GLOBAL DIALOGUE

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Talking Sociology with Abdie Kazemipur

Nazanin Shahrokni

Rethinking Sociology in Iran

Nazanin Shahrokni
Reyhaneh Javadi
Esmail Khalili
Zohreh Bayatrizi
Aghil Daghagheleh
Shiva Alinaqian
Nafiseh Azad
Maral Latifi
Mahbubeh Moghadam
Fatemeh Moghadasi
Ladan Rahbari
Reza Sohrabi

The Political and Social Economy of Labor Migration

Karen Shire
Heidi Gottfried
Rina Agarwala
Ashwin Kumar
María Camila Vega-Salazar
Carolina Moreno
Suelen Castiblanco-Moreno
Javier A. Pineda D.
Lynn Yu Ling Ng
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Sejin Park
Feng Xu
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Kaxton Siu

Open Section

> Gaza: War as Entangled Accumulation

MAGAZINE

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> Editorial

This first issue of Volume 16 of *Global Dialogue* opens a new moment marked by both continuity and renewal. After three years of intense and committed work, Carolina Vestena and Vitória Rodriguez conclude their role as editorial assistants of *Global Dialogue*. Their dedication, editorial care, and critical vision were essential in sustaining and strengthening the magazine during a particularly challenging period for global sociology. On behalf of the editorial team, I express my deepest gratitude to both of them. At the same time, it is a great pleasure to welcome Marcia Rangel Candido, researcher at ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, who will be taking on this role from now on. With extensive editorial experience, a strong commitment to public sociology, and a comparative and global perspective, Marcia will undoubtedly make important contributions to this new stage in the magazine's trajectory.

After the previous issue which was a collective tribute to the intellectual, political, and human legacy of *Global Dialogue*'s founding editor Michael Burawoy, this new issue returns to its regular structure. It does so in direct conversation with two pressing concerns that shape our historical moment: the situation in Iran and the global transformations associated with labor migration.

The 'Talking Sociology' section opens the issue with an interview conducted by Nazanin Shahrokni with Abdolmohammad (Abdie) Kazemipur, reflecting on debates around national sociologies, social change, the challenging boundaries between the sacred and the secular, and the evolving questions shaping Iranian sociology today.

This conversation is followed by a rich set of contributions in the 'Rethinking Sociology in Iran' section, carefully edited by Nazanin Shahrokni and Reyhaneh Javadi, which brings into focus the tensions and paradoxes of doing sociology in contexts marked by political repression, epistemic surveillance, and deep cultural contestations. From the public relevance of sociology and the (non-) institutionalization of the field, to the privatization of teaching, the ethnic question, the struggles over gender studies, and the constraints on critical research, this section offers a multifaceted look at the challenges facing Iranian sociology today. It also features a dynamic roundtable that gathers scholars situated across multiple geographies, contributing to a situated and collective portrait of knowledge production on and from Iran.

In a moment when Iran once again occupies headlines across the world – often framed through selective narratives, geopolitical simplifications, or narrow security lenses – it becomes even more crucial to engage with grounded, public, and global sociological perspectives. Beyond the images circulating in mainstream media, Iranian society is marked by complex forms of political contestation, vibrant intellectual traditions, everyday struggles for dignity, and shifting configurations of state power and social mobilization. Understanding these dynamics requires listening to scholars who work *in*, *on*, and *with* Iran, and who are able to situate current events within broader histories of repression, resistance, knowledge production, and social transformation. Although this section is not devoted to analyzing the most recent events, it greatly contributes to offering a broader, historically grounded understanding of the situation.

The second major section, 'The Political and Social Economy of Labor Migration,' edited by Karen A. Shire, Heidi Gottfried, and Rina Agarwala, examines one of the defining issues of our era: the centrality of labor migration in the reorganization of global capitalism. From "safe and orderly" mobility programs in India, to global care chains connecting Venezuela and Colombia, to systems of migrant labor in China, Singapore, Dubai, and Cambodia, the contributions show how inequality, gender, ethnicity, borders, and state power intersect in producing new forms of precarity – and new possibilities for agency and resistance.

In the 'Open Section', the issue closes with a powerful analysis by Guilherme Leite Gonçalves on the war in Gaza, interpreted as a form of entangled accumulation rooted in political, economic, and colonial dynamics that extend far beyond the battlefield.

With this issue, *Global Dialogue* renews its commitment to a public and global sociology capable of analyzing contemporary processes through situated, plural, and dialogical perspectives. We hope that the reflections, debates, and research gathered here help broaden conversations, strengthen networks, and open new questions in a world shaped by inequalities, violence, and displacement – but also by resistance, critical imagination, and collective efforts toward more just futures. ■

Breno Bringel, editor of *Global Dialogue*

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> Submissions should be sent to: globaldialogue@isa-sociology.org.

International Sociological Association

GLOBAL DIALOGUE

> Editorial Board

*In "Talking Sociology," Nazanin Shahrokni speaks with **Abdie Kazemipur** about the evolving questions shaping Iranian sociology.*

*The thematic section **"Rethinking Sociology in Iran"** explores the tensions of doing sociology amid repression, epistemic surveillance, and cultural contestation.*

*The thematic section **"Political and Social Economy of Labor Migration"** examines labor migration's central role in the reorganization of global capitalism.*

Cover picture: Hans-Peter Gauster, via Unsplash.

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"While national or regional sociologies rightly challenge dominant paradigms, they can also reproduce the exclusions they oppose – essentializing contexts or replacing one universality with another"

Abdie Kazemipur

> The Fetish of the Particular, and the Sacred as Secular

An Interview with Abdie Kazemipur

Portrait of Abdie Kazemipur. Credit: Abdie Kazemipur.

Debates over the global dynamics of sociological knowledge production have intensified in recent years, with growing interest in "national sociologies," "Southern theory," and "regional traditions." Iran offers fertile ground for these discussions, as explored in an interview with **Dr. Abdolmohammad (Abdie) Kazemipur**, Professor of Sociology and Chair of Ethnic Studies at the University of Calgary and former president of the Canadian Sociological Association. His recent work examines how the sacred and secular intersect in modern Iran and how migration is reshaping its social landscape. In this wide-ranging conversation, Dr. Kazemipur reflects on the state of Iranian sociology – its challenges, contributions, and the pursuit of a locally rooted yet globally engaged discipline. He is interviewed here by **Dr. Nazanin Shahrokni**, Associate Professor of International Studies at Simon Fraser University in Canada.

Nazanin Shahrokni (NS): Many sociologists have challenged the idea of a "universal" sociology, pointing out that what has long been presented as universal is, in fact, a particular tradition rooted in European and North American experiences. In response, the turn to particularity – through national sociologies, regional approaches, and Southern theory – seeks to foreground alternative epistemologies. How do you view this turn, and what does it mean to speak of a "national sociology" in the Iranian context?

Abdie Kazemipur (AK): I find the distinction problematic, both descriptively and prescriptively. While national or regional sociologies rightly challenge dominant paradigms, they can also reproduce the exclusions they oppose – essentializing contexts or replacing one universality with another. Arguing against universalism is now uncontroversial, but we risk a new "fetishism of the particular."

First, each "particular" contains internal diversity. Claiming to speak for all its subcategories repeats the same error as universalism. Iran and Turkey – neither directly colonized – cannot be readily grouped with formerly colonized countries such as Algeria, India, or Egypt, and even within the Arab Middle East, as Sari Hanafi notes, eastern and western parts of the region differ markedly.

Second, framing "national sociology" or Southern theory mainly as opposition to Northern paradigms often serves identity-centered political goals more than epistemological ones. This can elevate symbolic figures whose revolutionary appeal fades over time. For instance, Raewyn Connell

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cites Ali Shari'ati as a key voice against Western cultural imperialism before Iran's 1979 Revolution. Yet his intellectual influence waned soon after, showing how identity claims may mobilize politically but contribute little to the sustained growth of sociological knowledge.

NS: Given your concerns about the fetishism of the particular, do you think we should abandon the idea of national sociologies altogether? Is the concept of something like an "Iranian sociology" analytically useful, or does it risk reinforcing the very epistemological divides it seeks to overcome?

AK: National sociologies do exist and should exist, but not as theoretical enclaves. Their value lies not in claiming distinct theories or methods, but in generating distinct questions rooted in the specific conditions of their societies. "Good" sociology begins with clearly defined, locally grounded questions; and answering them requires drawing on all available intellectual resources – Northern or Southern, Eastern or Western – without disqualifying any a priori. Such answers emerge from long processes of negotiation between ideas and realities, and from exchanges across intellectual traditions. We should therefore practice theoretical agnosticism and eclecticism – embracing concepts from multiple traditions rather than sacralizing or dismissing particular theories.

NS: Let me follow up with two questions. You suggest that the value of national sociologies lies in the questions they ask, rather than in advancing distinct theories. But as feminist sociologists have long argued, there's no neutral standpoint: the questions we pose are conditioned by the conceptual tools and analytic lenses available to us. Dominant paradigms can preclude certain questions from even being asked. From that perspective, national or regional sociologies aren't just about posing local questions, but also about developing alternative frameworks that make new kinds of inquiry possible. How do you respond to that?

AK: I agree, but I think it works both ways. Just as so-called "universalist" perspectives can limit the questions we are able to ask, so too can "national" perspectives foreclose other lines of inquiry. This tension has been especially evident in feminist scholarship. While the universalist stance of certain strands of feminism in the Global North has often blinded them to alternative problems and theoretical possibilities emerging from the South, much feminist awareness in the South has in fact been shaped by engagement with feminist agendas rooted in the North. This is precisely why sustained and active dialogue across perspectives is essential.

NS: Building on that, since you emphasize that national sociologies emerge through the questions they raise, could you speak to the kinds of questions and themes that have defined Iranian sociology in recent decades?

AK: Iranian society has undergone extraordinary changes over the past 50–60 years, shaping the questions sociologists have pursued. These include rapid state-led modernization and secularization in the pre-revolutionary period; the unexpected rise of religion as a powerful political and personal force during the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which mobilized roughly 10% of the population; and the Iran–Iraq War: the longest of the twentieth century.

Recent decades have seen both secularization – either abandoning religion altogether or embracing a personalized spirituality free from institutions, rituals, clerical hierarchy, and theology – and a form of secularism in which religion is subservient to the state; an unintended result of their merger under aggressive Islamization.

Iran also has a unique migration profile: it is both a major migrant-sending and migrant-receiving country, hosting about 4.5 million refugees (roughly 5% of the population) while some 8 million Iranians live abroad (around 9%). Surveys suggest over half the population would emigrate if possible, making Iran a rare case for studying immigration and emigration simultaneously.

Finally, a powerful and authentic women's movement has emerged in response to systemic gender inequalities and cultural patriarchy, reshaping the nature, scope, and demands of social movements in the country. These interesting and intersecting dynamics – ideological shifts, religious change, war, migration, and gender – have fueled vibrant sociological inquiry within Iran and among the Iranian diaspora, particularly in the sociology of migration, identity, gender, and social capital.

NS: Given this dynamic history, what do you see as the most significant obstacles to the growth of sociology in Iran today, and how do these challenges shape the kinds of questions that can, or cannot, be asked?

AK: The greatest challenge is the state's restriction on free inquiry. Dr. Saeed Madani, a leading sociologist of social problems, is currently in prison; Dr. Fariba Adelkhah, a France-based anthropologist, spent several years in jail before her release. Many others have been expelled from universities, yet they continue to produce exceptional work.

Closely tied to this is the continued primacy of the state and the "political" in the intellectual imagination of Iranians, including many social scientists. This preoccupation has tended to overshadow the "social" itself, limiting the kinds of questions that are posed and the analytical directions that are pursued. In particular, there is a dearth of research on community empowerment or locally based

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initiatives in a situation where the state is unwilling or unable to function as expected.

Another obstacle is a dual pathology: excessive fascination with theory – almost fetishism – paired with atheoretical empirical work, what C. Wright Mills called "abstract empiricism." Iranian sociology needs more theory-driven empirical research that is both grounded and conceptually robust.

Finally, Iranian sociology remains largely disengaged from global sociology and from comparative research – even with regionally and/or historically comparable contexts such as Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

That said, emerging mechanisms are connecting Iranian sociology to broader scholarly conversations. A growing cohort of younger, often second-generation immigrant sociologists based outside Iran brings fresh energy and curiosity to the study of Iranian society. While sometimes romanticized, their work has been crucial in translating Iran's social realities for global audiences and raising the field's international visibility. Another is the vibrant translation movement within Iran, which has made both classic and contemporary sociological works available in Persian with remarkable speed. This has significantly shaped local academic discourse and exposed Iranian scholars to global debates – though still largely at the level of reception rather than contribution.

NS: That translation movement is certainly impressive, but it also highlights a deeper asymmetry: the flow of translation remains largely unidirectional. Works produced outside Iran – especially in English – are translated into Persian, while very little sociological work produced in Persian is translated outward, nor is there much uptake of Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, or other regional sociologies within Iran. This linguistic and epistemic imbalance raises broader questions. With that in mind, how do you see Iran's place within the broader project of Global South sociology, and particularly in relation to Middle Eastern sociology?

AK: You are right: this one-way flow is unhealthy for Iranian sociology. Iranian sociological associations could help by building more systematic, regular ties with counterparts in the region and beyond, benefiting both sides.

As Michael Burawoy has argued, national sociologies, like personal identities, are formed relationally and come to understand themselves through engagement with others. In his words: "We can no longer project the particular – whether it be the US or France, men or colonizers – as the universal. Yet nor can we fall back into a swamp of disconnected particularisms. Global sociology has to be built on a dialogue among particularisms."

Tweaking a remark by Michel Foucault, the future of sociology lies in spaces of encounter – where Europe and non-Europe, West and East, North and South, and the diverse parts within each meet and unsettle one another. Iranian sociology's contribution to that future depends on cultivating a discipline grounded in real, context-specific questions: neither trapped in imported theoretical models nor reduced to national exceptionalism. ■

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> Between Repression and Relevance:

Rethinking Sociology

Through the Lens of Iran

by **Nazanin Shahrokni**, Simon Fraser University, Canada and **Reyhaneh Javadi**, University of Alberta, Canada

This symposium on the sociology of Iran appears at a moment when knowledge production in the country is under extraordinary strain. Iranian sociology has long been animated by debates over its public role – whether it should serve as a critical voice, a diagnostic tool for social crises, or a mediator between state and society. Today, however, the terrain on which these debates unfold has narrowed dramatically. Political repression, the silencing of dissident academic voices across a fractured public sphere, economic precarity, global sanctions, and restrictive mobility and visa regimes have collectively thinned the institutional and intellectual infrastructures that sustain scholarly life. Universities operate under tightening political constraints, research funding is scarce, and international collaboration increasingly difficult. Yet Iranian sociology persists, sustained by scholars who continue to analyze, document, and engage profound transformations shaping their society.

As we prepared this symposium, the volatility of this landscape became impossible to ignore. Iran moved through a sequence of crises illustrating the precariousness of academic life and knowledge production. In June 2025, Israel launched a twelve-day war on Iran, striking military and civilian infrastructure across the country. Months later, the January 2026 uprisings erupted, only to be met with a brutal state crackdown that left thousands of civilians dead. The protests and the state's violent response were described by the Iranian Sociological Association as neither unprecedented nor unpredictable. The Association warned that normalized violence threatens social solidarity and human dignity. In this context, sociology becomes more – not less – necessary: a means of documenting crises, interpreting their structural roots, and sustaining public conversation about possible futures.

Yet even these constricted circumstances have been further undermined. As this symposium goes to press, a new round of coordinated U.S.–Israeli military strikes has again killed civilians across the country indiscriminately. Among the victims are more than 100 schoolgirls under the age of 12 killed in a devastating attack on an elementary school in the small southern city of Minab. The bombardments have further devastated infrastructure, compounding an already fragile institutional landscape and placing at risk the intellectual foundations painstakingly built and sustained by generations of Iranian social scientists.

Taken together, these developments capture the terrain on which sociology in Iran must operate. Scholars confront pressures from multiple directions at once – domestic repression that constrains intellectual autonomy and public debate, and external military and economic coercion that further destabilizes the institutions on which scholarly life depends. This symposium thus reflects not only on Iranian society but also on the conditions under which sociology itself must persist and speak.

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> Workers and infrastructures under repeated attack both in and outside Iran

The fragility of these conditions is perhaps most visible in the precarious physical existence of the Iranian Sociological Association. Its official office at the University of Tehran remains vulnerable to state-regulated scrutiny and exposes the Association to recurring pressures on its autonomy. Its stalled efforts to secure an independent and permanent site further illustrate a broader contraction of sociological and public life. These institutional uncertainties unfold alongside recurring waves of arrests targeting scholars, translators, and researchers undermining not only individuals but also the infrastructures that sustain critical thought. Under these conditions, sociological work often carries considerable personal risk. These pressures have deep historical roots: sociology has long been treated as ideologically suspect, repeatedly subjected to Islamization, disciplinary "cleansing," and persistent securitization.

These contradictions extend beyond Iran's borders. Iranian American and other diasporic scholars confront growing surveillance and mobility constraints in both Iran and Western academic institutions, navigating overlapping security logics that limit travel and collaborative work. The suspicion that marks sociology inside Iran increasingly shadows it outside Iran.

> Unexpected forms of resilience

Yet these pressures coexist with meaningful shifts. The 2025 election of Dr. Shirin Ahmadnia as the first woman president of the Iranian Sociological Association triggered many reactions, signaling both the belated recognition of women's sociological labor and the possibility of reconfiguring a historically male institutional space in a discipline now largely sustained by women students. That such an election occurred in the midst of institutional precarity is itself telling: even as structures weaken, new claims to visibility and authority emerge. In this tension, Iranian sociology has cultivated unexpected forms of resilience, as scholars and students carve out spaces for thought and debate across universities, private institutes, reading groups, and diaspora networks.

