

LIFE EXPERIENCES OF AFGHAN WOMEN IN FINLAND

A study of everyday life experiences of Afghan women living in Helsinki Region

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of the research was to show and highlight the everyday life experiences of Afghan women living in Finland, especially in Helsinki region. The majority of South Asian women living in Finland are Afghan women. It aimed to emphasize the culture and religion related issues of those women, who have been living in Finland for more than five years. Moreover it explains their emotional situations, as per their experience and our observation many of them could be possible victims of social exclusion and depression due to residing in a culturally different society.

The methodology used to gain reliable data for the research was qualitative. It includes data collection through observations, interviewing professionals working for immigrant women and mainly interviewing Afghan women themselves. Thematic Analysis approach was used for data analysis which helped to study different aspects of Afghan women's lives.

The research can be helpful to readers, mainly social service providers, policy makers and common Finnish citizens to know the situation of an important minority group of immigrants in Finland, by which customised integration programmes targeted towards these women can be made. Moreover the research can help the Afghan women to understand the integration process better through the life experiences shared by the interviewees in the research.

Keywords: Afghan women, cultural, religious, everyday life, immigrant.

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1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In an organization, during a placement one of us saw an Afghan woman who was not feeling well and was crying and sitting alone in a corner. After talking with her it was found that she was suffering from depression, loneliness and emotional dilemmas. The reason behind the situation was, being split from her family back home, as her children were still in Afghanistan facing difficult situations of war and unrest.

She had moved with her husband to Finland for past 10 years with the hopes of safe future and reuniting with her children soon, but she was left alone when her husband died. Moreover she is not educated adequately to understand the systems of a completely different country, for instance she always carries a piece of paper with her important information on it i.e. home address and important phone numbers. In addition, she had taken a wrong medicine that day, which caused her severe weakness and headache, fortunately one of the fellow women in the organization noticed and she was taken to health care center by the social worker.

This incident motivated us to study Afghan women and their challenges. Hence one of us decided to conduct a research in order to see the clear and deeper picture of their deprivations and reasons of helplessness in Finland. Moreover the research also explains the ways they are handling and trying to solve their issues.

During past two decades, the flow of individuals and groups from different parts of the world towards Finland has been rising; the increasing number of immigrants raises the social problems too. The issues related to integration, cultural and religious background appeared. Among diverse groups of immigrants south Asian Muslim women are one of the significant groups, who are vulnerable members of society and face relatively more difficulties to integrate as compared to other immigrants. Many of them are victims of social exclusion and

depression because of residing in a culturally different society. The study focuses on everyday life experiences of Afghan women in Finland, because the biggest majority of south Asian women living in Finland are Afghan women.

It explains the paths and methods, which were used to receive reliable answers for the research; also the study will help readers, mainly social service providers, policy makers and common Finnish citizens to learn about the situation of a minority group in Finland.

1.1 Target group

The study is aimed for Afghan women specifically residing in Helsinki region aged between 30 to 50 years, other minority Immigrant communities in Finland who have similar needs and situations as Afghans. Policy makers, service providers and organizations working for immigrants and multiculturalism are also one of the significant target groups as it influences the policies and the implementations for the well being of immigrants.

1.2 Research questions

According to Palmary, Burman, Chantler and Kiguwa (2010), discrimination against migrant women functions selectively; it does not completely exclude them from public discourse, but rather includes them conditionally in subordinate, feminized positions. Although decision of conducting a research on Afghan women's life raised a number of question in our minds, but few questions were obviously more crucial and dominant over others, so we decided to find out answers for mainly following two questions:

What are the experiences of Afghan women regarding personal and social aspects of their lives in Finland?

What are their experiences for being culturally and religiously different from the host society?

1.3 Social policy of Finland

The new integration law was founded on May 1st 1999 and it offers active role for the immigrants in planning their own life in the Finnish society. The objective of this Act (Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers) is to promote the integration, equality and freedom of choice of immigrants through measures which help them to acquire the essential knowledge and skills they need to function in society and to participate in work life, and to ensure the essential livelihood and welfare of asylum seekers by arranging for their reception. The object of the law is also that at the same time immigrants could preserve their native language and their ethnical and cultural features. (Heikkilä& Peltonen, 2002)

The basic course of Finnish language is usually the first action for the immigrants within the law. Other usual courses are for example occupational and craft courses arranged by the labor agency. Besides these 'official courses' immigrants who objected to law can choose quite freely different actions and educative courses, which help them to integrate into the Finnish society. (Heikkila & Peltonen, 2002)

1.4 Afghans in Finland

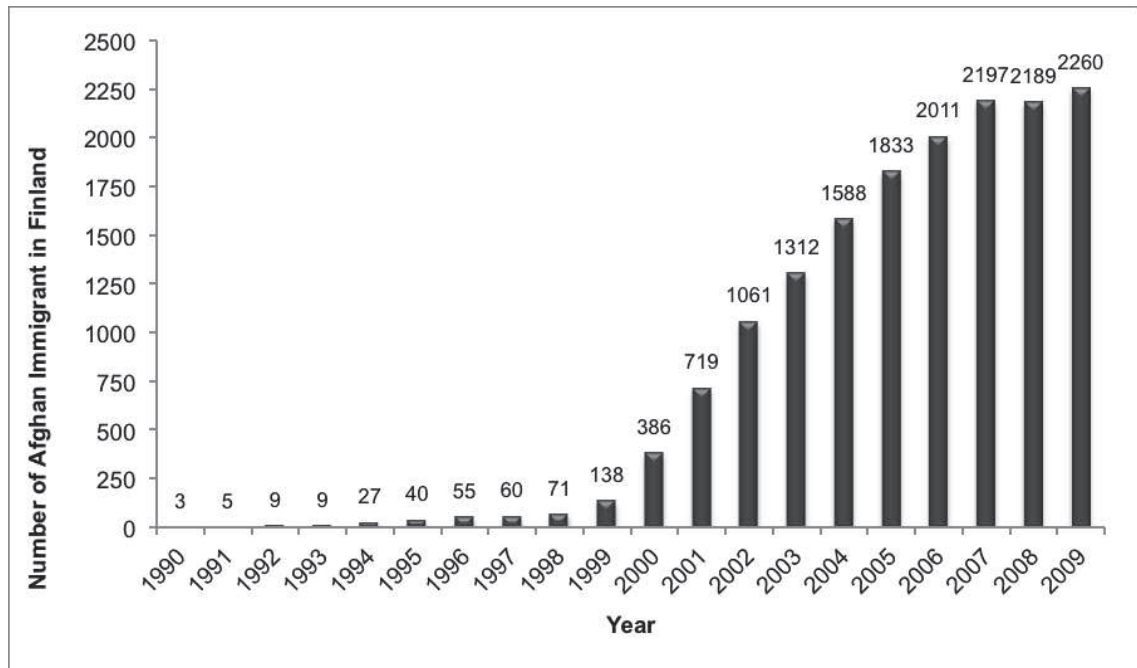


TABLE 1. Afghan Immigrants in Finland during 1990-2009

Small numbers of Afghans have migrated to Finland since the early twentieth century; however particularly since 2001-2010 there has been increase in the number of Afghans arriving to Finland. In 2010, Finnish immigration service Migri estimated the total number of Afghans in Finland as 3500. The figure includes both persons with a permanent status and those whose asylum applications are under consideration. (IOM, Afghanistanilaiset suomessa)

