

## GAR Blog

### Interview with Liza Schuster: A Conversation on Migration, Migrants and Politics\*

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***“It is crazy to penalise people when they would actually contribute to society and to put up barriers to prevent this success.”***

Dr. Liza Schuster, City University London, has spent much of the last decade doing fieldwork in Afghanistan, including a stint at Kabul University. She first worked at the Centre for Migration, Policy and Society at the University of Oxford in September 2005 before coming to City University London. Prior to this, she was a T. H. Marshall Fellow at the London School of Economics, working on a comparative project examining processes of inclusion and exclusion in the UK, France, Germany and Italy. Since then she has worked critically on access to the EU, UK, French and Greek asylum systems and has focussed on deportation, analysing the European return directive and the impact of deportation on those returned to Afghanistan.

I interviewed her to get her views on a wide range of issues such as how the issue of migration shaped her academic career; her advice to junior researchers at a time when anti-immigrant sentiment is popular; the future of Afghanistan and the current state of Afghan migration; and the impact of countries' policies on irregular migration. I hope that this interview with Lisa Schuster, a distinguished figure in the field of migration studies, will be enlightening for researchers. Here are the details:

***Semih Nargül: Considering your academic studies on migration, I would like to start by asking how your personal curiosity and interest in the subject started. What influenced you to choose to work in this field?***

Lisa Schuster: So, when I was doing my undergraduate degree, I was studying French, German politics and I had to spend my third year –it was a four-year degree– in Germany. So, it was 1992, just after the fall of the wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. So, I decided that I wanted to study in Leipzig in East Germany. It is important to know that the year I spent there was 1992 to 1993. So, it was during the war in Yugoslavia, and there were a lot of refugees that were coming into Germany. At the same time, in Germany, there was a big debate about changing the German Constitution which had quite a generous asylum policy. Basically, it said anybody who is politically persecuted has the right to asylum. But, because of the number of refugees coming in Germany, there was a big discussion and eventually this was changed. So, my undergraduate dissertation was about the asylum debate in Germany. Curiously, at the same time, to try and help me understand what this would mean for people, I began volunteering in an asylum hostel and I became close friends with an Afghan family. I didn't really think about working in Afghanistan then but 30 years later, I have spent quite a lot of time in Afghanistan. But mostly, I was interested at that stage, at the earliest stage of my career, in European asylum policy. Why European countries? We're saying one thing and behaving in a different way. Why they were so keen to restrict access to asylum which they've done very successfully. So that was how it started.

***SN: What are the challenges of studying migration in an era of rising anti-immigrant attitudes around the world? What advice would you give to researchers who want to pursue an academic career in this direction?***

LS: That's a big question, I think. A really important challenge is to remember that when you are speaking to migrants, they are not just migrants. They are mothers, fathers, sons, daughters. They are government officials, teachers, farmers. They may be religious; they may be not religious. It's really important to never forget that they are as human and as different as you are.

The other thing to remember is that people who have migrated are experts in their own personal experience. So if you are speaking with migrants, you speak to them about their own personal experience, but you don't expect them to explain migration policy to you or to talk about the impact of migration policy. That's your job.

Well, I suppose another thing to remember is this: if somebody who has migrated agrees to speak with you, they are giving you a gift. And it is the gift that you cannot repay. So it's very important that, one, you are grateful, and two, you are very clear with them that speaking to you will not do anything for them, that you are the one who will benefit because you will get your PhD, because you will complete your research project, because you will get a promotion. Maybe, maybe you can influence policy. Realistically, all you can do is maybe stop it from getting worse a little bit, slow it down. You can't stop it, maybe you can slow it a little.

***SN: Some of your work is especially related to Afghan refugees. You have been there for many years and carried out various studies. Can you tell us the reasons for choosing this country?***

LS: As I said, when I was doing my undergraduate degree, I met some Afghans. In fact, after I finished my undergraduate degree, I went on to do a PhD. And I was focused very much on policy. So I didn't think about Afghanistan again. But in 2008 I moved to Paris. And I began to work with volunteers at a soup kitchen near where I lived. And many of the people who were coming to the soup kitchen were very young Afghan boys and men. And it was a very cold winter, and the canal became very frozen and there were not enough spaces for these young people. So, it was very difficult to leave them at 10 o'clock at night when it was freezing to sleep on the streets. So, I took some of them home with me. And some people stayed just one night, some people one week, one person stayed one year. And we became friends and almost like a family. I should say that having those people in my home really shaped and influenced my writing about asylum policy. Before that, I had been critical but from a sort of an objective perspective. But when I was living with these people, I could see the impact that policy had on their lives. So as I was writing, they were reshaping my work. Then in 2010, somebody came to see me and said they wanted some advice about their PhD. And at the end of the interview, she said to me, "*you know, you write a lot about Afghan asylum seekers, but you've never been to Afghanistan. I work in Afghanistan. Would you like to come?*" I said, "yeah, sure". So I went, I went on holiday for 12 days. And when I went, many of those people that I knew said, "*please go and see my brother, please go and see my father*". At that stage, many of them had not seen their families for 2, 3, 5, 8, in one case, 10 years. They had been in exile in Iran, in Europe, and they hadn't seen their families. And at that stage also, FaceTiming, video call was not such a big thing, and it was difficult for them. So I went and I was invited to stay with their families, which I did. And I thought, okay, I think it should be possible for me to do an ethnography here.

