Section III

Representations of Borders and Mobility

in Diaspora
The Borders of Integration

Paperwork between Bangladesh and Belgium

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Abstract
This chapter draws on the experience of Bangladeshi men in Belgium to argue that integration should be conceptualized not as the outcome of ideal-type national models of citizenship and integration, but as the product of the intersection of migrant aspirations and strategies with regulatory frameworks. It argues that a comprehensive engagement with identity theft and new forms of paperwork that straddles South Asia and Europe offers insights into what integration entails, and how it materializes through everyday practices and dilemmas. The struggles for paper documents and processes that establish the paper identities and civic participation that are foundational to integration provokes us to rethink what such processes and policies entail. In other words, integration is also about the struggle to integrate. Such struggles include troubled border-crossings and anxious arrivals, and moral claim-making, civic participation, and collective protests in the re-settled context. The chapter suggests that the everyday aspirations and prolonged disappointments of people in resettled contexts are foundational to comprehending what integration implies. The processes and dilemmas that enable and disable people to integrate in Europe rely on ‘paperwork’.

Keywords: citizenship, belonging, undocumented migration, civic participation, deservingness

In the twenty-first century, undocumented border-crossings have made historical anxieties surrounding nations and citizenship resurface. They have also generated new humanitarian dilemmas. While contemporary humanitarian efforts resonate with old nationalist agendas in ways that reinforce the distinctions between refugees and migrants – fixing the former
in narratives of persecution and needing asylum, and the latter in rational economic choices —, the precarious circumstances in which people continue to be displaced and move across borders make these categories porous. Given the diversity of contemporary displacement and resettlement, Nicholas De Genova's reminder that the study of undocumented migration has been lost in the struggles between demography, policy studies, and criminology holds true. In showing how undocumented migrants do not live in isolation, but in proximity to and engaged with citizens and documented migrants, De Genova illuminates the intellectual paucity of migration studies. He compellingly argues that such investigations on international migration seldom treat the migrant as a subject of ethnographic enquiry, and instead remain content to frame migrants as either ‘illegal’ or ‘immigrants’ (De Genova 2002). His observations hold true for the large numbers who are fleeing western Asia's war ravaged zones, along with those from regions like South Asia who have been displaced for other reasons, and who seek asylum in Europe.

Indeed, the questions that contemporary migration scholars encounter are more daunting than those of a century ago, when investigations primarily focused on migration from Europe to North America (Lee et al 2014). As Richard Alba and Nancy Foner have recently cautioned, all wealthy western societies will be undergoing transitions toward increasing diversity in the coming decades. They advance that, due to massive demographic changes that are largely fuelled by migration, rich nations will increasingly rely on young non-natives and minorities to thrive economically, socially, and culturally. Therefore, they argue that successful integration is central to ensuring that migrants are not marginalized into becoming disadvantaged minorities (Alba and Foner 2014).

In the light of the contemporary humanitarian crisis in Europe, and its implications for those who were already seeking asylum in Europe, this chapter explores the relationships between undocumented migration and Europe's integration policies. We argue that ethnographic attention to the everyday predicaments of asylum seekers in Antwerp, a city in the Flemish-majority area of Flanders in Belgium, and the accompanying collective actions, offer new ways of thinking about resettlement and belonging. We especially followed migrant lives in the context of a wide-raging regularization campaign that aimed at integrating undocumented migrants in Belgium. In particular, we consider the challenges that Bangladeshi asylum seekers face in Belgium, their struggles to procure new documents and their efforts to convince a distant world of their capability and worthiness of civic participation and residency.
The visibility of undocumented Bangladeshis living in Antwerp who marched in Brussels on 17 June 2006 with more than fifteen thousand protestors to the beat of drums and chants, holding placards demanding regularization, assumes greater political significance today as states violently police undocumented border-crossings (Sur 2014; Kalir, Sur and Van Schendel 2012). On that day, as the protestors marched, music blared from a small van with oversized speakers. Families gathered on their balconies to get a glimpse of the large procession. Having arrived in Belgium from various parts of the world, the protestors were mensen zonder papieren (‘people without papers’) – commonly portrayed as ‘illegal’ migrants. This demonstration in Brussels was the grand finale to a regularization campaign initiated in December 2005 by NGOs in Belgium, such as the Progressive Council for People without Papers. The Progressive Council argued that since these people had lived in Belgium for several years, embedding themselves within Belgian society and acquiring language skills, they deserved rights as residents and workers under the clauses of integration promoted by the Belgian state.

This collective protest, the demands of Bangladeshi asylum seekers and their Belgian supporters, provide a useful starting point to ethnographically probe the efforts of mensen zonder papieren to integrate in Belgium. Adrian Favell and Gary Freeman argue that integration should be conceptualized not as the outcome of ideal-type national models of citizenship, but as the product of the intersection of migrant aspirations and strategies with regulatory frameworks (Favell 2010; Freeman 2004). In ethnographically exploring the struggles that surround integration, we suggest that not only macro demographic demands, but also the uncertain circumstances under which people move and are compelled to make a living, make questions of integration critical to the social sciences. We contend that the events that structure integration as a means to enable inclusions within Belgian society, and the everyday uncertainties of Bangladeshis who sought to resettle in Belgium, foreground both the efforts and the dilemmas that surround it. We posit that integration is also about the struggle to integrate. Such struggles include troubled border-crossings and anxious arrivals, moral claim making, civic participation, and collective protests in a resettled context. We argue that the prolonged disappointments and everyday anxieties of people in relocated contexts are foundational to comprehending what integration implies. The processes that establish paper identities and civic participation which are therefore foundational to integration – invite us to rethink what integration actually entails.