Nearly three million Afghans are living in exile, not only in the neighboring countries, but also spread all over the world. Millions of Afghans have left their homes in fear of war, famine and chaos. One of the countries they have been

resettled in is Finland, which supports the international refugee program by receiving approximately 200 Afghan refugees from Iran every year. (Elena, nuori-
pori) Table 1 shows the official statistical data by Finnish immigration ministry, which provides the exact number of Afghans living in Finland for last two decades. (Source: IOM)

1.5 Afghan Women

Afghanistan is a country with 28.396-Million (2009 est.) population (Bouhammer, 2010). Afghanistan, prior to the Soviet occupation and Taliban takeover, was a relatively liberal country with a progressive outlook on women's rights. Afghan women form up to 50 percent of government workers, 70 percent of schoolteachers and 40 percent of doctors in Kabul. However, the effects of war and the Taliban regime quickly effaced the rights of women in public life and relegated them to solely the domestic domain. In 2001, with the overthrow of the Taliban, Afghan women were once again able to enjoy some of the freedoms that had been stripped from them. In particular, the education and health sectors have provided greater access to women and advanced their social development in an emergent state.

With the fall of the Taliban, women have been able to re-enter schools and universities. In fact, girls composed a third of the nearly six million children who returned to school this year, 2014. Women have also started serving as teachers and faculty members again, and are filling political positions and participating in the national elections.

The health sector is working hard to improve the lives of Afghan women, and, free from the prohibitions of the Taliban, male physicians are now allowed to examine and treat female patients. However, while women can see male doctors, the availability of clinics and hospitals is nonetheless limited. Qualified

health professionals attend only 15 percent of births in Afghanistan, thus contributing to the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world. One pregnant woman dies for every 6 live births. Besides pregnancy-related deaths, a lack of sanitation and potable water has led to outbreaks of tuberculosis, among which 64 percent of the deaths are women. Continued efforts in the health sector will be pursued to provide women with advanced healthcare and promote their wellbeing. Afghan women have suffered through war, poverty, famine and violence, but with the help of the international community and the Government of Afghanistan, they are reemerging with even stronger voices for change (Afghan embassy, Washington DC 2014).

While men's and women's identities are impacted by war and human rights violations that lead to uprooting from their communities and countries, women and girls are on the one hand disproportionately more vulnerable to violence. They are vulnerable in flight and refugee situations in asylum, and in resettlement and return. And on the other hand, in refugee and disaster situation, women often take on additional roles in caring for family members and maintaining the family and the community.

1.5.1 Cultural aspects

Afghan culture is often regarded as Confucius, as it is based on family oriented values with relationship bonding full of loyalty and respect. But in case of women, one could argue that Confucius merely meant that a woman was to be originally attached to her father's household when unmarried, her husband's when married and her son's when widowed (Bulbeck 1998).

According to Giacomelli and Finckh (2007) the family is the mainstay of Afghan society and a common trait across diverse ethnic groups. Extremely close bonds exist within it. It also states "Family honor, pride, and respect towards other members are highly prized qualities". Being South Asian women we share

many common values and norms with them, which can absolutely be related in the above mentioned context.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will be focusing on the theoretical framework and the key concepts of the research. Previous researches and literature has been used to explain and relate to the subject of this research, which includes brief explanation of immigration history of Finland and Europe. It also includes the concept of being immigrant women and being a religious and cultural minority group.

2.1 Immigration and Finland

Immigration phenomena are not new to European countries. A large amount of worker immigration occurred after the Second World War. Young immigrants came to Europe on the crest of this immigration wave in the 1950's and the 1960's. After the 1970's, their families began to join them. The last immigration wave began in the 1980's and continued increasingly after 1990's; the immigrants were refugees who escaped from their countries because of lack of human rights and democracy (Cömertler, 2007.)

Boswell and Crisp (2004) say that immigration is a phenomenon as old as human history. Sometimes natural disasters such as earthquakes, flood, drought, famine, and hunger and sometimes calamities such as wars force people to immigrate; sometimes people immigrate for a dream of rich and luxurious life. Whatever the reason, the purpose has often been the same: to survive and to live in safety without a fear of death and hunger. As early as in the 1800's, there were some European people immigrating to United States of America, but after the Second World War, Europe became the destination of immigration flows. Today approximately 175 million people in the world are living in a country in which they were not born (cited in Cömertler, 2007.)

What does being an immigrant in Finland mean? The Finnish Ministry of Labor (MOL, 2001) defines immigrants as all persons who have migrated to the country. Officially the term 'immigrant' refers to refugees, migrants, repatriates and other foreigners living in Finland (cited in Cömertler, 2007.)

The Finnish government has made significant efforts to improve the position of immigrants in Finland. The Finnish integration law is extensive and, comparatively speaking, a fairly developed structure. The law requires all the municipalities to have an integration program, on the basis of which individual integration paths for all immigrants are built, the aim of which is full membership of society and employment (Triandafyllidou & Gropas 2007).

According to Berry (1997), there are many kinds of cultural groups existing in the societies that are mainly due to factor like mobility. Some groups have integrated into the society voluntarily (e.g. immigrants) while some experience integration without having sought it out (e.g. refugees, indigenous peoples). For others the situation is a temporary one such as international students, guest workers or asylum seekers. Similarly in Finland there are diverse groups of immigrants, which include both men and women.

The growing number of foreigners in Finland is also a consequence of internationalization, accelerated by Finland's EU membership in 1995. After rapid growth in the early 1990s, the numbers of foreigners arriving in Helsinki, its urban region (i.e. The Helsinki Region) and in Finland generally has slowed. This slowdown is in part accounted for by an increase in the number of foreigners receiving Finnish citizenship (Tikkanen, 2009).

Table 2 consists of Finnish immigration services' (Migri) record of applicants for residence permit of Finland, in year 2009. According to the table Russian immigrants, who applied for residence permit are highest in number, followed by Somali immigrants, Chinese, Indians and Turkish immigrants.

TABLE 2. Applicants for residence permit for Finland in 2009.

