



Article

The Impact of Temporary Residence Permits on Young Refugees' Abilities to Build a Life in Sweden

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Abstract: Drawing on interviews with young refugees, 20–30 years old, mainly from Syria and Afghanistan, we discuss the effects that temporary residence permits have on their ability to build a life in Sweden. The article includes both unaccompanied and accompanied youth that at some point had been given temporary residence permits. These permits could later be renewed or turned into permanent permits if the youth fulfilled certain tough requirements. Through rich empirical data, we show how these temporal techniques of border control keep young refugees in a state where they fear deportation, which have detrimental effects for their ability to build a life in Sweden. They are not able to plan ahead and they feel forced to work although they would have preferred to study, which puts them out of sync with other young people around them, challenges their sense of agency and increases their vulnerability. Temporary residence permits severely limit the life opportunities of young refugees in Sweden, and thus hamper their ability to achieve the “migrant integration” that is expected of them.

Keywords: temporary residence permit; refugee youth; vulnerability; agency; temporality



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1. Introduction

Sweden has gone through a paradigm shift in migration legislation since 2015 towards increasingly restrictive policies. One key change has been the introduction of temporary, instead of permanent, residence permits as the main rule for those granted asylum. In this article, we show how temporary residence permits are detrimental to young refugees' ability to build a life in Sweden. We conducted interviews with 40 young adults, between 20 and 30 years old, who have claimed asylum in Sweden, either alone or together with members of their families, and primarily originating from Afghanistan or Syria. The overall focus of the interviews was how different vulnerable conditions affected the young adults' ability to build a life in Sweden. The specific focus of this article was inspired by the sense of urgency our participants felt regarding the issue of temporary residence permits and the vulnerable conditions they create. Earlier research (Lind 2021) on youth migration in nine European countries shows that legal status is a primary factor in young people's lives, and how insecure legal statuses have detrimental effects on young refugees' life opportunities across Europe. Sweden is considered to have the best conditions for migrant integration in the world¹. Our results on young refugees in Sweden therefore have the potential to offer clues on how temporary resident permits affect young people more broadly; if they have difficulties under the conditions presented to them in Sweden, it is likely they have similar or even more difficulties elsewhere.

In this article, we analyze the narratives of young refugees who have applied for asylum and have, or at one point had, temporary residence permits in Sweden through the theoretical concepts of temporality, agency, and vulnerability. Our aim is to discuss in detail the impact of temporary residence permits on young refugees² in Sweden. We ask:

- How do temporary residence permits affect young refugees' experiences of building a life in Sweden?

- How can temporary residence permits be understood in relation to broader regimes of restrictive migration rules that create vulnerable conditions for young refugees?

In the next section, we give a background of the political changes in recent years in Sweden through which the changing rules regarding temporary residence permits can be understood. Then, we discuss earlier research on youth migration and “integration” in Sweden and connect this to our theoretical framework of temporality, agency, and vulnerability. After introducing our methodology, we present the findings, followed by a discussion and conclusion.

2. Background: A Paradigm Shift towards Increasingly Restrictive Migration Policies in Sweden

At a large manifestation supporting refugees in September 2015, the social-democratic prime minister Stefan Löfven said that “my Europe does not build walls” (Aftonbladet 2015). Three months later, the message had changed as he proclaimed that the Swedish reception system needed a “breathing space” (Wiese 2015). To accomplish this, several temporary changes were introduced in the 2016 Swedish Aliens Act (of which most became permanent in 2021) to limit the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. After the 2022 elections, three right-wing parties formed a government supported by the far-right anti-immigrant party the Sweden Democrats based on the Tidö Agreement³. This agreement can be understood as the full completion of the paradigm shift in Swedish migration policies that started during the government led by the Social Democrats and the temporary law in 2016, as it suggests far-reaching changes in more or less all legislation areas relating to migration, with the purpose of constructing one of the most restrictive migration legislations in Europe. This agreement suggests, for example, that permanent residence permits should be abolished completely for refugees. It should also be possible to deport people for having an “exceptionable way of life” (*bristande vandel*⁴). Furthermore, parts of the agreement have been interpreted as suggesting that permanent residency permits should be possible to downgrade into temporary permits (The Local 2022). In our discussion of the empirical data, it is clear how young refugees with temporary residence permits worry about not having their temporary residence permits extended, despite the interviews being conducted before the launch of the Tidö Agreement. If such fears may have been seen as ungrounded at the time of the interviews, the agreement makes such projected futures more likely. Consequently, it makes the arguments made in this article even more relevant and timely.

