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## Leaving family behind: Understanding the irregular migration of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors

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### Introduction

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (UAMs) are a particularly vulnerable group that present considerable humanitarian, legal and policy challenges to many countries around the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines an unaccompanied minor as ‘a person who is under the age of eighteen years, unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier and who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by an adult who by law or custom has responsibility to do so’ (1997, p. 5).

Since 2006, approximately 113,000 asylum claims have been lodged by unaccompanied or separated children worldwide (UNHCR, 2013). According to the UNHCR, ‘more than 25,300 individual asylum applications were lodged by UASC [unaccompanied or separated children] in 77 countries in 2013, far more than in previous years ... [which] constituted about 4 per cent of the total number of asylum

claims lodged in these 77 countries' (2014, p. 29). The main countries of origin of UAMs were South Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia. Kenya, Sweden, Germany, Malaysia, UK and Norway reported the highest number of UAM claims. 'Available information indicates that more than 7,100 unaccompanied or separated children were recognised in 2013 as refugees or granted a complementary form of protection in 44 countries ... Roughly two thirds of all decisions taken on UASC claims during the year led to the granting of refugee status or another form of protection' (UNHCR, 2014, p. 29). Accordingly, the recognition rate for UAMs seems to be higher than the overall total recognition rate, which was 44 per cent in 2013 (UNHCR, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Between 2008 and 2012, a total of 1,832 UAMs arrived in Australia as irregular maritime arrivals (IMAs) (Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers, 2012). The proportion of UAMs arriving as IMAs relative to the overall number of asylum seekers increased from 4 per cent in 2008 to 11 per cent in 2012 (Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers, 2012). Despite the many risks faced by this vulnerable group of children, and also the challenges this population poses for the Australian Government's humanitarian, legislative and policy frameworks (Crock & Kenny, 2012), very limited research has been conducted in Australia to date (Barrie & Mendes, 2011).

In 2013, the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) commissioned a large-scale quantitative survey of 1,008 adult IMAs who were granted protection visas between July 2011 and December 2012. The survey has provided vital empirical evidence to better understand 'why and how people decide to leave their countries of origin and travel to Australia, including in relation to economic, family, protection and other reasons' (McAuliffe, 2013, p. 5). Importantly, the survey findings have highlighted the need to undertake further qualitative research to supplement the quantitative results, 'particularly as they relate to specific demographic groups' (McAuliffe, 2013, p. 30).

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study funded by the 2012–13 Irregular Migration Research Small Grants Programme. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. Why do UAMs leave their parents/guardians or other family members and engage in irregular maritime migration?

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1 2013 global recognition rates are indicative as some states have not yet reported relevant data.

2. Who makes the choice of destination country and what factors influence this choice?
3. How do UAMs travel between source, transit and destination countries?
4. What are the experiences of UAMs in transit countries?

## Current knowledge of the irregular migration of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors

Although there is an emerging body of literature on the irregular migration of asylum seekers to Australia (McAuliffe, 2013; Koser & McAuliffe, 2013), little is known about UAMs in the Australian context. This section draws on what is known about three of the four main stages of the irregular migration process and highlights issues of particular interest for Australian research on UAMs: the decision to leave the country of origin, the choice of destination, and the transit countries.

### The decision to leave

A recent quantitative survey of irregular migrant adults (mainly from Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) living in Australia on protection visas found that although protection-related factors were prominent, other factors such as employment, education services, housing, health services, poverty, corruption, geography and family/community links were also important drivers of irregular migration (McAuliffe, 2013). The available literature pinpoints a number of reasons for UAMs to seek asylum, including widespread poverty, economic hardship, political instability and poor educational prospects, along with trigger elements such as violent incidents, threats, or a parent's death (Mounge, 2010; Thomas, Nafees, & Bhugra, 2004).

Most recent irregular migration frameworks focus on macro-level (structural reasons to move) and meso-level (role of policies; intermediaries) explanations, but little is known about the micro-level of individual or family decision-making (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013). A study of 30 UAMs and 70 service providers in Scotland found that 'a community helping response' commonly involving an 'uncle' (not necessarily a close relative but a familiar person) was part of the migration decision-making process (Hopkins & Hill, 2008). Another study of Afghan UAMs in Europe

showed that birth order and sex are important variables in determining who leaves; generally, it is the oldest son who makes the journey (Moungé, 2010). This study also found that in some cases minors make their own decision to leave (especially when they are already separated from their families).

## The choice of destination

In the global context, growing evidence indicates that the choice of destination country for irregular migrants is influenced, among other aspects, by geography, finances, available travel routes, documentation and chance (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013; Spinks, 2013). Some of the factors that may influence asylum seekers to choose Australia as a destination country include: economic prosperity and the stability of Australia in comparison with other countries in the Asia–Pacific region; Australia is a signatory of the UN Refugee Convention (while many of the other countries in the region are not); and preexisting connections of asylum seekers with people already in Australia (Crock & Ghezelbash, 2010).

