



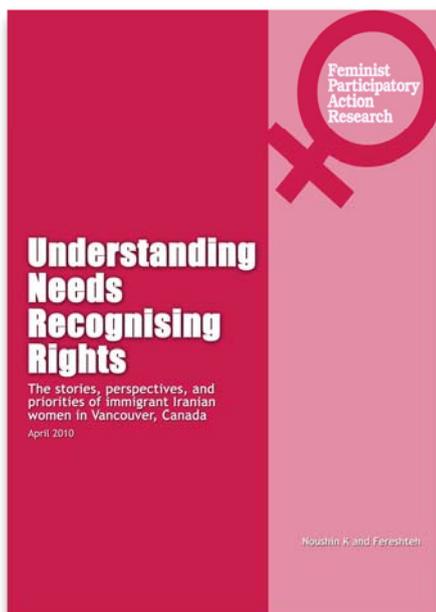
Feminist
Participatory
Action
Research

Understanding Needs Recognising Rights

The stories, perspectives, and
priorities of immigrant Iranian
women in Vancouver, Canada

April 2010

Noushin K and Fereshteh



Women know their lives best! They know their strengths. They know what they want changed. In Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), women research the issues that affect their own lives in order to bring about needed change. As a community, they analyse their stories and talk about what actions they will take and what needs to be changed. As opposed to traditional research, women are active participants in the research process; they are not 'researched on'.

FPAR requires a certain attitude - one that believes women can steer change; one that embraces and values the complexity of women's lived experiences; and one that highlights the strength and resourcefulness of women in the face of disempowering and discriminatory circumstances.

This FPAR initiative follows an FPAR process facilitated by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) in 1999 and 2000 which worked with several groups to explore what trafficking was and how it manifests in women's lives. Ten years on, GAATW and like-minded anti-trafficking advocates have come to the FPAR process again, this time looking at how trafficking is connected to broader parts of women's lives - to their experiences of gender, migration and their work.

GAATW conducted a methodology learning workshop with NGOs and Self-Organised Groups (or groups led by members of the target group themselves) in the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia in 2009. Researchers went back to their communities, or to the communities they work with, and acted as catalysts for the FPAR process. Research groups included: the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya (FIDA-Kenya); Legal Resources Center - Untul Keadilan Jender Dan Hak Asasi Manusia (LRC-KJHAM) in Indonesia; Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia-Jakarta or the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers (ATKI-Jakarta); Self-Empowerment Program for Migrant Women (SEPOM) in Thailand; RESPECT Netherlands together with TRUSTED Migrants and the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers in the Netherlands; Researchers Noushin K and Fereshteh in Canada; Akina Dada wa Africa (AkiDWA) in Ireland, La Strada Moldova; Movimiento De Mujeres Unidas (Modemu) in the Dominican Republic; Sociedade De Defesa Dos Direitos Sexuais Na Amazônia (Sodireitos) in Brazil; and Centro de Apoyo Aquelarre (CEAPA) in the Dominican Republic.

At the end of this FPAR process one Self-Organised Group said: 'This is a feminist process'. The anti-trafficking sector has often been accused of determining what's best for women 'for their own good'. This initiative seeks to counteract that idea by documenting how women are steering change in their communities. We are proud to share their knowledge and their stories of resilience, hope and strength.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| ABOUT THIS REPORT..... | 3 |
| ACRONYMS | 4 |
| INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| Gendering immigrants in Canada..... | 5 |
| A brief history of Iranian immigration to Canada..... | 6 |
| Gender roles, immigration, and resettlement..... | 7 |
| METHODOLOGY | 8 |
| Research design..... | 8 |
| Procedures | 9 |
| Analysis | 10 |
| PARTICIPANT PROFILES | 11 |
| Roxanna..... | 11 |
| Farah..... | 12 |
| Atoosa..... | 12 |
| Bahar..... | 13 |
| Pariyeh..... | 14 |
| Solmaz..... | 15 |
| FINDINGS | 16 |
| Loneliness and social isolation..... | 16 |
| Struggle | 18 |
| Resilience..... | 20 |
| Resolve..... | 21 |
| Considerations..... | 22 |
| RESEARCHER'S REFLECTIONS..... | 23 |
| Researcher's social location..... | 23 |
| The challenges of doing FPAR in this context | 24 |
| CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... | 25 |
| REFERENCES | 26 |
| APPENDIX 1: Participant information and consent form..... | 28 |
| APPENDIX 2: | 30 |
| SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT PROFILES..... | 30 |
| Pari..... | 30 |
| Monia | 30 |
| Adile | 31 |
| Mahnaz | 32 |
| Zaynab | 33 |
| Hamideh..... | 33 |
| Raheleh..... | 34 |
| Arghavan..... | 34 |
| Mona | 35 |
| Soheyla | 36 |
| Monir | 36 |
| Hormat | 37 |

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is part of the Global Alliance Against the Traffic in Women (GAATW) 2009 Feminist Participatory Action Research Project. The GAATW promotes the rights of women migrant workers and trafficked persons and advocates for living and working conditions that provide women with more alternatives in their countries of origin. This global research project is being carried out by migrant and trafficked women, as well as by activist researchers who have been working closely with migrant and trafficked women in their communities. All research projects look at the lived experience of migration and workplace realities through the eyes of women and listen to their stories carefully. The ultimate aim of this global research project is to impact both global and local immigration policy through evidence-based research and communication.

Acknowledgments and dedication

This research project is dedicated to the strong women who were willing to share their stories, experiences, tears, and laughter with us. We hope we have done you all justice.

ACRONYMS

| | |
|-------|---|
| BC | British Columbia |
| CIC | Citizenship and Immigration Canada |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| FPAR | Feminist participatory action research |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a tangled web of conflicting changes - some increase women's control over their lives, some create additional barriers before them. Migration effects profound changes in the compact between men and women. Sexuality and gender are renegotiated based on available resources (Shahidian, 1999:191)

Gendering immigrants in Canada

In Canada, the majority of legal immigrants are eligible for full citizenship rights and entitlements with well-defined social and political rights and access to labour markets. Citizenship and Immigration Canada sets and implements policies arising from the 2002 *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* to determine the suitability of all immigration applicants based on specific criteria. A point system helps to categorise potential immigrants as independent "Skilled Workers" or part of the "Business Class" who want to bring significant or entrepreneurial skills to Canada. Individuals can also apply for immigrant visas under the "Family Class" or "Sponsorship by a Canadian citizen or permanent resident" categories. This point system considers six criteria: education, work experience, fluency in English or French, age, arranged employment in Canada, and adaptability (including previous studies or work in Canada, arranged employment, relative in Canada and partner's education) in order to determine suitability for immigration. The higher the points in the categories of education, work experience and language proficiency, the greater the likelihood of application acceptance. Although spouses of the Principal Applicant are also categorised as economic (independent) immigrants, they are not assessed under the point system which defines work as paid work. In this manner, Canada's immigration policies privilege traditionally "male" jobs over work such as childbearing and small-scale production and sales (Suto, 2009). These inequalities continue upon arrival in Canada, despite the fact that immigrant women purportedly share in the same financial, social, and legal rights as immigrant men.

The largest share of women who immigrate to Canada do so as sponsored or dependent immigrants. In 2001, women accounted for 69% of business *dependent* and 79% of skilled *dependent* workers in contrast with 15% of business *principal (independent)* and 24% of skilled *principal* workers (Fletcher, 2006). In the same year, 64% of all foreign born women were in the paid labour force compared to 70% of Canadian born women and 80% of immigrant men (VanderPlaat, 2007). According to Boyd & Pikkov (2005: v), "*diminished social entitlements that emphasise private provision of care provide abundant, but also precarious, employment opportunities, while increasing women's burden within their own families.*" Therefore, and despite representing 50% of the total number of immigrants to Canada over the last two decades, immigrant women in Canada face tremendous challenges that are created, in part, by gendered immigration policies, underemployment, lack of access to formal education, isolation, partial citizenship, and a lack of recognition of credentials (Boyd, 2005; Dossa, 2002; Fletcher, 2006; Oreopoulous, 2009; Suto, 2009; VanderPlaat, 2007). As a result of these barriers, many immigrant women are too often unable to settle and fully integrate within Canadian society.

While service agencies for South and East Asian immigrant women have been available throughout Canada over the last two decades, there continues to be a dearth of centers to assist Middle Eastern immigrant women in a culturally-appropriate manner. These women face serious risks and challenges when seeking and accessing legal and community information, services, and assistance. Such risks are especially pronounced for women who have experienced domestic violence and for those engaged in indoor-based sex work in order to support themselves and their families. We believe that these women can and must play a vital role in developing and strengthening Canada. However, in order to truly impact immigration and labour policy in the context of immigrant women, it is crucial to understand the common systemic challenges faced by these women in order to address their needs.

A brief history of Iranian immigration to Canada

A cursory look at the recent literature surrounding migration out of Iran largely considers the displacement caused by the Islamic revolution in 1978-9, the human and economic impacts of the Iran-Iraq war, and forced exile as a result of religious and political persecution as the primary reasons behind Iranian immigration to Canada over the last few decades (Moghissi, 2003; Shahidian, 1999; Swanton, 2005). In comparison to other immigrant groups, Iranians are relative newcomers to Canada. It was only until the 1970s that the number of Iranian immigrants to Canada increased from 100 individuals a year to 600 individuals a year, with a real surge in immigration being felt after the Islamic revolution in 1978 (Garousi, 2005). In 1993, an estimated 40,000 Iranians lived in Canada, with men and women forming 60 and 40 percent of the immigrant Iranian community respectively (Shahidian, 1999); in 2001, there were over 89,000 Iranian-Canadians in Canada, and since 2004, Iranian immigrants have continued to be one of the top ten source countries of immigration in British Columbia (BC) (Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, British Columbia, 2008).

Despite the steady influx of Iranian immigrants into Canada, employment opportunities are severely limited for residents to gain occupation related to their own professions and degrees. In 2001, the percentage of unemployed Iranian-Canadians over 15 years of age was higher than the ratio of all Canadians put together. Specifically, 34% of Iranian-Canadians did not work versus 29% of all Canadians, and 37% of all Canadians had full-time jobs while only 28% of Iranian-Canadians worked full-time (Garousi, 2005). Furthermore, 34% of Iranian-Canadian families were considered to have a Low Income Rate (LIR) in 2001 versus 55% of all Canadians. Here, "Low Income Rate" was defined as the "*proportion of persons in economic families and unattached individuals with incomes below the Statistics Canada low-income cut-off (LICO). The cut-offs represent levels of income where people spend disproportionate amounts of money for food, shelter, and clothing. LICOs are based on family size and degree of urbanisation; cut-offs are updated to account for changes in the consumer price index*" (cited in Garousi, 2005:20). While the Iranian immigrant community "*could be called one of the most successful immigrant communities in Canada*" (Lalani & Lalani, n.d.), there are several barriers to the successful settlement and integration of Iranian immigrant communities in Canada (see Garousi, 2005):

- Unemployment, underemployment, and financial shortcomings due to a lack of recognition of Iranian credentials;
- Inadequate language training for newcomers, and insufficient access to services, training, and information on employment opportunities;
- Ineffective immigrant policies and negative attitudes to the treatment and integration of refugees;
- Lack of resources to train competent interpreters/translators for refugees;
- Cultural differences within the host country;

- Insufficient community cooperation to assist newcomers settle in their environment;
- Absence of adequate and culturally-appropriate emotional support;
- Systemic racism.

