

WAR, TRAUMA, and REALITY: AFGHAN WOMEN'S PLIGHT IN TURKEY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the late 1970s, international wars and intra-state violence have battered the country of Afghanistan, generating several waves of mass displacement. According to the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2011), a tragic consequence of this violent legacy is that currently one out of every four refugees in the world is from Afghanistan – making it the leading country of origin for refugees. Although 2.7 million Afghans are now scattered across 79 countries, the majority of them sought refuge in neighboring or nearby countries such as Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Turkey. Finding “durable solutions” to resolve the plight of displaced people has become a priority for the UNHCR and the international community. While voluntary repatriation remains the most preferred solution, continued instability, the threat of persecution, and the inability to access basic services prevent many refugees from returning to their country of origin (UNHCR, 2011). This is particularly the case for Afghan refugees. Since almost half of all Afghan asylum claims have been lodged in Turkey or Germany (UNHCR, 2011), reliance upon the cooperation and protection of these two governments has become critical.

Due to its unique geographical location, Turkey has been a key transit country for migrants. UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, Francois Crepeau, noted in his 2012 Human Rights Council report that Turkey has become a hub, particularly for migrants from Asia, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and Northern Africa. Many refugees cross over Turkey on their way to Europe. It is estimated that approximately 55,000 migrants crossed from Turkey into Greece via the Evros River in 2011 (UNHCR in Turkey: Facts and Figures, 2010). Unfortunately, cooperation between the EU and Turkey to address the issue of these undocumented crossings has primarily focused on securing the border rather than addressing the needs of those migrating. In the last two decades, economic growth and political stability have strengthened Turkey's appeal as a destination for migrants and asylum-seekers instead of a mere transit country. Continuing upheaval in neighboring countries such as Iraq and Syria has also added to the large influx of asylum seekers and refugees. By the end of 2011, UNHCR had processed 35,000 individuals as a “population of concern” in Turkey and this figure does not include the approximate 200,000 Syrian “guests” now living in camps along its southern border (UNHCR, 2011; Davutoğlu, 2012). Turkey's geo-political position in the region is significant, and its support of the UNHCR's goal to seek durable solutions for the thousands who migrate through the area is necessary. However, due to its current migration and border management policies and practices, those who find their way inside Turkey are often caught in a tenuous mixture of uncertainty and bureaucratic entanglements. This article seeks to examine, in particular, the plight of Afghan refugee women who have been caught between Turkey's internal migration policies and international community's reluctance to host their resettlement.

A team consisting of a scholar-practitioner, two graduate students, and one translator researched how complex humanitarian experiences and exposure to war affected the emotional well-being of Afghan women in their home countries, during their migration

to Turkey, upon their arrival in the Turkish city of Van and later during their second displacement to Mersin. In order to conduct this research, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted in the city of Mersin in 2012. A total of 20 Afghan refugee women participated in this project. The women who participated in the project were selected because (a) they had fled from Afghanistan due to the violence and war between 2006 and 2011, (b) they had chosen to come to Turkey and currently awaited resettlement to a third country, and (c) they had survived two earthquakes in Van and were re-settled again in Mersin¹.

Research analysis indicated that as one of the receiving countries, Turkey has not been particularly flexible throughout this vulnerable group's migration process. Turkey's internal border management and migration policies, along with the international community's reluctance to permanently resettle Afghans have negatively and repeatedly impacted the lives of these refugees.

The subsequent sections of this paper will articulate the research project's analysis and conclusions. The first section will touch upon the historical reasons for mass migrations to and from Afghanistan for the last several decades. The second section will provide a comprehensive study of the current literature with emphasis on displacement, refugees and Turkish refugee law. The last section will offer analysis of research findings and conclude with policy recommendations for Turkish government, countries accepting refugee resettlement, the UNHCR and NGOs working with refugees and migrants in Turkey.

BACKGROUND

Located in one of the most unstable regions of the world, Afghanistan has suffered through years of war and internal conflict (Barfield, 2010; Tomsen, 2011). For more than three decades, the Afghan people have experienced wartime trauma and displacement due to consistent and wide-spread exposure to violence and disorder. Invasion by Soviet forces in 1979 constituted the beginning of a protracted conflict in Afghanistan (Malhuret, 1983; Tomsen, 2011). Staunch resistance by Islamic factions controlled by the Mujahedeen began to employ guerilla warfare against twin foes – the Afghan government and Soviet forces that were occupying rural regions. In response to fierce counter insurgency, the Soviets deployed 100,000 troops and began to use scorched earth tactics. Violent conflict devastated the infrastructure of rural areas, resulting in a high death toll and thousands of wounded and displaced people (Karp, 1986).

