

RESILIENCY AMIDST THE FRAGMENTED LIVES OF
AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN

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AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN

By

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ABSTRACT

According to the latest refugee statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2011), the number of people forcibly displaced worldwide has reached 43.7 million, the highest number in 15 years. Roughly 80% of this population are women and children. Afghanistan continues to be the place of origin for the largest number of refugees under UNHCR responsibility across the globe. From 1979 to 1990, the largest and most enduring forced migration in human history occurred when 6.2 million Afghans were displaced and fled their homeland to neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran.

During the processes of conflict, upheaval, exile, and resettlement, refugee women face numerous traumatic events and are exposed to various challenges at every stage of their refugee journey. Very little scholarly research has examined their strengths and resiliency during this time.

The primary purpose of this study is to provide insight into the challenges that Afghan refugee women have faced during pre-migration, exile, and resettlement. Specifically, this inquiry using feminist theory and method examines (a) their experiences in all three contexts in which they have lived and managed, (b) the significant roles that they have played, and (c) the coping mechanisms that they have used to overcome the problems in these situations.

The sample for this interpretive qualitative research was drawn from Afghan refugee women in the city of Hamilton and the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario, Canada. The study was conducted with six in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The results provide

contextually laden detail of the Afghan refugee women's unique lived experiences. The results revealed Afghan refugee women as resilient and as strong leaders. The dominant discourse that portrays Afghan women as weak and oppressed should be challenged. Implications for social work practice, education and policy are identified, and recommendations for improved services are outlined.

The right to hope is the most powerful human motivation I know. (Aga Khan IV)

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Throughout my life and especially during my graduate studies, I thanked the Lord in whom my faith exists; he who is most benevolent.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Gulbanu Vellani, and my mother-in-law, Rehmat Bhanji, for their sincere prayers and unconditional love.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The 2006 Canada census counted 48,090 Canadians of Afghan ancestry; they are concentrated mainly in the Southwestern region of Ontario and the Greater Toronto Area, with sizeable communities in Vancouver, Ottawa, and Montreal. They form a very tightly knit community. Afghan Canadians are from various ethnic groups and speak Dari (Persian) or Pashto. Afghan culture places a strong emphasis upon being family oriented, which includes extended family, and upholding the values of collectivism. Traditionally, Afghans come from a patriarchal, family, and home-centred society (Statistic Canada, 2006).

Afghans are also divided along ethnic, linguistic, political, economic, and religious lines. Most Afghans practice Islam, but the Taliban's version of Islam is controversial among the world's larger Muslim population. Islam has a tradition of protecting women and children, going so far as to have specific provisions that define the rights of women in areas such as marriage, divorce, and property rights (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2001).

My decision to pursue this study was framed by my own experience as an immigrant woman who came to Canada over 35 years ago. Although I have been here for over three decades, I feel that I am treated as an 'outsider.' If I feel unaccepted despite being educated, having English language skills, and having lived here for so long, how do refugees who have suffered persecution, human-rights violations, trauma, and hardship feel? The lack of language, education, employment, and other skills in Canada multiplies the effect of settlement for new refugees.

The second reason that I wanted to pursue this study was my involvement with this population. I was appointed as a chairperson for the settlement of the newly arriving Afghan Ismaili families in the early 1990s. In my work with these families, and especially with the women, I noticed the significant strength and courage of these women who had come into a completely new environment and had suffered so many traumas. They were eager to learn, trying to cope with the multiple challenges of looking after their families, working to support their families, and trying to learn the English language in a different culture and environment. After seeing their courage and fortitude, I was motivated to travel to Afghanistan to work for an international nongovernmental organization (NGO). For almost 10 years I worked with various women's groups, and their inner strength and resiliency amazed me. Although Afghans have a complex culture and diversity of experiences, they are very warm and hospitable and show enormous endurance beyond the imagination of many of us in the industrialised world.

Many settlement agencies that work with Afghan women are unaware of their issues and the diversity of their experiences, which are highly individual and differ by culture, ethnicity, religion, and other aspects. The "refugee needs are often misunderstood and sometimes neglected due to lack of knowledge about the population and their experiences" (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2009, p. 18). Moreover, evidence has shown that Canada's settlement policies are currently in a state of crisis, largely because of the lack of a long-term perspective and the combination of funding cutbacks and imposed restructuring by the NGO sector that delivers these settlement services (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). It is crucial to gain a better understanding of the complex needs of Afghan women and how to address

these needs. In this thesis I will weave the voices of the women with my own personal experience of having worked with this population to extend our knowledge of their issues.

Although refugee women face increased vulnerabilities, they often have well-developed moral, political, and philosophical understandings of the events in their lives and worlds. The media, the donor agencies, and some scholars contribute to the image of refugee women as victims. In identifying them collectively as victims, it ignores their identity and treads on their individuality.

Having lived and worked with Afghan refugee women for over 20 years, I have come to know them as strong and active women who challenge patriarchy and stereotypes. I admire their courage and fortitude despite the tragedies they have experienced. Their presence in Canada challenges us to rethink our relationship with them and, in turn, to act to become partners with them in their right to fight for dignity and justice—which is our role as social workers. I also want to challenge the dominant discourse that portrays Afghan women as weak and oppressed.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The next chapter is a review of the literature, which discusses the background and history of Afghan forced migration, defines *refugee*, and discusses gender, the effects of migration, life in refugee camps, challenges to the resettlement process, and the portrayal of Afghan women in light of these issues. The third chapter discusses the methodological framework of the study, the research design, the data-collection methods, the data analysis and management, and the advantages and disadvantages of insider and outsider research. Chapter four discusses the findings of the study and the themes that emerged, such as life in Afghanistan, life in exile, life in Canada,

and women's resiliency. The discussions that follow in chapter five depict Afghan refugee women as strong and resilient. The final chapter concludes the thesis with discussions about social work with refugees who have undergone war and trauma and the implications for future social work education, practice, policy, and research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter highlights the existing literature on the various experiences and struggles of Afghan refugee women during the war in Afghanistan, from their flight to the country of first asylum, Pakistan, where they were in exile for several years, to their current challenges as they resettle in their new host country, Canada. I also discuss the major issues in the available literature of forced migration, the portrayal of Afghan women, and the significant roles that women play. Before we begin to look at the issues that Afghan refugee women face, it is important to consider the background of Afghanistan as well as the history of Afghan forced migration.

Background and History of Afghan Forced Migration

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia, divided into 34 provinces with a population of approximately 22 million. It is bordered by Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China and is considered to have strategic regional significance. About 75% of the population live in rural areas, although only 12% of the land is arable. It is an ethnically diverse country where an estimated 30 languages are spoken; the two official languages are Pashto and Dari. Religion is an important binding factor in the country in that almost 99% of Afghans are Muslims, of whom 80%-85% are Sunni Muslims and 15%-19% are Shia Muslims who are frequently subjected to discrimination. In 2006, it was estimated that 57% of the men and 87% of the females were illiterate. Infant and child mortality rates are amongst the highest in the world, with one in five children dying before they reach the

age of five (Koch, 2006; Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, 2008; Tamang, 2009).

Afghan history is much more complex than the media formulations of the pre and post events of September 11, 2001. The first phase of Afghan mass migration occurred after the military coup in 1978 carried out by the Afghan Marxist political group the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) against the Daoud government. As a result of the increased tensions within the PDPA, the Soviet Union sent 80,000 troops to Afghanistan in December 1979. The spread of violence throughout the country, along with the changes to landownership and marriage customs, attempts by Soviet troops to overthrow Afghan traditional practices such as the *purdah* (veil), and the introduction of mass education, created negative reactions from the majority of male Afghans who were from the Pashtun ethnic group. This led many Pashtuns to leave Afghanistan.

The United States and its Western allies considered the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan a new threat to international security. Subsequently, Western financial aid, arms aid, and other support were offered to Afghan resistance forces, collectively known as *Mujahidin*. Intense fighting led many people to become internally displaced or flee to the neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran. This time, the majority of refugees were Dari-Persian speakers. After the Soviets withdrew, the political situation in Afghanistan remained volatile as neighbouring countries tried to push their interests in Afghanistan and as the various resistance Mujahidin groups turned from battling Soviet troops to fighting each other. A second wave of refugee exodus took place from 1992 to 1996 as civil war engulfed the country.

In 1996 the Taliban captured the capital city of Kabul, and a third wave of refugees left the country. The Taliban imposed rigid, punitive laws based on their strict interpretation of the *shari'a* Islamic law. The political situation was exacerbated by a drought that created widespread food and water shortages for several years. After turning a blind eye for many years, the UN began to implement sanctions against Afghanistan, which further isolated the country. After the events of September 11, 2001, the United States launched its War Against Terrorism and defeated the Taliban in December 2001. The fourth phase of Afghan mass migration occurred soon after as a result of the socioeconomic and political instabilities and the ongoing drought, again causing large numbers of Afghans to become refugees. During these four waves of exodus, from the anti-Soviet resistance through the civil war and the pre- and post-Taliban regime, over 5 million Afghans were forced to migrate to neighbouring countries; 90% of the educated population left the country, possibly for Western countries (Bureau of Democracy, 2001; Khan, 2002; Nemat, 2011; Tamang, 2009). In the Afghan context, therefore, the political climate was responsible for forcing the migration of Afghan citizens out of the country in search of a more stable and safer life.

Forced Migration

According to the International Association of Studies of Forced Migration (n.d.), “Forced Migration is a general term that refers to the movements of refugees and internally displaced people (those displaced by conflicts) as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects” (para. 1). The forced migrants include refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. According to the “Report on the Taliban’s War Against Women” (Bureau of

Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, 2001), the long years of war and instability in Afghanistan have resulted in massive numbers of displaced persons internally and in neighbouring countries. From 1979 to 1990 the largest and most enduring forced migrations in human history occurred when 6.2 million Afghans fled their homeland (Khan, 2002; Tamang, 2009). Between 1993 and 1994, another one million Afghans were internally displaced and were then forced to seek refuge in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan and Iran (Khan, 2002). According to Tamang, migration has a long history, but only in the 20th century has the issue become politicized and have the attacks against the United States and its allies rendered the situation of Afghan refugees one of primary international concern. To understand the situation of Afghan refugees, we first need to define *refugee*.

Defining *Refugee* and Canadian Discourse on Refugee

As defined in the UN 1951 Convention (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 1998) relating to the status of refugees, a refugee is someone who is outside his/her country of nationality and has a well-founded fear of returning because he or she might be persecuted there because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. In addition to the 1951 UN Convention, the UN Protocol of 1967 relating to the status of refugees defined their rights and duties and contains provisions of respect in a variety of matters, such as the right to work, public assistance, and social security. In many such matters refugees are to receive the same treatment as nationals of their country of settlement or resettlement (IFSW, 1998).

According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada ([CIC] 2010),

A Convention refugee is a person who, by reason of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular

social group, or political opinion, (a) is outside each of his/her country of nationality and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of each of those countries; or (b) not having a country of nationality, is outside the country of his/her former habitual residence and is unable or, by reason of that fear, unwilling to return to that country. (p. 18)

Lacroix (2006) stated that, although states have adhered to the Convention, they have instituted their own refugee regimes according to their own historical, political, ideological, and social relationships to noncitizens. This has led to disparity and conflicting views on what constitutes a refugee. While working with Afghan refugees to assist them with sponsorship to Canada, I noticed significant discrepancies in how different visa officers applied the definition of a convention refugee.

Over the years, Canada has welcomed many refugees who have been forced to leave their homes and who meet the definition of Convention refugees. As a member of the Geneva Convention of 1951, Canada has responded to the crisis in Afghanistan by accepting refugees from there. However, like many Western countries, it has begun to restrict the number of refugees entering Canada as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the changing discourse on refugees (Nadeau, 2004). Basok (1996) reported that Canada started to implement more restrictive policies in response to financial crises, increased xenophobia, and the idea of some members of the Canadian public that refugees significantly increase the strain on the Canadian welfare system. Daenzer (2008) added that, although Canada has been very generous in absorbing refugees, its refugee policy “has, at times, been characterized by spurts of indifference, generosity, racism, or ambivalence” (p. 242). She noted that Canadian policy has been influenced by world events, economic social trends, and close interrelationships with the United States. Therefore, Canadian refugee policy is rooted

in the 1951 Geneva Convention, but is also an evolving discourse based in political, social, and economic trends.

Gender

Gender is an important factor to this discussion: as I mentioned earlier, refugee women and their dependent children constitute 80% of the world's refugees (Khan, 2002; Mehraby, 2007; Mohamed, 1999; Nadeau, 2004; Ross-Sheriff, 2006). The experiences of women and girls during flight, in exile, and post-conflict are significantly different from those of men, according to the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2006). Refugee women in the midst of conflict and turmoil become the most vulnerable, because they are threatened at every stage of flight in their country of origin: along escape routes, in border areas, in refugee camps, in countries of asylum, during repatriation, and even in their country of resettlement. Widespread violations are perpetrated against refugee women: They are arrested, persecuted, tortured, raped, sexually abused, and sold for prostitution because they are women (Mehraby, 2007). They tend to lose their agency and sense of self, other systems take over their lives, and they have limited control.

Furthermore, different gender roles have a differential effect on how refugees access services, the barriers that they face, and the choices that they make. It is therefore critical to analyze the experiences of refugee women. According to the UNHCR (2001), displacement can be a particularly disempowering experience for women. Women are "traditionally responsible for children, the elderly and domestic work, often overburdened by the realities of displacement, when traditional protection mechanisms are eroded and violence in the communities' increases" (p. 4).

The Canadian Council for Refugees' ([CCR] 2006) report on resettlement for women also shows that women face additional barriers in many arenas, including paid-work opportunities, access to the health care system, and education attainment. The CCR added:

Gender as a variable is hardly discussed in settlement related discourses. The lack of gender analysis in the studies on settlement experiences of refugees and immigrants create a gap in understanding how women refugees view settlement. Many talk about services, numbers, and extent of services needed for refugees without analyzing the impact on women. (p. 13)

Therefore, according to the literature, the simple fact of being a woman is the cause of many added risks for a refugee that include violence and economic hardship, but gender-specific risks are not widely discussed in refugee settlement practice and policy.

