Health and Socio-cultural Needs of Iranian Asylum Seeker Women Living in Sydney, Australia

By

Sara Shishehgar

Supervisors
Dr Leila Gholizadeh
A/Prof Michelle DiGiacomo
Professor Patricia Mary Davidson

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2020

University of Technology Sydney

Certificate of original authorship

I, Sara Shishehgar, declare that this thesis, is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of PhD, in the Faculty of Health at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

28.01.2019
Signature of Student

Production Note:
Signature removed prior to publication.

Acknowledgement of editor

Professional editor, Rosemary Purcell, provided copyediting and proofreading services, according to the guidelines laid out in the university-endorsed national *Guidelines for Editing Research Theses.*

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to those who helped make this dissertation possible. First, I am forever indebted to my principal supervisor, Dr Leila Gholizadeh. Thank you for supervision, support, encouragement, and wonderful friendship from the inception of this journey. I would like to express my immense gratitude to Professor Patricia Mary Davidson and Associate Professor Michelle DiGiacomo for sharing their expertise, and the valuable guidance and sincere encouragement that they extended to me. I would like to say to each one of my supervisors that words cannot express my thanks for their ongoing support and mentorship.

I also take this opportunity to express gratitude to all individuals in the Faculty of Health, who directly or indirectly have lent their hand in this venture.

I am immensely grateful to the Iranian Community in Sydney namely 'Caravan of Love' and its coordinator Mrs Djamileh Vambakhsh and am indebted to all my study participants for their valuable time and their contributions.

During the course of this research project all research fellows at the HDR student room were kind and supportive and I would like to thank all of them for sharing their experiences and supporting me whenever I needed. I am also thank God for having amazing Iranian friends who encouraged my effort and supported me mentally over the last few years.

I want to say that without my endless family support it would not possible for me to arrive at this point and I cannot find enough words to say thank you to my family: my lovely husband Majid who facilitated and encouraged my efforts through this venture; my

beloved son Radin who patiently sacrificed his childhood over the last years to help me concentrate on my study; and Arian who brought joy to our lives. Thank you all for all sacrifices and open hearts you spared to me to help me reach this point.

Finally, I like to extend my gratitude and respect to my parents. I cannot find words to truly express how their support helped me to arrive at this point. Without their support this journey would never be over. I wish that I can provide this incredible support and love to my children.

Statement of contributions to jointly authored works contained in the thesis

This thesis contains two published literature reviews, which are presented in Chapter 2. My responsibilities, as the first author of the articles, included conducting the literature search, assessing the quality of the articles, extracting required data, synthesising the findings, and drafting the manuscripts. Dr Leila Gholizadeh, A/Professor Michelle DiGiacomo, and Professor Patricia Mary Davidson, the members of the supervisory team, provided guidance, commented on the manuscripts, and contributed to the discussion of the findings. I accept full responsibility for the accuracy of the findings presented in these publications and this thesis. I also presented the findings of this study in several national and international conferences, and media interviews as outlined below.

Peer-reviewed journal publications

1. **Shishehgar, S**., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M. & Davidson, P.M. 2015. The impact of migration on the health status of Iranians: An integrative literature review. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, *15*(1), p. 20.
2. **Shishehgar, S**., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M., Green, A. & Davidson, P.M. 2017. Health and socio-cultural experiences of refugee women: An integrative review, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, *19*(4), pp. 259-973.

Conference presentations

3. **Shishehgar S**., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M. & Davidson, P.M. Coping strategies applied by Iranian asylum seeker women in Sydney, Australia, International Council of Women Health Issues, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA, 6-9 November 2016

2. **Shishehgar S**., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M. & Davidson, P.M. Living with insecurity: A phenomenological study on asylum seeker women, researchers for asylum seekers (RAS), interdisciplinary postgraduate conference, University of Melbourne, Australia, 17 November 2016
3. **Shishehgar S**., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M. & Davidson, P.M. A review of health and socio-cultural experiences of displaced women, Annual International Conference on Fostering Human Resilience, Las Vegas, USA, 15 June 2015
4. **Shishehgar S**., Gholizadeh, L., DiGiacomo, M. & Davidson, P.M. Health and socio-cultural experiences of refugee women: An integrative literature review. The International Migration Conference in Monash University, Melbourne, 11-15 February 2015

Radio interviews

1. Health needs of refugee and asylum seeker women living in Western countries, October 2016. http://www.2ser.com/component/k2/item/25061-health-needs-of-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-women
2. Iranian immigrants' health status and living condition worldwide, November 2015. http://www.2ser.com/component/k2/item/19322-think-health-sunday-29-november

Abstract

Background:

Australia is known as a world leader for resettlement of asylum seekers and refugees; however, the country has recently introduced a number of legislative initiatives to deter illegal immigration, such as mandatory detention and temporary protection visas. Those who are released into the community remain in an insecure residency status for an undetermined period, often without permission to study and work. These legislations have affected Iranian asylum seekers who have entered Australia by boat since 13 August 2012, of which about half are women. Despite dramatic increase in the number of female asylum seekers in the recent years, they have remained understudied in health research.