Gender roles, immigration, and resettlement

According to Swanton (2005:9),

Depending on how Iranians entered Canada, they are bracketed into one of a number of immigrant classes (economic, immigrant, skilled worker, refugee, sponsored immigrant, dependant and so forth), and this process of (black)boxing migrants can generate horizons of possibility enabling or constraining the individuals obliged to live within them.

Gender plays a significant role in determining the outcomes of immigrants, with women often feeling the “*brunt of uprootedness more than men*” (Moghissi, 2003: 209). No longer able to rely on the support of female networks in times of hardship, “*women have to struggle against male domination under conditions that provide Iranian men with more freedom to interact with members of the opposite sex....In addition, they are pressured by a watchful community that wants to maintain its authenticity through controlling female sexuality*” (Shahidian, 1999: 217). Additionally, a lack of culturally appropriate childcare may force women into unemployment, underemployment or precarious work environments due to the difficult act of balancing education and family responsibilities (VanderPlaat, 2007).

Nonetheless, as Moghissi (2002: 210) notes:

Iranian women, generally, demonstrate more capability than men, a greater readiness to cope with displacement, and more flexibility and resourcefulness in adjusting to new conditions....the legal and social support system - child custody, the welfare system, and shelters for abused women - provide protection and new possibilities, and, to a certain degree, act to reduce male prerogatives and power.

She finds, as we hope to show, that Iranian women in the diaspora “demonstrate enormous resilience and moral courage in coping with change” (Moghissi, 2002: 210). How do immigrant Iranian women in Canada exercise such moral courage? What challenges do they face in the context of gender, migration and labour? And what actions do they consider to be important in minimising the negative impact of these linkages on their lives?

The broader aim of our report is to contribute to research related to the development of progressive immigration policy by documenting the experiences of immigrant and refugee Iranian women, in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. All of these women have engaged in indoor-based sex work at some point after their immigration to Canada in order to make ends meet.

Specifically, we aim to (1) gather, analyze, and process information about the concerns and priorities of immigrant and refugee Iranian in Vancouver, Canada, (2) report on emerging issues impacting needs, and (3) promote service development/provision that prioritize and address these expressed concerns.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

fem-i-nism, noun: a philosophy, a process and a movement, centred on women's diverse perspectives, that challenges all forms of inequality and discrimination based on sex and gender (and their intersections with class, race, ethnicity, age, religion and other markers of difference) to achieve social change and policies which recognise women as political subjects and which create a rights enhancing environment (GAATW FPAR Working Group)

This study was designed to document the stories of immigrant and refugee Iranian women in Canada, and to analyse their lived experiences of migration and employment using a feminist and human rights perspective. Immigrant men and women face several challenges when adjusting and resettling in their adopted country, including “changes that affect individuals, their occupations and the environments in which they function” (Suto, 2009). Such changes are even more pronounced for women who are entitled to differing levels of economic, cultural, social, and political resources when compared to men. A feminist participatory action research (FPAR) perspective lends itself well to “open and flexible theory-building grounded in a body of empirical work ceaselessly confronted with, and respectful of, women’s day to day experiences” (Reid, 2004: 7). By using FPAR, the experiences and expertise of each woman become a central part in the design, planning and execution of the research, minimising assumptions made by the researchers about the women’s own interests and experiences. Five key FPAR guiding principles formed the basis of the design, planning, and execution of this research (see Reid, 2004; Reid et al., 2006):

- 1) *Inclusion* of participants in identifying key issues and questions in all phases of the research process, including action and evaluation, thereby valuing their experiences, ideas and needs;
- 2) *Participation* and collaboration between researchers and research participants, as well as among research participants;
- 3) *Commitment to individual and collective action* in order to produce positive changes through empowering women participants;
- 4) *Social change* to alter the initial situation of a group, organisation, or community in the direction of a more liberated state;
- 5) *Researcher reflexivity* to acknowledge the researcher as a non-neutral participant.

As a methodological tool to examine the intersections between gender, labour, and migration experience by immigrant women, FPAR allows for immigrant women to talk about their experiences from their own perspectives, enables them to express their experiences on their own terms, and addresses their capacity to participate in determining interventions, policies, and actions, and their own power to exercise and realise their rights. It also provides an appropriate framework with which to examine discussions based on the issues, concerns, and themes emphasised by the women themselves.

Procedures

Twenty-one women shared their experiences of immigration to and resettlement in Canada between August 2009 and February 2010; however, due to potential identification markers that are central to each woman's story and as a result of safety concerns, only 19 participant profiles are included as part of this report. Employing purposive and convenience sampling techniques, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to identify the challenges that Iranian women face when trying to settle in Canada. While we sought out to examine the experiences of Middle Eastern women (including Iraqis and Arabs) more broadly, our final sample consisted of mostly Iranian women and one Turkish woman. This sample of informants is unique, and to our knowledge, includes the only known examination of the struggles of Iranian women in Canada whom have engaged in sex work at some point post-migration due to severe financial constraints. The taboo nature of sex work in general coupled with the severe communal repercussions of engaging in sex work¹ pose significant challenges to accessing such a hidden, invisible community.

All of the women who shared their stories were known to a well-respected local advocate whom they trust and who was able to coordinate the interviews after explaining the research purpose and preparing them with the questions that may be asked (see Box 1). Both researchers were available to conduct the interviews at any time chosen by the participants in order to ensure that they were available, prepared, and willing to engage in discussion. Furthermore, private face-to-face interviews were chosen as the preferred and most comfortable method of data collection for the participants. Additionally, written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviewing in order to formalise the interview process and reassure participants about confidentiality (see Appendix 1 for the consent form template). It also offered participants with the opportunity to address any concerns about the research process while providing the researchers with a documented record of the interview and honorarium provided. Participants were paid a base honorarium of \$30² and 2 bus tickets for transportation to and from the interview, with additional compensation allotted for childcare expenses (if applicable). Ethics approval from an external body was not sought out for this research.

For five out of twenty-one interviews, both researchers (NK and FR) were present; for three separate interviews on researcher (FR) and advocate were present, and for the remaining interviews, one researcher (FR) conducted the interviews alone. Interviews were primarily conducted in Farsi, with occasional dialogue in English, in order to better facilitate a comfortable and open discussion for the participants. All interviews were conducted in one neutral, safe central location that was known to the participants and lasted 1.5 hours on average. We decided *a priori* not to tape-record the interviews due to possible distress participants may experience around

Box 1: Interview Guide

1. *When did you move to Canada?*
2. *Did you move to Canada by yourself?*
3. *What were the reasons behind your moved?*
4. *What were your expectations about life in Canada before you moved?*
5. *How did you feel about moving to Canada at that time?*
6. *What was the immigration process prior to moving to Canada?*
7. *Did you face any challenges when you first settled in Canada? How did you feel about your move to Canada at that time?*
8. *Are you currently facing any obstacles, including legal problems, as an immigrant/refugee woman in Canada?*
9. *What are the reasons for your continued stay in Canada?*
10. *Are you content with your current situation?*
11. *What do you think will improve your current situation, if any, as an immigrant/refugee woman in Canada?*

¹ The type of sex work described here refers specifically to indoor-based sex work with a few select and regular clients.

² All monetary values are in Canadian dollars

confidentiality. Instead, both researchers took detailed notes as the participants spoke, noting particular terms and expressions that were often used.

Feminist interviewing techniques were employed during the course of this research, with participants determining the course and pace of the interview (Acker et al., 1983; Oakley, 1988). The interviews began by addressing participant concerns, clarifying any questions about the interview guide (Box 1), and reassuring participants that the interview could end at any point during the discussion. We also began the interviews with open-ended, free response questions about their life before immigration, the immigration process, and how they felt about their current living situations. Participants took as much time as they needed and wanted to take to tell their stories. When a portion of the unfolding story was unclear, care was taken to clarify details while reassuring participants that they were free to disclose only as much information as they were comfortable to. In particular, neither the researchers nor the participants made any formal acknowledgement of sex work as one of the types of work the women engaged in, especially given the privacy and cultural-taboo around the issue. Furthermore, since the goal of the research was to document and understand the perspectives of working-class immigrant Iranian women in Canada, we sought to clarify the frames of reference each woman offered by examining the meanings, interpretations, and assessments expressed by each participant. Above all, the emotional well-being of the participants was, by far, our primary concern and guided the warm, compassionate, and patient tone of the interviews.

After each interview, both researchers debriefed and discussed the interview content at length. In particular, we talked about the impact that each participant's narrative had on us and the possibilities of translating participant-identified actions into reality. No direct follow-up interviews or member checks were conducted with the participants; however, information about the accuracy of the data, how each participant was doing, any further challenges faced post-interview, and the opportunities to take immediate action have been facilitated through the local advocate.

Analysis

During the data collection and analysis process, women's stories were constantly compared and contrasted in accordance with a grounded theory method (Jackson, 2003). Research notes on the facts, metaphors, scenarios and feelings, as well as other details relevant to migration, labour, and gender were similar among the participants and reflected the researchers' own conceptions of the specific preliminary categories used to organise the data. These categories included common experiences with the immigration process among the refugees, similar challenges upon arrival into the country, and a similar expectation of individualised action, such as earning enough money to get an education or assistance with getting a mortgage in order to help set them in the direction of their choosing.

One researcher reviewed each interview note in order to gain an overview of the main issues and themes raised by participants, comparing these findings to the preliminary categories and adding new ones to account for more subtle themes. The notes were then read with all pertinent references to the categories highlighted. Each category and its corresponding data were then recorded on separate sheets. Through the lengthy process of re-reading the transcripts several times and making detailed memos of the findings, we became highly aware of the dataset and of the emerging themes. We did not ask an independent reviewer who was blinded to the purpose of the research to look over the coded data. Also, no participants were involved in analysing the information.

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The reader is about to meet 6 women and 1 transwoman whose ages range from late twenties to late forties. Although twenty-one interviews were conducted overall, the following interviews were analysed in detail and represent the diverse range of the women's experiences and challenges as described throughout the research process. The remaining interviews, which occurred later on in the research process and do not form part of the described analysis, are summarised in Appendix 2.

As immigrants and refugees to Canada, each participant spent time talking with the researchers about the challenges they face, the actions they continue to take to overcome their struggles, what elements they feel would help improve their situation as an immigrant/refugee, and their hopes and dreams for the future. A conscious decision was made to leave the participant's sex narratives out of the interview due to the severe cultural taboos and discomfort around the explicit discussion of such issues. Every profile has therefore been considered and edited to best ensure each woman's safety. These themes are shared across all the stories and detailed profiles on the remaining participants are provided in Appendix 2. No real names were used throughout this report.

