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The Local Politics of Belonging and Municipal Responses to Irregular Migration and Informal Employment

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Abstract
Irregular migration represents a growing challenge for urban centers in developing countries, where returned migrants often enter informal labor markets without legal protections. This study explores the experiences of irregular migrants who returned from Turkey and Iran to Quetta, Balochistan, focusing on their integration into informal employment and the municipal responses to irregular labor. The research aims to examine social stratification and power hierarchies in the informal economy, documenting how ethnicity, gender, and legal status shape exploitation and negotiation processes. Employing a qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 participants who had previously worked as irregular migrants abroad and returned to Quetta. Thematic analysis identified four primary themes: structural precarity and labor exploitation, strategies of negotiation and agency, ethnic and gendered hierarchies in informal employment, and the political economy of shadow labor markets. Participants described navigating precarious work environments, resisting extreme exploitation, and asserting agency within constrained circumstances. Findings indicate that informal labor markets reproduce existing social hierarchies, with employers and intermediaries benefiting from cheap, disposable labor. Municipal responses were found to be inconsistent, reflecting gaps in regulatory capacity and political attention. This study highlights the intersection of migration, informal labor, and urban governance, offering insights into the socio-political mechanisms that shape belonging and marginalization in Quetta. By documenting the lived experiences of returned irregular migrants, the study contributes to broader debates on migration governance, urban labor politics, and the ethical responsibilities of municipalities in managing informal economies.

Keywords: Local Politics; Municipal Responses; Irregular Migration; Informal Employment.

1. Introduction

Informal employment structures significantly impact the economic integration and social inclusion of irregular migrant workers by perpetuating their vulnerability and marginalization. Irregular migrants often find themselves in informal employment due to restrictive immigration policies and labor market barriers, which limit their access to formal job opportunities (Meeteren, 2013; Trimikliniotis & Fulias-Souroulla, 2013). This situation is exacerbated by the structural features of secondary labor markets, which are characterized by low wages and precarious working conditions, making them attractive to employers seeking cheap labor (Maroukis et al., 2011). In countries like Thailand, informal employment is strongly associated with poor employment conditions, and irregular migrants face compounded disadvantages due to their status and the nature of informal work (Ducanes et al., 2023). In Italy, the integration of immigrants into the informal economy is driven by economic transformations that favor irregular work relationships, providing lower labor costs and increased

competition (Ambrosini, 1998; Ambrosini, 1999). Similarly, in Colombia, Venezuelan migrants predominantly work in informal sectors due to barriers such as non-recognition of qualifications and discrimination, which lead to unstable employment trajectories and poor living conditions. Day labor worker centers in the US have shown some success in improving employment outcomes and social integration for migrant workers, highlighting the potential of social intermediaries in promoting socioeconomic inclusion (Visser et al., 2017). However, the informal economy's reliance on irregular migrants creates a cycle of dependency and exploitation, as seen in Southern and Central-Eastern Europe, where the informal economy and irregular migration are interlinked (Maroukis et al., 2011). Policies aimed at formalizing employment and expanding legal migration channels are crucial to breaking this cycle and enhancing the economic and social integration of irregular migrants (Ducanes et al., 2023).

Informal employment significantly impacts the socio-economic status of irregular migrants in South Asia by exacerbating their vulnerabilities and perpetuating cycles of poverty and precarity. Irregular migrants, often engaged in informal work, face unstable working conditions, low wages, and limited access to social protections, which collectively undermine their well-being and economic stability (Ducanes et al., 2023; Makki et al., 2022). The prevalence of informal employment among irregular migrants is linked to broader labor market inequities and economic pressures, which drive individuals to seek employment through irregular migration channels, often at great personal risk and cost (Makki et al., 2022). In South Asia, the transient and precarious nature of migrants' lives exposes them to multiple health risks, including chronic ailments and mental health issues, further compounding their socio-economic challenges (Kapilashrami & John, 2023; Seibt, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these vulnerabilities, as migrant workers in informal sectors experienced significant declines in earnings and were less able to rely on social networks for support, compared to local workers (Valdivia & Ismail, 2024). Additionally, the lack of legal status and exclusion from urban citizenship rights leave irregular migrants in a state of dispossession and exclusion, limiting their access to essential services and protections (Srivastava, 2022). Despite these challenges, some migrants navigate their precarious circumstances by engaging in high-risk coping strategies within informal labor markets, although these strategies often reinforce their economic precarity. The socio-economic status of irregular migrants in South Asia is thus shaped by a complex interplay of informal employment, health risks, and systemic exclusion, necessitating comprehensive policy interventions to address these intersecting vulnerabilities and improve their living and working conditions (Ducanes et al., 2023; Kapilashrami & John, 2023; Seibt, 2023).

