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The Life Experiences of Ten Female Refugees from Iraq and Iran: An Oral History Research Study

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The University of San Francisco

THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF TEN FEMALE REFUGEES FROM IRAQ AND IRAN:
AN ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH STUDY

A Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education
International & Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the
Degree Doctor of Education

By

Nicole Ludwig

San Francisco, California

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

The Life Experiences of Ten Female Refugees from Iraq And Iran:
An Oral History Research Study

This qualitative study about the experiences of 10 religiously persecuted female refugees from Iran (Baha'i) and Iraq (Chaldean) was conducted in both Northern (Bay Area) and Southern (San Diego County) California. The study focused on three periods in their lives: previous experiences in the refugee's home country prior to resettlement; adaptation to a third country during the resettlement process, especially in regard to experiences with resettlement agencies; and finally, resettlement as refugees in the United States. An oral history methodology was used to conduct the in-depth interviews with the participants.

Key findings in the research study included identifying various pull and push factors for leaving their home country and resettling in the United States, such as religious persecution in their homelands as a push factor and the availability of education in the United States as a pull factor. In addition, the findings revealed the hardships the refugees were exposed to while waiting in a third country for processing of their resettlement. Lastly, in regard to the refugees' experience in the United States, findings showed that the refugees' identity was more closely tied to their religion (Baha'i/Chaldean) rather than to their nationality and also revealed that some women had a stronger level of independence in the United States than in their home countries.

Keywords: Refugee, women refugees, forced migration, Baha'i, Chaldean

SIGNATURE PAGE

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Nicole Ludwig

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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this dissertation to all the displaced individuals, whether it be resettled refugees who are faced with a new country, asylum seekers, or the millions of refugees currently living in uncertain conditions, particularly the ones who had to make a home for themselves for the time being in one of the many refugee camps around the world. I also want to dedicate this to my family, in particular to my mom and stepdad who were so supportive in my time as a doctoral student. Finally, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful partner Manuel.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| DISSERTATION ABSTRACT | ii |
| SIGNATURE PAGE | iii |
| DEDICATION | iv |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | v |
| TABLE OF FIGURES AND TABLES | ix |
| CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| Statement of the Problem | 2 |
| Background and Need | 3 |
| Theoretical Framework: Post-colonial/Third World Feminism..... | 14 |
| Purpose of the Study and Research Questions | 16 |
| Limitations of the Study | 17 |
| Significance of the Study | 18 |
| Background of the Researcher | 19 |
| Definition of Terms | 22 |
| CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW | 25 |
| Introduction | 25 |
| Legal Framework of Refugee Rights | 25 |
| The Refugee Regime | 30 |
| UNHCR and Other Stakeholders..... | 30 |
| Refugees in the United States..... | 33 |
| Refugees in the Western Hemisphere: Resettlement and Asylum..... | 33 |
| Iraqi and Iranian Refugee Populations..... | 39 |
| Summary | 45 |
| CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY | 47 |
| Research Design and Methodology..... | 47 |
| Participants | 48 |
| Data Collection..... | 52 |
| Data Analysis | 54 |
| Protection of Human Subjects..... | 55 |
| CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS | 56 |
| Profiles of Participants | 57 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Research Question 1:..... | 63 |
| Research Question 2:..... | 75 |
| Research Question 3:..... | 87 |
| CHAPTER V: | 97 |
| SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION..... | 97 |
| Summary | 97 |
| Discussion | 99 |
| Recommendations | 110 |
| Personal Reflections..... | 115 |
| Conclusion..... | 117 |
| REFERENCES | 119 |
| Appendix A:..... | 125 |
| Appendix B:..... | 127 |

TABLE OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Table 1: Data Collection Steps & Timeline55
Table 2: Participants.....58

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

"We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before" (UNHCR, 2015, para.1). Former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres stated in regard to the current crisis of massive displacement fueled by the violence and instability in the Middle East (and in particular Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan). According to the UNHCR (2015), worldwide forced displacement was at its highest ever in 2014. At the end of 2014, 59.5 million people were displaced, an immense increase from 51.2 million just a year earlier, and from only 37.5 million a decade ago. Currently, one in every 122 individuals has a status as a refugee, internally displaced person (IDP), or is seeking asylum, which would constitute the 24th largest country by population (United Nations, 2015). This number included 19.5 million refugees, 38.2 million internally displaced persons and about 1.8 million people with pending asylum applications (UNHCR, 2015).

The UNHCR (n.d.) defines a refugee as an individual who is:

persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (para. 1)

In contrast to refugees, IDP's are defined as people who "have not crossed an international border to find sanctuary but have remained inside their home countries. Even if they have fled for similar reasons as refugees, IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government" (UNHCR, n.d., para.1). Most refugees flee to

neighboring countries of their originating country, and only a very small percentage has the opportunity to leave their region of origin and get resettled to an industrialized country. From 2002 to 2012 about 836,000 refugees were resettled, mainly through the UNHCR and with the help of some NGO's to Europe, North America and Australia (UNHCR, 2013). Consequently, forced displacement of populations continues to be a serious problem in the 21st century and is doomed to increase over the next years due to continued political instability and conflicts in many regions of the world.

Statement of the Problem

Of the world's refugees, 48% are women and girls, who constitute a particularly vulnerable group of displaced people (UNHCR, 2013). While all refugees have to face certain kinds of hardship in fleeing their home country, women and girls usually have to deal with added pressures, ranging from being subjected to sexual abuse and violence in refugee camps, difficulty attaining refugee status based on "gender-related" asylum claims (such as persecution due to female genital mutilation, forced marriage, domestic abuse), being exposed to harsh conditions in detention centers while waiting for asylum claims to process and identity struggles due to not feeling at home in a new country (Brane & Wang, 2013; GAO, 2003; Musalo, 2010; Okigbo, Reiersen & Stowman, 2009).

A small number of recent studies have examined the experiences of women refugees from Iran (members of the Baha'i religion) and Iraq (members of the Christian faith, who identify as either Chaldean or Assyrian); therefore a gap in the research exists for these specific groups. Furthermore, many of the empirical studies that research women refugees categorize them into one general group without acknowledging that

women from different countries and cultures, who come out of different reasons, might have very distinct experiences. For instance, Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman (2009) stated that their participants were from numerous countries, but at no point did they highlight what the differences in their home countries and diverse backgrounds might mean for the findings.

Even among the studies that did focus on Iraqi refugees in the U.S. (Government Accountability Office, 2010; Hanna 2011; Yako & Biswas, 2013), none discussed the distinct experiences of females as they all were mixed gender studies. Even though Ghorashi (2008) and Williams (2009) focused on female Iranian refugees in their studies, Williams (2009) concentrated on Iranian refugees in Australia and not in the U.S., and Ghorashi (2008) did not focus on Baha'i women despite including women in the United States among her participants. Furthermore, no study has attempted the objective of this study to compare the Iraqi and Iranian refugee population, or used the methodology of oral history in order to allow the participants to delve into great detail about their lives. Thus this dissertation study was unique in the scholarly literature.

Background and Need

Minority Persecution in Iran

Even though Iran is dominated by Shia Muslims, the religious composition of the population is very diverse with Baha'i, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian and Mandaean individuals as the minority (Sanasarian & Davidi, 2007). Each of these minority groups has experienced a certain degree of discrimination, but none to the degree that have affected members of the Baha'i faith. The Jewish population has suffered attacks, such as the anti-Israeli rhetoric by the government and the denial of the Holocaust. Christians are

also subjected to harassment; for example, some churches are closed and identity checks are made before entering Christian centers. Even kidnappings of pastors have occurred in the last decade (Sanasarian & Davidi, 2007).

Discrimination against non-Muslims is further illustrated by blood money (money being paid as compensation to the family of victims by the perpetrator, even in case of an accident) being less for non-Muslims than Muslims; blood money for a non-Muslim male is half that of a male Muslim man. The outcome of this continued discrimination against religious minorities in Iran is the rapid decline of these minorities, as the Jewish population has decreased from about 80,000 in the 1970s to 13,000 in 1996, while 15,000 to 20,000 Christians are emigrating each year (Sanasarian & Davidi, 2007). However, none of the other religious groups have faced as much discrimination as the Baha'i.

Oppression of the Baha'i

An early version of the Baha'i religion (called Babi) was founded by The Bab in the mid-nineteenth century; ever since its early days the faith has faced persecution. The Bab was killed by the government as the traditional clerical class saw a threat to its monopoly if the Babi religion would spread further (Kazemzadeh, 2000). The religion was continued by a prominent follower of The Bab, Mirza Hoseyn Ali Nouri (later called Baha'u'llah), who renamed the religion to Baha'i. Persecution of the faith continued under the two Pahlavi Shahs (1925-1979); Baha'i schools were closed, marriages were not recognized, and generally members of the faith were treated as second-class citizens.

Since the overthrow of the Shah and the Islamic revolution in 1979, the persecution of the Baha'i has intensified severely. Baha'is have been subjected to a plethora of restrictions and discriminatory policies, such as being prohibited from

practicing many professions (i.e. law, medicine, psychology) and attending universities (Kazemzadeh, 2000). The cruelest measure of the government has been the killings and disappearances of Baha'i leaders since the revolution in 1979. As Kazemzadeh (2000) points out, "The strategy was plain. Destroy the head and the body will wither and die" (p. 548). Baha'i is also the only religion which is not mentioned and legitimized in the current Constitution of Iran, thus having the status of "unprotected infidels." (Kazemzadeh, 2000).

Momen (2005) argues that the situation of the Baha'i in Iran can be compared to a certain extent with the genocides that occurred against the Jewish and Armenian populations. Since 1979 the Iranian government was actively proceeding towards genocide of the Baha'i. This movement was somewhat stopped by international campaigns led by members of the Baha'is outside Iran, resulting in a number of United Nations resolutions, most recently resolution 67/182 in December 2012. Therefore, the current situation in Iran could be correctly labeled as a "suspended genocide" (Momen, 2005, p. 239).

A more appropriate term not only because it is more accurate, but also because it prevents any relaxation of vigilance over a situation that could deteriorate to a full genocide at any time. This is borne out by the fact that the persecutions worsened again during the period when reporting in Iran was dropped from the agenda of the UN Commission on Human Rights. (Momen, 2005, p. 239)

Despite this harsh persecution and repression, Karlberg (2010) describes how the Baha'i in Iran have "pursued a distinctively non adversarial approach to social change under conditions of violent oppression" (p. 222). Despite living under harsh

discrimination in Iran, the Baha'i are committed to obedience of the laws of the state, peaceful creation of alternative institutional models, and commitment to face persecution with love and compassion.

An example of an “alternative institutional model” is the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), an underground university created in 1987 to provide higher education for Baha'i who banned from entrance to universities in Iran (Karlberg, 2010). In addition, the international Baha'i community outside Iran has adopted a strategy that shines light on human rights abuses against this religious minority in Iran in order to heighten global awareness. This strategy has been very successful as the United Nations has taken notice of oppression, international media has given the struggle of the Baha'i some attention, and human rights organizations have lobbied on behalf of the Baha'i (Karlberg, 2010).

While the severity of the prosecution of Baha'i ebbed in the 1990s, it has intensified again in the last decade (Kazemzadeh, 2000). According to the Baha'i International Community (BIC), an organization affiliated with the United Nations, government-led attacks on Baha'i in Iran have been on the rise since 2005. As of 2014, 136 Baha'is are reportedly imprisoned on false charges related to the practice of their religious belief system (Baha'i International Community, 2014). Since 2005 more than 710 Iranian Baha'is have been arrested including all seven Baha'i leaders who currently serve 20-year sentences (Baha'i International Community, 2014). Among the more disturbing recent imprisonments are cases where Baha'i women have been imprisoned together with their infants. For example, on April 27, 2013, a woman and her one-year-old child were imprisoned to serve a two-year sentence. In 2013 alone, three instances

were documented where babies were imprisoned along with their mothers (Baha'i International Community, 2014).

In 2010, Iran had its first Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism of the Human Rights Council at the United Nations. At the end of the review, of the 188 recommendations by the United Nations in regard to human rights, Iran accepted 123. Several of the accepted recommendations concerned religious freedoms and four of those recommendations mentioned specifically the Baha'i. In the Summer of 2013 President Rouhani won the elections. His campaign platform included a number of promises to improve human rights in Iran, including pledges to end religious discrimination (Baha'i International Community, 2014). Iranian government officials have publicly denied any discrimination towards Baha'i, or have proclaimed that if any Baha'i members are detained or otherwise negatively affected, it is because Baha'i is a political movement (Baha'i International Community, 2014).

Despite the public assertions of the Iranian government, human rights atrocities against Baha'is have continued and in many ways worsened (Baha'i International Community, 2014). Since the 2010 UPR report, more than 400 Baha'is have been detained, constituting an increase in arrests from the preceding years. In addition, in the period since the 2010 UPR, anti-Baha'i propaganda has been widely distributed in Iran's government controlled media. Baha'is have been portrayed as the source of any conceivable evil; for instance, Baha'is have been accused of acting as foreign agents and branded as social outcasts who should be shunned (Baha'i International Community, 2014).

Currently, most young Baha'í do not have access to higher education. In 2003, international pressure led the government to modify the university entrance examination in order for individuals identifying as Baha'í to be able to take the exam. However, in practice, most Baha'í are still excluded from universities in Iran due to a computer program that returns applications as “incomplete” once the applicants are confirmed to be Baha'í. Even official government documents have shown a systematic approach to exclusion. In 2006, the government wrote a memorandum to most universities ordering the expulsion of Baha'í students if their religion was revealed. Furthermore, educational discrimination extends even to high school and elementary schools. While the government allows Baha'í to attend pre-university education, students still face harassment by administrators and teachers (Baha'í International Community, 2014).

Since 2010, efforts to marginalize the Baha'í community have continued. Multiple attempts to close the Baha'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE), the underground university, have been made by the government. Such attempts have included efforts to arrest teachers and administrators of the institution. In May 2011, agents raided 30 homes all over Iran and arrested 16 Baha'is who were involved with BIHE. Of those arrested 12 were sentenced to four to five years in prison (Baha'í International Community, 2014). Furthermore, the Iranian government has made it increasingly tougher for Baha'í to achieve an adequate living standard due to discrimination in employment opportunities. Government jobs and careers in education and law have excluded Baha'is since 1979.

In addition, entrepreneurial endeavors by Baha'í been discouraged by shop closings and severe restrictions that apply to business licenses for Baha'í owned

businesses (Baha'i International Community, 2014). Furthermore, the perpetrators of violence against Baha'is and vandalism against their properties have been protected from prosecution by the Iranian government. Between the years of 2005 to 2012, hundreds of violent attacks took place against Baha'is or their properties. However, during the same time period, none of the perpetrators of attacks were prosecuted (Baha'i International Community, 2014).

Persecution of Christians in Iraq

Christianity in Iraq has a long history, dating back to when Christianity established itself in Mesopotamia during the first century and developed into a well-structured community during the second century. The Christian population continued to play an important role in modern day Iraq and at the beginning of the second Gulf War in 2003 Christians made up between four and five per cent of the Iraqi population (approximately one million individuals). The majority consisted of Aramaic-speaking Chaldeans with 70%, and the remaining percentage being comprised of Syrian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, and Assyrians, as well as smaller numbers of Armenians, Protestants and Greek Orthodox, for example.

Even though many scholars do not distinguish between Chaldeans and Assyrians since both are Christians, a distinct difference exists between the two groups; usually people's identity is tied very strongly to either being Assyrian or Chaldean. Approximately two-thirds of Christians are Chaldeans, belonging to an Eastern rite of the Catholic Church, and about a third are Assyrians who follow the Church of the East. Both groups are descendants of Mesopotamia and speak Aramaic (also called Syriac) (Human

Rights Watch, 2009). The majority of those Christians have been living in the cities of Baghdad, Mosul (including a multitude of town and villages surrounding Mosul in the Nineveh area), and Basrah (Rassam, 2008).

In 1972 the Ba'ath party supported recognizing the cultural rights of the Aramaic-speaking people. As a result, Aramaic was included as a language of instruction in primary and secondary schools, programs in Aramaic were broadcasted on television, and even magazines were published for the Chaldo-Assyrian population (Hanish, 2011). However from the mid 1970s the government introduced "arabization," which sought to alter the ethnic composition of northern Iraq by displacing thousands of Kurds, Chaldeans, Assyrians, as well as other minorities from their land, re-populating the land with Arabs. This policy lasted until the U.S. invasion in 2003 (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the number of Christians, namely Chaldeans and Assyrians, in Iraq have declined rapidly, since they have been the target of both Sunni and Shi'a Islamist groups (Hanish, 2011). From 2003 to 2008, over 350,000 Christians out of a population of 1,000,000 fled Iraq before the invasion of the US (Youash, 2008). From 2003 onwards, especially in the Nineveh area (a traditional stronghold for Christians in Iraq), where the Arab-dominated central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) struggle for control, Chaldo-Assyrians have suffered greatly (Human Rights, 2009). Right after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Kurdish militia fighters (*peshmerga*) vied for control in Nineveh, and a civil war between Sunni and Shia developed in central and southern Iraq. Nineveh's capital of Mosul has especially become a high-risk area, partially since KRG dominance has alienated Sunnis

who were accustomed to much privilege and influence before 2003 (Human Rights Watch, 2009).