There is evidence from Europe that ‘a global network of agents’ is critical in determining the destination of children (Hopkins & Hill, 2008). Relationships with these agents are sometimes exploitative, abusive and traumatic for the UAMs (Hopkins & Hill, 2008). While international and Australian research has reported that in many cases asylum seekers have their destination chosen for them by people smugglers (Spinks, 2013), a 2009 study in Norway found that people smugglers do not have a significant power in questions of destination; the presence of social networks played a significant role, instead (Breke & Aarset, 2009).

There is contradictory evidence about the level of knowledge irregular migrants and asylum seekers have about the destination country, ranging from very little knowledge to well-informed (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013).

## Transit countries

UAMs from Afghanistan frequently move to Iran and Pakistan with their families or on their own to live and work some years before they travel to Europe (Moungé, 2010). Pakistan and Iran continue to host a significant number of Afghan refugees. Reasons for secondary movement from countries of first asylum are related to lack of legal status which represents numerous risks to asylum seekers including risk of refoulement, harassment

or arrest by police, lack of access to healthcare, education, housing and employment (Human Rights Watch, 2002), and lack of access to child protection services (Mounge, 2010).

Indonesia has traditionally been an essential transit country for UAMs travelling to Australia (Human Rights Watch, 2013). UAMs in Indonesia have no legal status, no work rights, limited access to education, and are subject to detention for long periods of time (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

There is evidence from Australia and internationally that a large number of IMAs pay people smugglers for one or more parts of the migration journey (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013). This journey can be very costly and often families incur debt or sell possessions in order to pay. Where these options are not available, the agreement with the smuggler is to pay in instalments (Mounge, 2010). The length of the journey depends on the way the payment is made: those who pay in instalments usually have longer journeys than those who pay in full at the outset (Mounge, 2010).

Afghan UAMs travelling to Europe have little understanding of the conditions of the journey (Mounge, 2010). Smugglers tend to separate groups of children travelling together, preventing them from making friendships that could threaten their authority (Mounge, 2010). While some boys have regular contact with their parents or relatives, for others, this contact depends on the smugglers (Mounge, 2010). The boat journey from Indonesia to Australia is very risky, overloaded, with no safety regulations, and with smugglers often failing to supply enough water, food and fuel (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

## Methods

The research was a collaborative effort between the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. Full ethics approval was granted by the QUT Human Research Ethics Committee. Using a qualitative approach, a peer-interviewer model and a snowballing technique, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 participants who: (i) were living in Brisbane on a protection visa; (ii) had arrived in Australia over the past five years as IMAs; (iii) had arrived in Australia as UAMs (12–17 years of age at time of arrival); (iv) were aged 16 years or over at the time of

the interview; and (v) had the capacity to provide informed consent to participate. Questions were informed by the objectives of the research and the current literature gaps, and were developed in consultation with DIBP.

Significant efforts were made to interview protection visa holders from both sexes (although most UAMs who have arrived in Australia as IMAs are males) and diverse ethnic backgrounds. However, all recruited participants were males and all but one were either born in Afghanistan or born elsewhere to Afghanistan-born parents. A number of female protection visa holders and other potential participants from Sri Lanka, Iran and Iraq were approached but declined to participate. Those who provided reasons for declining to participate indicated their reluctance to talk about past traumatic experiences. As shown in the literature, refusals by potential participants should be seen as a positive sign, because they are 'indicative of an ability to make a choice' (Molyneux, Kamuya, & Marsh, 2010, p. 25). All interviews with protection visa holders were conducted by peer interviewers who received training in research skills and the ethical conduct of research. Written notes only were taken during these interviews.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight nongovernment service providers working with UAMs in the Greater Brisbane area with the aim of obtaining multiple perspectives, uncovering deeper meaning in the data and enhancing the validity of the research (Patton, 2002). All interviews with service providers were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed by a senior research assistant.

Interview transcripts were entered into NVivo software (QSR, v.10) and analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Patton, 2002). A coding matrix was created using the first three stages of the irregular migration process as a broader thematic framework (i.e. decision to leave country of origin, choice of destination, and transit countries). This chapter focuses on protection visa holders' and service providers' perspectives and presents the key themes derived within each of the three stages of the irregular migration process.

## Findings

Seventeen protection visa holders who had arrived in Australia as UAMs were interviewed. All were males. Fifteen respondents were born in Afghanistan, one was born in Pakistan from an Afghan background, and one was born in Iran. The majority of those born in Afghanistan or to Afghan parents were ethnic Hazara. Their average age at the time of the interview was 19 years, and they had been in Australia for 2.3 years, on average.