Syrian and unaccompanied asylum seekers in Sweden have been especially affected by the new rules in the 2016 temporary law. In 2013, Sweden became the first country to grant all Syrians applying for asylum permanent residence permits based on an assessment that the conflict there would continue for a longer time (Abdelhady and Al Ariss 2022). Prior to 2016, Sweden granted permanent residency for refugees immediately as a rule and after four years, they could be granted citizenship. As a result of the new rules introduced in 2016, Syrians were no longer granted permanent residency, but instead (just like all other nationalities) received three-year temporary residence permits if classified as refugees, or 13 months long temporary permits if classified as in need of subsidiary protection or alternatively needing protection (Borselli and van Meijl 2021). Both these permits can, under the current rules, be renewed for (normally) two years at a time if the reasons for protection remain. A temporary residence can be made permanent after three years if the applicant is still in need of protection and can support him/herself economically.

The rules regarding unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in Sweden have also gone through several complicated shifts since 2015 (for a detailed description, see Kazemi 2021). Before 2015, unaccompanied minors who had their asylum application rejected commonly received permanent residence permits on humanitarian grounds if no “orderly reception for minors” could be guaranteed in their country of origin. After the change to temporary permits as a rule in 2016, several thousand minors suddenly risked deportation after they turned 18 since no “orderly reception” was necessary to deport them as adults. Many unaccompanied minors had also wrongly been registered as adults through (heavily

critiqued) medical age assessments (Noll 2016) and were waiting for the courts to process their appeals to their rejected asylum applications while still being enrolled in school. As a humanitarian relief, a few rules were changed in the 2016 temporary Aliens Act through the introduction of The Swedish Upper Secondary School Act⁵ (SUSSA). SUSSA gave many in this group (but not all depending partly on their exact arrival date in Sweden) temporary residence permits to enable them to finish their upper secondary school even after they turned 18. While on SUSSA, the youth must apply to extend their temporary permits often several times during their studies until their examination date. They are then given six months after they finish school to find a permanent job with a salary that guarantees that they can provide for themselves. If they fail to do so, their temporary residency permits will run out without the possibility of extension. This law is complex and puts great pressure on the youth to finish their schools and find permanent jobs—something that Swedish-born youth seldom manage to do directly after school. Several of our participants who arrived as unaccompanied minors, but whose asylum claims had been rejected, had temporary residence permits based on SUSSA or had been granted permanent residence permits after finishing school and finding a permanent job.

3. Earlier Research: Youth Migration and Integration in Sweden

Research in Sweden (Beskow 2018) and internationally (Nickerson et al. 2011; Schultz 2020; Ziersch et al. 2021) shows that temporary residence permits to a larger extent lead to mental health issues and a more vulnerable position on the labor market compared to permanent residence permits. Syrian refugees in Sweden with temporary residence status work to a larger extent and, in the short term, earn more money than those with permanent residence status. However, permanent residents have entered education to a larger extent and earn more money in the long term, Jutvik and Robinson (2020) shows. We add to their study by showing qualitatively the driving forces behind these decisions and how they impact young refugees. When interviewed by Wernesjö (2019), social workers problematized the impact of temporary residence permits and SUSSA on unaccompanied youth, saying that, on the one hand, the rules make supporting young people's integration uncertain, and on the other hand, integration becomes key as it is necessary for finding permanent jobs that are necessary to gain permanent residency. This complexity is further amplified by the fact that the Swedish reception system promoting integration of this group is fraught with challenges (Wimelius et al. 2017). Wernesjö (2020) has also shown how unaccompanied youth navigate conditional belonging and expectations to integrate by expressing gratitude, diligence, and narrating a story of themselves as responsible and education-oriented individuals.