The processes that facilitate and impede people’s integration in Europe rely on what we call ‘paperwork’. In what follows, we ethnographically and comprehensively engage with identity theft and new forms of paperwork.
that straddle Bangladesh and Belgium. From 2006 until 2011, we conducted participant observation and interviewed Bangladeshis who were at various stages of asylum appeals, as well as those who had stayed on in Belgium after their request for asylum had been rejected. Unlike the asylum seekers from Africa and Latin America, undocumented Bangladeshis were all men.1 Their specific predicament as men and Muslims demonstrate how gendered and religious identities reinforce racial stereotypes that cast Muslim men as criminals. Since the presence of foreigners in Europe (both with and without documentation) is at the centre of contemporary debates on citizenship, the lives of Bangladeshis in Antwerp offer valuable lessons into the everyday enactments of integration policies, their potentials, and pitfalls.

**Paperless Lives in Belgium**

Following the Second World War and through the 1950s, the presence of foreign workers recruited through guest-worker policies and from former colonies transformed Europe’s social landscape. By the 1970s, family reunification schemes ensured that this foreign work force established communities with strong institutional bases and political aspirations. The presence of foreign workers widened the political horizons of citizenship from being uniquely and singularly premised on shared nationhood to alternative emancipatory interpretations, such as post-national citizenship. Yasemin Soysal makes a compelling argument that post-national citizenship occurs when the logic of universal personhood replaces nationhood and universal human rights replace national rights. However, she also acknowledges that there is a dialectical tension between national citizenship and universal human rights, where the nation-state continues to act as the primary mediator and guarantor of both types of rights (Soysal 1994).

The consequences of this tension between national citizenship and universal human rights are evident in Belgium. Belgium was one of the main migrant-receiving countries in the post-war period (Moch 2003). Workers from Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and Turkey could travel freely to Belgium and formalize their stay after they had started to work (Martiniello and Rea 2003). These migrants were considered welcome ‘guests’, as Belgium needed them to alleviate labour shortages. A decade of economic prosperity followed, during which migrants settled in urban conglomerations. The host population perceived them as docile and honest (Martiniello 2003). However,

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1 We have changed all names to protect the identities of our interviewees.
when labour shortages decreased due to the economic downturn in the 1970s, migration policies became more restrictive, and efforts were increasingly made to prevent migration (Martiniello 2003). The economic crisis of the 1970s negatively impacted Bangladeshis in Europe. Like other migrants who did not have relevant educational skills, they were unable to look for alternative employment. The rising numbers of immigrants on welfare benefits set a new negative tone to public opinion on immigration, in which non-European immigrants were seen as depleting the welfare state. Bangladeshi migrants sought asylum after the end of labour recruitment in 1973 and continued to legally arrive in Western Europe to work in the 1980s (Knights and King 1998).

In Belgium, however, other forms of migration persisted even after guest workers were no longer being recruited: in the 1980s, family reunification was on the rise, and since the beginning of the 1990s, a growing number of asylum seekers have arrived (van Meeteren, van San, & Engbersen 2008). At the end of the 1990s, irregular migrants occupied churches and went on hunger strikes to demand regularization. As a response, the Belgian federal state instituted a regularization campaign in 2000 as an attempt to end the marginalization of migrants without documents. The number of asylum applications submitted as part of this campaign was 42,691 – the highest ever recorded in Belgium. There were several grounds on which migrants could be regularized, including special ties to Belgium or Belgians – commonly interpreted as ‘integration’ (COM 2004). In practice, this meant that applicants would try to prove their special ties by adding all kinds of paperwork to their application. This paperwork, for example, would include letters from Belgian citizens who acknowledged their friendship with the applicant, or from Belgian children who stated that they were friends of the applicant’s children. Proof of school enrolment and membership in social organizations were other criteria for integration. Undocumented residents frequently invoked these and supplied papers in their regularization applications.

After this round of regularization in 2000, Belgium escalated border controls for irregular migrants while making it easier for regular migrants to obtain Belgian nationality. This marked the beginning of new Belgian immigration policies based on the twin pillars of stringent rules about immigration and asylum aimed at newcomers, and an integration policy for older migrants who were already present in the country. Over a period of time, the integration framework expanded to, perhaps unintentionally, also to include services for people without papers.