Addressing irregular migration in Quetta, Balochistan, presents significant policy gaps and challenges, primarily due to the lack of a comprehensive migration-sensitive infrastructure in Pakistan. The country lacks a dedicated migration policy and a centralized body for managing migration-related data, leading to fragmented governance across various government entities (Cheema et al., 2023). Economic pressures, such as unemployment and low wages, are primary drivers of irregular migration, exacerbated by labor market inequities and the growth of human smuggling networks. In Quetta, these economic factors are compounded by the historical influx of Afghan refugees, which has been securitized in public discourse, often without empirical backing, leading to logistical and bureaucratic challenges rather than direct security threats (Makki et al., 2022). The irregular migration phenomenon is not temporary but a structural feature of many societies, including Pakistan, where irregular migrants often find themselves in a continuum of legal statuses, complicating governance efforts. Furthermore, the lack of a cohesive policy framework results in a paradox where exclusionary policies coexist with some level of authorized inclusion in public services, particularly at the sub-state level. This situation is further complicated by the political economy of migration, where declared policies often do not align with enacted ones, creating "grey" areas that migrants can exploit to remain in the territory (Ambrosini, 2018). To address these challenges, there is a need for targeted economic interventions in high-migration regions, expansion of legal migration channels, and international cooperation to dismantle smuggling networks while protecting migrants' rights. Additionally, a shift towards rights-based approaches, including better vetting, registration, and regional cooperation, is essential to improve the management of refugees and irregular migrants in line with international

standards (Makki et al., 2022).

This study explores the experiences of returned irregular migrants in Quetta, focusing on their engagement with informal employment and the municipal responses shaping labor practices. By examining social stratification, agency, and the political economy of informal labor, the study provides insights into how marginalization and exploitation are reproduced locally. Understanding these dynamics is significant for policymakers, labor regulators, and migration scholars, offering evidence to inform interventions that balance economic necessity with ethical responsibility and social protection. The introduction connects directly to the study's three core objectives, which collectively frame the inquiry into Quetta's informal labor market. First, the study investigates social stratification and power hierarchies shaped by ethnicity, gender, and legal status, highlighting how these factors structure opportunities and vulnerabilities for irregular migrants. Second, it documents the lived experiences of these migrants as they negotiate wages, resist exploitation, and assert forms of agency despite significant structural constraints. Third, the study maps the broader political economy of shadow labor by identifying the actors—formal and informal—who benefit from the labor of irregular migrants. Together, these objectives position Quetta's informal labor dynamics within wider global and regional debates, illuminating the complex interplay between migration, social stratification, and municipal governance.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Irregular Migration and Labor Precarity

Irregular migration is primarily driven by a combination of economic push factors and labor market precarity, exacerbated by globalization. Economic hardships, such as high unemployment rates, low wages, and inadequate working conditions in home countries, compel individuals to seek better opportunities abroad (Dibeh et al., 2018; Misra, 2007). For instance, the displacement of small-scale farmers in Mexico due to trade agreements like NAFTA illustrates how global economic policies can devastate local livelihoods, pushing workers to migrate to urban areas or wealthier nations in search of employment (Misra, 2007). Conversely, pull factors include the demand for cheap labor in destination countries, where migrant workers often fill low-wage jobs that locals avoid, leading to exploitation and precarious working conditions (Leitão et al., 2024; Misra, 2007). This dynamic creates a cycle where labor market inequities and institutional weaknesses in migrants' home countries drive them towards irregular migration, further entrenching their vulnerability in the global economy (Dibeh et al., 2018).

2.2. Social Stratification and Marginalization

Social stratification among irregular migrants is primarily influenced by factors such as legal status, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic disparities, which collectively hinder their integration and well-being. Legal challenges, including the precariousness of undocumented status, create barriers to accessing essential services and social networks, leading to isolation and discrimination (Sigona, 2012; Vaquera & Rachko, 2024). Additionally, the intersection of gender and class further complicates migrants' experiences, as these dimensions shape their opportunities and integration prospects in host societies (Mora, 2019). Ethnic background and language barriers exacerbate vulnerabilities, resulting in mistreatment and exploitation in the labor market, as seen in the experiences of Chin migrants in Malaysia. Overall, these stratifying factors not only affect migrants' daily lives and mental health but also perpetuate cycles of inequality, limiting their access to resources and opportunities for upward mobility (Butt, 2023).