Roxanna

Roxanna was a young middle-class woman in Iran, who arrived in Canada in 1991 after getting married. Roxanna's husband moved to Vancouver, Canada in 1984, and during one of his trips back to Iran, he went to her house for *khastegari*³. While she did not know him well, she had only 5 days to consider his marriage proposal and felt under pressure to make a quick decision. She accepted his proposal during this time so that wedding preparations could begin while he was still in Iran and so that she could obtain her marriage license to begin the immigration process to Canada. It took her 20 months from the time of the initiation of her sponsored-immigration to the time of completion, although she was told it should take 4-5 months. Roxanna believes that her husband probably took "his own sweet time" to send the relevant papers to the immigration officials thereby delaying her immigration process unnecessarily.

While she had no particular expectations about life in Canada, except that she would be able to continue her education, she was horribly surprised to learn that her husband had lied to her about his work and life circumstances. She also quickly discovered that he was abusive and non-supportive. She moved into a bare one-bedroom apartment furnished with one queen-sized mattress, and one television set in the living room. Realising that her husband did not own two apartments as he had previously claimed, she also soon discovered, by accident, that he had lied about being his last year of an engineering program at a prominent BC university. Instead, he was in the process of obtaining a basic trades certificate at a local community college and worked as a cab driver on the weekends. She describes feeling "horribly deceived and betrayed." Since she was sponsored by her husband to stay in Canada, he was officially responsible for her financial support; however, he could barely make ends meet and any money he did earn would go towards their basic necessities and his entertainment. As a result, she was unable to continue her education, especially since she could not ask the government or associated agencies for any financial help.

³ *Khastegari* is the tradition of a formal marriage proposal whereby the man, accompanied by his family, calls upon the woman's family to ask for her hand in marriage. They are received warmly both by the woman and her family and are offered tea and sweets upon their arrival. If the couple is not well-known to each other, they are allowed to go out on a date. If the couple is known to each other and the woman accepts the formal marriage offer, planning and celebrations for the wedding begin.

Roxanna found out she was pregnant within six months of her arrival in Canada. While pregnant, she returned to Iran to visit her family and chose to remain there due to continued arguments with her husband in Canada. She gave birth to her first child while in Iran. However, despite her marital problems, she decided to move back to Canada when her daughter was seven months old for the sake of her family. She has since divorced her husband and is a single mother to two daughters, the elder of whom is now a teenager.

Farah

Farah is a young, previously married transwoman who came to Canada from Iran as a refugee via Turkey. She decided to leave Iran since life in Iran was hard for a transgendered person. She hoped to secure greater rights and freedom which is why she decided to flee to Turkey. She struggled with interacting freely and comfortably with people, and while her social life was better in Iran, she desired greater control of her own life on her own terms. She looked forward to having more opportunities in Canada. For Farah, life before her sex change was hard and life after her sex change was difficult. In Turkey, a transsexual woman is looked down upon, and as an unmarried transsexual woman, she's categorised as being of "poor character."

Farah met and married a man while living in Turkey, and he had accompanied her to the Canadian embassy at the time of her initial application for refugee status. While waiting to hear back about the status of her refugee application, she had to resort to sex work for survival due to the conditions placed on refugees living in Turkey⁴. Once her application was accepted, she received \$100 (CAD) a month to cover her basic needs; however, this amount was barely enough to feed oneself since the average price of bread at the time was \$4 (CAD). Facing increasing physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband, Farah went to the embassy and begged them to ensure that he could not follow her to Canada. She vividly recalls receiving no support from embassy officials who insisted they could not help her despite the fact that she was the principal applicant for refugee status. Furthermore, when she was informed about her final flight out of Turkey into Canada by an embassy representative, she was told that she had to show up for the flight, on time and with her husband, or her ticket would be revoked at her personal expense. Despite her pleas, she was given no explanation about why she needed to be accompanied by her husband in order to reach her final destination. She landed in Halifax, Nova Scotia before moving to Hamilton, Ontario with her husband. She finally left her husband and moved from Hamilton, Ontario, to move to Vancouver, British Columbia, for a "fresh start". She is currently divorced and receives financial assistance from welfare. She is also applying to colleges with some support from the local advocate to further her education opportunities in Canada.

Atoosa

Atoosa is a middle-aged, previously married single mother to two young sons. Atoosa never thought of leaving Iran. However, at a young age, she received an offer of marriage from her then-husband who came to her house for *khastegari* with his family. While her family suggested that she carefully consider the marriage proposal, she decided to go ahead with the wedding and follow her husband to Canada. Like Roxanna, Atoosa was sponsored by her husband and had a smooth immigration process to Canada; also like Roxanna, Atoosa discovered that her husband lied about his job, his education, and his living circumstances. Having been on the waitlist to enter design school in Iran, she believed she would be able to continue her education upon arriving in Canada. However, she quickly

⁴ The situation for non-European refugees in Turkey is bleak and has been the subject of recent criticism by Amnesty International (see Amnesty International, 2009; Helsinki Citizens Assembly & ORAM, 2009). Turkey is currently the most common destination for refugees fleeing from the Islamic Republic of Iran and, based on the experience and knowledge of the local advocate, its policies render non-Europeans, including Iranians, in particularly vulnerable and exploitative situations.

learned that her husband, who had previously claimed to be highly-educated with a well-paying job, was actually a high school student and dishwasher at a local restaurant.

While living in subsidised housing in Ottawa, Ontario, Atoosa bought a used sewing machine for \$25 and began working out of her home to earn some income. She estimates that she earned over \$4000 by mending and tailoring clothes for her neighbours. While trying to complete high school and raising her children, Atoosa sought out additional work opportunities and began selling products for the make-up company AVON. Not long after moving to Vancouver, she separated from her increasingly controlling and abusive husband. She took up a job working full-time at minimum wage - a salary that is not nearly enough to meet all her basic food, shelter, and childcare needs in a city that was recently ranked the most unaffordable housing market on the planet. She realised that working full-time at minimum wage did not provide her with financial security and created the emotional burden of being away from her children all day.

Bahar

Bahar is a young refugee with an infant son. As an unmarried, upper-middle class woman in Iran, she made the sudden decision to leave everything she knew after discovering that she was pregnant with her first child. Unable to bear the burden of an abortion, which was the wish of her child's father, and unwilling to bring shame to her family as the eldest unmarried and pregnant granddaughter, she wrote her parents a letter detailing that she was leaving Tehran without specifying any reasons. With only \$100, a pair of jeans and two t-shirts, she took a taxi to the airport the week that she discovered she was pregnant. Her parents rushed to the airport after becoming aware of the letter but were unable to get to her in time.

Leaving behind her beloved family, she arrived in Istanbul. She took a taxi and asked the driver to take her to the cheapest hotel he knew. After a sleepless night with only \$65 remaining, she found a nearby internet café and researched how to navigate the UN refugee system. Clutching her passport, which she was careful to protect since she had heard about trafficking and exploitation in Turkey, she travelled 4 ½ hours to Ankara without having anyone around with whom she could communicate. When she finally arrived at the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), she had to wait for 8 hours in the cold. Bahar considers herself fortunate to be allowed to stay in the refugee area, and received assistance from a Farsi-speaking lawyer who discussed her options with her. As a lonely, cold, and pregnant twenty-two year old girl with only \$15 to her name, Bahar was allowed to stay at the UNHCR hostel in Ankara. Despite needing to adjust to the poor conditions in the hostel, such as sharing one toilet and shower amongst everyone living therein, she befriended a Kurdish family from Iraq who were still patiently waiting for their application to be approved five years after putting it forward. Finally, with the help of a lawyer who she describes as a "foreigner and a feminist", she was able to successfully prepare for her interview.

Bahar is hesitant to revisit the five and a half months she spent in Ankara while waiting to leave Turkey for Canada. Without status, one cannot work; and without formal work, a young pregnant woman has few options to survive. After facing *badbakhti* or misfortune and not wanting to complain to the police about all the injustice she had experienced due to fear of a police report affecting her refugee application, she finally reached Vancouver in 2005. Still believing that she, her son and his father could be a family, she got married to her boyfriend over the phone. Despite his wealth, he is unwilling to move to Canada and leave his comfortable life in Tehran to join her until she is completely settled and with a good job. She has since asked her mother, who has only recently become aware of her grandchild, for funds to divorce her husband who she describes as *namard* (literally

“non-man”, implying cowardly). Currently, Bahar is working towards obtaining a healthcare-related diploma while raising her son.

Pariyeh

Pariyeh is a young mother who fled Iran at the tender age of seventeen due to severe religious discrimination. She asked to accompany her sister and her husband to Pakistan and then to the United States as a refugee. Although life was difficult and everyone worked long hours for small amounts of money, Pariyeh was thrilled to have left the school and society in which she was singled out for her religion. However, since all of them shared an extremely small apartment, Pariyeh hoped to save up enough money to move out and give her sister and brother-in-law some more privacy. In the meantime, Pariyeh received a marriage offer from a man who was significantly older in comparison. Since she had refused a potential suitor while living in Pakistan, she felt she had unnecessarily burdened her sister and brother-in-law who sacrificed a lot to help her leave Iran. Therefore, in order to afford them greater privacy, Pariyeh accepted the marriage proposal and moved out of the apartment.

Unfortunately, Pariyeh’s husband was physically abusive and within a few years, Pariyeh made the decision to leave her husband. At this time, she had already given birth to a daughter. While in the process of separating from her husband, Pariyeh fell in love with a man she met in an online chat room. She decided to go to Canada to be with him, never anticipating that she would experience significant immigration challenges. While their relationship was initially good, she soon realised that her partner was unable to work and was mentally and emotionally unstable. Still unsure about whether she wanted to marry him, Pariyeh describes feeling pressured by her sister and other relatives in America to get married because of the social taboo of living with one’s partner out of wedlock. After marriage, Pariyeh discovered she was pregnant with her second child. Having reasoned that they could barely make ends meet as it is, Pariyeh underwent an abortion with her husband’s consent. However, soon after, Pariyeh describes being physically and emotionally abused by her husband for having “killed their child.” She also talks at length about how her husband began to resent and abuse her daughter from her previous marriage.

She decided to leave Canada and return to the United States in order to protect her child. She experienced tremendous difficulties upon her return as she had left the country and attempted to return without a green card. She was informed that she should not leave the country until she gets her green card, and that if she decides to move to another country before receiving her green card, she would not be allowed to re-enter the country. After months of receiving harassing phone calls from her husband begging her to come back, she made the decision to move back to Vancouver - a decision she now describes as *khariat* (stupidity). She returned to a more abusive husband who has broken her finger, slammed her head into walls, beaten her so severely that she has been unable to move, and threatened her life. After giving birth to a second daughter, Pariyeh decided to leave her husband whom she fears greatly. However, in the process of trying to secure Canadian residency, an immigration official made an error in her paperwork that leaves her without documentation that allows her to apply for welfare benefits. She is currently living in a transition house with her daughters. However, she receives no government income assistance and is unable to legally apply for jobs. Consequently, she is in an extremely vulnerable situation and is often forced to put herself in precarious situations to earn money to feed her children.

