distance.
- **Contextual constraints:** The Taliban's surveillance and participants' fear of reprisal may have limited the depth of disclosure. Some women may have withheld sensitive details, leading to partial accounts of the truth.
- **Lack of literature:** The lack of existing literature specifically focused on Afghan women's working mobility under post-2021 Taliban rule made it difficult to contrast the findings with other researchers' conclusions. However, this created an opportunity to provide novel, valuable findings based on first-person accounts to the existing body of feminist and mobility literature.

Despite these limitations, the combination of interviews and visual methods provided rich, multilayered insights. The findings capture both the structural violence of mobility restrictions and the embodied resilience of women navigating Kabul under Taliban rule.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how Afghan women employed in Kabul experience and navigate the profound restrictions on female mobility imposed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, and more specifically how these restrictions affect their working mobility. Through the voices and drawings of twelve women, this investigation has shed light on the ways in which a once familiar urban space can be subtly reshaped through policy and policing into a terrain marked by surveillance, fear, and exclusion, and consequently one that requires resilience and adaptation to successfully navigate.

The findings show that commuting from home to work is increasingly complicated. For women in Kabul, each commute has become an emotionally charged journey during which they must constantly negotiate their new political reality. Every journey entails risks and requires women to previously calculate through route, gather information from other women and even ask themselves how much of their freedom, dignity or integrity they are willing to gamble to get to their workplaces. Checkpoints, moral policing, and the enforcement of dress codes fragment the city into areas inducing varying degrees of anxiety depending on the amount or severity of the restrictions in place, when they are not outright excluded from accessing or traversing certain parts of the city. The street, once a path to connect two points, is now rendered a crippling corridor of fear where your right to the city is put into question. The drawings produced by the participants during the data gathering capture these geographies of fear with striking clarity, depicting Taliban figures as looming threats (e.g., one depicted them as ghosts), checkpoints as solid barriers and the routes as visibly meandering and convoluted.

Yet, by the same token, the collected accounts also reveal the resilience of agency. The interviewed women described adaptation strategies that ranged from choosing longer routes to avoid harassment, to shifting their careers online. Digital spaces presented themselves throughout the course of this investigation as both a refuge and an alternate extension of mobility, offering some women the opportunity to study, teach, or network despite their confinement. While such adaptations cannot replace the full freedom of physical presence in the city, they reflect how Afghan women have found alternative spaces where dignity and professional identity can survive.

These findings make several important contributions. Theoretically, this thesis brings to light an underexplored dimension of contemporary Afghan women's lives: while international reports and human rights investigations have extensively documented the education bans and

workplace exclusions, little scholarly work has been dedicated solely to examine the everyday, spatially embodied experiences of women's mobility under Taliban rule. In this sense, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature, highlighting mobility's dimension as a deeply gendered, emotional, and political experience. By situating Afghan women's voices at the center of analysis, it also contributes to feminist mobility studies with an Afghan feminist perspective, resisting the universalizing tendencies of Western feminist narratives and grounding the theory in first-person accounts and context-specific lived realities.

Methodologically, this thesis demonstrates the potential of using innovative approaches to obtain information from highly constrained contexts. Conducting voice-only online interviews via WhatsApp, combined with participant-generated drawings, proved to be an efficient way of allowing women to share sensitive experiences in times and spaces of their choosing where they felt safe to speak and enjoy relative anonymity. The drawings proved to be particularly valuable: they revealed spatial and emotional geographies that were not always verbalized or that were hard to verbalize, while also allowing the women to reflect deeper on their experiences during the interview process. This multimodal approach enriched the data, by allowing the verbal narratives and visual testimonies to complement and enhance each other in a way that allows us to understand more fully how mobility is felt, experienced and navigated by these women. To my knowledge, this combination has not been applied before in Afghanistan, making it a methodological contribution for future research in repressive or high-risk environments. It illustrates how combining digital communication and visual methods can create new possibilities for feminist research where conventional face-to-face methods may prove limited or impossible.