However, the harsh treatment by, and rejections from, Swedish authorities have forced some asylum-seeking unaccompanied minors and youth into a state of "social death", as they are "lacking hope and opportunities for agency where they are not treated as fully human or grievable" (Elsrud 2020, p. 500). In her research, Elsrud followed some youth as they re-escape Sweden to other countries in Europe where their chances of gaining asylum were better and where they are able to "regain self-control, dignity and the hope of finding belongingness" (Elsrud 2020, p. 510). Moberg Stephenson and Herz (2022) further show the complex situation of asylum-seeking unaccompanied youth who fear deportation and at the same time are expected to become "integrated" while they wait for their asylum application to be processed. Their deportability (De Genova 2002) hampers their ability to plan ahead as "[t]hey are both told to wait and use their time to plan for a future that might never come"—only after getting a residence permit, they can start dreaming about the future (Moberg Stephenson and Herz 2022, p. 510). Both Elsrud and Moberg Stephenson and Herz describe experiences that are shared by many of the unaccompanied participants in our study. In relation to this earlier research, we contribute in this article with an in-depth analysis of the effects of specifically temporary residence permits on young people's ability to build a life in Sweden, focusing on both unaccompanied and accompanied refugees with different backgrounds.

The above research points towards a key political debate that strongly affects the situation of young refugees in Sweden, namely the issue of migrant “integration”. In his Statement of Government Policy⁶ in October 2022, the new conservative prime minister Ulf Kristersson suggested that “our single biggest Swedish economic and social problem is due to large immigration combined with failed integration”. This conflating of the two policy fields of immigration and integration serves to both enable increasingly tougher demands for making migrants’ residence statuses permanent and raise the benchmark for when one is considered having successfully “integrated”. Recent important critique towards policy-relevant approaches in research on integration has concluded that the monitoring of integration is a “neo-colonial form of knowledge” (Schinkel 2018, p. 1) and suggests that “the notion of integration emerged as the core idea of nation building in diverse post-immigration scenarios” (Favell 2022, p. 4). Schinkel (2018) instead suggests that research such as ours should focus on “what happens when migrants move across social ecologies”. This implores us as researchers to not be limited by, and uncritically reproduce, current hegemonic discourse when studying such politically sensitive issues. In this article, we still use the word “integration” when citing policy, earlier research, and our own participants (whenever they use the term). However, in our own analysis of the social, everyday experiences of young refugees’ emplacement (Hansen 2022) in Sweden, we instead argue for the usefulness of the less politically and semiotically burdened analogy of “building a life” to capture the ongoing process that is specifically present during young adulthood (for migrants as well as non-migrants) of finding one’s place in the world. Through this choice, we aim to resist the taken-for-granted understandings of “integration” in a Swedish policy context that primarily serves to stigmatize those who “fail to integrate” and highlight its politically contested and socially constructed character.

4. Theory: Temporality, Vulnerability, and Agency

In conjunction with the debate on integration outlined above, a shift towards “temporal techniques of border control” (McNevin and Missbach 2018) through temporary residence permits has occurred. In contemporary research, the temporal characteristic of recent migration policy across Europe and other Western states is conceptualized as a kind of migration governmentality that creates prolonged indeterminacy for refugees and asylum seekers (McNevin and Missbach 2018). Such temporal techniques of border control are designed to deter asylum seekers from making claims to protection or to simply give up and return (Andersson 2014; McNevin and Missbach 2018). These temporary forms of legal statuses imply detrimental human costs for those experiencing them (e.g., Schultz 2020), some of which are examined in this article.

One contribution of this article in relation to this earlier research on temporality and migration lies in our focus on young people and the way our participants’ lives during youth are characterized by an increased sense of urgency and impatience to start building a life of one’s own. Youth is temporally defined as a transitory period between childhood and adulthood. Young people experience time differently than adults where young people to a larger extent are forced to “reckon with the future in relation to their present social positions” and, for them, “finding oneself incapable of following the timing of society may radically challenge one’s sense of agency” (Dalsgard et al. 2014, p. 3). In this article, we explore conditions of migration legislation which strip people of their agency, both in relation to being limited in one’s choices in practice, but also in relation to how temporary residence permits strips young people of their “sense of agency” (Dalsgard et al. 2014) through putting them out of sync with young people around them who do not have to worry about their residence permits. In this process, refugee youth are made more vulnerable as they have less influence on the circumstances that impact their self-determination and wellbeing. As such, time is a pronounced dimension in the interview data, where the young refugees’ uncertainty, powerlessness, and vulnerability transform into either agency or passivity, and for some, despair.