Solmaz

Solmaz was sixteen years old when she became engaged to a man in Iran through a family arrangement. As a result of her engagement, Solmaz was forced to give up her education because of a high school policy that disallowed engaged or married women from attending school. As soon as she was married, Solmaz experienced intense physical abuse at the hands of her husband.

In 1997, and together with her husband and three year old son, she decided to leave Iran in order to avoid the continued discrimination they faced as ethnic minorities. She hoped to raise her son in a new country where she felt comfortable teaching him about his own culture. After applying for refugee status in Turkey through the UNHCR agency, Solmaz discovered she was pregnant with her second child. However, as a result of kicks and beatings she suffered at the hands of her husband, Solmaz experienced a miscarriage. She then got pregnant again and delivered a daughter at home and without a doctor since there was only one physician for everyone in the hostel. However, her child was born with a heart defect and other conditions as a result of the physical abuse experienced.

Solmaz and her family were accepted to enter either Canada or Sweden, and they chose Canada because of greater familiarity with the Latin script and the English language. After arriving in Vancouver, Solmaz decided to attend the free English as a Second Language (ESL) classes provided to all refugees; however, no financial provisions are made for daycare. Consequently, a settlement worker suggested that she stay at home and take care of her children instead of attending classes. Not realising that she has between two to five years to attend these courses for free, Solmaz decided it was more appropriate to take care of her children at that point. She had also delivered her third child soon after arriving in Canada. Unfortunately, her daughter's health was worsening and she finally passed away at the very young age of six in her mother's arms.

Solmaz experienced intense depression thereafter and was unable to access any counseling. She had also decided that she no longer wanted to be with her husband and called the police when he broke her nose in a physical assault. He was given a restraining order. In order to make ends meet, Solmaz went to the welfare office with her then 9 year old son. However, after three months, Solmaz was informed that she needed to find a job and would no longer be given any financial assistance. While Solmaz asked for ESL classes and skills training, she was provided a job placement as a dishwasher and cleaner at a local restaurant. The meager income she obtained was used to pay for her children's childcare when she was away at work in the evenings and after midnight. She realised after several months that she missed spending time with her children and that the income she earned was barely sufficient to make ends meet. She has since quit her job and is content with her decision to work from home and raise her children.

FINDINGS

The findings presented in this report should reflect the commonalities and diversity of female migrant and refugee experiences around the world. Several themes emerged over the research period, including the difficulties surrounding the immigration process for refugee applicants, the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, the gap between the participants' expectations and reality, and the labour-related, financial and social challenges of integration. These themes are described below and will be related back to the participants through the local advocate when discussing the outcomes of the research.

Loneliness and social isolation

*A window lavishing the tiny hands of loneliness
with the night's perfume from gentle stars.
A window through which one could invite
the sun for a visit to abandoned geraniums
(From "Window", Farrokhzad, 2007: 97)⁵*

Most of the women spoke about *ehsaas-e-tanhai* or loneliness, especially when they first arrived in Canada. In the context of our discussions, we came to discover that feelings of loneliness and social isolation are interchangeable. In addition to being separated from one's family, the participants who lived with their husbands in Canada faced abuse, violence and ever-increasing domination. This domination by their husbands contributed to the social isolation they felt. According to Atoosa, "*nobody was allowed to say hi to me but everything [my husband] did was okay.*" She goes on to describe the following incident that happened fairly soon after her arrival:

One day, as I was leaving the house to get groceries with my husband, a new Iranian neighbor said hello to me while I was standing in the doorway. I had said hi to him once before when my husband was not around. After I said hello back to him, my husband became very upset and said to the man, "you say hi to my wife but you don't say hi to me?" My husband was busy tying his shoelaces and thought the man was ignoring him when the hello was meant for both of us. Then, another time, when we were coming back and I was carrying heavy groceries in plastic bags, we were struggling to re-enter the apartment. The same neighbor walked by and said hello. The moment I said hello, my husband hit me in front of him and yelled and screamed to our neighbor that he would call the police on him. He said, "Okay, call the police" because he knew it was an empty threat. Gradually, even he stopped saying hi to me.

Atoosa discussed her inability to speak to anyone about her married life because she was worried - "*Would they tell everyone what was happening?*" She also kept the deception and the abuse a secret for 8 years before finally confiding in her family in Iran.

As a non-English speaking newcomer to the city, Roxanna relied on her husband for basic necessities which compounded her feelings of isolation. There was no telephone in the house for her to contact her family when she first arrived. When her husband finally bought a telephone for the house, it was only after stating that "*whoever has something*

⁵ Considered to be one of the greatest female poets in Persian literature, Forough Farrokhzad attracted as much acclaim as she did scorn for her uninhibited descriptions of her short-lived affairs with men. Towards the end of her brief life, she began to be recognized as one of the greatest modern poets of her time. Condemned as a "whore" by some and revered as an artiste extraordinaire by others, Forough Farrokhzad continues to stand as a symbol of strength, courage, talent, and hope for the ever-growing multitudes that remain touched by her poetry.

in their name has to pay for it." She was then forced to pay for the phone using the money that her aunt in the United States sent to her as a wedding gift. Roxanna estimates that the cost for calling Iran was around \$10-\$15 in 1991 for a few minutes of conversation, making it extremely difficult to keep in touch with one's family. Roxanna recounts a story, recaptured and paraphrased below, about her isolation and fear after moving:

Eight weeks after I came to Canada, my husband and I were invited to the house of one of his friends whom I am still close to. On the way to their house, my husband told me that he had to go to the police station to pay a fine for a traffic violation and that he would be out in a few minutes. After an hour, I was very cold, sitting in the car, crying and swearing. I heard a knock on the window and a big-built police officer told me to go home because my husband was being held in jail. He had told the police officer that he could not be detained because his wife was sitting alone outside. I could not speak English well and tried to explain to him that I could not go home because I did not know how. I asked him for more information about what was happening and was so distraught. The police officer told me that my husband would remain in the station until a judge came but he did not explain why all of this was happening. I asked the officer if I could see my husband and he told me it was not legal; but he was sympathetic to my plight and took me into the station so that I could at least be warm. I was shocked to see my husband behind bars and I could not understand how he could be arrested for a speeding ticket. I asked to call our friend whom we were on our way to visit and told him what was happening. I cried so much that my face looked like a pillow. Our friend came to the police station with his infant son and I went to sit in the car with the child while our friend spoke to the police. Eventually, our friend paid for his bail and my husband was released. I was so scared. I found out later that he was arrested for fraud.

Farah spoke about her difficulty adjusting to life in Canada when she first arrived and describes loneliness as her "biggest challenge." Although immigration officials were told she could continue her education while being a refugee, she declares, *"they did not speak about rights, only the barriers - not what you could do, just what you could not do."* Unable to bear the winter cold, she started to feel depressed as a result of the increasing abuse she faced at the hands of her husband. She speaks about an incident that remains vivid in her mind. It is summarized as follows:

I was always upset so I went to the consulate to talk about the abuse but they sent me to shelters. So I went to talk to the officials at the immigration office in Hamilton to ask about my rights and what I could do to leave him. The woman at the office was Iranian and I showed her where he hit me. She had such bad behavior. She told me I had no rights and that I needed to stop acting silly and return to my husband. I went outside and sat on the side of the road and cried and cried. Then my husband called me and said he was sorry for hitting me and came to pick me up. He bought me a dress to because he felt bad. He was nicer to me then than the woman at immigration.

Pariyeh held back tears as she recounted her decision to leave her family and job in the United States to move in with a mentally and emotionally unstable man. Despite the physical assaults that she had to endure on a regular basis, Pariyeh was unable to speak or confide in anyone about her domestic circumstances because having one unsuccessful marriage was enough of a burden to bear. Compounding her feelings of isolation was the fact that the physical abuse often happened in public and in front of neighbours and acquaintances who would not intervene in a domestic disturbance. As a result, Pariyeh

describes feeling extremely alone despite the fact that many individuals were aware of her situation.

Solmaz spoke about the tragedy of her daughter's death and how isolated she felt when trying to connect with physicians about her daughter's condition. Since her daughter was born in Turkey without access to proper medical care, Solmaz was unable to get a specific diagnosis for her child's heart trouble. Upon arriving in Vancouver, Solmaz took her daughter to a doctor in order to better understand her health issues. Since her English was poor, she was unable to grasp the specific details described by the doctor. She asked if he could bring in a translator to communicate with her. However, the doctor informed her that it was not his responsibility to hire a translator and that if she wanted, she could bring along a friend who could help translate. When she was finally able to ask someone to accompany her, this individual felt uncomfortable relaying potentially negative but extremely important details about the diagnosis. Further, and after her daughter's death, Solmaz was unable to access free grief counseling because of the language barrier. Additionally, she could not afford the \$170 to go to a private counselor who could speak Farsi. Unable to communicate effectively in English, Solmaz spoke at length about experiencing severe depression as a result of her isolation and grief.

Only Bahar differed in this regard. While she misses her family greatly, she was overjoyed at finally reaching Vancouver after several terrible months in Turkey. It was only in Turkey that she felt particularly isolated. She cries as she recalls an incident soon after she arrived in Canada, when an old couple offered her and her baby a seat on the bus. She describes being shocked at the generosity and kindness she received, without anyone looking at her or judging her for having a small child. She talks about sitting near the waterfront, holding her baby and crying tears of joy at finally reaching her destination.

Struggle

*O kind friend, if you visit my house,
Bring me a lamp, cut me a window,
So I can gaze at the swarming alley of the fortunate
(From "The Gift", Farrokhzad, 2007)*

In addition to facing marital struggles, all the participants experienced and continue to experience labour-related, financial and social struggles. Bahar struggled to find housing when she arrived in Canada, and then struggled to survive on welfare and child tax benefits (approximately \$800 per month). Her son was born premature and the cost of dried milk cost over \$45 a month. In order to ensure that they didn't go homeless, she only spent money on tea and toast for her first few months. A slender woman, she tells me that she had lost 13 kilograms in three months due to her diet and that it took her a while to regain the weight. She finally got work as a cashier and waitress at an Iranian restaurant, and did everything from dishwashing to cleaning to bookkeeping. She was paid under the table at less than minimum wage, sleeping only 2-3 hours a night after being on her feet all day. She and her son also lived in the basement of the home owned by the family who ran the restaurant and had to do all the housework for no pay. She described her situation as "nonstop work" where she would struggle to save her tips so that she would have enough to make ends meet and save for college. Despite all the work she did for the family that owned the restaurant, her pay was deducted if she ate more than one meal a day or if she took food from the home pantry to feed her son.