Effects of Migration

Afghan women have faced multiple traumatic experiences in the several decades of civil war in their country, and they have fled their country and lived in refugee camps in neighbouring countries such as Iran and Pakistan (Ross-Sheriff, 2006). Having experienced civil war, Taliban rule, and gender apartheid, many Afghan women became marginalized and oppressed because of the abuse of their human rights (Wali, Gould, & Fitzgerald, 1999; as cited in Dattadeen, 2007). These events, including the severe curtailment of women's freedom of mobility, employment, and right to education, have affected the lives of many Afghan refugee women (Dattadeen, 2007).

According to the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2006), many displaced women and girls experience numerous traumatic events and are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence at every stage of their refugee journey or their journey as displaced persons. Afghan women's lives also become fragmented as they lose their family

members and are separated from their relatives (Mehrab, 2007; Tamang, 2009). In addition, refugee women lose their employment as well as their land during migration, and many lack the presence of a male. Many women are pressured to take on the role of men because the men are lost, have died, or have returned to the home country because of unemployment in the host country. Similarly, with no male presence, Afghan women have had to take on the role of the head of household. Many are confined, not allowed to work, and forced to wear veils, which reinforce their gender inequality. They suffer significant loss from being uprooted. Many Afghan women have to coexist with different ethnic groups who were considered enemies with whom they had traditionally fought for several years (Tamang, 2009).

The most profound experiences that affect refugee women's mental well-being are war-related forced displacement and the disturbance to their families and support networks. Women experience intense bereavement and grief over the deaths of their loved ones, miss their homes, and face many psychological impacts such as the loss of self-identity (Mehrab, 2007). From her own work with Afghan women in refugee camps in Pakistan, Mehrab concluded that "due to rape and sexual assault many women have feelings of fear, flashbacks, nightmares, shame, guilt, loss of confidence and self-esteem, depression, anxiety as well as gynaecological problems" (p. 6). Ross-Sheriff (2006), in her interviews with Afghan women, affirmed that women experienced various psychological distresses during the war in Afghanistan, as well as in Pakistan during their exile.

According to Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou, and Moussa (2008), "Past experiences of refugee women are multiple, confusing, disturbing, painful, and deeply affect their

identities” (pp. 44-47). She added that their past is also present in the lives of traumatized women, who often relive their trauma, not as a memory, but as a re-actualization of the traumatic event. In my own work with many Afghan refugee women, I have noticed that they suffer a great deal of stress and complain of headaches, backaches, sleeplessness, and fear. Sometimes they miss their loved ones who are suffering and still remain in their country, in addition to feeling guilty about being safe and enjoying life in a new country.

Jacob, Levy, Frigault, and Bertot (1994), in their quantitative study with refugees in Canada from various countries, also noted that the “pre-migratory traumatic experiences while refugees spent their time in transit also caused detachment, anxiety, irritability, emotional instability, aggression and depression” (p. 21). Similarly, Lacroix (2006), in discussing the settlement experiences of various refugees in Canada, alluded to the fact that pre-migratory traumas such as organized violence, torture, rape, imprisonment, threats, and so on that they experienced in refugee camps impact their post-migratory phase.

Unfortunately, research in the area of Afghan refugees in Canada is very limited. Although some reports have been written, generally, information is very scarce, and to come to any comprehensive understanding of these women and their situations more research is required.

Life in Refugee Camps

The situation of refugees is further strained when they are forced to live in large camps or settlements where they may be deprived of educational, agricultural, and income-generating activities and have little prospect of finding a quick solution to their plight. According to Tamang (2009), Pakistan accepted Afghans as refugees not for humanitarian

reasons, but because of the desire to gain international military, economic, and diplomatic status. As I discussed earlier, instead of accepting refugees into their own countries, many Western countries prefer to provide financial aid to the neighbouring Third World countries to support the refugees (Khan, 2002; Tamang, 2009).

Although some of these countries continued to provide support through financial assistance to less wealthy, refugee-receiving countries through the UNHCR and other nongovernmental services (Giles, 2008), the funding was inadequate. For this reason countries such as Pakistan began to cite refugee fatigue (Khan, 2002), and women in these countries became especially vulnerable because of inadequate access to food, education, and housing and the inability to meet other basic needs (Giles, 2008).

Women in the refugee camps faced various constraints such as low wages, poor working conditions, limited economic support, police raids and extortion, rape, torture, starvation, and disease. Their mobility was also restricted as a result of the differences between their customs and the culture of Pakistan, where they had to wear the veil (Mehrab, 2007; Rahman, 2001; Ross-Sheriff, 2006; Tamang, 2009). According to the UNHCR (2001), 80% of all refugee women faced rape and sexual abuse, which were used as weapons of war. During Mehrab's five years in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, none of her female patients reported sexual assault and rape because of the stigma, shame, and guilt; "for some women the threat of rape is so ominous that they had committed suicide to avoid it" (p. 3). For the vast majority of refugees, life in the country of asylum was extremely difficult, but most have no other alternative except to bear the suffering because returning

home is not a choice. To the UNHCR, resettlement in a third country was considered the best option.

The term *resettlement* is used by the UNHCR to describe the settlement of refugees in third countries, a durable solution which is only resorted to in cases where a refugee's return to his or her country of origin does not appear to be possible in the foreseeable future and where it is not possible for the refugee to integrate in the first asylum country. (Gibbs Peart, 1989, p. 3)

A minority of refugees had an opportunity to resettle in an industrialised country such as Canada through government sponsorship, international NGOs, private sponsorships, and the UNHCR.

Challenges in the Resettlement Process

According to the CIC (1995), settlement is a process by which a newcomer, during his or her first few years in Canada, acquires basic information, knowledge, and skills to become self-sufficient. For example, this entails finding a home and a job, learning to communicate in one of Canada's official languages, securing access to health services, interacting with schools, and so on. The CCR (1998, pp. 10-12) suggests that settlement is a two-way process that can be complex, long term, and multidimensional. It incorporates all social, economic, cultural, and political spheres of an immigrant's life. As we consider these two definitions—and there are many others—we realize that various governments as well as NGOs that work with refugees have vaguely defined the term *settlement*. Furthermore, the settlement services offered vary and do not adequately address refugees' long-term needs. Current research lacks consistent settlement terminology, which thereby makes interpretation confusing and realistic solutions difficult to attain.

Jacob et al. (1994), who conducted a study in Quebec with refugees, noted that settlement in the host country is often accompanied by multiple tensions and stresses that lead to profound disorganisation in the personal and social identity of refugees and increases their psychological imbalance (p. 21). The authors concluded that “psychological tension was predominantly modulated by socio-economic factors and stressors linked to acculturation process as well as nostalgia to return home” (p. 24). Mehraby (2007), a bicultural counsellor in Australia, pointed out that refugees’ lives are scattered because they have a hard time adapting to new cultures. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research specifically on Afghan women in Canada.

According to Mehraby (2007), the major issues in settlement are language barriers, lack of employment, and knowledge of the host country. Most refugees have been traumatized and therefore require specialized services as well as support from family, friends, and community in the integration process. Smith (2007) also emphasized women’s vulnerability because of sponsorship issues, homelessness and poverty, lack of language capabilities, unemployment, poverty, and social isolation. Lacroix (2006) concurred with other researchers that women are marginalized as a result of posttraumatic stress disorder and the loss of family, country, social status, and identity. The “failure of the Canadian and Quebec governments to provide adequate social services has been documented by various non-governmental organisations working with this population” (p. 25).

With regard to refugees who have settled in Hamilton specifically, Navaratna (2007) reported that refugees struggle in Canada when their lives have been shattered, but they are generally grateful and do not complain because their new life is safe and peaceful.

According to the author, refugees struggle with poverty, low incomes, unemployment or underemployment, language barriers, integration into society, immigration loans, and funding constraints. Furthermore, settlement is also impacted by their experiences in refugee camps, such as violence, prostitution, ill treatment by Canadian government officials, and culture shock (Navaratna, 2007; Satzewich & Shaffir, 2007).

Refugee women are doubly silenced -- first as refugees and second as women. They have to juggle multiple employment and caregiving functions, and they are socialized to silence their own experience, needs, and pain. Sometimes in the host country other causes of silencing occur, such as language barriers, racism, discrimination, and isolation (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008). Although refugee women suffer major challenges in settlement, they continue to survive and keep their families together.

According to Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al. (2008), when refugee women can voice their personal narratives without fear of persecution, the generic category of refugee woman begins to break down, and, instead, we hear their hopes and fears for their welfare, and especially for that of their families and communities, in their voices. We learn about the strategies that they utilize to maintain their sense of self-identity and their pragmatism in planning for and carrying out the tasks of everyday life for their families (p. 63). We need to empower women by applying gender and culturally sensitive interventions. We cannot depict them as vulnerable victims because, although we must recognize their special needs as women refugees, this image creates the tendency to portray them as unable to survive and cope in hostile environments and adapt to new situations and therefore as needing to be rescued (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008). Therefore, the literature has shown that,

although refugees undoubtedly face challenges when they resettle in a third country, through empowerment and breaking down their fears related to persecution will help them to express their needs.

Portrayal of Afghan Women

Ashraf (1997) contended that Western conceptions of Muslim women stereotype them as one group: as women who wear the veil (*purdah*) and are submissive to their husbands:

The Western media, for some reason, latch on to a few examples of unjust behaviour in the Islamic world, brand Islam as a backwards and “fundamentalist” religion, especially in its treatment of women, and ignore that it was the first religion to accord women equal rights (p. 1).

Havedal (2007), who has been working with Afghan women for several years, also noted that in the “world of western media and politics, Afghan women are often portrayed as weak, oppressed, and in need of ‘liberation’ as they are seen as the victims of their own male-dominated culture” (p. 51). Ross-Sheriff (2006) concurred that recent literature—specifically, periodicals and mass media, have portrayed women in Afghanistan as helpless victims who weep over the dead bodies of their sons, brothers, and husbands and wait to be liberated by Western military and humanitarian interventions. She added that the literature from the feminist movement has focused on the Taliban’s brutal treatment of Afghan women in the late 1990s and the restrictions imposed on them.

By portraying Afghan women as negative and focusing on selective and limited representations of their lives, we have ignored their coping strategies and social contributions and filtered out a more nuanced understanding of the women’s active participation in resistance to oppression, multiple roles during exile and repatriation, and aspirations (Ross-

Sheriff, 2006). Ross-Sheriff alleged that outsiders who are not familiar with the fine nuances of Afghan culture observe mainly the public arena and neglect or do not have access to the private spheres of women's lives: "Those who view Afghan women through a Western lens fail to take into account the concepts of family responsibilities and obligations as well as the strengths of Afghan women" (p. 218). Ashraf (1997) supported these arguments and noted that, by portraying women negatively, these prejudiced attitudes give rise to discriminatory treatment of women. The UNHCR (2001) also lamented that "the gender-blind procedures and practices of UNHCR, state bodies and non-governmental organizations often unintentionally reproduce women's disempowerment" (p. 4).

In my own experience with Afghan women, when they are empowered, they demonstrated significant strengths. This literature review has also revealed how powerful and resilient Afghan women are in their everyday lives (Havedal, 2007; Kumin, 2008; Mehraby, 2007; Pilch, 2006; Ross-Sheriff; 2006; Tamang, 2009). Clearly, portrayals of Afghan women in Western media are one sided because they fail to acknowledge the strengths of this population.

Resiliency

Plodinec (2009), from the Community and Regional Resilience Institute in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, examined various definitions of resiliency, including Ganor and Ben-Lavy's (as cited in Plodinec), and defined it as "the ability of individuals and communities to deal with a state of continuous long-term stress; the ability to find unknown inner strengths and resources in order to cope effectively; the measure of adaptation and flexibility" (p. 9). This definition fits the experiences of Afghan women quite well.

Resources that help many refugee women to cope effectively are found in their religion and faith. Religion plays a critical role in many people's lives as a source of emotional support and a forum that allows social, cultural, and political expression. It is a vehicle for community building and group identity. As a Muslim woman, I have been raised with Islam as a way of life; for example, in the way that I conduct myself in everyday life by being kind, generous, and respectful. Faith in Allah guides and strengthens me and other Muslims through adversity. Having access to an environment in which people can congregate for prayers reaffirms communal identity and belonging. My experience in working with Afghan refugee women affirms that faith and religion are extremely important to them and that, without them, they would not survive. According to Ross-Sheriff (2006), Allah is a source of hope and resilience to Afghan refugees and a reservoir of sustenance to help them to continue to face hard times with grace and fortitude (p. 213). Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al. (2008) also concurred that "refugee women often rely on faith during their quest for healing and on places of worship as spaces where they regain hope and re-create social bonds" (p. 43). Many Muslim refugee women feel that mainstream service providers misunderstand them, do not understand their beliefs, and neglect to see the person behind the veil. Some researchers and policy makers tend to neglect the role of religion and spirituality as a source of resiliency during war and displacement and when refugees face the challenges of life in a new country (Gozdziak, 2008).

Another resource is their inner strength as mothers and family nurturers, which cuts across international borders and ethnic divisions because women have a huge investment in the stability of their communities. Displaced women and girls hold their families together

under the most difficult and inhumane circumstances and do so while their safety and well-being are at increased risk—risks that include rape, beatings, torture, hunger, and abandonment (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 2006. When Resolution 1325 came before the Senate Council, Secretary General Kofi Annan addressed the council: “For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls” (Kumin, 2008, p. 225).

Ross-Sheriff (2006) supported the assertion that Afghan women are social actors who have used their networks, supported their families, and are very resilient in times of stress. She added that women are nurturers and caretakers and that they play critical roles in their households as well as in the economic and sociocultural arenas. Even when they were in refugee camps, Tamang (2009) pointed out, “Although Afghan women had to coexist with different ethnic groups, who were enemies,” they “managed to establish social support networks and emotional support, community identity and construct an alternative space” (p. 8).