Although illegal entry and stay is considered a criminal offense punishable by a fine and/or detention of up to three months under Belgian law, Belgian authorities detain to deport, rather than imprison, irregular migrants.
Furthermore, the police do not deport individuals who have on-going regularization applications (van Meeteren 2014). One way of legalizing an irregular status is to apply for regularization under ‘exceptional circumstances’. The criteria for these special circumstances are unspecified. We observed that people made efforts to learn the native language, procured letters from citizens they know well, placed their children in school, and had long lengths of stay. Each of these factors was sometimes considered exceptional for regularization. However, the chances of regularization are invariably slim – only about 300 people per year are granted regularization based on exceptional circumstances (van Meeteren, van San, & Engbersen 2008). Most lawyers and NGO activists who give legal advice recommend that irregular migrants claim integration as a ground for regularization. Although unspecified by the law, the organizations that interact with irregular migrants argue that integration is a valid criterion. Since ‘integration’ is not a clear-cut concept and can be interpreted in different ways, these applications are, in legal terms, trial-and-error exercises. Many irregular migrants try, and some try more than once. On average, 15,000 irregular migrants apply for regularization in Belgium each year (van Meeteren, van San, & Engbersen 2008). Since the possibilities for individual regularization are limited and uncertain, often the only chance of legalization is through general and collective campaigns. Throughout 2006, Bangladeshis and others occupied churches, demonstrated in the streets, and engaged in hunger strikes all over Belgium. These actions began in response to a series of events in 2005, when a group of 130 irregular migrants occupied a church in a district of Brussels. After a prolonged hunger strike, the Minister of Internal Affairs conceded to their demand for residency, which in turn sparked similar actions all over the country. The UDEP (Union pour la Défense des Sans-Papiers) a collective of irregular migrants organized these. With the support of several NGOs and semi-governmental organizations, the ‘pro-regularization movement’ managed to influence government debates about the reform of asylum procedures. Further, it managed to get the government to formalize some of the criteria for individual regularization that had been used informally since the previous collective regularization. For example, the criterion used during the campaign in 2000 that migrants who had been enrolled in asylum procedures for an unusually long period of time would be granted regularization, now became formal policy. However, migrants who have been involved in crimes, served jail sentences, or caught using false identity papers or providing a false name are denied regularization (van Meeteren, van San, & Engbersen 2008).
Papers and Lives

The contemporary migration of Bangladeshis to most European countries reflects recent migration pathways between countries that have little historical association. This is symptomatic of the new globalization of the migration process, which sees ethnic communities establishing themselves with enormous rapidity in different parts of the world (Knights 1996). Upon their arrival in Belgium, Bangladeshis and other undocumented people become subject to state scrutiny. This is not only because they are compelled to use the services of migration agents and brokers for travelling but also as they arrive without documentation. Belgium has responded to the presence of undocumented people with a combination of regularization measures that depend on a pre-determined set of conditions and punitive responses, including deportations. Like other mensen zonder papieren, those Bangladeshis we followed during the regularization campaign and after, were quick to realize that they were not welcome in Belgium. Moreover, being Muslim men, their religion and gender further marginalized them. For Belgians, Bangladesh is internationally discredited as an example of high corruption and is considered part of the Islamic terror frontier. In addition to race, Islam and crime are seen as representative of the migrant threats that haunt Western Europe. Because of these public perceptions, Bangladeshis in Antwerp conveyed that Belgians aligned them with Turkish and Moroccan migrants with whom they have no historical or cultural links, except for supposed connections to crime, delinquency, and shared religious beliefs. However, their legal status and predicaments in Belgium are vastly different from these earlier settlers.

With the exception of Minaz and Karim, who had been residing in Europe for over twenty years, most of the Bangladeshi men we spoke with had been completely clueless about their final destination in Europe when they left their villages in Bangladesh. They travelled cramped in the bellies of cargo ships, and partly by roads, navigating complicated routes, aided by migration brokers who guided them to Europe. These brokers, commonly referred to as ‘visa dalals’, manage the business of the ‘European dream’ an illustration of what David Kyle and Christina Siracusa designate a ‘migrant-exporting scheme’ (Kyle & Siracusa 2005). In most instances, the brokers emphasized wage differentials between Bangladesh and European countries as the selling point, concealed legal requirements and differences in actual costs of living. Visa dalals in Chittagong, Dhaka, Mumbai, and Dubai swiftly dispatched them to Europe. Spanning airports and seaports were other collaborators – customs officers, immigration services, and navigators
who let them pass with false names and forged documents. Occasionally, brokers coached them to assume false identities that they could convey to the immigration authorities. After arrival in Europe, there were sympathizers who had arrived earlier under similar circumstances and provided shelter, employers who hired them for below-minimum wages, ‘co-illegals’ who supplied information, migrant support organizations, and lawyers who aided them to make appeals for asylum. In several instances, women in Belgium offered to marry Bangladeshi men for a high fee, to enable to prove that they had emotional connections to the country. Each industry had cashed in on the basic aspirations for stable resettlement. Like state agents in Bangladesh, ones in Belgium too, ignored, restricted, regulated, and in several instances, supported these acts.