In addition, eight service providers (six females and two males) from five non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with UAMs in the Greater Brisbane area were interviewed. Their average time as individuals working with refugees and asylum seekers at the time of the interview was 6 years. For one service provider, English was not their first language.

### Stage 1: The decision to leave the country of origin

All protection visa holders stated that they had no other choice but to leave their country of origin. Their decision to leave as UAMs was prompted by discrimination (because of their ethnicity or religion), persecution, threat to their lives, or torture. All young people indicated that one of the main reasons to leave their country of origin (or the country they were living in) was the fear for their own life. In some cases (5 out of 17) the decision to leave was influenced by other family members or close friends being detained, missing or killed:

[O]n my way to Kabul we were stopped by Taliban and held up for few hours. I was so scared as they threatened us to death. Few of us managed to escape but some of my friends are still reported missing ever since. After that incident, I went straight to Kabul City and stayed in a hotel. I contacted my mother and explained my encounter with Taliban, my mother was very frightened she said I am everything that she is left with and she would want to protect my life by any means possible. (PV11, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)<sup>2</sup>

I have left Pakistan because it is not a safe country for people who are from Afghanistan. And it is very unsafe for Hazara people, because Hazara people are Shia and they hate Hazara Shia people. Because the enemies

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the acronym PV has been used to refer to protection visa holders.

we have in Pakistan, they kill us wherever they get us. And also most of the time in Pakistan they make bomb blasts to kill us and also do target killing in different areas of Pakistan. They want us to leave Pakistan or be killed there, no other options. (PV05, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

Almost all service providers mentioned that there was ‘no choice’ for these young people but leaving their region of origin.<sup>3</sup> They indicated that the main protection reasons for the UAMs to leave their countries of origin were: political, religious or ethnic persecution, discrimination, arrest by the authorities or other organisations, and/or torture:

I guess young people leave, unaccompanied minors leave their families either they are forced to leave. They are not given a choice. It is something that the parents are deciding for them and they are taking that decision on behalf of the family. So, war, persecution, discrimination, racism and violation of human rights, torture and kidnapping. My clients have spoken of, they have been abducted and held I guess within this like a cell or a place they don't know, they don't really have details about it, but it is a place where they don't know where it is. Sometimes that's done. They are covering over their head when they are taken there, so they don't know where they are, and tortured in those situations. (SP01)<sup>4</sup>

A number of young people (6 out of 17) mentioned that, in addition to protection reasons, they left their region of origin with the aspiration of getting a ‘better life’ or ‘opportunities in life’. In this context, ‘better life’ was understood as being able to live free from persecution, feeling safe, and being able to access education and employment opportunities. Other non-protection reasons mentioned were: general insecurity/lack of safety/conflict, a pessimistic outlook for the future, widespread violence, looking forward to living a peaceful/free life, and deportation from a neighbouring host country:

In Afghanistan there are many issues that have really made people's life very hard. It is very hard for people to live a good life or you can say a ‘good quality life’ in Afghanistan. Because Afghanistan is a country where no one can feel safe. Taliban can attack any one at any time, at anywhere. They are the real people who have control over the country. Most of the times they burn the schools. Because they do not want us,

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3 Region of origin encompasses either ‘country of birth’ or ‘neighbouring host country’.

4 For the purposes of this chapter, the acronym SP has been used to refer to service providers.

they do not want Hazara people to get education, to be healthy, to feel safe and live a happy life. (PV08, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

I was not allowed to go to school and get education because I was an Afghan. So because of all these issues I had to leave Iran and travel to a country where I would feel safe, where there is right for human beings. And where I could get education. (PV09, 21 years old, male, Afghan-born, 4 years in Australia)

In addition to protection reasons, service providers also mentioned non-protection reasons for the children to leave, such as internal conflict, war or unsafety in their countries of origin, to get a 'better life', security, or to have education or employment opportunities to assist their families financially:

It is important to acknowledge that some of these young people have never lived in their country of origin. They might be born in the refugee camp, that isn't the country of origin, but they wanted to be safe, they wanted to get a better life, they wanted security, go to school, get education, employment, and get better health. (SP02)

I've had a few clients who didn't know why their parents put them in a boat. And obviously when they come here to tell their story is 'I don't know'. It's because they are so young and they've been, I am assuming for their own safety by their parents, they put them on a boat. (SP05)

According to the young people, the decision to leave the country of origin (or the host country they were living in) was either made by their parents (or close relatives), a joint decision between their family and themselves, their own decision, or a decision made together with friends. In many cases (14 out of 17), at least one parent or another member of the family was involved in the decision to leave. No participant stated that people smugglers influenced their decision to leave. Finding a people smuggler was 'easy' once the decision to leave was made:

My parents and brothers made the decision for me to leave Iran and I also did not want to stay there anymore. (PV09, 21 years old, male, Afghan-born, 4 years in Australia)

Both my mother and I decided that it was time for me to leave the country and save my life. (PV11, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

My friends from school and I all five of us sat together and decided if we want to live a peaceful life we need to leave Afghanistan. Once this decision was made by us as individuals we then informed our families ... In Kabul is quite easy to find contact numbers of people who can arrange your travel from Afghanistan in return for some money. I got in touch with a man who agreed to plan my trip from Kabul to Indonesia. (PV12, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

All service providers agreed that in most cases the family makes the decision for their children to leave (with no input from the children). In some situations (e.g. when their parents are dead or missing), the decision is made by their relatives (mostly uncles or aunts), while in a few cases, the decision is made by the children (when orphaned, or on their own choice to support their families back home). Some interviewees also mentioned the role that the community may play in the decision-making:

I don't think most of them approved many of the discussions, they have been told to leave. And a number of them said, their parents said 'You are leaving and you are going now'. (SP02)

I've had a few clients from Sri Lanka, they are from the same village. To keep the boys safe, what the village has done is to put all their money together to send these boys to Australia ... It's not that the families put their hand up and 'My boy', I think as a village they all decided who was going to go, which I don't know how they did. (SP05)

Protection visa holders frequently stated that they were the oldest male child of the family:

My family consists of my mother, 3 sisters and 2 brothers. My father has gone missing since about 6 years ago. I am the second child but the eldest son in the family. (PV13, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

I made the decision that it was time for me to leave the country. I was the eldest son in the family and I felt very responsible towards my siblings. I decided to leave and make a better life for us in Australia. (PV15, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

According to service providers, it was common for whole families to face protection issues (e.g. due to their ethnicity and/or religion) and consequently one member of the family was chosen to leave 'and rescue the others' (SP06). Almost all service providers agreed that the decision about which member of the family leaves is made on the basis of age

and sex; the oldest male child in the family leaves. In some cases, other factors are taken into consideration by the families in order to get the best outcome, such as: strength, intelligence, maturity, courage, ability to learn English quickly, having some level of education, or on the basis that they are more likely to survive and succeed in Australia. Some service providers mentioned that, to a lesser extent, female asylum-seeking minors also seek to come to Australia after experiences of kidnapping and sexual assault in their country of origin, or when families living in unsafe conditions have a single female child or constitute an all-female family (in that case the oldest daughter would be chosen), or when they are the only survivors of the family:

It is safety, certainly safety issues, for some of the families I worked for, at least one member of the family would survive, and so they would put all their finances and ensuring that member of the family got out alive. So the expectation on that child was so high to survive and succeed on behalf of the family. (SP07)

[T]here was a situation where one of the boys had a twin brother and he wanted to come and I said: ‘How did they choose out of you who was the person who was meant to come?’ and he is like: ‘Because I came first’. So literally is the oldest and he was bigger and he was sent. (SP01)

We do have one, who recently turned 18, she was from Iran, Iranian background, but we don’t have many females. And I’ve asked my clients ‘Why do you think why girls don’t come if it’s not safe at home?’ And they would say ‘Because it’s not safe for them on the boat’. They see them as either they would be targeted upon by males, and they also see it as males are stronger than females, they wouldn’t be able to survive. (SP05)

## Stage 2: The choice of destination

Young people and service providers were asked about the choice of destination country, the sources of information and the people involved in this choice, the presence of family or friends in Australia, and whether or not the choice was made prior to or after leaving their country of origin.

Ten out of 17 respondents had lived in neighbouring countries for at least a year (in most cases with their families) but left those countries because of safety concerns, discrimination, deportation or lack of rights and entitlements. For 6 out of 17 respondents, Australia became a choice after living in or being deported from neighbouring countries (Pakistan and/or Iran):

Before coming to Australia I lived only in Pakistan no other countries. Because Pakistan and Iran are the countries where most of Hazara people go to when they abandon Afghanistan. But unfortunately in those countries too, we are targeted and killed every single day. (PV08, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

I had already attempted living in Pakistan or Iran but failed. I only considered Australia after that. (PV15, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

Similarly, many service providers mentioned Pakistan or Iran as the most common neighbouring countries for people fleeing Afghanistan.