> Aims of this collection and a heuristic aid

This collection pursues two aims. It foregrounds both the intellectual vitality of Iranian sociology and the obstacles that contour its practice, and places these debates within wider disciplinary efforts to rethink sociology through a global frame attuned to uneven geographies of power. As a heuristic guide, we introduce a distinction between *sociology in Iran* and *sociology of Iran*; not as a geographic binary, but as a way of marking the epistemic, methodological, and political fissures that contour the field.

> Sociology in and sociology of: circulations across contexts

By *sociology in Iran*, we refer to the diverse professional, pedagogical, and research practices that take shape within Iran's universities, associations, private institutes, and informal intellectual networks. These include not only the production of sociological knowledge but also its circulation through a vibrant translation industry, public lectures, workshops, and semi-independent teaching spaces that sustain sociological engagement beyond formal institutions. These practices unfold under conditions of censorship, surveillance, ideological vetting, economic austerity, and international institutional gatekeeping, including language, reputation, and geopolitical barriers: constraints that render critical inquiry risky and uneven, yet also generate inventive strategies for collaboration, pedagogy, and public debate.

By *sociology of Iran*, we refer to the body of scholarship that seeks to understand Iran – its social formations, histories, and political economies – whether produced inside or outside the country. Much of this work circulates within global academic frameworks and is shaped by expectations of "legibility" to dominant disciplinary audiences. These pressures can sideline the concepts, priorities, and epistemic vocabularies that emerge from within Iran, even as they facilitate broader international visibility and debate.

Crucially, these orientations are not fixed domains or opposing categories. Ideas, archives, and methodological sensibilities circulate across borders despite political and institutional barriers. Scholars move between these positions over the course of their careers, and their work is shaped by shifting combinations of access, constraint, and audience.

> Under suspicion the world over and constrained by sanctions

Yet the asymmetries of visibility, resources, and institutional recognition remain significant. Researchers inside Iran contend with censorship, surveillance, and material precarity; those outside confront sanction regimes, visa restrictions, and the disciplining gaze of Western institutions. For many diasporic scholars, this means being rendered suspect in both locations – monitored in Iran and scrutinized in North America or Europe – in ways that materially affect what can be studied, written, and shared.

These fractures are further intensified by geopolitics. US sanctions have made it difficult, and at times impossible, for scholars based in Iran to participate in global academic networks, pay dues to professional associations, or attend conferences. Once a more robust hub of public debate, the Iranian Sociological Association now struggles

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to sustain even basic activities under economic strain and institutional pressure. These exclusions not only constrain Iranian sociology, they diminish global sociology as well, normalizing the absence of voices from sanctioned, surveilled, and structurally marginalized contexts.

> Epistemic, methodological, and institutional strains

The contributions to this symposium approach these dilemmas from multiple angles. Some examine the institutional conditions under which sociology is practiced; others probe foundational epistemic questions; and an interview with Abdolmohammad Kazemipur situates Iranian debates within wider theoretical reflections on particularism and universality.

Essays by Aghil Daghagheleh and Shiva Alinaqian trace the epistemic silences around ethnicity and gender, revealing how a dominant normative center – shaped by intersecting gender, ethnic, and class hierarchies – has long structured Iranian sociology, positioning peripheral and feminist perspectives as marginal or suspect. These exclusions are not only intellectual but institutional. As Esmail Khalili shows, the Iranian Sociological Association embodies an "institutionalization of non-institutionalization": a form of organizational life in which the aspiration to institutionalize sociology persists, even as the structures meant to sustain it are continually undermined. His analysis highlights the paradox that, while much of the field's energy is directed toward building durable institutional forms, these very efforts unfold within settings that constrain substantive autonomy and reproduce the limits they seek to overcome. A similar tension appears in work on privatization: Reyhaneh Javadi and Zohreh Bayatrizi demonstrate how the privatization of sociology, initially imagined as a partial remedy to the absence of academic autonomy, has instead deepened neoliberal logics of commodification, transforming education into a credentialing market rather than a public good.

The methodological struggles discussed in the roundtable "Under Constraint: Sociological Research on Iran" extend this analysis into the everyday practice of research. From fieldwork limitations and opaque ethics procedures to the threat of criminalization, participants show how politically charged environments – whether in Iran or in the diasporic and institutional settings in which Iran is studied – shape not only what can be examined but also how data can be collected, archived, and disseminated.

> Emerging transformative practices and innovative modes of engagement

Yet the symposium also highlights possibilities forged within and against constraint. Feminist scholars continue to produce incisive analyses of gender, religion, and state power despite marginalization within official institutions. Work on ethnicity pushes against nationalist orthodoxies, insisting that ethnic difference must be situated within the histories of state formation, sovereignty, and everyday resistance. The Iranian Sociological Association – despite its insecure premises and dependence on public universities or municipal goodwill – continues to provide platforms for conferences, publications, and public-facing events. Private and semi-private sociology classes generate hybrid pedagogical spaces that oscillate between resistance and neoliberal reproduction. Across these contexts, sociologists transform limitations into methodological and conceptual innovations.

Taken together, these contributions illuminate a terrain marked by complex, multi-scalar constraints alongside diverse and inventive modes of engagement. They show how the field is continually remade through the interplay of structural pressures and the resourceful practices scholars deploy to endure, adapt, and intervene.

> Towards a sociology *with* Iran

This symposium does not aim to map Iranian sociology comprehensively, but rather to situate these pressures within a broader set of disciplinary questions. The precarities facing sociology in/of Iran resonate with wider patterns across the Global South, where sociologists contend with authoritarian governance, market pressures, and unequal access to global circuits of knowledge. By assembling these interventions, we seek not only to document these challenges but also to invite readers to consider the conceptual and methodological insights they offer for the discipline more broadly. In this sense, the story of Iranian sociology becomes a story about sociology itself: its limits, its possibilities, and its ongoing struggle to remain accountable to the societies from which it emerges.

What we propose, therefore, is a gesture toward a *sociology with Iran*: a mode of engagement grounded in collaboration, reciprocity, and reflexivity. This approach does not resolve the tensions between sociology *in* and sociology *of* Iran, but it insists on working through and across them. It recognizes Iranian sociology as central – not peripheral – to rethinking the discipline's global trajectories and to challenging the exclusions that shape the production and circulation of sociological knowledge.

Such a stance resists treating Iranian sociology as a case or an object of external scrutiny. Instead, it affirms that the intellectual labor, institutional struggles, and methodological innovations of Iranian sociologists constitute vital contributions to sociology writ large. At a moment when Iranian voices are systematically excluded from international forums, the imperative to build a sociology *with* Iran is also an imperative of disciplinary justice. ■

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> The Iranian Sociological Association and the Institutionalization of Non-Institutionalization

by **Esmail Khalili**, former faculty member of the Institute for Civilizational and Socio-Cultural Studies, and Vice-President of the Iranian Sociological Association (2021-25), Iran

The Sixth Conference of Conceptual and Critical Reflections on Iranian Society, September 2025.
Credit: Mohadeseh Ghazvini.

Sociology entered Iran's higher education landscape via the establishment of the University of Tehran in 1934, where Gholamhossein Sadighi, a Sorbonne graduate, began teaching the discipline in 1940. In its formative decades, sociology in Iran was a small and elite field, shaped by French intellectual influences and tethered to the modernist nation-building project of the Pahlavi state. It remained a discipline cultivated largely within Tehran's academic elite, with limited institutional reach and a narrow professional community.

The 1979 Revolution and the subsequent Cultural Revolution of 1980–1983 brought both rupture and expansion. The new Islamic Republic radically restructured the university system, expelling faculty deemed ideologically suspect, closing universities for reorganization, and embedding ideological vetting into every stage of academic life. Sociology – like other social sciences – was subjected to intense scrutiny, with entire intellectual currents purged and syllabi rewritten to reflect Islamic and revolutionary values.

Paradoxically, the post-war period of reconstruction following the end of the Iran–Iraq War in the late 1980s and 1990s saw a rapid expansion of higher education and a dramatic increase in sociology enrollments. The field's institutional growth, however, was deeply embedded in the rentier state's bureaucratic and ideological apparatus. Academic promotions, research funding, and departmental appointments were governed less by intellectual autonomy or scholarly merit than by political loyalty, personal networks, and bureaucratic compliance. While the sheer number of sociology departments and students increased, the quality of intellectual life was shaped by the tension between formal expansion and the constraints of ideological control.

> A varied bureaucratically compliant mainstream and a diverse academic periphery

Within this post-revolutionary landscape, Iranian sociology became increasingly differentiated. The interplay of ideological screening, bureaucratic formalism, and the prestige economy of the rentier university produced a profession in which scholars occupied different – and sometimes sharply divergent – positions. Some entered the field through rentier channels tied to formal ideology, leveraging political loyalty into managerial positions within oligarchic academic networks. Others, less ideologically committed, nonetheless assumed bureaucratic roles out of pragmatic interest, seeking security and advancement within the system's existing rules.

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There were also staunch ideologues – whether religious, leftist, or nationalist – who positioned themselves outside the university mainstream, focusing on political assertion rather than sustained empirical inquiry. Beyond the academic core, independent researchers, many of them expelled in the purges of the 1980s, continued to produce works of lasting intellectual value despite lacking formal affiliations.

The "university periphery" included those employed in research institutes or scientific bodies, who often engaged broader audiences through public lectures, publications, and online forums. A younger cohort of extra-university scholars emerged as well – some excluded from academia by regulation, others avoiding it by choice – who remained in dialogue with critical global intellectual currents. The Iranian diaspora encompassed two distinct groups: those trained in Iran but unable to return due to political prohibitions, and those born or raised abroad whose scholarship nonetheless engaged deeply with Iranian society. Finally, there were "identity seekers": graduates for whom sociology served less as a sustained intellectual vocation than as a means of personal or symbolic affiliation, offering recognition, status, or a sense of belonging rather than ongoing scholarly contribution.

> Legacies

This layered and fragmented professional terrain predated the formation of the Iranian Sociological Association but decisively shaped its culture and internal politics. The coexistence of such diverse orientations ranging from bureaucratic loyalty to radical independence, from global intellectual engagement to purely personal identification, ensured that the Iranian Sociological Association's institutional life would be characterized by both pluralism and tension.

These legacies set the stage for what might be called the institutionalization of non-institutionalization: a professional culture where the appearance of scholarly vitality often outweighs the substantive production of knowledge.

> Between form and substance

Measured against formal benchmarks, the Iranian Sociological Association has made visible strides toward institutionalization: it has grown in membership, expanded its annual conference, and increased its visibility within public debates. The original and decisive step toward formal professional organization had been taken in 1991, when seventeen Iranian sociologists, largely trained in Europe and the United States, founded the Iranian Sociological Association. During its formative phase, the Iranian Association developed a more structured internal organization. In addition to administrative functions, such as the evolving organization of its conferences and publications, it created working groups aligned with various subfields of sociology. Yet many of these groups have operated without a clearly defined focus or set of objectives.

What emerges here is a paradox that can be described as the institutionalization of non-institutionalization. Scientific associations often operate in ways that privilege form over substance: the performance of knowledge production through conferences, workshops, and meetings becomes the very measure of legitimacy, while the actual generation of new insights remains secondary. In this sense, heteronomy takes shape not only via dependence on external forces but also in the routinization of practices that simulate intellectual labor without necessarily producing tangible fruit.

> Consolidation followed by the entrenchment of convention

The years between 2000 and 2015 were a period of relative stability and consolidation, during which the Iranian Sociological Association acquired academic and social credibility. But the subsequent years brought a generational overhaul: during this period, many senior scholars stepped back from active participation, and newer entrants – often navigating a constrained academic environment – faced fewer avenues for systematic training and integration into professional networks. While quantitative growth continued, the association's intellectual core weakened. The institutional norms and routines established during the stabilization period became entrenched, forming an identity that had once been effective but has since grown resistant to change.

The Iranian Sociological Association's early organizational blueprint rested less on explicit planning than on tacit knowledge: the informal habits and assumptions of its founding members. Rather than developing structures tailored to Iranian realities, it largely copied the outward form of professional associations in Europe and the United States. This emulation gave the association the appearance of formal organization, but without the reflective adaptation or codified rules that could anchor a durable institutional identity. As a result, the association lacks foundational documents articulating its intellectual mission, ethical and scientific codes, or long-term vision. Debates on central issues for scholarly life – such as democracy, associational ethics, or the division of labor between working groups – remain underdeveloped.

The absence of codified norms has left the Iranian Sociological Association operating based on uncodified conventions and personalized decision-making. It is less a modern institution than a hybrid: formally organized but lacking the reflexive self-understanding that institutional durability requires. This "non-institutionalization within institutionalization" is visible in its democratic processes: members rarely engage in substantive deliberation about the asso-

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ciation's direction, and the Iranian Sociological Association is not widely recognized by its own members as a shared intellectual and organizational project.

> Prestige outweighs intellectual rigor and responsibility

At the same time, the association's internal life has been shaped by paradoxes. The Iranian Sociological Association reproduces the outward rituals of organizational life – conferences, elections, publications – without fully realizing the substantive goals of a scholarly association. Instead of fostering robust intellectual contestation around theories, methods, or research priorities, its competitive energies often gravitate toward questions of prestige, visibility, and identity. Activist and identity-seeking impulses have grown more visible in recent years, and while they have expanded the Association's public profile, they have sometimes overshadowed the task of building durable institutional capacity.

These dynamics play out across three intersecting axes of competition: ideological, prestige-based, and institutional. Ideological divides, once muted by the relative homogeneity of the early membership, have become more pronounced, often intersecting with activism and identity politics. Prestige-based competition reflects the broader academic culture in Iran, where leadership positions are sought more for symbolic capital than for intellectual responsibility. The institutional axis, meanwhile, remains underdeveloped: despite seminars and conferences, the Iranian Sociological Association shows little evidence of scientific competition – debates over theories, methodologies, or research agendas – that could drive the consolidation of a robust scholarly community.

These patterns are not simply internal but are reinforced by structural weaknesses in Iran's university system itself: uneven academic preparation before the presence of the association, limited mentoring within universities, and the dominance of rentier logics and oligarchic academic cliques. Taken together, they illuminate the paradox of an association that is formally present, publicly visible, and quantitatively expanding, yet still struggling to consolidate a durable intellectual and institutional foundation, leaving its future trajectory an open question.

> Future prospects

Amid the Iranian Sociological Association's institutional ambiguities, opportunities for transformation are beginning to surface. A small but growing cohort of critical scholars, often lacking the privileges of earlier generations, engages deeply with global critical thought, resists identity-driven prestige-seeking, and strives to construct scholarly selves independent of prevailing hegemonies. Their commitments, rooted in democratic practice, intellectual pluralism, and institutional reflexivity, remain marginal within the Association's dominant culture but nonetheless signal possible avenues of renewal.

For such currents to consolidate, several interdependent pillars are essential: democracy, to channel heterogeneity into deliberation rather than factionalism; pluralism, to ensure working groups reflect diverse orientations; operational autonomy, to allow those groups to set substantive agendas; and the continuity of periodic conferences, oriented around problem-centered research rather than identity-driven or prestige-based agendas. The gradual shift toward more problem-oriented conference papers suggests an opening for such change, with the potential to foster collaborations that extend beyond the event itself.

> The challenge ahead

The Iranian Sociological Association today reflects layered legacies: the elitist and foreign-influenced sociology of the pre-revolutionary period; the ideological ruptures and purges of the 1980s; the rentier-bureaucratic expansion of the post-war decades; and the increasingly fragmented intellectual culture of the present. This history has left the Iranian Sociological Association with both vitality and volatility: a broad membership base spanning bureaucratic loyalists, independent intellectuals, and globally engaged critical scholars, but without a codified self-understanding or culture of sustained democratic debate.

The challenge ahead is not numerical growth or public visibility, but the cultivation of habits, norms, and structures that enable the association to become more than the sum of its factions. In other words, the task is to move beyond the paradox of form without substance: to turn performance into practice, and appearance into genuine scholarly production. If the Iranian Sociological Association can anchor itself in pluralism, democratic deliberation, and intellectual autonomy, it might yet turn its heterogeneity into a source of collective strength. Without such a shift, it risks remaining an association in form but not in substance: an institution with the appearance of cohesion but the reality of fragmentation. The trajectory it chooses will define the next chapter of sociology's collective life in Iran. ■

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> Between Politics and Profits:

Private Sociology Classes in Iran

by **Reyhaneh Javadi** and **Zohreh Bayatrizi**, University of Alberta, Canada

The sign reads "The Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran." In this image from 2009, the former signage is resting in a corner of the faculty courtyard, leaning against a damaged gate. Credit: Reyhaneh Javadi.

External, domestic, and international political and economic forces have long shaped university teaching and research, often with both constructive and detrimental effects. In recent decades, underfunding, neoliberal funding models, and the politicization of teaching and research have forced universities in many countries to prioritize vocational training as well as research that is aligned with state or private sector priorities. On the educational front, micro-credentialism, MOOCs (massive open online courses), and certificate-based education are, at least in part, a response to these wider political–economic pressures, leading in turn to greater commodification of higher education, the weakening of formal classroom education, and the devaluation of many areas of education and inquiry.