The practical and policy implications of these findings are also significant. These women's testimonies show how the denial of mobility has widespread ramifications both on a social and on a personal level. It is not merely a restriction on movement, which in and of itself is already an encroachment on someone's freedom, but an attack on dignity, professional and personal identity, and mental health. It is therefore crucial that policies and programs addressing Afghan women's rights extend beyond the well-known spheres of education and employment to also draw attention to the limitation of women's mobility and right to the city, both elements closely tied to women's presence in the public sphere, a presence being made to vanish through the new Taliban government's policies. Supporting digital education and work platforms, strengthening informal networks of solidarity, and embedding mental health services in humanitarian interventions are all steps that can help women sustain a sense of agency under

these repressive conditions. At the international level, mobility should be explicitly recognized as a human right in advocacy and aid frameworks, as without it women's participation in society remains incomplete.

Looking forward, this research opens many interesting new avenues for future further studies that could investigate how rural women, widows, or younger generations experience differently these current limitations on mobility, and how prolonged reliance on digital rather than physical presence can reshape women's identities and opportunities in such a society. Comparative work with other conflict-affected or authoritarian contexts could also refine global understandings of feminist mobility justice.

In conclusion, the stories shared in this thesis offer a valuable portrait of how employed Afghan women in Kabul are learning to navigate the seemingly paradoxical situation of having to move through a city that actively seeks to erase them from the public sphere. And yet, though these constraints erase their presence from urban space women still find ways in which to exercise their agency and create new paths when traditional ones are barred to them.. These paths may take the form of hidden detours to avoid checkpoints, online alternatives to physical workspaces, or time-saving information whispered in moments of privacy and solidarity. These represent women's determination to remain present in a city that denies their presence. These "invisible roads" remind us that mobility is not only about distance travelled or the means to traverse said distance, but is also an indicator of our ability to navigate public spaces in dignity and enjoy our right to the city and to be a part of the fabric of public life.