Havedal (2007), who has worked in Afghanistan, agreed that the women whom she has come to know are strong and challenge patriarchy and stereotypes by studying and pursuing careers. Mehraby (2007), who currently works with Afghan refugee women in Australia, had the following commentary,

Inspired by the strength of refugee women settling effectively in Australia, I believe they are not a burden on the Australian society. Although they may look empty handed they enrich Australia with their strength, wealth of experiences, knowledge and skills. Refugee women are the battlers, the survivors, and the true heroines of the war. (p. 7)

Besides having a wealth of experiences and skills and being caretakers of their families, when Afghan women take part in the political process, they are powerful advocates for peace, reconciliation, and moderation and can play critically important roles in peacemaking and reconstruction efforts (Pilch, 2006). More and more refugee women are becoming creative and dynamic actors in their own histories. Kofi Annan's statement (Kumin, 2008) that women are an extraordinarily constructive force resonates with my experiences of Afghan women over the last 20 years of having worked with them. They have faced extraordinary struggles that many others could not even imagine having to endure.

In summary, this review of the relevant literature demonstrates that the current literature focuses on the experience of refugees generally, with a limited focus on the experiences of refugee women and even less on Afghan refugee women in Canada specifically. The existing literature is fragmented, fails to foster an understanding of the special needs of Afghan refugee women, and is limited to reports, theses, and bureaucratic websites. Major knowledge gaps exist in the resettlement issues of Afghan refugee women in Canada, their resiliency, and their positive roles. Many articles focus on the negative experiences of the women, which catches the attention of the media and others in the short term, but becomes problematic for women and those who work with women when it portrays them as only weak and passive. The research focus of this study is therefore especially important because it contributes further knowledge to this field to enable communities to offer relevant services to Afghan refugee women.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodological framework that I used in the study, the relevance of this methodology, the research design, the use of in-depth interviewing, and the process of collecting, managing, and analyzing the data using grounded theory. Finally, it explains my role as an insider-outsider researcher and discusses the advantages and disadvantages.

Qualitative Methodology

Research methodology is important because it frames the questions being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed, and shapes the analysis (Smith, 2004). Qualitative research begins with people. Individuals can open the door to their reality and allow us to see how they perceive and make sense of their own experience. Qualitative researchers focus on seeing the world through the eyes of the participants in the study (Jackson & Verberg, 2007) and on “understanding interpretations at a particular point in time and in a particular context” (Merriam, 2002a, p. 4). Qualitative researchers engage their participants through language in an attempt to understand all social and cultural phenomena (Myers, 1997). According to Schwandt (2001), qualitative inquiry deals with the lived experiences of human beings as they live, feel, make sense of, and undergo them. Qualitative social research relies mostly on interpretive and critical social-science approaches. The use of this method helped me to understand the particular experiences of the women in this study in various contexts.

The interpretive approach is the foundation of social research techniques that are sensitive to context. The researcher uses various methods to understand how others see the world and attach value to everything, such as the interactions between the research participants and the outside world, their life situations, and their roles in society (Neuman, 1997). Interpretive social science also helps to appreciate subjective experience and individual understanding. I chose to use an interpretive approach because it would allow me to explore Afghan women's histories: their untold stories and lived experiences of conflict, upheaval, insecurity, survival, and settlement in various contexts in which they have lived. In the interpretive approach the researcher puts what people say into the context of their daily lives (Neuman, 1997). Engaging the idea of gender resonates with my beliefs that women are discriminated against primarily because they are women and that a feminist perspective would anchor this inquiry to the experiences of women.

According to Neuman (1997), feminist research involves intersubjectivity, acknowledges historical and social contexts within which current issues related to gender politics are situated, and seeks an understanding of how relations of gender and power permeate all spheres of social life. Therefore, I chose to use standpoint theory, a unique feminist perspective that focuses on social reality. According to Fuller (2004), standpoint theory offers an “epistemological justification for starting research from the standpoint of those actively working with subordinate groups to transform social structures: research so done is actually more scientific” (p. 97).

Feminist-standpoint epistemology requires the fusion of knowledge and practice. It is both a theory of knowledge building and a method of doing research – an approach to

knowledge construction and a call to political action (Brooks, 2006). Feminist-standpoint scholars emphasize the need to begin with women's lives as they themselves experience them, to be able to accurately and authentically understand what life is like for women today. The principles and concepts of interpretive social science and feminism were the research foundations for my study. The methodology of feminist standpoint further complemented the research study in that I sought an understanding of the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women. I therefore adopted a feminist research framework for my research to achieve the aims of my study and facilitate a process in which the women participants were able to 'find a voice' and share their experiences openly.

Using qualitative methodology with feminist and interpretive social science helped me to begin to deconstruct the idea that Afghan women are helpless victims and suggest new perspectives of women as social agents, nurturers, and remarkable constructive forces.

Data Collection

The participants in this study were refugee women between the ages of 35 and 60 who had experienced war in their country, had migrated to Pakistan (the country of exile) for several years, and have been in Canada for between two and eight years. Two of the six women were widows, three were married, and one had returned to Pakistan in 2005 to remarry. Although she has sponsored her husband since then, to date he has not been granted permanent resident status. All of the families entered Canada as permanent residents and had been given refugee status in the country of asylum, Pakistan. Two families were sponsored by FOCUS, an international NGO, three of the families were sponsored by their relatives through the Group of Five sponsorship, and one family was assisted by UNHCR

through Group of Five sponsorship. I recruited the participants through referrals from my social contacts, through some of the participants in the study, and via the Afghan community in Hamilton and the Greater Toronto Area. Two of the six participants were from the city of Hamilton and four from the City of Toronto.

It was central to the research design that I share the participants' experiences through their own personal stories. Therefore, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews using the three themes and probing questions outlined in the interview guide (Appendix A). Before the interviews began, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix B) with the participants, offered them an opportunity to ask questions, and sought their permission to audiotape the interviews. I collected the data by using tape recordings augmented by handwritten notes.

Interview Process

Qualitative researchers rely on in-depth interviewing as a data-collection method fairly extensively (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). According to these authors, fundamental to qualitative research is the idea that the researcher explores a few general topics and respects the participants' framing and structure of the responses. Although I had prepared the interview guide (Appendix A), which included open-ended and nonjudgmental questions, I believe that the participants felt most comfortable when I left the questions unstructured to allow them to discuss whatever was most important to them within the three contexts in which they have lived; that is, their experiences before and during the war, during their period of exile in Pakistan, and currently in Canada. For this reason some of the participants focused more on their experiences during the war, whereas some talked more about their

current lives in Canada. Because of my social location, and having worked with many Afghan women, I was able to establish a trusting relationship from the beginning that gave me greater access to the richness of their experiences.

As the interviews proceeded, I clarified details to obtain accurate information and to learn about the research participants' experiences and reflections (Charmaz, 2006). Although my age criterion included women between 35 and 50 years, many of the participants who came forward were over the age of 50, and I therefore expanded my criterion to include these women. I interviewed six Afghan women between the ages of 35 and 60 years who had lived through the three contexts and who were willing to share their knowledge and lived experiences of it.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. I gave the participants the choice of speaking either English or Dari (one of the Afghan languages), whichever they felt most comfortable using. Four participants chose to speak in Dari, and two who were in their 30s preferred to discuss the topic in English and use Dari only when they wanted to express something that was difficult to articulate in English. I translated from Dari to English and then transcribed it verbatim. I conducted five of the six interviews in the participants' homes because it is culturally appropriate and a usual practice in the Afghan culture. For one of the participants it was easier to meet at the community center because she had young children at home who would have disrupted our discussions.

With respect to the emotional risks of the interviews, my many years of experience with Afghan families helped me to gauge when and how to explore sensitive areas, thereby minimizing the participants' emotional distress. For example, for sensitive questions, rather

than asking them directly, I asked the participants to discuss in general whether someone they knew had experienced certain challenges. I also continued to check with the participants with regard to their willingness to continue with particular questions or the interview itself if they seemed uncomfortable. Four of the six participants became emotional during the interviews, and when I asked them whether or not they wished to continue, they all chose to do so. Consistent with feminist research principles, it was important that I end the interview from a strength-based perspective. I gave each participant feedback on her strength in surviving the difficult times, nurturing her family, and continuing to provide for them in Canada. I asked the participants if they wished to be referred to supports available in the community, but they all noted that the meeting had provided an emotional release, and they felt good about discussing it with someone who was familiar with their struggles.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research results in large amounts of contextually laden, subjective, and richly detailed data. Data analysis is the “process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 111), and qualitative data analysis consists of identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns found in the data.

According to Charmaz (2006), “Grounded theory coding is more than a way of sifting, sorting and synthesizing data; rather, coding begins to unify ideas analytically and enables you to make the leap from concrete events and descriptions to theoretical insights and theoretical possibilities” (p. 46). I coded the transcripts of the interviews line by line, using techniques from grounded theory. Because researchers who use grounded theory collect and analyze data at the same time, after the first round of the data collection I began

to analyze them and refine them for subsequent data collection. Grounded theory coding consists of at least two main phases: (a) an initial phase in which the researcher names each word, line, or segment of data ; and (b) a focused, selective phase in which the researcher uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize. I began to sort and name each segment of the initial data that I collected according to various codes. Following the initial phase, I focused on the most significant codes to sort, synthesize, and organize the data. Charmaz asserted that a researcher's challenge is to balance a participant's subjective account with the collective analytical account. Careful attention to coding helped me to understand what was happening in the Afghan women's lives as I tried to understand their viewpoints and situations (Charmaz, 2006).

Insider or Outsider Research

Feminist researchers advocate for the mutual creation of data with their participants and acknowledge that women are better informants and more communicative of their own experiences (Clingerman, 2007). In Afghan culture it is unacceptable practice to share experiences with outsiders because Afghans feel that personal matters are private and must be kept confidential. However, I also know that conducting research as an insider would impinge on their privacy and that, because they might feel that other members of their respective communities would learn about their issues, they might prefer an outsider who would respect their privacy. The questions that I asked myself were as follows:

1. Would my familiarity with their culture and language and my sharing the same faith create a sense of comfort or discomfort?
2. What should I do in each case?

I believe that constant reflection and writing in a personal journal helped me to monitor this process. In addition, I continuously reminded myself that our backgrounds are different, that they had survived war and other trauma that I could not even imagine, that our cultural backgrounds are somewhat different, and that my knowledge of their language is limited. How could I reconcile this? I needed to make certain at each stage of my research that I was constantly mindful of our cultural differences. Moreover, because most Afghan families have been victims of war and trauma, it was crucial that I be careful to avoid making false assumptions because of my lack of a common life experience. It is important that researchers understand their epistemological view and their assumptions and biases.

Advantages

According to Charmaz (2006), exploring research participants' lives from the inside often gives a researcher otherwise inaccessible views that to outsiders would be "limited, imprecise, mistaken, or egregiously wrong" (p. 14). As a Muslim woman of color and one who shares many cultural, social, and religious similarities with my participants, many scholars would consider me an insider. Also, my having worked in Afghanistan for many years and knowing the language would encourage the participants to openly share their ideas and concerns. The participants were willing to share with me their deepest feelings and emotions because they felt that I was one of them and could understand them. My experiences with Afghan families have shown me that if they can identify with you, they will open up to you wholeheartedly. This resulted in much deeper interactions, which are necessary because depth and breadth are both important in conducting qualitative research.

Through their stories I learned about their strengths and courage and how they resisted and managed their lives as well as provided for the needs of their family. There was no evidence that the participants felt uncomfortable with me as an insider.

Disadvantages

Being an insider also has various limitations. For example, I was concerned that even though the participants might automatically think of me as an insider because of my familiarity with their culture and my experience, I might not understand their culture and, even more, their subculture (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Similarly, I did not want to automatically assume that I would understand them because I am somewhat familiar with their culture for fear that I might not be aware of the nuances between what they actually said and what they really meant. I was also concerned that I might make assumptive conclusions and therefore might not be able to communicate or interpret the results of my research correctly.

Language is another key element of interaction, and although I understand Afghan languages to some extent, I might not necessarily understand their idiosyncrasies—words, phrases, slangs, meaning, and so on. I was also apprehensive that it might become apparent that I was not one of them or that they might omit relevant information, thinking that I am already aware of it. This could lead to incomplete conclusions or conclusions that were clouded by my own personal experiences rather than reflecting theirs. This would affect how I shaped my perceptions and the data and lead me to impose my own personal experiences and informed views onto those of the participants, override theirs, and inevitably blur the boundaries between the participants and me as the researcher (Jaspal, 2009).

Although I would clarify that I was genuinely interested in the diversity of their personal experiences without jeopardizing my credibility as an interested researcher, this could pose a severe limitation because their interpretations, meanings, and ideas were important to me. Making assumptions because of our similarities and failing to explain individual differences could potentially impede the research process, compromise my judgment, and reduce my objectivity. “Insider researcher enhances the depth and breadth of understanding a population; however, objectivity, reflexivity, and authenticity can be an issue because perhaps one knows too much or is too close” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 57).

It was crucial that I constantly be aware of my assumptions and biases and be reflexive. Critical success factors in effective research are reflection on the research data and processes and the determination of whether the researcher has been effectively objective despite his or her biases and experiences. I agree with Hamdan’s (2009) notion of employing reflexivity throughout the research, whereby the researcher pays close attention to his or her involvement in all areas of the process and is prepared to assess the impact of that involvement on the research.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

I explored the experiences of Afghan refugee women through their previously untold stories and lived experiences of conflict, upheaval, insecurity, survival, and resettlement in various contexts in which they have lived. This chapter discusses the themes that emerged from the data: life in Afghanistan, life in exile, life in Canada, and women's resiliency. The participants' experiences during war, in exile, and in adjusting to life in a new country revealed commonalities. I have included direct quotations from the participants to illustrate these themes, and I have assigned them a letter from F through K to protect their anonymity.

Life in Afghanistan

Before War

All of the participants shared their experiences of life prior to the civil war (Mujahidin) and/or during the Taliban invasion. They reported that life before the conflict was very peaceful and they could work and attend school. They were free to go about their lives. The participants' reported that, prior to the civil war, females were not forced to wear veils and hide in their homes; they could pursue careers and work outside their homes, and they were happily living their lives with hopes and dreams.