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These broader trends sometimes subvert and other times reinforce pre-existing dynamics in local contexts. In the case of Iran, which we focus on here, political censorship, underfunding, and hiring policies favoring ideological loyalty over academic merit have long constrained the teaching of sociology. On the other hand, student-led activism has pushed for higher-quality education and the free exchange of ideas since the early twenty-first century. Students have organized reading groups on popular or banned subjects and formed private classes with politically-ostracized academics. Over time, private, fee-based courses have also emerged to address the quality gap in universities and offer alternative educational platforms.

This article explores private sociology courses in Iran, analyzing their origins, structure, participants, perceived quality, and broader political and academic implications. We argue that these classes illustrate the dual dynamics of commodification and resistance in academia. We have applied a combination of methods, including archival studies, web research, and semi-structured interviews with 28 students and instructors from eight private institutes offering sociology classes. Our study shows that, while some of these developments are peculiar to Iran, in some respects they align with broader shifts in higher education throughout the world, especially the commodification of knowledge. However, in the Iranian context, private sociology classes also function as a space of potential resistance to state-imposed constraints.

> Private classes: from reading circles to profiteering

Reading circles and lecture series have long existed in Iran. However, fee-based sociology courses mainly emerged in the private sector in the 2010s at educational institutes such as Porsesh and Rokhdad-i Tazeh (two prominent Tehran-based institutes). Academic associations, including the Iranian Sociology Association, have also begun offering fee-based courses. Courses offered on these platforms range from niche and trendy theoretical subjects (Phenomenology of Spirit, Derrida in Plato's Pharmacy) to applied methodologies (Discourse Analysis, NVivo Coding). The institutes exemplify a form of "shadow education," operating alongside formal institutions but shaped by different incentives and logics.

Many private courses are lecture-based, with limited participation and no syllabi, evaluations, or assignments. A few private institutes issue certificates, which are primarily used by PhD applicants to strengthen their applications. Course fees, which vary widely, and limited income from class recordings are the source of profit for these institutes. While financial incentives exist, private sociology institutes are not highly profitable; of the eight institutes we identified, two had gone bankrupt.

Not surprisingly, institutes prioritize low-cost, lecture-based, and popular topics. Initially, these were trendy theoretical topics that had a guaranteed audience among the intellectual stratum of major urban centers such as Tehran, which is home to several major universities and where intellectual circles have long flourished. But these classes have their critics, too. One of the interviewees mentioned how profit motives lead the private institutes to give a larger platform to niche Western theoretical debates: "These institutes set the agenda. They are powerful businesses and operate like merchants. And what is the merchandise? [Social] thought is the merchandise; thought is irrelevant to our social and economic situation." (Interviewee #5).

> Privatized subaltern counterpublics

These spaces function as what Fraser would call subaltern counterpublics: semi-autonomous forums where marginalized voices engage in critical discourse outside state control. Participants come from various academic backgrounds, and their motivations include academic exploration, political frustration, networking, and an escape from university pressures. Many see these classes as an intellectual refuge, particularly during the 2010s following the suppression of the 2009 Green Movement, which greatly affected universities. For politically outcast sociologists, private courses provide both academic engagement and financial sustenance, while university professors with a secure income also teach these classes, which they see as freer spaces to express critical views.

Despite requiring state permits, private institutes allow more open discussions than universities. Students enjoy the relaxed power dynamics, contrasting with rigid university hierarchies. Some see these institutes as sources of intellectual prestige, particularly the now-defunct Porsesh, which possessed considerable symbolic capital and elite social capital in its heyday. Private classes also attract students who seek learning opportunities with professors outside their universities.

Participants in private classes often criticize university sociology programs as ineffective, leading them to seek alternatives. While private classes offer more engagement, opinions on quality vary. Some value specialized knowledge, while others feel the courses merely commercialize intellectualism, providing little that is not publicly accessible. Critics see the risk of commodifying thought itself, turning complex theoretical work into marketable content for individual consumption.

Many private classes offer an intellectual space for students seeking deeper theoretical engagement beyond limited university curricula, though critics argue they often glorify Western thought without addressing its relevance to the Iranian context. One interviewee likened the experi-

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ence to spiritual catharsis, where participants feel intellectually enriched without substantive learning. That interviewee defended official university education, arguing that it exposes students to social research in Iran, unlike the detached theoretical focus of many private classes.

> Impacts

Private classes offer a contested but vital alternative to Iran's restrictive academic environment. Some argue that these classes undermine universities by offering high-quality alternatives and, therefore, weaken student activism within academia. Others consider private classes essential to preserve independent sociological discourse in a state-controlled academic environment. They argue that universities are too rigid to change, making external intellectual spaces necessary. Some see private classes as a new, albeit flawed, platform for critical engagement: "If these institutes shut down, what is the alternative? The state will control everything" (Interviewee #23).

Private classes also expose deeper structural tensions within Iran's higher education system, particularly around the question of reform and institutional legitimacy. While some believe private competition pressures universities to improve, others worry that these institutes serve as distractions, allowing the state to avoid reform. For many, private sociology classes offer a contested but vital alternative to Iran's restrictive academic environment.

The socio-economic impact of private classes is also noteworthy. Decades of market-driven changes have reshaped Iran's higher education landscape, making access increasingly stratified. Admission to major, state-funded universities has become highly competitive and open to gaming by higher-income families. In addition, while these universities are supposed to offer free tuition, loopholes have increasingly been found and utilized to charge fees. The decline of educational quality in public universities and the rise of private, fee-based courses reinforce existing inequalities and further restrict access to quality education.

In many countries, micro-credentialism stems from corporate pressures on universities. In Iran, fee-based courses arise from political contestation and weaknesses in state-controlled academia. Initially, they functioned as intellectual spaces for theoretical debate, but they now include skill-based training and certificates that enhance academic and job prospects.

> Conclusion

Private sociology classes in Iran represent more than just a market adaptation; they occupy a contested space where commodification meets resistance. As a form of shadow education, they mirror neoliberal logics of credentialism while also creating counterpublic spaces that challenge state control and intellectual conformity. These privatized responses to systemic political constraints reflect broader shifts in Iranian higher education, where public institutions are weakened by underfunding, ideological interference, and rising inequality.

Future research should examine how the rise of social media as a site for intellectual engagement affects public knowledge dynamics, reconfiguring the boundaries between formal and informal education. Social media platforms might expand public sociology, extending critical discourse beyond the classroom, yet further commercialize knowledge through branding and content monetization. Whether this shift democratizes access to sociological insight or simply replicates market logic in a digital form remains an open question. ■

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> Ethnicity in Iran:

The Question Iranian Sociology Avoids

by **Aghil Daghagheleh**, University of Northern Colorado, USA

Ethnic diversity map of Iran showing major groups. Credit: Ethnic Groups in Iran, by Mapper 01, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Ethnicity in Iran is an elephant in the room – at least when it comes to mainstream sociology. Iran is home to several ethnic groups, including Persians, Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Baluchis. Persians constitute the majority in the central plateau, while other ethnic groups are concentrated in peripheral regions. These ethnic divisions intersect with religious differences, as Shia Islam is predominant in the center, and Sunni populations are more prevalent in peripheral regions. Even this brief description raises sociological questions, such as how such ethnic and religious differentiations and intersections shape social experiences. Yet, surprisingly, within the scholarship on Iran, these fragmentations are overlooked.

This is not to deny the growing body of literature on ethnicity, which I will explore later, but in general sociological studies, ethnicity is largely denied as an analytical category that differentiates social experiences in Iran. There are studies after studies being published examining a variety of themes, from the Iranian revolutions to women's struggles, social movements, subaltern politics, and other sociopolitical challenges the country faces. However, in much of this literature, the subject remains a singular "Iranian people," while ethnicity is muted.

The denial, on the one hand, stems from nationalist perspectives that portray Iran as a historically unified and homogeneous nation. Ethnicity, thus, is seen as a matter of cultural variations rather than a structuring dimension of social experience. This view often draws on narratives of a glorified ancient Iran as well as myths of Aryan descent to naturalize the national unity and reject the existence of national fragmentation. Within this framework, including ethnicity as an analytical axis for understanding everyday realities in the country is deemed irrelevant and even dangerous, as acknowledging ethnicity is feared to solidify such distinctions, fracturing what is imagined to be a unified whole.

Critical scholars are more likely to acknowledge the modern construction of the nation. The majority of them recognize that Iran is not exceptional in the global history of nation-state formation. However, within this tradition, ethnicity has received little attention as a structuring dimension of Iranian sociopolitical life, although some recent

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work has begun to address this gap. For instance, a recent paper by Kadivar et al. (2025) incorporates ethnicity as a dimension in analyzing recent waves of protest in Iran. Yet this approach remains marginal.

This analytical silence is not accidental but rooted in the positionality of Iranian sociology itself. The field has historically been shaped by Persian, Shia, and middle-class intellectual traditions. This tradition tends to equate the nation with the culture, language, and historical experience of Iran's central plateau, thereby overlooking the possibility of different social realities. This becomes more significant when we consider the intersection of ethnicity and religion, as large peripheral populations are both Sunni and non-Persian. It is also important to keep in mind that peripheral communities have experienced different trajectories in their relationship with the central Iranian state. The formation of the modern Iranian state, for example, that is widely celebrated as the birth of the modern Iranian nation and its territorial integrity in the center, is remembered in peripheral regions as the loss of autonomy. The same can be said about the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when the emphasis on Shiism triggered resistance and violent repression in the periphery. Of course, the list could go on and on. But the point remains that how these views from the edge, to use Iranian historian, Arash Khazeni's words, remain largely absent in this scholarship. The problem here is not that these perspectives are difficult to reconcile, nor is it simply a lack of personal willingness to see the social world through the eyes of those on the margins. The issue, rather, is that the view from the periphery remains largely unthinkable from a standpoint deeply entrenched in the center. Underlying all of this, of course, are deeper power relations, which I set aside for now.

> Ethnicity in Iran is usually framed as a pathology rather than as an axis of inequality

Despite this broader analytical silence, scholarship on ethnicity in Iran has developed as a narrow, separate, yet growing field. Within the country much of the research on ethnicity adopts a policy-oriented, pathological lens. Ethnicity is framed as a "problem," an existential threat to national integrity that must be monitored, contained, or neutralized. Researchers move across ethnic groups as if investigating risk zones. They constantly assess levels of national identity, evaluating how ethnic affiliations align with or diverge from national ones, and whether it constitutes a threat at this time.

Topics such as separatism, national cohesion, and ethnocentrism (*qawmgerayi*) dominate the field. Some studies deny the very existence of ethnicity in Iran, portraying it as a myth manufactured by elites or foreign actors intent on destabilizing the nation. Others treat it as an unfolding crisis: a latent threat to sovereignty, a "security illness" (*bimaari-ye amniati*) to be diagnosed and treated, a flashpoint for future conflict, or a security challenge that should be managed. This is, indeed, a sociology that "sees like a state," to borrow James Scott's phrase, seeking to make ethnic populations legible and manageable for the purposes of control, rather than to understand them on their own terms.

Alongside this, a more critical and interpretive body of work has emerged, analyzing how ethnic policies have been shaped by broader state-building projects. Rather than framing ethnicity as a pathology to be managed, this scholarship situates ethnic identity within the historical processes of nation-building, coercive integration, and uneven development. Works in this tradition examine how state discourses and institutions have produced marginalization through mechanisms such as linguistic homogenization, the suppression of minority histories, and securitization of non-Persian communities. Some scholars have also highlighted forms of everyday resistance: how ethnic minorities negotiate, subvert, or contest dominant narratives of national identity. There is also a growing, though still limited, body of empirical research that has begun to explore ethnic disparities in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, raising the challenging yet still largely unanswered question of whether ethnicity functions as an axis of inequality in contemporary Iran.

> Ethnicity is entangled with long-standing struggles

Important gaps still remain. The first is conceptual: ethnicity remains elusive within the Iranian context, leading some scholars to substitute terms like "minority" to avoid political and theoretical tensions. "Minority" generally refers to numerical marginality or structural subordination, but is less concerned with contentious questions such as how to define an ethnic group, where to draw its boundaries, or how to avoid essentializing identities. This shift allows scholars to pursue what Rogers Brubaker calls "ethnicity without groupism" (as seen in Elling's work), which may enable analysis of marginalization without invoking collective identity claims or challenges to sovereignty.

Yet, the question persists: what does "ethnicity" – even when framed more cautiously as "minority" – actually mean in the Iranian context? This becomes especially more important when applying Western frameworks without sufficient critique, theories which often emphasize identity, cultural difference, or symbolic boundaries, but pay far less attention to the historical question of sovereignty. In Iran, ethnicity is not simply about cultural distinctiveness. It is entangled with long-standing struggles over state sovereignty, territorial control, and forced incorporation of peripheral regions. The country's major ethnic groups – Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and Turkmen – are concentrated in what is commonly called the "periphery": regions geographically distant from Tehran and the central

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plateau. These regions and their communities often had their histories of semi-autonomous rule and longstanding tensions with the central state: regions whose incorporation into the political body of the Iranian state entailed military campaigns, forced assimilation, and population control. Yet these histories are often excluded from contemporary analyses of ethnicity, making it difficult to grasp the full complexity of ethnic dynamics today.

> Integrating tribal histories into the sociology of ethnicity reveals how historical legacies shape current realities

To be sure, the state's expansion into the periphery has been documented – particularly in literature influenced by subaltern studies. These works trace state violence and local resistance, typically framed as "tribal politics." However, studies of tribal politics and ethnicity have remained siloed: the former relegated to history, the latter to the present. This division obscures how historical legacies shape current realities. Bridging this gap would open new conceptual horizons for ethnic studies in Iran.

A small but growing body of scholarship is beginning to do just that. Drawing on peripheral histories of state formation, these works question the nature of the Iranian state itself. They examine episodes of forced displacement, cultural erasure, and state violence, arguing that state formation involved not just modernization but also logics of colonial domination. From this view, Iran's expansion into its ethnically distinct peripheries resembles a settler colonial project, and resistance to it constitutes decolonial praxis. This reframing unsettles dominant paradigms and demands the integration of tribal histories into the sociology of ethnicity.

> The censored need for empirical research which recognizes the multiplicity of lived experiences

Still, understanding ethnicity – regardless of theoretical framing – requires empirical grounding. It must be studied as a lived, negotiated, and situated phenomenon shaped by everyday practices and contested meanings. This calls for long-term ethnographic engagement. Yet such research is severely constrained in Iran by political and structural barriers. The securitization of ethnicity has created a climate of fear and self-censorship. Researchers and interlocutors alike risk accusations of separatism or acting against national security. Fieldwork becomes fraught, and institutions are unlikely to support research that challenges dominant narratives.

Centering ethnicity compels Iranian sociology to confront its exclusions, challenge dominant national imaginaries, and recognize the multiplicity of lived experiences. It also invites a more grounded understanding of the Iranian state – one shaped not only by revolution and ideology but by contested geographies, peripheral histories, and struggles over sovereignty. ■

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> Situated Lives, Contested Knowledge:

Reclaiming Gender Studies in Iran

by **Shiva Alinaqian**, independent researcher, Iran

Illustration by Yonesu.

During the eight years I taught courses on gender, ethnography, and narrative in Tehran's universities, my personal experience was continually entangled with institutional constraints and everyday politics. Being dismissed from my teaching position in 2022 – at the very moment the Woman, Life, Freedom (Jina) uprising unfolded – did not simply mark a personal rupture, it laid bare how the production of critical knowledge on gender in Iran is inseparable from power relations and forms of everyday resistance. In these conditions, even small pedagogical decisions – inviting students to write mini-ethnographies, foregrounding lived experience, or discussing global feminist theories alongside local narratives – become deeply political: they destabilize the institutional expectation that gender remain confined to legal–administrative or "safe" family policy frameworks.

The classroom, then, is not a protected academic space; it is a site where state disciplinary logics collide with students' desire to make sense of their own lives. My dismissal simply made visible what many instructors already knew: gender knowledge in Iran is precarious because it emerges from everyday life, not despite it.

> A chronology of gender studies in Iran: a discipline built from above

To understand the stakes of the teaching practices deployed in gender studies in Iran, one must situate them within the local history of the field. Gender studies did not arise in Iran in an open or autonomous academic environment, but developed in a context where the social sciences were already heavily constrained and politically monitored. The shadow of the Cultural Revolution – a restructuring of universities between 1980 and 1983 – still shapes academic life in Iran today. Departments in the humanities were scrutinized, curricula rewritten, and disciplines deemed potentially disruptive tightly regulated. Gender studies was born within this atmosphere of suspicion.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, the field was formally launched as a state project. Women's studies programs were introduced in major universities. From the outset, the aim was not to cultivate feminist critique but to regulate a domain of knowledge that was gaining visibility in society. As women's activism expanded and gender debates entered public life, the state moved to contain these energies by defining the terms through which "women's issues" could be studied. The discipline became a mechanism for channeling social concerns into legal–administrative and family-centered frameworks rather than allowing them to develop into critical inquiry.

The Islamic seminaries makes this tension even more visible. Feminist theories entered these theological spaces, but only within the confines of Islamic jurisprudence. They were mobilized not to rethink gender hierarchies but to reaffirm "natural roles," defend doctrinal boundaries, or address religious objections. In both universities and seminaries, feminist concepts circulated, but always under conditions that neutralized their transformative potential.

These institutional choices were reinforced by the broader epistemic order governing the social sciences. Positivism and classical quantitative methods dominated the institutional hierarchy, shaping what counted as legitimate knowledge and dismissing approaches grounded in lived experience or embodiment as "unscientific." This hierarchy aligned with the state's desire for a depoliticized, administratively useful discipline.