Some young people considered other destination countries such as USA, Canada, England, Denmark, Sweden and/or New Zealand before choosing Australia. Although most participants indicated they had little knowledge about Australia prior to leaving their countries of origin, they had heard that Australia was a safe, free and peaceful country that welcomes refugees. These general impressions were also mentioned as the main reasons for choosing Australia:

I also considered Denmark and Sweden, but I decided to come to Australia as I found this to be the easiest to arrange for logistically, with a better chance of success and obtaining refugee protection. (PV17, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

Australia is a country where everyone wants to come to. And for people like us it is the country where we can live our life without being threatened to be killed or targeted by any religious, politician or any other group. (PV05, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

All service providers agreed that young people have no or very little knowledge about Australia before leaving their region of origin. Some service providers stated that young people's families might have more information about Australia than the young people themselves. Many service providers agreed that safety and opportunities to study, to work, for family reunification, and for sending remittances back are the main reasons for choosing Australia.

All service providers agreed that young people do not consider staying in any of the countries of transit, mainly because of the lack of safety, rights and entitlements in those countries:

I don't think Indonesia is ever the destination, because there is no work rights, there is no education, there is no citizenship, they are nobodies. (SP08)

Minors had greater involvement in the choice of destination country than in the decision to leave their countries of origin. For 6 out of 17, choosing Australia was their own decision, for five the decision was made by their families (with no input from the minors), while for four the decision was shared between minors and their families. Importantly, for 8 out of 17 minors, the decision to choose Australia was somewhat influenced by friends and acquaintances. Only one young person indicated that a people smuggler directly influenced the decision to come to Australia:

After that day I decided that I must leave Pakistan and since I had heard a lot about Australia from my friends in Iran and Pakistan I decided to come to Australia. (PV15, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

I contacted my mother from Kabul ... We discussed my options of survival and decided I should leave the country and go to a safe place. We had heard a lot from random people that Australia accepts refugees and many Afghans are travelling there and being accepted into the country. (PV11, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

I did not have any direct contact with that person [people smuggler]. And he did influence the decision to go to Australia. (PV01, 19 years old, male, Pakistan-born, Afghan background, 3 years in Australia)

Service providers ascribed greater influence on the decision to choose Australia to people smugglers. One service provider also mentioned that the community ('the village' in the case of some UAMs from Sri Lanka) may play a role in the decision:

I think for a lot of the young people, I think it's the people smugglers that choose Australia. I don't think the family sit down and go 'OK, where are you going to go?' and sit with a map and map it out. I think the people smugglers are the ones that say 'Go to Australia, you get an easy ride'. (SP04)

Others in the village will decide to put money in together and also bring them, the village puts some money together and send them on a boat to come to Australia for a better life. (SP05)

None of the young people interviewed indicated they had family or relatives in Australia prior to arrival, and only two stated they had friends living already in the destination country:

I had a friend in Melbourne who arrived a couple of years before me. I contacted him on Facebook from Indonesia. (PV13, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

It is important to note, however, that this finding may be somewhat different if other cohorts of young people (e.g. other countries of origin or ethnicities) had been interviewed.

According to service providers, whether or not UAMs have family or relatives in Australia varies and is frequently related to minors' cultural/ethnic backgrounds:

With the clients I'm working with at the moment, Hazara clients most of them have family members, either if it's a distant cousin, or an aunty, an uncle, they know someone. I haven't met a Hazara person that doesn't know someone in Australia, either because they've arrived 10 years beforehand or they arrived just last week. They all at least know someone in their community here in Australia. (SP05)

All young people indicated that the decision to come to Australia was made before leaving their country of origin (or a neighbouring host country). In some instances, the decision was prompted after being deported from a neighbouring host country:

My auntie and her husband and myself sat together in their house in Kabul and explored my options. Together we reached the decision that I must leave Afghanistan, we knew that Pakistan is also infested with Taliban and therefore we decided that I should come to Australia. (PV13, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

I was deported from Iran and then I really did not have anywhere to call home and feel safe, and also because there is also problems in Afghanistan, especially the conflict. So I decided to come to Australia, live my life under the shadow of peace and call it home. (PV06, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

Service providers agreed that the decision to come to Australia is frequently made before leaving their countries of origin or while in a neighbouring host country, although in some cases the decision is made in transit (Indonesia). One service provider highlighted differences according

to ethnicity; while Hazaras and Sri Lankans make the decision in their countries of origin, Rohingyans are more likely to decide when they are in Indonesia:

With Hazaras they've all decided in their own country, so before they started their travels they had Australia in their mind. With Sri Lankans, again I think it's their parents who put that, because they come straight from Sri Lanka, they don't have another country in the middle. I've had a few Burmese or the Rohingyan clients, who obviously went to Indonesia, and they were not too sure if they wanted to come to Australia or New Zealand, and they chose there ... It's a mixture of all, I guess. (SP05)

### Stage 3: Transit countries

Regarding transit countries, respondents provided information about the ways in which UAMs leave their countries of origin and travel through transit countries, the difficulties experienced during their journey and how they cope with it, the assistance they receive, and how they look after themselves.