Struggling financially was the most predominant thread that weaved together all the women's stories. Farah continues to struggle on welfare, describing *bipooli* (poverty) as the "worst kind of pressure." She uses the verb *larzidan* or trembling to describe how she feels when confronted with monthly bills. With only \$620 from welfare - a significantly small amount to survive on in a city like Vancouver - she asks, "How am I supposed to pay for my [hormone] medications?" Her daily diet, she reveals, is *sibzamini va polo va goje* (rice, potatoes and a tomato) and describes fruits as a "luxury" she cannot indulge in. In addition to the barriers facing all professional and non-professional immigrant women, Farah is hard-pressed to find employment that is accepting of her status as a transwoman since she is constantly told that business clients may feel uncomfortable encountering someone who looks like a woman but still sounds like a man. When she was finally able to get a minimum-wage job, she was laid off because a few people would stand outside her place of employment to stare at her.

As a woman who has slipped through the cracks, Pariyeh does not receive any financial assistance from the government due to an error made by an immigration official in her paperwork. While she has managed to secure transitional housing for her family, she does not receive any provisions to buy food. Often, she spends entire weekends without meals, preferring to give the bulk of whatever she can scrape together to her children. Pariyeh is often forced to contact her abusive husband for money when she is in especially desperate circumstances.

Roxanna, Atoosa, and Solmaz faced similar challenges, struggling with underemployment in full-time minimum wage jobs that took them away from their children without providing any real, sustainable income for basic expenses. For Atoosa, working full-time in a school cafeteria at minimum wage was not a feasible option. She would be exhausted after being on her feet all day and would have to pay almost her entire paycheck after tax just for childcare. Since funding issues at job placement centers are often dependent on how many "successful" placements job advisors locate, Solmaz was hastily placed in a position that offered her no specific skills training or opportunities. As a dishwasher and restaurant cleaner who was forced to work into the early morning, Solmaz spent virtually no time with her children. Further, any money she earned from her job was spent to hire babysitters to pick up her children from school and take care of them until she got home. For Roxanna, finding a job that matched her Iranian qualifications was difficult, and like Atoosa, Roxanna was aware of the "trap" of a single-mother working a full-time job at minimum wage:

You work all day when you have children at home. You are separated from them and then you have to pay the babysitter. What does this do for a single mother?

Due to her predicament, she was forced to live in a dingy basement with her daughters after her divorce, a situation she describes as "depressing."

Socially, all the women faced different struggles related to their resettlement and integration in Canada. Atoosa holds back tears as she describes the following story:

I was three months pregnant with my second son and I did not know it. I was sitting in the car with my husband and we started arguing. He reached over to try to slap me and I defended myself by covering my face, like this. I had long nails and I scratched him by accident. He got enraged and drove to the police station telling them that I was violent with him. I started crying, thinking about how he was reversing the roles to the police. They put me in a cell, with an iron bed and no mattress. I kept crying out, ey khoda, inja kojast? (Oh God, where is this place?) I can't remember this incident without horror. They gave me food but I

flushed it down the toilet and did not want to think about it. I was there from 10am to 10pm. When I could barely stand up, I realised that I could be pregnant and I told the police officer. Laughing, he turned around and said, "How long have you been pregnant for?" When he was writing the police report, he took a long time and he turned around and asked me if I wanted a lawyer. I did not know the system in this country and told him that I can explain what happened to him without a lawyer. He then told me that I should ask for a lawyer. He was already taking his side of the story. I cried so much because they believed him. At that time, his English was better than mine. When I walked into the room, I realised that I had no chance. They had already heard his side of the story and sided with him. I could not afford a lawyer and called Legal Aid. By the time I got to call them, it was 10pm and there was no one on the other line. I managed to get a lawyer to come by in the end who advised me not to say anything. They took my fingerprints, my mugshot, and pronounced me guilty. Fortunately, my ex-husband dropped the case so I do not have any criminal record; but because of this incident, I had no right to go within a certain distance of my home for 2 months before he dropped the case, but he would still call me to come and pick up our son to take care of him. He wasn't even willing to take care of his own child. My neighbor later told me that he tried to seduce her and that he was trying to bring women to the house.

She believes the police need to tend to the needs of immigrant women but are not trained to do so.

Resilience

*In a room the size of loneliness,
My heart's the size of love.
It contemplates its simple pretexts for happiness:
The beauty of the flowers' willing in a vase,
the sapling you planted in our garden,
And the canaries' song - the size of a window
(From "Reborn", Farrokhzad, 2007: 79)*

While their lives were complex and filled with challenges, each woman exercised agency in their own way. They are able to see beyond their challenges by aiming to improve their own situations.

Bahar experienced severe trauma, suddenly uprooting her comfortable life in Iran for the squalor of a refugee hostel in Turkey. Unwilling to abort her child, she endured abuse while waiting for her refugee status to be approved and had to survive in the informal workforce in Ankara as a young, lonely pregnant woman. Despite the extreme challenges she faced, she persevered until she reached Vancouver. Willing to take on any job, she continued to face her struggles as best as she could to make ends meet for her and her son while trying to start a savings fund. In addition to the exploitative situation described above, she heard that a local construction company was looking for workers. Despite his hesitation about having a young, single mother working in a dangerous construction environment, she convinced the owner of a demolition/construction company to give her a job painting the fences. After a serious work-related accident forced her to quit this job, she started applying to local colleges to earn a diploma in order to get a stable job with a steady flow of income.

After Roxanna returned to Iran after becoming pregnant with her first daughter, she would wake up and leave the house with her father at 6am and work until 10pm in order to pay the bills. Even though her ex-husband would not send any money for her and their newborn child, she worked extremely hard to pay her bills and save some money. While she ended up returning to Canada in seven months “because [her] daughter would cry for her father”, she had the strength to divorce him and build a better life for her children. So far, she is working for a local company and looks forward to her eldest daughter going off to university.

Atoosa was determined to work hard from the day she landed in Canada. Although she does not have a degree, Atoosa does not see it as a significant barrier since she believes that a person can make a decent living if they are resourceful and willing to work hard. While the financial challenges she faces as an immigrant woman are significant, she is unwilling to deny her children costly extra-curricular activities enjoyed by their peers, like karate and art classes, because she sees such engagements as character-building and positive for her children. At the time of the interview, Atoosa’s take-home salary is \$1200 a month. Coupled with her child tax benefit, she not only manages to pay off her \$1480 in monthly needs (rent, food, car insurance and childcare) by working overtime, she also manages to put away \$125 a month in education savings for her children. She also describes the strength it took to divorce her husband, and the positive impact the divorce has had on her oldest son who has become calmer and happier.

Both Pariyeh and Solmaz experienced tremendous grief, loss and abuse in their married lives but had the courage to leave their abusive situations despite the financial difficulties of separation. Determined to provide safe environments for their children, both participants remain unwilling to resign themselves to their unfortunate situations. Similarly, Farah escaped her abusive husband and moved to a completely new city in spite of the challenges. While Farah continues to struggle, she is constantly searching for employment opportunities and was recently accepted into the makeup artistry program of a local college. Although she has faced difficult and challenging situations with shared accommodations, due to the stigma she faces as a transwoman, she is unwilling to leave Canada and is determined to carve out a life for herself.

Resolve

*Speak to me.
From the sanctuary of my window
I am intimate with the sun
(From “Window”, Farrokhzad, 2007: 99)*

In this theme, we have collated the participants’ responses about what actions they felt needed to be taken to improve their lives with the strength and resolve they continue to display despite their challenges. For Roxanna, staying in Canada after giving birth to her second child made the most sense. She had no savings to go back to Iran and her oldest daughter had already started school in Vancouver. She decidedly states that she does not want *zamin* (land), *farsh* (Persian carpets), or *tala* (gold); her biggest desire is to get the banks to approve her mortgage so that she can get a house and finally “be settled.” While she is currently working for a little over minimum wage in a job she describes as “hard,” she is determined to pursue it. She is also willing to take on a second job in retail over the weekends in order to obtain a mortgage and help her daughter through university.

Since welfare has closed her file because her son has reached a certain age, Bahar has had to take out a student loan to cover her education expenses. Her loan is \$15,000 but her

tuition and textbook fees amounts to \$11,000. The remaining \$4000 is spread out over the duration of the school year (8 months), which leaves her almost no money for basic monthly expenses. The government gives her \$500 a month plus the child tax benefit, but she has to top up at least \$300 a month for daycare, rent, food for her child, and transportation, with whatever remaining funds going towards her own food. Despite feeling “stuck”, she is determined to finish her course because she knows that she will be able to get a “respectable” job at the end of it. She chose her current field of education because it offers stability, which is something she is resolved to give her son. At the time of the interview, she was looking for a roommate to help reduce her monthly rent in order to help her fund her education. She also works odd jobs, including cleaning peoples’ houses, for extra money.

In addition to being in a job she likes and getting a good boyfriend, Farah desires to finish studying and start working so that she no longer trembles when she sees a bill. Although Farah was able to get into a local community college for make-up artistry, she revealed during the interview that she wanted to go into programs that would help her become a counselor for other transgendered immigrants. As she tells us, *“I understand the pain that they feel and I still feel it. I know I can help.”*

Finally, in recent years, Atoosa has managed to secure a mortgage after proving to the bank that she is able to pay off her monthly amount. Her goals are to get into a part-time Digital Arts or Interior Design program at a local college so that she can get better work and more “social recognition”. However, she talked at length about the difficulties in trying to go back to school with two young children and a low-paying job, and asks, “How can you study when you have no money?” She mentions how she routinely speaks to her friends, recent immigrants from Iran, to encourage them to go to school especially when they don’t have children. There are barriers for migrant women, she argues, but those barriers can be broken. In addition to wanting increased child support payments, she describes what she believes to be the best action for immigrant women:

“Pass the success stories forward so that they don’t feel like they can’t get out of their situation.”

Considerations

The following considerations are important to bear in mind. First, and as a result of our decision not to tape-record the interviews, we were not able to sufficiently capture everything that was said. Nonetheless, both researchers were able to take down quick and detailed notes about the stories, scenarios, and expressions highlighted by the women. Second, my inability to follow up with this hard-to-reach population through member checks does not allow for further participant input in checking the findings for accuracy. The local advocate, however, was able to look over the material to verify what has been extracted. Overall, we believe that the findings of this study provide interesting insights into the complexities of gendered immigration and resettlement.

RESEARCHER'S REFLECTIONS⁶

Researcher's social location

The experience of listening to these stories was striking in a number of ways. First, I was entirely struck by my own ignorance about the significant challenges, financial and otherwise, experienced by the participants. All of the participants were extremely well-dressed and well-kept - women that I would have automatically assumed were well-settled in Canada as part of the middle to upper-middle class. I am part-Iranian and my own parents struggled to resettle in Canada when I was a teenager. However, unlike the women I spoke with, they moved here relatively later on in their lives and long after they were able to accrue enough money for a comfortable retirement. While in Canada, my parents had to adjust to the winters, the loneliness when compared to where they used to live since their social circle was not as large, and the barriers to employment due to "lack of Canadian education and experience." They eventually decided that they needed work that would keep them busy and allow them to keep their retirement savings relatively intact. As a result, and despite having long and well-established professional careers, they accepted jobs that were neither worthy of their international experience nor professional skills. However, and I am ashamed to admit, I had never really considered the degree, diversity, and range of experiences faced by immigrant and refugee Iranian women.