Aim and objectives:

This study aimed to explore health and socio-cultural needs of Iranian asylum seeker women living in Sydney, Australia and strategies that they develop to build resilience in the face of migration-related circumstances/stressors.

Methods:

A narrative methodology was undertaken to explore experiences of 17 Iranian asylum seeker women who arrived in Australia by boat and were living in the community for two to three years awaiting a decision upon their refugee applications. The research methodology was informed by epistemology of constructivism and interpretivism. The resource-based model was used as the framework for designing the research including developing interview questions, data analysis, and discussion of the findings. The model provides an insight into the experiences of loss/gain of resources over forced migration and the impact of

these losses/gains on the adaptation and wellbeing of refugees during pre-migration, transit, and post-migration phases. The participants shared their experiences of migration via in-depth semi-structured individual interviews. A thematic analysis was undertaken to construct meanings and knowledge out of the narratives.

Findings:

Three main themes emerged from the experiences of the participants. These themes included: 1) embarking on the perilous journey, 2) arrived, yet living in-between, and 3) building resilience. Embarking on the perilous journey described experiences of the participants prior to migration and in transit, which included their reasons for leaving home and losses incurred during transit. From these experiences the following subthemes emerged: disempowerment of women, sacrifice for family, loss of safety/security, and loss of control over circumstances. Arrived, yet living in-between described their post-migration experiences, including time in detention and living in the community. Participants shared their mixed feelings of living in a prison; yet, a safe place during detention. Their experiences of living in the community included insecure residency, cultural incongruity, and utilising healthcare services. Participants developed a number of coping strategies to help them build resilience towards the migration difficulties.

Conclusion:

Asylum seeker women are more likely to experience traumatic experiences pre-migration and during transit. Their post-migration experiences are impacted by resources they have lost pre-migration and during transit as well as adverse immigration policies, in particular insecure residency and unemployment, limiting asylum seekers' capacity to invest on resources to prevent further loss, recover

from lost resources and gain new resources. These traumatic experiences increase the risk of health issues, in particular mental health problems amongst this population, and their need for appropriate healthcare and supportive social services. Although these findings reflect the experiences of Iranian asylum seeker women, the results can be useful for similar populations. The women strived to build resilience and gain the control of their lives through adoption of emotion focused and problem solving coping strategies.

Table of contents

Certificate of original authorship i
Acknowledgement of editor ii
Acknowledgements iii
Statement of contributions to jointly authored works contained in the thesis v
Abstract vii
Table of contents x
List of tables xiv
List of figures xv
List of abbreviations xvi
Glossary of terms xvii
Chapter 1 : Introduction 1
1.1 Introduction 1
1.1.1 Statemnet of problem 3
1.1.2 Search aim and objectives 4
1.1.3 Research questions 5
1.1.4 Outline of the thesis 5
1.2 Migration as a global phenomenon 7
1.3 Immigration to Australia 11
1.3.1 The Australian Humanitarian Program 13
1.3.2 Asylum seekers in Australia 14
1.4 The impact of migration on forced immigrants' health 19
1.5 Iranian culture and history 21
1.5.1 History of Iranian migration 23
1.5.2 Iranian immigrants in Australia 24
1.5.3 Iranian asylum seekers in Australia 25
1.6 Significance of the study 26
Chapter 2 : Integrative literature review 28
2.1 Introduction 288
2.2 Health and socio-cultural experiences of refugee and asylum seeker women: An integrative review 299
2.2.1 Background 299
2.2.2 Methods 30