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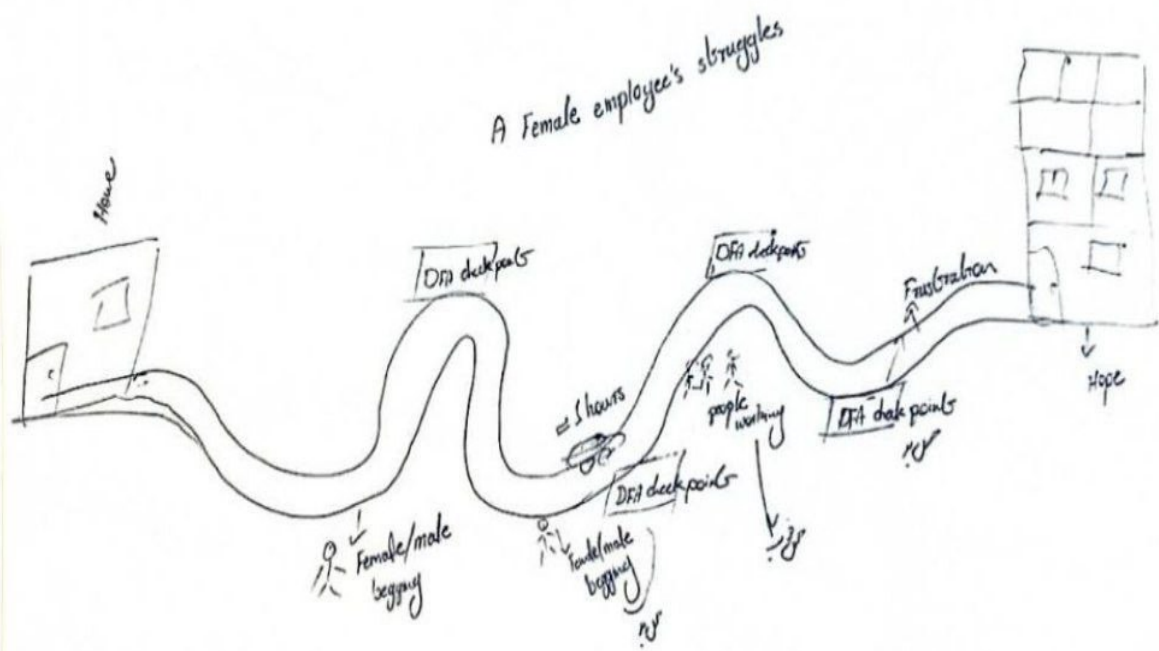
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