	Em- ployed	Self- em- ployed	Finn- ish origins	Stu- dents	Other ground s	Family tie (mar- riage)	Family tie (chil- dren)	Family tie (oth- ers)	Family mem- bers to Finnish citizens	Total
Russia	1096	13	607	890	300	493	719	74	68	4260
Somalia	6	0	0	0	57	278	596	1256	74	2267
China	319	9	0	658	209	100	142	14	22	1473
India	66	0	0	165	693	257	202	11	8	1402
Turkey	237	47	0	189	38	108	142	6	64	831
United States	438	2	7	254	286	36	61	1	16	708
Ukraine	438	0	3	36	87	45	74	10	4	698
Iraq	16	0	0	6	77	107	174	61	58	499
Vietnam	78	2	0	186	17	54	77	12	27	453
Thai- land	168	3	0	30	83	19	70	4	67	444

As a result of immigration, many societies become culturally plural. That is, people of many cultural backgrounds come to live together in a diverse society. In many cases they form cultural groups that are not equal in power (numerical, economic, or political). These power differences have given rise to popular and social science terms such as “mainstream”, “minority”, “ethnic group” etc. (Berry, 1997)

2.2 Immigration and women

The phenomenon of immigration has not only been experienced by men, but also by women. The existence of various programs devoted to the study of ‘minorities’ women, homosexuals and native Americans - is an important development, given that all these perspectives were almost completely ignored in the scholarship that dominated the academic world several decades ago (Beattie and King, 2004).

The movement of peoples over the past few decades has had a considerable impact. Natives and newcomers often seem far apart, and beneath a veneer of harmony, countless stories can be heard- by those willing to listen- about daily cultural clashes (Sheffer, 2007). These impacts affect both immigrant men and women equally.

2.3 Afghan immigration and women

Afghan immigrants abroad still strongly adhere to many Afghan traditions. Family life and kinship are one of the core priorities of their lives.

The primary obligation for women is to uphold family honor by conforming the norms of accepted behavior (koninklijke, 2005.)

The major religious and cultural roots of Afghan women are based on Islam, which makes them even more diverse as immigrants. But for a Muslim woman, to emphasize her identity as a Muslim does not necessarily have to do with religious stances or religious feelings. Separation from their native countries and feeling that they are aliens in foreign culture might push many Muslims to define themselves first and foremost as Muslims, whereas in different surroundings they would operate with different self-definitions. In such a situation Islam tends to become a term of contrast, which a Muslim woman might use to designate a traditional structure. (Beattie and King, 2004)

2.4 Concept of Everyday Life

The sociology of everyday life is a bundle of paradoxes. Everyday life is the wider picture, none of the large scale events could occur without there being individual people doing little things in local places. These micro level small-scale practices relate to, and are shaped by macro-level patterns. Social order, disorder and change are at once reflections of the relationship between individual and society, agency and structure, process and regularity (Scott, 2009.)

2.5 Target area of research and research organizations

Helsinki was the target area of research because majority of Afghan immigrants are residing in Helsinki and its suburbs. The women of Afghan origin with low level of literacy or no literacy, aged 30 to 50 were chosen who came to Finland as asylum seekers and settled here later on.

There were mainly two organizations, with help of which the research process has been smoothly possible. One of the two organizations is situated in Helsinki, which works for wellbeing and integration of immigrant women in various dimensions, by teaching Finnish language, handicrafts and arts, by giving them counseling and emotional support. The other organization works in more or less

same manner, but is in Vantaa and provides integration services to immigrant women of Vantaa.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

The research was an inductive research and the method used to find the results was qualitative. According to Burney (2008) it is called bottom up or hill climbing approach in informal language. This method of research leads to generalized theories on the basis of specific observations.

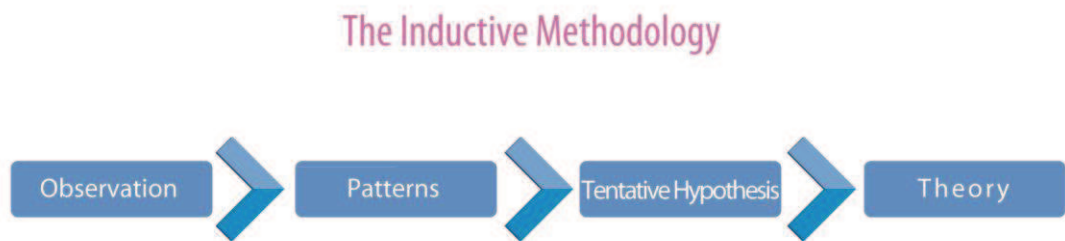


FIGURE 1. Inductive Methodology (Source: Human Resources International)

Feminist observational or interview-based studies include a strong connection between the researcher and people studied that improves during the course of studies and lasts beyond it (Cömertler, 2007). Keeping this in mind, the trust of interviewee women was gained firstly, before proceeding towards data collection process. By informal conversations, own introduction and explanation of motives and aims of the research we were successfully able to attain their confidence. The communication with Afghan women had been an interactive stage where they laughed, cried, shared joys, sorrows and life stories with us.

Ethnography was a considerable approach in this research. According to Denscombe (1998), it requires the researcher to spend considerable time in the field among the people whose lives and cultures are being studied. The ethnographer needs to share in the lives rather than observe from a position of detachment. Routine and normal aspects of everyday life are regarded as worthy of consideration as research data. Afghan cultural and religious aspects were studied and sensitivities of cases and situations related to ethnic background of them were taken into consideration while collecting data.

One of us spent 2 months in an organization with Afghan women where there was an opportunity to know them in person and their culture closely. During this period close observation was done and a field diary of approximately 20 pages was maintained. The notes collected during the observation have also been used as data for the research.

3.1 Aims of study

As mentioned earlier the research is intended to unveil the real situation of forgotten group of immigrants, who also have social and psychological needs.

It aims to provide the policy makers, organizations, immigrant communities mainly Afghan community, native Finnish communities, students and third country nationals with a guiding medium for future work on well being of immigrant minority groups. In addition to that developing our professional skills and competence in the field of community development work was one of the vital aims.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected between May 2013 and January 2014. Being South Asian and women helped us immensely in getting acceptance from the Afghan wom-

en for interviews, because of cultural and religious similarities between our countries of origin. On the other hand proceeding towards other sources e.g. previous researches and related institutes for the information was a bit of challenge. The data was mainly collected through observations, structured and semi structured interviews of groups and individuals and searching for the facts and figures.

Snowballing is an effective technique for building up a reasonable-sized sample, especially when used as part of a small-scale research project (Denscombe, 1998). So snowball sampling technique proved to be fruitful in approaching people for data collection.

