

(In)Visibility of Afghan Migrants in Turkey's Informal Labour Market

Authors : Rezzan Alagoz, Seda Gonul

Abstract : This study examines the migration, work, and social life experiences of undocumented Afghan migrants employed as shepherds in Iğdır. Despite their high visibility in informal labor markets, their undocumented status renders them invisible in everyday life. Their invisibility in both official status and social life, coupled with their vulnerability to exploitation in the labor market, renders them particularly susceptible to marginalization. This research employs the concept of the subaltern to examine the characteristics of Afghan migrants as unrepresented, unheard, and invisible. It also analyzes their experiences in the labor market based on the concept of biopolitics. Undocumented Afghan migrants are engaged in labor-intensive occupations such as shepherding, thereby addressing an essential gap in the workforce that local workers are reluctant to undertake. The reliance of employers on the labor of these employees is significant; however, the undocumented status of these workers leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. In addition to serving as a critical source of low-cost labor, these individuals are susceptible to exploitation in the form of non-payment for their work, extended and intensive work schedules, and, on some occasions, physical violence. In the event of a conflict between shepherds and their employers, undocumented workers are unable to seek legal recourse, which serves to reinforce their marginalized status further. The predominant practice among Afghan shepherds is to utilize the workplace as a place of residence. In the context of shepherding work, the prevailing conditions at the workplace frequently pose a significant threat to the health and well-being of the individuals engaged in such activities. As a result of their lack of official status, these individuals lack access to basic services such as healthcare, which has the consequence of rendering them invisible in public and institutional spaces. Attempts to engage with public systems carry the risk of deportation, reinforcing the already fragile and precarious nature of their existence. This study examines the socio-political implications of undocumented status and addresses these experiences in the context of national and international migration policies. In line with Agamben's concept of the "state of exception" undocumented migrants exist in a state where fundamental rights are effectively nullified, and they are rendered outside the protection of the law. This exclusion is further exacerbated by the intersection of economic exploitation, political and physical invisibility, and limited access to basic services, which collectively contribute to a cycle of vulnerability. This research is based on in-depth interviews with 18 Afghan shepherds in Iğdır province in August 2024. The research contributes to the ongoing critical debates on migration, labor exploitation, and biopolitics by focusing on the experiences of Afghan shepherds. The article examines how undocumented migrants maneuver between visibility and invisibility within the context of a system that relies on exploitation in the labor market and migration policies. The research findings demonstrate the necessity for policy intervention to address the structural exclusion of undocumented Afghan migrants from national and international protection systems, as well as their indispensable role in local economies.

Keywords : Afghan migrants, biopolitics, border economy, informal labour market, migration policy, shepherding, Subaltern

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