Almost all young people had direct or indirect contact with people smugglers (or their networks). Contact with people smugglers took place at airports, through phone calls, or through other asylum seekers. In order to leave their countries of origin, young people themselves, their families and/or friends contacted a people smuggler to arrange the journey. In a few cases, the arrangement with the smuggler was made for the journey from the region of origin to Indonesia. Once in Indonesia, it was up to the minor to find a smuggler to travel to Australia:

I flew from Karachi to Bangkok in Thailand. It was 14 of us that were travelling in the same plane from Karachi to Bangkok. At Bangkok airport only 3 of us managed to pass through the passport check. The other 11 were detained at the airport and were later deported back to Pakistan. We were picked up by a taxi at the airport and took us to a hotel. The next day a taxi picked us up from the airport and drove us to the bus terminal. We went on a bus that drove us to Malaysia. We spent two nights in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur and on the third night we were picked up by a taxi from our hotel. The taxi took us to the seashore ... We boarded a small boat and after 2 hours we reached Indonesia. We spent one night in a big beach house and the next day we were left on our own to find our own way to Australia. (PV15, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

Yes, I met with the people smuggler who arranged my travel from Kabul to Indonesia ... My house mates in Jakarta arranged the contact with the people smugglers in Indonesia and therefore I did not see them. (PV13, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

All service providers agreed that people smugglers are contacted by the minors or family members to arrange the journey and that payments are made before departure, once they arrive in Australia, and/or throughout the journey. Some service providers pointed out that people smugglers are in regular contact with UAMs during the journey (i.e. to get them out of jail, find accommodation, keep them hidden, getting a boat):

They are continually paying people to get them to that next point, or to get them out of jail, or to take them somewhere where they can go into hiding for a few weeks, or take them into a jungle. (SP01)

Young people used a variety of ways to travel from one place to another during their journey to Australia: cars, taxis, buses, motorcycles, planes, trains, boats. Some had to walk to cross borders or move inside transit countries. Many left their country of origin by plane using their valid passports. Subsequently, people smugglers at countries of transit provided them with false passports, and also SIM cards for mobile phones to keep in contact. In some cases, young people bought the SIM cards themselves to communicate with their families. Most young people were able to talk to their families back home by phone during the journey, although the frequency of these calls varied. Three young people did not have any contact with their families during the journey:

I flew from Kabul to Delhi in India legally with my Afghan passport and spent 28 days in there. I was met at the Delhi airport and was given a fake passport. After 28 days in India, I flew to Malaysia using my new passport and stayed in the airport for 5 hours as transit and then flew to Bali. I was lucky that I made friends with a man in Delhi who was also coming to Australia. In Bali we had to get Indonesian visas on our passports and I was scared to death at that point, I thought that I will be caught out. Luckily we managed to get the visas and we flew to Jakarta. (PV13, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

I flew from Kabul to Dubai and was picked up by someone at the Dubai airport and was given a SIM card for my phone. I was taken to a room which I spent about a month in—there were other people that shared the room with me. I was only allowed to leave that room once per day to go to the bakery and purchase bread. After about a month, I received a phone call and it was arranged for me to be taken to the airport.

I boarded the plane and reached Malaysia, I was told as soon as I reach Malaysia I should tear up their visa at Kuala Lumpur airport and show them the Thailand visa that was also in my passport. Therefore I was able to reach Thailand by plane. (PV12, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

According to service providers, Malaysia and Indonesia are the two main transit countries (other transit countries mentioned are United Arab Emirates, Thailand, and Bangladesh). Some service providers pointed out that in some cases minors have very limited contact with their families back home during the journey:

I've had a few clients who said that they had no contact at all when they came into Australia, so easily 8 months with no contact with family back home. I had others who had contact with them in Indonesia, and then that was it. It is only when they have money to be able to call back home that they would. Most of them were out of contact for the whole time, especially when they are hiding from the government in Indonesia, it's very hard for them, and in some cases I had clients say the family told them not to contact, because they thought the telephones were all bugged, so why risk it? Just get to Australia and call us when you are there. (SP05)

The journey through transit countries was commonly characterised by danger and unpredictability and by the need for young people to 'maintain a degree of invisibility' (SP08). Although the final boat voyage was seen by young people (10 out of 17) as the most logistically difficult part of the journey, respondents found 'leaving home' also difficult, and felt particularly vulnerable while hiding in the jungle, being away from their family, not knowing who to trust, not being able to speak the local language, feeling sick and unable to see a doctor, finding themselves hungry, thirsty and with no money, struggling to find accommodation, and fearful of being stopped by police and government officials. Six respondents mentioned that they had direct contact with government officials during their journey, but only one was detained while in transit:

I had a significant number of issues on the way, because I could not speak the language of the countries I had to go through. I did not have enough money to pay for the journey. I did not have any money even to get food and feed myself. I was always worried about being cheated by the smugglers, and being arrested by the government officials. And I was also very afraid of getting on the boat. Because I had never travelled by boat in my whole life before coming to Australia. (PV04, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

But being away from my family members and not being an adult to know what to do and what not to, was a hard thing for me to deal with. (PV05, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

Service providers identified a number of issues faced by UAMs in their journeys through transit countries, including lack of food and water and poor sanitary conditions during the boat voyage or while in detention, fear of the boat sinking, adverse weather conditions, health issues and no access to healthcare services, lack of adequate shelter, lack of money, isolation and lack of information, separation from groups of other asylum seekers, fear of being robbed or detained, physical abuse, and fear of animals while hiding in the jungle.

Assistance during the journey sometimes came from people smugglers and/or locals who provided phones, food, clothing, information about places or how to find a boat and accommodation, and often from other asylum seekers they met along the way (e.g. by helping each other with money, companionship, finding a boat, or being introduced to people smugglers' assistants). However, the unpredictability of the journey meant that friendships were short lived. Only three participants indicated they already had family members or friends in Indonesia who provided assistance:

There were some rare occasions where the people smugglers would provide me with a phone to contact my family and inform them of my whereabouts. In Indonesia, however, I purchased a mobile phone and communicated with my mother regularly. (PV11, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

But like others, I would meet new people make friends and then we were separated again. Because, during the journey, no one knows what is going to happen and when. So that is why it is very difficult to keep being together and stay with each other during the whole journey. (PV05, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

I had a friend who had been living in Indonesia for 2 years and were waiting for their refugee application to be processed. I made contacts with my friend ... He provided me with accommodation. (PV15, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

Support or assistance from locals, friends made along the way, extended family members, acquaintances and in some cases the assistance of people smugglers were also identified by service providers.

In addition to receiving support or assistance from other people, young people looked after themselves and increased their sense of safety by using strategies such as remaining positive and hopeful, being careful, staying healthy and praying:

I tried to concentrate on the good future that I will have after all this journey is passed. I remained positive and knew that I have no way of turning back since my passport was valid only for a month. (PV14, 19 years old, male, Iran-born, 1 year in Australia)

I was praying to God every day to look after me. I tried to follow the instructions of the guide person very closely at different stages of my journey, such as when we were crossing the Thai–Malay border. I was quite healthy and did not feel sick during the journey. I tried to eat well and take care of myself. (PV15, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 2 years in Australia)

Service providers also mentioned that remaining hopeful, building relationships, meeting locals and praying were important strategies used by UAMs during their journeys:

I know they talked about praying a lot, lots on the boat, and that they've been in absolute fear. A lot of them don't know if they are going to survive the journey, and certainly they talked about the lack of food, being sick, lack of water, so I think the way they do look after themselves is through prayer. (SP04)

I guess their own upbringing to be that strong to be able to survive, something like that and I guess street smart, if that makes sense? ... A lot of them got together in groups of young men, young boys together, I think that helped a few, to build that relationship to other people in the same situation as them. (SP05)

The data shows young people's strong determination to reach Australia. Most participants indicated never considering staying in any of the countries en route to Australia (because they do not accept refugees or because of poor life conditions) or going back to their countries of origin during the journey because of concerns about their safety and security. Three participants also mentioned lack of money or validity of current passport as barriers to return. Only two respondents stated that they thought about going back when they saw the conditions of the boat or realised the dangers involved in the journey.

The data also shows the strong responsibility young people feel about the wellbeing of their family members back home. Fourteen respondents stated that their families wanted to come to Australia and join them through sponsorship. Seven young people also mentioned that their families back home expected them to provide financial support. For three respondents, their families were expecting them to get a good education and succeed in life:

I really wanted to come to Australia, but on the way to Australia I had to go to Indonesia. And then I really liked being and living in Indonesia. Because Indonesia too is a war-free and peaceful country. But because they would not accept me stay there and would not give me any ID card so that is why I had no choice but to come to Australia. (PV01, 19 years old, male, Pakistan-born, Afghan background, 3 years in Australia)

I could sense death with every wave that hit our boat and I knew this is a life or death journey but I also knew that going back was not an option since it would equate to death. (PV11, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

I was certain that I will reach Australia. I knew that even if I am caught and sent back I will attempt again and again until I reach Australia ... My family's first and foremost request from me is to take my education seriously and pursue my dream of becoming someone great in life, someone who can make a difference. They also would like to come to Australia and expect me to assist with their sponsorship and if I am financially able to do so, provide them with some financial support. (PV12, 18 years old, male, Afghan-born, 1 year in Australia)