Prolonged waiting is an expression of the ability of sovereign states to curb individual migrants' agency. [Huijsmans \(2012, p. 42\)](#) argue that "young migrants are not inherently vulnerable but become vulnerable if, among other factors, their agency is constrained." Consequently, temporary residence permits become a source of vulnerability: the temporary permit is a form of vulnerable condition created by states wanting to govern migration through the stripping of migrants' rights ([Lind 2019](#)). However, this aspect of how states create vulnerabilities is often made invisible "in favor of its role as a protector" ([Anderson 2012, p. 1254](#)).

Even though the concepts are interrelated, vulnerability and agency are not necessarily each other's antonyms. "Vulnerability does not preclude agency and similarly, where young people show agency, one cannot assume they are not vulnerable," [O'Higgins \(2012, p. 85\)](#) suggests. According to [Sayer \(2011\)](#), both agency and vulnerability can "prompt us to act or fail to act" ([Sayer 2011, p. 5](#), see also [Butler et al. 2016](#)).

We argue that having a sense of control of one's life—including one's time—is especially crucial during young adulthood as it is a period when most people make choices that heavily impact the outcome of the rest of their lives, and even more so for migrant youth who must navigate a new context while attempting to build a life. In the analysis below, we discuss how temporary residence permits, understood as temporal techniques of border control, strips young refugees of their agency and creates vulnerabilities as they strongly limit their abilities to build a life in Sweden. However, we also show how some young people are able to be resilient and turn their vulnerable conditions into a motivation for action.

5. Method

The empirical data used in this paper were collected as part of the Horizon 2020 MIMY project. We draw on 40 semi-structured interviews, recorded during 2021–2022, with 13 female and 27 male research participants between 20–30 years old. The majority lived in either the city of Malmö or the region of Österlen (the south-eastern rural corner of Sweden's southernmost county Scania) since this was the main geographical focus of the project. Six research participants lived elsewhere in Sweden. The participants were recruited with the help of stakeholders (who we also interviewed in the MIMY project), voluntary organizations, folk high schools, snowball sampling, and the researchers' personal social networks formed during previous fieldwork).

The participants arrived in Sweden between the years 2008 and 2020, of which the great majority arrived in 2015. A total of 20 of the interviewees had applied for asylum in Sweden with their families; 19 were born in Syria and 1 in Somalia. The other 20 participants applied for asylum as unaccompanied minors; 18 were born in Afghanistan, 1 in Somalia, and 1 in Eritrea. The categorization of "unaccompanied migrant" minors and youth in Sweden is highly debated; it includes young people who came to Sweden alone as minors but whose age has often been disputed by the migration authorities. There is also a large variation inside the group (and among those from Afghanistan) in relation to who were granted asylum and not. The Syrian refugees we interviewed were to a larger extent granted asylum in their initial application, partly due to the favorable regulations concerning this particular group of refugees in recent years. Hence, the legal status of the participants at the time of the interview varied. Many had permanent legal status but had previous, and sometimes recent, experiences of undocumentedness and temporary legal statuses. Some had temporary legal statuses (such as SUSSA) while a few were asylum seekers. Regarding the educational background of the participants, we saw a clear difference between the participants from Syria on the one hand, and those from Afghanistan, Somalia, and Eritrea on the other. The participants from Syria had to a larger extent attended schools and even university studies and/or had parents that were educated professionals, than those from the poorer countries of Afghanistan, Somalia, and Eritrea.

Of the 40 participants, 32 were recruited based on the criteria of living in so called vulnerable conditions in Sweden, in accordance with the MIMY project framework. The

delimitation of vulnerability was broadly defined and include aspects such as insecure legal status, experiences of poverty, racism, discrimination, difficulties in completing an education, or difficulties in finding and keeping a job. In the interviews, we discussed with the young adults (who identified themselves as having experienced vulnerability) what they considered being sources of vulnerability in their lives.

The remaining eight participants were recruited based on the criteria of having experiences of public visibility in Sweden (as per the MIMY project framework), such as receiving recognition for their professional or activist endeavors. However, despite having positive experiences of recognition in Sweden, they had also experienced the detrimental effects of insecure legal statuses during some time in their lives. Overall, our sample mainly includes migrants that were either studying or working, both in low-skilled and highly skilled jobs, whereas only a few were either unemployed or not attending school, of whom two had problems with substance abuse. Considering the great variety among our participants regarding socio-economic class, educational background, and legal status, the depictions of individual experiences cannot be generalized, but still offer some insights into the effects of temporal techniques of border control on refugee youth in Sweden.