While for some Bangladeshis who were part of the public call for a regularization campaign in 2006, Belgium was the first port of entry; others had been circulating through Europe for anything between seven and 25 years. Bangladeshis in Belgium found themselves aligned with second-generation Muslim migrants who Belgians equated with asylum seekers, and regard as riding on the benefits of the welfare state. In contrast with ‘post-national’ guest workers and their descendants, mensen zonder papieren are uniquely located at what we designate a territorial paradox. It is especially important to acknowledge this category today, with the massive border fortification programs that European nation states are undertaking to prevent refugee movements in the light of recent air strikes and wars in western Asia. War and devastation across western Asia along with migration brokerage are likely to ensure the persistence of mensen zonder papieren as a category that oscillates between the clear-cut definitions of refugees and migrants.

Bangladeshis in Belgium are simultaneously situated within a territorial vacuum and intensely shaped by territoriality. Paperwork that includes the loss of original passports and identity papers confiscated by migration agents and the quest for new documents underscores this territorial tension. Both people displaced by wars and those depending on predatory migration brokers fall outside the labour regulatory structures of labour-sending and receiving nation-states. In the absence of a sending nation-state and documentation that espouses nationality and labour connections, mensen zonder papieren also contrast sharply with former guest workers who have resettled in Europe. Upon their arrival in Europe, such unauthorized migrants are entirely dependent upon border-patrol agents, humanitarian agencies, the regulatory framework of the nation-state they manage to get a foothold in and others who share similar predicaments.
Mannan, who left Chittagong in 1998, was unaware of the papers he needed to travel to Europe. For him, paperwork – or the actual implications of having a paper document – started in Dubai when his broker confiscated his passport. Mannan who had newly acquired this, could barely relate to it as an identification document. Upon his arrival in transit destinations such as Dubai and Morocco, unknown brokers controlled his movements. These brokers destroyed his passport and other identity papers, and they compelled Mannan and other travellers to camp for months in concealed places while they secretly arranged routes of travel to Europe. During his confinement in one such secret camp in Dubai, Mannan stayed with a group of Indians and Pakistanis for a month. After this, the broker arranged their travel in batches to mitigate the risks of being associated with illegal entries. Some were made to travel via Eastern Europe, and some via Morocco. Mannan told us that the final group of 41 South Asians left for Turkey a few days after him, but had never arrived in Europe; all of them had died from their injuries after their truck overturned.

Karim purchased a fake United Arab Emirates passport for 4000 euros, obtained by selling his only plot of land in Feni district in Bangladesh. From Dubai, a broker arranged his place as a crewmember in a cargo ship with seven Indians and Pakistanis. He was supposed to load sugar and sail to Jordan, but he jumped ship in May 2002. He left his false passport in the cargo ship at the Antwerp harbour. He had no idea about Europe; he was only acquainted with stories of England, where his brother had lived for over twenty years. Upon his arrival in Antwerp, Karim walked through the streets and found a shop owned by a Bangladeshi who advised him to destroy his passport. He was sheltered there for twelve days, too scared to venture outside. During this time, he wrote his first asylum appeal and travelled to Brussels to register his fingerprints with the immigration office. Having no recourse to legal employment, Karim submitted a request for asylum on the grounds of political persecution (coinciding with political upheavals in Bangladesh).

The Belgian state places Karim and Mannan in the category of ‘bogus asylum seekers’, ‘rejected asylum seekers’, and those whose asylum pleadings are in various stages of consideration. With no passports, they continued to inhabit the grey zone between asylum and criminality, living through several appeals and judgements for more than ten years. At the first stage of asylum, when their claims were being considered, they were given a white identification card, which entitled them to receive social welfare. If their asylum hearing ends on a positive note, they would receive an orange card. This confers on them the right to work. For those who held orange cards, the
aspiration was what they called a plastic card – a residence permit, which allowed them to travel back and forth to their country of origin. Finally, many dreamt of a red passport, which would confer on them Belgian nationality, marking their entry into Belgian citizenship. In this way, state systems of registration that includes graded identity cards, embrace citizens and bring them under state surveillance and control (Torpey 2000). Only after landing in Europe did Mannan and Karim realize the enormous importance of having new papers – through repeated asylum pleadings, visits to asylum lawyers, and appeals for regularization. For four years, their inconsistent testimonies had made their asylum claims weak, judges had rejected their appeals and struck them off social welfare. When we met them they were always agitated, pensive – awaiting regularization.

Tanveer, who managed a telecommunication shop, was not as perturbed about his irregular status, unlike Karim and Mannan. Speaking to us over the faint tune of Bollywood music while he cheerfully managed irate customers complaining about faulty connections, he conveyed that he had resigned himself to a life of uncertainty. A highly reluctant migrant, Tanveer’s father had cajoled him to enroll in a management course at the University of Paris in 1993. In Tanveer’s self-depiction, he aligned himself with people from his district, Bogra, whom he argued were exceptions to footloose Bangladeshis. To substantiate this claim, he stated that in the past years he had not met anyone from his district anywhere in Europe: ‘Even gnawing poverty does not push us to leave our hometown; we would rather sell betel leaves on the streets than leave’. Within six months of his arrival in Paris, Tanveer’s father died, causing the flow of funds that Tanveer relied on to dry up. Without completing his management course, he tried to find work in Paris and failed. Acquaintances asked him to apply for asylum. He sought asylum as an activist victimized due to his political beliefs and was rejected. Within the next two years, he moved to Cyprus and then Belgium.