In extremist Islamist propaganda, Chaldo-Assyrians are often perceived as collaborators with the US since they share a common religion; one common extremist message to Christians is “Death to U.S. Agents” (Youash, 2008, p. 347). Usually Christians are given the option of either converting to Islam and showing commitment in their conversion, or facing threats of kidnappings and murder. If these threats are unsuccessful, many members of the Chaldo-Assyrian community are kidnapped or murdered and churches are often bombed or attacked (Youash, 2008).

In the summer of 2007, Christians were threatened in their own homes with the orders: “Convert to Islam, or leave, or face the consequences.” This is how the “al-Dora” neighborhood in Baghdad was emptied of the vast majority of Christians. “Al-Dora” used to be nicknamed the Vatican of Iraq, since mostly Christians lived in the area amidst a strong presence of religious buildings, with two cathedrals as well as of several churches, the Chaldean seminary and theological college (Rassam, 2008).

One of highest profile attacks against the Chaldo-Assyrian community happened on February 2008, when Archbishop Paulus Faraj Rahho from Mosul was kidnapped. The assailants shot his driver and killed the Archbishop later on (Human Rights Watch, 2009). An Assyrian leader states, “Before we understood that we had a totalitarian government and therefore abuses happened. But now we are supposed to be free and democratic. This democracy is killing us” (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 31). In

Baghdad, the Christians who remain in the city rely on checkpoints for their protection and security. Even though heightened security is in place, incidences of severe violence are happening, such as a hostage taking in the Saidat al Najat (Our Lady of Salvation) church in Baghdad in October 2010, motivating many Christians to migrate (IOM, 2011).

In the last two years, the severity of the persecution has increased dramatically due to the rise of the terrorist organization of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) (referred to inter-changeably as ISIL, Islamic State or Daesh in the media), taking over parts of Iraq, particularly the Nineveh area. For the very first time in almost 2,000 years, virtually no Christians were left in the city of Mosul after ISIS issued a statement on July 18, 2014, warning that all Christians should convert to Islam. The remaining Christians were ordered to either pay the “*jizya*,” a tax by Muslims over non-Muslims, or else face death. In addition, Christians were not allowed to take belongings with them when leaving the area (Human Rights Watch, 2015). In the aftermath, Mosul’s Christian sites have been either destroyed or converted into mosques (Isaac, 2014). The Christians have largely migrated to Dohuk or Irbil in Kurdistan to seek refuge (Cole, 2014).

According to Cole (2015), the Human Rights Commission of Iraq, an institution attached to the Iraqi parliament, issued statistics in June 2015 outlining the one-year impact of ISIS on that country. Such statistics show 3,000,000 Iraqis displaced and 50,000 killed within the one-year time span beginning in the summer of 2014. On June 10, 2014, ISIS took over Mosul (Cole, 2015). This organization has committed many atrocities, such as ongoing suicide attacks, executions, torture, gender discrimination, forced marriage, sexual assault, destruction of property, and murder and kidnappings of minorities. These onslaughts have taken place particularly in the Nineveh Province in and

around Mosul. A multitude of Christian towns, which for thousands of years were inhabited by Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs are now abandoned. For instance, in the town of Telskuf, the main square is deserted, which was once a thriving market with an abundance of food. Of the previous 7,000 residents, only a handful remain (Human Rights Watch 2015). Militants have also marked Christian homes with a red Arabic “n,” for Nasrane, a slur, and have taken over the water supply, which supplied the surrounding Nineveh Plain (*New York Times*, 2015). The estimate is that instability since the 2003 war and persecution by ISIS have reduced the population of Christians in Iraq to around 260,000, from a peak of about 1,250,000 during the rule of Saddam Hussein (AINA, 2015).

The arrival of ISIS has led to the creation of Christian self-defense units in areas where Christians have been persecuted by the militants. For example, The Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF), a 500-member militia comprised by Christians, patrols a number of towns with Christian populations. The NPF, the Dwekh Nawsha, and the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), are all locally formed militias, whose aim is to take back the Christian lands from ISIS. (*New York Times*, 2015).

The extensive historical background in this section is intended to portray the difficult circumstances which the Iranian Baha’i and the Iraqi Chaldean refugees in this study experienced in their home countries. Many of these issues and challenges directly impacted all the participants. While religious persecution exists in the countries discussed, the persecution is experienced somewhat differently in each country. In Iran, the government is spearheading the persecution, while in Iraq the religious persecution developed from religious extremists unaffiliated with the government, most significantly

in the last few years by ISIS. Even though the persecution comes from very different factions in those nations, the end result is the same: the daily life of religious minorities is negatively affected to the extent that living in their home country is no longer feasible.

Theoretical Framework: Post-colonial/Third World Feminism

This study was framed by Post-colonial/Third World Feminist Theory (Johnson-Odim, 1991; Mohanty, 1984, 1991; Spivak, 1988) One of the most widely read post-colonial theorists is Chandra Mohanty (1984), who in her landmark essay, “Under Western Eyes,” presents her criticism of “Western” feminism. Mohanty in particular rebukes the fact that Third World women are often seen as a monolithic group by the West:

feminist writings colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing /re-presenting a composite, singular third world woman - an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse. (p. 19)

As Mohanty (1991) further explains in “Cartographies of Struggle:”

Just as Western women or white women cannot be defined as coherent interest groups, Third World women also do not constitute any automatic unitary group. Alliances and divisions of class, religion, sexuality, and history, for instance, are necessarily internal to each of the above groups. (p. 49)

Mohanty (1984) also elaborates how the image of an “average third world woman” is socially constructed, defining her as sexually oppressed, uneducated, home bound, victimized and ignorant in contrast to the “Western” woman who is portrayed as

educated, modern and in control of her own life. Mohanty (1984) supports her argument with examples of writers who represent “Third World” women as this “homogenous powerless group,” such as Fran Hosken (1980) who writes about female genital mutilation, or Patricia Jeffery (1976) who portrays women as victims of Islam (Mohanty, p. 23). Similarly, Mohanty criticizes how Gail Omvedt (1979) discusses “Indian women,” but conducts her case study on a specific group of females in Maharashtra, or Mince who discusses “Arab women” as if all women in the Middle East are the same. Mohanty (1984) explains that not only do a large number of Western writers focus on these same topics (i.e., women are oppressed by men), but putting Third World women in such homogenous categories is very problematic, as it “assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination” (p. 31). Mohanty (1984) states that this portrayal of Third World women is a “colonial move,” as those females never rise above an “object status” (p. 39).

Spivak (1988) discusses in another landmark essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” the representation of individuals in the Third World, especially women. Traditionally the colonial subject or what Spivak (1988) refers to as the “subaltern” (men and women of the illiterate classes, tribes and lowest classes of the urban dwellers) is represented as the “other” in the first world. Spivak (1988) states:

Both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (p. 287)

Spivak (1988) gives an example of Indian widow suicide (*Sati*), where the Third

World woman is represented as monolithic and needs to be saved by the white man from the brown man. Thus, Spivak comes to the conclusion that no, the “subaltern cannot speak” (p. 308).

Johnson-Odim (1991) states in her contribution to Third World Feminism that the oppression of Euro-American women is associated with gender and class, but Third World women’s oppression is also linked to race and imperialism. As the author states:

... gender oppression cannot be the single leg on which feminism rests. It should not be limited to merely achieving equal treatment of women vis a vis men. This is where feminism as a philosophy must differ from the shallow notion of ‘women’s right.’ (p. 320)

Thus, Johnson-Odim (1991) concludes that feminism must be a “comprehensive and inclusive ideology” and if it does not include issues such as race and imperialism, then it does not apply to the majority of women in the world (p. 321).

It is crucial to view the stories of the participants in this study through a Post-colonial/Third World feminist perspective versus traditional Western feminism. All of the issues that Mohanty (1984,1991), Spivak (1988), and Johnson-Odim (1991) address apply to female refugees from Iran and Iraq who resettled in the United States. Many times, female refugees from a varied background of countries are seen as a monolithic group and the differences between the women’s cultural, religious and ethnical background are neglected.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was: (1) to analyze the life experiences of women refugees from Iran and Iraq before and after being resettled in the United States, and (2)

to identify strategies and coping mechanisms that the participants found effective in facilitating the transition to their new home. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the push factors for leaving their home country and the pull factors for resettling as refugees in the United States?
2. What is the impact of government programs/inter-governmental organizations/NGO's/local communities?
 - a. What role did the government and inter-governmental programs play in helping female refugees make the transition from the home country to the United States?
 - b. What role did NGO's/local communities play in the transition and acclimation of women refugees in the United States?
3. What kind of experiences do women refugees from Iraq and Iran have in the United States?
 - a. How do their experiences in the US impact the identity of the women refugees?
 - b. How do women refugees from Iraq and Iran adjust to United States society?

Limitations of the Study

Participants were chosen from two different communities: Iraqi Chaldean refugees in El Cajon (East San Diego) in Southern California and Iranian Baha'i refugees in the Bay Area and North San Diego. Since only five participants were chosen per group to participate, generalizations about the wider populations of both groups were not

possible. Secondly, some of the Iraqi and Iranian participants were not fluent in English, and thus an interpreter was employed for two of the ten participants. Due to the nature of interpretation, some details of the interview might have been lost in translation. Thirdly, since the participants were describing their experiences of persecution in Iran and Iraq, which occurred several years ago, selective or incomplete memory was possible. Finally, since I was an outsider to both communities, trust, and willingness to participate was an issue especially in the Chaldean community. This lack of trust also may have led to the fact that some of the participants did not tell me the most personal and private of their experiences.

Significance of the Study

By examining the experiences that women refugees face in the United States and hearing their perspectives, government organizations, NGO's, inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations or other organizations concerned about women refugees will benefit from insights on how to support this population more effectively. Especially, local organizations that deal directly with the communities of Iranian and Iraqi refugees will benefit greatly from the detailed insights gained from this study. Examples of these organizations are the Ladies of Hope, or the local chapter of the International Rescue Committee in San Diego County that serve the Chaldo-Assyrian population in El Cajon. Lastly, underrepresented voices of female refugees from Iran and Iraq were heard and represented in detail due to the oral history methodology, to allow the "subaltern," using Spivak (1988)'s term, to speak.

Background of the Researcher

My interest in the Middle East stems partially from my own family background. When I was in my late teens, my mother remarried a Muslim man from Lebanon. All of a sudden my conservative and somewhat sterile family was surrounded by the hospitality and warmth of another culture and a big family. My mother did not only marry my stepfather but also inherited his four brothers and one sister, who quickly became my extended family as well. In 1975, right after the Civil War in Lebanon started, my stepfather left Beirut with his family and fled to Turkey. After a few years in Turkey, the whole family decided to emigrate to Germany to start a new life. When I was a teenager my mother met my stepfather in Stuttgart, Germany. Once my stepfather was part of my family, I was fascinated and intrigued by his stories about his home country and culture.

The first time I came to the United States was in the early 2000s, not long after 9/11, and I originally believed that the United States was an amazing melting pot of cultures, races and ethnicities that more or less lived peacefully with each other. Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby, Michael Jordan, some of the most recognized names in the entertainment industry are non-white, so I naively imagined the United States to be the land of equal opportunity for all. After a few months of living in San Francisco, I quickly realized that actually racism, discrimination and unequal opportunities were the harsh reality, even in the supposedly most liberal city of the United States. In fact, I found out the Bay Area and California in general are quite segregated racially and ethnically in regard to housing as well as social interactions. Specifically, I noticed the segregation of many groups from the Middle East; for example Fremont in the East Bay hosts a huge

Afghani population, and El Cajon, near San Diego, hosts the second largest Iraqi (Assyrian/Chaldean) population.

In February 2012, one of the foremost scholars in the United States on racism and white privilege, Tim Wise (2013), compared the United States with Pakistan in a speech at the University of San Francisco:

Benazir Bhutto, was twice elected Prime minister of Pakistan. It would be absurd for anyone to suggest that Pakistan has conquered all issues of sexism. And yet, in America, the election of Barack Obama has been pointed to by the mainstream media as evidence that racism no longer exists. (Wise, 2013)

Moreover, I was especially horrified that in the post 9-11 era, the Middle East and Islam were often associated with terrorism, Jihad and anti-Americanism. However, after a few years in the United States, I also realized how I as a white, European woman benefitted from white privilege. Countless examples over the years come to my mind; for instance, I am never asked by law enforcement what I am doing in a certain neighborhood at a certain time, when I am in a store the employees treat me nicely, and most of the time people are excited and interested in my German heritage. I also have seen how the reaction I am receiving from mainstream society is not the same treatment that my non-white friends receive.

I continued my interest in Middle Eastern studies during my undergraduate years where I majored in History and minored in Political Science. I intensified this interest during my Master's in International Policy Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, where my study emphasis was human rights. After joining the International and Multicultural Education Department at the University of San Francisco,

and taking classes such as Whiteness, Power and Privilege, Race and Ethnicity in the United States, and Immigration and Forced Displacement, I realized further how deeply entrenched institutional and societal discrimination are in the United States and how, at the same time, white privilege is the norm.

As Peggy McIntosh (1990) explains, white privilege is:

... an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible knapsack of special provision, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and black checks. (p. 1)

Furthermore, Pease (2012) states, “most privilege is not recognized as such by those who have it. Not being aware of privilege is an important aspect of privilege” (p.9). By acknowledging my deeply rooted privilege not only as a white woman, but also as someone who came willingly to the United States and grew up in a democratically stable and developed country, I am taking the first step necessary to start a productive interaction with my participants. I am not oblivious to my “knapsack” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 1) but aware that I had and still have many advantages because of the color of my skin and my heritage. Pease (2012) explains,

... from a social justice perspective, members of privileged groups have a responsibility to critically reflect upon their own position. Members of privileged groups need to be aware of the ways in which their speaking positions can be oppressive and dangerous and, at the same time, not retreat from political work that is contentious. (p.31)

I realize that I will never fully understand what it means to be a female refugee

woman from Iraq or Iran, not only due to the cultural differences, but also because of my white privilege. I could never know how it feels to be uprooted from your country unwillingly, even persecuted, or to encounter a new country that is not always hospitable and welcoming. Thus, I was always an outsider among my participants, but I did my best to be empathetic and listen to my participants' stories. Just as Pease (2012) states, I had to be careful that my speaking position as a white researcher did not become oppressive at any point during the data collection process. Thus, I believe an oral history approach fit best as my methodology so that my participants were freely able to tell their stories.

Definition of Terms

Asylum:

“The terms asylum-seeker and refugee are often confused: an asylum-seeker is someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated. National asylum systems are there to decide which asylum-seekers actually qualify for international protection. Those judged through proper procedures not to be refugees, nor to be in need of any other form of international protection, can be sent back to their home countries” (UNHCR, n.d., para.1).

IDP: Internally Displaced People

“Unlike refugees, IDPs have not crossed an international border to find sanctuary but have remained inside their home countries. Even if they have fled for similar reasons as refugees (armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations), IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government – even though that government might be the cause of their flight” (UNHCR, n.d. para.1).

Protracted Refugee Situation:

“A protracted refugee situation is one in which 25,000 or more refugees originating from the same country have sought asylum in another country (or countries) for at least five consecutive years” (United States Department of State, year, para.1).

Refugee:

“ An individual owing to a well founded fear of being prosecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR, n.d., para. 3).

Resettlement:

Resettlement involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them - as refugees - with permanent residence status. The status provided ensures protection against ‘refoulement’ and provides a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependents with access to rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the resettlement country” (UNHCR, 2011, p. 9).

Resettlement agencies:

The resettlement agencies which help the refugees in the adjustment period in the United States include the International Rescue Committee, the Catholic Charities, Alliance for African Assistance and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS).

UNHCR: United National High Commissioner for Refugees

The UNHCR is the main stakeholder and gatekeeper in the international refugee regime and works closely with NGO's and governments in fields such as refugee camp management, resettlement and repatriation (Clark, 2008).

Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE)

The Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) is an underground university in Iran established 1987, that was founded and operated by Baha'i leaders in response to the government policy of not allowing Baha'i to any of the public universities in Iran after 1979. Many of the participants of this study or their family members have completed coursework or attained Bachelor or Master degrees at BIHE. The university was first based in Professors private residences and other private homes, and in the last decade more and more classes were offered online. Currently BIHE has about 700 faculty members and offers over 1000 courses either classroom based or online and graduates of BIHE have been more and more accepted to universities in the USA, Australia and Europe. However, the Iranian government has not up to this day recognized degrees obtained at BIHE, and faculty and students have faced oppressive conditions, such as arrests of teachers, raids of locations, and confiscations of equipment, from the Iranian government for teaching and attending BIHE up to this day (BIHE, 2006).

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review is divided into three main sections. The first part explores the international legal framework of refugee rights, with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. The second part examines the refugee regime with particular attention to the activities of the UNHCR. The third and final part discusses the United States refugee population. It first portrays the experiences of refugees who have gone through the resettlement and asylum process, and then discusses Iraqi and Iranian refugee populations.