2.2.3 Results 32
2.2.4 Discussion 41
2.2.5 Conclusions 46
2.3 The impact of migration on the health status of Iranians: An integrative literature review 59
2.3.1 Background 59
2.3.2 Methods 62
2.3.3 Results 623
2.3.4 Discussion 71
2.3.5 Conclusion 776
Chapter 3 : Theoretical framework 88
3.1 Introduction 88
3.2 Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping 89
3.3 Berry's acculturation framework 89
3.4 Hobfoll's theory: Conservation of resources 91
3.5 The resource-based model: A model of refugees' adaptation and wellbeing 91
Chapter 4 : Methodology and methods 97
4.1 Introduction 97
4.2 Research design 98
4.2.1 Epistemology 998
4.2.2 Theoretical perspective 100
4.2.3 Methodology 101
4.3 Method 102
4.3.1 Sampling 102
4.3.2 Recruitment 103
4.3.3 Data collection 108
4.3.4 Data analysis 119
4.4 Strengthening the rigour and trustworthiness of the research 124
4.4.1 Credibility 124
4.4.2 Dependability 126
4.4.3 Transferability 126
4.4.4 Confirmability 127
4.5 Ethical considerations 127
4.5.1 Research with a vulnerable population 127
4.5.2 Confidentiality and informed consent 129

4.5.3 Data management and storage 130
Chapter 5 : Result (1) Embarking on the perilous journey 132
5.1 Introduction 132
5.2 Participants' characteristics 133
5.3 Reasons for leaving home 13535
5.3.1 Disempowerment of women 13636
5.3.2 Sacrifice for family 141
5.4 The losses incurred during transit 143
5.4.1 Loss of safety (feeling of safety)/security 144
5.4.2 Loss of control 152
Chapter 6 : Result (2) Arrived, yet living in-between 15656
6.1 Introduction 15656
6.2 Experiences of living in detention: prison versus security 158
6.3 Experiences of living in the community 16565
6.3.1 Living with insecure residency 16565
6.3.2 Living with cultural incongruity 184
6.3.3 Utilising healthcare services 191
Chapter 7 : Result (3) Building resilience 19797
7.1 Introduction 19797
7.2 Coping strategies during transit to Australia 19898
7.3 Coping strategies during living in the community 199
7.3.1 Engagement with the host society 200
7.3.2 Adjusting life plans 205
7.3.3 Seeking support from formal and informal resources 206
7.3.4 Positive thinking and maintaining hope 212
7.3.5 Avoidance 214
7.3.6 Spirituality 215
Chapter 8 : Discussion 217
8.1 Introduction 217
8.2 Summary of the key findings 217
8.3 Theoretical application of the resource-based model 218
8.4 Pre-migration experiences 219
8.5 The transit experiences 223
8.6 Post-migration experiences 230
8.6.1 Experience of mandatory detention 231

8.6.2 Experiences of living in the community 23636
8.6.3 Adjusting to the new environment and building resilience 253
8.7 Limitations and strengths of the study 261
Chapter 9 : Conclusion and recommendations 264
9.1 Introduction 264
9.2 Implications for policy 267
9.3 Implications for clinical practice 271
9.4 Implications for future research 272
Appendix 1: People in immigration detention facilities as at 31 December 2013 27676
Appendix 2: People in immigration detention facilities as at 31 December 2014 27777
Appendix 3: People in immigration detention facilities at 31 December 2016 27878
Appendix 4: People in community under residence determination at 31 December 2016 279
Appendix 5: Health and socio-cultural experiences of refugee women: An integrative review 280
Appendix 6: The impact of migration on the health status of Iranians: An integrative literature review 295
Appendix 7: Approval from the multicultural community centre 306
Appendix 8: Invitation letter (Farsi) 307
Appendix 9: Invitation letter (English) 308
Appendix 10: Participant information sheet (Farsi) 309
Appendix 11: Participant information sheet (English) 311
Appendix 12: Interview guide 314
Appendix 13: Socio-demographic questionnaire 315
Appendix 14: Ethics approval letter from UTS Human Research Ethics Committee 316
References 317

List of tables

Table 2.1: Summary of included peer-reviewed articles 47
Table 2.2: Summary of included peer-reviewed articles 78
Table 5.1: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (N = 17) 134

List of figures

Figure 1.1: Components of change, 1976–77 to 2016–17……...13
Figure 2.1: PRISMA flow chart of search process 33
Figure 2.2: A developed conceptual framework based on the review findings 44
Figure 2.3: PRISMA flow chart of search process 63
Figure 2.4: A framework of concepts pertinent to Iranian immigrant experiences, derived from the review of literature 64
Figure 5.1: Participants' experiences pre-migration and during transit 133
Figure 6.1: Participants' experiences after arrival in Australia.....158
Figure 7.1: Coping strategies employed by participants 197

List of abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CASP	Critical Appraisal Skills Program
CINAHL	Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature
IMA	Irregular Maritime Arrivals
NSW	New South Wales
PBS	Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
PPV	Permanent Protection Visa
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review
PsycINFO	Psychology Information
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RBM	Resource-Based Model
STARTTS	Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USA	United States of America