In his special report to U.S. Congress (2012), the Middle East specialist Kenneth Katzman describes the various ways the Mujahedeen militants (eventually Afghan Interim Government) were reinforced with U.S. dollars. Funding and munitions from the United States supported the seven major militant groups from 1980-1989 until the Soviets began to

¹ Ages of the women varied from 18 to 34. These women came from Herat, Kabul, Kunduz, Parwan, Ghazwin and Mazar-e Sheirf. Out of the twenty women, three were single and the rest were married. Their ethnicity breakdown is as follows: seven Tajik, five Pashtun, seven Hazara and one Ozbek. Except for two Christian converts, eighteen of the women were Muslim. Three of the women did not have any children; the rest had between one and five children. There were four high school graduates, eight primary school graduates, four who never went to school, and one university level (who also served as the translator).

withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. Although the Soviet Union had already begun to disintegrate, the USSR continued to support Afghan president Mohammad Najibullah until 1992. During these twelve years, thousands of uprooted people fled from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran, where these refugees – especially women, were exposed to poorer and more difficult economic and social conditions (Oxfam, 2009). It is important to note that in the first phase of Afghanistan's contemporary conflict, it was the lives of rural women, rather than the educated elite of Kabul, who were affected because the source of resistance came from the more conservative and outlying sectors of the population (Khattak, 2002).

Withdrawal of the USSR troops was followed by the establishment of the Islamic State of Afghanistan in 1992. The president and new government declared Shari'a law, which put severe restrictions on women (RAWA, 1998). The new government, however, could not enforce Shari'a law throughout the entire country because its power base was limited to the capital and specific stronghold areas. Additionally, the new leader, President Rabbani, failed to comply with the rotating system of governance outlined at the establishment of the state in 1992. This decision generated tension between the government and former Mujahedeen allies, resulting in the onset of a civil war in 1992 which lasted until the Taliban seized control of the country in 1996 (Tomsen, 2011).

During this period of civil war, gross human rights violations including executions, sexual violence, and many forms of torture were committed by all factions. In Mujahedeen dominated territories, girls were not allowed to go to school and women were not permitted to leave their homes without male accompaniment (Baker, 2010). Rape and sexual harassment were used as strategic tactics between warring factions (Physicians for Human Rights, 2001). Because the national government was not stable, civil infrastructure collapsed and basic social services were no longer available. Once considered "heroes", the Mujahedeen were now feared. Rural refugee returnees from the Soviet war who came back to Afghanistan in the hope of living in peace faced even harsher conditions, while the urban professional class became the new targets of violence (Oxfam, 2009). Movement and migration continued to mark the face of civil society.

In 1993, the Taliban movement led by the Pashtun in Kandahar gained increasing influence in Afghanistan by promising stability and peace. Refugees displaced in Pakistan, Iran and Iraq began to return. Once the Taliban came into full power, however, they implemented and governed with strict adherence to an extreme interpretation of the Shari'a law and Islam (ICG, 2003). In this third phase of contemporary conflict, both women and men were negatively affected irrespective of their ethnicity, class, or sect (Khattak, 2002). There was also a cultural assault over other minority ethnic and religious groups. On the global level, the international community began to withdraw its support for the Taliban due to severe repression, human rights violations, and its connection with Al-Qaeda (ICG, 2003; Oxfam, 2009). The economy continued to plummet which worsened the already restricted availability of basic services.

In the wake of 9/11, the Taliban government became a target of the international community, more specifically of the United States and its allies. Afghanistan was perceived to be housing international terrorists, and was well-known for its human rights violations. These perceptions assisted the West in justifying its war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Although the Northern Alliance (United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and France) brought about the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, noncombatants were caught in the crossfire. While no official or reliable figures for the civilian impact exists, according to an ICRC (2009) survey, 96% of the population has been adversely impacted by the war. Of those with direct experience, “most had to leave their homes (76%), suffered serious property damage (66%), lost contact with a close relative (61%), lost their means of income (60%), or saw the area where they lived come under enemy control (56%).” (ICRC, 2009) Even as the country shifted and began its transition towards democracy, civilians continued to face dilemmas posed by a corrupt government, warlords and criminal groups, and insurgents who used violence against civilians. The accrual of over three decades of war upon the lives of Afghan citizens left many of them displaced, impoverished, uneducated, and struggling against the psychological repercussions of having their lives defined by violence. Although the context and culture of Afghanistan is unique, there are some general similarities shared by all peoples displaced by civil strife. The following section is a brief literature review of general refugee trends and current research more specifically focused upon Afghan women refugees.