Legal Framework of Refugee Rights

International Legal Framework: 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees

The main pillars of the international legal framework regarding refugee law are the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (Clark, 2008; Musalo, Moore, & Boswell, 2011; Goodwin-Gill, McAdam, 2007). Musalo, Moore and Boswell (2011) explain that the 1951 Convention was created in the aftermath of World War II. The original intent was to create a document that would protect individuals fleeing from persecution related to World War II; as a result, it originally was limited in its scope to events happening before 1951 and only pertaining to Europe. Not until 1967, with the amendment of the Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, were both the geographic and time limitations lifted, making it apply to individuals created by events at any time in order to keep up with new refugee situations not caused by World War II (Musalo, Moore, & Boswell, 2011). However,

apart from this expansion, all the articles in the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol are the same (Musalo, Moore, Boswell, 2011).

According to Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, (2007), refugees are identifiable by having four main characteristics based on the refugee definition outlined in Article 1 by the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol:

1. They are outside their country of origin
2. They are unable or unwilling to seek or take advantage of the protection of that country, or to return there,
- 3.

Such inability or unwillingness is attributable to a well-founded fear of being persecuted; and 4. The persecution feared is based on reasons on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group, or political opinion. (Goodwin-Gill, McAdam, 2007, p. 37)

One of the most important aspects of the 1951 Convention is article 33, which covers prohibition of expulsion or return, also called “non-refoulement” (Clark, 2008; Musalo, Moore, & Boswell, 2011; Goodwin-Gill, & McAdam, 2007). Specifically, article 33 of the 1951 Convention states:

1. No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion.
2. The benefit of the present provision may not, however, be claimed by a refugee whom there are reasonable grounds for regarding as a danger to the security of the country in which he is, or who having been convicted by a final judgment of a particularly serious crime, constitutes a danger to the

community of that country (UNHCR, 1951, p.30).

Clark (2008) states that Article 33 prohibits any refugees to return to a country if life or freedom of the refugee could be threatened, including individuals whose status has yet to be determined, meaning asylum seekers who applied for refugee status (Clark, 2008). In the rest of the articles of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the rights and obligations of a refugee are outlined, ranging from access to religion, education, and labor rights, to just name a few (Clark, 2008).

Academics and field practitioners debate in recent years whether the current definition of a refugee is outdated and should be expanded. The topic is very complex, as some realize that the capacity of who should be considered a refugee is already approaching its limits with recent conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War; however others strongly believe more individuals should be granted the privileges of a refugee (Betts, 2010; Bierman & Boas, 2010; Lister, 2013; Hathaway, 1997; Gibney, n.d).

Betts (2010) is one of the academics who strongly believe that many forced migrants suffer unnecessarily under inadequate legal framework to protect them. Betts (2010) notes that traditionally states have seen people who cross borders as either falling under the 1951 Refugee Convention, or as voluntary economic migrants. But in the last years the notion emerged that some migrants do not qualify for either of these categories. Betts (2010) describes a new set of migrants, called survival migrants, including those compelled by new drivers of forced migration such as environmental disaster, livelihood failure, and state fragility. These are “persons who are outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they have no access to a domestic remedy or resolution” (p. 365). To better serve these survival migrants, Betts favors a “soft law

framework, based on the consolidation of existing state obligations alongside a much clearer division of responsibility between existing international organizations” (p. 379).

Betts (2010) supports this argument with international case studies where international response was minimal for certain groups of survival migrants. For instance, during his research in Angola, Betts found that hundreds of thousands of Congolese have fled to Angola for survival migration reasons. Many of the diamond mines in the Congo have collapsed, and low employment rates are driving emigration. The Angolan government has deported most of the Congolese migrants who arrived between 2003 and 2009, even though the Congolese face dire situations in their home country. The institutional response has been almost nonexistent as UNHCR argues that these migrants fall outside its mandate. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has tried, but failed, to receive funding for the situation. Many NGO’s who are on location have been denied access from the government; thus only a very limited amount of outside actors are allowed to help. As Betts (2010), points out, this is one of the situations where institutional response has been close to nothing, causing great suffering for these survival migrants.

Another case of forced migrants being forced out of their homes without coverage by the current legal framework is that of “climate refugees.” Bierman and Boas (2010) define climate refugees as:

... people who have to leave their habitats, immediately or in the near future, because of sudden and gradual alterations in their natural environment related to at least of the three impacts of climate change: sea –level rise, extreme weather events, and drought and water scarcity. (p. 67)

Bierman and Boas (2010) state that by 2050, current estimates expect 200 to 250 million people to be displaced by rising sea levels and other climate change impacts. The authors urge that climate induced individuals be recognized as refugees by the international community. The two authors propose a new legal instrument that addresses climate refugees, called a Protocol On Recognition, Protection and Resettlement of Climate Refugees, which would attach to the existing United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

However, other academics, lawyers and field practitioners do not favor a revision or addition of the current legal framework (Gibney, nd.; Lister, 2012, Hathaway, 1997). Gibney, a world renowned scholar who focuses on refugee issues (n.d), states that since Internally Displaced People (IDP's) do not fall under the legal definition of a refugee, the international community is prevented from intervening in the domestic affairs of other states (Gibney, n.d).

Lister (2012) also argues against broadening the refugee definition, claiming that poverty or natural disasters should not be grounds for inclusion in the Refugee Convention. His view is that it is more feasible for these individuals to remain in their home country by promoting economic development and relieving the effects of natural disasters. Lister claims that aid in place would help many more people, rather than helping only a few by offering services such as resettlement.

Hathaway (1997) agrees with Gibney (n.d.) and Lister (2010) that it is crucial that the current definition of what a refugee constitutes should not be expanded. Hathaway argues that adhering to the current definition is needed if operational paralysis of the UNHCR and other stakeholders is to be avoided. For that reason, Hathaway states that events such as floods, famines, or other environmental catastrophes should not be reasons

for refugee status eligibility. He further points out that refugee law is for people who do not have access to national protection of their home countries, but in all the cases mentioned, that is not true (Hathaway, 1997).

The Refugee Regime

UNHCR and Other Stakeholders

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is internationally the main stakeholder and gatekeeper in the refugee regime. However, UNHCR is hardly the only actor in the refugee regime; it also works together closely with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), governments and organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Barnett, 2011; Chimni, 2004; Clark, 2008; Crisp 2009). Clark (2008) points out that the UNHCR was created in 1950 and its scope of work is to prevent refugees, to prepare for possible emergencies, to protect refugees, and to offer post-conflict relief. More specifically UNHCR (2013) describes its mandate as:

Using the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention as its major tool, UNHCR's core mandate is to ensure the international protection of uprooted people worldwide. It promotes the basic human rights of refugees and that they will not be returned involuntarily to a country where they face persecution. It helps them to repatriate to their homeland when conditions permit, integrate into states of asylum or resettle in third countries. UNHCR promotes international refugee agreements, helps states establish asylum structures and acts as an international watchdog over refugee issues. (para. 1)

Even though the definition of a refugee has not changed in international law,

Crisp (2010) explains that the UNHCR has still somewhat broadened its boundaries of protection in the last decades. For instance, UNHCR has been involved in a number of natural disaster operations that fall outside their mandate, such as the Asian tsunami, the floods in the Philippines and the earthquake in Pakistan, and even work at times with IDP's. Crisp (2010) explains that the broadening of the UNHCR's boundaries is due to several reasons. In 1950 UNHCR started with a handful of staff and a small budget; it has since expanded to 6,600 staff members and a budget of \$2.3 billion. Also, increased awareness in humanitarian disasters due to advocacy and the media is present (Crisp, 2010). However, Crisp (2010) also points out that many of the key donor states have often expressed wariness in response to this expansion and have advised that UNHCR should return to its core mandate of helping those who fit the refugee definition.

One of the core tasks of the UNHCR is finding durable solutions for refugees, such as resettlement to a third country or repatriation (Barnett, 2011; Chimni, 2004). Chimni (2004) outlines that the UNHCR has changed its directions for durable solutions for refugees over the decades from promoting the solution of resettlement to shifting towards repatriation. Specifically, Chimni states that from the end of World War II to 1985, the Northern states with help of the UNHCR promoted resettlement to offset the significant loss of the labor force that resulted because of the war. However, from 1985 onwards, since no labor shortages were present in the Northern states, voluntary and safe repatriation to the home country was the preferred solution. From 1996 onwards, the policy of imposed return has been supported by UNHCR, even if conditions in the home country are less than optimal. One of the reasons imposed repatriation became necessary is the lack of money available to care for refugees and pressure of host states, which are

in many cases poor and dependent on international aid themselves (Chimni, 2004).

Chimni (2004) points out the examples of Zaire and Tanzania, which gave 2.5 million refugees asylum in 1994 during the crisis in Rwanda. Tanzania abandoned its open door policy since the country was not able to afford to care for that many refugees.

Barnett (2011) explains how the UNHCR is a paternalistic organization. The author defines paternalism as “the inference with a person’s liberty on the grounds that it is his or her best interests” (p. 106). This paternalism contributed to the actions of the UNHCR to make decisions on behalf of refugees, without their consent, as in the case of repatriation. Barnett states, “its determination to promote repatriation is based not only on the refugees preference but more fundamentally on UNHCR’s objective assessment of whether life was better at home relative to life in the camps” (p.124). Specifically, UNHCR realized it was next to impossible to receive consent from thousands or often times hundreds of thousands of refugees. It introduced terms such as “voluntariness” that meant that the consent of the refugees was not necessary and the home country’s situation only needed to appreciably improve or even only have the promise of improving (Barnett, 2011).

UNHCR also was criticized for failing to ensure the safety of women and girl refugees in camps. The United States General Accounting Office (GAO), an evaluative and investigative branch of Congress, states that limited UNHCR’s resources and weak management have endangered the safety of women and girls. In regard to resources, donors failed to meet funding commitments, which resulted in budget cuts of UNHCR, and those led to a reduction in safety programs targeted for women as well as limited monitoring of camps by UNHCR protection officers (U.S. GAO, 2003). For instance, in

Tanzania, UNHCR had one junior officer in charge of 155,000 refugees over five refugee camps. The result of this was that management of camps had to be taken over by locally hired staff and even refugees. Furthermore, refugee women remain susceptible to sexual abuse due to the high level of poverty in camps, which at times leads to exchanging sexual favors for necessities such as food, clothing, and cooking items. Finally, some UNHCR employees hold cultural attitudes that tolerate abusive situations. For instance, UNHCR staff members in Nepal were fired for tolerating sexual misconduct among Bhutanese refugee women by men (government officials and refugee men) in the camps (U.S. GAO, 2003).

Refugees in the United States

Refugees in the Western Hemisphere: Resettlement and Asylum

Refugees can come to a country in the West through either resettlement or asylum (Hanna, 2011; Clark, 2008; Kerwin, 2012, Musalo, Moore, & Boswell, 2011, UNHCR, 2013). Clark (2008) describes the difference between resettled refugees and asylum seekers as “resettled refugees are chosen and wanted. They arrive with a resident status and a welcome. Asylum seekers are unwanted and are tainted with negative characteristics” (p. 134). The UNHCR (2011) defines resettlement as the

... selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them –as refugees- with permanent residence status. The status provided ensures protection against refoulement and provides a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependents with access to rights similar to those enjoyed as nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the

resettled country. (p. 3)

In contrast, asylum seekers are defined as: "an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined" (UNHCR, 2013, p. 5).

Traditionally, the United States led in the number of both resettlement and asylum claims (Musalo, Moore, & Boswell, 2011, Nezer, 2013, UNHCR, 2013). As Nezer (2013) points out, in 2011 out of the world's 61,649 resettled refugees, 43,215 (70 %) were resettled in the United States, followed by Canada (11%), Australia (9%) and the Scandinavian countries (7% Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland combined) (Nezer, 2013). However, out of the world's millions of refugees less than 1 percent of refugees had the opportunity to be resettled in the Western hemisphere (Nezer, 2013). In the United States, the president decides the quota each year of how many refugees will be resettled, ranging from between as low as 27,000 right after the 9/11 attacks to as high as 207,000 in 1980 (Nezer, 2013). UNHCR (2013) points out in its annual report on asylum trends that in 2012 the top five industrialized countries (comprising 57% of the world's asylum claims) for asylum claims were the United States (84,000) Germany (64,500), France (54,900), Sweden (43,900), and United Kingdom (27,400) (UNHCR, 2013).

The resettlement and asylum policy in the United States is mainly based on the Refugee Act of 1980 (United States domestic legal framework) as well as international law (Kerwin 2012; Musalo, Moore & Boswell, 2011). Musalo, Moore and Boswell (2011) explain that before 1980, United States refugee policy included the requirement that a refugee was fleeing a communist country or came from the Middle East. With the introduction of the Refugee Act in 1980, this provision was lifted and refugees could

come from all regions of the world. However, in practice, some refugee groups, such as Iraqi refugees, still are prioritized from countries where the United States has a foreign policy interest (Musalo, Moore, & Boswell, 2011).

Many scholars, lawyers and refugee advocates have criticized both the resettlement and asylum process (Brane & Wong, 2013; Kerwin, 2012; Musalo, 2010; Nezer, 2013). Kerwin (2012) states that one of the resettlement challenges is the growing diversity of refugee populations since the United States had a “one size fits all” approach regarding arriving refugees. However, the experiences vary tremendously from refugee to refugee; some have lived for years or even decades in refugee camps, and others have only spent a few months in a third country before being resettled. Similarly, Kerwin points out that some refugees have English skills and are highly trained, but others lack these valuable assets. However, the monetary assistance refugees receive is the same for all groups; every refugee in the United States is eligible to be supported for up to eight months, after which welfare kicks in if the refugee is not able to support himself/herself (Kerwin, 2012).

Nezer (2013) observed several different groups of resettled refugees, all of which struggled with resistance in local communities to refugee resettlement, ranging from local governments to populations. For instance, in Tennessee over 4300 refugees were resettled from 2009 to 2011, mostly from Iraqi, Burmese, Bhutanese and Somali refugee communities. However, in May 2011, local officials enacted the Refugee Absorptive Capacity Act, which made it mandatory for resettlement agencies to inform local governments when new refugees are arriving, as according to the law the refugees put a burden on the local communities (Nezer, 2013). The local government even put a

moratorium on new settlements if it is documented that the absorptive capacity (i.e. availability of housing, capacity, of school district) is met (Nezer, 2013). In addition, refugees have to suffer under general resentment in the community, particularly aimed at Muslims (Nezer, 2013). Thus, even though these refugees have the support of the federal government in starting a new life, local governments and communities make the transition to their new home country extremely difficult.

While Nezer (2013) included both males and females in her study, Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman (2009) just focused on the experiences of women refugees in the United States. In their study the authors used participatory and community action research in the Fargo-Moorhead area of North Dakota and Minnesota. The research participants were mainly from Africa, namely Egypt, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan and focused on acculturation of women in the United States (Okigbo, Reiersen & Stowman, 2009). Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman (2009) state in their findings, that the majority of the women have serious acculturation challenges, the most difficult being transportation, language, and education, which all contributed for the women not being able to being fully involved in society. The women expressed that limited transportation fueled isolation by limiting educational opportunities, since the Fargo-Moorhead area does not have good public transportation (Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman, 2009). Language barriers contributed to interacting with Americans in the community, as one refugee woman explains “ language is the key to moving my life ahead, language is number one” (Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman, 2009, p. 132). When asked for a solution for how the acculturation process could become easier for the refugees, the participants agreed that the refugee resettlement programs should allow

more time for adjusting and extending the support beyond the current time of eight months, and provide more opportunities for education, orientation and interaction (Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman, 2009)

Refugees have experienced many challenges in the United States asylum system (Brane & Wang, 2013; Kerwin, 2012; Kassinja & Bashir, 1999). As Kerwin (2012) points out, it has been a challenge in the post 9/11 era for potential asylum seekers to even reach the borders of the United States within creased border control (as about a third of asylum seekers cross the border illegally) and stricter temporary visa regulations. Even if asylum seekers are able to cross into the United States, they face detention if they cross the border without proper documents while they wait if their asylum claim gets approved. Kerwin (2012) further explains that the most important factor whether the asylum seekers' case gets approved is whether a refugee has legal representation.

While both men and women face detention if they seek asylum in the United States without proper papers, women face additional hardships in detention (Brane & Wang, 2013). For example, Brane and Wang (2013) conducted research in various detention facilities around the United States on behalf of the Women's Refugee Commission and found the average length of being kept in detention was 10% longer than men's time spent in detention in 2012. Furthermore, women often have less access to facilities within detention centers, such as law libraries, religious services, medical appointments, visitation rooms and even court proceedings. For example, at the Glades County Prison in Florida, females can only participate in court hearings via video teleconference, but male detainees are able to participate in person (Brane & Wang, 2013). Detained women are also more likely to be mixed in with criminals, since not

enough new detainees come in every day to fill an entire housing unit. In addition, Brane and Wang (2013) explain that detained asylum seekers suffer from high rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. It is crucial to identify these vulnerable populations of women; however, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) may often fail to identify them since they rely on detainees to self-identify and rely on untrained and often male personnel to ask sensitive information (Brane & Wang, 2013).