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> Amid vital shortcomings, grassroots knowledge and resistance from below opened opportunities

A foundational absence further shaped the discipline: the near-total exclusion of queer theory, deeply marginalized both legally and academically. This omission prevented gender studies from developing intersectional analyses that might connect gender to sexuality, desire, kinship, and non-normative embodiments. In parallel, the dominance of Anglophone liberal feminism – imported without the social base that generated it – narrowed the field toward individualized and middle-class concerns. While insufficient for addressing the structural conditions shaping the lives of minorities and subaltern women, this framework brought to the surface challenges within the middle-class context that remain unresolved: the persistent devaluation of reproductive and care work, the legal vulnerabilities, and the feminization of poverty. Together, these forces created a discipline present in name but restricted in substance; one that must now grapple simultaneously with its neglected constituencies and the enduring inequities within its presumed core.

Yet even as the academic field remained narrow, it resonated socially. Although women's studies never fully consolidated within the university, it became deeply intertwined with women's activism from the start of the twenty-first century onward. Through NGOs, charitable associations, literature circles, campaigns, and everyday acts of quiet resistance, women generated their own forms of analysis and critique. These grassroots forms of knowledge existed in tension with the academic structures created from above.

This history produced a discipline shaped by two opposing forces: regulation from above and resistance from below. This dual dynamic – state control and feminist innovation – has defined the trajectory of gender studies in Iran and continues to open opportunities to rethink the very boundaries of social knowledge.

> From regulation to reclamation: the remaking of gender studies in Iran

Against the institutional constraints that have long structured gender studies in Iran, feminist scholars, students, and activists have steadily worked – often quietly, often at personal risk – to reclaim the very intellectual space from which they were excluded. In my own classrooms, this resistance became visible in the assignments students chose to write: accounts of care work, intimacy, mobility, and the small regulations that shape gendered life. These were not merely exercises; they were insurgent forms of knowledge that pushed back against the domestication of the field.

Outside the university, women's rights activists, NGO organizers, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluchi feminists, migrant women, and countless others forged analytical frameworks grounded in lived struggle rather than state-sanctioned curricula. This long-standing work laid the groundwork for the profound shift that followed the Jina uprising.

Originating in Iranian Kurdistan, the Jina moment made legible a new feminist consciousness: intersectional, decolonial, and transnational in orientation. It drew from decades of organizing among Kurdish, Baluchi, Arab, and migrant women who had long confronted intersecting regimes of patriarchy, militarism, ethnic marginalization, and economic dispossession. Their struggles provincialized Tehran-centered feminism and revealed how gender is inseparable from ethnicity, class, violence, and coloniality.

This emergent feminist consciousness is grounded locally yet attentive to global circuits of violence and solidarity. It recognizes that the struggles in Rojhelat and Sistan–Baluchestan resonate with those in Palestine and Afghanistan, and that the demand for life and dignity is always transnational. It challenges gender studies to break from its state-shaped origins and rebuild itself around solidarities from below, around the knowledge that emerges from bodies, communities, and everyday survival.

> The need to enact a sociology grounded in lived experience and committed to collective transformation

In this light, my dismissal was not an isolated event but a symptom of the broader struggle over who gets to produce knowledge and what forms of knowledge are allowed to exist. It is a reminder that reclaiming gender studies requires us to bring center stage precisely the forms of narrative, care, and grounded inquiry that have long been treated as peripheral.

From here, feminist praxis appears not as an alternative to gender studies but as its reorientation. It advances a regional ethics of solidarity that holds minority, Afghan, and Palestinian struggles together without producing hierarchies of suffering. In this landscape, gender studies emerges as a connective practice of listening, translation, and making marginalized lifeworlds visible: an epistemology that is situated yet transversal; rooted in context yet able to move across disciplinary, national, and identity boundaries. Its future depends not on institutional recognition but on its ability to produce and enact a sociology for people, grounded in lived experience and committed to collective transformation. ■

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> Under Constraint: Sociological Research on Iran
A Roundtable

Credit: Hans-Peter Gauster, via Unsplash.

This roundtable brings together six sociologists working on Iran, situated within distinct academic fields and institutional contexts across varied geopolitical locations. While united by their disciplinary training in sociology, the contributors bring divergent positionalities shaped by their locations within and outside Iran, producing knowledge across national, linguistic, and institutional boundaries. The roundtable engages three key methodological questions probing the challenges, innovations, and ethical dilemmas of conducting sociological research on Iran. Though their research spans a range of topics, including urban life, educational policy, digital activism, and environmental justice, all the contributors share a commitment to grounded, critical, and reflexively engaged inquiry. Each navigates the complex terrain of researching Iranian society amid political restriction, epistemic erasure, institutional constraints, and global hierarchies of knowledge production. The contributors can be briefly described as follows.

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Nafiseh Azad is a social researcher based in Iran whose work focuses on gender and urban life through qualitative methodologies. **Maral Latifi**, an Iran-based researcher of urban marginality and social suffering, examines downward mobility in Tehran. **Mahbubeh Moghadam**, a PhD candidate at the University of Illinois (USA), draws on transnational feminist theory to study youth activism, aesthetics, and political subjectivity. **Fatemeh Moghadasi**, a scholar of education and social policy based in Iran, examines the privatization of education, child labor, and anti-poverty initiatives. **Ladan Rahbari**, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands), explores (digital) discourse and the politics of gender and resistance. **Reza Sohrabi**, a PhD candidate at Carleton University, Ottawa (Canada), investigates environmental politics and water scarcity.

Together, these scholars engage with three core issues: how to navigate the methodological constraints of studying Iran under conditions of surveillance and restricted access; what ethical frameworks guide their work amid political sensitivities and risk; and how global power dynamics shapes the conditions and hierarchies of knowledge production. These questions were posed by **Reyhaneh Javadi** and **Nazanin Shahrokni**, who framed the conversation and guided the dialogue.

Reyhaneh Javadi (RJ) and Nazanin Shahrokni (NS): Let us start with the challenges that shape the very possibility of research. What is one specific methodological obstacle you have encountered in conducting research on Iran, and how did you navigate or adapt to it? What broader insights does this experience offer about the practice of sociology in politically constrained or opaque contexts?

Nafiseh Azad: My recent research focuses on the intersection of women and urban life, using qualitative methods to explore women's lived experiences. Two persistent obstacles have shaped this work: limited access to data and the heightened political sensitivity surrounding women's issues in Iran.

Access to reliable data remains a major challenge across social research, especially in gender-related fields. Key statistics – such as those on self-immolation or honor killings – are often classified or inaccessible. By triangulating data from the Statistical Center of Iran and figures released by semi-governmental or private organizations, I have been able to extract partial insights despite these constraints.

The second obstacle stems from the widening gap between official and public culture in Iran, which has eroded both the possibility and infrastructure for independent national-level research. Independent institutes willing to engage with sensitive topics are few, but they offer crucial opportunities outside the university system. My most recent study on women's economic agency was conducted through one such institute.

Political sensitivities continue to impose thematic limitations: some topics remain off-limits. Nonetheless, by focusing on accessible populations and domains, and by innovating methodologically, I have been able to generate in-depth qualitative data with broader sociological implications. While public dissemination remains limited, especially outside academic journals, this approach has allowed me to sustain critical inquiry under restrictive conditions.

Fatemeh Moghadasi: Nafiseh's reflections on the difficulty of accessing reliable data on women's issues resonate with my own experience in researching social policymaking. In my work, the obstacles I've encountered are less about cultural taboos and more about deep-rooted institutional limitations that structure the field itself.

Social policymaking depends on sustained interaction between researchers and policymakers, yet in Iran, this relationship is notably weak. The dominance of abstract, philosophical approaches, coupled with minimal demand from policymakers for empirical research, has isolated researchers and severed the link between knowledge production and policy action. This disconnect has shaped my research on educational inequality and the privatization of public education, where I've repeatedly encountered methodological barriers.

First, there is the issue of access to micro-level data. To analyze educational inequality effectively, one needs data that reflects students' individual, familial, and environmental contexts. In Iran, such data is scarce, inconsistently reported, and typically available only at national or provincial levels. Formal mechanisms for accessing detailed data through institutions like the Ministry of Education are largely absent or ineffective. This pushes researchers to rely on informal channels and personal networks – methods that are not only unsustainable but ethically fraught.

Second, government control over survey data presents a significant obstacle. Since the 1990s, numerous large-scale national and smaller attitudinal surveys have been conducted, mostly funded by public institutions. Yet the resulting data remains inaccessible to independent researchers. This monopolization of field data contributes to a broader scarcity of reliable sources in Iranian social science.

Finally, access to the research field itself is increasingly restricted. Even when working with official permissions from ministries, efforts to conduct in-school observations, interviews, or other forms of data collection are often met with bureaucratic hurdles or suspicion. The educational environment is treated as a politically sensitive space,

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The National Library of Iran.
Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

making it difficult to carry out even basic empirical work. As a result, researchers are often forced to rely on documents or secondary analysis, limiting the scope and depth of qualitative inquiry.

These constraints not only shape what kinds of questions can be asked but also influence the very possibility of doing meaningful, evidence-based policy research in Iran.

Ladan Rahbari: Like Fatemeh, I have also struggled with inaccessible or incomplete data, but the institutional distance she describes takes on different contours when one is working from the diaspora and has no easy or safe access to the field. Conducting research from outside Iran adds an additional layer of complexity. I can give you an example of this from my work on digital discourses of resistance and dissent.

In one of my current projects, I am analyzing Farsi-language Twitter posts that circulated during and after the "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising in 2022. It took time for me to make sociological sense of the uprising and to feel ready to study it, especially as a researcher who feels proximity to the topic in a professional and personal sense, but is living far from the center of events, in the Netherlands.

My focus in this specific project has been on how Farsi-speaking users express their sentiments toward religion. A persistent methodological challenge that I have faced has been disentangling critiques of Islam as a faith from criticisms of the Islamic Republic as a political system. This is an analytical difficulty that may be familiar to many working on Iran and on popular political discourse on religion and religiosity. I have seen a tendency to overinterpret the data in favor of one of the two sides of the spectrum.

If I had direct access to the field, I would complement discourse analysis with a large-scale qualitative–quantitative survey to clarify intents and interpretations further. I know that remote surveys are technically possible but conducting them using online tools from another country introduces numerous complications and biases. Additionally, as scholars of Iran know quite well, the diaspora cannot serve as a reliable proxy for the broader Iranian population. So, I only have imperfect tools to work with.

There are of course ways to overcome these challenges. I have to, for instance, rely on alternative methods such as making use of co-readers and collaborative interpretation as well as member-checking techniques. But even so, I still believe that these strategies, valuable as they are, cannot

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fully substitute for the rigor and reach of a solid and representative survey done in Iran. A targeted remote member-checking method can probably help to some extent; but it cannot fully resolve interpretive ambiguities. This is only one recent example of the many methodological limitations and challenges I must recognize and work through in my research.

Mahbubeh Moghadam: Echoing Ladan's concerns about distance from the field and the constraints imposed by travel restrictions, I've had to redefine what it means to "be in the field." One of the most significant methodological challenges I've faced in researching the role of Gen Z in the Woman, Life, Freedom movement has been my inability to travel to Iran and conduct in-person fieldwork. This limitation has restricted access to everyday interactions and informal conversations that are crucial for ethnographic research.

The movement catalyzed youth-led protests across Iran against gender-based violence and authoritarian rule. Rather than abandoning the topic, I turned to digital ethnography. I have been training myself in this method and have begun systematically collecting data from social media platforms, news coverage, and digital archives. To enrich this digital approach, I've been building a trust network through snowball sampling – conducting online interviews and informal conversations with individuals currently in Iran, as well as those who have recently left the country. I also speak regularly with people who travel between Iran and the U.S., asking them targeted questions and gathering their observations. Friends in Iran help me access recent research and academic dissertations.

Although the project is still in its early stages, this adaptive, multi-source strategy has enabled me to gather insights into the everyday lives and perspectives of the local actors I study, offering a more grounded and nuanced understanding of the field despite physical absence.

Reza Sohrabi: Mahbubeh's turn to digital ethnography and anecdotal accounts reminds me how much access today hinges not only on relationships with participants, but with methods themselves. In my case, trust-building was not merely a prerequisite to research, it became a method in its own right.

My PhD research focuses on water scarcity and social movements in Iran. It is a comparative study of Isfahan and Khuzestan provinces, where I interview scholars, activists, and farmers about the politics of water. Fieldwork constraints have been especially pronounced, particularly when it comes to recruiting participants.

Like Mahbubeh, studying from abroad has made trust-building crucial to securing interviews. To navigate this, I relied heavily on snowball sampling: soliciting suggestions and recommendations without indicating whether I would follow up, in order to protect anonymity. I also found community engagement to be a particularly effective strategy. Establishing open communication with participants before the interview helped convey the academic nature and purpose of my project. Once they understood the significance of their contributions, many became eager to participate.

In politically sensitive contexts, research requires locally grounded approaches: ones that depend on participants' trust in the researcher and their belief in the value of the project. For me, communication and community engagement emerged not just as tools for access, but as central components of doing research ethically and effectively under constraint.

Maral Latifi: What Reza highlights about the fragility of trust in sensitive research settings is absolutely vital. My doctoral dissertation examined the downward mobility of middle-income groups in Tehran through a Bourdieusian framework, focusing on the entanglement between social suffering and spatial displacement under Iran's recent economic crises. Empirically, the research drew on 32 interviews with individuals navigating this trajectory, with 25 forming the analytic core. Two central methodological challenges necessitated a reflexive, relational Bourdieusian approach. First, participants were asked to articulate chronic and sedimented forms of social suffering – what Bourdieu called *misère du monde* – that unfolded over many years. Second, these experiences were closely tied to processes of pauperization, which, for the middle classes, carry particular stigma.

This dual bind risked reducing interviews to formulaic exchanges or, more critically, reproducing structural violence within the research encounter itself. A careful, trust-based methodology was essential to ethically engage with these narratives of loss and displacement.

RJ & NS: What emerges from your reflections is that method is never merely a matter of technique, it is shaped by the conditions in which research unfolds: where access is precarious, information is withheld, and the field itself remains unstable. Given these conditions, in your work on Iran, how have you navigated the ethical tensions related to risk, whether for yourself, your interlocutors, or your data? What ethical principles have guided your decisions, and in what ways might they complicate or challenge dominant frameworks of research ethics?

Ladan Rahbari: Like many sociologists working on Iran, I continuously grapple with complex questions of safety and confidentiality for my interlocutors, and also for myself and other researchers working with or for me. But one of the most consequential challenges I have recently faced came not from the field of study itself, or from the Iranian state, but from my own university's ethics review process.

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After applying and securing funding for the project that I described in my earlier comment, my university's ethics board flagged it as high-risk, based on the assumption that any contact with Iranian people could trigger the Iranian state's (remote) surveillance apparatus to target me, my institution, and also the online social media users I study. I acknowledge that these concerns were not entirely unfounded, and I also certainly share some of them. But the protocols proposed to mitigate these safety issues were not well informed and would have rendered the research extremely difficult or nearly impossible.

One recommendation was to obtain informed consent from all social media users in the rather large dataset that I wanted to work with. This would be an unfeasible task and would also be counterproductive as it would potentially further endanger those users because of coming in direct contact with me. Another was to conduct all analysis in a hyper-securitized digital environment and immediately delete the data, which would have prevented me from revisiting the material or verifying my findings.

After months of negotiating, I eventually received approval to go ahead. This was a long process that delayed the start of the project by months. After going through the process, I was truly disheartened and chose not to collect new data. Instead, I used an existing dataset compiled by a colleague at another university in the Netherlands who had already secured ethical approval from their university. I was very lucky such a dataset already existed.

I share this story to show how (Western) institutional ethics frameworks can themselves end up functioning as tools of securitization, especially when dealing with research centered on the so-called non-Western contexts perceived as "sensitive" and "high-risk" areas. Such processes, even though well-intentioned, risk curtailing academic freedom, particularly for migrant and diasporic scholars like me, by leading to self-censorship or discouraging scholars to the point that they end up changing research topics or strategies altogether.

Mahbubeh Moghadam: The institutional securitization Ladan describes resonates with a related ethical bind I often face in my own work. In my research on Gen Z's digital activism in Iran, ethical tensions frequently arise around visibility and risk.

One notable case involved a teenage girl whose public Instagram content became emblematic during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. Although her posts were widely shared, I chose not to cite them directly. Instead, I anonymized and paraphrased her content, incorporating it into composite narratives to prevent re-identification. I've consistently prioritized participant safety and consent over the perceived "completeness" of data. While some ethics frameworks regard public data as neutral, I cannot ignore the dangers of hypervisibility in such a politically sensitive context.

After the crackdown on the movement, the girl deleted many of her posts and stories. The tone of her profile changed noticeably; her Instagram highlights and Telegram posts shifted from sociopolitical commentary to humor and trivia. This shift underscored the real risks of exposure.

Additional ethical concerns surfaced during online interviews with participants inside Iran. I used encrypted platforms like Signal, avoided recording conversations unless explicitly permitted, and ensured full anonymity. These practices are not just technical choices but ethical commitments shaped by the precarious conditions in which both researchers and participants operate.

Reza Sohrabi: Mahbubeh's attention to visibility brings to mind a broader tension many of us face: how to preserve the integrity of participants' narratives without increasing their vulnerability. In my research, I addressed this ethical challenge through a flexible, participant-centered approach that allowed individuals to assess and shape the interview process as it unfolded.

Conducting anonymous interviews proved essential. It enabled participants to speak more freely, without fear of repercussions. Anonymity significantly reduced the anxiety many felt while articulating their views. In one instance, an activist shared a detailed critique of government water management policies. Although the conversation was open, the participant later expressed concern about whether their comments might be traceable. After discussing the risks, they felt reassured that their opinion was not identifiable, and gave consent to include it.