DISPLACEMENT AND REFUGEES

People displaced because of war share some common experiences. Prior to migrating to another country as asylum seekers or refugees, individuals, families, and communities are often exposed to human rights violations, torture, imprisonment, ethnic cleansing, rape, and physical or systematic violence (Schwietzer, Melville, Steel & Lacherez, 2006; Kruse et al., 2009; Williams & Thompson, 2011). The UNHCR defines refugees as “persons who are forced to flee their home countries to escape serious human rights abuses and other causes of prolonged physical and emotional distress.” (UNHCR, 2012) Escalating violence and unrest during armed conflict or war can challenge civilians’ sense of power, identity, security, emotional attachments, and existential meaning. As a result, studies on refugees indicate that asylum seekers and refugees suffer from mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1993; Lindencona, Edbrad & Hauff, 2008; Kruse et al., 2009; Williams & Thomspson, 2011). After migrating to another country, these individuals are exposed to new social and political infrastructures whereby they experience difficulty adapting to language, education, employment, social and economic status and community. They also face a lack of access to medical care, poor nutrition and a decrease in emotional support systems as they face news of persistent violence in their country of origin. Pre-migratory experiences with violence coupled with these post-migratory conditions exacerbate levels of stress, the risk of depression, and other psychological problems (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel & Lacherez, 2006; Robertson et al., 2006; Kruse et al, 2009). In

addition, prolonged uncertainty for refugees and asylum seekers heightens anxiety and psychological vulnerability (Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1993). Studies also argue that women refugees are in a relatively more vulnerable position due to the lack of education and literacy, and the responsibility for taking care of children (Robertson et al., 2006). In conclusion, both pre-migration experiences and post-migration stressors negatively affect the psychological condition of asylum seekers and refugees, especially women and children.

Women and their children constitute close to 80% of refugees and displaced persons around the world (UNHCR, 2011). An entire sub-section of refugee research is devoted particularly to the struggles women face because of the unique ways war and migration impact and destabilize their lives. The multiple roles that they play (mothers, sisters, widows, wives, wage earners and caretakers within their families and larger community) increase the complex ways violence impacts their lives and puts them at risk (Khattak, 2007). For this reason, issues of gender, war, complex emergencies and reconstruction have occupied an important place in refugee literature for the last three decades (Ajdukovic & Ajdukovic, 1993; Summerfield, 2000; Quota, Punamaki & Sarraj, 2005; Ross-Sheriff, 2006; George, 2010). With respect to Afghan women, pre-migration experiences of living and vacillating inside thirty years of contested space has increased their risk of continued vulnerability.

Historically, Afghan women have been a consistent symbol and site of ideological (political and religious) warfare (ICG, 2003; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Khattak, 2007). Prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union, women's conditions and roles within their families and society were based upon socioeconomic status and geographical location. Middle and upper class women in Kabul were educated, while lower-middle and lower class women were restricted to their homes with little communication outside the privacy of their houses. However, women from rural areas faced fewer restrictions compared to their counterparts in urban areas because of the critical role they played within an agriculture-based community. In rural areas, men and women were mutually dependent upon each other for their daily routines (Ross-Sheriff, 2006). However, regardless of space or proximity, within the wider scope of the Afghan political arena, women's freedoms became pegged to the ebb and flow of ruling governments and conflicting forces. According to Ross-Sheriff (2006), Khattak (2002 & 2007), and Hoodfar (2007), women in Afghanistan were persistently exposed to gross human rights violations, harsh punishments, forced marriages, exclusion from the labor market, and educational restrictions. These conditions were present during the Soviet period and persisted during the U.S. led allied forces sponsored the Karzai government. The results of these severe conditions were waves of mass migration to neighboring or nearby countries.