Musalo (2010) states that in the United States, gender asylum has been particularly controversial. Gender asylum is defined as:

... two types of claims: (1) claims in which the form of persecution is unique to, or disproportionately inflicted on women (for example, female genital cutting (FGC), domestic violence, rape, forced marriage). (2) claims in which the harm may or may not be gendered, but the reason (nexus) it is imposed is because of the victim's gender. A woman raped for political activism has suffered a gendered form of harm, imposed for non-gender reasons (political opinion), whereas a woman prohibited from attending school or working has suffered non-gendered forms of harm, which are imposed for gender reasons. It is not uncommon for claims to involve gendered forms of harm, which are also inflicted for reasons of gender. The clearest examples of such claims are those involving Female Genital Cutting (Musalo, 2010, p. 47).

According to Musalo (2010), opponents to gender asylum argue that the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol were not intended to protect gender claims;

accepting such claims, this would open the floodgates. As Musalo (2010) states, both of these arguments are without basis in truth. Musalo explains that the UNHCR has realized that gender claims fall within the 1951 Refugee Convention, and numerous examples have shown that gender asylum does not cause a significant increase in asylum applications.

The first landmark gender asylum case in the United States was the Matter of Kassinga (her name was altered from Kassindja to Kassinga by accident), the case of a young Togan woman who sought asylum in the United States for female genital mutilation (FGM), a case that would have most likely been denied if the asylum seeker lacked legal representation (Kassindja & Bashir, 1999). In their biographical book, Kassinja and Bashir (1999) describe the situation of the young refugee arriving to the United States and asking for asylum after which she was detained for a prolonged period. Finally she was lucky in that her case was picked up by a young law student with the help of several renowned lawyers and the attention of media. After over a year of legal battles, Bashir, a law student, and Musalo, one of the foremost refugee lawyers, won the case and Kassinga was granted asylum in 1996 due to facing FGM if she would be returned to Togo (Kassindja & Bashir, 1999).

Iranian and Iraqi Diaspora

Iraqi and Iranian Refugee Populations

Several scholars, such as Hanna (2011), Yako and Biswas (2013), and the Government Accountability Office (2010) have studied and analyzed the Iraqi refugee community in the United States. Yako and Biswas (2013) conducted a mixed methods

study in two resettlement areas of Iraqi refugees, one in Detroit, Michigan and the other in St Louis, Missouri. The 154 participants of Muslim as well as Christian background were seeking resettlement due to death threats and violence against them and their families. The study analyzed acculturative stress factors related to the resettlement process. The participants expressed they believed that once resettled in the United States they would find a “heaven,” an idea fostered by American media, especially television; however instead they were faced with crime, unemployment, and discrimination.

Participants in Yako and Biswas’s (2013) study expressed that the resettlement agency representatives who met them did not provide proper care, did not understand Iraqi cultural customs and some even insulted them for their lack of knowledge of the refugee system. The majority of the refugees were skilled individuals, many with university degrees not recognized in the United States; thus highly trained refugees such as engineers and doctors were working menial jobs. The interviewees recommended these changes to significantly improve their lives in the United States: adequate housing, financial aid provided for a longer period than eight months, English instruction at a minimum of one year, and reciprocal trust between the resettlement agencies and the incoming refugees (Yako & Biswas, 2013).

Hanna (2011) described the challenges of Iraqi refugees who were resettled to El, Cajon (a suburb of San Diego). Similarly to Yako and Biswas (2013), Hanna (2011) found many shortcomings in the support of the government and organizations that accompany the resettlement process. For example, many are highly trained professionals in the areas of engineering or health care. Since their education and certifications are not recognized at all in the United States, physicians are not even allowed to practice as

lower level health care providers such as nurses. Hanna recommended that the government provide recertification courses to make the employment transition easier.

Hanna (2011) also pointed out that the financial support the refugees receive is not enough, especially for being resettled in expensive California, forcing several families to share a small apartment (in San Diego refugees receive \$345 as an individual and \$561 as two refugees sharing a household). Finally, another financial strain is put on the refugees by having to pay back the travel expenses for coming to the United States (which the US government pays up front), which can range between \$10,000 and \$20,000 for a large family (Hanna, 2011).

As Hanna (2011) and Yako and Biswas (2013) have discussed, Iraqi refugees often have higher education since university is free to attend in Iraq; still Iraqis have struggled to find even entry-level positions once resettled. The Government Accountability Office (2010) studied in further detail the reasons behind the high unemployment, focusing especially on government employment. In Iraq many of the resettled refugees worked as contractors for the United States government, such as translators (GAO, 2010). Once resettled in the United States, government positions, particularly related to Arabic language proficiency, could provide refugees with a seamless transition into the job market, as Arabic speakers are in high demand in government positions. However, Iraqi refugees actually have very limited employment opportunities for federal government jobs. Most government positions require background investigations, which is impossible to complete for recently arrived Iraqis; moreover, certain positions, even require security clearances, for which citizenship is a requirement (GAO, 2010). The Government Accountability Office (2010) stated that

before the 2008 economic crisis, refugees were often able to secure entry-level jobs in the non-government sector soon after their arrival; but since the economic downturn, that is not the case anymore. Resettlement agencies point out that securing any job for refugees takes longer than ever for refugees, much less a job in their learned profession (GAO, 2010). As a result, Iraqis are often facing long term unemployment; and refugees struggle to survive on only United States government aid, as it is only a few hundred dollars a month (GAO, 2010).

Shoeb, Weinstein, and Halpern (2007) conducted a qualitative study of 60 Iraqi refugees, Arab Muslims, Kurds, and Chaldeans who resettled in Dearborn, Michigan. This study illustrated what kind of meaning religion had in the refugees' lives, including aspects like identity, home, and hopes for the future. The authors found that the Iraqi community in metropolitan Detroit was not a cohesive unit, but rather was divided due to class, education, economic status, political convictions and ethnicity. Each community had its own center, clubs, and associations. In regard to identity, men were striving for new identities as "religious warriors." In contrast, women were more likely to hold on to their former identities since these selves were less damaged (Shoeb, Weinstein & Halpern, 2007). Furthermore, two different images of the US were present in the psyche of the Iraqi refugees. Iraqi Arabs mostly espoused the "Bad America" view where the refugees felt alienated from the US, but Chaldeans and Kurds adopted the "Good America" stance, where refugees embraced their new country and were grateful to be in the US (Shoeb, Weinstein, & Halpern, 2007).

Chatty and Mansour (2011) studied Iraqi refugees and people displaced within the Middle East (as most of Iraq's exiles are in the Middle East). The countries with the

highest number of refugees are Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The study's participants included not only people in exile but also local non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM. Chatty and Mansour (2011) stated that many Iraqis kept their distance from the official agencies mandated to assist them, and refugees did not even register in many cases with UNHCR. In 2011 at the time of the study, the Iraqi displacement crisis had reached a critical stage since international interest in Iraq was declining. However, at the same time Iraqi refugees remained in neighboring states under increasingly difficult circumstances. As the refugees' savings continue to dwindle, circular movements in and out of Iraq will be more likely to make money (Chatty & Mansour, 2011). Chatty and Mansour (2011) also asserted that in all three countries, voluntary return to Iraq does not seem promising as Iraqis accept voluntary repatriation packages.

Other scholars have focused on the experiences of female refugees from the Iranian community (Williams, 2009). Williams (2009) studied the identity and sense of belonging in Baha'i refugee communities in and around Melbourne, Australia. She found by interviewing Baha'i refugees that they primarily identified themselves as Baha'i rather than Iranian or Australian, thus religious identity outweighed national identity. Williams (2009) further elaborates that: "the Iranian Baha'i refugees indicated that their Baha'i identity facilitates the process of adaptation as the Australian Baha'i community provided a familiar administrative structure and a comfortable base" (p. 4). Furthermore, most participants in that study were very active in Baha'i activities, for example serving on spiritual assemblies, and thus were offered a sense of community. The participants also expressed great pride at being able to identify as Baha'i, since many were persecuted

before in Iran (Williams, 2009).

Ghorashi (2008) interviewed women refugees (without indicating their religious background) who left Iran after the revolution in both the Netherlands and the United States, specifically Los Angeles, and compared their life experiences in each country. The author herself is an Iranian woman who came to the Netherlands in the late eighties as a political refugee. As a research methodology, Ghorashi used “life story,” which she found essential in focusing on both the past in Iran and the present in exile. The women interviewed in the Netherlands felt as if they were treated by society as “the Other” since foreigners (particularly from the Middle East) in the Netherlands are portrayed in a negative light. Ghorashi realized that the more the Iranian women experienced being treated as “the Other,” the more they themselves stereotyped the Dutch population. On the one hand, Iranian women in the Netherlands were very successful, in learning the new language and completing their studies, but on the other hand, they felt a deep sense of not belonging in the new country. As Ghorashi (2008) stated, most of the women refugees would say, “What is going to become of us here? We will never find our place here, but is there any place for us left in Iran?” (p. 125). This fueled a deep sense of fear in the women about their future.

Women refugees whom Ghorashi (2008) interviewed in the United States, however, felt very differently about their new home. They felt as if they belonged in Los Angeles and were not treated as “the Other,” especially due to the large community present in “Irangelles.” The women also felt as if they were part of American society and had two social circles, one American and the other Iranian. Therefore, the interviewees stated that the United States was the country in which they felt at home, felt a sense of

security about the future, and even referred to themselves as Iranian- Americans (Ghorashi, 2008).

Summary

The first section of this literature review covered the international legal framework of refugee rights. In the current debate as to whether the refugee definition should be expanded, Betts (2010) argued that “survival migrants” should have greater legal rights than they have currently, whereas Bierman and Boas (2010) stated that more legal rights should be expanded to climate refugees. The second section examined the refugee regime with specific attention to the UNHCR. Chimni (2003) and Barnett (2011) explained that the UNHCR is increasingly moving away from resettlement as a durable solution towards repatriation.

The third section discussed refugee populations in the United States. In the first subsection that delved into the experiences of refugees who have experienced the resettlement and asylum process, Nezer (2013) and Kerwin (2012) pointed out how the resettlement process presents difficulties for refugees to the United States. Okigbo Reiersen, and Stowman (2009) specifically explained how resettlement is challenging for women refugees. In regard to asylum, Musalo (2010) discussed how difficult it is for gender-related claims to get asylum in the United States. Brane and Wong (2013) delved into detail as to how women face added problems in asylum detention centers as compared to their male counterparts.

In the final subsection that reviewed empirical studies of Iranian and Iraqi refugees, Hanna (2011), the Government Accountability Office (2010), and Yako and

Biswas (2013) described the difficulties Iraqi refugees face in the United States, such as lack of employment, financial pressures and language difficulties. In Ghorashi (2008) and Williams' (2009) studies of Iranian refugee women, Williams (2009) depicts the struggles of identity and sense of belonging among female Baha'i refugees in Australia. In contrast, Ghorashi (2008) compared female Iranian refugees in the Netherlands and the United States, concluding that refugees in the United States possessed a better sense of belonging than did those in the Netherlands.

This section also illustrated the gap in the research that lays the groundwork for my own study. For example, none of the authors (Government Accountability Office, 2010; Hanna, 2011; Yako & Biswas, 2013) who studied the Iraqi population focused on women refugees. Even though Ghorashi (2008) and Williams (2009) focused on female refugees, Williams (2009) studied Iranian refugees in Australia and not in the United States. While Ghorashi (2008) did include women in the United States among her participants, she did not focus on Baha'i women. Further, no study either compared the Iraqi and Iranian refugee population or used oral history as its methodology as I am intending to do in my dissertation research.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The third chapter of the dissertation identifies the methodology, starting with a description of the research design and methodology, research setting, data collection, data analysis and lastly protection of human subjects. The purpose of this study was: (1) to analyze the life experiences of women refugees from Iran and Iraq, before and after being resettled in the United States, and (2) to identify strategies and coping mechanisms that the participants found effective in facilitating the transition to their new home.

Research Design and Methodology

I conducted a pilot study with Iranian Baha'i refugees as part of a class assignment in April and May 2012. I interviewed one male and one female refugee who resettled post 9/11 in the United States. I asked very specific questions during the interviews and focused mainly on their experiences since living in the United States. As a result of the pilot study, I decided to revamp the approach to my research and to ask more open-ended questions in order to learn about the whole life story of the interviewees and only focus on female participants. After deliberation with my dissertation committee, I decided an oral history methodology would be most effective for this study.

The Oral History Association (2009) defines oral history as:

... a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in the past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies. (para.2)

Specifically, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) state, "oral history allows us to get at the

valuable knowledge and rich life experience of marginalized persons and groups that would otherwise remain untapped, and, specifically, offers a way of accessing subjugated voices” (p.151). In addition, the authors note, “while oral history focuses on the individual and her narrative, it can be used to link micro- and macro phenomena and personal life experiences to broader historical circumstances” (p. 153).

To further strengthen my skills in interviewing and oral history, in June of 2013, I attended a four-day workshop with Voice of Witness (VoW). VoW is an oral history organization that publishes a book series that illuminates critical human rights situations, as well as providing workshops for students and educators to learn how to use oral history methodology effectively (Mayotte, 2013). In the workshop, the attendees learned all the steps involved in conducting an oral history interview, including transcribing and editing.

Participants

The participants were from two different communities: female refugees from Iran who belong to the Baha’i faith and female Iraqi refugees who are Christians and identify as being Chaldean. Snowball sampling was used to meet all of the participants.

According to Creswell (2008), snowball sampling involves identifying “cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (p.158). In general, the only participants who were sought out were enthusiastic and highly motivated about telling their life stories. If anyone was reluctant to share her personal information, this was highly respected and no participants were in any way persuaded into participating (Mayotte, 2013).

Iranian Baha'i

As mentioned earlier, I previously conducted a pilot study with two Iranian Baha'i refugees, and one of the female participants (Sanam) was willing to be interviewed for the dissertation once again. Sanam also was generous enough to share with me her contacts within the Baha'i community and talked to several of her family and friends, who were also willing to be interviewed. I ended up choosing Sanam's sister-in-law as one of the other participants, who in turn put me in touch with some of her former roommates and friends in San Diego who had come as refugees to the United States. The male participant of the pilot study also put me in touch with another refugee who settled in San Mateo. The Iranian Baha'i refugees varied in age, marital status, and background. The youngest was 30 and the oldest 56. One was single, three married and one was divorced. All of the participants had at least some years of college education.

Iraqi Chaldeans

In addition, as of September 2013 I made extensive contacts in the Chaldean community of El Cajon, a suburb of San Diego. A fellow doctoral student at the University of San Francisco connected me to the St. Peter Chaldean Cathedral and the "Ladies of Hope" women's refugee organization. "Ladies of Hope" was of tremendous help in finding participants for my study. The current president of the organization, Nada Mati, and several of the board members put me in touch with about 15 female refugees. While I talked to all of them briefly, some were not willing to participate in a formal sit-down interview, which I respected. Out of about 15 females, about half were willing to be interviewed and from that number, I chose five. As the researcher, I strove continually for a variety in age, demographics, and personal situation. The age varied from 23 to 47, and

one was single during the interview (although she got married a few months after our meeting), three married, and one divorced. Only two of the participants had some level of higher education.

All of the participants were able to speak English (or a translator was used at two occasions) and arrived in the United States post 9/11 with one exception. Vicky, a Chaldean refugee in San Diego, was the only person who did not come after 9/11 to the United States, but in 1992. I made an exception for Vicky as I found her story very compelling since she was the only single mother among the Chaldean refugees and worked for a refugee organization herself (International Rescue Committee). The researcher chose all together five participants from each country of origin.

Research Setting

The research setting was in both the Bay Area and the San Diego area (El Cajon in East San Diego for the Chaldean refugees and North San Diego for the Baha'i).

Iraqi Chaldean-El Cajon

The rationale for including a research setting in a different part of the state from where I lived was that El Cajon is home to the second largest Chaldean community in the United States (after Detroit). El Cajon has a population of about 30,000 Chaldeans/Assyrians; many arrived in the United States after the second Iraq war in 2003, since violence against Christians greatly increased in the post-Saddam Hussein era (AINA, 2012). Overall, El Cajon has just over 100,000 inhabitants, according to the 2014 Census, and is very diverse aside from having a substantial Iraqi minority: 28% Hispanic, 6% African American, and 3.6% Asian (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The median household income is \$44,112 (2009-2013), significantly below the California average at

\$61,094. The population percentage below the poverty line was 26.4% as compared to 15.9% in the rest of California (United States Census Bureau, 2015).

Iranian Baha’i in Bay Area and North County San Diego

The Iranian Baha’i participants resided in both the San Francisco Bay Area (East Bay and Peninsula) and San Diego (North County, La Jolla, and Encinitas). In San Diego, North County lies along the coast and is considerably wealthier than East County where El Cajon is located, and is, at the same time, a lot less diverse racially and ethnically. The Baha’i participants were a lot more dispersed around California, compared to the Chaldeans, who were all clustered in a small area.