3.2.1 Observations

The research was started by a method of observation called participant observation. This is mainly associated with sociology and anthropology, and is used by researchers to infiltrate situations, sometimes as an undercover operation, to understand the culture and process of the groups being investigated. It usually produces qualitative data (Denscombe, 1998). Observation of the women in field assured the naturalness of the information. Most of the research steps were done in the organizations working for immigrants, where the immigrant women come to learn language and other skills for better integration in Finnish society. We were able to notice different ways and aspects of their daily lives, for example how they deal with daily life issues, whom they interact with and how they react on daily life happenings and incidents.

Electronic media can play an important role in data collection for a social research, watching a couple of movies based on Afghan immigrant's life challenges in Europe and Russia gave us a more clearer picture of issues related to Afghan immigrants in the western world.

3.2.2 Interviewing

According to Entezar (2008), the more accurate one's information about an individual and his environment, the more accurate the prediction. Thus, to understand the behavior of individual and societies, it is critical to be familiar with their culture and the current local conditions. Keeping this in mind before the interviews, we tried to know the culture of women through various channels, which helped during the interview process.

Interview is different than normal conversation, in which we asked predetermined questions based on our research question in the pursuit of credible information. Firstly we studied the literature on research techniques and went through interview methodologies and instructions. Secondly, we got permission from appropriate authorities of related organizations to conduct the research interviews, and then arranged the suitable date, time and venue. We tried to choose suitable environment for all of our interviewees where they felt comfortable and at ease to carry a conversation with us without any hindrance.

We prepared ourselves for the semi-structured interviews, which were consisted of several key questions that helped us to have a clearer vision of our area of research. We prepared tape recorder and relevant equipment and then moved ahead towards the discussion. But unfortunately in most of the interviews we could not record the conversation because interviewees said that the authenticity and truth of the research questions might get affected because of distraction.

We interviewed four Afghan women, aged between 30 to 50 years, who have lived in Finland for more than 2 years and two professionals, working for the integration of immigrants in Helsinki region. Interviews were both, individual and group.

3.2.3 Interviewing Afghan Women

Initially the interviews were kept informal and friendly, in order to create comfortable settings. The questions were asked in convenient and comprehensive language to easily coax out relevant information. Sensitivity to the feelings of interviewees was shown as part of social courtesy. Being silent, listening and understanding the interviewee was our principle throughout the interview. Questions and words were repeated for the ease of the interviewees, and probing technique was used to get the detailed information about related issues. One of the most essential aspects of interviewing is that researcher should be able to identify how true is the information; sometimes interviewee can exaggerate or alter the truth due to a number of reasons.

We proceeded gradually and systemically, starting from general conversation towards asking about their social life. Later on we asked about psychological, cultural and religious issues. We also asked them about their satisfaction with the Finnish services and life conditions in general. Lastly we asked them to advice other Afghan women or women from similar cultural background, in accordance to women's own experiences of everyday life.

Due to the sensitivity of the issues, the interviewees did not agree on the idea of recording the conversation. Hence, the tape recorder was not used and notes were made which were approximately 49 pages in total. The notes were transcribed and useful information was extracted that was relevant to our research questions and themes.

3.2.4 Use of different Languages and Translator

Conducting research in a multicultural environment leads to the language barrier. Collecting data in one language and presenting the findings in another involves researchers taking translation-related decisions that have a direct impact

on the validity of the research and its report (Birbili, 2000). We encountered language barrier during data collection process, as most of the Afghans are Pashto and Dari (Afghan native languages) speaking, and a few are Persian speaking.

Afghan women we interviewed spoke Dari and a little Finnish; one also spoke a common language, which was Urdu so we had fewer difficulties during the interview process. We had to seek help in two of our interviews from a staff member to translate the answers for us. The translator played a very important role in making the women express their feelings and life incidents with confidence.

In one of the interview there was no translator available so the interview was taken solely in Finnish language, it was feasible because one of us speaks and understands Finnish.

3.2.5 Interviews of professionals

Apparently interviewing professionals was quite similar to that of interviewing other women (Afghan women), but in reality it was a bit complex and unconventional. It took us more time and attention to prepare questions for the professionals, we had to go through the introduction and work of their organizations and had to consider lots of aspects of immigrants' life situations and work being done by institutes for them. On the other hand, it was more informative and practical. The professionals not only answered our research related questions but also guided us and gave suggestions on how can we conduct our further research.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process in which useful information is highlighted, inspected and transformed, leading towards conclusions. The validity of the data in qualitative research can be affected by a number of factors, it's the responsibility of

researcher to recognize and interpret the accuracy of provided information. In this research, the data collected through different ways was interpreted after long hours of brainstorming. The information was filtered and useful information was separated considering different contexts of the research. Thematic analysis method was used to analyze the collected data. Later on the secondary analysis was done to explain findings and conclusions effectively.

3.4 Ethical Issues

The word “ethics” is derived from the Greek ethos, which means one’s character or disposition. Today, ethics refers to a branch of philosophy concerned with how people should act, judgments about those actions (e.g., right versus wrong, good versus bad), and developing rules for justifying actions (Kitchener, 2000).

For the research process there is consent to take part. From the researcher’s point of view this is particularly important in relation to research ethics (Denscombe, 1998). The interviews are done with the permission of the interviewee, participants and the organizations involved in it. Once the interviewee agrees to participate, he/she should be explained the aims and meaning of the research. The most important aspect of research ethics is that the content of the interview, which can reveal his/her identity, should be kept confidential.

Keeping the above-mentioned norms of academic research we conducted the research in an ethical way, the ease and comfort of the participants was kept in mind. They were interviewed and observed in in-formal ways, in order to avoid any disturbance and confusion in their daily routine matters. For instance we avoided taking much time in a conversation; we interviewed the women participants after they were done with their own routine activities, which were mainly language and handicraft classes.

4 RESULTS

This chapter will include all the data analysis according to the different themes to elaborate the experiences and findings of each interviewee. By dividing the content into different themes, it helped to view the different aspects of Afghan women's lives in a clearer way.

4.1 Personal Aspect

As an individual every one of us has our own identity and choices. According to Lawler (2008) "Not only we are identical with ourselves but we are identical with others. That is we share common identities -as humans, say, but also within this, as 'women', 'men', 'British', 'American', 'White', 'Black', etc. At the same time, however, there is another aspect of identity, which suggests people's uniqueness, their difference from others." From Lawler's perspective we can conclude that we share similar roles and positions in society, which makes us, identical however in the other hand every individual has certain aspects which are very distinct that makes individuals different from each other.

Not only roles and positions but there are various aspects, which differentiate us from each other such as our history, root and different qualities. Eventually combination of all these aspect makes the identity of an individual.