2.3. Municipal Governance and Informal Economies

The implications of irregular migrant informal economies on municipal governance are multifaceted, affecting both social structures and economic frameworks. Local governments often struggle to manage the risks associated with informal economies, as seen in Shanghai, where the rise of informal work has led to a defamiliarization of community ties, complicating governance efforts and increasing the precariousness of migrants' livelihoods (Zhang & Xiong, 2020). In Europe, municipalities face

tensions between inclusive policies for irregular migrants and national immigration control objectives, with some local measures facilitating migrants' access to services while others reinforce exclusion (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2020; Spencer, 2020). This duality highlights the challenges municipalities encounter in balancing social cohesion with economic rationality, as irregular migrants often lack access to essential services, which can exacerbate social inequalities and hinder integration efforts (Adam & Ilham, 2023; Buckel, 2011). Ultimately, the governance of irregular migrant economies necessitates a nuanced approach that reconciles local needs with broader national policies, fostering both economic participation and social inclusion.

2.4. Migrant Agency and Negotiation

Irregular migrants navigate the precarious labor markets by balancing strategic compliance with their desire to assert agency and resist exploitation. They often engage in survival-oriented labor within informal economies, which exposes them to significant risks of exploitation due to their socio-legal status and lack of rights (Waite & Lewis, 2017). However, this vulnerability can also serve as a catalyst for agency, enabling migrants to mobilize and resist oppressive conditions through various strategies, such as forming networks and participating in social movements (Waite et al., 2015). For instance, low-income migrants in the UAE utilize high-risk coping strategies like subleasing and informal entrepreneurship to contest their economic precarity, thereby asserting their agency within restrictive systems. Ultimately, these dynamics illustrate how irregular migrants can navigate their precarious circumstances while simultaneously striving for inclusion and political mobilization (Strange et al., 2017).

3. Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative design to understand the experiences of returned irregular migrants in Quetta, Balochistan. The population comprised individuals who had previously remained irregular migrants in Turkey or Iran and returned to Quetta. A purposive sample of 10 participants was selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, occupation, and migration experience. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, each lasting 60–90 minutes, exploring participants' experiences in informal employment, negotiations for wages, coping with exploitation, and interactions with municipal authorities. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was applied following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, involving coding, pattern identification, and theme development. This approach facilitated exploration of structural constraints, migrant agencies, and the political economy of informal labor.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Structural Precarity and Labor Exploitation

The findings reveal that structural precarity and labor exploitation were pervasive experiences among returned migrants, shaping their reintegration into local labor markets. Participants consistently reported that upon returning home, they encountered informal employment systems marked by instability, unfair treatment, and a lack of legal protection. Their narratives indicate that exploitation was not incidental but embedded in the broader socio-economic and political structures governing local labor relations. Several participants described how employers, labor contractors, and intermediaries took advantage of their vulnerable position. Despite possessing international work experience, many returnees found themselves unable to secure stable or adequately paid employment. One participant highlighted this challenge, stating, *"We were forced to work long hours without proper pay. If we complained, the contractor threatened to replace us. Even though we returned from abroad, here we feel like outsiders in our own city, constantly exploited for cheap labor."* This quote captures the dual burden faced by returnees: economic exploitation and a persistent sense of social marginalization.

The discussions reveal a pattern of systemic abuse, where employers leveraged migrants' legal and economic vulnerabilities to suppress wages, deny benefits, and impose long working hours. Participants noted that the informal labor market operates with minimal oversight, enabling contractors

to manipulate working conditions and discipline workers through threats of job loss or replacement. This dynamic is consistent with studies on labor insecurity in post-migration contexts, which highlight how returnees frequently re-enter unequal labor hierarchies that devalue their skills. Moreover, participants emphasized that labor precarity was not uniform; rather, it intersected with ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background. Individuals belonging to minority ethnic groups or marginalized tribes reported facing heightened discrimination, including being offered lower wages and fewer opportunities. Women returnees—especially those without strong family networks—encountered additional barriers, such as gendered expectations and limited mobility, which further restricted their access to fair employment.