The exact location for the interviews for both groups was chosen by the participants, whether in their homes or another location. This decision was part of de-centering authority from the researcher and fostering shared authority between the researcher and the participants, as well as making the participants as comfortable as possible (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Most of the interviews were conducted in people’s homes, but a few were conducted in public spaces such as coffee shops and one in a church community room. I was fortunate enough that most of the participants graciously invited me to their apartments. That way I was not only able to interview the women, but also experience the gracious Middle Eastern hospitality and meet their families. Almost each of the women introduced me to their children, husbands, siblings and often more extended family members such as cousins, as all of the participants lived with family members. During the interviews I was generously offered Turkish coffee or mint tea along with sweets such as Baklava or candy. Some of the participants even invited me to eat dinner with their families, which I, of course, graciously accepted.

Data Collection

The data collection process involved several steps. The interviews were conducted over the course of almost one year. The steps included initial screening, selecting participants, conducting the interviews, transcribing, and editing. First, initial contacts were set up with seven to eight participants from the Baha'i community and about 15 potential participants from the Chaldean community. The oral history process, time involvement, and rights of the participants were explained in detail in these initial sessions, which were conducted either via email or in person. Also, a release and consent form and the participant's bill of rights were given during that time.

Secondly, from the short meet-ups or email correspondence, the researcher chose five participants per group for extensive oral history interviews. These final participants were chosen due to their enthusiasm to participate in the project and to ensure that a variety of voices will be heard in regard to age, marital status, and background. These first two steps were conducted in late February 2014.

Third, the first oral history interviews were conducted with the 10 participants, lasting about one to two and a half hours per person, from March 2014 to November 2015. All the interviews were digitally recorded. During the interviews, the researcher took on the role of an active listener, which Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) describe in this way:

We must train our minds and ears to hear the story of others, not just the words, but also the meaning, the emotion, the silence. This process may involve the questioning and disavowing of previously held concepts and categories that frame our understanding of social reality, making the process potentially

transformational for the researcher as well. (p.160)

Fourth, the researcher transcribed the interviews right after conducting the interviews. Fifth, the researcher edited the transcripts for run-on sentences and excessive words such as “ums” and “like” (Mayotte, 2013). In the sixth step, the researcher shared the transcription with the participants. Voice of Witness describes this step as significant in that it honors participants and demonstrates that their stories are shared accurately and respectfully (Mayotte, 2013). This step was completed as soon as the transcripts were written and edited.

In the seventh and final step, the researcher conducted one shorter interview (15-45 minutes) with some of the participants to fill in any gaps in the research. This interview was done either in person or over the phone, email, or instant messaging and was completed between October 2014 and February 2015.

| Steps | Timeline |
|--|---|
| 1. Initial screening and contact of participants | February 2014 |
| 2. Five participants chosen from each group | February 2014 |
| 3. First round of oral history interviews | March 2014-November 2015 |
| 4. Transcriptions | Starting May 2014 with first round of interviews and spanning until mid- February 2015 after the last follow up interviews |
| 5. Editing of transcripts | Starting late May 2014 with first round of interviews and spanning until late February 2015 after the last follow up interviews |
| 6. Sharing of transcripts with participants | After transcription and editing of transcripts, from late May 2014 to late February 2015, depending on interview round |
| 7. Second round of interviews with most of the participants either in person, via email or instant message | October 2014-February 2015 |

Table 1: Data Collection Steps and Timeline

Data Analysis

After the transcription and verification of the validity by the participants, the researcher began the process of data analysis, which involved several steps. First, the data were organized, meaning that the researcher read the transcripts closely to attain a general sense of all the data (Creswell, 2009). Second, the data was coded for themes. Creswell (2008) states that the “process of coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence of the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p.184). The first two steps began in June 2014 and, depending on the participant, spanned until February 2015. For

the purpose of this study, a combination of predetermined codes, based on the literature and common sense was used; but also emerging codes, from topics that were unforeseen and came up during the interviews were used (Creswell, 2009). Third, the researcher identified the emergent themes from the coding process (presented and described later in Chapter IV). This step was completed from February 2015 to early March, after which Chapter IV and Chapter V were written from early March to early May 2015.

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to starting my interviews, I applied for permission from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco and was approved on February 11, 2014 as “Exempt” according to 45CFR46.101(b). Participation in the study was voluntary, and all interviewees received pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and protection for the participants. The women were able to choose their own pseudonyms to foster empowerment in the process of interviewing. Further, the participants signed a form of consent (Appendix A).

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings to the research questions, based upon interviews with the 10 participants. The chapter begins with a brief description of each participant, followed by a thematic analysis of responses to the three main research questions. The underlying themes emerged during the transcription and analytical coding process of the interviews.

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to analyze the life experiences of women refugees from Iran and Iraq before and after being resettled in the United States, and (2) to identify strategies and coping mechanisms that the participants found effective in facilitating the transition to their new home. The research questions were the following:

1. What are the push factors for leaving their home country and the pull factors for resettling as refugees in the United States?
2. What is the impact of government programs/inter-governmental organizations/NGO's/local communities?
 - a. What role did the government and inter-governmental programs play in helping female refugees make the transition from the home country to the United States?
 - b. What role did NGO's/local communities play in the transition and acclimation of women refugees in the United States?
3. What kind of experiences do women refugees from Iraq and Iran have in the United States?
 - a. How do their experiences in the US impact the identity of the women

refugees?

- b. How do women refugees from Iraq and Iran adjust to United States society?

Profiles of Participants

This section introduces all of the participants. First, an overview is presented in Table 1 Participants, and then each participant is described with background information. The participants were all selected by snowball sampling.

| Name | Age | Country of Origin | Religion | Occupation | US Arrival |
|---------|-----|-------------------|----------|--|------------|
| Alast | 56 | Iran | Baha'i | Stay at home mother | 2004 |
| Azam | 54 | Iran | Baha'i | Educational psychologist, currently stay at home mom | 2014 |
| Azar | 30 | Iran | Baha'i | Architect | 2010 |
| Sanam | 33 | Iran | Baha'i | Lawyer | 2002 |
| Rana | 35 | Iran | Baha'i | Student | 2006 |
| Farah | 47 | Iraq | Chaldean | Stay at home mother | 2009 |
| Khalida | 38 | Iraq | Chaldean | Day care | 2012 |
| Nadiya | 23 | Iraq | Chaldean | Student | 2009 |
| Vicky | 47 | Iraq | Chaldean | Resettlement case officer at IRC | 1992 |
| Wasan | 47 | Iraq | Chaldean | Housekeeper | 2010 |

Table 2. Participants

Iranian Baha'i Refugees

Alast. Alast was born in 1958 in the northeastern part of Iran. Her family, as well as the family of her husband at that time, had land and several properties, all of which

were taken away by the government after the revolution. Soon after, Alast and her four daughters had planned on leaving Iran. However, because Baha'i in Iran were denied passports until recently, they were not able to leave until 2004. Originally, Alast, her husband, and two of her daughters were planning to go to Australia, but the family was resettled to San Diego, since one of her daughters already lived there. But even their journey to San Diego was challenging with a ten-month stay in Turkey before being granted final approval for immigration. Alast was not employed at the time of the study due to health challenges, but focused her time being involved in the Baha'i community and taking some community college classes in English for Second Language Learners. All of her daughters were living in North County of San Diego; however, she divorced her husband briefly after coming to the United States.

Azam. Azam is a mother of three and was born in 1960 and came very recently to the U.S. She studied at the BIHE (Baha'i Institute of Higher Education), an underground online university of members of the Baha'i faith for over 10 years; in fact she was one of the first students of BIHE, and finished her Master's degree in educational psychology. Since her degree was not recognized in Iran, she was not able to find employment in her field. Just four months before the interview was conducted in November 2014, she came with her two youngest daughters to San Diego. Her oldest daughter had arrived in San Diego four years prior. Azam started English classes at the community college and is eager to get a job in her profession in the near future. Her husband is a self-employed merchant and is still back in Iran. The family hopes that their father can join them in San Diego within the next year.

Azar. Azar is the sister in-law of Sanam and was born in Tehran in 1984. She

came in 2010 to the United States, also through HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). Before coming to the U.S., she stayed for four months in Vienna to wait for her resettlement status to be processed. She resettled to San Diego and lived there from 2010-2012, after which she moved to Berkeley. Azar completed a Bachelor's degree in architecture at BIHE, and graduated in May 2014 from UC Berkeley in the Master's Degree of Architecture. She was the first student ever in Berkeley to have her undergraduate degree in Architecture from BIHE recognized. Azar was publicly very outspoken about the Baha'i persecution in Iran and testified in the past in Washington, DC, as well as before the United Nations in New York City in Fall 2015. At the time of the study, she was working for an architecture firm in Berkeley, California.

Sanam. Sanam was born in 1981 in Tehran. She came together with her brother, in October 2002 to the United States, after having lived for 11 months in Vienna, Austria, during the resettlement process. HIAS submitted her application to the United States government. While living in Austria, she worked as a translator for HIAS. From 2003 to 2005, Sanam studied at the Berkeley City College and then transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, where she majored in political science. From 2009 on, she enrolled in University of California, San Francisco Hastings Law School, where she concentrated in International Law. After graduating in 2012, she completed a fellowship at Asylum Access, a refugee advocacy organization, for several months and afterwards worked at an immigration law office in San Francisco. She currently returned to the Bay Area from living in Geneva, Switzerland for one year, where she worked for the Baha'i International Community. At the time of the study, she had accepted a position as an asylum officer at United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Sanam

had been back to her home country only once in 2004 since moving to the U.S.

Rana. Rana came in 2006 to the United States from Tehran, where she was born in 1978. She stayed for almost a year in Turkey waiting for her resettlement papers to be processed by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Her father was one of nine elected officials from the Tehran Baha'i Assembly. Due to the high profile engagement of her father in the Baha'i community, her brother and sister were imprisoned in the early 1980's by the Iranian government. After arriving to the United States, Rana enrolled in an intensive English program, as her English skills were very limited. She found employment in retail after five months of being in the United States. After getting married, she started her Bachelor's degree in physiology at San Francisco State University. Her goal is to enroll into dental school or complete a Master's degree in Physical Therapy.

Chaldean Refugees

Farah. Farah was born in Baghdad in 1968. Her husband had owned a flourishing cosmetic store but was forced to close the store due to the violence after the 2003 U.S. invasion. Farah left Iraq in 2006 with her husband and three children and went to Lebanon for three years to wait for their resettlement to the United States. Eventually, the family resettled in San Diego in 2009, where her husband was able to find employment as a welder. Farah, however, has not been able to work due to health concerns. Her sister Eman also joined the family a few years ago with a visitor visa and is currently applying for asylum status. Eman is severely ill with advanced osteoporosis, arthritis, and psoriasis and is not able to get any medical benefits in the United States since her case is still pending. Farah is actively involved in her sister's asylum case and was able to raise most

of the money needed for the asylum lawyer from the local church, Non Governmental Organizations, and community.

Khalida. Khalida was born in 1976 in Mosul in a big family of eight children. The Iraq War in 2003 affected her family tremendously. Her father was killed by extremists, and her husband escaped a kidnapping attempt with severe injuries. She, her husband, and five children (two teenage daughters and eight-year old triplets) lived in Baghdad before they fled to Damascus, Syria, in May 2007 after the attempted kidnapping of her husband. The family waited for four years to be resettled to the United States. Finally in March 2012, Khalida and her family were resettled to El Cajon, San Diego. Her husband is unable to work since his kidneys were severely injured while escaping his attempted kidnapping and he is currently attending four weekly dialysis treatments. The family lives on welfare, and Khalida is supplementing the family's income by running a day care program for toddlers out of her two-bedroom apartment. At the time of the study, she had been taking English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) classes for several years at the community college in El Cajon and had been steadily improving her English. At the end of the study, she had enrolled in a Pharmacy technician certificate program at a community college.

Nadiya. Nadiya was born in 1992 in Basra, the southern region of Iraq, where she lived with her parents, three sisters, and one brother. Her childhood rapidly changed after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Her father, who owned liquor stores, was killed by extremists in 2004. The family then moved to a village close to Mosul, so her mother and siblings could be with extended family. In 2008 two bombs destroyed part of the village including their house, forcing the family to leave Iraq. During the resettlement

process, the family lived in Turkey for six months until being resettled to the El Cajon area of San Diego in 2009.

Nadiya quickly learned English in high school and graduated with her Associate's degree from a local community college in May 2014. She is currently studying at the University of California, San Diego, and working part time as an assistant at a law firm. Since the first interview, Nadiya married a Chaldean man and moved a few hours north of San Diego.

Vicky. The only refugee who did not arrive in the U.S. after the 2003 Iraq invasion, Vicky, came in 1992 to Michigan with her husband and daughter. She was born in Iraq in 1967. After being a newlywed, she accompanied her husband, an engineer for the Iraqi government, on a business trip to Germany. During their stay in Germany, Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the couple was not able to return to Iraq. Germany granted the family asylum, but instead she and her husband decided to go to Greece to apply for refugee resettlement to the United States. Vicky and her husband had extended family already in Michigan and San Diego.

From 1992 to 2002, the family lived in Michigan, where Vicky completed her university studies in mathematics and sciences. After graduating with her Bachelor's degree, she worked as a high school teacher. In the early 2000's, she and her husband finalized their divorce and she moved with her children to San Diego. Vicky opened a clothing store where she designed evening and wedding gowns. After a few years running the store, she accepted a position with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) as a caseworker for Iraqi refugees.

Wasan. Wasan was born in 1967 and lived with her two children and husband in Baghdad before resettling to El Cajon, San Diego. Before the 2003 war, she had a stable job as a receptionist and later was a stay-at-home mother. After the invasion, her husband was kidnapped twice by extremists. After the second kidnapping, the family left Iraq to Lebanon where they lived for one year and four months before being resettled to the United States. The original plan was to come to Canada, since they have a big family there, but the United Nations, which processed their case, changed the resettlement location to San Diego. Wasan is currently the sole provider of her family, as her husband is ill and depressed as a result of the kidnappings. She works as a housekeeper at the Holiday Inn. Wasan states her children have adjusted well to life in the United States and speak English well.

Research Question 1:

What Are the Push Factors for Leaving their Home Country and the Pull Factors for Resettling as Refugees in the United States?

Push Factors

In this study, the push factors include the participants' reasons and motivations for leaving their country. The participants, being refugees, usually had little or no choice to leave their country due to some kind of persecution or fear of persecution. As outlined in Chapter I, the official definition, according to UNHCR (n.d.), of a refugee is someone who

... owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside

the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (UNHCR, n.d., para.1)

This definition of a refugee contrasts with that of immigrants, where individuals chose out of their free will to leave their home country. Religious persecution emerged as the common theme in push factors between both groups and provided the basis of the participants' claim to being awarded refugee status under international law. However, religious persecution differed between the two groups in the level and severity of violence and discrimination. In both Iran and Iraq, the participants were not able to freely practice their respective religion, pursue education, or to work and live uninterrupted without harassment and violence.

Iranian Baha'is. In the case of the Iranian participants, religious persecution started immediately after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and continues up to this day, as detailed in Chapter I. Every participant from Iran had property confiscated by the new government. Additionally, after 1979, many of the participants' parents and family members lost their jobs, as Baha'i members were subjected to employment restrictions by the government. As Sanam explained:

My parents were both educated before the revolution, my mom was a school counselor and my dad was a self- employed architect. My mom got fired from her job after the revolution because Baha'i were not allowed to work for the government anymore. My dad works for other people's architecture firms now, since a self- employed architect has no chances of getting government contracts. My grandparents owned a lot of land, they lost a lot of land after revolution, and it was all confiscated. They had to all start from zero.

Sanam's quote powerfully illustrates the oppression of a minority religious group after the 1979 revolution in the form of property confiscation and work discrimination. It is clear that discriminatory measures imposed by the government tremendously affected the economic well being of the Baha'i population.

In some Iranian Baha'i participants' cases, family members were imprisoned after the 1979 revolution and even tortured. As Rana stated,

When I was born, it was the same year as the revolution. My family was about to move to the USA in 1979, but my dad was elected to Baha'i council in Tehran so we had to stay. After that a lot of stuff happened. My dad was out of job, the government was out to catch him and kill him because he was one of the leaders of the Baha'i Council. So we had to leave our place so the government could not keep track of where we are. We had to go underground and kept moving so the government could not find us. My brother and sister were 13 and 14 years old at the time. They stayed with my grandparents. The government put them in jail, so they could get to my dad. They were in jail for 1-2 years. After they got out of jail my mom arranged for them to get out of the country and come to USA. They stayed in Pakistan for 1-2 years before coming to the USA as refugees. The situation was very confusing. My experience growing up was chaos and confusion. There was no safety.

These words reveal how severe the persecution and lack of stability of the early years after the revolution affected Rana and her family tremendously. Especially since Rana was a young child during this time, great psychological damage was inflicted on her that has had lasting effects up to now.