4.1.1. Family as a basic unit

According to our interviewees family is not only about having a nuclear family in which partners live with their children under the same roof. It is also inclusive of extended family members, which they value very highly. As per Afghan culture and South Asia in general, family is a very tight unit in comparison with western

society. The absence of their complete family members creates a huge challenge in the process of integrating into completely foreign environment.

Our fourth interviewee stated, "Even though I am happy here but I can never forget my Afghan family, my country and my golden time back home." This explains that her extended family members and the pride she carries for her country will always be very important aspect in her life. Interviewee one has a very lonesome life, she is a widow and she had to depart from her daughter in Afghanistan. She is currently living with one of her son and the other son lives far away from her, both of them have a very busy lifestyle hence they don't spend quality time with each other which contributes towards not having a strong bond as a family which they used to have back home. Hence, she really misses the happiness she always loved and cherished in her life.

4.1.2 Role as mother, wife, sister

Playing different roles and being able to fulfill each one of them is a part of everyday life of these women. Being a wife, a mother and a sister simultaneously demands much effort to play each of these roles. Our interviewees shared that harmony; brotherhood and togetherness of family mainly depend on how a woman tries to achieve those in different roles in a household.

Culturally, Afghan women are supposed to be responsible caretaker of the family and household, which consumes most of their time and energy. Whereas, the social structure of Finland demands both men and women to contribute equally towards the labor market. Hence their life in Finland has given them opportunity to come out of their home and express their voice not only as a mother, wife and a sister but also as an individual.

4.1.3 Children and their influence

Children have a vital role in the lives of these women; they are the center of attention in their lives. They get motivated to live life to the fullest, as their children add meaning and dimension to their everyday life. The idea of being with their children and taking care of them gives them the array of hope and joy to women's otherwise challenging life.

According to our experience while interviewing each one of them, their faces lit up as soon as we ask about children and their influence in their lives. More than their own lives they seem to be interested and concerned to mold their children's life and future. The children are not only the motivation factor but they also act as a guide for the mothers in everyday life like official matters, accompanying them to visit health centers and they are also a medium for social interaction in the local community in daily life.

Interviewee 4 shared being a single mother she has more responsibility to fill in the gap of their father and nurture her children. Her life revolves around them no matter how independent she is; her ultimate happiness is to see her children grow responsibly and also be culturally sensitive towards both Finnish and Afghan culture. According to her the children belong to both communities and it's very important for the children to balance and find their identity without being imposed.

Interviewee 2 shared very interesting story of her teenage son, when he expressed he is living in 21st century in Europe and according to him it's not necessary to follow Afghan culture. Small things like greeting the guest in Afghan way, showing the kind gesture to elders and following the basic family norms. However, the mother didn't take her son's opinion in a negative way and took it in a humorous way, which really surprised us.

4.2 Social Aspects

The host country plays an important role in order to decide the possibilities of a new immigrant's equal role in the society. Finland being one of the welfare state, immigrants becomes part of society's structure through structural integration and system for example kela. There are different social offices, which help them to find language classes, employment, and work placement, vocational trainings, which in return helps these women to find comfort in a completely new environment. These organizations also act like a platform for contacts, which helps them to find new friends with common interest.

Every religion has their own beliefs and norms hence; these factors can play a huge role in order for an immigrant to integrate in the society. Prohibiting the consumption of alcoholic beverages, pork and non- halal meat products can restrict the immigrants to socialize with the mainstream society. For example these Afghan women can never participate if the Finnish family invites them for a Christmas dinner because the main food that is traditionally served during the Christmas is pork. In addition to that the main feature of the Finnish society is alcohol consumption, which can play a barrier between socialization between two parties.

4.2.1 Language and its role

Language being one of the most important tools for socializing in the local community in everyday life, immigrant are encouraged to learn the Finnish language. To conduct the basic communication, the Afghan women take Finnish courses where they are taught Finnish in various ways to fulfill their requirement.

In these language centers different kinds of activities are conducted which help these women to learn Finnish language as well as to participate in the activities,

which eventually makes it a learning process. Some of the examples are making new friends, getting creative through vocational trainings, learning different cultures and having good time.

Interviewee 1, who doesn't work professionally states, "Being able to communicate in Finnish language, it's so easy for me to travel locally and going to the market to buy food". Whereas interviewee 4, who is a practical nurse, says, "It's hard in the beginning to learn the language, but still it's hard because the local people don't communicate that often". There are different perspectives on language from our interviewees however, all of them agreed upon importance of language to be able to live everyday life.

4.2.2 Significance of friends

In the opinion of our interviewees friends are very important to them in Finland, because most of their family members are not here or they are busy with work. They have more free time in comparison to their life back home, hence having friends can really help them to overcome the loneliness and sharing the emotional bond with each other. For example interviewee 3 had emotional crisis because of the traumatic past and her friend supported her when needed and she said it really helped her to feel more comfortable and relaxed.

Our interviewee 1 shared she had one close friend who got busy in her personal life. Due to the fact her friend is busy, they don't get to spend time together, she feels lonelier as she cannot share her feelings with her friend or anyone. Whereas interviewee 4 feels she is able to conjure her hobbies as she has many friends and feels more alive and happy comparatively living a widow and low-key life back home.

4.2.3 Education and skills

Having a qualification from Finland opens opportunity to work in Finnish labor market, added skills like being competent in language and previous work experience in related field paves the way to work as a professional. Interviewee 4 mentioned her life became better once she got her Finnish degree in the field of nursing and worked as a certified nurse.

According to the interview that was conducted with professional social workers, immigrant women who lack professional education from Finland have less opportunity to work professionally. However, rest of our interviewees shared little interest to get the professional degree in Finland due to their personal priorities in life.

4.3 Psychological aspect

It is definitely not easy to move to a different country. Hospitality of the host country makes the huge difference for the immigrants to venture their new life with a completely strange environment. Therefore immigrants may have the maximum possibilities to go through the vast change of psychological imbalance such as depression, loneliness and nostalgia especially when they are not guided and supported enough.

4.3.1 Physical and mental health

All our interviewees were very satisfied with the health benefits that were facilitated by the Finnish welfare system. Interviewee 1 is going through osteoporosis and to help her with the mobility, Finnish health care service has provided her with wheeled trolley, which has indeed helped her in performing the daily life activities.

Interviewee 2 is also satisfied with the health services because it is helping her to combat her depression due to the separation of her children. She is facing the depression for the last ten years since she moved to Finland. She has been offered psychotherapy along with medical treatment and counseling which has helped her in everyday life. Similarly interviewee 4 was also suffering from depression when she came to Finland. She lost her husband and she had to leave her eldest son back home, which was one of the major causes of her depression. She was very pleased with the services that the Finnish health care system provided her which allocated her needs which eventually helped to overcome her depression.