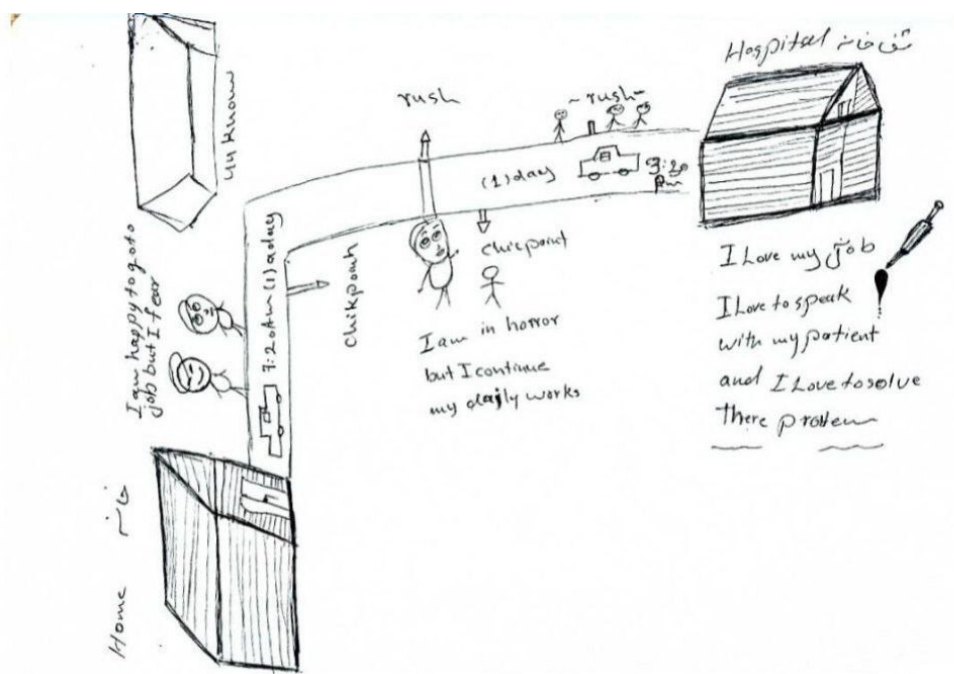
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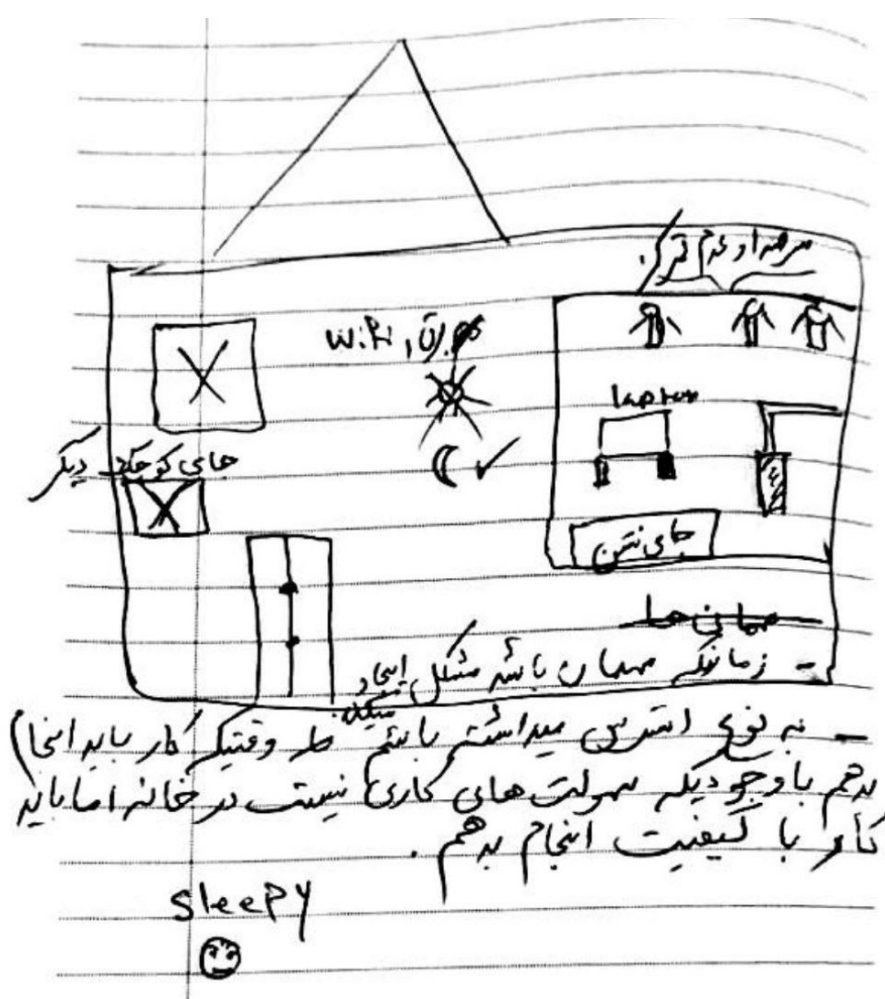
Participants Map Drawing