The participants shared some of their good memories from this time period. One woman talked about how happy she was in high school, knowing that she would graduate with her diploma, until the Mujahidin invaded Kabul:

Lessee Mariam school was very close to my house, and when I went to high school I was really happy because I was thinking that after four years I will graduate and I

will get my diploma. [. . .] You know, I had lots of hope and goals. I really had a good time, as I was with my parents, [. . .] and we had really good life until I entered high school. That year Mujahidin occupied our country. (H)

In spite of economic difficulties, one participant told me that her father ensured that his children all went to school: “In those times, many fathers did not send their children to school because economic situation was not good and many sent their children to work, but my father sent all of us to school, all of us” (I). Another participant was employed as an engineer prior to the invasion of the Taliban:

My life was very sweet, and after finishing university, I got a job as an engineer at the Pamir Cinema building. We were going to different places; [. . .] my life was very sweet. But when Taliban came, we wore Chadari (veil), and after that we couldn't go to work. (K)

One participant who lived in rural Afghanistan acknowledged that, although rural life involved hard work, her family members were happy and content with their lives because they were safe and had freedom:

It was really nice, like Canada—green trees and shrubs; we had lots of cows, goats, and wheat from the land. [. . .] Although it was lots of hard work on our farm, life was good, as we had lots of milk, butter, everything. [. . .] [We] had a very good life. (G)

All six participants' narratives reveal a common theme; that is, life before the civil war was filled with hopes and dreams for the future; it was a time of peace and normalcy. Their narratives indicate that they tend to retain their positive memories from their lives prior to war and violence, given such statements as “I had a good life,” “Life was sweet,” and “It was really nice.” The participants had the freedom to attend school, to work, to pursue a career, and to participate in various activities because no restrictions were imposed on them, and they all felt safe and secure.

Crisis of War

Afghanistan suffered several decades of war, and during this time families suffered significant losses. They not only lost loved ones, but were also forced to move constantly from one area to another because of persecution, poverty, and human rights violations. This caused additional strain on families as they left behind their belongings, homes, shops, and communities.

Most of the participants had to move several times during the conflict; this disrupted their lives and caused a great deal of hardship. Many had to abandon their homes and shops. Without access to education or a meaningful livelihood, they were forced to rebuild their lives, which caused anxiety. One participant stated: “When first time there was civil war by a group called Mujahidin, our family had to move from Kabul to Pul-e-Khumri” (F). Another participant added, “My husband had a shop in Kabul, and when Rabani came into power, we left for Mazar. When we went to Mazar, we were refugees, and I started to do embroidery work” (I). Another participant shared her experience: “When Mujahidin was there, there was fighting between one party and another party, and missiles came to our house. [. . .] Then we went to my uncle’s house. We were refugees and lived at our uncle’s house” (K). One participant expressed the difficulty of having to survive without any income because women were not allowed to work. She had no choice but to teach children from her home and having to stop when it became too risky to continue doing so:

Ladies were not allowed to work outside, so I taught children at my home. They paid me 35 Afghanis per hour. Even when people knew little, they taught because they needed to. [. . .] And then I got warning two times, and I had to leave it. (K)

Not only were these families displaced from their homes, but many family members were captured, tortured, or buried alive. Some lost their lives as a result of missile attacks, and others were taken away from their homes and brutally killed. One participant's family lost their two sons and waited for them to return home while fearing that they would have to identify their bodies from the caves:

Two of my sons were lost and we were really worried about them. We wanted to leave Afghanistan for Pakistan, but we could not leave until we found our two sons. Taliban was killing hundreds of young men and dumping their bodies in the holes in caves and then covering them with mud. Several times we would go to check over the dead bodies. No one could recognize them because their faces were decomposed, but families recognized them through their clothes and shoes. We could not find our sons for several months and cried for many days and were ready to give up when suddenly we heard that they had crossed the border into Pakistan. (F)

Another participant was emotional when she discussed the loss of her family members: "I lost my sister and mum together. [. . .] That time was Mujahidin time; I lost my dad two years before Taliban came" (K).

Yet another participant reported that her husband was killed by the Mujahidin and described his suffering:

During Taliban time there was so much *Zulm* [torture], and it was really difficult. My husband was also beaten up but during Mujahidin time. They hit him so much that he almost died. [. . .] My son was only one-and-half years old when my husband died during the time of Mujahidin. I worked in the school as a maid and at people's houses until my son completed Grade 9. (J)

Despite their difficulties, the women did not wish to leave their country until their families were accounted for. Some of the participants discussed working to support their families either by doing embroidery work, working as a maid, or teaching from home even though they knew the risks of being persecuted if they were caught.

Fear

The participants disclosed that their lives were encompassed by fear. Sometimes they feared for their lives, and at other times they feared for the lives of their family members. Several participants talked about having to hide for several months in the mountains under difficult circumstances in an attempt to save their lives from the Taliban:

In 1997 Taliban invaded Pul-el-Khumri [PLK], and a day before they came to PLK, we left the valley to hide in the mountains. We hid there for three months. We had no food, clothing, or place to sleep. We covered ourselves with the wheat in order to keep ourselves warm. For the meals we took little bit of wheat flour and mixed with water to make dough so that we could cook some naan [bread]. We sat in the dark and could not light the lamp in case Taliban saw the light and came after us. We could not come out even if we wanted to urinate in the fear that we may be caught by Taliban. We had to wait until dark when it was safe. (F)

The participants of Hazara ethnicity feared being persecuted for belonging to an ethnic minority tribe who practice a Shia tradition of Islam. This group was targeted by the Mujahidin and Taliban, who followed the Sunni tradition of Islam:

Men could not travel as they would be caught by Taliban, especially because we were from a tribe called Hazara, a minority tribe in Afghanistan who follow Shia tradition of Islam; and because Taliban is Sunni, they would torture and persecute us. (F)

When men were being captured by Taliban, I had to be very brave like a man and had to take care of the entire family. I went to the market to bring some items for the family and carry the heavy load all alone. (F)

The above examples illustrate that women's primary roles were to care for and nurture their families even when their own lives were at risk. The participants in this study saw their own needs as secondary compared to those of their families.

Women's experiences of *jung* (war): Heightened oppression

According to the participants, the Taliban imposed extreme restrictions on women. The Taliban physically assaulted, kidnapped, and raped women, and these actions created an atmosphere of pervasive fear. Many families prevented their female members from attending school or going out as a result of this fear. All of the participants described the cruelty that women suffered during this time as absolutely dehumanizing:

Taliban really terrorized women. If females came out, they really hit them and troubled them. If they wore nail polish or wore sandals and their feet showed, they punished them and beat them. They took out their veil and asked them, "Why do you show your feet or your nails?" (G)

We were afraid to go out because most of the females were kidnapped at that time, and my father was really worried as he heard lots of things that was happening to the ladies. [. . .] [The Taliban were] sexually harassing them. [. . .] He said no, [. . .] no more school. [. . .] Stay home. (H)

They took ladies and cut their breast, and they put nail in the guy's head. Yes, this is true. People know about this. [. . .] They took one pregnant lady when she was walking with her husband on the road due to pain as baby was coming. They told her, "We want to see how the baby is coming," and her husband was there with her but couldn't do anything. (K)

Taliban put *Tehzab* [acid] on females and took young boys and girls for their own pleasure, young and beautiful boys and girls. It was the time of torture and pleasure [intoxication] for them. [. . .] When Taliban came, we could not go out, [. . .] but because they took young people, I was afraid for my son, and I left for Peshawar. (J)

Another participant reported, "Ismailis were treated very badly—we were discriminated and harassed more than anyone. [. . .] Every day we were afraid that they will come to kill and take away Ismaili women, [. . .] and this is how we passed our lives" (G).

The war was a harsh and a painful experience for the women. The ongoing harassment of themselves and their family members, the disappearance or death of loved

ones, and the fear of being raped or kidnapped were difficult for the women to bear. They had to find ways to resist or cope with the situation.

Women: Murders, suicide, and marriage to escape threats of kidnap and rape

Respect for and honour of a family has a profound meaning in Afghan culture. The participants discussed the disgrace to their families of female members being raped. Therefore, women had to use various coping mechanisms to deal with it. Sometimes men or heads of households would bury their females alive before the Mujahidin or Taliban could get to them. Sometimes women were forced to commit suicide to escape the shame, and many fathers ensured that their daughters were engaged or married at a very young age.

One participant expressed her concern about how her male family members tried to cope when they were worried that the Taliban would rape their females:

Usually Taliban would capture women/girls and give it to the men in the military for sexual pleasure. This was extremely shameful for any family, and therefore many families would kill their own females so that they are not put through the misery of being raped and families having to live with the shame for the rest of their lives. [. . .] One time all the men in my family decided that they should dig a hole in the ground and bury all the girls because they did not wish Taliban to take their girls and rape them. (F)

Another participant lamented that two sisters were forced to commit suicide to escape the Mujahidin:

Mujahidin went house to house too. One day they wanted to take Naheeda and her sister, but Naheeda escaped and her sister throw herself from the balcony, and she died. They wanted to capture Naheeda, and she didn't want to be *Badnam* [disgraced], so she also committed suicide. [. . .] They did that with lots of women. [. . .] Like, you know our culture; they can't say to anyone "Mujahidin took our daughter or wife." They say, "She died by missile or rocket, and we didn't find the body" [. . .] to save themselves from *Badnami* [shame]. (K)

Several participants explained that to escape the horror of being raped, harassed, or kidnapped by the Mujahidin or Taliban, they were forced to become engaged or married at a very young age because their parents wanted to protect themselves from the disgrace that rape, harassment, or kidnapping would cause their families:

I was engaged at the age of 14. I was really young and I didn't know anything about my life. After two or three years, at the age of 17 I got married. The day I married, after one day we moved to Pakistan. (H)

When I was in Grade 5 he [my father] got me engaged. When I finished Grade 6, I could not continue with Grade 7, and then in Grade 7, I got married. When I got married, after one year I gave birth to my eldest daughter. (I)

In Afghan culture, once a girl is engaged, she becomes the responsibility of her in-laws. One participant described the additional burden of having to take their young daughter-in-law-to-be with them when they left for Pakistan:

Besides taking my daughters with us, we also had to take my son's fiancée as she was engaged to my son, and in our culture, once they are engaged, they become the responsibility of the in-laws. Families did not want to leave them in Afghanistan due to fear that something happened to them. (F)

These examples show the various coping methods that the women used to protect themselves and their families from the threats of the Mujahidin and Taliban. Murder, suicide, and early marriage were commonly used methods to avoid bringing shame upon one's family as a result of the actions of the Mujahidin and Taliban.

Life in Exile

Challenges During Flight

In discussing their attempts to flee their situations, the participants reported the extreme difficulties that they encountered as they were stopped, searched, questioned, and

harassed. They talked about the difficulty of crossing the border into a neighbouring country, Pakistan. One participant expressed her family's fear during their flight:

We were very scared and feared all the way. We wore big *chaadri* [veils] to cover ourselves. We were stopped several times by Taliban. [. . .] At one time they took my husband and my son, and I had to plead and beg them by the name of holy *Quran* [holy book]. (F)

Another participant added, “We were afraid as they stopped the car every step of the way and searched everyone. [. . .] With a lot of difficulty, we crossed the border into Peshawar” (G).

Leaving their home country and crossing the border into Pakistan was a very difficult journey. The participants described the harsh conditions under which they managed to survive for many years:

We were left with six people for eight months in one small room, and it was very, very hot; it was almost 45 degrees. It was really, really the darkest moment of my life after marriage and very hard for me. After almost a month I got pregnant at age of 17, and I was not able to work, nor was I able to even walk because I did not have any energy, and I was very young at that age. (H)

Harassment

Most of the participants explained that the local people (Pathans) took advantage of them when they first arrived in Pakistan. The local men, police, and landlords beat and harassed the men. One of the participants described how the local people used various tactics to get her husband addicted to drugs:

One day we sent him [my husband] to the market to buy some groceries, and a person approached him and told him that he will show him a better place to shop. He took him into a building and was forcing him to go inside when my husband decided to run away from there. Someone later told him that there are drug addicts there, and people are injected, and slowly they become addicted to the drugs. (F)

Another participant added, “Another time my son was also badly bitten by some Pathans” (F).

The local people would physically harass women or try to rob them. Many of the participants talked about taking a male escort with them to escape harassment from the local police. One participant commented, “Police really harassed us. [. . .] We always took a male with us when we went outside so that no one would talk about us. Like this we passed our lives for seven or eight years” (G).

Another participant articulated the difficulties of being physically assaulted by local people, compounded by not being able to turn to the police:

Local people touched us improperly or stole our purses, but we could not complain to the police because of shame. If we did, we would need to bribe them, and we did not have any money, so we had to keep our mouths shut no matter what happened. (F)

The participants in this study discussed the need to escape the Taliban’s harassment and facing the subsequent hardship caused by displacement and poverty; in their discussions they alluded to the fact that living in Pakistan was not very different from the lives they had tried to flee.

Discrimination and Prejudice

A major challenge that the participants talked about was the economic hardship that they faced, which had a negative impact on their quality of life. Examples of these hardships are their inability to access proper food, education, health services, and clothing. One of the main reasons for these hardships was a lack of employment. Although refugee men could find work in factories, they faced discrimination and were paid only half of what the local

people would be paid for the same job. Women had to find work cleaning homes or tailoring. One participant had no money to take the bus or buy simple things:

Sometimes we wanted to take a bus, but we did not have the money. Once the bus conductor told me that either I pay or get out, so I had to get out. Another time there was a woman who paid five rupees for me. [. . .] We did not have enough money to buy clothes. When our sleepers ripped, we had them stitched. My two daughters did some tailoring, and then slowly they found better jobs. (F)

A widowed participant talked about how difficult it was for her to provide for her children: “I went from house to house to make 100 rupees every other day and then bought clothes for my children and for myself” (G).

Several participants discussed the daily hardships that their limited financial circumstances caused:

My husband found a job in a factory, but it was not enough for our family. I was very sick, and when my doctor gave me prescription, [. . .] I [. . .] gave it to my husband. He went out and came back and said, “We don’t have enough money to buy this medication, and we will try to buy it later.” I was pregnant and had to eat good food, but we had nothing. (H)

Pakistan people gave local people 5,000 to 10,000 rupees; they gave us only 2,000 rupees. It was not enough, and if we asked for more, we were told to go find work somewhere else—because we were Afghans. (F)

Aside from economic barriers, the participants undoubtedly faced language barriers during this transition. Many women referred to their inability to speak the local language in Pakistan as a barrier to accessing services and employment: “We had a very difficult time as we did not know the local language of Pakistan, which is Urdu. My husband had a hard time learning Urdu, and so he could not get a job” (F). H explained that “language was the main problem. When I used to go to doctor, I had to take translator. Some things were secret [women’s issues], but we had to use them” (H).