Still, I took further steps to enhance anonymity, omitting specific temporal and geographic references to minimize the risk of exposure. This allowed me to retain the substance of the narrative while protecting the participant's identity.

This experience underscored for me that ethical research, especially in politically sensitive settings, requires not only attentiveness to the ethics of visibility but also a commitment to participant safety as integral to the work itself. Flexibility and responsiveness to participants' concerns were key to fostering a space of trust, and ultimately, to making the research possible.

Maral Latifi: Like Reza, I've come to understand ethics not as a checklist but as an ongoing relationship. For me, this required rethinking not only anonymity but also the very grammar of engagement with participants. Ethically resisting the objectification of participants meant shifting from an externalizing "you" to a collective, empathetic "we."

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Following Bourdieu's approach in *The Weight of the World*, I recruited participants through trusted social networks – either direct acquaintances or referrals. This strategy reduced symbolic distance and created the conditions for sharing stigmatized experiences. It was further reinforced by my own biographical proximity, having experienced forms of spatial demotion myself. These affinities helped foster mutual understanding and enabled more nuanced interpretation.

Yet the very conditions that facilitated trust and access also complicated anonymization and demanded methodological adaptation. For example, I opted to forgo biographical portraiture – which might have better captured the relational depth of participants' suffering – in favor of thematic analysis, which offered greater protection of identity, even if at the expense of narrative coherence.

Fatemeh Moghadasi: Maral's point about proximity and risk highlights a dilemma I often face: the very trust and intimacy that underpin ethical research can come into conflict with state institutions that view critical inquiry as a political threat. While academia offers researchers a degree of freedom in selecting topics and methods, that freedom quickly narrows when research moves beyond academic boundaries – whether through collaboration with state institutions or the public dissemination of findings. These limitations are not merely technical or bureaucratic; they are deeply ethical and ideological.

In the field of educational policymaking, critique is generally tolerated when directed at managerial inefficiencies or executive shortcomings. But when it challenges deeper issues – such as the ideological underpinnings of the education system, the normative values embedded in schools, or questions of linguistic, cultural, and political justice – it often provokes responses rooted not in scholarly engagement but in ideological vigilance or political control.

In such an environment, structural critique is rarely welcomed. It is frequently dismissed as "political maneuvering" or accused of "undermining national institutions." These conditions place the researcher in a difficult ethical position, requiring constant negotiation between scientific integrity, field access, and personal or professional safety, particularly in justice-oriented research, which entails its own distinct risks and complexities.

Nafiseh Azad: Fatemeh's reflections on the politicization of research freedom resonate with my work in women's studies, where concerns around safety and consent shape every stage of the process. Given my reliance on ethnographic methods and purposive sampling, anonymity is essential; especially in research on women. I use a range of techniques to safeguard participants, including anonymized data storage, removal of identifying details, and deleting interviews after the research is completed. Participants can withdraw their interviews at any point – fully or partially – and may request that I stop recording at any time. I take every possible measure to ensure their safety. I avoid sharing interviews via messaging apps or email and only share them with other members of the research team when participants give explicit consent.

In some cases, I have declined to submit research to commissioning bodies when participants did not agree to share original interviews. In others, I've assumed full responsibility for my written analysis to avoid revealing the names or locations of participating women. These precautions are even more challenging outside the university system, where institutional protections and resources are limited.

Perhaps the most painful and unavoidable aspect of this work is that I sometimes abandon entire research areas preemptively – when I feel I cannot ensure the safety of the data, that of the participants, or my own safety in disseminating the findings.

RJ & NS: And yet these ethical and methodological tensions are not merely local, they are embedded in global power structures and shaped by the politics of knowledge. From which questions can be asked to whose narratives are deemed credible, power determines what counts as research. How do global dynamics, such as sanctions, diaspora positionality, or Western academic expectations, shape the production, circulation, and reception of sociological knowledge on Iran?

Maral Latifi: A further, less visible impediment to sociological knowledge production in Iran is the prevailing demand that sociological scholarship address immediate political developments or predict final results of collective protests. This imperative, rooted in the discourse of "society-in-transition," subtly discourages foundational research into the dynamics of social space. Ironically, such pressures constrain the emergence of an Iranian sociology capable of offering a nuanced elucidation of the present and imagining possible social futures.

Fatemeh Moghadasi: Building on Maral's point, I've found that even efforts to pursue long-term or foundational research are often blocked by structural funding constraints. One major obstacle to sociological research in Iran is the reliance of universities and research centers on commissioned projects, usually funded by government or semi-government institutions. These projects follow a "request and response" model, leaving little room for independent or long-term inquiry.

In my experience, I've drafted proposals on pressing social issues that were never realized due to a lack of

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funding. This not only wastes research potential but also undermines motivation and diminishes the quality of knowledge production.

Internationally, Iran is rarely prioritized as a case study in social policymaking. Research agendas in MENA-focused institutions tend to align with the interests of international bodies or favor cases with easier access to data. As a result, Iranian issues are often sidelined or reduced to geopolitical and security frames.

This gap is evident in the literature on education privatization. Countries like Afghanistan and Iraq – despite facing crises – are frequently analyzed, while Iran, despite undergoing significant policy shifts, remains largely absent. This is partly due to the lack of a transparent data system and the absence of sustained international collaborations, which make Iran difficult to position as an "analyzable" subject within transnational research frameworks.

Reza Sohrabi: Expanding on Fatemeh's point about structural exclusions, I want to highlight how international sanctions reshape even the most basic logistics of academic research, particularly for scholars in the diaspora. US economic sanctions on Iran impact researchers in multiple ways. During fieldwork, I was unable to provide financial support or send gifts to participants, as international transactions, including gift cards, were blocked.

I also applied for an external research grant, but my application was never assessed because my fieldwork was based in Iran. The justification cited a prohibition on research in "war zones" – a designation that included Iran, despite the absence of active conflict in recent years. This reflects how broader militarized imaginaries of the Middle East and the Global South shape Western classifications, misrepresenting realities on the ground and excluding diaspora scholars from essential resources.

Such experiences reveal the distinct limitations faced by researchers working from the diaspora, including restricted mobility, a lack of funding access, and structural academic hurdles not encountered by those working in less-politicized contexts.

Nafiseh Azad: The isolation Reza refers to is not only material, it is deeply intellectual. Speaking from within Iran, I experience a suffocating isolation shaped by both international sanctions and domestic restrictions. Sanctions have limited access to academic resources, training programs, and essential research tools. Participation in international conferences is often blocked by visa denials, and in recent years, it has become virtually impossible. These barriers are compounded by the Iranian government's own restrictions on attending international events, leading to a pervasive isolation of Iranian scholars; an isolation that is not emerging, but already entrenched.

Even more troubling, however, are the expectations and biases of Western academic institutions, which often obscure the complexities and diversity of Iranian society, especially in relation to women. Stereotypical views of Middle Eastern Muslim women continue to shape the perceptions of journal reviewers and editors. One of my recent articles was rejected by a prominent gender studies journal because the findings were deemed incomprehensible or unacceptable. I believe this stemmed from a dissonance between my research and dominant Western narratives about Muslim women. Expressions of agency, resistance, or alternative approaches to family and motherhood are frequently questioned at a fundamental level.

Throughout the review process, I increasingly felt treated not as a researcher but as a data collector. In another article – eventually published after extensive revisions – I had the distinct impression that reviewers, despite never having been to Iran, felt they understood Iranian women better than I did. Attempts to represent women in all their diversity and transformation often encounter serious resistance in global academic spaces. This issue is even more pronounced in conference settings, where similar dynamics unfold. Unfortunately, some Iranian scholars in Western institutions reinforce these dynamics, assessing their peers' work through the same exoticizing lens. Yet what emerges from deep fieldwork are women whose lives and choices defy these reductive narratives.

Ladan Rahbari: I want to shift the focus to the politics of voice and credibility in diasporic spaces, particularly within the Western academy. As an academic who is part of the vast Iranian diaspora and is somewhat empowered by institutional resources, I am both shielded from the Iranian state's oppression and enjoy a degree of support that not everybody has access to. Although I am not safe from remote surveillance or harassment, I face other forms of gatekeeping, both within academic institutions and sadly, also in diasporic Iranian circles.

I have also noticed that certain types of voices, especially those perceived as West-leaning secular (sometimes self-proclaimed) experts, are more easily embraced in Western contexts. They are also the ones which tend to reproduce colonial or orientalist narratives of Western saviorism. In such an environment, it is difficult to be heard when certain and sometimes dominant diasporic narratives have already shaped the frameworks accepted or favored.

This makes it even more important to produce grounded and empirical scholarship. Yet, as I mentioned in my earlier comment, hyper-securitized research protocols pose serious obstacles, not only to data collection and handling but to the broader process of knowledge production. I can also relate to what Nafiseh says about how institutions work within already established epistemological

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paradigms and are not so flexible when it comes to alternative knowledge or forms of knowledge-making. What I think we need to do is to reject the approach that sees us as data mines to prove already established Western theories: the Iranian context has its own specificities and is best knowable through a combination of knowledge repertoires that are local, regional and yes, also sometimes transnational. What we need most now is rigorous, nuanced research that resists reductive, imported, repeated and often tired framings.

I say all of this, but I also know that this is not easy. There are institutional and neoliberal pressures to simplify political and social realities in Iran. And not all of it can be blamed on the structures. Academics are, like everyone else, part of a benefit-driven capitalist market, and sometimes making difficult "choices" is costly. Navigating these challenges, alongside methodological and ethical constraints, disciplinary norms, diaspora politics, and persistent gatekeeping is really and truly exhausting. For a lot of (especially early-career) academics, who are trying to survive in the brutal job market, such epistemological decisions are entangled with one's personal life. As we sociologists love to say: it's complicated.

Mahbubeh Moghadam: Ladan's reflection on exhaustion deeply resonates with me. In my own work, I've seen how dominant epistemologies narrow what counts as valuable knowledge. I ground my research in transnational feminist and anti-colonial approaches, treating global power dynamics not as external constraints but as central to how knowledge on Iran is produced, circulated, and received.

As a diasporic scholar, I benefit from forms of visibility – platforms, language access, and publication opportunities – often denied to those whose lives and resistance I study. Yet sanctions, US–Iran tensions, censorship, and surveillance continue to limit my access to archives, fieldwork, and collaboration with scholars in Iran.

At the same time, Western academia tends to privilege liberal and institutional forms of knowledge – centered on legality, policy, or reform – while overlooking the political significance of affect, memory, aesthetics, and everyday resistance. My work insists that these less legible practices are politically vital. This is not just a theoretical stance, but a reflection of Iran's specific conditions and the creative strategies of struggle that arise within them.

It is also an ethical commitment to resist extractive frameworks and center forms of knowing rooted in embodied experience. This is a feminist refusal to render research legible only on terms defined by the Global North. ■

> The Political and Social Economy of Labor Migration

by **Karen Shire**, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, **Heidi Gottfried**, Wayne State University and Russell Sage Foundation, USA, and **Rina Agarwala**, John Hopkins University, USA

Stamps from an art exhibit. Credit: Karen Shire.

For centuries, migration has toggled between being seen as an opportunity for some and a curse for others. From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, migration from Europe to South and Southeast Asia, North and South America, and Africa offered new resources, land, and opportunity to European immigrants. But these same migration flows meant conquest, land dispossession, disease, violence, and (in some cases) total cultural annihilation for native populations in the receiving countries. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, forced migration from Africa and South Asia to other parts of Africa, Asia, and especially the Americas brought wealth to settlers in the receiving nations, but inhumane violence and degradation to the migrants themselves, not to mention to generations of those migrants' descendants. Today, we are witnessing another version of the same conundrum. For billions of people, migration offers the only chance for economic survival and/or physical safety. Yet these same migration flows are creating deep insecurities and angst for billions of natives. These tensions are leading country after country into right-wing coalitions fueled by hatred. It is time we offered a set of new analytical lenses to examine the migration question, and sociologists are well poised to take on this challenge.

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This special section advances sociological analyses of the political and social economy of labor migration by focusing on states, policies, actors, and the challenges posed to persons who seek to improve their livelihoods through mobility, both internally and across national borders. The articles that follow build on contributions originally presented at the conference on the "International Political Economy of Migrant Labor" sponsored by the International Sociological Association's Research Committee on Economy and Society (RC02) and the World Society Foundation at the University of Duisburg-Essen in the summer of 2024. They address sending states and policies of out-migration; capital for foreign investment; the complex intersections of rural-to-urban and cross-border migration, especially from and to the Global South; comparisons of sending and receiving states; educated and low-wage migration; and how all these shape migrants' expectations and life trajectories. Countries featured span a wide sociopolitical geography, revealing complex intraregional and transnational migration flows across the world system.

> Analyzing migration-development regimes

An important innovation in the sociological analysis of migration is the shift to conceptualize the role and consequences of labor migration for sending states where economic, social, and political transformation becomes tied to migration in what Agarwala calls the "migration-development regime." As summarized in the lead article by Agarwala, three questions inform the study of migration-development regimes in India, where Agarwala originally developed the concept, and in other contexts in the developing world: first, who benefits from migration; second, what are the consequences of migration; and third, how the nexus between migration and development is constantly changing.

Exposing who benefits from migration may contribute to positively shaping public opinion about and support for migration. Scrutinizing the consequences of migration, especially in relation to social class hierarchies and elite coalitions, can yield insights into migration as a model of growth and its effects on social protections. Finally, studying how migration-development regimes change over time can yield alternative imaginaries of how migration can benefit social development.

In studying out-migration from India to lower-wage sectors abroad, Kumar examines whether bilateral agreements existed between sending and receiving states, a practice promising, at least nominally, to ensure safe and orderly migration. Kumar finds that these agreements fail to adequately consider the health and safety of Indian out-migrants, in part because they neglect to consult and enable the participation of migrant organizations and labor unions in developing protections. For the Indian state, out-migration serves multiple purposes, promoting economic development, while securing political legitimacy both at home and abroad, and achieving consent for a new neoliberal habitus.

> Domestic and care labor migration

Sociological work on migrant mobilities has long traced the consequences of care migration, both for communities of origin left with care gaps, and for social inequalities in destinations where exploitative working conditions are rooted in global social and ethnic hierarchies. The series of papers on domestic and care migration engages in transnational comparisons of mobilities within the Global South and comparisons between rural-to-urban and cross-border migrations.

Vega-Salazar, Moreno, Castiblanco-Moreno and Pineda show how South-to-South mobilities of women in Latin America deviate systematically from South-to-North flows, which have dominated research on care migration. Global care chains are not simple transfer systems of reproductive labor. The large population of Venezuelan women migrating to Colombia carry their care obligations at home with them when they migrate with their children and other dependent adults. In the care work sector, however, displaced Colombian women are also strongly present, while the irregular migration and informality common in the sector affects the working conditions and livelihood security of Venezuelan migrant women.

Ng and Ye compare patterns within East and Southeast Asia, between the rural-to-urban care migration within the People's Republic of China and the transnational migration of domestic laborers from lower-income countries to Singapore. Ideologies of "mobile developmentalism" operate very similarly in both contexts to situate mobile and migrant domestic laborers as less modern, and thus less worthy of decent work and fair treatment by the modern urban families for whom they work.

> Questioning assumptions about educated and skilled migrants

Two contributions focus on analyses of educated and skilled migrants, still relatively neglected in migration scholarship. This is especially true for research on migration to the Gulf States. Paul, Yavaş, and Park discuss the findings of their research on expatriate migrants from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Asia to Dubai: a destination preferred over the usual Global North labor markets. While career development and living standards in Dubai do not deviate from Global North contexts, expatriates from the MENA region and South Asia view geographic proximity enabling easy family visits and tolerance for religious and ethnic identities, as rendering Dubai a preferred destination over the Global North. This condition does not, however, apply to migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, who experience

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discrimination in Dubai not unlike that experienced in the Global North. Global cities like Dubai are sites for the incorporation of large numbers of low-paid immigrants serving elite expats, creating a precarious feminized economy of reproductive services.

Xu compares the motivations of migrants from China, who are mobile both internally and cross-nationally to Canada for education. Research has assumed that citizenship in Canada and urban "hukou" registration status in China are major motivations for educational migration cross-nationally and domestically. On the contrary, Xu finds that rural education migrants are more interested in the better job prospects in the urban Chinese labor markets after graduation than in a different registration status (*hukou*). Chinese education migrants to Canada prefer permanent residency to citizenship, as do Chinese who have migrated from rural regions in China to Canada, as foreign citizenship could restrict their mobility back to China and their capacity to live transnationally.

> The case of Chinese influence in Cambodia

The final article by Lai and Siu focuses specifically on how Chinese foreign direct investment in Cambodia, accounting for 90% of the garment industry and 55% of all foreign-owned factories, strengthens a model of authoritarian capitalism in Cambodia where economic growth reliant on foreign investment is prioritized over labor rights and democratic participation. While Cambodian garment workers continue to struggle against exploitation, the incidence of strikes has dropped sharply as the country aims to deliver cheap labor to attract and placate Chinese investors. The migration development regime that emerges resembles earlier research on dependent development in Latin America and other Southeast Asian contexts.

> Ideologies and policies affect whether migration offers social mobility or merely strengthens existing hierarchies

New avenues for future sociological research on migration suggested by these papers point to the importance of states – sending and receiving – and their development and investment models for shaping whether migration opens up chances for social mobility and livelihood security, or results in trapping already vulnerable migrants in precarious livelihoods. Social class, as well as gender and ethnicity, especially when the latter overlaps with differences in income levels of countries of origin and destination, strongly shapes these possible consequences of migration. Though educated migrants are most likely to experience benefits, this depends on their integration or exclusion from labor markets in their destinations.