The findings also suggest that returnees' international migration experience does not shield them from precarious labor conditions upon return. Instead, many felt they were perceived as "outsiders" despite being locals, reflecting deeper issues of social fragmentation and exclusion. This persistent marginality reinforced the structural nature of exploitation, indicating that precarious labor is maintained through power imbalances, weak regulatory frameworks, and the dominance of informal intermediaries. Overall, the results demonstrate that labor exploitation among returned migrants is a systemic and multi-layered issue, rooted in structural inequalities rather than isolated incidents, ultimately affecting their economic stability and sense of belonging.

4.2. Negotiation Strategies and Agency

Despite the structural exploitation and precarity that shaped their working lives, participants demonstrated a notable degree of agency, resilience, and strategic adaptation in navigating hostile labor environments. The findings reveal that returned migrants did not remain passive recipients of injustice; instead, they actively negotiated wages, leveraged kinship and community networks, and selectively resisted oppressive working conditions. These strategies served both as coping mechanisms and as means of asserting dignity within constrained circumstances. Participants explained that, after repeated experiences of unfair treatment, they learned to identify opportunities to renegotiate their roles, communicate expectations, and challenge exploitative demands. One participant described this emerging sense of agency, stating, *"I learned to bargain for my wages and refused work that was too dangerous or underpaid. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not, but standing up was necessary to survive in this city."* This quote reflects the broader sentiment among returnees who viewed negotiation not merely as an economic act but as a necessary assertion of self-worth and survival.

Social networks—particularly ties with fellow migrants, relatives, and community members—played a central role in enhancing participants' bargaining power. Several respondents mentioned relying on peers to identify trustworthy employers, secure safer jobs, or collectively confront unfair contractors. In contexts where formal mechanisms for labor protection were absent, informal solidarity networks became crucial avenues for reducing vulnerability. These networks enabled migrants to make informed decisions, avoid predatory intermediaries, and occasionally secure better terms of employment. However, participants also acknowledged the limits of their agency. While negotiation strategies sometimes yielded improved wages or safer working conditions, participants recognized that structural inequalities—rooted in ethnicity, class, and power dynamics—restricted how far their agency could extend. Migrants from marginalized ethnic groups, for instance, reported that attempts to negotiate were often dismissed or met with threats of replacement. Female returnees faced additional gender-based constraints that limited their ability to resist or bargain independently.

Despite these limitations, the consistent theme across interviews was one of adaptive resilience. Participants viewed negotiation as an evolving skillset developed through lived experiences, trial and error, and collective learning within migrant communities. This agency challenged the stereotype of exploited workers as powerless victims, instead highlighting the complex interplay between structural constraints and individual strategies. In summary, the findings show that while returned migrants face systemic labor exploitation, they simultaneously cultivate negotiation strategies that reflect autonomy, resistance, and adaptability, demonstrating how agency is exercised even within oppressive environments.

4.3. Ethnic and Gendered Hierarchies

The findings indicate that ethnic identity and gender significantly shaped participants' access to labor opportunities, reinforcing hierarchies within the informal employment sector. Returned migrants consistently described how social stratification—rooted in tribal affiliation, cultural norms, and gendered expectations—created unequal pathways to work and income. These hierarchies were not isolated incidents but part of a broader structural pattern that determined who received favorable treatment, fair wages, or stable employment. Participants belonging to minority ethnic groups repeatedly reported discriminatory practices that placed them at a disadvantage in comparison to dominant tribal groups. One participant summarized this experience clearly: *"Being from a minority tribe, I noticed that employers gave better opportunities to others. Women were confined to domestic work with lower wages and longer hours. Our background always mattered more than skills."* This quotation reflects two intersecting patterns: ethnic discrimination and gendered marginalization, both of which restricted economic mobility and reinforced precarity.

Male returnees from minority tribes noted that they were often offered the most physically demanding, hazardous, or low-paid jobs, regardless of their experience abroad or acquired skills. Employers, influenced by local power dynamics, tended to reserve more desirable positions—such as supervisory roles or skilled technical work—for individuals from majority groups. This practice entrenched existing social hierarchies, leaving minority returnees with fewer opportunities for advancement or stable income. Gendered inequalities further deepened these disparities. Women returnees, especially those without strong family networks, faced severe constraints in entering the labor market beyond domestic work. Participants reported that women were typically confined to caregiving, cleaning, or household support roles, which offered lower wages, longer hours, and minimal protection. Social norms that limited women's mobility and public visibility also reduced their bargaining power, making it difficult to negotiate better working conditions or refuse exploitative arrangements.