And it seemed to me it was really important to do that because when Afghans were being deported from Europe, the argument of European states was, *we do not deport people to countries where their lives will be in danger*. The people we deport are not at risk. But they had no evidence of this. There was no monitoring. They had no idea what happened to people afterwards. So that first project was about saying what happens after deportation. So that's what I did. That was, I went back in 2012 and I was there most of the time between 2012 and 2018. And then I went back for brief visits in 2019. And then I went back for [...] it was six weeks in 2021.

The interesting thing is that the treatment of asylum seekers is still very bad. They are neglected, and as you said, they are left to sleep outdoors now in Paris. But it's also important to remember that those people that I knew 12 years ago, 13 years ago, now they're married. They have children. They have homes. They're working. It's still not easy for them. But actually, they have worked hard. They have had good lives. Their children have gone to school and to university. They're doing degrees. So I think it's really important to remember that migrants as a group tend to be those people who have energy and courage and dynamism. And although a proportion don't survive, a proportion are broken by the system –there are suicides, mental illness–, but probably the majority them do survive. They do go on

to contribute, to pay taxes. So from my perspective, it's crazy that you punish people and you put up barriers to stop this success when actually they're going to contribute to society. Why not embrace them and make it possible for them to participate much quicker?

***SN: As is well known, Afghanistan is an important country of origin in the context of international migration. In your opinion, what does migration mean for Afghans?***

LS: Afghans have been migrating all through history. Afghans are great merchants and traders, and Afghanistan is at the crossroads of so many civilizations. So they have been moving east to India and past India to Bangladesh, and west for centuries. There is a very beautiful short story by Rabindranath Tagore called *Kabuliwala*, which tells the story of an Afghan who leaves home to sell dried fruit and carpets in Bangladesh. But also, for Afghans, it's been a really important strategy for survival. I think for many people across the world, but definitely for Afghans, it has been a survival strategy. Afghans have migrated because they needed to earn money for their families, because they wanted to get a bride price so they could get married. They migrated for education, to study. And then after 1979 and the Soviet invasion, the migration changed shape and instead of it being mostly men who migrated, it became whole families. And the families were displaced to Pakistan and to Iran mostly. Millions of people in Iran and in Pakistan. A few people went also to Turkey. And I have visited carpet shops in Turkey that are owned or worked in by Afghans. And some continued [their journey] on to other countries, like the US. So during the period of Soviet occupation, there were quite a few people that went to the US, to Australia, and then more recently to Europe. So you can say that migration is in the blood of Afghans.

***SN: Considering the current circumstances in Afghanistan, what are your predictions for the future of the country?***

LS: It's a really difficult question. I think it will be very difficult for the current de facto government to continue because of the economic situation. If there is not more aid from outside, I think the situation will be very difficult. I'm very pessimistic and I think that in most cases the Global North will not help unless they see that it is in their interest, or they will help because they think that it [the Taliban regime] is going to collapse and there could be terrorist attacks from Afghanistan. If they don't believe that, then they have no interest to help people and they will allow them to starve because they allow many countries to survive in complete poverty.

It's possible that there will be another civil war, but I think Afghans are very tired. They're very tired and very exhausted. It's difficult to foresee what will happen. It's difficult to foresee because it's very difficult to see what the world is going to look like in five years, never mind in 20 years. Right now, we have so many different conflicts occurring around the world with what's happening in Israel and Gaza. It can explode at any moment. When that happens, Afghanistan is forgotten. But this conflict could suck in many countries. I mean, I'm not sure what the feeling is in Turkey at the moment, but I imagine the Turkish government is also very worried.

Then there is a good chance that the tendency will be to follow Iran and Pakistan and deport Afghans. The problem with that is if Afghans are deported back to Afghanistan, the economic situation will become even worse. Because a large proportion of Afghans now rely on money sent from abroad. If you reduce the money sent from abroad, it's a complete catastrophe.