Secondly, I was struck by the indifference to migration expressed by Atoosa and Roxanna, both of whom were sponsored by their husbands. My own biases had initially led me to believe that these women, like most other Iranians who are not part of the extreme elite in the Islamic republic, would seize any opportunity to move to a different country with greater respect for human rights and opportunities. Indeed, all my previously-known peers who were born and raised in Iran could not wait to leave the repressive, oppressive and tyrannical regime currently in place. Although it is completely reasonable to expect that one would want to remain in their home country surrounded by their loved ones, I was a little surprised that the women had no initial desire to move to Canada, especially given the great lengths that many refugees go to in order to exit the country. It is, however, important to note that Atoosa and Roxanna no longer want to move back to Iran since their kids are Canadian and their lives would come under the scrutiny of the neighborhoods they lived in as a result of their status as divorced single mothers.

Thirdly, I was completely oblivious to the challenges facing non-European refugees in Turkey. While I was not ignorant to the fact that many Iranians flee Iran through Turkey, often under the most severe circumstances, I was entirely unaware of the harsh and unspeakable circumstances they face. Through the course of this research, I have come to learn that Turkey is the only country in the world that makes a distinction between European and non-European refugees, with the UNHCR responsible for the latter group. While there are UN hostels for refugee applicants, waiting times average years, not months; and forced to survive by any means possible, conditions endured by refugees render them extremely vulnerable as easy targets for exploitation.

Finally, I was made aware of how many things I, as an English-speaking Canadian with a post-graduate education, take for granted. From getting an education and accessing jobs, to being able to live a life free of violence and constant struggle, I am fortunate enough to know my own rights and defend them without any real fear of prosecution or censure. The actions women talked about were simple pushes in the right direction. I was left thinking about how they needed just a little helping hand to even out the reintegration playing field - they would manage the rest themselves. I have learned a tremendous amount about

⁶ This section is written by Noushin K. and details her reflections on the research process.

courage and determination from these women who, in spite all of the challenges described above, have the strength and resolve to secure a promising future for themselves and their children in Canada.

The challenges of doing FPAR in this context

By blending together critical feminist theory and participatory action research, FPAR embodies a *“conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women’s multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action, while confronting the underlying assumptions researchers bring into the research process”* (Langan & Morton, 2009: 167). While FPAR provides a detailed and appropriate methodology for such research, the realities of conducting FPAR in a highly-sensitive environment around taboo issues poses significant challenges, some of which were especially unexpected. Specifically, coordinating interviews on extremely short notice and to the benefit of participants can be especially difficult in terms of organising resources, establishing trusted relationships, and building upon existing relationships. Furthermore, in our context, conducting this kind of research would have been virtually impossible had it not been for the local advocate who could vouch for the sincerity of the research methodology being used. In order to better contextualize our discussion, we return to the guiding principles described in the beginning of this report.

Challenges were experienced in four out of the five guiding principles:

Inclusion: Despite being a collaborative process that stresses the inclusion of participants throughout the research process, the participants in this study could not be directly involved in developing the interview guide. As a hard-to-reach population who were unknown to one another, the prospect of gathering the group together for collective action was logistically unfeasible. Nonetheless, despite these difficulties, I developed the interview guide with supervision from the local advocate and took measures to ensure that the interview questions were available prior to the interviews so that the women could think and speak about their experiences on their own terms. We also made sure we were available at any time during the week for interviews to better coordinate the research for participants. We also provided an honorarium that included the cost of transportation and childcare (if appropriate) to help facilitate participant inclusion.

Participation and collaboration among research participants was not pursued to ensure the safety and security of the women involved. Prior to the start of this research, we were aware that many of the women who were previously known to one another had some unfortunate encounters with the law. Specifically, and as a result of police raids in the past, it was not safe for us to bring the group together at this time. In previous occasions when networks were formed, women were able to give up names of others who solicited sex out of their apartments for survival under the legal threat of having their children removed from their home.

Commitment to collective action and social change proved challenging since getting all the women together to discuss their needs as a group was neither safe nor logistically feasible. Furthermore, and despite the distinct challenges faced by each woman, the taboo nature of the topics discussed would likely aggravate the discomfort felt by the participants who may cross paths in the community in the near future. By collating current literature on the struggles of immigrant women in Canada with the context-specific factors relevant to the improvement of the participants’ lives, we are able to make broader recommendations for collective action aimed at social change. While this situation is not ideal, we are confident that our recommendations reflect participant perspectives of relevant and necessary individual and collective action.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*I will put my hands in the
garden soil -
I will sprout,
I know, I know, I know.
And in the hollow of my ink-
stained palms
Swallows will make their nest
(From "Reborn", Farrokhzad, 2007: 81)*

The common underlying themes that weave together all the stories are largely common themes of loneliness, social isolation, and continued financial struggle rendering immigrant Iranian women structurally and socially vulnerable. However, amidst all the barriers they face, these women continue to be resilient and steadfast in their determination to carve out promising lives for themselves in Canada. Furthermore, the needs of refugee women need to be kept in mind since women are extremely vulnerable to the violence and abuse that occurs both in flight and in temporary settlement areas near their country of origin. As Boyd & Pikkov (2005:13) note, *"women who are single heads of family, or whose adult male relatives are unable to support them, are at risk of expulsion, refoulement (forcible return), sexual harassment, rape, torture, prostitution, and other forms of exploitation."*

However, together with an analysis of the literature and participant suggestions, we propose the following broad-based and higher-level recommendations. We believe that these recommendations can help to better understand the needs and recognise the fundamental human rights of immigrant and refugee women in Canada:

- Government investment in the training of front-line immigration officials and police officers about the language, economic, and social barriers faced by immigrant and, especially, refugee women;
- Assistance from refugee and immigration services in finding suitable, safe and temporary housing as well as assistance navigating the immigration system;
- Creation of a well-funded child care strategy that would provide safe, low-cost care for newcomers to Canada as well as all resident and citizens (Suto, 2009);
- Provision of local, integrated services including the creation of funded post-secondary programs to assist immigrant women with their continuing education. These programs should have a childcare option so that the women can focus on their education without having the added burden of worrying about their children;
- Reconsideration of current welfare and child-benefit policies, especially in a city like Vancouver, where the cost of living is substantial;
- Provision of free ESL classes, job search, job training and employment assistance programs that acknowledge and match the skills and abilities of women with Canadian employers as part of a recent immigrant work integration programme.

REFERENCES

- Acker, J., Barrym, K., & Esseveld, J. (1983). Objectivity and truth: Problems in doing feminist research. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6, 423-435.
- Amnesty International. (2009). *Stranded: Refugees in Turkey denied protection*. London: Amnesty International Publications. Available online at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR44/001/2009/en/0f217291-cae8-4093-bda9-485588e245d8/eur440012009en.pdf>
- Boyd, M. & Pikkov, D. (2005). Gendering migration, livelihood and entitlements: Migrant women in Canada and the United States. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Available online at: [http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpPublications\)/51123BF9358511BEC1256FEF00372244?OpenDocument](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpPublications)/51123BF9358511BEC1256FEF00372244?OpenDocument)
- Dossa, P. (2002). Narrative mediation of conventional and new "mental health" paradigms: Reading the stories of immigrant Iranian women. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 16, 341-359.
- Farrokhzad, F. (2007). *Sin: Selected poems of Forough Farrokhzad*. Trans. S Wolpé. Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press.
- Fletcher, F. (2006). Full participation in Canadian society continues to be a challenge for immigrant women. Presentation to the Work & Learning Network Conference at the University of Alberta. Available online at: http://www.wln.ualberta.ca/papersconf_06/Fletcher_conf.pdf
- Garousi, V. (2005). Iranians in Canada: A statistical Analysis. Available online at: <http://canadianiranian.com/archive/IraniansCanada.pdf>
- Helsinki Citizens' Assembly and Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (ORAM). (2009). *Unsafe haven: The security challenges facing lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender asylum seekers & refugees in Turkey*. Available online at: <http://oraminternational.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Unsafe%20Haven%20Final.pdf>
- Jackson, W. (2003). *Methods: Doing Social Research* 3rd ed. Toronto, ON: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Lalani, R. & Lalani, R. (n.d.). Tehran to North Vancouver. Available online at: <http://www.canadianimmigrant.ca/culture/article/493>
- Langan, D. & Morton, M. (2009). Reflecting on community/academic "collaboration": The challenge of "doing" feminist participatory action research. *Action Research*, 7, 165-184.
- Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, British Columbia. (2008). Labour Market and Immigration Division: BC Immigration Trends, 2008 Highlights. Fact Sheet. Available online at: <http://www.welcomebc.ca/shared/docs/communities/immigrationtrends2008.pdf>
- Moghissi, H. (2003). Away from home: Iranian women, displacement cultural resistance and change. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 30, 207-217.
- Oakley, A. (1988). Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing feminist research* (pp.-30-61). New York: Routledge
- Oreopoulous, P. (2009). Why do skilled immigrants struggle in the labor market? A field experiment with six thousand résumés. Research on Immigration and Diversity in Metropolis British Columbia. Working Paper Series 09-03.

- Reid, C, Tom, A.. & Frisby, W. (2006). Finding "action" in feminist participatory action research. *Action Research*, 4, 315-332.
- Reid, C. (2004). Advancing women's social justice agendas: A feminist action research framework. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3, 1-22.
- Shahidian, H. (1999). Gender and sexuality among immigrant Iranians in Canada. *Sexualities*, 2, 189-222.
- Suto, M. (2009). Compromised careers: The occupational transition of immigration and resettlement. *Work*, 32, 417-429.
- Swanton, D. (2005). Iranians in Vancouver: 'Legible people'/irredeemable others/migrant stories. Research on Immigration and Diversity in Metropolis British Columbia. Working Paper Series 05-21.
- VanderPlaat, M. (2007). Integration outcomes for immigrant women in Canada: A review of the literature 2000-2007. The Atlantic Metropolis Centre. Working Paper 8-2007.