Glossary of terms

Acculturation: A dynamic process through which a person adjusts to a different culture during resettlement in a new environment. [1]

Adaptation: A process by which new immigrants adjust and integrate socially, politically, and economically within a new environment and the host society. [2]

Assimilation: Immigrants reject their own culture and become involved in the new culture. In brief, assimilation allows for attachment to the host culture including language, values, traditions, behaviours, and interests while refusing one's own culture. [3,4]

Asylum seeker: An individual whose international protection claim for refugee status has not yet been determined. As part of the obligation to protect refugees, the country of asylum is normally responsible for determining whether an asylum seeker is a refugee or not. [5,6]

Brain drain: Migration of talented, skilled, and trained individuals that results in a reduction of skill resources of the origin country. [4]

Country of origin: Also source country, sending country, or home country – refers to the country that migrants come from. [7]

Culture: The symbolic organisation that a social group chooses or values. A combination of language, customs, ideas, beliefs, aesthetic technical knowledge, tastes, values, and lifestyles may also represent a culture. [8]

Deportation: The act of removing a non-national person from a state or country to their country of origin after refusal of their residency application or termination of permission to stay. [9]

Detention: In the migration context, detention refers to confinement of irregular migrants (who enter a country with no valid visa/ or overstay after termination of their visa) in oreder to restrict their movement. Irregular migrants are often subject to detention because their action violated immigration laws. [10]

Emigrant: (Also migrant) refers to persons who left their usual place of residence to settle elsewhere. Emigrant describes the move relative to the point of departure. [7]

Forced migration: A migratory movement when something threatens people's life and livelihood, whether arising from man-made or natural causes (e.g. movements of internally displaced persons, refugees, and people displaced by environmental, natural, chemical, nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects). [4]

Immigrant: A person who is displaced internally or internationally to settle in a country other than their country of origin. [7]

Immigration: A process of international movement by which a non-national person moves into a country for the purpose of settlement. [4]

Integration: Occurs when immigrants are engaged with the dominant culture of the new environment while keeping their own culture. [11]

Internally displaced person: Someone who has been forced to leave their place of habitual residence to avoid the effects of violation of human rights, armed conflict, human-made or natural disasters, but who has not crossed an international border. [4]

Irregular maritime arrivals: A person who enters Australia by sea without authority and became an unlawful non-citizen upon their entry.[12]

Irregular migration: Movement of people outside the regulatory norms of the origin, transit, and receiving countries. From the perspective of the origin country, it refers to when a person crosses an international boundary without fulfilment of the administrative requirements for leaving the country, such as obtaining a travel document or a valid passport. From the perspective of destination countries, it refers to entry, staying or working in a country while violating the country's immigration regulations. There is also a tendency to use the term 'illegal migration' in cases of trafficking or smuggling of migrants.[4]

Migrant: A term that covers a wide range of people who cross borders for a variety of reasons to settle in a foreign country, not to be confused with short-term visitors such as traders and tourists.[13]

Migration: A process by which a person changes their residence by crossing borders of a country. The process encompasses departure, transit, living in the destination, and return. This movement may result in permanent or temporary residence in a new country.[4]

Push-pull factors: Push factors are social, economic, or political factors that drive people out of their country of origin. Pull factors include positive aspects of the host country, such as job opportunities, safety, and better life and economic opportunities that attract people in.[4,14]

Receiving country, host country, third country, or country of destination: A country that has admitted a certain number of immigrants and refugees on a yearly basis by

decision of its leaders including ministers of immigration or parliament. In the case of repatriation or return, the country of origin is also called the receiving country.[4]

Recipient country: Also country of destination or host country – the country in which migrants are located after crossing international borders.[7]

Refugee: A person outside the country of their nationality who is unable or unwilling to return to the country of origin due to fear of being persecuted for reasons such as religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. A refugee is a person whose refugee status has been recognised under the 1951 Convention.[6,15]

Resettlement: The relocation and integration of a person (internally displaced person, refugee, immigrant, etc.) into another geographical environment, usually in a third country. Refugees often lodge their refugee application in a transit country, then upon their application approval they will be transferred into another country that has agreed to admit them, called the third country.[4]

Smuggling: An action through which a person who is not a national or a permanent resident of a country or state is brought in illegally. Contrary to trafficking, smuggling is not usually associated with exploitation, violation, or coercion, but does have direct or indirect financial and material benefits for smugglers.[4]

Transit country: A country different to the country of origin through which migratory flows move. Migrants pass through transit countries (legally or illegally) to enter a host country.[16]