Each interview lasted typically between one and two hours. The interview guide prompted the participants to share their experiences in Sweden in relation to school, work, friends, and leisure time, as well as to reflect on their relationship with family members, previous countries of residence, upbringing, and migration trajectory. A total of 16 of the interviews (with Syrian refugees) were conducted in Arabic, since it is the mother tongue of the research assistant in the project (third author of the article), and the remaining 24 were conducted in Swedish by the two project researchers (first and second authors). Approximately half of the interviews were conducted online (Zoom), and half were conducted in person. The choice of conducting interviews online was based on the recommendations and safety measures during the pandemic, and also as per the request of some of the participants. Research has shown the advantages of combining online and offline interviews in qualitative research, in particular when studying migrants ([Andrejuk 2020](#)). Due to high level of familiarity with online video communication resulting from their everyday transnational communication with family members and friends, we conducted the online interviews successfully.

All interview scripts were transcribed manually and systematically coded using NVivo. We analyzed the data according to key themes that we identified abductively, such as: experiences of vulnerability; experiences of school and work; family relations; and future plans. To analyze the material, we applied the thematic narrative analysis methodology ([Guest et al. 2011](#)) widely recognized as an insightful qualitative method to identify key issues raised by research participants. The quotes used in this article were selected based on their ability to illustrate the main themes. Ethical approval was gained for the MIMY project (approval no 2020-04922) before fieldwork started and full written consent was received from all participants. All participants have been given pseudonyms in this article and their data were stored safely on password protected servers provided by Malmö University.

6. Worrying about Deportation

The uncertainty that follows with holding a temporary residence permit was manifested in our participants' lives in different ways. However, a shared experience was that temporary residence permits were a source of worry; and when one worries about the future, it is more difficult to focus on the present. Even if receiving a temporary residence permit is better than having their asylum application rejected, migrants with temporary residence permits are still at risk of not having their permits renewed and being involuntarily deported from Sweden. Several participants worried about potential deportation even though this risk may not have been immediately imminent. In other words, they were all at some point of the "continuum of deportability" ([Sager and Öberg 2017](#)).

Even if practically all⁷ Syrian refugees in Sweden coming since the start of the war and up until today who have applied to extend their temporary residence permits have been

able to do so, there is still a widespread fear that deportation awaits them in the future. In a recent interview, the director-general of the Migration Agency, Mikael Ribbenvik, commented on the suggested changes in the Tidö Agreement that permanent permits should be able to be revoked, and said: “I’d be worried if I had permanent residency” ([The Local 2022](#), our translation). Jumana, 28 years old and born in Syria, explained how having a temporary residence permit makes her uncomfortable in Sweden.

Jumana: I want to feel comfortable in the place that I am living in, I wouldn’t want to live in a place where I am not comfortable. I am honestly worried a bit about my residency status. There is a lot of talk about deporting people, my parents keep talking to me about this and I cannot handle it. I must let go of everything negative and focus on my studies. I want to live happily, and I don’t want to get deported.

The potential of having an application for extending a residence permit as a refugee revoked, is connected to the situation in one’s country of origin. Nader, 21-year-old from Syria, had a temporary residence permit that would expire two years after the time of the interview, and he wondered if he will be able to renew his status in 2024 if the situation in Syria changes. “This really worries me, and I think about it a lot,” he said.

Ali, 22 years old and born in Afghanistan, had lived in Sweden for six years and had temporary residency under SUSSA. He did not have a job and was struggling in school, so he was stressed and worried a lot about his future since he needed to have a permanent job in place six months after finishing school, or he would be deported from Sweden. This made it difficult for him to study and although he studied hard, he then forgot what he had read. “Perhaps it’s because of stress,” he said, “and the stress is because of the residence permit, which inhibits me to build a new life. I want to work, make it on my own, pay taxes, then I would not feel as stressed.” He spent most of his time working out at the gym. By focusing on what he was doing in the moment, he managed to push away the stress and worry he otherwise felt, he said.