Some participants mentioned having very limited family support, if any, and they were consequently left alone without a support system:

I was alone with young kids, and I could not leave them alone in Peshawar to go to help my husband in the hospital. For six to eight months he was under treatment in Karachi. No one was there. After he died of cancer, I had no one in Pakistan. I was alone by myself, and it was extremely difficult for me. (G)

My son was 12 years old when we went to Rawalpindi. There was no one familiar, and we had to share a house with many other Afghani families. In the beginning I worked as a maid (cleaning, washing dishes, clothes, cooking) in five to six homes so that I could feed my son. I could not afford to send him to school, but he attended English classes in the evening. He was also working as a carpet weaver, and when he was a bit older, he was able to work at a factory. (J)

Most of the participants recalled their fears in a new environment and trying to survive under difficult circumstances. The distress that they faced might have been a constant reminder of what they had left behind in Afghanistan. Once again, without male escorts, their movements were restricted, and they still faced uncertainty about the future. All of the families faced economic hardships, and many were forced to work at very low wages because the local employers took advantage of their situation. Several participants who had lost their husbands had no choice but to work in their neighbourhoods doing menial work to feed their children. Living in exile created an environment of fear, anxiety, mistrust, and hopelessness because many did not know what would happen to them. But the participants in this study kept working and trying to maintain their hope and faith while they waited for new doors to open for them.

Life in Canada

After many years of living hard lives in Pakistan, and without the hope of returning home safely, these women had to seek refuge in another country. Some women in this study

were assessed by either the United Nations or an international NGO for refugee sponsorship to Canada. Other women's families who had already settled here sponsored them.

One of the participants stated that the United Nations knew her horror story, but she did not wish to disclose it during the interview:

My problems Canada Immigration knows, United Nation knows, and my family knows, but nobody else knows. Even my aunt and uncle don't know. I was in the shelter with United Nations, [. . .] and they came to check every day, and [. . .] this part nobody knows. (K)

Two of the families were grateful that they had been selected because their children knew English: "Luckily, after some years FOCUS, an NGO, was sponsoring some refugees to go to Canada. They were selecting single young people over the age of 21 years who knew English, and therefore we were able to come" (F). (I) reported, "After one or two years there was a list from FOCUS. [. . .] My daughter gave exam, and she was selected. After one year we were accepted due to God's mercy and came to Canada in 2002."

Most of the participants were grateful to have had an opportunity to come to Canada given that they had no option to return home. They had heard positive things about Canada and were looking forward to a peaceful life after many years of trauma.

Resettlement

Several participants felt a sense of relief after migrating to Canada, as they would finally be safe and their children would have a better future. All of the participants appreciated the many positive things that Canada has to offer, such as access to education, good employment prospects, personal and societal freedom, safety, security, and rule of law. One participant was grateful to be here for the sake of her children's happiness:

I am happy I am in Canada. My children are okay and my job is okay and salary, even though I don't have any benefits. I like Canada a lot. I just want my children to be happy, because for me it is done. (K)

One participant talked about the positive aspects of life in Canada and was relieved that she could finally sleep without being afraid:

Good things are safety, law, justice; you can fight if something goes wrong. Here we can sleep peacefully; over there we could not sleep peacefully—we were half awake and worried that robbers will come or someone will come and harass us. (G)

Many participants talked about the crucial support that they received from NGOs, their sponsors, the community, and their families upon their arrival. Most expressed their gratitude for the support that they had received, without which the process of resettlement would have been very difficult: “FOCUS, with the help of the community, provided us with all the furniture, groceries, and paid the rent money. They helped my children to get jobs, and now we have bought this house” (F); “When we first came, it was very cold and snowing, and [a community volunteer] bought coats, shoes, everything for us. She really helped us. We appreciate her help and will never ever forget her kindness” (G);

And then five Canadian people [sponsors] helped me. [. . .] I just had one bag of clothes when I came with my children, [. . .] and they are like family and come to my house. Everything they know about my life; nobody else knows. Just these five people know about my life. (K)

Support systems are crucial at the beginning of resettlement because they help newcomers to connect to new environments, which are strange and often cause anxiety. For Afghan women, support networks are critical because they are accustomed to a supportive environment consisting of families, neighbours, or the community around them. Because

most of the participants did not have any extended family or friends in Canada, the NGO and community support were instrumental in keeping their hopes high.

Most of the participants were grateful to have good access to education, health services, and employment. They appreciated the freedom to move and be independent, especially because they had previously faced restrictions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. One participant expressed her feeling of comfort that, with hard work and appropriate language skills, one can make progress:

Women can go to work and study, drive; lots of opportunity for women here in Canada. And we feel this is our country after we get citizenship. We are very comfortable in this country because we used to live in Pakistan for 10 years and no progress. [. . .] And education for children is much better here. (H)

Life was good in a way that I did not think that my life would be so good. It was good there [Montreal]. [. . .] Then we came to Toronto. We were all working, my husband, our elder son, our daughter. Elder son, who was engaged, sponsored his wife, and after one year she came. Life really became better. After that my daughter also got engaged and sponsored her fiancée, and he also came. (I)

The participants expressed their appreciation for the fact that they are in a safe country where they can live with peace and security and their children have a meaningful future.

Barriers

English as a second language

The single most commonly identified barrier for all of the participants was their lack of English language skills. They discussed at length the difficulties that they encountered, especially upon arrival in Canada. They had a hard time finding their way around the city,

communicating at work, and maintaining their work. One participant highlighted the difficulties in the beginning because of her lack of English language skills:

It was very difficult for me for the first year—problem of not being familiar, did not know what to do. It was very difficult without the language. I could not even call Afghanistan; I did not know how to dial. Now it is much better. (G)

Another participant echoed this sentiment:

[The] main problem was language for me, [. . .] because I didn't have language; it was very difficult for me to find my way in Canada. When she was training me, I did not understand. Oh my god, what's she talking about? [. . .] Because everything for me was totally new. In our country we don't have so many things like here in Tim Horton. [. . .] We have only two kinds of tea; [. . .] here we have lots of teas, doughnuts, muffins, big shop. It was really difficulty for me to remember and communicate, and two or three times I made mistakes. (H)

One participant expressed the difficulty her daughter encountered in having to work twice as hard in university because English was not her first language: “My daughter studied 24 hrs. She tells me that a friend of hers from another country only reads once and remembers, and she has to read again and again because her language is not English” (I).

The participants highlighted the reasons that not having English language skills was a major barrier to resettlement. It impacted their employment prospects and overall economic situation and limited their ability to understand their new environment. For some, this was a source of stress and anxiety. The lack of language skills led to difficulties in maintaining employment, which further complicated their economic circumstances.

Living in poverty

Most of the participants experienced economic hardships, which affected their self-esteem and limited the number of opportunities for self-improvement as one of the participant had to drop out before she had completed the course because of economic

hardships and she stressed: “But I didn’t study too long; eight months I study. I started two years full-time training. I didn’t work, as Government Canada would support me for two years, but I stopped and started work in factory” (K).

A widowed participant described how she survived her first year in Canada with a little support from her mother-in-law and the Child Tax Credit, after which her family had to go on welfare:

My mother-in-law stayed with us for 1.5 years and gave us \$500 and \$1,000; came from child tax benefits. We were able to manage with \$1,500. First year there were too many problems, and then after one year slowly, little by little, it got better, and then we went onto welfare. Children are working little bit and have money for small items. (G)

Another participant described her inability to sponsor her family members, who were still in Pakistan because of a lack of money: “It is possible if we sponsor, [. . .] like put money and sponsor them, but we don’t have enough money—financial problem, so we are not able to sponsor them” (H).

One participant became very emotional when she discussed the difficulty of not having a car, even after having lived in Canada for a long time, and of having to walk very far to get to work:

Eight years I am in Canada; I don’t have a car. Always I am carrying the cart.—I will show you— [. . .] and I am walking. [. . .] Going to work and coming back takes me more than 35 minutes because I have to pick up my children from daycare. (K)

Another participant described the challenges of having to repay various loans:

Here we live in one room, which is also our living room, and in the basement we have a fridge and a stove, and we cook there. [. . .] When we first came here, we did not have enough money to rent apartment and pay two months advance, so we took a

loan from someone to pay rent here at this house as they only wanted one month advance. [. . .] We are still having problems due to burden of this loan and the travel loan; it is very difficult for us to pay. Still we have \$1500 balance left to pay the government for the money they lent us to come here. (J)

For two participants, learning to drive was very important because they felt that without this skill they did not have the freedom to go places and to participate in activities with their children because they had to rely on others:

I had a problem whenever I wanted to go anywhere; I needed someone to take me like *Jamatkhana* [prayer house]. One day one of my friends told me, “I will drop and pick you up,” and for three days she did, and then she started to change her directions. (H)

One participant stressed that “it is very difficult here; every woman of Afghanistan who comes, first thing they should learn how to drive. Driving is important so that they can take their children to school and stay with their children” (I).

Difficulties obtaining meaningful employment

Most of the participants expressed the need for better jobs to ensure their financial self-sufficiency. One participant constantly worried that, after having spent years learning English and getting a diploma, she might still not be able to find a well-paying job: “My biggest worry is to find a good job that is good for me; otherwise it is big tension. It is important. Financial problem is a big problem” (H).

Another participant, who was once an engineer in Afghanistan, had to work as a daycare attendant because her credentials are not recognized in Canada. She also described the differences in her earning potential as a result: “People say, ‘Oh, she is in Canada and has a nice job,’ but people don’t know how difficult it is here. In Afghanistan every engineer has a car, but here I don’t even have a bike” (K).

Some participants discussed their depression and the difficulty of forgetting the past. This was complicated by other stressors that compounded their emotional issues. One participant constantly worried about feeling guilty because she was not aware of the “proper way” to raise her children, which keeps her awake at nights: “Always I think of the past and worry and get depressed. I cannot forget the past. [. . .] I cannot sleep without this medication of depression. [. . .] My depression became more and more when my nephew committed suicide three months ago” (I). In addition,

When I go sleep, I always think, How come I did not do this for my son or for my daughters? She got toothache; when I took her to the dentist, they said it would cost \$500, and I did not have the money. I took her to another person who said it cheaper, and then all the teeth were destroyed. And now I think about those things. (I)

Some of the participants talked about being discriminated against at work, that they were not treated in the same way that others were, or fearing losing their jobs because they wear veils. One participant described her frustrations in explaining to the Canadian authorities why her husband wore a beard, and she reported that she challenged the system by continuing to wear her veil:

But here also I am scared to lose my job. But they cannot fire me because I am wearing *Hijab* [veil]. You know, [. . .] they are thinking because I have scarf I am Mujahidin, Taliban. They are not aware how I hate Mujahidin and Taliban. (K)

They [Canadians] are asking why my husband has beard. Oh my gosh. They know that even now American people go to Afghanistan; they also have to have a scarf on, so why are they asking about my scarf? They didn't give me travel document first because I had a scarf. [. . .] Why are they asking me like this, because I am Afghani; culturally, we have to. Now I want to keep it on because I see what is going on here. I am educated; I have master's degree. I worked five years as an engineer. (K)

Although resettlement in a new country offers many opportunities, the participants also described many barriers to their well-being. They all concurred that the economic and

language barriers were the most significant in trying to learn the new language, retain multiple jobs, and look after their families; just as in their country of origin, these women were juggling many roles. Because of these barriers, many still did not have complete financial independence even after having been in Canada for six to eight years. Some wanted to sponsor their families but could not because of economic difficulties. This caused some of the participants a great deal of stress because they missed their families back home, wanted to bring their families to Canada, or felt guilty because they were safe here, whereas their families might not be secure.

Raising Children in a New Environment

All of the participants who had teenage children talked about the various tensions and challenges that they faced in the dominant, Canadian culture. It was evident that one of the biggest challenges for them is being parents who are raising children in a completely different and new environment from the one that they have known all their lives.

Four participants were concerned that their children do not listen to their parents, nor do they respect their elders or teachers: “Here children do not listen to parents. What can we do? We do not have any control. [. . .] They say, ‘You are listening to peoples talk; don’t listen to people talks!’” (G). In addition,

Children here are less respectful if I compare to my country. And nobody cares about elder people. In our country lots of respect for elder people. When they come home or when you see them, you say hi to them. Parents have a lot of tension here. (H)

Big difference from Afghanistan. [. . .] They had some fear from their teachers and from the principal. They had a nice and clean uniform and respect teachers. Here it is totally different as they have lots of freedom, do whatever they want. I worry about— [. . .] hopefully, they will listen to their parents; otherwise they will lose their way. (H)

A few participants were very concerned about the type of clothing that their children chose to wear, which was generally very different from their own conservative traditions:

Here everyone wears clothes that are open, and for me this is a problem. Here if girls wear short skirts and open, it is not good, as we should cover everything. I tell them that they should not. I am very uncomfortable, as Afghan people gossip a lot. (G)

Some participants also voiced their concerns about their children having boyfriends or girlfriends. Dating is not traditionally part of the Afghan culture, nor is marrying someone from another faith or culture:

We do not have culture that girls have boyfriends and boys have girlfriends, because if they have, they should hide. Here everything is open. I told them that our culture does not allow, but even if they do, I cannot do anything because government really allows them to do whatever they want. Our daughters should be simple with respect and not go with anyone until they are married. (G)

H commented, “Yes, sometimes they forget their religions; they marry with any girls they want. [. . .] In Afghanistan [. . .] our parents decide. [. . .] Now I don’t know. [. . .] Because of freedom, they use drugs. This is big tension for parents.”

Another participant voiced her concern about in-school sex education as early as Grade 5, which in her opinion was too early. She was also worried about children being involved in drugs at a very early age: “They teach them [children] about sex education [. . .] [at a young age]. [. . .] Their age is very young in class 6 or 5. [. . .] These are negative things in Canada” (H).