They want me to sponsor them and save their life. (PV04, 19 years old, male, Afghan-born, 3 years in Australia)

According to most service providers, experiences of detention in transit countries do not influence onward movement (either to third countries or returning to their regions of origin). UAMs' strong determination to reach Australia was also highlighted by service providers, and this determination was influenced by families' expectations for the children to find safety, to join their children in Australia or to receive financial support from them:

I think that it probably makes them more determined in regards to, they come on such a journey and I think it makes them more determined to be able to gain their education and to be able to get employment, so that the journey is worthwhile. Probably it makes them more determined. (SP04)

## Conclusion

By interviewing protection visa holders who arrived in Australia as UAMs, as well as service providers working with this population group, this study provides valuable qualitative micro-level insights on the drivers, determinants and decision-making processes of irregular migration among UAMs arriving in Australia, in particular those born in Afghanistan. In light of the need for a better understanding about decision-making by irregular migrants (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013), this study complements the quantitative findings reported recently by the DIBP-commissioned survey with adult irregular migrants living in Australia (McAuliffe, 2013).

Similar to what was found in the DIBP survey (McAuliffe, 2013), young people's decisions to leave their country of origin were influenced by both protection and non-protection reasons (although the most prominent factors were primarily related to protection). This highlights the complexity of irregular migration and the danger of oversimplifying its root causes. The study has also shown that some UAMs actively participate in the decision-making process to leave their country of origin and in the choice of destination country.

Our research found that while service providers ascribed greater influence to people smugglers in choosing a destination country, young people did not attribute a major direct role to smugglers in their decision to leave or in their choice of destination. The DIBP's recent survey also found lesser involvement of smugglers in the final decision to travel to Australia (i.e. only 16 per cent of respondents were influenced by people smugglers) (McAuliffe, 2013). Similarly, a 2009 study of asylum seekers in Norway (Breke & Aarset, 2009) suggested that smugglers are central in facilitating travel but not in determining destinations. Further research is needed to investigate the potential indirect influence smugglers can have on asylum seekers' decision-making through other people in the community.

Among this group of protection visa holders who arrived in Australia as UAMs, a critical factor that influenced their choice of Australia as a destination country was not the presence of family or friends in Australia, but the information they received from friends and acquaintances in their region of origin. There is contradictory evidence on the level of knowledge irregular migrants and asylum seekers have on the destination countries prior to departure (Koser & McAuliffe, 2013). This group of UAMs had

little knowledge about Australia before leaving their region of origin, and their limited knowledge was related to their reasons for leaving: a safe, free, peaceful and welcoming place for refugees.

Like the results of a study of unaccompanied Afghan children in Europe (Moung, 2010), our research shows that many of the UAMs interviewed lived in a neighbouring host country (sometimes for several years) before they moved to Australia. In those countries, these young people commonly experienced discrimination, lack of rights and entitlements, and even persecution. In some instances, the decision to travel to Australia was prompted by being deported from their host countries.

As highlighted by Hopkins (2008), UAMs have a marginal position for multiple reasons: because they are children and asylum seekers, lacking the company of parents or another adult caregiver. Young people's stories describe a journey marked by unpredictability, vulnerability and the need to 'maintain a degree of invisibility'. Nevertheless, this research illustrates the resilience of the young people interviewed: they were highly resourceful, had a remarkable capacity to look after themselves, and showed a strong determination to reach Australia.

Since the aim of the research was to understand the micro-level drivers and determinants of irregular migration among UAMs arriving in Australia, the approach adopted here was qualitative. As stated by Yin (2010), 'the events and ideas emerging from qualitative research can represent the meanings given to real-life events by the people who live them, not the values, preconceptions, or meanings held by researchers' (p. 8). This study was based on a small sample of protection visa holders (mostly males from Afghanistan) and service providers. Therefore, the findings here cannot be extrapolated to other UAMs in Australia or elsewhere. Nevertheless, this research, along with the previous and current studies undertaken as part of DIBP's Irregular Migration Research Program, makes a significant contribution to addressing the evidence gaps and has the potential to inform policy deliberations.

In some instances, information given by service providers diverged from protection visa holders' statements. Patton (2002) cautions that triangulation does not aim to reach consistency across data sources. Our study has offered multiple perspectives which proved to be successful in uncovering deeper meaning, providing additional and complementary information and enhancing the validity of the research. In order to enrich

our understanding of the complexity of UAMs' irregular migration, there is a need to include in future research the perspectives of female UAMs, young people from other ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Sri Lanka, Iran, Iraq), UAMs living in transit countries, as well as the perspectives of the family members left behind. Importantly, further research is needed to determine how UAMs can be better protected while living in host and transit countries.

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