Since those on SUSSA had to find a permanent job within six months after finishing school to avoid deportation, it put them in the hands of benevolent, but at the same time unreliable, employers. Sedat, 22 years old and born in Afghanistan, explained his situation before finding a job:

Sedat: I kind of couldn’t trust anyone. The manager at work told me: ‘[I’ll get you] a permanent position when you’re done with school,’ but I didn’t trust him. After three years, he might have had a bad night [and change his mind]. Who knows?

In the end, he was offered a permanent position at a hospital in the region. However, overall, the worry and stress most of our participants felt based on their temporary legal status created an emotional vulnerability that affected their overall wellbeing as well as their ability to perform as students and find the work they needed to gain permanent residency.

7. Not Being Able to Make Plans for the Future

Temporary residence permits caused our participants a lot of worry and stress, not just because they feared deportation, but also because they were not able to plan for their future in Sweden, which impacted very negatively on the participants’ motivation to build a life here. For example, Omar from Syria, 25 years old, said that “People who have temporary residence permits here do not feel safe [. . .] and they don’t have the push or motivation to study or learn the language.” Jumana, 28 years old and from Syria, had similar concerns: “How can we develop and feel like we belong and do our best with no guarantees to stay here?” Another participant, 28-year-old Abbas from Syria, elaborated on the effects of this in more detail:

Abbas: You are allowed to stay here temporarily and build your life, build a social network, learn the language, get a job. But after this temporary residence permit, you may find yourself being sent back. So, ‘okay, I’m wasting my time for nothing’. [. . .] And if you worry about [being sent back] a lot, you don’t succeed in making contacts, learning the language, integrating and being part of society. Because it’s huge, difficult things you

think about. If you think about them often, you can't move on, and it's very hard to push those thoughts away.

Abbas tried to cope, or to be resilient, by telling himself not to think about his family and all his hardships so that he did not get too caught up in his worries, which otherwise could affect his ability to be successful in Sweden. Not thinking about his family did however make him feel like a traitor.

Abbas: It's kind of a betrayal somehow, and it's hard, you don't know how to handle it. [...] I would say it like this: You must shut out the past and shut out the future because of one's [temporary] residence permit. Thinking about the future: Where will you end up? It's difficult. And if you think about the past, it's also hard, and then you can't be in the present.

Furthermore, Abbas said that lacking permanent residency makes you engage mostly with people who speak your own language. He suggested instead that the politicians should support migrants to be “curious, open, and accepting”, which are necessary traits for migrants to “move to the next step” when building a life in Sweden. As we have seen, worrying about temporary residence permits and not being able to plan for the future is detrimental for young people’s ability and motivation to build a life. Arguably, it strips them of a sense of agency—a feeling that is crucial for young people’s ability to flourish and invest in their future. In the next section, we discuss what practical consequences this worry has in young refugees’ decision making.

8. Working Instead of Studying

As a result of the requirements involved when applying for permanent residence permits, most of our participants chose to work when they actually would have wanted to study at the university. In this way, the effects of temporary residence permits are arguably particularly detrimental to young people who are in a transitioning stage in their lives. The unaccompanied participants with rejected asylum applications received temporary residence permits based on SUSSA until they finished school but were forced to find a permanent job to have a chance to stay in Sweden at all in the long term. Those who were granted asylum and had received temporary residence status could apply to extend their temporary permits several times, while studying at university for example, on the sole basis of still needing protection. However, since many worried about their future and the risk of not being able to renew their temporary residence permits, they too felt forced to fulfil the requirements for permanent residency and thus find work. Many of our participants talked about how they had to choose between the secure path of finding an “easy” job that they may not be interested in but that will give them permanent residency, and the risky path of following one’s dreams. Nader had many friends who worked instead of studying because of their temporary residence permits.

Nader: They wasted five years of their lives just to do any job in order to get their residency. This really affected their lives. They accept low wages, and more hours, it really affects them now.

As one is forced to take any job to get a permanent residency, it is easy to get stuck in this situation and lose sight of one’s dreams once it is possible again to study. One example is Masoud, 28 years old and born in Afghanistan. He said that he took the “easy” route by finding a job within health care that he was not initially interested in. Looking back on the choices he has made, he advised his peers not to act the same way he did, but instead take control of their own lives.