When Tanveer’s asylum appeal had reached its final stages in Brussels, however, he distanced himself from his own testimony. To the complete disbelief of his asylum lawyer, he informed the judge that he was repulsed by Bangladeshi politics as a student, had no political affiliations, and was neither a persecuted Awami League activist nor a Bihari refugee from Bogra, as his asylum papers had stated. He informed the court of his difficulties in being a student without funding, being away from Bangladesh for over a decade, and not acquiring any skills that would help him to gain employment in Bangladesh if he were to go back. Tanveer pleaded for support. The judge – although sympathetic and touched by his frank testimony – responded that he did not ‘fit’ into any schemes for support in Belgium, which were
limited to asylum claims. Since then, Tanveer has stayed on in Antwerp, managing a telecommunication shop for a Pakistani employer. His ambiguous predicament shows the limitations of integration policies that assume people can only arrive in Europe as victims of fear and persecution as well as disregard how circumstances compel legal immigrants like students to become irregular.

The Right to Reside

Whether *mensen zonder papieren* like Tanveer, Karim, and Mannan will get the rights to residence and work in Belgium is decided by a combination of factors: the Belgian state and its asylum, integration, and regularization policies; the Bangladeshi state, its international rankings for democracy, corruption, fundamentalism; facts and figures that match crisis databases; and, finally, the oppositional discourses of Islamophobia and pro-migrant solidarities in Western Europe. Additionally, *mensen zonder papieren* are juxtaposed between the politics of the pan-European multiculturalism – with which Belgium aligns – and discourses on integration, which speak to sub-nationalism in Flanders. They benefit, for instance, from an asylum framework that is guided by humanitarian agendas and international covenants such as the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. Outside the asylum system, some of their human rights are guaranteed by civil society organizations. Integration policies in the Belgian federation are organized along linguistic divisions (communities): Dutch, French, and German. Brussels, where all three languages are accommodated, has its own integration policy. Flemish integration policies have persistently emphasized the ability to master the Dutch language, amongst other criteria (Bulcaen & Jaspers 1999, cited in Coffé & Tirions 2004, 34). This is an expression of Flemish sub-nationalism, which emphasizes that the language (historically) spoken in the region should be spoken by all residents of the region, in order to constitute a collective identity group (Coffé & Tirions 2004). The Flemish sub-nationalist consciousness started to grow in the early 1990s after the electoral gains of the extreme-right Vlaams Blok (later known as Vlaams Belang), and has remained high ever since (Billiet, Coffé, & Maddens 2005).

*Mensen zonder papieren* from Bangladesh feel that they are rejected by the Belgian state, which denies them residency and permission to work, and by Belgian society, which treats them as unwanted aliens. This perception of un-wantedness is reinforced by anti-immigrant politics, which are not
only aimed at undocumented migrants but also at former guest workers, their children, and those who have been granted asylum. This is especially so in the cities in the Flanders, where Vlaams Belang’s has obtained massive electoral victories over the past fifteen years. For instance, in local elections in October 2006, almost a third of Antwerp’s inhabitants voted for this party, whose rallying cry was to ‘put our own people first’, weed out criminals among migrants, and get all migrants to integrate into the Flemish sub-national culture. The mainstream parties initially agreed that they would not form a coalition with Vlaams Belang because of this anti-immigrant discourse. Although the parties have stuck with this agreement, however, there has been a convergence in the immigration discourse over the years; several mainstream parties now echo the views of the extreme-right wing, albeit in softer tones (Billiet, Coffé, & Maddens 2005).

Armed with a degree in Chemistry from Jagannath College in Dhaka, and organizational skills gained as the head of the Flemish Bengali Association (FBA) – an association of Bangladeshis – Warsi argued that Europe has failed to understand the human conditions that persuaded him and others to cross several difficult and violent borders. He felt that the ground rules for humanitarian concerns should be rooted in the human condition. Hunger and death should determine the causes that deserve shelter and social support – whether these are fuelled by war or poverty should be immaterial. But the European framework fails to understand that the basic human condition is death – and the specific events that trigger it should not influence asylum policies. The system should not, therefore, privilege war over famine or economic crisis. He justified his presence in Belgium as a response to the political crimes perpetrated by developed countries upon nations like Bangladesh after depleting their resources.

Warsi never failed to remind us that he did not work because he wanted to be on the ‘side of the law’. He denied that his entry was ‘outside’ the law; his carefully crafted story of religious persecution as a Ahmadiyya minority explained and justified his presence in Belgium. Warsi felt that illegality was essentially a western condition that was used as a tool when countries wanted to close their borders. He referred to a circular issued by the Belgian state in 2005 directing its nationals not to travel to Bangladesh as tourists for security reasons. The same country, he declared, turned away asylum seekers from Bangladesh without any remorse! Unike Warsi, Shahidul proactively sought employment since he needed to remit money home for his family. Once, he was caught by the police in a shop where he was working in the back. The police asked him to leave the country within five days. However, like Warsi, he argued that since he was not a criminal, he would not leave
the country. He produced his asylum papers. He stated that: “I knew and they knew that formally, since I did not have work permit, it was illegal to work. But that did not make me into a criminal, did it?”