Development ideologies and policies matter for whether migration presents an opportunity for social mobility or for cementing gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies. International governance for safe and orderly migration, however, has not yet delivered equity and protection for migrants in low-wage work. Also, policies in destination countries do not yet offer skilled migrants the social and political protections they seek. The consequences of migration in relation to bordering and questions of inclusion and exclusion are very similar for internal and transnational migration, which intersect in sectors like domestic and care labor and low-skilled manufacturing. South-to-South migration and the confluence of both out-migration and immigration in a growing number of contexts underscore the need for more research on the institutions and practices that shape the experiences of migrants globally. ■

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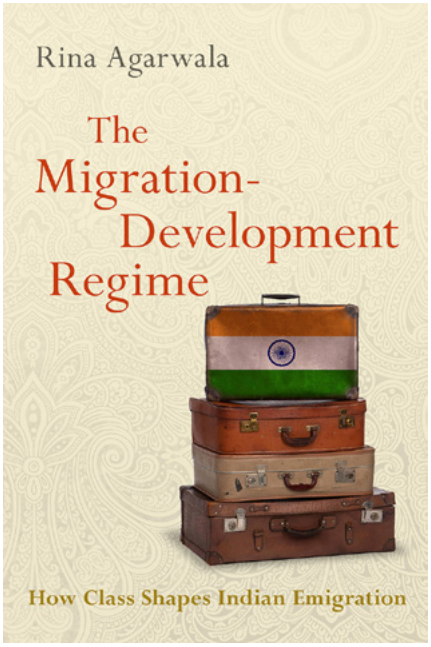
> Sociological Contributions to the Migration Challenge

by **Rina Agarwala**, John Hopkins University, USA



Book cover of Rina Agarwala's The Migration-Development Regime, *Oxford University Press.*

Global migration is among the greatest challenges of our century. The topic itself is determining election results, and people's views on the issue are dividing countries, communities, and even families. How can sociology help address this challenge?

For decades, sociologists have helped redirect our gaze from simply looking at individual migrants to also understanding the broader economic and social forces catalyzing internal and global migration flows in the first place. Understanding these structural factors has helped illuminate who migrates, how and where they migrate, and why they migrate despite the costs and risks involved. For example, sociologists have analyzed the different "push factors" – such as economic poverty, disease outbreaks, land dispossession, and violence – that urge certain populations to make the difficult and often dangerous decision to leave their homes and loved ones in sending regions. Sociologists have also highlighted the varying "pull factors" – such as legal and institutional frameworks and labor demand – that draw people to certain receiving regions over others. Knowing that people are not simply rational actors, sociologists have also studied the mediating processes – such as ethnic networks, cultural affinities, and family/household-level decision portfolios – that fuel certain migration flows, even when they are not the most cost-effective or risk-free.

But as sociologists, we must not stop our inquiry here. In my recent book, *The Migration-Development Regime: How Class Shapes Indian Emigration*, I offer a new analytical framework that I call the migration-development regime, or MDR, that draws on our sociological tool kit to expand inquiry in three important ways.

> Who benefits from migration regimes?

First, we must tap our sociological understandings of power to expose the non-migrant actors that not only lose but also *benefit* from migration. While the public and political controversies around migration have shown that migration clearly affects populations far beyond those that actually migrate, current debates tend to focus on the costs incurred. But highlighting exactly who among non-migrant populations are benefitting and how they benefit can better explain why migration flows continue despite the costs and risks involved. Highlighting these beneficiaries and the benefits may also help increase public support for migration. Finally, exposing these beneficiaries and benefits can help expose exactly which areas require protection.

So which non-migrant actors benefit from migration and how? In the case of global migration, we know that native employers often attain increased economic profit and race- and gender-based status mobility through cheap migrant labor in the paid productive sphere. Sociologists have also helped expose how native families attain increased race- and gender-based power in the paid and unpaid reproduc-

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tive sphere by relying on migrants to care for their elderly, their young, and even themselves.

The MDR framework highlights another beneficiary that is too often occluded in sociological studies on migration: the state. Since the early 1900s, the "migration states" of receiving *and* sending countries have controlled who enjoys the right to enter or leave particular national borders. And despite the proliferation of interest in "transnationalism," nation states still serve as the sole actor with the legitimate authority to regulate, restrict, and govern the cross-border movement of people. But such governance is costly. So why would states bother? Drawing on the case of India as a sending state from 1833 to the present, I demonstrate how the Indian government has consistently used out-migration as a vector through which to attain economic growth at home, secure political legitimacy (at the domestic and global levels), and attain consent for new norms, habits, and practices. For example, Indian emigrants helped spread the anti-imperialist and anti-racist movement of the early 1900s and a pro-democracy movement in the 1970s. And more recently, poor migrant workers who circulate between India and the Gulf transmit ideals of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency and formulate identities of global cosmopolitanism.

But important questions remain to be answered in future research. Increasingly, states are simultaneously serving as sending and receiving states. How do they manage these competing roles? How do national-level state regimes differ from and potentially clash with sub-national state regimes? Relatedly, does the MDR framework call on us to break down the current silos separating domestic-level and international-level migration analyses?

> What are the exact consequences of migration regimes?

Second, by highlighting the exact beneficiaries of migration, we can also more accurately expose the exact consequences (intended and unintended) of migration; which in turn can better highlight the exact nature of the problems we need to solve.

In the case of India, I use the MDR framework to argue that a key consequence of the Indian state's emigration policies and practices from the 1830s to the present has been to consistently exacerbate and cement class-based inequities between Indian citizens. For example, in the wake of its 1833 abolition of slavery, the British colonial regime encouraged the emigration of poor Indian workers to serve as racialized coolies (in indentured servitude, informal employment, and middle-class professional jobs). But since the 1900s to the present day, the Indian government has legally restricted poor citizens from emigrating abroad, while allowing elite citizens to move freely. While these restrictions on mobility were implemented in the name of protection and nationalism, they offered what I call "paternalist protection," which in turn has deepened class inequalities within India and globally.

Meanwhile, since the 1980s, the Indian state has enabled its elite emigrants to form what I call an "elite pact" with business and government leaders in India, which in turn has shifted India's position in the global capitalist order for the first time since the 1800s. Due to the Indian state's emigration policies and practices, Indian-Americans, in particular, have served as a key transnational vector for the transmission of neoliberal ideals and practices of privatization, self-sufficiency, and voluntarism from elite US spaces to elites in India. This has reshaped Indian businesses, civil society organizations, education, healthcare, tax codes and real estate markets, making India a new type of global economic actor. The UK's Indian-origin, Hindu ex-prime minister exemplified how such transnational vectors also bleed into the intimate sphere; he is married to an Indian citizen and daughter of the founder of one of India's most successful IT firms.

But, again, important questions remain to be answered. If the MDR framework exposes class-based inequities, should it also be able to expose the caste- and gender-based consequences of migration regimes? How have migration states cemented these hierarchies over time?

> How can and do migration regimes change?

Finally, as sociologists we are well-trained on the complicated and dynamic relationship between structure and agency, and we know that power can be exerted from above and below. Therefore, the MDR framework conceptualizes the migration state not as a static entity, but as a site of struggle. In our migration research, therefore, we must not only show how political and economic structures shape migration from above, we must also show how migrants sometimes reshape states and economic structures from below. As a result of this dialectical relationship between states and migrants, MDRs change over time. In the case of India, my book traces the rise and fall of three distinct MDRs from the 1830s to the present. Future research should trace the historical shifts that have occurred in the MDRs of different countries, and sub-national regions, and use these histories to envision alternative futures.

Sociologists have been making important contributions to our understanding of global migration for decades. But contemporary challenges are taking new turns, and our research needs a breath of fresh air. The MDR framework offers one new tool to help expand our future research. ■

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> The Indian State's Practice of a Safe and Orderly Migration

by **Ashwin Kumar**, Cornell University, USA

Waving the Indian flag. Credit: Ragu Raja, via Pexels.

Over the past few decades, considerable literature has emerged on the role of the state, particularly the sending state, in managing migration towards various political and development goals. The call for safe and orderly migration arises alongside the discourse on how migration and development are interlinked. The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the Global Compact for Migration adopted in 2018, outline a paradigm for "safe, orderly and responsible" migration.

This essay explores the realities of this framework on the ground, and how national and subnational governments envision and implement programs to those ends. Specifically, I examine how India, the world's largest sender of migrant labor, envisions safe and ethical migration through the dissemination of marketable skills for prospective migrant workers. To do so, I draw on interviews with worker organizations, as well as federal and state skill and recruitment agencies, in the major migrant-sending regions of Delhi, Kerala, and Telangana.

> The promise and limitations of the "skill–migration ecosystem" for safe and orderly migration

The colonial and post-colonial Indian state has always intervened and engaged with its migrant population to achieve its own development ends, as Rina Agarwala argues. One of the primary ways this intervention has occurred is through ensuring the safety of its migrant workers.

More recently, the Indian state has attempted to promote ethical recruitment by providing migrant workers with marketable skills and by sending them through official channels negotiated in bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) with receiving countries. While limited in their enforceability, these agreements aspire to ensure a mutually agreed upon set of norms regarding safe and ethical recruitment practices, as well as wages and work protections in destination countries. As of February 2025, the Indian federal government, as well as some state governments, entered into skill-based BLAs with countries such as Germany, Israel, and Japan for a wide variety of occupations and sectors, including con-

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struction, electrical and technical work, and healthcare. Through these agreements, the Indian government argued that they could also better control the functioning of private agencies, which still dominate the recruitment market, through monitoring and occasional collaboration. New actors (namely federal and state agencies, in addition to private skill development agencies) have now entered the "skill–migration" ecosystem.

However, implementing these programs has been challenging within the fragmented federalist Indian migration management framework. Federal and state actors pursue differing goals and strategies, but also hold distinct political stances, causing competition and confusion during the implementation process. My interviews with federal and state skilling agencies revealed fierce competition among them, as they seek to outdo one another for contracts and institutional prominence, as well as to compete with the numerous existing private recruitment and skilling agencies. This has led to a lack of collaboration and created confusion about the standard for skilling migrants. For instance, while the recent India–Germany agreement required stringent skill and language training standards to be met before recruitment could take place, the longer established India–Israel agreement for construction work only required a cursory task-based test.

> The practicalities and ethics of "safe" migration to danger zones

The India–Israel agreement, in fact, sparked great controversy regarding what constituted safe and ethical labor migration. When I questioned officials on the safety of sending Indian workers to an active conflict zone, both the federal and Telangana state agencies justified their decision by assuring strict government oversight. The workers would receive a good wage for their work, with the agreement even covering their food and accommodation. In the event that workers find themselves in a dangerous situation, the Indian consulates would take care of their needs, including their evacuation, if required.

The Kerala state agencies, on the other hand, did question the safety and ethics of the bilateral agreement. In contrast to the federal government's more ambivalent stance towards the conflict, the Kerala Chief Minister officialy condemned Israel's attacks in Gaza in December 2023. The Kerala government recruitment agencies confirmed that, following the Chief Minister's statement, they refused to send workers to Israel under this agreement. As one Kerala state recruitment agent argued:

"We [government agencies] should be focused on the ethical recruitment of workers to various destinations. Sending them to an active war zone is antithetical to any sort of ethicality!"

The extent of the inability of the Indian government to protect workers was also evident in hiring and firing practices. A few months after the arrival of the first batch of workers in Israel, an investigative report found that almost 2,000 Indian workers were laid off from their workplaces by local Israeli contractors, resulting in many being deported from Israel altogether. The employers cited a "lack of skills" as the reason for the dismissals. And there was little that the government could do to redress the situation. This incident revealed several cracks in this program's vision to facilitate "safe, orderly, and responsible" migration.

> Bringing in worker voices

Finally, beyond federal and state governments, civil society matters too. Traditionally, worker organizations, civic groups, and transnational labor networks have been instrumental in defending migrant rights. My interviews reveal that as government management of migrant labor expands, the voice of migrant worker organizers has diminished. For example, Indian trade unions opposed India's deal with Israel, arguing that it was not ethical at all to add to the ongoing oppression of Palestinians. Yet, unions and other migrant organizations confirmed that they were not consulted during the formulation of those agreements.

Organizers noted that any move towards safe and ethical recruitment of migrant workers needed to take into consideration the insights of those defending the rights of migrant workers on the ground. In the context of tightening global borders, their inclusion becomes increasingly critical, especially at the transnational level. Beyond training migrant workers and matching them with willing employers, any hope for safe and orderly migration will require a more inclusive vision for ensuring migrant worker rights. ■

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> Caring Across Borders: Venezuelan Migrant Women in Colombia

by **María Camila Vega-Salazar**, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia, **Carolina Moreno**, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia, **Suelen Castiblanco-Moreno**, Universidad de La Salle, Colombia, and **Javier A. Pineda D.**, Universidad de los Andes, Colombia

Settlement tents in a forest with laundry hanging over a footpath. Credit: Luna Andrade Arango, via Pexels.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, sociologist Arlie Hochschild introduced the notion of global care chains – transnational networks of women transferring care responsibilities across borders, typically from poorer countries to wealthier ones. This concept sparked a robust academic field analyzing how gender, class, and migration intertwine with caregiving. Much of the literature has centered on South–North migration: women from the Global South moving to wealthier nations to meet growing care demands. But what happens when care chains operate within the Global South? Latin American scholars have been examining just this, revealing complex patterns of migration and caregiving across countries such as Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and, most recently, Colombia.

This article shifts the focus to South–South migration, using the case of Venezuelan women who have migrated to Colombia in massive numbers since 2015. As of late 2023, nearly 2.9 million Venezuelans had moved to Colombia, with women slightly outnumbering men. Many of these women are not only navigating precarious immigration policies and hostile labor markets but also shouldering paid and unpaid caregiving roles.

Our central argument is that global care chain theory must be revised to reflect the realities of regional, feminized, and often circular migration flows in the Global South. These care dynamics do not always follow the same patterns observed in wealthier countries. For example, migrant women often travel with their children, form multi-gener-

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ational households in the destination country, or continue caregiving within their own families. In these contexts, care work is reconfigured, not simply transferred.

> Care work in Colombia: a complicated landscape

Colombia has long been shaped by internal displacement caused by armed conflict, contributing to a large population of women who work in informal care and domestic sectors. Now, the country is also a major destination for international migrants, particularly Venezuelan women.

Initially, the Colombian government responded to the Venezuelan influx with humanitarian relief. Later, it introduced mechanisms for legal regularization, notably the Temporary Protection Permit (PPT), which offered access to work and basic services. However, administrative delays, shifting political will, and limited enforcement have left many migrants undocumented and vulnerable to labor exploitation.

This is especially true in the care economy. Using data from Colombia's official household survey (GEIH), we find that, despite having relatively high levels of education, Venezuelan women are overrepresented in low-wage, informal sectors like hospitality, food service, and retail. Surprisingly, domestic work is not the primary sector for these women. That role is largely filled by internally displaced Colombian women, reflecting how Colombia's internal conflicts have shaped its own care labor market.

Venezuelan women working in domestic roles tend to be younger and more educated than their Colombian counterparts, yet they face higher rates of informality and exclusion from social protections. For example, 40% of Venezuelan domestic workers had no health coverage in 2023, and only 7% were affiliated with retirement savings systems, despite full-time workloads. Most have only oral labor contracts, further exacerbating their precarious status.

> Beyond the numbers: a feminist critique

Our study urges a more intersectional approach to analyzing care work. Gender is not the only variable at play. National origin, legal status, race, age, and education all intersect to shape how care responsibilities are distributed, and who gets excluded.

The Venezuelan case also raises questions about the sustainability of current migration and labor policies. Colombia's shift from humanitarian assistance to "socioeconomic integration" has yet to be realized in the form of meaningful protections or opportunities for migrant women. More recently, political shifts have led to calls for voluntary returns to Venezuela, despite the ongoing instability there.

We argue that instead of relying on temporary permits and political discretion, countries like Colombia need robust, permanent migration policies that recognize the value of caregiving work and ensure rights for those who provide it, regardless of their documentation status.

> Rethinking care chains in the Global South

This research adds to a growing body of Latin American scholarship that challenges Eurocentric models of care migration. Rather than assuming a one-way flow of labor from South to North, we must acknowledge the dynamic, multi-layered realities of care in regional contexts. In Colombia, care is both exported and imported: while many Colombians have fled the country as migrants, the nation is also hosting a large influx of care workers from abroad.

Moreover, care in the Global South is often shaped by displacement, inequality, and state neglect. It is not just a matter of employment but of survival and solidarity among women. Care is distributed through informal networks, family arrangements, and communal strategies, often without state support.

Venezuelan women in Colombia are reframing what it means to be a migrant and a caregiver. Their experiences challenge simplistic models of global care chains and invite us to see care not just as labor, but as a site of political struggle and social transformation. By documenting these realities, this study calls for a more grounded, inclusive sociology of migration and care, one that centers the voices and agency of women navigating life on the move. ■

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> 'Mobile Developmentalism' of Care Labor Migration in China and Singapore

by **Lynn Yu Ling Ng**, York University, Canada, and **Yunhui Ye**, University of Victoria, Canada

Day off for domestic helpers. Credit: Rex Pe, via Creative Commons CC BY 2.0.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to care work and our global dependence on migrant domestic workers. Yet despite shared struggles, these workers' experiences have rarely been analyzed across different national contexts. The vibrant scholarship on this front in East Asia, Europe, and indeed within large countries like China and India has gained traction, but remains relatively marginal to mainstream research contexts. We participate in this significant conversation by weaving together the case of domestic care workers (DCWs) in China and foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in Singapore to reveal how similar economic development strategies create parallel forms of exploitation.