Despite these difficult circumstances, it was the denial of education that finally forced the Iranian participants to seek resettlement. The three younger Iranians, all in their 20's and 30's, stated the inability to attain higher education as their final push in deciding to seek resettlement to the United States. Baha'i members are not allowed to attend university in Iran, and their only chance continuing their education within Iran is through the Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE). BIHE, as mentioned previously, is an underground university that first held classes in private homes, but in the last few years, has moved many classes online. Azar described her personal journey as to why she decided to leave Iran:

In 2005 it was the first year the government alleged they would admit Baha'i students to university. And we were eligible to take entrance exam. Over 200 or 300 Baha'i students took the exam but none could not go to university. For different reasons for each case. Like paperwork is not complete, or the score was 0, or the university said there are problems in your documents. For each case different excuse. So, I started to study architecture at BIHE. I find myself truly passionate about architecture and design, but BIHE in Iran is too limited. The professors are basically devoting their life to the program and risking their life. As soon as the government finds out, they would attack the place that is holding BIHE classes. They would confiscate the place and arrest people. Whoever is affiliated in Iran is risking their lives. For architecture there is limited number of architects who graduated before the revolution. So I wanted to explore more ideas in design and that is only possible outside Iran.

Azar had clear educational limitations at BIHE, so to further her education and career she had no choice but to go abroad. Again, this example shows that the government clearly wanted to limit the economic advances made by any Baha'i and forces this minority population into very limited career choices. Similarly the two older participants in their 50's came because their children wanted education; thus they accompanied their children or followed briefly after.

Iraqi Chaldeans. Even though the Iranian Baha'i participants had to endure horrendous events and ongoing persecution and discrimination after 1979, the level of violence the Chaldean Iraqis experienced in their home country was even worse. Every Chaldean participant had a family member murdered, raped, or tortured by extremists. These extremists rose from the instability and turmoil caused by 2003 invasion by the United States into Iraq and targeted the Chaldean population. Before then, each Chaldean participant stated they had generally a good life, meaning they experienced safety in that they did not face harassment or violence in their daily life and stability. Some of the older female refugees, such as Vicky, Wasan, and Khalida, did indicate that they suffered food shortages during the previous wars, such as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the invasion of Kuwait in 1990 followed by first U.S.-Iraq War in 1991. However, the Chaldeans were generally safe despite a lack of food. When compared with life after the 2003 invasion, all participants indicated they had a better life under the rule of Saddam Hussein. For instance, Nadiya explained that under Saddam Hussein:

... life was normal; we did not have any problems with Muslims and lived peacefully in Basra. After the war in 2004, I was 12 years old, when my dad was killed by extremists and then we left and came to a village by Mosul, my

grandparents' village. It was a pretty hard life, no jobs for my mom and she had 5 kids, and we were all very young. In 2008 two bombs hit the village and our house was destroyed, and we decided to leave the village and Iraq.

Not only was Nadiya's father killed and the family suffered an irreplaceable emotional loss, but also the family's whole livelihood was destroyed after the bombs destroyed the family house. Other female refugees reported that their husbands were kidnapped, injured, and tortured. Khalida described her experience in Baghdad after the U.S. invasion in this way:

We lived in big house in Iraq, we had work. I worked as a medical assistant and my husband as a manager in a supermarket. Then my father was killed. One day in the supermarket insurgents tried to kidnap my husband and he severely got injured trying to escape. After 2003 it was not a good life in Bagdad, it was a hard life. No electricity, no water, can't go outside because it is a danger of being killed. We were always in fear of being killed. When we go out, we see people being killed. My cousin was a priest and was killed in his church. He was only 32 years old.

Khalida's experience shows that the sectarian violence made life nearly impossible to live in Baghdad, especially after the attempted kidnapping attempt on her husband. These stories demonstrate what daily life was like for Chaldeans after the 2003 invasion. Each Iraqi participant had countless stories of horrendous events of religious persecution in their lives before deciding to leave their home country.

Pull Factors

Pull factors involve the reasons and motivations participants chose a certain

country or certain city as their destination. The leading pull factors as to why the participants chose resettlement in the United States versus other countries were family connections and quality of education.

Family connections. The majority of participants stated a preference for resettlement to the United States and/or California. In particular the San Diego area or Northern California region were desired. As mentioned in Chapter III, San Diego has the second largest community of Iraqi Chaldeans (after Michigan). Thus many participants had another relative already living there who was able to serve as a sponsor for the newly arrived refugee. A family relative can volunteer to be a sponsor for a refugee and will be responsible for the new arrival for the first few months. These responsibilities could include picking her up from the airport, driving the refugee to appointments with the refugee organization, and help with the apartment search.

Iranian Baha'is. In the case of the Iranian refugees, California was their choice since they had extended family; however, the Iranian Baha'i community is not as clustered as the Chaldean community in East San Diego, El Cajon. Iranian Baha'is are settled throughout California with strongholds in Los Angeles, San Diego, and the Bay Area. Rana explained her experience of coming to the Bay Area:

I came directly to the Bay area, to Alamo and stayed with my brother, his wife and their two kids. When I came to Oakland airport and saw my brother and his family, I felt relieved. I lived with them for one year. It was overwhelming to be in a new country and be separated from my parents and friends; I did not know what is going to happen. But I knew if I did not have a job and no money I could stay with my brother for the rest of my life, that gave me peace in my mind.

Rana was one of the lucky ones as she had the luxury to stay with her brother as long as she needed; however, it was still tough for her to be separated from her parents and friends who stayed back in Iran.

Alternatively, two refugees indicated that they originally preferred another country. Initially, Sanam had planned to resettle as a refugee in Germany where her sister was living at the time. However, she decided against it since her brother decided to join her and they have a large extended family in Los Angeles. Sanam decided on her own free will that she would rather go to the United States than Germany; in contrast, Alast was resettled against her will in the United States. Alast's first choice destination had been Australia. As Alast stated,

We wanted to go to Australia, but my sister was already here and UNHCR said since you have immediate family here you have to go to USA. But we knew life is very hard in America, you have to work hard. My brother is in Australia and he says life is very easy and nice.

The quote shows that the United States of America was not everyone's first choice. Alast and her family were aware that the United States was not necessarily the country of unlimited opportunities, but rather a country with severe hardships for new immigrants.

Iraqi Chaldeans. Four out of the five participants among the Chaldean chose San Diego since they had both family connections both there and a large Chaldean community in East San Diego. Nadiya is one of the refugees with a huge extended family in East San Diego and explained the family dynamics in this way:

My whole family is here; we are all very close. We all live in El Cajon just a few minutes from each other. Most of my family came since 2008, just in the last few

years. When I arrived in San Diego, we went to my aunt house and stayed there for a few weeks. No one of my family could speak English well at that time, so my aunt came with us everywhere and helped us get settled.

Nadiyas quote shows extended family in the United States can be a powerful pull factor and how much her family helped her mother and her siblings in the adjustment phase.

Wasan was the only Chaldean who said she and her family wanted originally to go to Canada instead of the United States. Wasan had a large extended family in Canada, but the UNHCR, which processed their papers in Turkey, changed their case. Wasan expressed her grief about the situation,

We did not want to come to the United States. We wanted to go to Canada where we have a large family, but the United Nations changed our file and we had no choice. I don't know why they would resettle them to the United States. I'm not happy I came here. Still not happy now, life is very difficult here.

Clearly, Wasan was very unhappy about UNHCR's choice to resettle her and her family in the United States rather than Canada. This quote also affirms the significance of the proximity of extended family to most newly arrived refugees.

Education. Education was the second most dominant theme among the pull factors to the U.S. Neither Iranian nor Iraqi refugees were easily able to receive an education in their home countries; thus many of the interviewees placed significance on receiving it in the United States.

Iranian Baha'is. As mentioned earlier, Iranian Baha'is are not allowed to attend university in Iran. Even though the government provides primary and secondary education to Baha'i, it practices severe discrimination in regard to university enrollment.

The only chance for university education within Iran is BIHE. Every single one of the younger refugees primarily resettled to the U.S. for the educational opportunities. Sanam, Rana, and Azar's primary purpose was to start or complete their university education. As mentioned, Azar saw the architecture program at BIHE as too limited, since it was a small program with few faculty members. Therefore, she wanted to pursue graduate education in architecture in the United States. As Azar states in her own words:

I find myself truly passionate about architecture and design and really wanted to learn, but BIHE in Iran is too limited. The professors are devoting and risking their life to the program. As soon as the government would find out where classes are held, they would attack the place. For architecture especially there are a limited number of Baha'i architects who graduated before the revolution. So I wanted to explore more new ideas in design and that is only possibly in another country.

Sanam and Rana also had high goals regarding their education. Sanam stated that she first enrolled in Berkeley City College and then transferred to UC Berkeley where she majored in political science. Her ultimate goal was to become a lawyer, and she was accepted at University of California, Hastings College of the Law. She completed law school and successfully passed the bar exam. At the time of the study, Rana was still currently finishing up her Bachelor's degree in San Francisco State University in physiology, but was planning on going to graduate school. Rana explained her educational journey in this way:

I would like to be dentist or physical therapist. When you know you can work on yourself and invest in yourself that always brings happiness no matter what. I kind

of sacrificed my plan of having a kid, because I think that is not what would make me most happy. I lost a lot of years, not being able to improve. Now is the time for me to improve and work on my professional life. Now is the time to fulfill this dream of mine. To get an education, be a professional and use all my power to help others.

Rana's experience illustrates clearly that a higher education was her primary goal, and she even sacrificed having children for this dream.

Iraqi Chaldeans. As already mentioned above, Iraqi Chaldean refugees had a very challenging time receiving any kind of education post 2003, not because they were not allowed to attend school or university but due to the violence and lack of security. Four out of the five Chaldean women I interviewed were married or divorced with children and only one of them, Nadiya, was below the age of 30. Nadiya was the only Chaldean participant with a goal of entering higher education in the United States. She stated

It was my first choice to go to United States. I always wanted to go to the United States, even when I was in Iraq. Women can't do everything in Iraq but here I think people are equal here, does not matter if your girl or boy, especially in regard to education. In my family it was always important to get an education. I just graduated from community college and now I study human biology at UCSD.

I want to finish my Bachelors and then do my Masters or go to Medical School.

Nadiya's young age at coming to the United States clearly contributed to her easily learning the language, which facilitated starting a higher education.

Khalida brought up she would like to complete a Medical Assistant certificate to further her employment and help her family succeed financially. Additionally, Vicky completed her Bachelor degree in the mid 1990's in Michigan, right after she arrived in the United States. However, as both Khalida and Vicky indicated, their educational desire was not necessarily the main reason for coming to the United States, but more a by-product of living here. Wasan and Farah did not have any educational goals for themselves; however, it was very important for them to assure a good and safe education for their children.

Summary of Responses to Research Question 1

In summary, three themes emerged in response to the first research question regarding the push factors for leaving the home country and the pull factors for resettling in the United States. First, religious persecution was the push factor for both groups of participants. However, the religious persecution took on different forms in both countries. In Iran, the persecution was in form of property confiscation, imprisonment of high-ranking Baha'i members and severe discrimination in regard to employment and university education. The Chaldeans, in contrast, had to suffer a much higher level of violence as many of the participants' family members were kidnapped, killed or injured by extremists. Also, it is significant to point out that the origin of the persecution emanates from different sources in each country. In Iran, the persecution and discrimination are government-initiated. In contrast, in Iraq the persecution is driven by religious extremists that are not part of the government.

Pull factors included family connections in California and a desire for higher education. Almost every Iranian and Iraqi participant had some kind of extended family

already either in the East San Diego area for the Iraqi participants or in San Diego and Bay Area for the Iranians, which motivated refugees to pick this location over other countries or states. Desire for higher education was the other pull factor; however, this urge and desire for education was much stronger and more in the forefront among the Iranian Baha'i refugees.

Research Question 2:

What Is the Impact of Government Programs/Inter-governmental Organizations/ NGO's/Local Communities?

a. What Role Did the Government and Inter-governmental Programs Play in Helping Female Refugees Make the Transition from the Home Country to the United States?

Except for Sanam and Azar, most of the participants sought refugee resettlement in the United States through UNHCR via a third country. The UNHCR processed all the documents and set up meetings with the US State Department to approve their resettlement case. However, between the two groups, there were differences in terms of the third country they came from, how long the waiting time was, and if they received any financial aid.

Iranian Baha'is. Alast, Azam and Rana all came via Turkey to the United States where UNHCR processed their paperwork. The time of processing varied among the participants from 10 months for Alast, one year for Rana, and two years for Azam. All of the participants stated the time in Turkey was difficult for many reasons. During the time in a third country, the refugees were not allowed to work, yet they were required to pay

for their own housing and all their expenses while waiting for their application to be processed. As a result, many of the refugees were dependent on financial support from their families. As Azam described:

I stayed in Turkey for two years with my two daughters to wait for resettlement. I had no working permit and my husband had to stay in Iran and earn money to send to us. Usually it takes less than one year until resettlement but in our case it took two years. It was difficult to survive with no job, one of my daughters sold self made bracelets and I volunteered part time as a cosmetologist. Other than that we would watch television and use the Internet to learn English during that time. It was a very difficult time to just wait and not do much.

As this quote illustrates, the refugees' situations were compounded by financial difficulties; additionally, the sense of uncertainty caused emotional turmoil.

Iraqi Chaldeans. Similarly, the Iraqi Chaldeans refugees encountered financial difficulties and emotional turmoil in regard to the resettlement process. Nevertheless their experiences were more complicated because they usually did not receive financial support from their families back home. In general, the Chaldean refugees raised similar issues as the Iranian refugees, regarding the time waiting for UNHCR resettlement process. However, the wait times were mostly much longer for the Chaldeans. Khalida had to wait four years until her case was approved in Syria. Nadiya waited with her family for six months in Turkey, Vicky for two and a half years in Greece, Wasan for one year and four months and Farah for three years in Lebanon. In each of those countries UNHCR processed their documents. Most of the refugees did not get any financial support from UNHCR and were legally not allowed to work.

Khalida, who had to wait the longest from all the Chaldeans for resettlement to San Diego, described the resettlement process in Damascus, Syria:

After the insurgents tried to kidnap my husband, we ran away immediately from Iraq. I had five kids at that time. Oldest 5 years old and my triplets were 5 months old. The first year we had to pay everything ourselves, only after one year we got a little bit of money from UN for housing because my family was special case. We had five kids under 7 and my husband was sick and injured from the attempted kidnapping. The health of my son was not very good at that time and medicine was very expensive in Syria and the UN did not help with any medicine. I had no choice but to go back to Iraq for a short time. My sister is a doctor there and I was able to get medicine for free.

As Khalida's experience illustrates, UNHCR did help with some cash support in her case, but medical support was lacking. This situation endangered her own and her son's lives, causing them to return to Iraq temporarily to receive medical treatment.

United States Government

The main contribution from the United States government towards resettlement was eight months of cash support in addition to food stamps and Medi-Cal after arriving in the United States. The cash support varied according to marital status and dependents. According to Vicky who worked for the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) was \$333 if a refugee were single, and \$542 if a married couple. Plus each new arrival received \$1000 as a one-time payment right after arrival in the United States. Every single one of the interviewees from both countries agreed that eight months of monetary support was not sufficient to make the transition from their

home country to the United States. Additionally, each participant agreed that the RCA was too low and did not cover living expenses. This experience was partially attributed to the high cost of living in California, both in the Bay Area and San Diego.

Most refugees I interviewed had zero to few English skills when they arrived and found it very challenging to make a fast transition into the workforce within eight months. As a result, the resettled refugees did not have enough time to adjust and learn the language properly. Often some of the refugees with a university degree had to work in the fast food or retail industry, largely because of limited English skills.

Iranian Baha'is. Some Iranian participants were able to stay with extended family for a few months or even longer after their arrival and were able to save on expensive rent, security deposits, and utilities. For example, Rana had the luxury of being able to stay with her brother in Alamo, California, for one year without paying any rent and could use the RCA to cover other expenses. She described the first few months in this way:

I did not have any money when I arrived in the United States. I had to rely on my brother. The only money I received in the beginning was a few hundred dollars from the government and food stamps. But it was not enough at all, even though I was living rent-free. I had to look for a job very fast and I did not have many skills and very little English skills. I got a job at Macy's. Then at Longs Drugs. I got those jobs after 4 months even though I had no English skills at all at the time. I think customers were thinking I was joking because I gave them often something that was totally irrelevant since I did not understand. My store manager would laugh; she was so nice she was like an angel.

Rana's experience showed that even though she was one of the lucky ones with family in the United States, she had no choice but to quickly find employment, rather than focusing on improving her language skills and adjusting to U.S. culture before entering the labor market. However, not all of the Iranian refugees were as lucky as Rana who was able to live rent free with her brother. For instance, Sanam and her brother lived by themselves in the Bay Area (after a brief two-week stay in Los Angeles with extended family) and had to pay rent and all other expenses from day one.