Influenced by Warsi’s leadership, several Bangladeshis in Belgium awaiting hearings for their asylum appeals reiterated his political views. Shahidul explained his presence as circumstantial and nothing more. But no one, he claimed, had made any attempt to know either the circumstances which compelled his displacement as an unemployed youth from Bangladesh or even his current precarious existence in Antwerp as a person who did not belong here. He hated participating in the charity dinners organized by their Belgian supporters, and was acutely conscious of being declassed. He compared these dinners to the kangali bhojon in Bangladesh, where affluent and charitable Bangladeshis distribute free food to the poor.

Jeroen, a Belgian official who works for the Ministry of Integration in Antwerp, emphasized the state’s official position on irregular migrants. He lamented the large presence of ‘adventure cowboys’ who snatched rights away from genuine asylum seekers. He further argued that, as a city, Antwerp displayed a complete lack of political courage and was unable to deal with migrants without papers. Although he was closely involved with regularization campaigns as a part of his official duties, he remained sharply critical. He found the campaign idealistic and estranged from reality: ‘They believe very much in the vision that those people should have the right to stay here, while the starting point should always be that we should investigate whether these people do in fact have the right to reside here’, he remarked in indignation. He attributed the primary cause of migration to economics, aided by courage and financial capacity. ‘This is in fact a perverse system that causes the real political refugee to have less and less chances to come here, and the courageous, the cowboys [...] people from Africa, Asia, South America, those cowboys, they come here.’ He bitterly recalled from a recent church asylum visit that none of the migrants could even speak Dutch – the opposite of the image promoted by activists that such migrants are linguistically integrated. He predicted that Belgium’s immigration system would collapse if migrants were to be regularized. Instead, he argued that the system should reject un-integrated migrants, saying, ‘Sorry but you are not integrated, you have been here for six years, and you do not speak even five words of Dutch, wouldn’t you start thinking of going back?’ He advanced that a high premium should be placed on return migration, rather than resettling migrants in Antwerp. The everyday complexities that surrounded migrant belonging defied Jeroen’s precise thresholds of inclusion and exclusion.
Protests and Participation

The main problem is that they present us as illiterates – and criminals. They think we are thieves – there are enough working class white people who will even steal bicycles, but we will always be tainted as thieves.

Shahidul, 14 May 2006

Bangladeshi men had camped in Antwerp's churches in 2006 with other migrants from all over the world. While city residents and Belgian citizens, including asylum activists, journalists, and pastors, arrived in the churches to support the campaign, outside them, right-wing groups like Vlaams Belang held press conferences opposing the campaign.

Warsi was at home in a small protestant church in Antwerp. Over endless sexist Bollywood jokes, he brewed coffee, gargling once with it before speaking into our tape recorder. Even though his numerous appeals for political asylum had been rejected, Warsi was not a dejected man. He marched along with the others and sought out journalists as the head of the FBA – a registered organization of Bangladeshis without papers funded by the Flemish community. Marijke, a Belgian national in her early sixties, is the most vocal Belgian supporter of this organization, which mostly functions out of her house and the blue spiral file that Warsi keeps close at hand. The FBA was started in 2004, when Marijke's friend who was working with integration services suggested that Warsi should organize the Bangladeshis in Antwerp to integrate them into Belgian society. In the past, Marijke had supported migrants without papers by sheltering and providing for them in her house. Warsi has been residing with her for the past seven years; during this time, they wrote several appeals for regularization that have all been denied. When we interviewed her, Marijke was glad that the regularization campaign was in full swing – and that Warsi was pre-occupied, not sitting at home and clumsily helping her with household chores. Warsi occasionally dipped into the bulky blue file as he spoke to us. Sometimes he pulled out documents that were filed in a random order and encased in polythene sheets. Warsi always kept the file next to his mattress in the church. In a separate green folder, he kept a list of his several private petitions seeking a regular residency status in Belgium.

The Belgian state dealt with Warsi and his associates in several ways: rejecting their numerous asylum appeals, sheltering them through its civil society network (mostly with government funding), and finally, doling out funds to the FBA through the Ministry of Integration for the hosting of cultural events. The state therefore extended a helping hand to migrants who could not be deported for reasons like not having passports, while
simultaneously labelling them as illegal. When FBA was founded, Warsi—who conveyed that he had been living a life of self-imposed seclusion from his fellow Bangladeshis in Antwerp for reasons he did not elaborate—called upon Zakhir, whom he had befriended at a camp run by the Red Cross. Within days, Zakhir spread the word through visits to the shops and telecommunications centres where Bangladeshis mostly worked. Bangladeshis with citizenship and residency rights distanced themselves and chose to stay away from FBA’s activities as the latter comprised of undocumented Bangladeshis. The first few gatherings were self-funded by FBA’s 54 members, and the Flemish community, i.e., the local government, funded subsequent events.