***SN: While there is a persistent focus on Afghans trying to migrate to other countries, there is very little in-depth research on those who are deported. You have done extensive and interesting work on this topic. What were the factors that influenced you to conduct research in this direction? Also, would you like to talk about the challenges you faced while carrying out your work?***

LS: So, one reason that there's not so much work done was because Afghanistan was a country in conflict. And so, for some years it's been very difficult to conduct research in countries in conflict if you wanted to do ethnographic research. So, there was a lot of research that was carried out by people

who were interested in war studies or peace studies, who would go and who would live in armed compounds and be embedded with military forces or with the diplomatic missions. But because it was considered a dangerous country, it was very difficult to actually manage to do research out in the community. And when I received the first grant to go in 2012, this was at a moment when the situation seemed to be a little bit calm. And so, I received the grant to go.

But a few years later, when I wanted to go back, I had to fight very, very hard. Because in universities, you have to do a risk assessment. And actually, it is not experts on Afghanistan who decide the risk. It is the insurance company. Because as an employee of the university, you should have insurance when you go into the field. And the insurance company was refusing to insure. Or they would say, we will insure, but you have to have “kidnapper and medical evacuation insurance” which is very expensive. And they would say, and we will not insure you unless you live in an armed compound or an armed hotel. And for me, for my work, that's just not possible. I need to be in the community. I need to be with normal people, not with soldiers and politicians.

So that was really challenging. And now I would think, unless you are going to be with the European delegation, for example, or the Indian diplomatic mission that you are never going to go outside, it's going to be very difficult to get funding. Maybe it will change now because certainly the argument now is that we can deport to Afghans because the war is finished, and the Taliban have won. So maybe we can argue now, okay, the war is over, the Taliban have won, now it's safe for me to go back to Afghanistan. Maybe I should argue like this. But this problem of how universities need to insure people and need to keep their staff safe makes them very risk-averse. Obviously, they don't want their staff to be killed or injured, but then this has an impact on the kind of research you could do.

One of the other problems now is because of the Taliban, you have to be very careful. If you were to go to Afghanistan today, you would either speak to the people whom the Taliban like, in which case you get one side of the story. Or you speak to people that they don't like, then you put those people in danger. So that becomes very difficult because it's not just you that is at risk, but the people that you speak to. For example, it would not be possible for you to speak to women. It would not be possible for you to speak to Hazara people. It would be very difficult for you to speak to people who had worked for the previous government or for some NGOs. So, the circumstances for doing research in Afghanistan today are very difficult.

***SN: You state that after being deported to Afghanistan, Afghans are subjected to some stigmatization in the places they go. Can you tell us a little bit about these? How do you evaluate their coping strategies against the challenges they face?***

LS: The stigmatization is attached in particular to the people who were deported from global North countries, from Europe, from the US, from Australia—particularly from Europe. Not so much to those who are deported from Iran or Pakistan. And the reasons for this is that everybody knows somebody who has been to Iran or Pakistan. And everybody knows somebody who has been deported. They know how the Afghan police and the Pakistani regime are like. So, there is no shame attached to being deported from Iran or Pakistan. It happens to a lot of people. You go again illegally; you get deported again. It's normal.

The difference with being deported from Europe is that getting to Europe is long and difficult and very expensive. It's very expensive and often the whole family have invested in sending this person to Europe. So, if this person is deported, it's a big loss for the family. It's not just the money that is lost. But when somebody goes, when a young man is sent to Europe, the hope is that he will earn money and he will send it back, and maybe he will be able to bring other members of the family. The initial investment is lost. The future earnings are lost. More importantly, hope is lost. This is really difficult, and people don't want to give up hope. They don't want to give up the possibility that there could be a better life somewhere else. And so instead of saying, “okay, it's really difficult, it's normal that this person should be deported”, they say, “okay, this person was unlucky, or he was stupid, or he did

something criminal, and so it's his fault that he was deported." If I go, or if his brother goes, they will have more luck. So, it becomes necessary to make it the fault of the person who was deported. That's one thing that leads to the stigmatization.

The other thing is that especially for people who have never been outside Afghanistan or Pakistan or Iran, the West is a very foreign country. It is a country full of *kafir* who are naked and have sex all the time. A lot of people, the only knowledge they have of the West was from pornographic movies which they got from Russia or online. And so Europe is this very dangerous place where if you go, maybe you will lose your faith, maybe you will lose your culture. So, when people return, if they return with gifts and they are very successful, then you say, "okay, this is good. He hasn't forgot his family. He's come back with gifts." If he comes back with empty hands and he's somehow, you know, ashamed of what happened, that he's not so full of joy, people come and they're looking at him and they're asking themselves, "Did you drink alcohol? Did you have a girlfriend? Because if you had a girlfriend, then I'm not going to give you my daughter in marriage. Did you meet a girl there? Did you pray? Have you been contaminated by your experiences amongst the *kafir*?"

And unfortunately, in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas –but not only in rural areas– all it takes is a rumour. Somebody jokes, "oh, I saw on your Facebook, you were with this girl." And boom! This rumour goes around everyone, and it becomes magnified. Even when this person never did anything. Even the rumour, the whisper, is enough to destroy their reputation and make it very difficult for them.