> Outdated models rank rural/traditional as more "backward" and urban/modern as "superior"

In our article "Same but Different: Care Labor Migration in China and Singapore" to be published in a forthcoming special issue on "Spatialities of Domesticity" in *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation*, we draw on feminist political economy scholarship and online ethnographic research to compare domestic worker experiences across national boundaries, revealing shared patterns of exploitation rooted in development ideologies. We illustrate circumstances of what we call "mobile developmentalism": linear and stage-based development ideologies that, following popular modernization theory, construct superior versus inferior statuses of rural/traditional and urban/modern people, respectively.

Migrant mobilities are shaped by such social hierarchies. In China, rural domestic workers are discriminated against based on lower *suzhi* (human quality). In Singapore, FDWs are understood as coming from "less developed" parts of Asia. Both groups of migrant women are subject to the "mobile developmentalism" of colonial civilizational ranking where some people are seen as inherently more "modern" or "developed."

This ranking system is not coincidental. It stems from post-war modernization theory that celebrates linear progress from "backward" rural/traditional societies to "advanced" urban/modern ones. Whether workers move across international borders (Singapore) or internal rural-urban divides (China), they face a similar devaluation of their humanity and labor.

> Understanding the care crisis

States use development strategies to justify the denigration of women and the care work they do. National goals of economic modernization and "uplifting" the country are a major, but not the only, part of the picture. There is rich feminist political economy scholarship on how care work is systematically denigrated. Whether performed by rural Chinese or Asian migrants, this labor is rendered invisible and exploitable through gendered ideologies that frame women of color as especially naturally suited to serving others. This state of affairs reflects broader global failures to value

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care work. Care is seen as women's "natural duty": an infinite, free-flowing resource motivated by "love" rather than deserving of fair compensation.

> The notion of *suzhi* (human quality) and "less developed" Asia

China's *hukou* (household registration) system, established in the 1950s, creates institutional rural–urban segregation. Rural migrants can work in cities but cannot access urban benefits like healthcare, education for their children, or social security. The suzhi discourse reinforces this by portraying rural people as "low quality": lacking civility and hindering China's modernization.

One domestic care worker courageously challenged this when her employer denied her New Year's Day off, asking: "As a *Baomu* (derogatory term for domestic worker), what right do you have to ask for a government holiday?" She responded: "Are *Baomu* not Chinese citizens? If so, they are entitled to statutory holidays." Her defiance cost her the job.

In Singapore, FDWs face racialized discrimination as women from "less developed" Asian countries. Recruitment websites display their photos, personal details, and "skills" like products for comparison shopping. The state's mandatory live-in policy and employer sponsorship system (similar to the *kafala* system) creates dependency relationships where workers cannot easily change employers, even when facing abuse.

Chinese workers are co-ethnic citizens moving within their own country. Their counterparts in Singapore are foreign nationals crossing international borders. Both groups navigate similar challenges.

Legal Vulnerability: In China, over 90% of domestic workers lack formal employment contracts because only companies, not households, are recognized as employers. Similarly, while FDWs in Singapore have contracts, they are classified as temporary "guest workers" in the lowest visa category, renewable only every two years.

Live-in Exploitation: Both groups typically live with employing families, creating an expectation of 24/7 availability. One FDW in Singapore shared: "I wake up at 4 am to cook breakfast […] my rest time starts from 11 pm to 12 midnight, depending on what time they arrive home from work." A Chinese domestic care worker's poem reads: "By the time my head touches the pillow, it's already eleven. Exhausted, drenched in sweat, I lie in bed, thinking of home."

Dehumanizing Treatment: Both groups face condescending attitudes rooted in development ideology. Chinese employers criticize domestic care workers' "non-standard Mandarin" and force them to practice speaking "properly". Singaporean employers view FDWs as needing "discipline" to make them suitable for urban life, criticizing their hygiene, familiarity with modern appliances, and "laid-back" rural lifestyles.

> Exploitation within private spaces and development ideologies treat migrant care workers as less worthy of dignity and protection

Our comparative lens pays attention to the national in international migration. Both internal migration (China) and international migration (Singapore) reveal development ideologies across different scales and contexts. Both create what can be called "spatialities of domesticity": private spaces where exploitation thrives beyond public scrutiny and labor regulation. Global development strategies create local hierarchies that justify treating certain populations as disposable labor. Whether justified through rural–urban or international development gaps, the result is similar: women's care work becomes a commodity extracted to support other families' social reproduction.

Understanding mobile developmentalism helps us see connections between seemingly different situations. Chinese DCWs fighting for basic labor rights and Singaporean FDWs organizing for fair treatment face similar challenges rooted in development ideologies that position them as inherently less worthy of dignity and protection.

Ultimately, a collective recognition of these parallels opens up possibilities for transnational and relational solidarity and learning across contexts. Both groups of women demonstrate remarkable resilience, using online spaces to share experiences, offer mutual support, and document injustices. Their voices challenge the mainstream denigration of care work and labor exploitation, and demand recognition of their full humanity. ■

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> The Distinct Pull of Dubai
for Non-Western Expatriates

by **Anju Mary Paul**, **Mustafa Yavaş**, and **Sejin Park**, New York University Abu Dhabi, UAE

Since Saskia Sassen's classic work describing New York, London, and Tokyo as global cities, other global cities have been identified and ranked largely using economic criteria. As nodes of corporate globalization, global cities are home to the offices of leading multinational corporations run by highly skilled migrants. As these cities vie for such talent, the analysts who assess and rank them, and even the policymakers who try to promote them, tend to use universal criteria as if all expatriates fit the same mold of seeking only high incomes, comfortable lifestyles, and greater safety. Even the cultural significance of global cities is assessed in terms of the number of museums and landmarks they host.

We ask if there are additional "distinct" aspects of a global city that can increase its appeal to specific subgroups of high-skilled migrants. To answer this question, we consider the case of Dubai, which has quickly risen in global city rankings. Drawing on surveys and in-depth interviews with non-Western migrant professionals in Dubai, we find that Dubai holds a distinct appeal as both a global city and a "local" city for expatriates from the South Asia and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions.

As a typical global city, Dubai offers (1) increased economic benefits, (2) higher living standards, and (3) greater safety that migrants often associate with the constructed category of the Global North. But Dubai also offers "local" benefits to these migrants: (4) geographic proximity to their origin countries, (5) cultural familiarity, given its large and long-standing migrant populations from these regions, and finally (6) greater tolerance for these migrants' specific religious and racial identities.

> Background to Dubai

A city of 3.5 million, Dubai is the largest city in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Over the last two decades, Dubai has rapidly developed into the preferred regional headquarters location for multinational corporations operating in the MENA region. The city prides itself on being the most business-friendly and liberal hub within the Middle East and consistently receives high scores for its public safety, trust in government, and livability, some of the standard criteria used to rank the expatriate-friendliness of cities.

Meanwhile, Dubai (and the rest of the UAE) remains heavily dependent on migrants to sustain its economic growth. In 2023, 92% of Dubai's population was non-Emirati. While the popular image of expatriates in Dubai is of Westerners, many more are, in fact, from South Asia and MENA.

> A different kind of expatriates

To assess the relative appeal of Dubai, we surveyed and interviewed high-skilled migrants from the three world regions directly surrounding the UAE (South Asia, MENA, and Sub-Saharan Africa). We considered North African countries within MENA and separate from the rest of Africa because people from these countries speak Arabic and are viewed as ethnically Arab.

Our survey data revealed that all three respondent groups had a strong desire to move to the UAE prior to their migration (averaging 3.68 on a 5-point scale from 1 to 5). But South Asian and MENA respondents expressed a much stronger desire to stay on in the UAE, compared to Sub-Saharan African migrants (3.35 versus 2.71). This divergence was linked to differing levels of satisfaction across the three groups when comparing their life in the UAE with their life in their previous country.

While South Asian and MENA respondents saw significant improvements upon arrival in the UAE on three key fronts – career, living standards, and cultural familiarity – Sub-Saharan African respondents only reported a significant improvement on the work and living standards fronts, but not for cultural familiarity, due to the smaller size of Sub-Saharan African communities. Consequently, Sub-Saharan African respondents were more interested in moving onward *out* of the UAE to a third country, compared to the other two groups.

> Dubai's economic, lifestyle, and safety benefits

Our in-depth interviews with 46 of these globally mobile professionals who had resided outside their home country before coming to Dubai helped unpack these differing viewpoints. All three groups highlighted the economic benefits, comfortable lifestyle, and greater safety they enjoyed in Dubai. These benefits are applicable to all skilled migrants working as expatriates in the UAE, regardless of their origin country. The financial benefits that Dubai provides expatriate professionals can sometimes even surpass their income from comparable positions in Western countries, partly thanks to the UAE's low value-added tax and lack of personal income tax.

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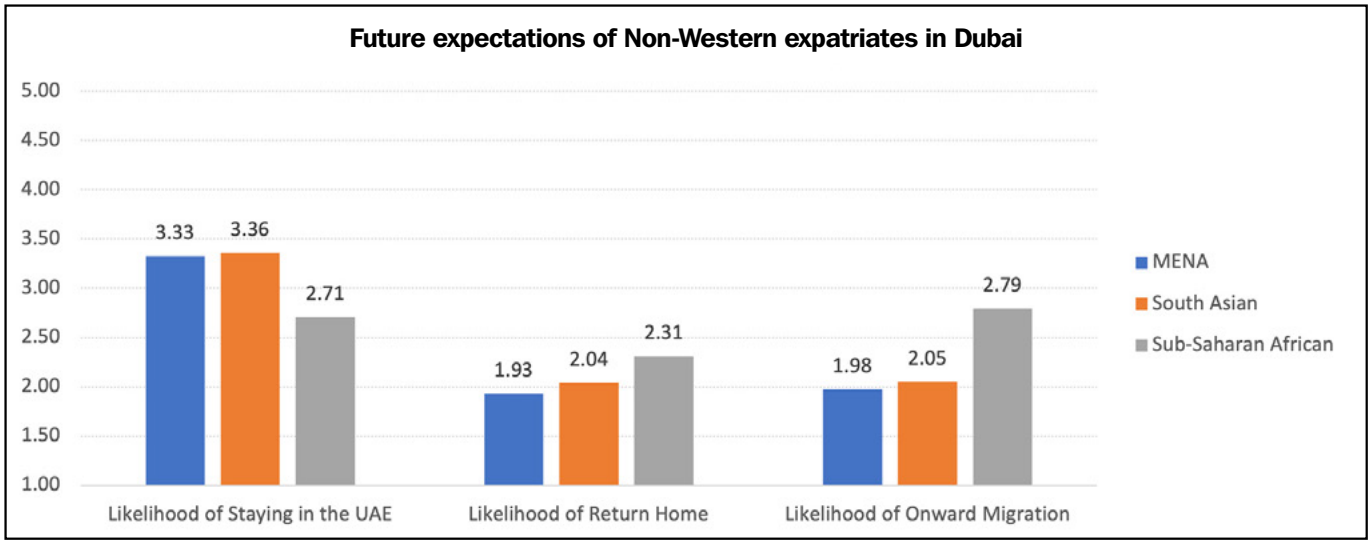

Source: Anju Mary Paul, Mustafa Yavaş, and Sejin Park.

Interviewees highlighted Dubai's high living standards, including a well-maintained public infrastructure and a sense of greater public safety. In addition, they emphasized their easy access to affordable domestic labor, thanks to the large volume of low-wage labor migrants from Asia and Africa who also flow into the UAE seeking employment in care work and service work. These characteristics speak to the bona fide "global city" status of Dubai, with its significant populations of migrants at both the high and low end of the labor market.

> Dubai as the best of both worlds

But South Asian and MENA interviewees also spoke at length about Dubai's geographic proximity to their origin countries, enabling them to enjoy frequent (and affordable) visits to family back home or for their relatives to visit them through the UAE's lax tourist visas. Given the long-standing populations of middle-class migrant communities from these two regions in the UAE, and the various cultural and social institutions that have developed alongside these communities, South Asian and MENA expatriates often highlighted Dubai's cultural familiarity, mentioning the various amenities (from mosques, to supermarkets and restaurants offering halal and ethnic food options, to schools teaching their national curriculum) that help make Dubai feel "like home" to them.

Finally, these interviewees spoke of the greater acceptance of their religious and racial identities, something they often lacked in the global cities of the North. In contrast, Sub-Saharan African interviewees were more likely to speak of racial discrimination in the UAE, or simply loneliness because of the absence of a large co-ethnic community at the same class status.

Overall, our findings highlight the need for global/world cities scholarship to consider the diversity of skilled migrants in these cities, rather than assuming a universal expatriate. There should be greater acknowledgement of cities' social and cultural characteristics, beyond facile notions of cosmopolitanism, in making select migrant groups feel "at home" abroad. ■

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> Chinese Education Migrants

at Home, Abroad and Returned

by **Feng Xu**, University of Victoria, Canada

Gaokao. Source: Hubei Daily, *available at:* http://m.cnhubei.com/content/2019-06/08/content_10844871.html.

Many young Chinese migrants seek social advancement through better education. This study considers internal and international education migrants, as well as "returnees". The research emphasizes their lived experiences in seeking local residency status: Shanghai or Beijing *hukou* (household residency), and permanent residency (PR) in Canada. While Canadian citizenship may be functionally closer to *hukou* than PR is, citizenship barely registered among my interviewees; voting rights go unmentioned, and Canadian citizenship otherwise merely complicates visits or future return to China.

From 2024 to 2025, I interviewed twelve Chinese education migrants in British Columbia, Canada, and fifteen in Beijing and Shanghai, China. Most were born in the 1990s; few were married; most were women; each was employed or seeking work.

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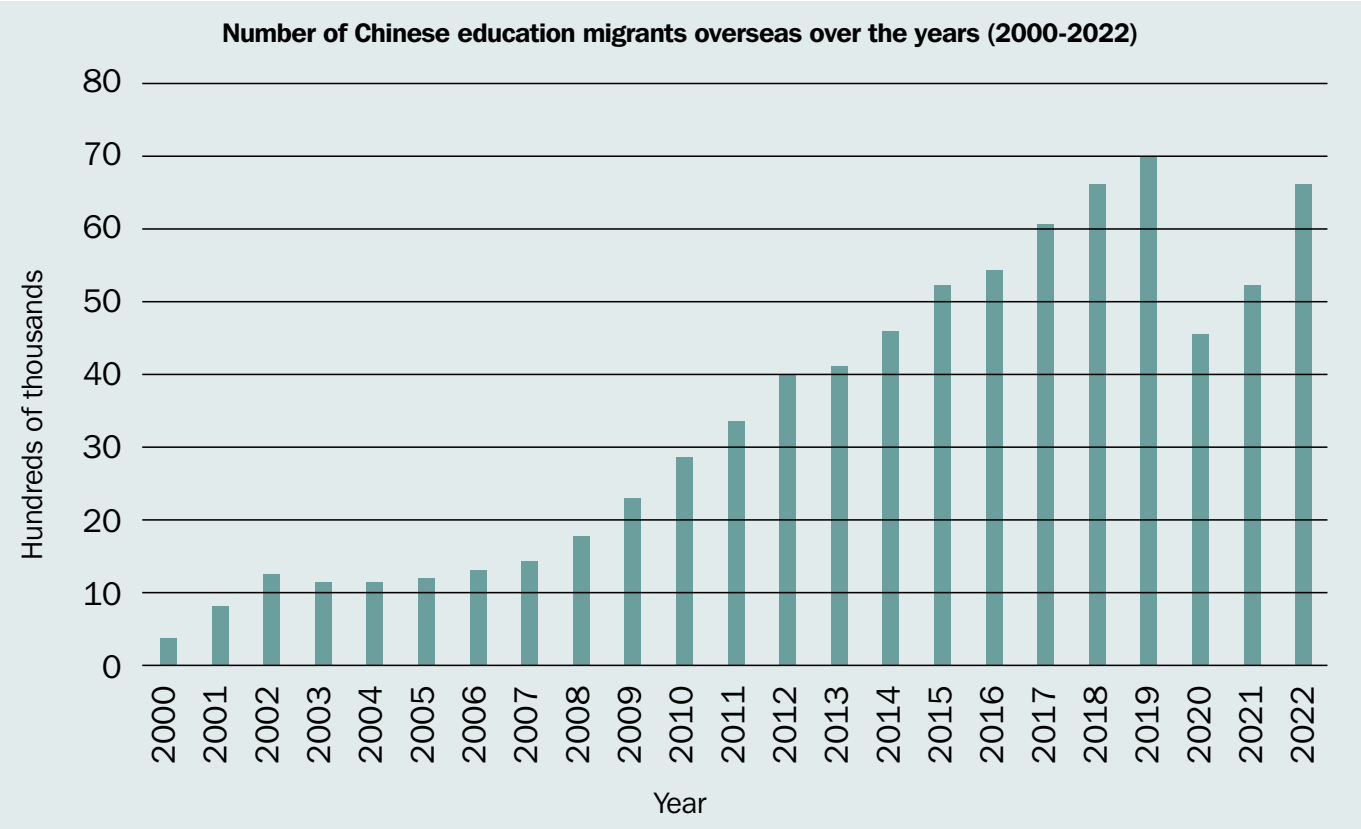

Data from the Center for China and Globalization, adapted from The Development of Chinese Students Abroad (2023-2024). *Available at* https://web.archive.org/web/20240514045418/http://www.ccg.org.cn/archives/84327.

Why combine the groups in one study? Firstly, "bordering practices" of inclusion and exclusion take place both at national borders and within national territories. Secondly, internal and international migration experiences overlap. And finally, the link between education and social mobility isn't smooth.