Iraqi Chaldeans. As mentioned before, rents in California were very high compared to the rest of the country and thus the participants thought the RCA was too low. Even in El Cajon, rent for a two-bedroom apartment is over \$1,000. Khalida lived with her husband and five children in a two bedroom home and explained:

After the eight-month cash support expired, we went on welfare. Now we get \$911 dollars from welfare for the whole family and plus food stamps. But rent is 1100. Rent is more than cash from government. If we had 3 bedrooms it would be even more expensive. But we stay in small house, 2 bedrooms; I have bunk beds for my kids since all five have to sleep in one room. It's not enough to live off, and when we work then the government cuts cash and food stamps. If I get a salary for \$600 a month for providing day care, I get my welfare cut by \$250 cash.

As powerfully illustrated by this quote, cash support was not enough to pay the full amount of rent, let alone any other expenses for a large family like Khalida's. In order for Khalida to raise her children in only a modest upbringing, she would need higher cash

support from the government. Her quote also shows that many of the refugees did not have a huge incentive to work since their cash support was cut once they had a job.

b. What Role Did Non-Governmental Organizations and Local Communities Play in the Transition and Acclimation of Women Refugees in the United States?

Non-Governmental Organizations. All the refugee participants had their resettlement processed by the UNHCR, except for Sanam and Azar who came via Vienna with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). HIAS took care of the entire resettlement process that traditionally is the responsibility of UNHCR, as well as helping the refugees after they arrived in the United States. The remaining participants received support after their arrival in the U.S. from three main resettlement organizations: International Rescue Committee (IRC), Catholic Charities, Alliance for African Assistance and Jewish Family Services.

Iranian Baha'is. Sanam and Azar stated that HIAS efficiently processed their resettlement application. Similarly to the other refugees who came through UNHCR, Sanam and Azar also had to pay for all their housing and expenses while staying in Vienna. Even though the time in Vienna was a financial burden on their families, both had mainly positive things to say about HIAS. They described how HIAS offered workshops about U.S. culture a few weeks before leaving Vienna. When Azar came to San Diego and Sanam to the Bay Area, the support system was much more limited than what HIAS offered; however, it was still sufficient for both of them. As Azar stated,

HIAS was pretty helpful. They have an office in San Diego. They visited me at my uncle's house and assured everything was all right. They tried to help me find

a job. I met with a career counselor who was helping me with the job search, even though I found eventually a job by myself on Craigslist. For me it was enough support because I had family. My uncle was always there and he would always help me. If I did not have anyone, then maybe would not have been enough, but I had additional support from my family.

Azar's statement shows that she was one of the lucky ones who did not need elaborate support from HIAS, as she had her extended family on hand to help out when needed. But this was not the case for all of the Iranian refugees.

Other Iranian Baha'i refugees had different accounts. For instance, Alast explained how she thought the sponsor was given too much responsibility by the refugee organization (in her case, Catholic Charities).

One of my daughters was a sponsor so she was supposed to do everything. It was hard for her because she had a job. Very hard for her. I could not drive at that time. The refugee organization was far away. Almost an hour away. Catholic Charities was not really helpful. We would have needed more support. When you come here you can't do anything, you can't speak the language or drive. In Iran, we had tram and bus but here in San Diego you can't go anywhere without a car. Too much responsibility is placed on the sponsors. They have their life too; they can't take time off all the time.

Azam reported having even greater difficulty with her resettlement organization, the Jewish Family Services.

When first came at airport, the organization was supposed to come to airport, but did not come. The case manager was not there. After two weeks case

manager came, but did not do anything. They even threatened my older daughter who came many years as a refugee if she would not help us, they would send me and my younger daughters to another city. So my daughter was forced to help and sign that the family is her responsibility, even though she was in the middle of her exams at UCSD. Thankfully we were able to solve our problems together and after two months we got this bigger two-bedroom apartment. But it was very difficult because we had no credit and agency did not help renting apartment.

Both Alast and Azam's words illustrate the kind of negative experiences the newly arrived refugees had with some of the resettlement organizations and show the clear limitations of these NGOs.

Iraqi Chaldeans. All of the Chaldean participants stated that the NGOs did not provide enough of a support network after arriving in the United States. Some of the common complaints of the Chaldean refugees included that the resettlement agency was too far away and difficult to access via public transportation. This was especially true for San Diego, as it is a sprawling city with limited public transportation. Other complaints included too few support services from the NGO's, such as career advice and psychological counseling. Many of the refugees felt as if they were on their own and without any help once they had arrived.

Farah, an Iraqi Chaldean refugee, described the first few months in the United States:

African alliance was our assigned resettlement agency and they supported us for eight months. But it was not enough. Food stamps were enough to buy food but it was very little cash money, I remember I needed more money to buy things like

school supplies for my kids. I wished it would have been more money. Also, my husband did not find work the first year. African alliance could have done more and I wished they would have helped to find job for my husband.

Farah's account shows the limitations of the help that the assigned NGOs, such as African Alliance, give to the respective refugees. Not only is cash money too little for even the basic needs of the refugees, but there is also lack of support to find a job which is crucial for supporting a family long term, particularly after the cash support stops after an 8 month period.

Vicky, who came to the U.S. in 1992 with Catholic Charities and then worked as a case manager for the International Rescue Committee, one of the largest resettlement organizations in the United States had experienced being on both sides. She admitted that the resettlement NGO's were offering limited support:

Usually I get 10 new cases a month. I have over a 100 cases a year. The government gives each of the four main resettlement organizations a number, how much people they need to help resettle each year. Before a client arrives in America, we call a relative and ask do you want to be the sponsor here in American? If they have no sponsor, better for us, we charge more then. The sponsor has to meet them at airport, find housing, and help with school as soon families come. However, often sponsor says I have job I can't leave my job so we end up doing everything for them. So this a bad thing and this happens a lot and then we can't charge more and we have too much work to do with not enough time for very case.

This excerpt shows how overwhelmed the average caseworker can be in helping to resettle refugees. Many refugees suffered as a result, since not enough time was allocated to help each one sufficiently. The case managers or even the NGOs could not be blamed for this lack of support, but the government needs to be held accountable as organizations such as IRC are primarily dependent on government funding.

Local Communities. The communities where the participants were placed had a huge role in helping to acclimate and settle the newly arrived refugees. In both case studies, the religious affiliations and institutions played a large part in settling into the community. Furthermore, the Chaldean community had a number of organizations that are dedicated and targeted solely for Chaldean refugees.

Iranian Baha'is. In the Iranian Baha'i community, the local Baha'i community played a large role in many of the refugees' lives. Even though the Baha'i community rarely provided any specific assistance for newly arrived refugees, such as offering services or workshops, all of the Iranian participants were very actively involved in the Baha'i community and benefited greatly from the support network in acclimating to their new home. Azar explained how the Baha'i community helped her both in California and in Vienna during the resettlement process.

In the Baha'i community by nature you never feel alone. If you can only find one Baha'i then they put you in touch with others. As Baha'i we are all one and help each other. The vision of Baha'i is embracing. Many gatherings, many celebrations, both in Vienna during the resettlement process and then here in the United States. The first day I came to Vienna, as the youngest daughter of the family, I was alone now, but I did not feel homesick. Not one day I ever felt

homesick, even though I miss my friends in Iran. I'm also more and more involved and active in the Baha'i community, right now I'm planning a vigil night for prisoners in Iran.

As this quote shows, the Baha'i community did not allow Azar to feel lonely or homesick, enabling her to feel welcome far away from home and her family.

Chaldean Iraqis. The Chaldean community in El Cajon had several organizations founded and operated by Chaldeans. Particularly, Middle Eastern Social Services (CMESS) and Ladies of Hope exclusively served the Chaldean refugee community with post resettlement support and services. For instance, CMESS offered a community clinic, mental health counseling, and naturalization workshops. Ladies of Hope held social evenings for refugees to eat and play Bingo along with a furniture and clothing warehouse where newly arrived refugees could pick up donated furniture and assistance with rent for the most needy families. Ladies of Hope consisted of solely Chaldean board members and officers. In many events, both organizations also worked closely together with St. Michael's Chaldean Catholic and St. Peter's Chaldean Catholic Cathedral in El Cajon. All the female Chaldean refugees whom I interviewed were contacted either through CMESS or Ladies of Hope, and all benefited in some way from these organizations as well as the churches.

For instance, Farah extensively used the support system of the Chaldean community, as she collected financial help for her sister, Eman, who was applying for asylum in the United States. Both Ladies of Hope and St. Peter's Cathedral donated money to her sister's asylum case. Farah was able to raise over \$5000 from the community for her sister's asylum case. Similarly, Khalida, who struggled financially

since her husband was severely ill, received cash assistance for her rent, backpacks, and car seats for her children as well as a mattress from Ladies of Hope.

Summary of Responses to Research Question 2

Research Question 2 explored the role played by inter-governmental agencies (UNHCR), government, NGO's and local communities. Both participant groups had similar experiences with UNHCR in the resettlement process. Resettlement took longer for the Iraqis than the Iranians in the third country, and only in rare cases of severe hardship would UNHCR give any financial assistance during this time. Next, the role of the United States government was discussed, and most participants from both countries agreed that the cash assistance they received was not enough to cover living expenses in California.

For some of the Iranian refugees who were able to live with extended family in California, the support provided by the NGOs was sufficient. However, other Iranians complained that their sponsor had too many responsibilities, and so they wished for more support from their resettlement agency in the United States. Among the Iraqis, every participant agreed that support from their local NGO was not enough.

On the other hand, local communities provided adequate support for both refugee groups in acclimating to the new country. The Baha'i Center for the Iranian helped participants to make friends and feel welcome in California. The Iraqi Chaldeans had a few organizations in their community that served the Chaldean community and provided furniture, social gatherings and, in some cases, financial support.

Research Question 3:

What Kind of Experiences Do Women Refugees from Iraq and Iran Have in the United States?

a. How Does their Experience in the U.S. Impact the Identity of the Women Refugees?

To answer this research question, I asked the participants how their identity changed or remained the same in regard to their national versus religious identity. Furthermore, I inquired if the participants experienced a potentially higher degree of independence as women in the United States compared to when they lived in Iran or Iraq.

National versus Religious Identity. This section explores whether the participants' identity is more closely tied to their nationality being Iranian/Iraqi, American or their religion being Chaldean/Baha'i.

Iranian Baha'is. Each one of the Iranian Baha'i refugees, except for Sanam, identified most strongly as being Baha'i first and foremost. Rana put it powerfully into words:

I think I feel first Baha'i then Persian. I identify more with being Baha'i because Baha'i culture and Persian culture are very different. Persian culture is Muslim culture. You have to cover yourself, but in Baha'i, we don't cover. We are equal men and women. But in Iranian culture men are superior, you don't see that in Baha'i families.

Rana pointed out some of the differences between mainstream Iranian and Baha'i culture, such as gender equality, which led her to identify more as Baha'i rather than with her nationality.

Sanam was the only participant I interviewed who felt defiant about her identity and whether she most identified with being Baha'i, Iranian, or American. She refused to let herself be defined by others, instead saying she was a mix. She stated:

I don't think I am any of them fully. I fell more American and then Baha'i and then Iranian but a mixed of the three is what I try feel. Iranians consider me as Baha'i and Baha'i. Americans consider me as Iranian and Baha'i consider me as Iranian.

Sanam was the participant who had been in the United States the longest, having arrived in 2002. She was also the only participant who then left the United States for one year to work in Geneva. She admitted that leaving the United States and living in Europe definitely changed her in regard to her identity. While working in Geneva she was surrounded by few Iranian and Baha'i; being exposed to different cultures and living in a different place contributed to not just having one single identity.

Iraqi Chaldeans. The Iraqi participants all identified as Chaldean; however, Vicky who had been here the longest (since 1992) seemed to struggle most with being able to identify with just being Chaldean. She explained: "I'm Chaldean but in my lifestyle I see myself as American. Inside I'm Chaldean but my kids are raised here mostly and they are very American now." Her statement explains her internal struggle of adopting a similar lifestyle as mainstream American, but at the same time still partially identifying as Chaldean. The rest of the Chaldean interviewees did not have this internal struggle. Nadiya who had been in the United States since 2009 stated, "I don't have yet American citizenship, but rest of family has it. But now I'm applying. Even if I have citizenship, we are Chaldean, we can't change who we are." All the other Chaldean

participants expressed a similar sentiment.

Higher Degree of Independence as Women. This section examines the higher degree of independence the women attained after arriving in the United States. For example, two participants became divorced, several of the younger women lived in more independent arrangements, and some of the participants with children ended up going back to participate in the workforce after being a stay-at-home mother in their home country.

Iranian Baha'is. The three younger Iranian participants, Sanam, Rana and Azar, all came to the U.S. without their parents or extended family. Sanam came with her brother, and Rana and Azar came on their own and stayed with extended family before moving in with roommates. All three women attended university, as Sanam illustrated in her interview:

Baha'i value education. My parents are also well educated. In Iran I would have lived with family, not with roommates, while attending university. Here I'm more independent. Usually girls also live with parents until married. I came alone to this country. My parents wanted to stay because they want to keep contributing to Iran and society. That is a big deal in Baha'i faith to contribute to society. It is normal for girls to come alone as refugees. There is a famous Baha'i quote that states, women's education is more valued. Girls become mothers. That is why we need to educate them more. But in the United States, I also find myself more free to express myself as a woman. In Iran there is no freedom of thoughts. Many journalists are in prison. I was scared of mentioning my views. Here I studied Political Science and am able to argue whatever I want. I can truly express

myself.

Her quote clearly shows that not only was she able to live more independently here than in Iran, but also she could express herself more openly. She even successfully built a career out of this openness of expression by first studying political science and then becoming a lawyer, neither of which would have been possible in Iran.

Alast and Azam came with their children, but without their husbands who stayed in Iran. Only Alast's husband had come to the U.S., but they were separated shortly after he arrived in San Diego. She admitted that living in the United States put additional pressure on the marriage, which had been strained since living in Iran. However, in Iran Alast did not consider a divorce. Alast explained:

I got separated from my husband after living in the United States for a while. He came after me and after 2 years living together we decided to separate. In Iran it is not common to separate. But here I had the possibility, maybe I would have done it earlier if it is acceptable in Iran. My husband nor me worked in San Diego, so we were home alone all day long. After a few years I just could not take it anymore.

Not only did divorce become more possible once in the United States, but Alast's move to the U.S. and the very different lifestyle she encountered also partially contributed to their divorce.

Iraqi Chaldeans. Every Chaldean refugee came with their immediate family, which meant that Nadiya (a minor) arrived with her parents and Faiza, Khalida, Farah, and Vicky with their husbands and children. Vicky was the only Chaldean participant who divorced her husband after resettling to the United States. Vicky lived in Michigan

for 13 years with her husband and two children. Shortly after her divorce, she moved with her two children to San Diego to be closer to her parents.

As Vicky explained:

When I got a divorce it was a big deal in 2001. I left Michigan and it was tough when I moved to San Diego. I never said I'm divorced. I always said my husband has a job in Michigan. For 4 years no one except my family knew I'm divorced. My clients at IRC still don't know up to this day. I still say I live with my family including my husband in San Diego. It still is a big deal, especially for the newly arrived Iraqis. Iraqis look at divorced women badly. It would have been impossible to get a divorce back in Iraq.

This excerpt illustrates the challenges involved in a divorce within the Chaldean community in the United States. However, it also shows the independence gained by moving to the U.S. Vicky was able to divorce her husband only because she lived in the United States and then was able to move from Michigan to San Diego.

In addition, many of the other Chaldean women had more independent lives in the United States than in Iraq. In general, many of the participants mentioned that even if they worked before their marriage in Iraq, they stopped working after marriage and having children. For instance, both Khalida and Wasan stopped working in Iraq when they were married; however, in the United States both women started participating in the workforce again. Both their husbands were ill, and thus Khalida and Wasan started to support their families. Khalida first obtained a daycare license and was running a day care program out of her apartment. By the time of the writing of this dissertation, Khalida

was completing a pharmacy technician certificate, while Wasan was working as a maid in a local hotel in El Cajon.

The Chaldean women became more financially empowered since their husbands were no longer able to work. In a sense, it was a forced independence and emancipation, since in the United States these women had a higher need for additional income which was not necessary back in Iraq. It is significant to note that this emancipation did not happen because these women were influenced or inspired by American ideals of feminism, but emerged more from pragmatic realities. Khalida described her situation:

It is very difficult for women to be in America. The women have to take care of kids, clean, cook, wash and work...they have to do everything. In Iraq women only work inside the home only. But now women have to work inside and outside the home. It is more work and more responsibilities than in Iraq. Sometimes I feel lucky, sometimes I feel unlucky to be here because it is so much more work.

b. How Do Women Refugees from Iraq and Iran Adjust to United States Society?

During the interviews, I asked if the participants liked living in the United States and how they felt regarding their home countries. While the Baha'i either had a desire to return to Iran or were unsure whether to stay forever in the United States, this desire to return did not exist much in the Chaldean community.