APPENDIX 1: Participant information and consent form⁷

Study: GAATW Feminist Action Research Project

The following consent form will provide information about the study being conducted, explain why the research is being done, and provide you with details regarding your participation. Please read this information carefully. Should you have any concerns, please contact Noushin <full name provided> at <email address provided>

1. **INTRODUCTION:** You are being invited to participate in this study because you are an immigrant or migrant woman in Canada.
2. **YOUR PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY:** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained to ensure that your rights are/will not be violated as a result of anything said in this study.
3. **WHO IS CONDUCTING AND FUNDING THE STUDY?** Two researchers will be conducting this study with support and funding from the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW).
4. **STUDY PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to document your immigration experience prior to coming to Canada, the challenges you have faced (if any) post-immigration, and what action you believe needs to be taken in order to improve the lives of immigrant women settling in Canada. We hope to create some action based on your suggestions to help improve the lives of immigrant women in Canada.
5. **WHAT DOES THE STUDY INVOLVE?** The study involves participating in in-depth but confidential interviews. Each interview will take approximately 1-1.5 hours to complete.
6. **POSSIBLE HARMS OF PARTICIPATING:** None. Individual answers are confidential and anonymity will be maintained if requested.
7. **BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING:** Participants will receive remuneration for participation in the study, and every effort will be made to reimburse transportation and childcare costs if needed. We hope that the ultimate aim of the study will lead to action both at the individual level, to improve the lives of participants in this study, as well as at a systemic level in order to improve the social, economic, and financial situation of immigrant women in Canada.
8. **WHAT HAPPENS IF I DECIDE TO WITHDRAW MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE?** Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason(s) for your decision.
9. **STUDY COMPLETION:** Upon the completion of this study, you will receive compensation for time spent during the study. Additionally, you will receive a draft of the report document and together, we will work collectively to finalize it.

⁷ The following consent form has been modified from the original and certain identifying pieces of information have been excluded.

10. COST OF PARTICIPATION: You will incur no costs as a result of participation other than the time to participate in the interviews.

11. CONFIDENTIALITY: All data will be automatically separated from any identifying information and assigned a unique study ID. The data will be kept in a confidential folder and only the research team will have access to this list.

12. WHO DO I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT MY PARTICIPATION? If you have any questions, concerns, or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Noushin <full name provided> at <email address provided> or Fereshteh <full name provided> at <email address provided>

13. PARTICIPANT CONSENT:

I have read and understood the information about this study provided above. I have had sufficient time to consider the information provided and to ask for advice if necessary. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have had satisfactory responses to my questions. I understand that all of the information collected will be kept confidential and that study findings will only be used for research objectives. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am completely free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from this study at any time without changing in any way my current position. I have read this form and I freely consent to participate in this study.

Please choose one option below:

I agree

I do not agree

APPENDIX 2:

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Pari

Pari is a young transwoman who was forced to undergo a sex change operation in Iran. In addition to experiencing tremendous physical abuse at the hands of her family, Pari faced severe social and economic discrimination. Unable to find employment in Iran because of her appearance and voice, she fled the country to find refuge through the UNHCR system in Turkey. She describes her time in Turkey as “very scary” due to the widespread mistreatment faced by transgendered and transsexual people at the hands of the police. Her application for refugee status was finally accepted by Canada in 2003.

Pari hoped that coming to Canada would offer her a fresh start and enable her to live a safe and self-sufficient life free of discrimination and judgment. Specifically, Pari dreamed about opening her own beauty salon. Upon her arrival into the country, she enrolled in free English as a Second Language (ESL) classes provided to incoming refugees. She also completed high school courses up until Grade 11 to help her better settle and integrate in her adopted country. However, as a refugee claimant with specific barriers to employment, Pari was only eligible to receive governmental income assistance for two years after her arrival. As a result, and without higher levels of Canadian education and work experience, she found it very difficult to financially support herself. Furthermore, while her settlement worker was very culturally-sensitive, she was not trained or educated on how to work with transgendered individuals. Pari recounts being asked what her genitalia looked like after her sex change operation, and how she intends on ever getting married and being a good wife to her husband.

Facing difficulties in securing employment due to her gender, Pari began working in a massage parlour to support herself. Currently, she is unable to secure a bank loan to start her own business due to her irregular paychecks and work history. She would like to government to provide her with financial support to continue her education and finish her hair design diploma. She would also like employment placement assistance in a beauty salon so that she can begin to earn a regular income and eventually qualify for a bank loan. At this time, however, she describes feeling discontent with her situation, especially since she had very different hopes and expectations of how her life would be in Canada.

Monia

As a widow in Iran with a young child, Monia was forced to live with her brother as a result of severe financial restraints and conservative social values. In a traditionalist society that frowns upon widows, Monia’s brother hoped that she would be remarried to a man looking for a second wife. Thus, he disallowed her from pursuing further education opportunities and spending any time out of the house should it negatively impact her chances of remarriage. Monia knew that she needed to leave Iran in order to secure her financial freedom, pursue educational and work opportunities, and realise her dreams of securing a better life for her and her son. Further, since Islamic law customarily places children with their father or their father’s family in cases of divorce or death, Monia was keenly aware that she could be forced to give up her son to her husband’s family at any given time.

Therefore, in order to “live as a human being”, she made the decision to move to Pakistan in 1996 and apply to come to Canada as a refugee through the UNHCR. She stayed in Pakistan for three years before finally moving to Canada in 1999. Monia describes her

immigration process as being particularly difficult, especially since the UNHCR was only accepting political refugees during the time of her application. Since she did not apply as a political refugee, her application was on hold for 18 months before finally being rejected. In the meantime, Monia was homeless and endured two brutal rapes, the second of which was so violent that she had to be hospitalised. She then left for India and reapplied as a political refugee without providing any details about her stay in Pakistan.

Monia describes facing serious challenges upon her arriving in Canada. Specifically, she describes having few opportunities to fully settle into her new environment and struggled to find affordable housing in Vancouver. She would regularly use part of her food allowance to pay for rent, leaving little money buy food for her and her child. As a result, her son would often ask classmates for food and eventually, the Ministry of Children and Family Development was informed that a student was potentially underfed. After being visited by representatives of the Ministry, Monia made the difficult decision to quit her ESL classes and look for full-time employment that would enable her to pay the rent and provide enough food for her family. She began to clean houses full-time and was able to make ends meet. However, after three years of working as a cleaner, Monia developed severe allergies to the cleaning products she had to use on a daily basis and was forced to change her profession.

Despite the challenges she continues to face, Monia will not go back to Iran since she believes she would be treated like a “second class citizen” with no rights; additionally, her son refuses to leave Canada. Monia is unhappy with her current situation as she feels isolated and discriminated against. She also longs for a friend in the Iranian community with whom she can communicate with. Monia hopes to get full-time employment as a payroll administrator which will help her purchase a two-bedroom apartment, go to yoga classes, and buy fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. She is also determined to send her son to university so that he has ample opportunities to create a stable and secure life for himself in the near future.

Adile

Adile came to Canada in September 2000 after being sponsored by her husband. He was 18 years older than her, had lived in Canada for over fourteen years, and had a steady, well-paying job with over \$300,000 in his bank account. Adile describes her immigration process as being smooth and easy, taking eleven months overall from start to finish.

Although she was an experienced high school teacher in Iran, Adile was aware that she may not be able to work in the same capacity in Canada. However, she was looking forward to settling down with her husband and starting a family. Once she arrived, she discovered that her husband was regularly unfaithful and was engaged in a steady affair with his secretary. She was also surprised to learn that her husband was unwilling to let her pursue ESL classes and that he reinforced patriarchal beliefs about how a “good wife” should focus on creating a family, raising children, and maintaining a household. Adile also describes her husband as being abusive. She recalls one incident where she informed her family doctor of the domestic abuse she suffered, but that this doctor ignored her pleas because he was friends with her husband. She also vividly remembers having to go to the hospital for stitches after her husband threw a coffee mug at her. It was at this hospital that she was able to speak with a social worker who informed her of a well-known Turkish advocate who could assist her.

After contacting this worker with whom she could freely communicate in her own language, Adile realized that she would have to re-apply for refugee or humanitarian status should she divorce her husband and break the terms of her sponsored immigration.

Uncertain about whether her application would be accepted and fearing deportation, Adile made the difficult decision to stay with her abusive husband and raise her two year-old twins. However, after a while and facing increasing physical abuse, Adile took her children and left the relationship. Since she was not eligible for income assistance due to her sponsored immigration status, Adile sought out any possible opportunities that would enable her to pay for rent and food.

Although Adile longs to return to her country with her children, she is unable to do so legally. Her husband was able to hire a good lawyer who secured an order to ensure that she cannot take her children out of the province without her husband's explicit permission. To date, her husband refuses to allow Adile to leave the country with their children. Her only remaining option is to leave the children in her husband's care and return to her family; however, as Adile notes, she does not trust her husband to be a good father to their children. So far, he has not visited the children on their birthdays and special occasions and is regularly late in providing child support payments despite his wealth. Adile describes her situation as a difficult one and wishes that the courts would seriously consider her husband's lack of attachment to his children and grant them permission to return to Turkey.

Mahnaz

Mahnaz is a young transwoman who came to Canada in 2006. According to Mahnaz, she knew she was transgendered from a very young age and had serious difficulty accepting her male body since she was three years old. Although she was free to express herself as a girl in front of her extremely religious family, she was disallowed from gaining employment in Tehran by the Iranian government until she underwent a sex change operation.

Uncomfortable and wary of undergoing a sex change, she left Iran for Turkey in order to avoid being forced into surgery. While waiting for her application to be accepted by the UNHCR, Mahnaz describes being brutally abused by the police in Turkey. In addition to the trauma she experienced, Mahnaz was forced to share accommodation with six other males due to the severe financial restraints experienced by refugees in Turkey and because no women were willing to accept her as a female roommate. She describes the 24 months she spent in Turkey as the darkest time she has ever experienced.

Once she arrived in Canada, Mahnaz was given financial assistance by the federal government. However, because she was unwilling to share accommodation based on her traumatic experiences in Turkey, all of her income went directly to her monthly rent. In order to provide for her basic expenses, Mahnaz began working under the table at a local grocery store. Mahnaz was willing to work under the table because any reported income would result in decreased financial support from the government and, consequently, would pose serious financial challenges and insecurity. One day at work, an Iranian man physically assaulted her for looking like a man and sounding like a man but "not acting like a real man." Mahnaz called the police for protection; however, as a result of this incident, the government became aware of her employment and revoked any previously allotted financial assistance.

Mahnaz was forced to look for full-time work opportunities that would enable her to survive on a basic salary. Unfortunately, since her English language skills were not very developed and she had no Canadian experience or education, she was unable to get a job that provided her with the minimum \$900 per month she needed to survive. Mahnaz describes the gap between her expectations and realities related to immigration. She had previously thought that living in Canada would enable her to go about her daily life as a

woman without significant prejudice and that she would be able to land a stable full-time job that pays at least minimum wage. However, within her first year in Vancouver, she realised that her expectations of life in Canada were “just a dream.” She received no help or support from the settlement workers who could not understand why she refuses to share rental accommodation.

However, Mahnaz emphasises that she does not want to return to Iran since *“living in Iran is not an option for a transgendered woman.”* She wants to stay in Canada where she can wear makeup, dress like a real woman and sit on public transit without any real fear of ridicule or assault. Although she describes being content with her situation, she is generally unhappy with her lifestyle as she feels that her wish to get married and have a loving husband is nothing more than a dream. She is also disheartened by the difficulties she faces in securing full-time employment as a transgendered woman who is not fluent in English. She hopes to complete a college diploma to become a social worker for immigrant transgender women but feels that even getting her high school degree is an increasingly unfeasible goal at this time. Mahnaz hopes to be able to afford an apartment in downtown Vancouver where she can be close to the transgendered Iranian community. However, with an extremely low monthly income of \$750, she cannot afford to rent an apartment in the area. Nonetheless, she is determined to improve her situation and is currently taking courses on social work at a local college.