One participant felt conflicted about the government’s role in family conflict. On one hand, she was happy that there were laws against spousal and child abuse, but on the other hand, she was concerned about the risk of splitting up the family when children and wives call 911, which would bring shame to the family and the community:

If someone hits their children, then government takes parents to jail. Yes, there are few families here from Afghanistan. In Sherbrooke there was a family who used to fight a lot, and police came and took their three children. Also, women from Afghanistan, when they come here, they know that no one can do anything, and so they fight with their husbands. [. . .] Then females phone police, and [they] take their husband. [. . .] Two or three families happened like this. [. . .]

In Afghanistan husbands bite/slap their wives, but if husbands do that here, then their wives call 911, and then husbands are taken to jail. [. . .] Here it is good, but men should not hit, and women should also not do that. Women take a lot of pain; you see how they go through difficulty giving birth and raise them, work, and then get bitten up by their husbands. So husbands should respect them and not do this, and wives should also try not to call 911 but try to settle between themselves; otherwise it is shameful and disgraceful, and this is not good. They should not take advantage of the freedom in Canada. (G)

One participant was not aware that she could not leave her son alone and was shocked when the police came to her house. This caused her depression to worsen:

I had a problem, because when my younger son went to school I was working, and he was nine years old, and he was alone at home. Police came to my door and said that this boy is young. I went to work every day and thought that my son was at home, but he went downtown and there was a fight. We are not allowed to let 15-year-old stay or go alone, and when I heard that, I became shocked. (I)

The above narratives illustrate that Afghan refugee women face numerous cultural and intergenerational tensions in Canada. The participants who came here with younger children or children in their teens discussed their concerns at length, but some of the participants whose children were older (i.e., over 20 years old at the time of arrival) did not have as many concerns. This is likely because the older children were not exposed to the Canadian school system and thereby avoided cultural clashes related to clothing, interpersonal relationships, and sex education. As well, the older children would have grown up within their own culture prior to moving to Canada and would be less influenced by Canadian culture as a result. An important element of Afghan culture is children's respect

for their parents and elders and the need to abide by their parents' right to choose their life partners for them. The two participants who specifically talked about these issues have young, school-going children who easily adopted the Canadian culture.

Grief: Family Members Left Behind

Many participants remembered their families back home and constantly worried about them. One participant talked about the stress of leaving their families behind and spending time thinking about how to sponsor them in Canada or send money back home. Another participant who had children and grandchildren back home as well as a widowed daughter in the country of asylum constantly missed them and worried about their well-being:

I have four children left in Afghanistan and [. . .] one of my daughters is in Pakistan—a widow, as her husband was killed by Taliban, and she is very depressed. Her expenses are only \$100 a month, but it is very difficult for her. I remember and miss my children a lot and do not feel like going anywhere. I do not feel like eating good things, and I remember them all the time. I wish my children were here; then it would be like heaven. (F)

I want to sponsor my family, my brother-in-law and mother-in-law. [. . .] Big stress. [. . .] Now I am thinking, how should I sponsor them? [. . .] Children who are grown up together have closeness with each other. If they don't see anybody, it is difficult for them. (H)

These examples show that arrival in Canada does not always result in cut ties with the homeland. Many refugees who resettle in Canada have left family members behind, and the stress of worrying about their family lingers even years after resettlement.

Psychological Impact

During the war children also witnessed many horrors. One participant talked about her own depression and stated that her children had witnessed many horrific incidences. She was concerned that they have been affected and might have problems as a result:

War of Taliban, children have seen such bad things. They have seen the dead bodies; they have seen lot of [. . .] things. I mean, the people of Afghanistan have all seen bad things. I also eat depression medicine from young age; I think that my children also may have some problems. Whatever happened, my children remember everything of the past. [. . .] That daughter went and saw everything with her own eyes. And when the car came and she saw all those bodies, and because she always used to go there, she saw that some did not have teeth, legs, nose, and they were bleeding. (I)

The psychological impact of conflict is extremely difficult to measure, particularly when it is compounded with dislocation and having to adjust in a totally new environment.

Women's Resiliency Across Life

Afghan women have also shown strength and resiliency despite the fear and danger that they faced and the many issues with which they have had to deal. They have demonstrated resiliency by resisting and negotiating with the Taliban when the men were captured: “On the way we were stopped several times by Taliban. At one time Taliban took my husband and my son. I had to plead with them, [. . .] begged them not to take my husband and son” (F). Another participant discussed the challenges that she has faced in Canada:

They [employee and employer] were telling me to improve my language. [. . .] I knew I had to go to school, [. . .] but that time I really needed money and had to work, and I dried my tears and just started to work again and not think negatively.

One participant felt that “mothers should realize what children are going through here so that they can help. How come I did not help them, understand them when I first came?” Another expressed her sentiments: “I was engineer, and now I am working very hard [at menial jobs], but I am happy. With everything I am happy.” Working multiple jobs, learning English, and juggling household responsibilities demonstrated their courage and strength in supporting their families:

And for six months I studied LINC classes, and I had to find job as we had financial problem again and we needed money. Now I work as a supply teacher in daycare, and I have evening classes from 7 to 10 p.m. I still work with previous job at Metro supermarket. (H)

Religion and Spirituality

The participants used various coping mechanisms and demonstrated resiliency throughout troubled times. Their faith and religion helped them to cope with multiple challenges and gave them enormous strength. All of the participants derived their strength and hopefulness from the constant remembrance of God and from their prayers; their absolute faith in God was all that kept them going during these times of unrest. All of the participants were thankful to Mawla (Allah) for his benevolence and mercy and commonly used phrases such as “*Shukhar Alhamdulillah*,” which means “Thank God; all praise is due to Allah.” They also used a very common saying in Afghanistan: “*Mawla Mehrabaan Ast*,” which means “Allah is kind, and he will look after us no matter what”:

That day we all prayed very hard, and, fortunately, the men changed their decision not to go ahead with the plan [to bury the females alive]. God listened to our prayers. [. . .] After four months we heard that our sons were safe in Pakistan, and that is when we decided to leave Afghanistan. God saved our sons. (F)

Last year I didn't know where they [my family] were. But *Alhamdulillah* [all praise is due to our lord], they are okay in Kabul. [. . .] *Alhamdulillah*, one of them (a Group of Five sponsor) is my lawyer. I have to thank God because he helped us so much. (K)

I am Muslim, and I say this is between me and my God. I thank God and want help in bringing my husband and changing my life. Why should I say to the people "It is difficult"? Never would I say it is difficult. (K)

We were afraid, as they stopped the car every step of the way and checked everyone. They stopped the people to check them, but by the grace of God we reached the border into Peshawar. We are thankful to God that nothing happened and we were saved from being dishonoured. And this is how we passed our lives for many years. (G)

I added, "Now, *Shukhar* [thank God] that he [my son] will finish Grade 12, and his acceptance into university he wanted has come. [. . .] From that time till now, God helped and no other problem happened" (I).

The above narratives strongly suggest that religion and spirituality have played major roles in the lives of these women and are a source of strength that has helped them to overcome adversity.

Women as Leaders

It was apparent in the interviews that these women played a significant role in all aspects of their family's lives, particularly during difficult times. When the men were not there or their lives were at stake, the women often had to take on a leadership role and assume responsibility for the family. These women had to juggle multiple roles: They worked from a very young age, looked after their children and extended family, and managed the household tasks, in spite of the fact that their health was often compromised as a result of inadequate healthcare. Moreover, many of the women had lost their husbands,

fathers, or brothers; and, as a result, they were left to protect their families. The participants shared many stories about times when, even during war, they had to assert themselves and their needs to protect their families. One participant had to plead with the Taliban to release her husband and son when they were captured on the way to Pakistan:

Taliban took my husband and my son. I had to plead with them, and we cried and cried and begged them to return them to us. I showed them our holy book, *Quran*, and told them that for the sake of the *Quran* please leave them, and finally they left them. (F)

Another participant articulated her desire to step forward as a leader by advocating for those who are experiencing situations that she has faced:

Inshaallah (if God is willing) my case done, I want to fight. I want to go to Afghanistan. Just, I am waiting because my children are young. I don't want to stay quiet here and take money and do my life thousand, thousand pieces like that. What about my responsibility? Like my sister and thousands of other ladies like me. (K)

The women in this study showed courage and fortitude during the most trying times by negotiating with the Taliban to save their family members, risking their lives to go outside the home when there were no male members to accompany them, and working to support their families for economic reasons. They expressed their desire to take on leadership roles.

Women as Caretakers and Economic Supporters of Families

At a very young age the participants in this study had learned to take care of their families and worked to support their families financially when their spouses could not. They sometimes had to juggle household chores with other income-generating activities to provide for their families, particularly their children:

I was 15 years old when I got married. When I was 18, [. . .] my husband fell off from the third floor and could not work for 10 years. I had to shoulder all the

responsibility of the family. I had to work like a man, stitching military clothing from home until very late at night so that my children could have good education, stationery, and clothing. I also did all the household chores and looked after the children. (F)

When I was young in Kabul, I did *kamakh dozi* [embroidery work] to sell to American people. When I was in Mazar for some time, I also worked at people's homes for a while. After that they opened a small shop in their office, and I stitched tablecloths and other items for 6 years. (I)

I went to Peshawar with them [my employer] and also worked there with her. In order to improve our quality of life, Maryann sent me to another family's home. Then I worked at both homes as rent was high and my children were all there. (I)

I decided to drop one of my jobs and go to school. I joined adult school in 2008, and for three years I studied in adult school. [. . .] I try to look forward and [. . .] be an independent person. I do everything by myself [. . .] although I had difficulty here in the beginning, but slowly, if you work hard and you are confident, you might make a good future. [. . .] I have to go to take my license. At that time I was very busy as I had two jobs and school and lots of responsibilities at home, but I decided to take my driving license. (H)

The women demonstrated considerable ability to take on multiple roles and be self-reliant when needed. Their toil knew no boundaries. Their stories have revealed these women's motivation to succeed in life, be flexible in their circumstances, and work for the benefit of their families. This was a huge strength that demonstrates that they are resilient and chose not to succumb to the hopelessness that surrounded them in trying times.

During their exile in Pakistan, despite facing economic hardship, the participants still managed to maintain their strength, keep their families together, and work hard. Although life was difficult, they ensured that their children had an opportunity to go to school and learn English so that they could have a better future: "I had seen a lot of poverty in my own home, and therefore I tried hard that my daughter wears good clothes and goes to school" (I); "Even though I was in a terrible situation, my children were able to go to school as I sent

them to English courses so that they can be somebody one day” (G); and “Many times I had no clothes, I had only one pair, but I bought stationery for the kids. I worked hard, washed clothes at people’s homes so that they could rest and concentrate on their studies” (F).

As the participants struggled to create a new life for themselves in Canada, they continued to play the role of caregiver, managed to work several jobs, all while simultaneously trying to learn the English language. Furthermore, many of the participants felt that, to be independent and provide for their children, they had to learn how to drive. One participant was aware that she was not alone in her struggles and compassionately wanted to return to Afghanistan to help other women who are experiencing similar struggles:

I studied English classes and worked part time. [. . .] I cleaned and did dishwashing for five months. Then I went to Pakistan. I came back, [. . .] started sewing job in a factory, and after nine months I was laid off. Then I got a letter from immigration re my husband’s sponsorship as I did not have a job. Then I got this job at the day care with St Joseph Immigrant Women Center. My supervisor doesn’t know my story. She knows how I am alone, but she doesn’t know how hard my life was before. (K)

Another participant had health problems: “My right hand and leg are very painful. They burn day and night. I don’t have any education, and I am illiterate but continue to look after my family”. (F)

Under the most difficult circumstances, these women have managed to nurture their families in Canada. Their narratives about their lives in Afghanistan, in exile in Pakistan, or currently in Canada portray significant strength and resilience.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter highlights the key findings from this research and discusses how this study aligns with the current literature on the subject. Afghan refugee women suffered through several decades of war, but throughout the years of conflict, upheaval, exile, and resettlement, they showed enormous strength and used multiple coping mechanisms for survival. This finding is in contrast to what the mainstream media and some scholars have portrayed. The lives of the participants in this study were uprooted, causing the women to experience emotional and physical loss of loved ones and belongings. However, they demonstrated resiliency and learnt to live with courage and fortitude. The participants' experiences heighten our awareness of how they found strength in their unwavering love for their families and the faith and religion that sustained them. They also help us to understand how support from and connections to their communities have a significant bearing on their positive mental health and well-being. Whether women had to deal with displacement, the loss of family members, economic and linguistic barriers, or the effort of protecting themselves and the honour and dignity of their families, they resisted, managed, and used various coping mechanisms to ensure that their families came first. Their negative memories of the past did not stifle their hope and their determination for the future.

Love for their Families

This study demonstrates that Afghan women find strength in their love for their families and their role as their caretakers. Their stories suggest that they are determined to nurture and provide for their families and that they will do so even if they have to risk their

own lives. During the war, even while these women were forced to leave their country, they did not want to leave their children behind, even if it meant losing their own lives. During their exile, they worked at menial jobs under difficult circumstances so that their children could attend school or have the basic necessities. For Afghan women, the needs of their children and their families take precedence over their own needs. Their lives revolve around their families.

Another important goal for Afghan women is to preserve the honour and dignity of their families. Their narratives illustrate that, facing the risk of being raped, Afghan women demonstrated resiliency by resisting the Mujahidin or Taliban and by using various coping mechanisms, including taking their own lives to preserve the honour of their families. The women in this study showed strength and hopefulness despite multiple losses. They played important roles in ensuring the safety and well-being of their families while negotiating with the Mujahidin and Taliban to release their husbands, sons, and brothers when they were captured or while looking after their families when none of the males were there. According to Mehraby (2007), Afghan women are the “true heroines of war” (p. 7).

Even in Canada the women have continued to work hard to support their families and provide for their children’s needs while recognising that their hard work is for their children’s benefit rather than their own. As one participant said, “My life is finished, but I live for my children’s future.” Most of these women, after their arrival in Canada, juggled multiple tasks for the benefit of their families, including working at multiple jobs, learning English, and taking care of household chores. From the participants’ experiences, it is clear that despite the linguistic, economic, and cultural barriers to resettling in a new environment,

they took the initiative to improve their situation. They did not let the various systematic barriers impede their motivation to continue to nurture their families.