In one of the cultural events organized by the FBA and funded by the Ministry of Integration, Warsi hosted a two-hour cultural show addressing an audience of Bengalis with a scattering of Belgians, reading aloud from written notes. Between songs, dances, and a documentary on Bangladesh, Warsi made numerous announcements of the regularization procedures in various European countries. Although in the audience at this event were several Bangladeshis who had settled in Belgium, but did not align with the FBA. They were members of a Bengali Association that is comprised entirely of people who had acquired legal rights of residence. They often employ their paperless co-nationals, but maintain social distance. The FBA members criticized the organizational politics of the main Bengali Association, which, according to them, reflects matobbori (‘feudal politics’) – replicating the patronage and corruption widely prevalent in Bangladesh. The members of the FBA complained that the Bengali Association imbibes nothing from the uncorrupted climate of Belgium; instead, they replicate all that is politically decadent about Bangladesh.

For Warsi, this forum, which defines his existence in Belgium, does not just orient Bengali people in Belgian society, but also more forcefully conveys information to Belgians about Bangladesh. When Bangladeshis find themselves in a country like Belgium where they have no historical links, they are faced with a people who are ill equipped to understand them. They perceive themselves to be lumped together with other migrants and seen as making an illegal living by flooding the streets of Belgium.

Back at the protest, Warsi passionately spoke to news-hungry journalists about how Europe needs to redeem its colonial past. Natives, he argued, had embraced colonizers with civility. This was not reciprocated for migrants who arrived at the doorstep of Europe. The journalists reporting on the asylum demands in the sleepy city of Antwerp lapped up his words and reproduced them almost verbatim the next day.

On 27 June 2006, we helped Warsi, Mannan, and others shift from one church to another. While we walked in a large procession on the street,
the police kept watch to ensure that we did not disrupt the thin traffic on
the roads of Antwerp. Warsi spoke to the police who were monitoring the
procession, assuring them that Bangladeshis were not lawbreakers and
criminals. We silently walked alongside, the drizzle slowly washing away
the paint from our banners. Rofique, another member of the FBA who was
initially disinclined to speak to us muttered that he had travelled enough
from Iran to Russia, after starting out in Mumbai. Now he was fed up. He
grumbled that he was suffering from monetary losses after paying 1500 euros
to a Belgian national for pretending to be his partner. ‘The bitch did not tell
me that they would come to inspect our bedroom, nor did she even warn
me that I would need to pretend to live with her, no! My money is all gone
now.’ His angry narrations called attention to the heavy monetary losses that
he had suffered not only during his multiple journeys but also in Belgium.

We unloaded mattresses from vans and lined them up in their new
destination, and then walked into the new church. At the door, a few men
dressed in smart grey suits and representing the Vlaams Belang chanted
slogans against illegal migrants and blocked our access to the church
temporarily. The journalists who had been following our procession,
and who had interviewed Warsi now scurried forward to record footage.
The opinion of politicians, especially ones that were anti-migration, that
journalists reported fed into prior public biases. We waited for the small
group to disperse before accessing the church premises. Close to the altar, a
makeshift podium had been created for the speakers. A group of Congolese
drummers broke into thundering beats before the speeches began. The
pastor spoke to his audience of mensen zonder papieren and activists. A
kindergarten teacher pleaded on behalf of her Belgian six-year-olds who
would miss their classmates if their parents were deported for not having
papers. From the audience, Warsi snatched the two-year-old Shamima from
her father Mannan and marched up to the podium reserved for speakers.
Shamima’s presence in his arms made Warsi look human. Shamima seemed
momentarily taken aback by the attention, but recovered soon enough to
clap her hands in glee and smile at a kindergarten teacher who sat in the
audience. Cameras flashed once again. Warsi took out a somewhat crumpled
poster from his inner jacket, and flashed it to the packed church. It read
‘Shamima, our girl zonder papieren turns two today’. At the sight of a child,
and the accompanying banner, the audience broke into loud applause and
the drummers thundered once again. The noise slowly died down and the
speeches concluded. Shamima jumped from Warsi’s arms to Marijke as
we walked to a large kitchen room where benches had been lined against
the wall.
Mannan, who was trained as a cook had worked for two days to prepare meals for everyone involved in the regularization campaign to celebrate his daughter's second birthday. He heaped generous spoonfuls of food onto paper plates, which we passed on as people streamed into the kitchen and filled up benches. Shamima stood somewhat agitated in a corner, as her Indonesian Muslim friends had decided not to attend the dinner since it was held in a church. Despite the marital frictions that this dinner had created, more than 20 Bangladeshi men had gathered that evening to support the cause of regularization. Their faces bore signs of exhaustion from working all day in grocery stores and supermarkets; others left soon after dinner for shifts in night shops. They heaped a table with brightly wrapped presents. Marijke gently held Shamima and sliced a huge cherry cake as we applauded. Events like this that demonstrated Bangladeshi hospitality and generosity, as well as the FBA, provided Bangladeshi men with an avenue to distance themselves from the criminality associated with being ‘illegal’ Muslim men. Most members of the FBA held that the Belgian state's funding of the organization's activities demonstrated that they had a quasi-legal existence and that their presence had state support. In other words, their presence, although unauthorized, was not completely frowned upon by the state (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005). Further, the members of the FBA steered clear of comparisons with other settled Muslims communities such as the Turks and Moroccans, who the Vlaams Belang frequently linked to delinquency and crime.