Post-migration has also been problematic for refugee women. In addition to being uprooted and forced to leave their homes, they had to cope with life in Iranian and Pakistani refugee camps or settlements. Socially segregated, they were forced to cope with traumatic past experiences, the loss of a way of life and figuring out a way to create a different life in settings where economic, social, and emotional support systems were limited. To leave "home" for these Afghani women was a literal and symbolic double bind. Prior to contemporary wars

the concept of “home” provided a sense of identity, culture, and collective history. While these important definitions had been defiled by thirty years of war, moving to a new country was not necessarily an attractive alternative. Our research supports Khattak’s (2002; 2007) findings which indicate that Afghan women faced this trade with ambivalence. The extreme violence they had survived in Afghanistan, coupled with limited opportunity in “host” countries has left many women refugees emotionally and psychologically bewildered. While much has been written about the challenges women and children refugees encounter, the voices of Afghan refugee women are limited – particularly those who currently reside in Turkey while awaiting resettlement. To anchor their plight more specifically within the Turkish context, in the following section we explore the political and legal challenges all refugees and asylum seekers face when they migrate to Turkey.

TURKISH REFUGEE LAW AND DEFINITION OF ‘REFUGEE’

Turkey’s unique geographical location which straddles the “east” and “west” has encouraged a long history of migration and asylum. Due to more recent regional instability, the country now receives thousands of asylum applications each year. With civil war currently happening in neighboring Syria, the country is facing a massive refugee influx with no asylum law in force. Turkey’s currently functioning asylum system is founded upon three pieces of legislation: the 1932 Law of Settlement, the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, and the 1994 Asylum Regulation (Mannaert, 2003). There is not a single comprehensive set of laws which regulates migration in and out of Turkey. When the Turkish Republic became a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1968 Protocol, Turkish politicians reserved the right to a geographical limitation. Only nationals from the Council of Europe member states who fled their home country prior to January 1, 1951 were granted asylum procedures. Although the date limitation was removed upon the signing of the 1967 Protocol, the geographical limitation remains to this day (Mannaert, 2003). As a result, Turkey is able to limit assigning refugee status to Europeans while all non-Europeans crossing its borders are considered asylum seekers.

According to legal expert Ibrahim Kaya (2008), the “problem” of undocumented migration in Turkey began when forced migration victims started flooding into Turkey after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Continued political, economic, and social instability in the region provoked refugee flows from Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq over the next three decades. UNHCR expert Celia Mannaert develops this analysis further by explaining the ensuing political complexities of Turkey. As a response to the large influxes of refugees, the Turkish government passed the 1994 Asylum Regulation², which has become the foundation for current Turkish asylum procedures (Mannaert, 2003)³.

2 The official title is “The Regulation On The Procedures and The Principles Related to Population Movements and Aliens Arriving in Turkey Either As Individuals or In Groups Wishing to Seek Asylum Either From Turkey or Requesting Permission in Order to Seek Asylum From Another Country.”

3 “This regulation, which served as the base for contemporary Turkish asylum procedures, effectively took status determination away from the UNCHR and put it under the umbrella of the Turkish Ministry of Interior. Under this new framework, only asylum seekers recognized as such beforehand by the Ministry of Interior can then refer to UNHCR for resettlement” (Mannaert, 2003).

Currently, when a forced migration victim crosses the Turkish border, they must apply to the Ministry of Interior as well as to the UNHCR for processing. In the literature, this is called “the dual application process.” (Kaya, 2008)⁴ Due to this process, the Ministry of Interior is solely responsible for issuing residence permits in Turkey. According to a recent figure by the General Directorate of Security at the Ministry of Interior, there are nearly 150,000 migrants residing in Turkey (UNHCR, 2010).

UNHCR statistics (2010) indicate that Afghan refugees now make up 17% of “non-European persons of concern” currently registered under their auspices. However, Afghans constitute one of the biggest irregular migrant groups in Turkey, which makes an accurate calculation of numbers nearly impossible (Kaya, 2008). As with other irregular migrants, Afghan asylum seekers are not covered by Turkey’s social security system. “Although in theory refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to work and receive social assistance in Turkey, in practice it is very difficult to obtain work permits and social support programs are virtually non-existent, with the exception of those provided by UNHCR.” (Mannaert, 2003) Currently, very few migrants or asylum seekers are issued work permits making it difficult for them to sustain themselves and to live a life of dignity (Crepeau, 2012).

In her professional experience as refugee case worker, the coauthor of this report witnessed some Afghan refugees waiting over five years in Turkey before being referred for resettlement. The UNHCR offers no formal explanation for this delay. Once refugees (as defined by the UNHCR) or asylum seekers (as defined by the Turkish government) are finished formally registering, the waiting process begins and they are sent to various “satellite” cities throughout Turkey where they wait indefinitely. Crepeau noted (2012) “...the ‘satellite city’ system obliges asylum seekers to reside in a designated city while their claims are being processed.” Moreover, he claims that asylum seekers end up leaving the satellite cities for other cities and even crossing illegally into Europe because they cannot work, move freely within the country or benefit from certain basic social services.