Interviewee 3 expressed she really likes the overall health and social care however as she used to live in Jyväskylä she felt she got quicker services from the welfare system in comparison to metropolitan city especially Helsinki region.

4.3.2 Impact of war and the past loses

Out of all the four interviews, each one of them had gone through some kind of trauma as a result of losing their spouse or a child. Three of the interviewees have their children or a child living back in Afghanistan due to the Finnish Immigration policy. Whereas interviewee 3 has lost her 6 years old son, in the war in Afghanistan, which has adversely affected her everyday life.

Losing their everyday essentials, properties, materials belongings, friends, extended families and occupation is one of the biggest impacts of the war. Similarly feeling helpless towards the condition of the country getting worst and dangerous has also impacted them and forced them to leave their home country and seek a safe shelter in different parts of the world.

4.4 Cultural and religious experiences

As all of our interviewees are Muslims and have refugee status, “Supporting refugee women’s faith is therefore important at every stage of the migration process. It is important that refugee women not only pray but also keep walking” (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Khanlou & Moussa, 2008).

As mentioned above by the authors we agree that refugee women who are religious should not only limit themselves inside homes and focus only on practicing the religion and culture, it is also important for them to explore the outer world and interact with the society in order to make the immigration process more at ease for the future.

According to most of our interviewees, culture and religion are one of the most important aspects in their life. All our interviewees are Muslims, which makes them different and prone to cultural and religious challenges in foreign land. Maintaining their culture becomes important in how they view their identity.

Living in Finland most of the things are different, there are unfamiliar things everywhere, which includes primarily language, weather, food and culture. Immigrant women also expressed that they felt strange initially with unfamiliar sounds, sights and smells. Even everyday life like shopping for food, traveling, and leisure time pursuits was challenging experience.

Mostly these women gravitate towards familiar neighborhood, group and individual with similar religious background and culture group. Furthermore these women have highly same reason to migrate with similar background, which leads them to be more comfortable and open to each other. The reason for migration is one of the major factors affecting their settlement here in Finland

Interviewee 4 believes that the belief based on religion and culture by older generations might cause identity confusion within the younger generation. Older

generation basically have more traditional views on some issues and they are more likely to raise their children with these views, which in turn might not be practical in western society, but with time they have learned to be flexible and adopt Finnish culture.

4.5 Role of social services

Finland, being a welfare state, role of social services has strong influence on the standard of living. Kela is the social insurance institute of Finland, which provides social security benefits for all residents of Finland. According to official website of Kela “the typical situations in which customers contact Kela include childbirth, study, sickness, unemployment and retirement”(Kela, 2012).

According to the Finnish Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers Section 6c, following are the duties of employment offices (1215/2005) in order to fulfill the needs of integration:

(1) Employment offices are responsible, jointly with the respective Employment and Economic Development Centers, for the provision of labor market services promoting and supporting the integration of immigrants, of instruction in reading and writing and of basic education for immigrants registered as jobseekers. They also perform other duties specified for them in this Act.

(3) Employment offices and the respective municipalities cooperate in the organization of measures and services to promote and support integration and in the provision of information about them.

These acts provide equal opportunity to all immigrants from different backgrounds to learn and have an access to labor market. Our interviewees are satisfied with the services provided by social welfare system of Finland in accordance with their needs. One of our interviewee shared that she could not imagine

living a secure life in her country in every aspect, whereas in Finland she is able to live a better and healthy life.

Not only covering their basic needs and health care, in order to meet social needs, they seek help from social services. They are given peer support which helps in meeting their emotional and social needs and at the same time gives them chance to learn to work together with people from different backgrounds. This whole process helps them to be more confident and goal oriented which minimizes the feeling of despair, which they go through being immigrant women.

5 PROFESSIONALS ON AFGHAN WOMEN

To acquire the clear insight of Afghan women's life in Finland, we interviewed two professionals working with immigrants on daily basis in an organization in Central Helsinki. In the organization the workers deal with issues of immigrants through counseling mainly. On asking their experience of working with Afghan women they told that the volume of Afghan women's problems to a large extent depends upon their previous education and skills. Some of the women come with no knowledge of Finnish systems and everyday life practicalities, while others come with enough know how of basics of western life. One of the professionals told that culture and religion becomes a challenge for Afghan women when they get into professional life, for instance fasting while working, going to pray during work hours and dealing with pork if they are working in a place where they have to deal with food. They told that a number of women come with the depression and emotional disturbance because of past events which may include loss of one or more family members and loss of home and belongings.

Moreover counselor told that making friends is hard when one doesn't share the same language of communication with the other. So the integration demands learning of Finnish language. Language courses for the immigrants are not enough to assure their integration in everyday Finnish life, the methods of teaching Finnish are not suitable enough for every immigrant, as they previously have different level of education from one another. The professional added while counseling, a woman confessed she was living a better and satisfactory life in Iran as a refugee compared to her life at present in Finland. They ended the interview by saying that Finland has every possible benefit for the wellbeing of the residents/citizens; all they need is to know the ways to approach and avail those benefits.

6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter we are sharing our own perspective on different aspects of our research in a broader spectrum. We will explain the feelings involved in the process of interaction with Afghan women and how the results are going to make an impact on the target group in future. In addition to that the importance of the role of society towards the wellbeing of all the members of society is discussed.

6.1 Source of Information

There has been very little data and study about Afghan women living in Finland. Our research can help to provide useful information for the institutes, organizations, policy makers, social workers, professionals, students and Afghan community who are keen to work for them. In order to develop the current projects working for immigrant women and to create future projects catering towards the needs of Afghan women, this research can be helpful to get the idea of the everyday life experiences of these women.

This research can also help immigrant women with different backgrounds that are minorities, to relate their feelings with the life situation of Afghan women. Moreover it's a very important subject for the Finnish communities to not ignore and to acknowledge the fact that immigrants are also a part of their society. Developing empathy towards each other is very important step towards living in harmony. Thus our research can help these women to reach out to majority groups.

6.2 Solidarity with Afghan Women

Solidarity is created and expressed by the process of mutual association (Fantasia, 1988). Being immigrants we have the sense of solidarity towards all im-

migrant women, we were more interested towards Afghan women because of the security and political chaos in their country. Amongst many other immigrants we felt Afghan women are more prone to leave their country for security and to seek refuge in foreign countries.

Our feeling of solidarity towards these women became stronger throughout the research process; we got very positive response from our interviewees and developed the bond of sisterhood. Being women we share common interest to uplift the women and believe in empowerment, this motive created a comfortable situation between our interviewees and us.

6.3 Motivations and Encouragement

Afghan women were delighted to know that we being non-Afghan are interested to know about their experiences and challenges in Finland. They also shared it was their first time to actually talk about their feelings and felt that we were genuinely interested to know more about them. Coming outside to talk with us about their personal, psychological and social life issues was itself a huge accomplishment. This became the reason of our motivation and dedication towards the research.