Many female refugee groups also use their families as sources of strength. As Kumin (2008) stated, “Women’s roles as mothers and family nurturers cut across international borders and ethnic divisions” (p. 225). The existing literature also validates the findings of this study. From a cultural perspective, Afghan women use their role as nurturers as a source of strength, and Ross-Sheriff (2006) stated that Afghan women’s “faith sustained them through troubled times, and they continued to work for the well-being of their families and communities” (p. 217). Ross-Sheriff added that “those who view Afghan women through a Western lens fail to take into account the concepts of family responsibilities and obligations as well as the strengths of Afghan women” (p. 218). Therefore, it appears that the women in this study, like other Afghan women in Ross-Sheriff’s study, derive their strength from caretaking and nurturing their family under the most difficult of situations and therefore demonstrate resiliency during times of hardship. It is important that we recognize that women’s needs, for this group of women, are ultimately the needs of their families.

Role of Faith and Religion

The findings also suggest that these refugee women used their strength to overcome the numerous systemic barriers that they faced from their religion and spirituality. This played a significant role in keeping them strong and their hopes alive. All of the participants in this study used phrases in the remembrance of God such as “*Shukhar Alhamdulillah* [all praise is due to Allah]” and told me that their faith in Allah sustained them throughout difficult times by giving them hope and helping them to struggle through hardship and

survive. For example, when male members of the family were deciding whether or not to bury the women to preserve the family's honour, the women prayed very hard, and the men decided not to bury them. Similarly, while they crossed the border into Pakistan, the women were worried about being checked, harassed, or arrested, but they had faith that Allah would protect them. From this we understand that Afghan refugee women derived some of their strength from reliance on and faith in Allah to be able to face the many adversities that they encountered.

Gozdziak's (2008) research with Iraqi, Cambodian, Kosovar, Bosnian, and Somali refugees also confirmed that "the diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices [. . .] sustain[s] many refugees and forced migrants in their processes of displacement, migration, and integration to the host society" (p. 183). According to Walsh (2006), "Transcenden[t] beliefs and practices provide meaning and purpose beyond a family's immediate flight and most families find strength, comfort and guidance through connections from their religious and cultural traditions" (p. 133). The sentiments of many Afghan women that Ross-Sheriff (2006) interviewed after they repatriated back to Afghanistan were similar: "Women had faith in Allah and felt that Allah had protected them during exile, [. . .] and their resilience emanated from their trust in Allah's grace" (p. 213).

For Afghans who suffered many tribulations, their faith in Allah helped to keep their hopes alive. For Afghan women, a spiritual or religious orientation gave them the strength to endure the difficulties that they faced; this, in turn, can be hypothesised to have promoted better mental health. It is important that we recognize that for Afghan refugee women, as for many refugee women, religion and spirituality play significant roles in their lives.

Mental Health and Well-Being

The experiences of Afghan refugee women also suggest that it is important to consider their resiliency and the coping strategies that they used for survival in relation to their mental health and well-being. Although intuition suggests that the trauma of uprooting their lives and witnessing the horrors of war would cause depression and anxiety, I did not find this to be pervasive in this study. The only exception was one study participant who acknowledged having depression. The women in this study made significant adjustments to their lives as a result of separation, disruption, and disintegration of their family units. New environments caused new challenges as they tried to make various social, economical, and cultural adjustments to accommodate their families and their children. But the Afghan women in this study retained positive memories from their lives prior to the war and violence and relied on their own strength and the strength that they derived from their families. They do not appear to have suffered from the mental health problems that might be expected.

Other researchers have also made this observation. Hayward, Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Ploeg, Trollope, and Khanlou (2008) in their research with Sudanese refugee women found that “belief in their own strength was a foundation to their mental health” (p. 204). Similarly to Sudanese women, Afghan women portrayed “built-in resilience and relied a lot on themselves” (p. 204). As one participant in this study said, “I dried my tears and just started to work again and not think negatively.” Besides their own strength, they relied on support from their families and the community in their resettlement, which helped them to maintain their own emotional and mental health.

According to Jacob et al. (1994) when they explored the settlement experiences of various refugees in Canada, “Social resources related to family and to communal support seemed to play important roles in maintaining mental health” (p. 21). This can be observed in my small sample. Of the families of the six women in the study, two received sponsorship from FOCUS, an international NGO, which provided financial and social support through community volunteers. These families appear to be faring much better than the rest of the four families who were sponsored privately by their own families or through the Group of Five sponsorship program. For example, their children are doing well in school, most of them are working and taking part-time courses, and both families have bought houses and have several cars. Of the other four families, three did not receive financial support but had their families’ support and a high degree of community support. These families had cars, took part in social events within the community, and received employment assistance from the community. The final family in this sample was sponsored by people from outside the Afghan community and did not share any cultural similarities with their sponsors. This family struggled to afford to buy a bike, which led to difficulties in work and school attendance and hindered the ability to attend English language classes. Although this family is comprised of a single mother with two children, I do not think that this was a cause for the hardships, because two other women in the study were also single parents.

These situations show that participant families who had support from their extended families and communities fared much better than those who did not. It also reveals that, for Afghan women, assistance from their extended families and support systems from within their own cultural or religious community is critical for successful adaptation in Canada.

More research in this area could reveal new knowledge on how this works and the benefits to women refugees.

In the study that Jacob et al. (1994) conducted with refugees in Montreal, “Psychological tension was predominantly modulated by socioeconomic factors and stressors linked to acculturation process as well as nostalgia for the country of origin” (p. 24). I was surprised to hear one of the participants use the word *depression* so many times in her discussions with me. Although her interview was in Dari, she repeatedly used the English word depression. Having worked with this population for a long time and having lived in Afghanistan for many years, I struggled with the translation of Western models of mental health because words such as depression and stress are not commonly used in the Afghan language. When I worked with refugee families in Afghanistan and specifically used words such as these, I asked my translators to translate them, and they would reply, “There is no specific word for mental health in our culture.” In fact, when I wanted to refer some families for specific mental health issues, we could not find a single institution in Afghanistan that offered mental health services. An NGO called Handicap International catered only to children less than 12 years of age who had physical disabilities. When I interviewed families and discussed mental health, they would use either the word *mad* to refer to someone with severe mental health issues or language such as “I have a headache” or “I worry too much” or “I could not sleep” in expressing their mental health concerns. Many cultures similar to the Afghan culture, such as the Sudanese, do not have a specific name for mental health, which they explained as follows: “We do not give name because name makes person more sick so we don’t want to tell that person she is sick” (Hayward et al., 2008,

p. 204). I believe that the participant who discussed her depression at length might be accessing mental health services and could have heard the terminology there. Similarly to Sudanese women who “drew upon their strengths to assist them in coping with the resettlement process, and in reconstructing their identities in a new host country” (p. 203), Afghan women too draw upon their own strengths and those of their families.

The results of this study highlight the enormous courage of Afghan refugee women, who nurtured their families and demonstrated resiliency throughout the conflict, upheaval, exile, and resettlement. They also used multiple coping mechanisms, deriving strength from family, community support, and their religion and spirituality. Their positive mental health and well-being are related to their own strength to endure difficult times and to use their families and other supports from the community to sustain them through the most difficult times. Thus the findings of this study are congruent with Ross-Sheriff’s (2006) argument that Afghan women were nurturers and caretakers of their families and demonstrated resiliency despite the danger and hostile situation they faced and that their faith sustained them through the difficult times. As we work with many refugees globally, nationally, or locally, we can use some of the concepts discussed above that are applicable to other refugee groups who have suffered similar experiences of trauma and loss.

As I mentioned earlier in this study, every refugee group has unique and diverse experiences, and it is important that we recognize their unique abilities and strengths in working with them. When we do not know and understand their lives, we tend to portray them as weak and passive victims of war and “unintentionally reproduce women’s disempowerment” (UNHCR, 2001, p. 4).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This exploratory study, I hope, has provided some insight and added to the current knowledge base and understanding of Afghan refugee women who currently live in Canada. Many scholars have documented the plight of refugees, but only a few have researched Afghan refugee women, and in particular the positive roles that they have played. The results of this study suggest the need to understand the experiences of Afghan refugee women in various contexts (i.e., historical, political, and cultural) as well as in different circumstances (i.e., conflict, upheaval, exile, and resettlement). Only through understanding their experiences can we begin to formulate appropriate programs, policies, and interventions. In this section I also make some recommendations for improved services for Afghan refugee women that will also be applicable to other refugee groups.

The untold stories have begun to be told. There is much to learn and to digest. The narrow image of Afghan refugee women as victims is slowly fading for some of us, but much remains to be done. The war's long-term impact on women will take time to heal because they have painful memories of lost loved ones, oppression, trauma, and the ongoing adjustment to resettlement. Afghan refugee women are powerful and nurturing human beings with inner strength and resiliency who have learned to cope with prolonged suffering. Our first task is to “stop concentrating on programs that prolong the stereotyping of refugee women as vulnerable as this stereotyping results in underplaying empowerment projects that can provide women with better education, economics and leadership skills and in turn enhance women's roles” (Kumin, 2008, p. 22). Instead, we must try to deconstruct the

image of Afghan refugee women by working closely with them and their families, by conducting research, and by documenting refugee women's multiple strategies and resiliencies (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al., 2008).

The result of this study illuminates the positive role that these women have played and continue to play in their new host country, Canada. Being aware of their positive roles will first of all help those who work directly with them to see them as women with agency and a vision for their families and their society instead of viewing them as refugees or victims. It will help service providers to empower them and focus on their strengths.

My personal experience with Afghan refugee women, while I coordinated a community case worker program in Afghanistan in 2002, revealed their incredible initiative and resources. The international organization for which I worked had initiated a repatriation program for the returnees, and I was coordinating the arrival of thousands of refugees who were returning home. I recruited 30 staff, half of whom were women. When I initially hired them in 2002, many of the women spoke very little or no English and did not have any computer skills, and most of them had minimum education because education for females had been curtailed during the conflict. Within a couple of years most of these women had acquired English and computer skills and were travelling with me to various areas of Afghanistan. After three years, most of these women found senior-level jobs with other NGOs and senior positions in banks. The reason that I am highlighting this is that, although from the outset it may appear to many of us that Afghan women are passive, in reality, they are assertive, smart and demonstrate resiliency.

Although as a social worker I had the opportunity to work with many Afghan women in Canada, this was my first experience of working with Afghan women in their home country. I modeled a strengths perspective throughout my work with them as I listened to their stories, involved them at every level, nurtured them, and empowered them to work hard to learn various skills. To me, they showed remarkable leadership and potential. My experience in working with people who have faced trauma and suffering is to nurture them with respect, caring concern, and love. This research also adds to our understanding when working with refugees, similar to crisis theory. Crisis theory argues that coping mechanisms provide a way of restoring individuals to their state of equilibrium and allowing the individuals to return to normal (Roberts, 2002). Refugees who have suffered trauma use their resilient factors, internal and external coping mechanisms, and support systems to do so.

Showing them genuine care and attending to their basic survival needs accomplishes half of the task; the rest involves being open and reflexive to learn their histories, identities, roles, culture, and what is important to them. In these circumstances it is often hard to remember, for example, that in Afghan culture, families and communities come first.

The focus of my research was specifically on the lived experiences of a handful of Afghan refugee women who had resettled in Canada. I believe that additional research with a larger number of Afghan refugee women, both in Canada and abroad, would generate a wealth of knowledge with more general applicability to refugee women in general. Research focused on extensive supports as a positive factor, the role of religion and spirituality in their lives, and intervention approaches and outcomes based on a strengths perspective would be particularly beneficial. Examining the outcomes of Afghan refugee women who have

resettled in other countries will help understand the unique experiences of those who have come to Canada, and the wider context of those who have resettled elsewhere.

Recommendations

First, our portrayal of Afghan women must change. This study has demonstrated that they are not the meek and submissive victims that they are often thought to be; we must dispel this image, and we must encourage these women to work to dispel it themselves as well.

Afghan women no longer should present themselves as poor and helpless victims, and neither should others assume that they are so. . . . It is essential that Afghan women's rights activists and leaders keep their close ties with women organizations and their leaders at the regional, continental, and global level. (Nemat, 2011, p. 31)

Second, there is a need to challenge the global structures that create such conditions that force refugees to flee their homeland without adequate solutions for their peaceful return home or positive resettlement in a new environment. Although some changes have been made in the last decade in the area of women's rights and refugee policies, much remains to be done. Refugee policies and international efforts must be based on women's realities and the UNHCR, human rights groups, women's movements, and humanitarian organizations worldwide need to work together to ensure international support for women who face such tragedies and whose lives are permanently at risk.

Third, all service providers, humanitarian workers, and social workers must work in partnership with the refugees and recognize the strengths and leadership skills that they bring with them to be able to empower them to make their own decisions. The voices and stories of these women provide insight into their individual experiences, the diversity of cultures, and their ability to endure, sustain, and manage in the most traumatic of times. We have

seen in this study as well as other similar studies that refugees' experiences are the experiences of their families and communities, and interventions must therefore be directed towards a collective approach based on the local population and on goals that are relevant to the community's definitions of resilience and resettlement.

Fourth, we must “note that there are interesting differences within feminist movements located in Islamic society” (Pilch, 2006, p. 110). This author stated that modern Islamic feminists are keen to make their case for women's rights within a religious idiom rather than global feminism based on Western conceptions of human rights, which give priority to autonomy and choice versus respect for family, religion, and community and thereby making it difficult to appropriately address women's issues in the Muslim world. Given the diversity of women's experiences and roles in the Islamic states, it is important that women globally network with each other to understand the rights of women, which are human rights that promote “peaceful resolution of conflict and the advancement of all the rights of all people, regardless of race or religion” (p. 116).