The FBA's emphasis on collective public activities was also important for paperwork: it created a sequence of documented evidence that included the participation of Flemish families. Unlike ordinarily, when their public presence was constrained, they found it relatively easy to claim public space as protestors and activists, sometimes forgoing a day's earnings in the process. Congregating for meetings, writing and reading speeches, holding specific organizational portfolios, and conducting events counts their deep sense of being completely declassed and dehumanized in an alien environment, at least to some extent. The FBA provided a space to regain class status, to feel linked with their co-nationals, and to hold on to notions of belonging even in the absence of national passports. Protracted uncertainties about their status and residency compelled Mannan and others to be inventive, taking every possible chance to establish a sequence of events that would help organize their papers, even if this involved exploiting the image of innocence provided by their own children. Flemish constructions of good citizenship have occasionally extended to ‘deserving’ and ‘integrated’ irregular migrants through the process of collective and individual regularizations. In their struggles for papers,
Bangladeshis in Antwerp have emphasized their deservingness while at the same time Belgian policies have increasingly limited their opportunities and claims to gain such deservingness over time. These processes effectively make deservingness both a civic obligation and a privilege (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas 2014). On 19 November 2006, two church asylum activists were granted papers, but neither were Bangladeshi. As the church protests wound down, most of our respondents dispersed. At the same time, Vlaams Belang grew in electoral popularity. In 2009, the Belgian authorities decided to issue another general amnesty. Irregular migrants could apply for regularization based on a set of special criteria that were valid for a period of three months. During this period, irregular migrants could claim ‘durable local embeddedness’. In practice, this meant that persons who had been in Belgium for five years and who could prove ‘integration’ could apply. It was only possible to claim ‘durable local embeddedness’ during these three months. About 30,000 people applied, of which only about 10,000 cases were new applications. The others were individual requests for regularization that had been shifted to the general regularization campaign (van Meeteren 2010).

Conclusion

The struggles of undocumented Bangladeshis to integrate in Belgium foreground two political conjunctures in contemporary Europe. Etienne Balibar has powerfully illuminated the first, arguing that the struggles and dealings of people without papers are privileged moments in the development of ‘active citizenship’. Without this, he cautions that there is no polity, but only a ‘state cut off from its own society and petrified in its own abstraction’ (Balibar 2004). Read in the light of Balibar’s words, the FBA and the moral and political claim making of mensen zonder papieren illuminate citizenship from below – which, as Balibar argues, combines submission to the rationality of the state with activist solidarity. For Balibar, the period of vacillation between the old forms of national sovereignty (which is not the same as the disappearance of nation-states) and the struggles of people without papers (sans papiers in France) and their defenders has made a contribution to the democratization of borders and the freedom of movement, which states tend to treat as arenas of their discretionary power. Cecilia Menjívar and Sarah Lakhani have provided another powerful interpretation of the political in the context of undocumented migration. They emphasize that state barriers and hostility towards migrants which push people towards the margins of legality also create conditions that provide the foundations for making
‘transformative, lasting changes’ in people’s lives (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016: 1818). These, they argue, shape integration. They further posit that in a social and legal context of increased ant-immigrant sentiment, pressures to integrate and conform may become stronger (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016).

In exploring the worlds of collective protests, organized civic participation, and the distressing everyday circumstances under which people like Mannan and Tanveer operate, we have shown how paperwork is integral to integration, and how civic participation and legalization efforts can have profound effects on the personal and social lives of asylum seekers in resettled contexts. Integration processes, then, can only be properly understood by taking both collective and individual struggles for papers and their effects into account. The efforts of the Bangladeshi protestors who were a part of the 2006 regularization campaign and whose lives represent the tightening of asylum provisions are important, as they will inform resettlement policies in Europe the coming years.

For Bangladeshi men, several of whom would have swelled the ranks of educated unemployed in Bangladesh, Antwerp is both a location that offers new possibilities as well uncertainty. In a poignant short story ‘Uddin’ (‘The Flight’) the Bangladeshi anthropologist and novelist Shahaduz Zaman illuminates the other side to this story. He describes the journey of a young cattle herdsman from a village in Bangladesh who, caught between rural poverty and urban unemployment, is mesmerized by the images of wealth and bounty hurled through satellite transmissions. Having no land to sell and buy a ticket, he clings onto the wheels of an airplane in a desperate attempt to escape despair. The clouds swirl at his feet and he slowly slips away, his body frozen and dead as the airplane lands in his dream destination. This story, and the everyday struggles of integration in Antwerp that we have emphasized, deserve scholarly attention so that the debates within the European Union that have slowly shifted from arenas of public debate and policy to crime and inter-governmental co-ordination, can once again re-think what it means to cross difficult borders (Guiraudon 2000).

References


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