***SN: How effective are programs provided by intergovernmental organizations and international NGOs to persuade forced returnees to stay, such as training and business development support, in other words, simplifying mechanisms that encourage staying in the country? What are the practices that you find lacking in this regard?***

LS: There were a number of these. And on the whole, if you look at the NGOs, they will tell you that they are quite successful. But what we found ourselves, while we were doing in the research, is that actually very few people access these programs. Partly because when you arrive back in the airport, you are very often traumatised and you can't think about these things. You're just back, you're afraid, you want to get somewhere safe, you want to get to your family if you think it's possible.

If it's not possible, you just want to find somewhere to sleep that is safe. So, you tend not to have any contact at the airport with the representative of IOM or whichever NGO. Then if you've managed to get some advice and you hear about these programs, and then you approach people, the conditions to access the support are very difficult to fulfil. You had to find a local partner. That was quite difficult, especially if you had never been in Afghanistan before. If you were born and you grew up in Iran, for example, and this is your first time in Afghanistan, how are you going to find a partner who's going to give you a contract so that you can access the funding? Very often, for the people who did manage to access the programs, these programs would be in two parts. They would get a small amount of cash, they would take the cash and then they would go and never come back because the conditions were so difficult to get the rest of the money, which would not be given in cash. You had to have this partnership, a business plan, etc.

The training that was proposed was with the vocational education department in the ministry. They were very weak. They were really very poor. The only programs that really worked were if it was somebody coming from a very rural area and the NGO could give, for example, a small amount of cash to buy animals, something like this. And maybe it could work and it could help them to stay. But the reality is that the poverty in Afghanistan was so great that of course migration is going to be the answer. And so even if people stay, what we found was 80% of people would leave again within 18 months to two years.

***SN: The early twenty-first century has seen a sharp increase in deportations, which are considered expensive, cruel and humiliating to human dignity. States see it as a necessary weapon in the fight***

***against irregular migration and argue that it acts as a deterrent. How do you assess the impact of deportations on irregular migration?***

LS: There is no evidence at all that deportation acts as a deterrent. And the evidence is the opposite. If you deport people and 80% leave again within two years, clearly it is not a deterrent. What it does is that it slows down, it acts as a break on the possibility of those people to begin to rebuild their lives. So it costs the migrant in terms of time. It costs them years of their lives. It is a burden on their families. It can change their destination. They will migrate. Some will go back to the same country. Others will try a different country. But it costs them a lot more in resources, so it's a big burden on them, on their family, and on their community.

But it's also a burden for the deporting state because so much money is wasted on keeping people in detention and then deporting them. And actually, if they welcome these people, help them to establish themselves and to become contributing members, it would be beneficial for the migrant, for the country, and for the people left back in the country of origin.

***SN: The so-called "refugee crisis" and the increasing irregularity of movements due to the migration policies of countries render the journeys of migrants more risky, difficult and long, making them very vulnerable. Considering the tragic events, what kind of policy should states adopt on irregular migration? I would like to listen to your recommendations on this issue.***

So, if you want to prevent people from migrating irregularly, then you have to create regular migration channels. You cannot stop migration. So it's important then to make it quick and efficient so that people can go where there is work. There's clearly labour shortages in the European Union, for example. So it's very stupid that you don't allow people to become part of the labour force quickly, which allows them to keep their skills and to be useful. But it also respects them as human beings and not just as migrants. One of the big difficulties with this emphasis on irregular migration, or as states call it, illegal migration, is that it dehumanizes migrants and it contributes to a very hostile environment and to increasing hostility towards people, which can lead to, in some cases, physical violence, abuse, discrimination.

If people are allowed to come and to work, if they're allowed to come and educate themselves, then they become contributing members of society. They are able to look after themselves and their families. So actually what we need to do is forget about this distinction between legal and illegal. We need to just make it migration, allow people to come in. If they find work, great. If they don't find work, they will go somewhere else and look for work. But the important thing is to help them to help themselves. And if you do that, it's good for our societies.

I am very pessimistic because when I look at how governments treat their own citizens, you know, most of these governments, they also treat their poor citizens very badly. And this is what causes the tension between migrants and poor people. Although, actually, if you look in the poor areas, very often the poor people are the ones who get on with migrants because they have a lot in common. So the problem is that people who want to hold power, who are manipulating both poor citizens and poor migrants. Of course, there is always a place for rich migrants.

One other problem I think is that unfortunately the left has become very, very weak. Normally the left should be encouraging this solidarity between working people of migrant origin and of native origin. At the moment, politically, the situation is very difficult and everybody who is not a member of the elite is suffering.

\* The ideas and opinions expressed in GAR Blog publications are those of the authors; they do not reflect those of the Association for Migration Research.

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