Fifth, in Canada we need to understand that Afghan refugees are people with skills and potential who have been accepted into Canada as refugees with permanent status. Therefore, Canada has a special responsibility to make resettlement inclusive and to eliminate the barriers that they face with a specialized program for them (Navaratna, 2007). We must come up with creative and effective long-term solutions to help ease their transition into productive members of Canadian society. For example, transportation loans create long-term economic challenges that force refugees to work at multiple jobs and thus do not allow them an opportunity to access English language classes. In turn, not having English language

skills creates challenges for future employment and sinks refugees deeper into poverty. We know that, in addition to economic and language barriers, refugees face many other barriers, and it is therefore imperative that targeted holistic services and long-term supports be provided to help them to settle successfully. For example, we need to recognize the credentials of those who were professionals in their own countries and create special employment opportunities for them to use their skills and expertise while giving them opportunities to learn the language. Offering those who have no skills language and vocational training and subsequently providing them with opportunities for job shadowing after they acquire these skills would help them to become contributing citizens rather than passive recipients of various social services.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Education, Policy, and Research

It is necessary to reconsider the language that we use to address this group. Terminology such as *newcomers* or *refugees* has come to portray them as a group who is here for a temporary, short-term stay, has limited knowledge and skills, and is a vulnerable or powerless group. Refugees who enter Canada for resettlement most often do so with permanent-residency status. Why should we refer to them as refugees? Continuing to label them as refugees depicts the power of language that Canada is a humanitarian country and that we are fulfilling our obligation to look after and care for these destitute people—the refugees. One could argue that calling them refugees serves an important function of giving them higher status than immigrants as they will be seen more positively in Canadian society as blameless for their situation.

As agents of change and refugees' first point of contact, social workers need to view them as human beings with skills and potential and offer them hope and respect as they begin their new lives. According to Ross-Sheriff, 2006, understanding the disparity between the Western world and their world is critical, because "those who view Afghan women through a Western lens fail to take into account" the cultural context (p. 218). We need to use common elements of culturally competent interventions and culturally competent models that include allowing the clients themselves to determine the needs to be addressed and the potential solutions, integrating the clients' cultural traditions and indigenous healing approaches in service planning, involving family and community members, and matching the clients with program staff with similar cultural backgrounds (McBeath, Briggs, & Aisenberg, 2010; Parker, 2003).

There is clear evidence that when services are culturally sensitive and are offered within the context of ethnic communities, people will more readily seek help and are more likely to benefit from it (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). Many racial and ethnic groups share similar needs but, nevertheless, express and understand the needs differently. Moreover, there may be strong, culturally based differences in how clients prefer to have their needs met (McBeath, Briggs, & Aisenberg, 2010).

As I discussed earlier, ensuring that refugees have extensive social supports during the early resettlement period is critical to their successful integration and settlement. Mobilizing and working closely with their families and communities becomes instrumental in achieve individual success while "aiming at the collective healing of an entire community" (Carranza, 2008, p. 34).

Another important aspect of working with Afghan refugee women is recognizing the role of religion and spirituality in their lives. As my participants and other literature have demonstrated, faith in Allah provides strength and resiliency under the most difficult of circumstances. This area needs to be explored with individuals and their families, because it is very individual and may differ even within the various Muslim communities.

Organizations need to hire staffs that have the appropriate linguistic and cultural background to work together with refugees. Trauma and diversity training should be introduced in refugee-serving organizations and public institutions, such as schools and healthcare services, to recognize and address problems earlier in the settlement of these refugees. Colleges and universities that educate service providers should alter curricula to both examine the specific needs of these populations and produce multicultural and culturally sensitive graduates. Colleges and universities need to admit a diverse student body as well as hire diverse faculty comprised of people of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Because Canada is a pluralistic society and a country with various ethnic communities, it is important that people at various levels and in various organisations who are from many of these ethnic communities provide culturally and linguistically appropriate and sensitive services to various citizens of its country.

Social work agencies and other organizations that serve this population need to form organized coalitions to defend the rights of minority groups and to work together to advocate for policies that promote social inclusion rather than exclusion of such groups. Social work agencies and those who work there have a responsibility to advocate for those whom they serve:

As one of the few professions that understand the issues of disenfranchised communities and oppressed populations, it is incumbent upon social workers to communicate their vast knowledge to decisions makers who may not understand what policies actually enhance the lives of people social workers serve. (Rocha, Poe, & Thomas, 2010, p. 324)

Similarly, Dudziak and Coates (2004) asserted that certain “social work academics maintain that social work must go beyond advocacy to more direct forms of ‘organized solidarity’ in the interests of oppressed groups aimed ‘at winning of state power through the electoral processes’” (p. 95).

As social workers we also need to advocate for funding to be restored to programs and services for refugees. Agencies need to collaborate with a “collective consciousness” (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 299) to provide services that target refugees. Relevant actors need to join with a multiagency response that involves all levels and relevant departments of the federal, provincial, and municipal governments in dealing with the challenges of newcomers’ settlement. There is a dire need to involve all stakeholders in a policy response, including settlement agencies, mainstream institutions, employers, and private foundations.

Our refugee policy needs to move from one that is passive to one that is active. We need to review our policies to see which are working and which need to be changed. These new policies will need to be “defined in concrete terms appropriate for incremental implementation, and must as well win public acceptance” (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003, p. 33). Policies that hinder the settlement process and create long-term barriers to success for the refugees as well as our country need to be changed. Examples of policy changes include, but are not limited to: the removal of travel loans which create economic challenges; the recognition of foreign credentials to encourage participation in meaningful employment

using their talents and skills; and, allowing refugees to sponsor their families to come to Canada, which will promote the re-development of traditional support systems without having to worry about supporting them financially, or feeling lonely, guilty, or depressed.

Refugees work hard and want to integrate into Canadian society and learn the language. Refugee's needs are multiple and unique, and it takes many years for them to acquire the language and other skills to be able to contribute as participating citizens. Therefore, there is a need to advocate for funding to be restored to creative programs and services that allow refugees access to targeted, long-term programs instead of short-term, ad-hoc services, which lump immigrants and refugees together as one group.

Another critical aspect of change is the involvement of the public, who must be made aware of the issues that refugee women face and their potential to contribute to Canadian society. Because Canada takes pride in bringing in refugees on humanitarian grounds, it needs public support to help them to integrate into Canadian society and have a successful transition to their new circumstances. Besides raising the awareness of the public and within various sections of the government, another strategy is to assist clients to challenge the power relations in society. This goal is particularly problematic for the Afghan women who arrive as refugees. Care must be taken to address the particular challenges of traumatized women who, while resourceful and strong, have particular fears and vulnerabilities in confronting powerful structures in their new-found homeland.

More social workers need to conduct research with diverse populations. Only a limited number of social workers from the dominant Canadian culture have conducted research with 'other' cultural groups or communities. Social workers from specific ethnic

communities are limited in number, and there are therefore few specific studies on the issues of subgroups of the Canadian population. There is a need to encourage research with diverse populations and funding for this research needs to be channelled accordingly to raise awareness within the academic and practice communities as well as in the general public.

Dissemination Plan

My dissemination plan has multiple components.

1. Upon the completion of my research, I will develop a summary that I will give to all of the participants who have requested a copy.
2. I will provide a copy of my research findings to the Afghan community in Hamilton, which is a small community whose members meet regularly and are eagerly awaiting the results.
3. Several community service organizations in Hamilton and the Greater Toronto Area work with Afghan refugee women, and it is my intention to share the results of this study with them. I will request some time from the board members to present the findings of my study through a PowerPoint presentation.
4. I want to present the research findings to FOCUS Humanitarian Assistance Canada, an international NGO that sponsored some of these families some 8 to 10 years ago.
5. The Ismailia Muslim community would also be interested in knowing about this research because they offer a great deal of community support to Ismailia Afghan refugee families. As this research provides insight into the needs and challenges of this particular group, I will request some time during their regional and national meetings to make power point presentations.

6. I am also interested in publishing the results of this study in a peer-reviewed journal, and I look forward to the opportunity to do so.

This research study has helped me to understand some of the challenges of resettlement of Afghan refugee women in Canada. As I stated earlier, there are gaps in the research on particular areas of the refugee population, and additional research could prove beneficial for service providers, social workers, policy makers, and funders. I hope to be part of this research in the near future.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

RESILIENCY AMIDST THE FRAGMENTED LIVES OF AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN

1. Describe research study and interview process.
2. Explain how confidentiality will be protected and obtain verbal consent & record on verbal consent log).
3. Ask the participant demographic questions, including: age, education, marital status, length of stay in country of asylum (Pakistan) and length of stay in Canada.
4. Please tell me about your life in Afghanistan.
 - a. Probe—Please tell me about the good times in your country
 - b. Probe—What were the most challenging times for you?
 - c. Probe—How did you manage that?
 - d. Probe—What made you leave Afghanistan?
 - e. Probe—When did you leave Afghanistan?
5. Could you please now tell me about your life in Pakistan.
 - a. Probe—What kind of challenges did you face?
 - b. Probe—How did you manage these challenges as women?
 - c. Probe—Please tell me about the good times in Pakistan
 - d. Probe—When and why did you leave Pakistan?
6. Tell me about your life in Canada.
 - a. Probe—What were some of the challenges when you first came?
 - b. Probe—How did you manage these challenges?
 - c. Probe—What are the current struggles you are going through?
 - d. Probe—What are some of the things you like about Canada?
7. Is there anything else that I might have forgotten or something important that you think I need to know/understand about your experiences in Afghanistan/Pakistan/Canada?

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT

RESILIENCY AMIDST THE FRAGMENTED LIVES OF AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN

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Why am I doing this study?

In this study, I want to hear about the experiences of women from Afghanistan who are now living in Canada. I would like to learn about the lives of women while they were in Afghanistan, their experiences when they were uprooted to Pakistan - a country of asylum, and how are they currently managing their lives in Canada. I am specifically looking for both the positive and negative experiences while you were in your own country (Afghanistan), your struggles during the war, your experiences in refugee camps and elsewhere while you lived in Pakistan, and your settlement in Canada. My goal is to be able to learn from your experiences and to share this information about how women from Afghanistan although having gone through such difficult times, continue to balance and manage their lives.

What will happen during the study?

I will meet with you either at your home or another location of your choice to talk about your experiences. I will first ask some information about your age, education, marital status, etc. and then we will discuss some questions on your experiences in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Canada. I am comfortable discussing the questions in Dari as I am familiar with the language. However, if sometimes I don't understand something properly, I will ask you to explain it to me in English so that I record your experiences accurately. If you desire and are more comfortable speaking in English, I am also fine with that. I will take notes as well as tape record the discussions with your permission, so that I don't miss anything you have to say. If you prefer not to have your interview tape-recorded, please let me know. Our

discussion will take about 90 minutes and at anytime anyone gets tired or needs a break; I can stop the interview and continue again.

Is there anything I should worry about regarding this study?

It is not likely that there will be any harm or discomfort from your participation in this study. Yes, some of the questions may cause you some discomfort or may be stressful. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You may also feel worried about other people knowing that you are participating or sharing your experiences. I would like to reassure you that everything will be kept very confidential. But, if you feel uncomfortable with any question or do not wish to answer simply let me know. You can ask me to stop at anytime, and you will have the choice whether you want to restart the interview, reschedule the interview or withdraw completely without any problem. Also, if you wish, I can assist you to contact some local agencies to deal with any issues or emotions that may surface during the interview.

How will this study benefit me?

The research will not benefit you directly. I hope to learn from you about the experiences as a Refugee woman from Afghanistan who has struggled for such a long time in various contexts of your life. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help me to better understand the trials and tribulations women from Afghanistan have faced in the last several decades and how they continue to struggle for a better quality of life.

Confidentiality

Your privacy will be respected. No one but I will know who did or did not participate in the study. I will not use your name and I will make every effort not to include information that might identify you in the research report. However, we are often recognizable in the stories we tell and references we make. Please keep this in mind through the interview. Any information I collect from you will be kept in a locked cabinet and will only be available to myself. The information will be used for future research if required.

Legally required disclosures

Information obtained will be kept confidential to the full extent of the law; however under some circumstances, I may be compelled by law to break confidentiality. For example, in cases where issues of child protection are involved or if you disclose that you will harm yourself or someone else.

What if I change my mind about participating?

Your decision to participate in this study is voluntary and absolutely your choice. If you decide to participate, you can decide to stop at anytime before, during or after the discussions. If you decide to stop, it will not be a problem at all. Any data that you have provided to that point will be destroyed immediately unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not wish to answer some questions but still participate in the study that is also acceptable.

Information about the study results

This study will be completed by September 2011. If you would like a brief summary of the results please let me know, I can either meet with you briefly to go over the summary or I can send you, or email you a copy. Please see the Informed consent form at the end of this letter to put your address or email.

Questions about the study

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please feel free to contact me Rosmin Bhanji, or my supervisor, Dr. Mirna Carranza. Our contact information can be found at the top of the first page.

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance from, the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

INFORMED VERBAL CONSENT

Rosmin Bhanji of McMaster University has gone over the details presented in this Letter of Information and Consent about a study being conducted to learn about the experiences of refugee women from Afghanistan who are currently living in Canada and who have been through various struggles in their own country as well as in the country of asylum before coming to Canada.

I have had the chance to ask questions about my being in this study and I was given more information when I asked for it.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw (stop) from the study at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant (Printed) _____ Date: _____

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded. Yes () No ()
2. Yes, I would like to receive a 2-3 page summary of the study's results.

Please send or email me at this address: _____ or

I wish Rosmin to come over to provide a brief summary for me. Yes ()

No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results. ()

3. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request. Yes () Please contact me at: _____ or No ()

APPENDIX C: LOG FOR VERBAL CONSENT

RESILIENCY AMIDST THE FRAGMENTED LIVES OF AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN

RESEARCHER'S LOG FOR RECORDING VERBAL CONSENT

Participant's unique ID number	Participant's name	Date

APPENDIX D: FOLLOW-UP PHONE CALL

RESILIENCY AMIDST THE FRAGMENTED LIVES OF AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN

Thank you for taking time to discuss the details of the study that I am conducting as part of my Masters Degree requirement with the McMaster School of Social Work.

I hope you have had a chance to think about the study. If you feel comfortable and wish to participate, I would like to meet with you at a convenient time and place to conduct the study. As discussed earlier, I would need approximately one and half hours for our discussions. An afternoon, evening or the weekend would be fine with me whenever you are available.

Date: _____

Time: _____

(If they decline, I would thank them for taking time to sit with me and go over the details of the study).