Although Article 27 of the 1994 Regulation states that “within the general provisions, possibilities for education and work, limited to their period of residence in our country, are to be accorded to refugees and asylum seekers,” satellite cities such as Van (where women in our study were initially waiting) do not have abundant opportunities for employment. In Turkey’s 2006 Circular⁵, asylum seekers are encouraged to become gainfully employed, but if they leave the satellite city for a bigger, industrial city without permission, they are regarded as an “escapee” (Kaya, 2008). An escapee can face prosecution and be issued a monetary fine or imprisoned.

4 “Asylum seekers who applied to Turkish authorities are also required to apply to the UNHCR. Those who pass the UNHCR test wait in Turkey for eventual resettlement to a third country. Those who are granted refugee status by the UNHCR go through an application process with the embassy of the resettlement country in accordance with the criteria set forth by the resettlement country. Final resettlement could take several months or even years in some cases. In fact, recognition of refugee status by the UNHCR does not guarantee final resettlement in a third country and Turkey” (Kaya, 2008).

5 “In 2006, General Directorate of Security, at the Ministry of Interior prepared an Implementation Circular to stipulate the asylum procedure, rights and obligations of refugees and asylum seekers” (Kaya, 2008).

Additional problems concerning refugees/asylum seekers in Turkey are legal definitions and labeling. The term “illegal migrant” is not defined under any Turkish legislation. Those with incomplete or inaccurate documentation (passport, visa, residence and work permit legislations) are labeled an illegal migrant. In fact, the Ministry of Interior also uses this definition. According to the new Law on Settlement (2006), a migrant is “a person of Turkish descent and who is attached to Turkish culture.” Legally, one can be labeled as a “migrant” only if they have Turkish origin. If not, they are only foreign residents (Kaya, 2008).

Although the new Law of Settlement (2006) attempts to categorize illegal and legal migrants, the asylum system in Turkey remains ambiguous. In response, Turkey is in the process of developing a National Action Plan for Asylum and Migration (NAP). “The NAP includes the adoption of two separate laws, namely a law on foreign nations and another law on asylum” (Kaya, 2008). NAP is currently being discussed in Parliament.

Since Turkish asylum and migration policy is focused on resettlement as opposed to long-term integration in the society, problems arise. Refugees/asylum seekers wait long periods for resettlement and in the meantime, they suffer tremendously. Mannaert suggests that the UNHCR and the Turkish government should change local perceptions of asylum and migration through strengthening civil society. The perceptions of the yabancı (foreigner) in Turkey should take into consideration that there are those who come to Turkey in need of protection and assistance (Mannaert, 2003).

ANALYSIS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

One of the ways to strengthen civil society and encourage public awareness about migration tensions is to acknowledge and empower existing refugees/asylum seekers currently residing in Turkey. Using semi-structured interviews and focus group methods, the research team not only acknowledged the voices and experiences of Afghan refugees, but gained insight into the two consistent and primary areas of concern that all of these women shared (a) a continued sense of vulnerability; (b) hopelessness and suffering.

Many themes related to vulnerability surfaced during the focus group sessions, but the most dominant fear women faced was related to health care access. According to them, hospitals and medication had been free for refugees/asylum seekers while they were living in Van. The hospital system in Turkey requires an ID for admittance. When they first arrived in the country, Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (a regional governance health/aid organization) in Van assisted in ensuring access to health care by providing each woman with a card with an official ID number. Health care admittance ran smoothly in Van, however when the women were suddenly resettled in Mersin, their ID numbers were no longer valid. The two different regional systems were not coordinated and Mersin’s own Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation was not institutionally prepared to issue new IDs or cards. When the research team met with the women, they had been living in Mersin for over 4 months. (In a follow up meeting 5 months later, they still had not received their cards). Several of them

had serious medical conditions and were in obvious pain. Fortunately, some of Mersin's local doctors were willing to see them pro bono, but the women lacked the economic means to pay for prescribed medications. Symptoms reported were chronic pain and worsening pre-existing conditions. Basic and acute medical needs were not being met which heightened their already prevalent sense of vulnerability.