Masoud: They [peer refugee youth] should think one more time about their future, you know. And when I see the future, I kind of see this: Imagine, most people who work in health care are foreign. They have chosen by far the easiest route, which is [still] not easy. [...] They have chosen to get a vocational education and go straight into work in healthcare. And then, suddenly, they end up receiving [€2200] per month. Then they get stuck there and suddenly they kind of notice after ten years: ‘I could have done things.’

So, my message is that if you have the opportunity, you should go for something else. [. . .] They should not care about what the teacher says or what anyone says because it's about their life. It's about their future. [. . .] If they have made it so far, [. . .] travelled here, lived through all the hardship, then they can cope with this too.

Masoud's message to his peers expresses a key problem that young refugees with temporary residence permits must manage; navigating the rules that condition your stay in Sweden with your needs as a young person to maintain agency in your life choices. One could say that he urges his peers to not let their vulnerabilities hinder them, but to continue persevering through their vulnerable conditions and turn them into a motivation to be resilient and keep struggling, as they have done up until now. In a way, Masoud is challenging a simplified understanding of young refugees as limited by vulnerable conditions and lacking agency, and instead suggests that they are not fixed entities but negotiable if one finds the strength and opportunity to do so.

9. Householding with Resources and Taking Risks

Two participants, Abbas (already mentioned above) and Ahmed, 22 years old and born in Afghanistan, had, one can say, followed Masoud's advice to not care about what others think but followed their dreams even if it was difficult to do so. They discussed how they managed to resist the forces that stripped them of their agency by householding with their resources and being willing to take risks. Ahmed had permanent residency. However, many of his friends around him had their asylum applications rejected and some of them applied to stay under SUSSA. Ahmed explained that one of his friends felt sorry for himself since he knew that he is part of a game that he has already lost.

Ahmed: In our language we usually say that we are a piece or part of a game that we have already lost. We're not part of the game. It means that he's got a job, and so he's going to get permanent residency, but what happens after two years? He says that: 'I won't be able to start studying again, because I've been paid, I've bought a car, so I'm going to have to pay it. I'm not going to give up on my apartment. I won't sell my car just to study further.'

He explained how many of his friends buy nice cars and apartments, but their living expenses increase, so they are stuck working to pay their bills and covering their loans. He, instead, bought a cheap car and a small apartment so that he could afford to study at the university. He was able to study since he has permanent residency and had more choices on what to do with his life and did not as easily risk getting stuck working and paying off loans, instead of studying. In a similar way, Abbas talked about that he had a lot of friends that had studied to become a doctor or an engineer before but who now work at McDonald's just to get permanent residency. However, he himself had taken the risk and chosen another path and studied and spent a lot of time doing unpaid work to get better at his occupation.

Abbas: It's also a big question: Should I follow my dream, or should I follow my security to get a residence permit and work at McDonald's? I refused it anyway, and so I continued with my dream.

He gambled, one could say, with his security by only being able to renew his temporary residency as a student and not be able to get a permanent residency immediately after three years in Sweden. However, it has paid off as he later was offered a permanent position in a sought-after workplace within his profession. After only a few years in Sweden, he reached a position where he is being publicly acknowledged through his success at work. It took a lot of effort and risk-taking by Ahmed and Abbas to resist these forces and take control of their own futures. However, others did not feel that they could take such control. Karmal, 22 years old and born in Afghanistan, showed how he handled his difficult situation through acceptance:

Karmal: Sometimes you can't decide everything yourself, you should also let life decide something for you.

Researcher: But you feel strong too, you don't identify as being that vulnerable?

Karmal: No, you shouldn't feel weak to the extent that you lose your life, all hope. If you lose all hope, life means nothing anymore. So, you must have hope, as long as life moves forward. So, let it roll forward.

In a way, Ahmed, Abbas, and Karmal's examples show how letting go of control as well as taking control can both be different kinds of strategies of expressing resilience in these vulnerable conditions. Still, for many young people, being forced into a life where one need to work to gain permanent residence permit creates a situation where it is easy to get stuck on a path where one's agency and ability to make choices about their future lives are severely limited, and it takes a lot of effort, both emotional and physical, to overcome the vulnerabilities created by strongly conditioned temporary residence statuses.

To end this empirical section, we want to highlight the great difference it made for Masoud to get a permanent residence permit. He said that the single most impactful event in his life in Sweden so far was when he received permanent residency, it made him feel like a human being.