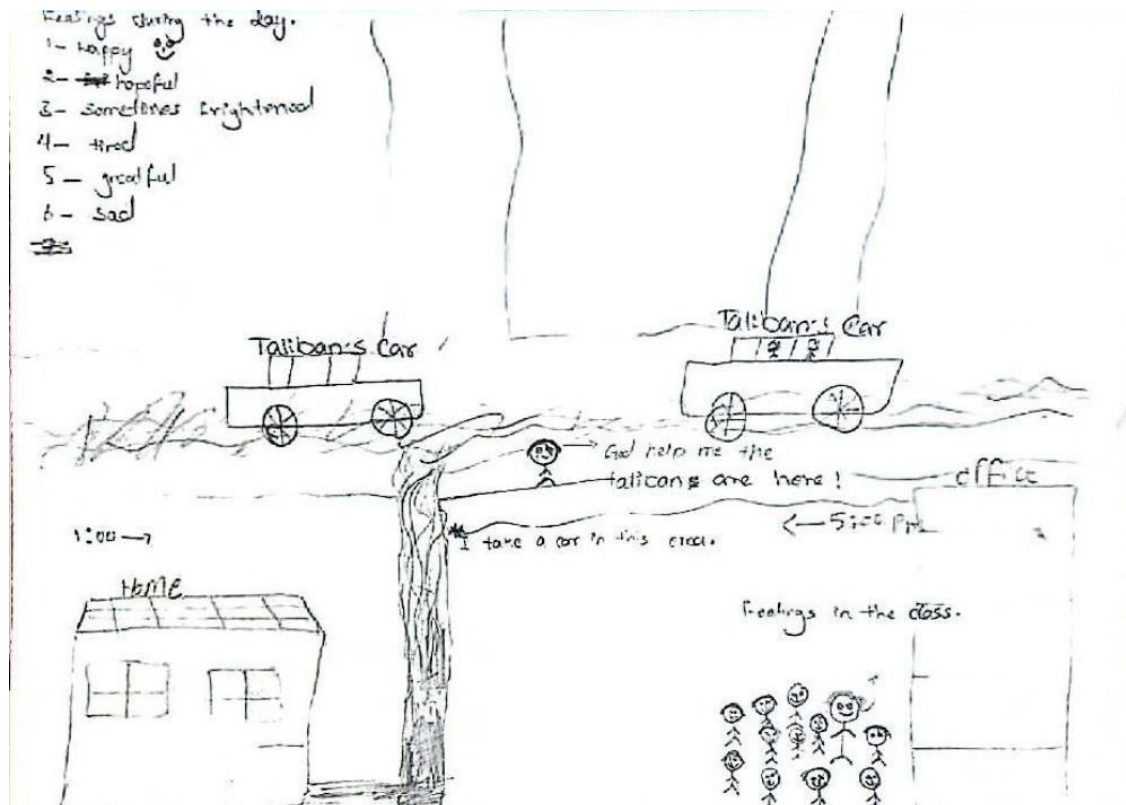






Feelings during the day.

- 1- happy
- 2- ~~hopeful~~ hopeful
- 3- sometimes frightened
- 4- tired
- 5- grateful
- 6- sad





Messoud Square

Klazar Moh
Alkbar Khan Road



Macroyan Road



→ whenever I reached
to this areas / checkpoints
I may fixed my mask or may
stop using my phone which
made me feel scared a bit.

Parent

Stars wedding
Hall

Maidan Road



Taliban's check points

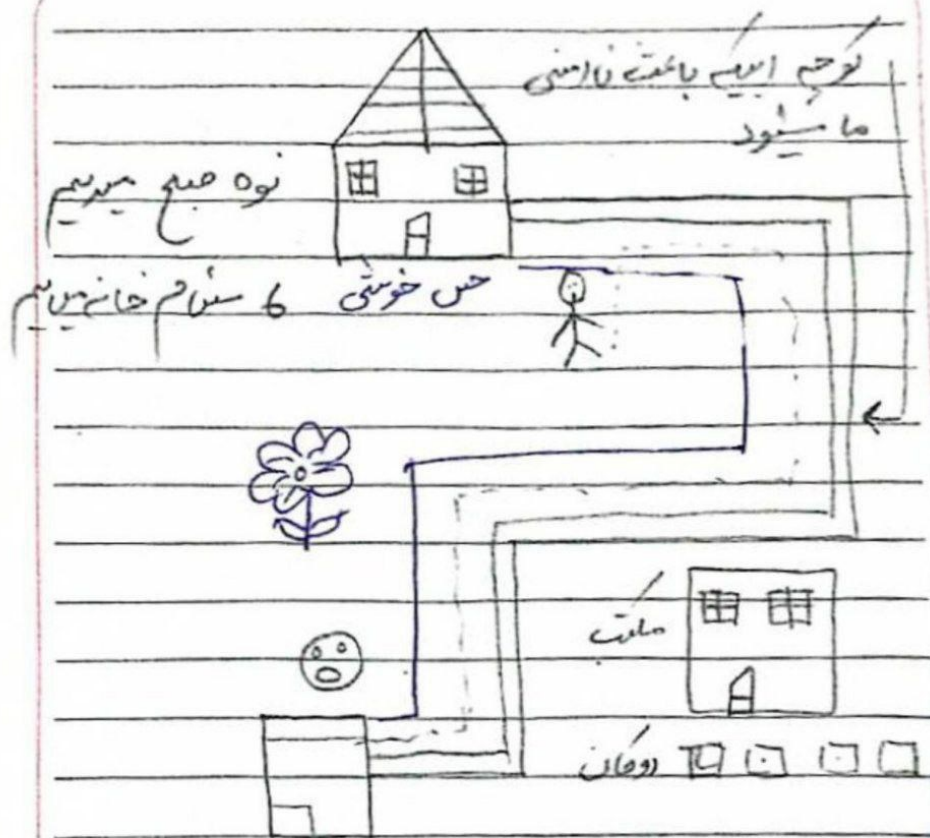


Transport → car

Time → 40 minutes

Reason → To keep live my hopes.

Feelings → Happy



من می‌توانم موفق شوم چون هیچ وقت تسلیم نمی‌شوم
 راجه ندرایط می‌زنم تا اینکه اسم را بگذارم