> Fluid, overlapping migrant experiences

My interviews upset neat oppositions between migrants at "home" and "abroad." All but three "internal migrants" had also "returned" after studying overseas, but none had returned to their hometown. Meanwhile, several "returnees" in Beijing or Shanghai considered these locations to be temporary too, though all considered these cities cosmopolitan, developed, and desirable oases.

Most interviewees in Canada wanted to stay, but even those with permanent residency traveled back to visit China-based relatives and friends, and some actively planned permanent return when their parents aged. (A recent study showed over 80% of education migrants worldwide return.) Overall, education migrant experiences proved provisional, fluid, overlapping, and messy.

> Spatial inequalities and education mobility

My respondents grew up in a hypermobile, reform-era China. The spatial mobility supporting their aspirations reflects sharp geographic inequalities. It depends on looser *hukou* and passport policies in China, receptive talent-recruitment policies of host governments, and improved, cheaper transport and communication (bullet trains, air travel, social media).

As these education migrants moved, wider migration pressures often changed their hometowns. Deindustrialization in China's northeast closed factories and forced out-migration. Market- and state-driven urbanization fundamentally altered the social fabric elsewhere. Labor migrants often build new houses for relatives back home. Hometowns are remembered for denser social relationships, but as places left behind.

Preferences for Beijing and Shanghai were likely shaped by the study's recruitment criteria, but they are unsurprising. Shanghai or Beijing *hukou* holders have easier access to top Chinese universities at home. By contrast, top rural or small-town migrants like my respondents moved, and often boarded, normally for junior high school at minimum.

Preparation for *gaokao* (the national college entrance exam) was all-consuming; it required immense invisible and undervalued supports: paid workers at boarding schools, or parents, mostly mothers. Those not boarding might rent accommodation near school with paid or parental support work, but they still spent most waking hours at school. Secondary students who had traveled to study were thus relatively immobile for years during study. En-

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tering a top Beijing or Shanghai university was therefore already a success story.

Many Canada-based interviewees also began their education migration in secondary school, mirroring the trajectories of internal migrants in China. Yet, unlike the prestige attached to entering a top university in Beijing or Shanghai, enrolling in a Canadian university is a far less clear marker of success. Many four-year undergraduates either did poorly in the *gaokao* or wanted to avoid it. Only a middle-class or wealthy family can afford the full education costs in British Columbia, Canada. Poorer British Columbia-based graduate students therefore often work while attending school. Cost and immigration potential led my respondents to Canada. Beyond class climbing, therefore, respondents often cited personal development as a reason to migrate to Canada.

> Bordering practices and strategizing for permanent local status

Lower-skilled labor migrants in China do not have the same hopes for upward social mobility as education migrants do. Local hosting governments in China want cheap migrant labor, but not as permanent *hukou* holders. While less important today, *hukou* still offers some key lifetime entitlements, including education rights for future children.

By contrast, successful education migrants enjoy a relatively privileged route to local *hukou*. But they still face multiple barriers at top Chinese universities and cities. Even when they succeed, big-city *hukou* holders mock the skills and exceptionally high exam scores of the migrants who succeed.

Unlike education migrants in Canada, Chinese education migrants can legally remain in Beijing or Shanghai without local *hukou* after graduation. They need only secure jobs and accommodation. Interestingly, because access to Beijing *hukou* only privileges state employees, it is not a priority for those aiming for employment in the private sector. Unlike low-skilled migrants, they know good private-sector jobs, not *hukou*, will provide them with private health insurance and pensions. Local *hukou* status matters mostly to migrant graduates with children, and many of my interviewees had other plans.

For Chinese education migrants in Canada, by contrast, permanent residency is crucial to any long-term stay, whether for job prospects, romantic ties, or to escape sexualized violence. On paper, "international students" do gain a distinct path to permanent residency under Canada's International Mobility Program. However, lived experiences of that path were complicated. Frequent changes in Canada's points system and recent intake reductions can jeopardize well-laid permanent residency plans. Also, to earn extra points towards an invitation to apply for permanent residency, interviewees often worked in local, low-skilled, and precarious jobs. Between graduation and a permanent residency application invitation, initial Canadian work experience can also be crucial to later, more permanent jobs. All but one interviewee found their first local job at Chinese-owned businesses, few of which require Canadian work experience. Some of the employers themselves were recent migrants. Common jobs include specialty services to the local Chinese community, including student educational and immigration services or restaurant work.

> Conclusion

Research on international and internal migration both have a bearing on these education migrant experiences. Combining studies, national borders are not central among the important barriers migrants face, including power inequalities. Chinese hukou divides rural from urban, and towns and cities of differing status; but also low-skilled from educated. Canadian permanent residency, not ultimately citizenship, leads education migrants into precarious employment, commonly in community businesses. Moreover, unstable rules of the game complicate their quest for stable local status. ■

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> Cambodian Garment Migrant Workers: Precarity and Protest

by **Tsz Chung Lai**, and **Kaxton Siu**, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

Cambodian rural migrant workers participate in a labour rights training session. Photo by Kaxton Siu.

On March 9, 2024, approximately 600 Cambodian rural migrant workers from the Chinese-owned Y&W Garment Company marched to the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training. They submitted a petition demanding unpaid wages and benefits after the company's owner abruptly declared bankruptcy, leaving them without their final month's salary. Later that afternoon, the ministry issued a statement urging workers, legal representatives, local unions, and other stakeholders to end their protest immediately, accusing them of obstructing traffic and causing congestion. The ministry advised the workers to seek redress through legal channels, emphasizing the importance of "maintaining public order and protecting the interests of the wider community."

The sudden bankruptcy of Y&W Garment Co. Ltd. and the resulting unpaid wages starkly illustrate the precarious conditions faced by Cambodian rural migrant garment workers within the evolving landscape of foreign investment. Simultaneously, the workers' collective protest not only exposes their vulnerability but also demonstrates their capacity to mobilize and assert agency amid escalating exploitation and insecurity. The rapid expansion of Chinese-owned factories, coupled with such acts of worker resistance, raises urgent questions for labor and industrial sociologists: What is the current situation for Cambodian rural migrant garment workers amid the overwhelming presence of Chinese capital? Importantly, how are workers responding to the challenges and hardships imposed by poor working conditions and economic uncertainty? What is the Cambodian government's stance on this situation?

> Workers' multifaceted precarity

When examining the current circumstances of Cambodian rural migrant garment workers, multiple and intersecting forms of precarity become apparent. Based on our 2023-2024 survey of 86 workers from 28 garment factories, it is

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evident that these workers face acute job insecurity, driven by subsistence-level wages (US$204/month), widespread short-term contracts (with 66% on contracts of six months or less), and pervasive age-based discrimination – workers over 40 are particularly susceptible to layoffs and exclusion. Factories routinely enforce rotational suspensions, paying workers as little as US$40/month during periods of order shortages, perpetuating cycles of financial instability and uncertainty. The industry's deep integration into buyer-driven global value chains enables international brands to shift the risks of fluctuating demand and production onto the most vulnerable: the workers themselves.

Precarity extends well beyond the factory gates, shaping migration patterns and household survival strategies. A significant 77% of workers are rural migrants, and dual incomes are essential for survival: 75% of married couples co-reside in Phnom Penh, yet basic living costs (US$300/month for two people) exceed typical wages. To cope, many families leave children in their home villages (37%), relying on grandparents for childcare and, in times of crisis, on reverse remittances; 31% of workers receive support from rural families. Debt is widespread and crippling (median: US$4,250), often secured against land, eroding workers' long-term security and perpetuating cycles of malnutrition and intergenerational poverty as wages consistently fail to meet even the most basic needs. These debts originated from underemployment during the Covid period, as workers struggled to make ends meet in Phnom Penh's high-cost environment. Additionally, some rural migrant workers borrow money to purchase motorbikes and fuel to commute between rural and urban areas, especially those who leave their children and elderly relatives behind in their rural hometowns.

> Authoritarian capitalism and the Cambodian state's response

The government's reaction to the Y&W protest exemplifies Cambodia's authoritarian turn in labor relations. By framing the demonstration as a threat to public order, the state signals a tightening grip on labor activism, consistent with a regional trend toward authoritarian capitalism: economic growth and foreign investment are prioritized over labor rights and democratic participation.

Although Cambodian rural migrant workers have a history of collective resistance, their space for action has narrowed dramatically. According to Better Factories Cambodia, strikes plummeted from 147 in 2013 to just 9 by August 2018, with lost workdays dropping from nearly 889,000 to 42,000. Labor disputes referred to the Arbitration Council fell from 248 in 2016 to 50 in 2017. This decline is less indicative of improved labor relations than a consequence of systematic state suppression: arresting union leaders, intimidating activists, and co-opting trade unions as government allies, especially since the 2013 election.

The legal framework for organizing has been steadily eroded, and independent dispute resolution is increasingly rare. The government's rhetoric – emphasizing "public order" and "community interests" – serves to obscure a deeper reality: the interests of capital, both domestic and foreign, are privileged over the well-being and rights of workers.

> Precarity and the possibility of resistance

The Y&W Garment protest offers a stark window into the multifaceted precarity and constrained agency of Cambodian rural migrant garment workers under authoritarian capitalism. While Chinese investment has fueled economic growth and job creation, it has also entrenched a system where risk and insecurity are borne almost entirely by workers. As of October 2024, Chinese capital accounts for approximately 54.7% ownership of Cambodia's 2,236 industrial factories, representing an impressive investment of US$9.086 billion. Most strikingly, Chinese investors now control around 90% of all garment factories in Cambodia.

This dramatic shift illustrates China's evolution from the "world's factory" to a leading global investor. Rising domestic labor costs prompt Chinese firms to relocate production to countries like Cambodia, where low wages offer a distinct competitive advantage. The dominance of Chinese capital in Cambodia's key industries compels the Cambodian state to align itself with capital interests. This alignment – evident in its suppression of labor activism and emphasis on "public order" – has further narrowed the space for collective bargaining and worker-led change.

Yet, the resilience of Cambodian rural migrant workers endures. Their willingness to protest, reliance on family and community networks, and ongoing struggles for fair wages and decent conditions all speak to a powerful spirit of resistance. The path forward will require new forms of solidarity and advocacy – both within Cambodia and across borders – to counter the deepening precarity imposed by global capital and authoritarian governance. The Cambodian case is a vivid reminder that the future of work in a globalized world will be shaped by the ongoing contest between capital's demands and workers' struggles for dignity, security, and justice. ■

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> War as Entangled Accumulation: The Case of Gaza

by **Guilherme Leite Gonçalves**, Rio de Janeiro State University, Brazil

Credit: Markus Winkler, via Pexels.

Legal scholars have offered key insights into the new patterns of war in contemporary society. Among them, in a chapter prepared for Masato Ninomiya's Festschrift, Toshiki Mogami connects three dimensions: state revenge, genocide, and colonialism. These processes, however, can be reread under specific conditions of capitalist development, when, driven by claims on future revenue, overaccumulated wealth fuels pressure to open new markets in the context of financialization. Such a perspective draws on Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Hannah Arendt, later redefined in debates on *Landnahme*-Theorem. This view contends that capitalist growth, constrained by spatiotemporal limits, overcomes these barriers by occupation of non-capitalist territories through violence, colonial policy, and war. The question is how this is manifested in recent military conflicts; a problem that must be situated within the system of financial accumulation.

Interest-bearing capital, grounded in property rights over money and the obligation of repayment with interest, assumes the form of fictitious capital in secondary markets, instituting expectations of income streams that multiply with capitalization potential. In the form of investment contracts, this regime overaccumulates claims on future surplus value, whose realization depends on expropriations annexing territories and populations into a circuit of valorization. Such annexations channel surplus capital into infrastructure, housing, and resource extraction, while generating income streams via securities backed by land and real-estate assets.

The devastation of Palestine is, in this sense, an extreme case of entangled accumulation at war.

> Israel has become a strategic node for global capital

As noted by William I. Robinson and Hoai-An Nguyen, the 2003 invasion of Iraq coincided with the Middle East's accelerated integration into the global economy, following the creation of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) and additional bilateral and multilateral agreements. It gave rise to a wave of corporate and financial investment across strategic sectors supported by Gulf capital – trillions in sovereign-wealth funds – alongside flows from Europe, the Americas, and China. Israel became a strategic node for global capital.

In this context, the enclosure of Gaza can be understood as a means through which transnational overaccumulation, already manifested through the Israeli corporate complex, seeks new frontiers of valorization. It represents a form of primitive accumulation: an expropriation of land, goods, and people aimed at transforming them into market-based social relations.

> Fear of terrorism and a state of emergency pave the way for state revenge

This expropriation rests on suspending rights and guarantees, enabling the deployment of military apparatus without institutional checks or safeguards. This suspension relies on a legal device (state of emergency) to authorize it. The concept of state revenge, as outlined by Mogami, captures this shift: the state's response to politically motivated violence against people or property is no longer governed by law but driven by retribution.

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After the Hamas attacks, Benjamin Netanyahu promised "mighty vengeance" and invoked the verse "remember what Amalek did to you", often read as an imperative to retaliate. This setting derives legitimacy from mobilizing fears through discursive appeal to "terror." Thus, population insecurity is magnified by a dominant ideology that normalizes social panic and authorizes disproportionate practices of state revenge. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's declaration of a "complete siege" of Gaza –"no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel" – has become emblematic of collective punishment and starvation as a method of war.

> Reproducing the logic of European colonialism

The ideology of state revenge rests on the stigma of the "terrorist." It functions as a mechanism of othering that ascribes to certain groups traits of violence, barbarism, and irrationality, thereby rendering them legitimate targets of repression. This dispositive also sustains the moral self-image of superiority in societies that regard themselves as "civilized." From this perspective, the war on terror reproduces the logic of European colonialism, where hierarchies of peoples and races justified civilizing missions and repressive rule over colonized populations. In this light, Yoav Gallant's description of Palestinians as "human animals" echoes the language of dehumanization typical of colonial projects.

The colonial character of state revenge renders contemporary wars instruments for meeting valorization demands of financial overaccumulation. Stigmatizing discourses of othering authorize violence that facilitates the dispossession of territories and peoples, reaching its extreme form in the Israel–Palestine conflict, where Netanyahu's far-right populism radicalizes what Eran Kaplan identifies as Jabotinsky's Revisionist legacy of colonial militarism. It appropriates religious and natural-law arguments to construct Jewish superiority over Arabs, advancing a racist colonialism that forecloses the prospect of equal coexistence. This framing allows the Gaza war to enact state revenge under imperatives of ethnic cleansing, paving the way for genocidal acts against Palestinians. This violence serves the solutions to overaccumulation, drawing on doctrines such as *terra nullius* – the claim that land deemed "empty" or "unused" is open to colonization – to justify annihilation and reconstruction, enabling new investments and asset valorization.

> Territorial colonization intertwined with militarized accumulation

According to Forbes, defense stocks hit record highs during the Middle East escalation, driven by contracts for major arms suppliers, which in turn reignited the military industry. This militarized accumulation is entangled with other forms of capital valorization. At the end of October 2024, amid bombardments, Israel granted licenses to transnational energy companies to explore for gas and oil in the Mediterranean, seeking to turn the country into a gas hub during the energy crisis aggravated by the war in Ukraine, as shown by Robinson and Nguyen.

The intertwining of territorial colonization, far-right ethnonationalism, and the channeling of financial overaccumulation has since become evident. Among the reconstruction plans for Gaza are *Gaza 2035*, issued by the Israeli government, and *An Economic Plan for Rebuilding Gaza: A BOT Approach*, by Joseph Pelzman, presented to Donald Trump's team. Both advocate international governance and security arrangements that promote privatization of public assets by foreign investors.

As Nur Arafeh and Mandy Turner note, the US plan declares the territory "devoid of property laws" and, on that basis, leases it for fifty years, with investors acquiring "equity shares in Gaza" and assuming full control over economy, infrastructure, and administration. By contrast, *Gaza 2035* ties reconstruction to exploiting Gaza's energy reserves (about 122 trillion cubic feet of gas and 1.7 billion barrels of oil). Both plans presuppose Palestinian displacement: the BOT plan calls for Gaza to be "completely emptied", while the Israeli project envisions "rebuilding it from nothing". Both also provide continuous military force to ensure external political control and enable economic restructuring aligned with investor interests.

> In Gaza, Palestinians trapped between violence and financial dependence

After the first phase of the ceasefire was agreed on October 9, 2025, debate over Gaza's reconstruction will likely intensify. Trump's 20-point peace plan proposes an administration with Palestinian participation, presented as technocratic but politically subordinated to a "Board of Peace" chaired by the US president and including historical actors of the neoliberal order, such as Tony Blair. The plan promises that surviving Palestinians will be "free to leave and return", alongside an economic initiative to "energize Gaza": a synthesis of earlier frameworks to attract investment, modeled on "the thriving modern miracle cities of the Middle East" (points 9 and 10). Celebrating the ceasefire, Trump declared, "Gaza is going to be slowly redone […] you have tremendous wealth in that part of the world".

The Gaza war illustrates how the entangled accumulation of destruction and reconstruction produces a complex interplay between dispossession, financialization, and remaining peoples. According to Orwa Switat, resistance to genocidal violence reaffirms collective or communal ties to the land, driving struggles against expropriation, while "economic valorization" as a colonial technique encourages civic inclusion but within a stratified Israeli citizenship that grows even more discriminatory in the postwar context. Rising demolitions and deaths are accompanied by promises of financial prosperity in the restructured territories. As such, entangled accumulation traps Palestinians between violence and financial dependence on reconstruction itself. ■

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