Masoud: That was the biggest thing because I had been waiting to get a yes from the Migration Agency for about seven years. I longed and struggled to get into that category and count as a human being. I mean, when you get a yes from the Migration Agency, you get a social security number. Then you count as a human being.

10. Discussion: The Vulnerabilization of Young Refugees

Social policy aimed at ameliorating refugee vulnerabilities (from which they sought protection by applying for asylum) can create new vulnerable conditions (Mackenzie et al. 2014). We argue that one example of such a policy is temporary residence permits, which we understand as a temporal techniques of border control. For example, the special rules (through SUSSA) that allow some unaccompanied youth who have been refused asylum to finish school, offers a humanitarian exception for them as they transition from childhood into adulthood. However, it does so through extremely strict conditions where the youth need to find permanent jobs within six months after graduating upper secondary school. These processes could be understood through the concept of "vulnerabilization" (Lind 2019) in which vulnerability is defined as a political process rather than a state of being: The state is the creator of vulnerability—although its representatives decline any such responsibility—through restrictive migration policies such as providing protection but only temporarily. It also has the privilege of attributing the label of vulnerability (caused by state policies) onto specific groups, such as unaccompanied youth. The state then mobilizes this vulnerability, that the state itself has caused and identified, to govern this group through different strict regulations that keep the group's territorial presence and mobility under control.

Ahmed and Abbas, who were householding with their resources and took risks, can be understood as exceptions that confirm the rule of how temporal techniques of border control strip many young refugees—at least partially—of their agency to be in control of their own future. As young people's choice of occupation was heavily impacted by the legal requirements for permanent residency, they often chose jobs below their skills-level and educational aspirations. As a consequence of their vulnerabilization, they became part of the racialized low-skilled precarious work force that conduct much of the jobs Swedish born young workers avoid. This is in line with a study carried out in Australia that showed how especially refugees and asylum seekers are likely to end up in low-status and low-paid jobs (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006).

11. Conclusions

This article examined the impact of temporary residence permits on young refugees' ability to build a life in Sweden. We have shown how young refugees who came to Sweden to seek asylum, and who gained temporary residence permits, still worry a lot about their

potential future deportation. This creates material as well as emotional vulnerabilities that affect their ability to perform in school and find work. These temporary permits also make it difficult for young people to plan for the future and it strips them of a sense of agency, which is detrimental for their ability and motivation to build a life in Sweden.

Further studies are needed to understand what kind of support enables certain individuals to be more resilient in this uncertain situation, although we suspect that these factors will be complex and multifaceted, just like individuals are. The only general suggestion that we can say for certain will improve all young refugees' chances to build a life in Sweden—or to live up to expectations in public debate and discourse on “integration”—is to make permanent residence permits the rule again. Permanent residence permits allow young people more agency in a time where developing agency is central as they transition into adulthood. If the ambition with temporary residence permits is to enable migrant “integration”, one needs to think again. Permanent residence permits allow young people to make long term plans and invest in their own lives and consequently in their new country. Such permits encourage them to study and learn the language, and, as Masoud suggested, feel like they count as human beings.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.mipex.eu/sweden> (accessed on 27 February 2023).

² We use the term refugee here on the basis of the claims our participants have made of having a right to asylum, even though some were still seeking asylum at the time of the interview or had some other kind of legal status.

³ <https://www.liberalerna.se/wp-content/uploads/tidoavtalet-overenskommelse-for-sverige-slutlig.pdf> (accessed on 27 February 2023).

⁴ For an explanation in English about the origin and use of the word “vandel”, see: <https://www.thelocal.se/20221021/%E2%80%8Bswedish-word-of-the-day-vandel/> (accessed on 27 February 2023).

⁵ <https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/Private-individuals/Protection-and-asylum-in-Sweden/The-Swedish-Upper-Secondary-School-Act.html> (accessed on 27 February 2023).

⁶ <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2022/10/regeringsforklaringen-den-18-oktober-2022/> (accessed on 27 February 2023).

⁷ A measure of 99.3% of applicants from Syria had their application for extending their residence permits accepted between 2013 and 2022 according to statistics provided on request by the Swedish Migration Agency. The total number of applications was 73,946. The most common reason for rejection is that the applicant had applied too early or had another parallel application accepted.

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