Another form of vulnerability that women noted was related to their identity. During focus group sessions, women spoke openly and candidly about how they perceived the international community and the UNHCR's treatment of Afghan refugees. In particular, they felt discriminated against because of their nationality stating, "No country in the world wants to house an Afghan." They informed the research team that Iranians received their Refugee Status Decision (RSD) and resettlement interviews at a much faster rate than Afghans. Moreover, Iranians also received a higher level of financial support from the UNHCR even though their extended families had the economic means to send them money from Iran. These women felt trapped inside international limbo without any political leverage or institutional support. At least while they were living in Van, the women could walk to the UNHCR office whenever they needed urgent assistance. Without a UNHCR office in Mersin, they were now forced to rely on phone calls to reach administrators in Ankara. It was their common experience that either the phone numbers did not work, the lines were constantly busy, or their calls were not returned. Women felt helpless to effect change within these various structures and felt particularly marked by their national identity.

Two additional forms of vulnerability were articulated during the focus groups: Afghan women's lack of education, and their inability to find work. When the women first settled in Van, they had been able to draw upon their traditional weaving skills. The city sits at a high elevation and the demand for blankets generated opportunities for them earn income to help support their families. The climate in Mersin, however, is quite warm. When they were resettled along Turkey's southern coastline, they could no longer rely on blanket weaving to help meet their families' economic needs. Some of the women reported working in orange groves but voiced frustration and anger at injustices they experienced. Predatory field supervisors had taken advantage of their vulnerability as undocumented workers and not paid them at the end of the day. Without worker's rights and no place to lay legal claim, these women were left powerless. Options to find alternative forms of employment were limited by their levels of education (many had only attended elementary school). Once again, they contrasted their experiences in Van to current opportunities in Mersin. While in Van, they had been able to access several informal educational courses organized by NGOs and UNHCR, whereas none of these support structures were available in Mersin. Without a viable ability to earn income or to learn new skills through education, the women felt trapped.

This study confirmed Summerfield's (1999, 2000) research findings among refugee populations. Contrary to Western notions, he noted that most people displaced by war are not interested in psychological healing. Instead, their social reality, their family circumstances, available social networks, economic position, and employment status are the primary foci

of their attention. According to him, for refugees and asylum seekers, personal recovery is grounded in social recovery. He maintains that recovery is not a detached process, nor is it simply a psychological process. Instead, he asserts, "It is practical and unspectacular, and it is grounded in the resumption of the ordinary rhythms of everyday life – the familial, sociocultural, religious, and economic activities that make the world intelligible." (p. 1107) Despite all of their attempts, the Afghan women in this study could not establish any type of rhythm or secure daily patterns. By the time we met with them, the result of persistent upheaval, relentless liminality, and the aforementioned vulnerabilities had given rise to the second dominant theme - hopelessness and suffering.

Over the last three decades, research on issues related to the mental health of refugees has fairly consistent findings. One shift in understanding, however, is the assumption that when a refugee is removed and resettled from the violence and unpredictability of war, they will show marked improvement in mental health. More current research indicates that PTSD, depression, and complicated grief may actually be exacerbated by the experience of exile (Miller et al., 2002). Being alienated and away from the socio-cultural support systems necessary for recovery can compound rather than lessen mental health difficulties caused by war (Hunt & Gakenyi, 2005; Miller et al., 2002). Factors such as unemployment or underemployment, dramatic shifts in economic and community status, the inability to speak and be understood, social isolation and the upsetting of traditional family roles may also contribute to and/or compound the psychological suffering of war (Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg, 1998; Miller, 1999; Miller et al., 2002; Pernice & Brook, 1996). Additionally, refugees who have fled their home countries due to widespread violence are not just contending with the effects of the violence they endured, but the loss and destruction of their cultural and collective lives. Their relationship to place and community has been cut off. Such uprooting can be devastating and disorienting. All of the aforementioned factors were affecting the women in this study. Although psychiatric surveys and evaluations were not given, several informants described symptoms consistent with PTSD, depression, and complicated grief.

During semi-structured interviews, women spoke more intimately about the personal struggles they each faced. They told stories of overwhelming terror in Afghanistan, fleeing through a violent landscape in order to exit the country, being smuggled over Iranian mountains in the dark, and arriving nearly destitute in Turkey. All that they had brought with them from Afghanistan had been carried on their backs. Essentially, they began life in Van with nothing. Initially they continued to experience the residual fear and uncertainty from their experiences in Afghanistan. Women who had fled violent marriages were especially concerned that they would be followed and killed. Remaining in hiding for the first several weeks of their transition, they eventually entered the streets and began to look for work. Immediately, they felt different and strange due to ethnic and cultural differences. Poor living and working conditions, in addition to lack of job opportunities, added to their sense of vulnerability. A challenge that all of the women described was their limited ability to communicate and to be understood. With the assistance of other Afghan refugees, however,

they did begin to develop a rhythm of life and to experience some “normality” in their lives. The political and social stability in Van brought welcomed relief.