One of our interviewee stated, "Addressing social issues is important, even in Europe Afghan women suffer", this indicates that Afghan women not only suffer in Afghanistan but also in a country like Finland which is based on equal rights and social welfare. Our research can help in motivating women to advocate for them, and to talk more about their challenges and everyday life issues with the social institutes.

6.4 Role of society

According to Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al (2008), many of the Muslim refugee women she worked with commented that they felt misunderstood by the main-

stream service providers, who did not understand their beliefs and did not see the person behind the hijab, or did not understand the many reasons why women veiled.

As mentioned above, Muslim women are likely to get more inclined to be misunderstood by the mainstream society due to their distinctive appearance. Society can play an important role to make those women not feel different just because of the way they look. People need to be more aware about cultural sensitivity and respect each other's beliefs. Understanding that we are human first rather than treating each other on the base of race and country of origin is vital. Our interviewees also agreed that they have experienced inequality in everyday life aspects mildly and they would like to feel as important as other members of the society.

In a sociological point of view, the social role is a functional concept and it indicates how an individual is expected to actualize his status in the form of behavior (Chakrapani and Kumar, 1994.). Likewise the immigrants can also contribute towards the community by being culturally sensitive and by following the systems and regulations of the host country. In this manner both parties can develop mutual understanding and create inclusiveness.

7 CONCLUSION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

This research offers the result that everyday life of Afghan women is well supported by the welfare state; they are pleased and satisfied with the services provided to them especially health care. Everyday life experiences are a continuous learning process; mainly language is the key aspect to make their life easy and more interactive with the society.

Children and families are their strength, priority and motivation to continue life. In addition to that, peer support they receive from their respective institutes provides them with moral support and assistance when required. As mentioned before most of the interviewees stated, family and personal life is their priority over profession and education. Not having adequate professional education has a direct impact on their degree of integration, the women who have opportunity to gain professional education in Finland have significantly better experiences as compared to those who did not go for professional education.

Culture and religion are highly valued in lives of Afghan women, they want to preserve their culture and religion and pass on to the future generations however, they are also open towards adopting Finnish culture, as they feel it to be a vital step to include themselves in Finnish community.

The past losses of Afghan women due to war are still a part of their memory; the traumas they have gone through has left an impact in their minds permanently. But they have accepted the realities and have managed to live their life in a positive dimension with the flare of hope and trust in God.

7.1 Challenges

Not knowing where to start the research from was definitely the first challenge followed by reaching the target group which were Afghan community specifically women in Helsinki region.

Language of communication has been another barrier during the research process. Transcribing and translating the data from Finnish language into English after the interviews was a difficult task and it consumed a lot of time. Making the interviewee understand the key concept of the research was hard due to language barrier. Most of them were confused and were not clear about this idea, hence, we had to spend a lot of time explaining about the idea.

As there has been less study focusing on Afghan immigrant women, it was difficult to find relevant literature to get in depth information. As part of the research managing and coordinating the time and schedule is equally important, while the research process working in pair, we coordinated our time and schedule throughout the research.

8 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Below are the individual perspectives, on the learning experiences and developments acquired through the research process.

8.1 Professional Development of Sumbal Ghaffar:

During the practical placement in spring 2013, I observed Afghan culture and learned about it in a new perspective. Frequent interaction with Afghan women helped me to develop interest to learn more about them and their life experiences in Finland, to further my inquisitiveness I decided to conduct a research about their everyday life being immigrant women in Finland.

While conducting this research, I came across various social work organizations actively working for immigrant women in Helsinki region, this really helped me to gain the insight to the work and methodology that are being used for well being of immigrant women in Finland. As I belong to a culture, which has many similarities with Afghan culture, it was very important for me not to be emotionally sensitive towards them in a personal level. Thus, I developed ethical skills to keep a distinction between my personal and professional life.

Working as a pair has improved my teamwork and decision making skills, having different opinions and working together with my co-researcher has contributed towards developing other skills such as critical approach, mutual understanding and agreement. These skills can be helpful in the future professional life. My pursuit of learning about Afghan women and their life situations has not been concluded with this research, in fact it has encouraged me to work with them and to make them more visible in the society.

8.2 Professional Development of Smriti Madonna Lama:

My decision to work with my co-researcher and complete the thesis with her has been really enriching experience. I had an opportunity to gain an insight on the Afghan culture and methods used in social work and development field in Finland regarding immigration and immigrants' issues.

Finland being one of the suitable countries for the immigrants due to its immigration policy and integration system, I received more option and exposure to meet professionals working in social sector. I consider myself fortunate to meet and interview the actual immigrant women from Afghanistan and to be able to hear their experiences and challenges living and working in Finland.

It is obvious that there have been certain limitations due to the language barrier in various situations, however it was not a major hurdle. Managing to respect time and following the schedule was very important in order for the research to develop in a smooth pace. I was also able to develop my professional skills on various factors such as literature review and working in cohesiveness. As part of my personal experience being a social worker we often have an opportunity to work with people from different backgrounds. Hence, in many situations there is a high chance of expecting the unexpected situations, thus in those kind of crisis situations, I learned to be calm and analyze the situation to act accordingly to maintain the situation.

9 THESIS PROCESS

The topic of the thesis was selected on the basis of researchers' interest in the issues of women. Initially one of us had individual research plan on caste based discrimination of women in a certain community, however due to unsuitable circumstances it was not possible to be continued with the original plan. The research on everyday life of Afghan women in Finland was already initiated by one of us, so on discussing with the thesis supervisor, we agreed upon a common thesis plan and decided to work and continue the thesis on everyday life of Afghan women as a pair.

As one of us joined later, it was very important for us to revise everything together and make a work plan suitable and effective for the research and its objectives. Three of the interviews were taken by one of us and the fourth interview was taken together. Transcribing the data was challenging as one of us was not present during the three interviews but that did not affect our work because we took it as an opportunity to intensely go through the documentation of the interviews and not miss any important subject matter relevant to our research question.

The work was not divided individually; it was done together as we believe that it would be more contributive towards our individual, professional development and our research process. Analyzing the research results was one of the most interesting parts for us. We made a mind map on different themes suitable to our research, we were focused on the related themes and by doing so the data analyzing process became relatively easier.

As individuals we have different opinions and perspectives, hence keeping that in mind we always respected each other's point of view and came to a mutual agreement. Apart from research content, flexibility and understanding each oth-

er's situations regarding time management was key element for continuous development of the research.