The intersection of ethnicity and gender produced compounded vulnerabilities, particularly for women from minority tribes. These participants experienced layered forms of discrimination, including exclusion from certain job categories, wage suppression, and social stigma. Their testimonies echo broader literature on intersectionality, which highlights how overlapping identities—such as tribe, gender, and socio-economic status—interact to shape experiences of oppression. Despite these challenges, some participants engaged in collective strategies to resist discrimination, such as relying on community connections or seeking employers with reputations for fairness. However, such strategies had limited reach in dismantling entrenched hierarchies. Overall, the findings underscore that informal labor markets are structured by ethnic and gendered power relations, which significantly influence migrants' employment outcomes and perpetuate systemic inequality.

4.4. Political Economy of Shadow Labor Markets

The findings reveal that the exploitation of returned migrants is embedded within a broader political economy, sustained by informal labor markets, intermediaries, and municipal neglect. Participants consistently described how local labor systems functioned not only as economic mechanisms but also as institutional arrangements that benefit powerful actors while maintaining the marginalization of vulnerable workers. This structural arrangement creates a shadow labor economy where exploitation is normalized and systemic protections are absent. Participants highlighted that employers, labor contractors, and even local authorities are direct or indirect beneficiaries of irregular labor. Migrants, despite their skills and prior international experience, often have no formal protections and are treated as disposable labor. One participant summarized this dynamic, stating, *"The contractor, middleman, and even some local officials benefit. We provide cheap labor, they earn profits, and the city authorities turn a blind eye. There is no protection, only exploitation built into the system."* This quotation captures the multi-layered relationships of power and profit that underpin the shadow labor economy, illustrating how systemic inequities are institutionalized rather than incidental.

The narratives reveal that intermediaries or middlemen play a pivotal role in perpetuating labor precarity, acting as gatekeepers who control access to work, determine wages, and mediate between workers and employers. By exploiting migrants' lack of legal and social leverage, intermediaries

consolidate profits while limiting workers' bargaining capacity. Simultaneously, municipal authorities were frequently described as negligent or complicit, failing to enforce labor regulations or provide oversight. This lack of accountability allows exploitative practices to flourish unchecked. Participants also emphasized that the shadow labor market produces recurring cycles of marginalization, particularly for returnees who are perceived as outsiders despite their local origin. The structural design of the system ensures that migrant labor remains cheap, temporary, and replaceable. Such conditions exacerbate economic insecurity, restrict upward mobility, and reinforce social hierarchies based on ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background.

Importantly, while returnees occasionally attempted to negotiate wages or improve working conditions, participants acknowledged that individual efforts could not dismantle the structural advantages enjoyed by intermediaries and employers. The political economy of the shadow labor market, therefore, functions as a self-reinforcing system that prioritizes profit over workers' rights and social equity. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the systemic exploitation of returned migrants is not accidental but structurally embedded, sustained by the alignment of private and public actors who profit from irregular labor. This shadow labor economy perpetuates persistent inequalities and underscores the need to understand labor precarity within broader socio-political frameworks.

5. Conclusions

This study reveals that returned irregular migrants in Quetta navigate highly precarious informal labor markets, shaped by structural inequalities, ethnic and gender hierarchies, and municipal inaction. Irregular migrants are vulnerable to exploitation, wage suppression, and unsafe working conditions, reflecting the broader socio-political dynamics of the city's informal economy. Despite these challenges, migrants employ strategies of negotiation and agency, asserting their rights within constrained circumstances. The analysis highlights the political economy of shadow labor, where employers, intermediaries, and governance gaps benefit from the disposability of irregular migrant labor. Social stratification, ethnicity, and gender intersect with legal precarity, reinforcing marginalization. Participants' experiences illustrate how informal labor markets reproduce inequality, while simultaneously offering limited avenues for economic survival and social negotiation. Municipal responses in Quetta are inconsistent and inadequate, emphasizing the need for policy interventions that address both regulatory gaps and the socio-economic integration of returned migrants. Policies should ensure labor protection, fair wage enforcement, and social support structures to mitigate exploitation. Further, recognizing the agency and negotiation strategies of migrants can inform governance practices that balance economic needs with ethical responsibilities. By documenting lived experiences, this study contributes to scholarly debates on migration, informal economies, and urban governance in Pakistan. It underscores the critical link between social belonging, municipal responses, and the political economy of irregular migration, offering evidence to guide future research and policy aimed at protecting marginalized labor in urban South Asia.

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