Unfortunately, after living in Van for just a few weeks or months, two major earthquakes devastated the city. Experiencing these earthquakes were traumatic events in and of themselves. In fact, at the time of the interviews, many women remained far more troubled by the earthquakes than the violence they had endured in Afghanistan. A few months later, they continued to struggle with hyper-arousal reactions and constrictive behaviors. Beyond the psychological repercussions of the earthquakes, losing all of their meager household goods again was especially disheartening. The persistence of disorder and instability throughout their lives and being forced to start from zero so many times intensified their level of fear, anxiety, and sense of insecurity. Trapped inside a vicious cycle of repeated traumatic events in which they had virtually no control, the quality of their lives had become defined by pain and loss. They were left exhausted by relentless violence, disorder, and suffering.

Feelings of alienation and hopelessness were pervasive. No longer living within their customarily communal contexts, women were disconnected from emotional and social support systems. They worried about how to care for their husbands and children while also trying to meet basic human needs such as food and adequate shelter. Without language ability, formal education, vocational skills, or civil rights, they could not conceptualize or plan a way to successfully navigate their future. The ambiguity of their resettlement status had also placed them on hold. Repeated displacement and the loss of self-efficacy in their lives seemed to diminish any comfort that ‘hope for a better future’ might offer. The UNHCR had underscored for them that life in Turkey was only temporary, but political dynamics within the international community kept them in limbo. The transitory and indefinite nature of these women's current physical, social, economic and political status had exacerbated feelings of vulnerability and hopelessness. Left in such a suspended state, they were visibly suffering.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the mass displacement of Afghan people over the past four decades, this research project focused particularly on the plight of Afghan refugee women in Turkey. During focus groups and interviews, two primary themes emerged. First, women were experiencing a profound and pervasive sense of vulnerability. Secondly, they suffered from war trauma and exile stressors. Being trapped inside the internal legal system was compounding a sense of hopelessness and despair. These concerns and observations are directly related to the general migration policies of Turkey. Recommendations given to the Turkish government by several bodies such as the EU and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants have confronted the legislative side of the migration process. Rapid enactment of the new *Law on Foreigners and International Protection* without amendments; development of relevant secondary legislation in consultation with civil society organizations and international organizations; and lifting the geographic limitations to the 1951 Convention Relating to the

Status of Refugees are central to any solution for problems faced by all refugees and migrants in Turkey (Crepeau, 2012).

For the purposes of this article and for the benefit of our target population, the Turkish government should go beyond these general recommendations. The central government must encourage and support the UNHCR in its training of local governments on refugee policies and how to deliver social services in satellite and non-satellite cities until the General Directorate on Migration and Asylum within Ministry of Interior has been established. Once this new branch is operational, the UNHCR can allocate its resources under the main mandate of the Directorate's protection.

The government must respect the rights of refugees highlighted by the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, of which Turkey is a signatory. The specific rights that should be immediately stressed are access to basic services of all people within its borders and respect to free movement within the country. The government should abolish the "ID number" system in accessing basic health care and education as well as the "satellite city" system to allow asylum seekers and refugees to live where they feel economic and social/cultural safety and security.

The central government must abstain from using derogatory language/terminology when speaking about refugees to avoid generating xenophobia. This practice should be passed onto local governments and civil society organizations as they support independent NGOs in establishing projects working to integrate refugees into the social fabric of Turkey more peacefully. Consistent and structured interaction between refugees and local communities will decrease fear and open up doors for job opportunities for those who can work legally.

Countries accepting refugee resettlement, especially those in Europe, must collaborate with Turkish authorities and the UNHCR to increase the number of refugees resettled within their territories and to share the responsibility to protect such vulnerable populations. This will discourage illegal crossings to Europe, which result in the death or detention of thousands of refugees and illegal migrants each year.

Apart from the Turkish government and neighboring governments, the UNHCR must also undertake projects to ease the challenges that Afghan refugee women in Turkey face. The UNHCR should establish and give country and gender-specific trainings to local governments, NGOs and other civil society organizations working closely with refugees. Understanding and education about the cultural, religious, gendered and historical differences between countries of origin is imperative because refugee concerns and needs are vastly different. The UNHCR can work with local NGOs and/or universities to conduct research about these differences in order to offer more culturally sensitive approaches to refugee services in Turkey.