Zaynab

Zaynab moved to Canada with her husband and two children in 2001, and gave birth to her third child in 2003. A year later, her husband passed away due to cancer and she was left with over \$17,000 in debt. She began working full-time at a store, and between 2005 and 2006, she received some income assistance to subsidize her daycare costs. However, after working at this job for a year, the store closed down. Zaynab failed to notify her daycare subsidy providers about her unemployment since she needed daycare services for her youngest child as she actively sought out employment opportunities. After six months of being on employment insurance, which provides temporary financial assistance for unemployed Canadians seeking work or opportunities to upgrade their skills, Zaynab could not find a job. Furthermore, she was no longer provided with a daycare subsidy as punishment for her failure to report her unemployment status in a timely manner. As a result, she was unable to get training to upgrade her skills as she had to look after her youngest child.

Upon completion of her employment insurance term, Zaynab decided to work out of her home in order to pay for rent and food. She describes being content with her current situation as she is able to spend time with her children while being able to provide for their basic needs. She would like to continue to staying in Canada until all her children are old enough to attend university, and would like the government to provide her with subsidized housing and daycare as well as training to upgrade her skills in the formal employment sector.

Hamideh

Hamideh came to Canada as a refugee through Turkey in 2007. She describes the process as being extremely challenging as she had to undergo stringent FBI security checks and provide her fingerprints from different US states. Although everything was in order, Hamideh was disillusioned by how long the process took for her application to finally go through. Although she has a work permit, she could not afford to pay her rent and medical expenses with the part-time job she was able to get working at minimum wage. As a result, she ended up working for herself in order to pay for her rent, medical expenses,

and food. Although Hamideh is not happy with her current situation and would like to change her job in the near future, she cannot go back Iran as she was a political prisoner and endured great suffering at the hands of the government. She would like to get her permanent residency as soon as possible so that she can go to college and find a career for herself.

Raheleh

Raheleh is a middle-aged Iranian woman who came to Canada from Iran after getting married in 2006. She was sponsored by her husband who was already based in Canada. Overall, her immigration process to come into Canada took approximately 9 months and was relatively smooth. However, it took her almost 4 years to become a permanent resident after her arrival into the country.

During these years, she was at the mercy of her dominating and controlling husband who could easily have stopped being her sponsor in the immigration and citizenship process. She describes being barred from making friends and leaving the house on her own. She was also forbidden to join any English classes to improve her language skills. The only time she was able to leave the house was when she went grocery shopping with her husband on the weekends. Raheleh bore three children in the short span of five years because her husband wanted a family. In 2006, her husband left to go to Iran and never came back.

She later discovered that he had claimed bankruptcy as a result of the large debts that he owed, and returned to Iran with a young Canadian girl as his companion. She was now alone in a foreign country and decided that she would raise her child on her own. Raheleh received income assistance for almost a year; however, when she got a very bad toothache and required some dental work, welfare would not cover her expenses. As a result, and given her situation, she decided to work out of her home.

Raheleh describes Canada as being a country that was unkind to her. As a mother of three young children, it was very expensive for income assistance to pay for her children's daycare and she was consistently denied attendance to training courses by the welfare worker handling her case while other women were readily accepted. These courses would have helped to provide Raheleh with the necessary skills to get a regular, full-time job.

She is unwilling to leave Canada and go back to Iran since she feels that her family would be further shamed by the fact that she is unwilling to live with another man after her husband abandoned her and their children. Since she is not very connected with the community, she is unable to find a good friend or date a nice man and is worried that her situation will impact the possibilities for her daughter's marriage. She believes that she will be able to go out and get work as a part-time cashier only after her children are old enough to go to university and she is home alone.

Arghavan

Arghavan was unhappy as a young, single woman in Iran. Strongly opposed to the Islamic regime's ill-treatment of women, she knew that she had few opportunities to pursue her dream of being a judge. Unable and unwilling to continue living under a repressive government, Arghavan applied for refugee status through the UNHCR when she was in Turkey for vacation. For six months while she waited to hear back about her application, Arghavan worked as a housemaid for a Turkish family. When her application was rejected for the first time, Arghavan decided to get married in order to make her reapplication for refugee status stronger.

Although her husband displayed no violent tendencies when they were in Turkey, he became extremely abusive when they arrived in Canada in 2005. In addition to physically abusing her on at least two occasions, he attempted to control her every movement and constantly threatened to divorce her after informing immigration that their marriage was a scam. They received financial support from immigration during their first year in Canada and from income assistance thereafter.

In 2009, Arghavan finally divorced her husband and started taking college courses before continuing on to university. She then began working out of her apartment in order to pay for her tuition and expenses, in addition to her basic living needs. Arghavan appreciates the greater freedom she experiences in Canada when compared to living in Iran. She describes being content with her situation as she knows she will no longer have to work out of her apartment once she graduates from university. Arghavan wishes for greater financial and social support and hopes for the decriminalisation of sex work.

Mona

Mona describes her immigration process to Canada as being very challenging due to her daughter's pre-existing heart condition. Nonetheless, she was able to immigrate to Canada with her husband and two children in 2001. Although her husband was occasionally abusive prior to their move, Mona was accepting of his nature as she considered it normal behaviour for husbands. However, in one incident that occurred almost three years after being in Canada, her husband broke her nose and she had to be rushed to the hospital.

While in the hospital, Mona was given the phone number for a Farsi-speaking support worker. She contacted the worker after she returned home from the hospital, and visited this worker on a weekly basis for six months. During these weekly meetings, Mona became increasingly aware of her rights and options as a resident of Canada. She also learned that abuse is not normal and that it was not her fault that her husband was violent. Mona then left her husband and moved to a transition house with her two children in order to start a new life.

For 8 months, Mona received income assistance and support from local food banks while living in one room with her two children. Through a provincial Family Maintenance Enforcement Program, Mona was able to take her husband to court for child support where he agreed to pay Mona a monthly amount for their children. However, as a result of this stated support, Mona was no longer eligible to receive income assistance since her child support payments were more than the allowance she was receiving. After a few months, her husband stopped making regular child support payments and she found it extremely difficult and time-consuming to reapply for welfare. After three weeks of hunger and two notices of eviction from her landlord, income assistance finally intervened to ensure her husband would restart his child support payments. After a couple of months, he reverted back to making irregular payments, if at all.

Mona suffered serious anxiety as a result of her situation and decided that she wanted to be able to raise her children without constantly worrying about evictions and hunger. She tried to find work and went to several interviews to work as a cashier but was unsuccessful. After exhausting her options, Mona finally began to work for herself. She is no longer late in paying rent and does not worry about putting food on the table. She continues to stay in Canada so that her daughter can receive adequate medical attention for her heart condition; she also believes that there is nothing left for her to go back to as a divorced woman in Iran. She believes that if legal aid were to give her a free lawyer to take her husband to court, she will be able to hold her husband accountable for his inconsistent child support payments. In this manner, she will be able to stop working to

make ends meet and attend training and education courses instead. In the future, Mona hopes to be able to buy an apartment and undergo medical office training in the near future.

Soheyla

Soheyla was a young, divorced single mother in Iran. She lived in her parents' house with her two children and was unable to contribute for the groceries and other expenses because she was unemployed. Having never been to university, she found it extremely difficult to find a job that would pay her a decent living wage. Given the current political situation in Iran and the difficulties facing single mothers living there, she decided to come to Canada through Turkey in 2003.

She came to Canada hoping that she would be able to bring her children over in the near future. She attended English courses for three months and got a job working at a local Iranian pastry store. After two years of working at the pastry store, she was informed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) that her income was not sufficient enough to sponsor her children to come to Canada. Since her English was still not good enough to work in a non-Farsi speaking environment, she decided to work for herself in order to earn more than minimum wage and pay the Goods and Services Tax on all taxable goods and services.

Soheyla doesn't like her experiences with CIC and is upset that they would not allow her to bring her children over and would not provide her with affordable access to a lawyer in order to review her case. She will no longer go back to Iran because she experienced a very difficult life as a divorced woman and is happy that she has more rights and freedoms in Canada. However, she is not content with her situation and never imagined entering such a lifestyle. Soheyla ardently wishes to have her children with her in Canada and hopes to be able to bring them here soon.

Monir

Monir came to Canada in 2004 to work as a nanny for an Iranian family. She had previously worked as a nanny in Iran to support her family. She describes her immigration procedure as being very easy and faced no challenges or problems throughout the process. Upon arriving in Canada, Monir had to work almost 18 hours a day straight, seven days a week. She describes having no time for herself and could not save any money since she had to pay her employer for her room and board. After two years working for that family, her contract was over and she had to go back to Iran.

Since she didn't want to return, she tried to stay in Canada and started to work for a new family in order to support her family in Iran. Her new host was extremely abusive and would yell at her for "not doing the job properly." In her last argument, her host physically abused her and she fled the home. She found a roommate and began working for herself in order to support herself in Canada. Monir is unhappy with her current situation as she is a lesbian and finds it very difficult to work with men. Currently, she is a humanitarian refugee and is unable to get support from income assistance as it may jeopardize her application. She hopes to get her permanent residency soon so that she can get financial support from welfare, take English language courses, and go to school.

Hormat

Hormat is a young transwoman who came to Canada through Turkey as a refugee. Her application was initially rejected by the UNHCR and had to get married in order to support her application to come to Canada. Once she arrived in Canada, Hormat was told by her husband that he was looking for a “real wife” as he only helped her to support her application to Canada and they soon separated.

She started going to English classes while getting help from welfare as a refugee. Since the financial support she was receiving was insufficient for her to live on her own, she ended up living in a house with two roommates in order to survive. Soon after moving into this new living arrangement, she was raped by both of her roommates and had to flee her accommodations. She later learned that it is very common for transgendered Iranians to be raped by other men in Canada. She stayed at a hospital for two days and requested that welfare provide her with a little more income so that she can live on her own without fear of being assaulted. Unfortunately, her request was denied and she began an exhaustive search for employment. After a few weeks, however, she realised that no one was willing to hire a transwoman with very poor command of the English language. She also knew she was unwilling to live with anyone after she was raped.

For four months, she spent all the money she received from welfare to pay for rent and lost over twenty pounds since she was only able to eat food she was receiving from the food bank. She then decided to work for herself in order to continue taking her language courses, pay for her rent, and afford basic meals. Hormat likes living in Canada despite the challenges she has faced and sees a better future for herself over here when compared to Iran. She describes being content with her situation as she is no longer hungry and does not have to share her small apartment with anyone. However, she is not happy with her situation as she works in order to make ends meet and not because she enjoys it. In the future, Hormat would like to go to a local college and earn a makeup artistry diploma and open a related business with her transwoman friends. She also wants to find a good husband and start a new family, but worries constantly that her current occupation may negatively impact her dream.