Continuous supervision and feedback on the research development throughout the thesis process by our supervisor was indeed very beneficial. The meetings, which were arranged in between the process, helped us to be focused and encouraged us to stay consistent. The prompt response and guidance through online medium was another positive aspect of supervision, which helped us to continue the work without losing direction.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Afghanistan, Location and neighborhood:



(Source: Bouhammer, 2010)

Appendix 2

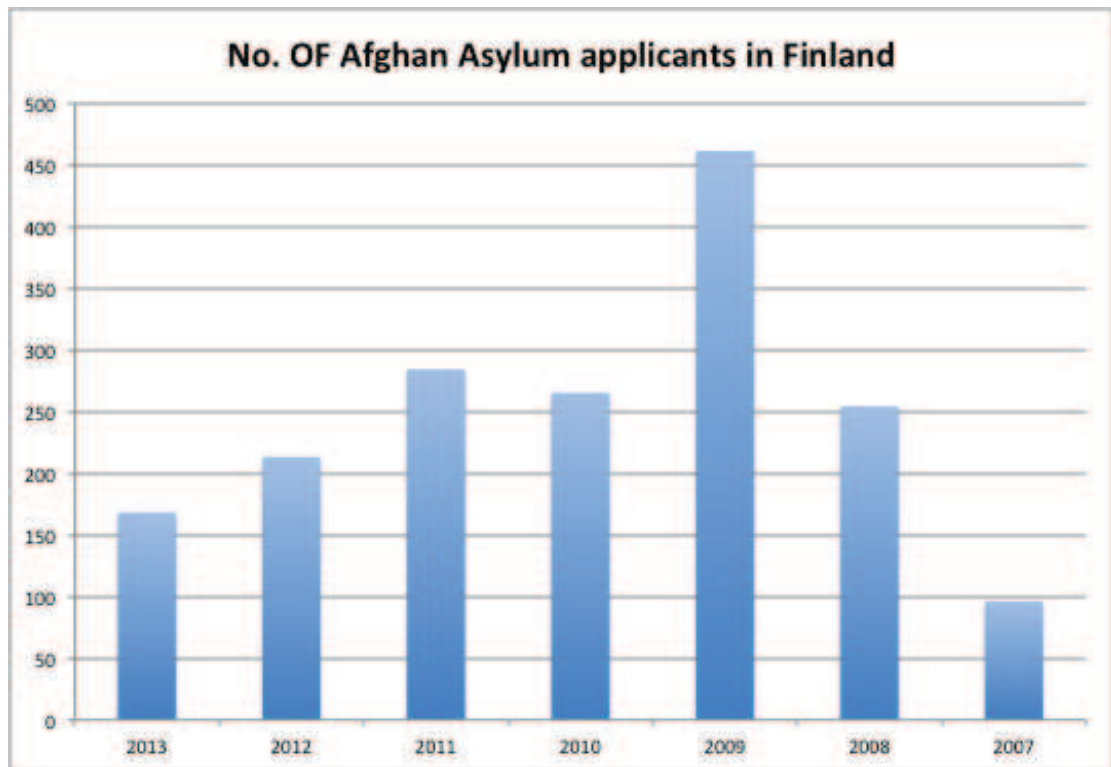


Table 1, Number of Afghans applying for Asylum in Finland for last eight years:
(source, Migri.fi, 2013)

Appendix 3

Residing in Afghanistan [1]	
Refugees [2]	16,866
Asylum Seekers [3]	71
Returned Refugees [4]	27,153
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS) [5]	574,327
Returned IDPs [6]	5,367
Stateless Persons [7]	0
Various [8]	879,377
Total Population of Concern	1,503,161
Originating from Afghanistan [1]	
Refugees [2]	2,552,208
Asylum Seekers [3]	46,051
Returned Refugees [4]	27,153
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPS) [5]	574,327
Returned IDPs [6]	5,367
Various [8]	880,072
Total Population of Concern	4,085,178

Table 2 Source: Statistical snapshots of Afghan migrants and refugees (Residing inside and outside Afghanistan) (UNHCR, 2014)

Appendix 4

Life expectancy: females as a % of males 2012	104.3
Adult literacy rate: females as a % of males 2008-2012*	-
Enrolment ratios: females as a % of males 2008-2012*, Primary GER	71
Enrolment ratios: females as a % of males 2008-2012*, Secondary GER	54.9
Survival rate to the last grade of primary: females as a % of males 2008-2012*	-
Contraceptive prevalence (%) 2008-2012*	21.2
Antenatal care (%) 2008-2012*, At least one visit	47.9
Antenatal care (%) 2008-2012*, At least four visits	14.6
Delivery care (%) 2008-2012*, Skilled attendant at birth	38.6
Delivery care (%) 2008-2012*, Institutional delivery	32.9
Delivery care (%) 2008-2012*, C-section	3.6
Maternal mortality ratio, 2008-2012*, Reported	330
Maternal mortality ratio, 2010, Adjusted	460
Maternal mortality ratio, 2010, Lifetime risk of maternal death (1 in:)	32

Table 3 Source: UNICEF, 2014, Afghanistan, Statistics on women's health.

Appendix 5

Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 14

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 18

- 1.2 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Source: United Nations, 2014, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Appendix 6

Type of Legislation

Legislation on Non-Discrimination Act (21/2004)

Section 6. Prohibition of discrimination

Nobody may be discriminated against on the basis of age, ethnic or national origin, nationality, language, religion, belief, opinion, health, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics. The prohibition of discrimination based on gender is covered by the provisions of the Act on Equality between Women and Men (609/1986).

Discrimination means:

- 1) The treatment of a person less favorably than the way another person is treated, has been treated or would be treated in a comparable situation (direct discrimination);
- 2) that an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice puts a person at a particular disadvantage compared with other persons, unless said provision, criterion or practice has an acceptable aim and the means used are appropriate and necessary for achieving this aim (indirect discrimination);
- 3) the deliberate or de facto infringement of the dignity and integrity of a person or group of people by the creation of a intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment (harassment); and
- 4) an instruction or order to discriminate.

Appendix 7

Interview Questions

Q1- what cultural shocks did you experience, in your early period of stay in Finland?

Q2 How is it different to live your life here in Finland as compared to Afghanistan?

Q3 have you experienced any kind of emotional problems for living away from your homeland, and how have you been helped?

Q4 do you have friends and do you have Finnish friends?

Q5 Tell us something about your skills and learning opportunities in Finland?

Q6 what kind of health, education and social services do you get, are you satisfied with those services?

Q7 Do you feel any difference when it comes to your religious practices in Finland, as compared to back home?

Q8 what do you think of everyday life here, because of having a different cultural and ethnic background?

Q9 what activities are part of your life? Do you have hobbies like Sports, exercise or music?

Q10 what are important things to you, in life?

Q11 what would you like to advice your fellow afghan women for their lives as immigrants in Finland?