Given the human resources concerns of the UNHCR, it is understandable that the organization cannot pay frequent visits to cities where refugees are located. However, this creates tension among refugee groups and is perceived as a discriminatory activity. To address

this concern, the UNHCR could identify and create a network within “satellite cities” among actors such as psychologists/psychiatrists or NGOs supporting psycho-social programs. These professionals and institutions could act on behalf of the UNHCR when it is unable to be directly available to more remote refugee groups. As part of this activity, the UNHCR should also oversee the effectiveness of aid and encourage NGOs and other actors to work collaboratively to prevent duplicating services.

NGOs working with refugees and migrants must lobby local governments to support their psycho-social programs and community building activities for these vulnerable groups who are dispersed throughout the country. Similarly, NGOs could introduce the presence of refugees in certain cities to the local universities, which in turn might help to develop psycho-social programs and support services as part of their curriculum. NGOs should also identify and approach local private businesses which emphasize social responsibility projects and encourage their sponsorship of refugee-support projects.

APPENDIX - I

Sources of Data and Data Collection

Each of the twenty women participated in two hour focus groups. A consent form which laid out the structure and goals of the research was read to the participants in Dhari. During the introduction, demographic information and data on the women's family composition were collected. Both sessions were videotaped. The focus groups and subsequent interviews were conducted in Dhari and translated into Turkish and English. To further develop the data, women who had been part of the focus groups self-selected to participate in 90- to 120- minute in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were used to cover specific topics related to the main research questions. Interviews were conducted in the homes of each woman in order to provide a level of confidentiality and safety. When children were present, they stayed in the room. Male family members were not present at any of the interviews. These ethical and cultural sensitivities enabled the Afghan women to openly reflect upon their personal histories and share some of their current dilemmas. By visiting the women in their homes, researchers also gained a richer understanding of the women's lives and experiences.

The semi-structured interview protocol provided informants space for flexibility in how they replied. Some of the guiding questions include:

1. Where do you consider home? Could you tell me a little bit about your home?
2. I am trying to learn more about how living under military violence and disorder in Afghanistan impacted women and children. If it would not be too difficult, could you tell me about your life under the Taliban regime, and or when the fighting started to happen after the invasion conducted by the United States?
3. How has your life changed as a daughter, as a mother, as a wife....?
4. What are some of the reasons that you left? If you left because of threat, what were you afraid of? Were you or members of your family ever personally threatened?
5. We have read a lot about the Taliban. Why do you think they placed women under such strict rules? How did this seem to affect the lives of women in your community?
6. When did you decide to leave Afghanistan, and why?
7. Can you describe how you got out of the country, and what happened?
8. You eventually settled in Van. Can you tell me a little about what life was like for you in the refugee camp or other housing?
9. If you were in Van during the earthquake, could you describe what you remember?
10. You have been through war, suffering, and displacement. These have been difficult years. How has all of this affected you (physically, mentally, and emotionally)?

11. What support systems have been made available to you in Turkey to help you with this distress? Have any informal support systems been created by people in your community?
12. How secure do you feel in Turkey?
13. What ways, if any, do you continue feeling vulnerable or afraid?
14. Tell me a little bit about your family. Do you have children? If so, do you have any concerns about their well-being or have you noticed things about how the war, escaping, and now living in Mersin have shaped them?
15. What are your hopes for the future? What kind of future do you imagine for yourself, your children, and for your home country?

This method was chosen because a semi-structured interview would allow women to share their personal stories and describe various experiences and feelings. The interview protocol was designed to include women from urban and rural settings, as well a wide range of religious, educational, and literacy backgrounds. Interviews flowed more like a conversation between women because the protocol allowed for flexibility dependent upon how each woman answered. Moreover, probing questions, not included in the interview guide, were asked in order to invite clarification or elaboration on an important issue expressed by the informant. Because these women had experienced multiple traumatic experiences and multiple displacements, emphasis was placed on how the informant framed and understood issues and events rather than the structure of the interview.

Women's responses to the questions were recorded and then translated into Turkish and English for narrative analysis. Researchers attempted to preserve the texture of quotes to remain as close to the authentic tone and meaning of the interviews. Microanalysis of chunk data was used in the first phase of analysis. The initial broad codes were divided into explanatory categories according to the analytical method explain by Strauss and Corbin (1998). These categories were labeled and classified into four periods: pre-flight, flight, resettlement in Van, post-earthquake resettlement. Using Gilligan's relational voice method (2003), a secondary analysis examined how women reflected upon and made meaning from their experience of persistent violence and instability in their lives.

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NOTES

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