Iranian Baha'is. Several of the Iranian Baha'i refugees mentioned a strong desire to repatriate to their home country at some point after they completed their education and gained some work experience. Both Rana and Azar had a powerful wish to go back to their country if they could have an impact and improve the life of other Baha'i, for

instance by teaching at BIHE. Both participants expressed a strong willingness to go back even if there were no change in the political climate of the country. Azar justified her decision in this way:

For me it is the long-term plan to go back. Technically, I would not be eligible to be able to work in Iran. Usually Baha'i architects have a hard time finding employment. Even before when I was in Iran I worked part time for an architect and they took a risk to hire me. I would go back even if it's risky for myself. I want to go back, still plan and go back to help BIHE, and help the architecture students. Especially now that most educated people leaving Iran, it has the biggest brain drain in the world. You feel sad that only ignorant people stay and all the smart and educated people leave. I often see Iran often as a dark place and even a super small candle would light up the whole place. You see that light more in absolute darkness. Back home you feel more effective and influential if you're educated.

This quote shows the dedication of Azar to return and contribute to Baha'i society in Iran.

The two Baha'i participants who came here with their daughters, Alast and Azam, expressed more hesitation about repatriating to their home country. Both participants stated that they could not go back if their children wanted to stay in the United States. Also, both agreed that the political climate would have to change drastically for them to consider moving back to Iran. As Azam explained,

If government changes then maybe I would consider. If no change, then I would not go back. It would have to get better for woman and Baha'i. Maybe in future

Iran will be good country. Hopefully we will have democracy. I love Iran and miss my home. But the change would need to be drastically.

The only Iranian participant who had no desire to repatriate at any time was Sanam. She stated she would love to help Iranian Baha'i from here in the United States, but at the time of the interview she did not consider moving back.

Iraqi Chaldeans. Not a single one of the Chaldean refugees said they would ever go back to Iraq, even if the religious persecution and violence would stop. All of the Chaldean participants left under extreme violent circumstances (as shown earlier in this chapter). Most of the refugees cited that one of the main reasons for returning would be their children who, having arrived in the U.S. at a young age, spoke Chaldean but could not speak or write in Arabic. Wasan explained:

We are already four years here and before that several years in Lebanon.

Primarily we could never go back because of the children. My kids adjusted to life in the United States. They speak the language perfectly, life is easier for them here than going back home.

Farah added:

I would never go back to Iraq. Lebanon yes, I would go back and visit. Even if Iraq would change I would not go back. I'm used to life here now. I love America and my children like the USA. They can't go back, sometimes I ask them if they want to go back they say no.

As both statements illustrate, the participants' children provided strong motivation for staying in the United States.

Summary of Responses to Research Question 3

Two themes emerged in response to Research Question 3 that explored how the participants' experiences in the United States affected the women's identity. First, the majority of participants clearly identified more closely with their religious affiliation, either Chaldean or Baha'i, rather than their nationality of Iraqi/Iranian or American. The second theme was higher independence as women. One participant in each group became divorced, an act that they admitted would have been next to impossible in their home countries. Also, all three of the younger Iranian participants came without their parents to the US and thus lived a much more independent life here than would have been ever possible in Iran. In contrast, the Chaldean women all came with their immediate families; yet almost all also claimed greater independence as women by participating in the workforce, an uncommon act in Iraq after marriage and children.

The final section described how women refugees adjusted in the United States and revealed the difference between the Baha'i and Chaldean community that four out of five Baha'i refugees expressed either a strong or mixed desire to go back to Iran. However, none of the Chaldeans expressed any interest in returning to Iraq.

Summary of Findings

As seen in the findings female Iraqi Chaldean refugees and Iranian Baha'i refugees have much in common, such as both groups coming to the US because of religious persecution in their home countries and both groups having extended family in most cases in California – which was a pull factor for both groups. Furthermore, the majority of the participants of both groups criticized the lack of a support system provided by the US government and the resettlement organizations. In addition, females

from both groups identified with their religion first and foremost, rather than with their Iraqi, Iranian or American nationality. However, the major difference centered in the fact that the individuals from Iraq experienced much more violent persecution in recent years than did those from Iran. In addition, the two groups differed in how much value they placed on getting a higher education and whether they would consider repatriation to their home countries.

CHAPTER V:

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS & CONCLUSION

Summary

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to analyze the life experiences of women refugees from Iran and Iraq before and after being resettled in the United States, and (2) to identify strategies and coping mechanisms that the participants found effective in facilitating the transition to their new home. Three main questions were answered during this research study:

1. What are the push factors for leaving their home country and the pull factors for resettling as refugees in the United States?
2. What is the impact of government programs/inter-governmental organizations/NGO's/local communities?
3. What kind of experiences do women refugees from Iraq and Iran have in the United States?

Religious persecution was the primary push factor for both groups of participants. However, the extent of the persecution varied immensely between the two participant groups. Property confiscations, imprisonment, and lack of access to higher education and skilled jobs were the main factors of persecution among the Baha'i, while the Chaldeans suffered under much more violence in the form of kidnappings, torture, and killings by religious extremists. Pull factors for both groups included extended family connections in California and desire for higher education. However, higher education was a stronger pull factor for Bahai's than for most of the Chaldeans.

Both participant groups had similar experiences with UNHCR in the resettlement process by waiting for months or even years in a third country before being able to resettle in the United States. Rarely was any financial assistance given during that period. The U.S. government's financial support for newly arrived refugees was very limited, and most agreed the amount was not enough to pay rent and survive in pricey California. In regard to the role of the NGO's, these organizations tried to fill the void in services from the government, but still did not offer enough support for most participants in either group. However, the local communities in both groups played a very significant role in providing support, especially the religious centers such as the Chaldean church and the Baha'i Center.

The majority of participants clearly identified more closely with their religious affiliation as Chaldean or Baha'i rather than with their nationality as Iraqi/Iranian or American. Also, the refugees indicated that they were more independent as women in the United States in contrast to their home country. This point was manifested by the fact that one participant in each group became divorced, an act that they admitted would have been next to impossible in their home countries. Three of the other Iranians lived with roommates away from their families, and two of the Iraqis who were married with children returned to the workplace after being stay-at-home mothers for the majority of their adult life. One difference between the Baha'i and Chaldean community was that the majority of the Baha'i refugees expressed either a strong or moderate desire to go back to Iran, whereas none of the Chaldean expressed any interest in returning to Iraq, due to violence in their home country and ensuring the future of their children in the United States.

Discussion

Impact of U.S. Foreign Policy

U.S. foreign policy had a direct impact of causing the political situations in both Iraq and Iran which led to the refugee crises from those regions in the world.

Iraq

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Chaldean Iraqis had a relatively stable and prosperous life under Saddam Hussein. At that time there was no persecution against Christians, and the Chaldean minority did not have to worry about leaving their house and completing their daily tasks, such as bringing their children to school, shopping, or going to work. Even though Saddam Hussein was a dictator who executed many erroneous policies and acts of aggression, life was stable for the majority of people in Iraq. Nowadays, that is no longer the case, not only for the very small number of Chaldeans or Christians left in Iraq, but also for other minorities. However, the 2003 U.S. invasion into Iraq that led to the removal of Saddam Hussein triggered much instability and violence, not only in Iraq but throughout the Middle East. Zunes (2015) states in a recent article that:

... if Congress had not authorized President George W. Bush the authority to illegally invade a country on the far side of the world that was no threat to us, and to fund the occupation and bloody counter-insurgency war that followed, the reign of terror ISIS has imposed upon large swathes of Syria and Iraq and the recent terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut, the Sinai, San Bernardino and elsewhere would never have happened (para. 2).

Zunes (2015) explains that both the military and political leadership of ISIS is primarily Iraqi, and many of these turned to radicalization by imprisonment and torture in U.S. military

organized prisons, including the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In addition, under U.S. occupation, traditional strongholds of secular power, such as the military as well as the civil service, were abolished. In this vacuum, the sectarian conflict emerged from Sunni extremists, who believed Iraqi Shias betrayed Iraq to Persians and Westerners, and thus began targeting Shia neighborhoods with violent attacks. The situation spiraled out of control when the Iraqi regime started to systematically kidnap and murder Sunni men.

The temporary decrease in fighting after late 2006 only happened because Sunni leaders agreed to cooperate with the United States and the Iraqi government, and in exchange, the Shia dominated government promised to incorporate Sunnis into the government. However, the Shia Maliki regime was known as one of the least transparent regimes of the world, and Sunni continued facing discrimination and oppression from the government. As a result, when ISIS rose to power, the Sunnis, despite being mostly secular and having a strong resistance to extremist ideologies saw ISIS to be the lesser evil.

Even the motivation of the young fighters to join ISIS is a consequence of failed U.S. foreign policy. Lydia Wilson (2015), research fellow at the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflict at the University of Oxford, conducted interviews in Kirkuk (Northern Iraq) with captured members of ISIS about their motivations for joining ISIS in the first place and committing some of the most heinous atrocities in the world. The Western media portrays these young fighters as inspired by a deep conviction in the Islamic State (caliphate) that motivates them to join. However, Wilson's (2015) interviews with the captured ISIS members revealed a very different motivation. Even though most are practicing Muslims, they are not necessarily devoted to a caliphate. In fact, the prisoners had trouble answering questions about the caliphate or jihad or even Sharia law. The average age of the captured ISIS members in Iraq was 27, most were

married, had two children and limited education (6-8 grades). These prisoners are the product of the occupation after the invasion of Iraq. Their adolescence was spent growing up in a country without security and with a civil war that raged in their country. Comparably, life under Saddam was stable and safe, although nevertheless oppressive. Thus, those young fighters started to resent the Americans, who they saw as being responsible for the lack of security in their life.

As Wilson (2015) states, the majority of ISIS fighters:

... are not fueled by the idea of an Islamic caliphate without borders; rather, ISIS is the first group since the crushed Al Qaeda to offer these humiliated and enraged young men a way to defend their dignity, family, and tribe. This is not radicalization to the ISIS way of life, but the promise of a way out of their insecure and undignified lives; the promise of living in pride as Iraqi Sunni Arabs, which is not just a religious identity but cultural, tribal, and land-based, too (para. 19) .

Who would have ever thought that suddenly Saddam Hussein, in retrospect, looked like a better choice for Iraq, rather than the U.S. foreign policy involvement which caused this instability?

Iran

One could even argue that U.S. foreign policy contributed to the Iranian Baha'i diaspora, triggered by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. While Baha'i suffered a certain degree of discrimination during the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from 1941-1979, this was mild in comparison with the violent and harsh persecution faced after the revolution. It is important to note the historical roots and subsequent impact of this

change in power. In order to have a strong ally in the region, the United States was instrumental in strengthening the power of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1950s (Dheghan & Norton-Taylor, 2013). However, by the 1970s, relations between the United States and the Shah had become increasingly more alienated, mostly because of oil pricing disputes. In fact, based upon an analysis of previously classified documents of the Nixon (1969-1974) and Ford (1974-1977) administrations, Andrew Scott Cooper (2008) has concluded that the U.S. actively contributed to the destabilization of the Shah in his last years of power, leading to the country's Islamic Revolution.

According to Cooper (2008), Iran became the most influential member of the Organization for the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and gained enough power to determine the price of oil. As a result, the U.S. grew more oil dependent on Iran in the early to mid 1970's (Cooper, 2008). At the 1976 OPEC summit in Doha, Qatar, the Ford administration urged Iran to lower oil prices, but the Shah refused due to economic pressure in his own country. When the U.S. responded by making a deal with the Saudi government to offer oil at a cheaper price, oil markets were shattered in the following months, and economic instability in Iran worsened. The Iranian government's efforts to restore economic order failed due to its harsh deflationary budget that led to increasing unemployment, unrest and food shortages (Cooper, 2008). As Cooper (2008) stated, "The Ford Administration, which had gone to great lengths to calculate the damage an increase in the price of oil would inflict on the American economy, apparently never attempted to measure the possible impact on the Shah and Iran's economy if the price rise did not go ahead. It was a stunning intelligence oversight, and one whose consequences became almost immediately apparent" (p. 589).

The collapse of the Shah's regime proved detrimental to the future of the Baha'i, as the new Islamic State initiated a much harsher stance toward this minority in Iran that has continued up to this day (see Chapter I). Even though we live in a time and age where colonialism is a thing of the past, U.S. foreign policy of neocolonialism continually meddles in the domestic policies of other countries, which in turn often has detrimental long term effects.

Post-Colonial Feminism

In Chapter 1, I presented how I based the theoretical framework for this study on Post-Colonial Feminism, with Mohanty (1984, 1991), Spivak (1988) and Johnson-Odim (1991) as the main theorists. All three scholars discuss how the West often see women in the Third World as a monolithic group, as Mohanty (1984, 1991) argues in her landmark essays "Under Western Eyes" and "Cartographies of Struggle." Mohanty (1991) states

Just as Western women or white women cannot be defined as coherent interest groups, Third World women also do not constitute an automatic unitary group. Alliances and divisions of class, religion, sexuality, and history, for instance, are necessarily internal to each of the above groups. (p. 49)

For this research study, I tried to give justice to my theoretical framework by carefully separating the women participants into two distinct groups: Iranian Baha'i and Iraqi Chaldean. Throughout Chapter IV where I presented my findings, I discussed the two groups separately and placed importance on pointing out similarities and differences between and within the groups. Not only is it erroneous to assume that all women from non-Western societies are homogenous, but also it is crucial to identify differences within the groups, due to age, marital status, and education. My approach to separating the two

groups is distinct, since many other studies of women refugees lump together different groups of Third World women into one category, such as seen in Okigbo, Reiersen and Stowman (2009), in their study about acculturation in the U.S., grouped together female refugees from several different countries (such as Egypt, Kenya, Sierra Leone).

Religious Persecution

Religious persecution emerged as the primary theme in regard to factors that pushed participants away from their home countries. In Iraq the Chaldeans fled from the sectarian violence since they had to endure extreme violence like kidnappings, murder or torture. In Iran the Baha'i suffered more from discrimination than violence. In the 1980s after the 1979 Revolution, imprisonments and torture of some family members from the participants' families did occur, but otherwise the religious persecution manifested itself very differently than in Iraq. Baha'i are not allowed to attend the university, and thus are very limited in their job choices and socioeconomic advancement.

As outlined in Chapter II, Goodwin-Gill and McAdam (2007) similarly point out that religious persecution is a main reason for being able to apply for refugee status, based upon the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Clearly, the participants in this study received their refugee status under the legal framework on refugee rights. Thankfully, the United States honored their commitment to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol.

Furthermore, the large population of refugees from Iran and Iraq was facilitated by the U.S. government's continued commitment to resettle the greatest number individuals in the world (70% of all resettlements worldwide) (Musalo, Moore & Boswell, 2011; Nezer, 2013; UNHCR, 2013). In fact, as Musalo, Moore, and Boswell

(2011) claim, refugees from countries where the US has had a foreign policy interest are given priority, making it possible for many Iraqis and Iranians to relocate in this country.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the most influential and powerful refugee intergovernmental organization, resettled all the participants, except for Sanam and Azar who came with HIAS over Vienna. As mentioned in Chapter IV, the participants most lamented the long wait times in the third country, (Syria, Turkey and Lebanon), the lack of financial support during that time from UNHCR, and the very high cost of living. Similarly, Barnett (2011) and Chimni (2004) found that one of the core missions of UNHCR was finding durable solutions for refugees, including not only resettlement to northern states but also repatriation. Fewer refugees in third countries have the chance to resettle, as resettlement since 1985 has not been the preferred solution. Instead repatriation – along with imposed return to the home country - is being promoted (Chimni, 2004). None of the participants have yet repatriated to their home country, even though several of the Iranian Baha'i refugees expressed a deep desire to return to Iran. To be approved for resettlement, the participants were some of the lucky ones worldwide as millions of other refugees in similarly dire situations never were approved for resettlement to any of the northern states.

Barnett (2011) also explains that UNHCR is a paternalistic organization, meaning that they make decisions on behalf of refugees without their consent. This point was confirmed in my findings, as in the case of Wasan, who preferred to go with her family to Canada rather than the US. However, UNHCR did not comply with Wasan's family wish

and instead made a paternalistic decision to resettle them to San Diego, even though other family members were not there.

The United States General Accounting Office (2003) stated that the safety of women and girls is often lacking in refugee camps, as sexual abuse often occurs due to a lack of proper supervision by UNHCR staff. Supervision is nearly impossible with too few staff available to monitor so many refugees. While none of the participants raised the topic of lack of safety during living in a third country, they did not live in formal refugee camps since they were urban refugees in Kayseri, Turkey, Beirut, Lebanon, or Damascus, Syria, living in private housing.

Lack of Support from U.S. Government/NGO's

The consensus of the participants was that both the U.S. government and the NGO's (mostly funded by the U.S. government) that help in the resettlement process lack an adequate support system to address the needs of newly arrived refugees. This view was also observed by Kerwin (2012), who criticized the approach of the U.S. government in applying a "one size fits all" approach toward resettlement support. Kerwin stated that the U.S. government does not distinguish between a refugee who has spent decades in a refugee camp and one who has come directly from their home country.

This need to provide more efficient targeting help to newly arrived refugees also came up in my findings. While a few participants felt adequately supported by the U.S. government and the resettlement NGO's (mainly because they could rely on help from extended family), most were in dire need for more support, not just in terms of finances but also to learn English, to find a job, and to accomplish simple tasks like driving a car.

The need for receiving support beyond the eight-month limit also emerged in Okgigbo, Reiersen and Stowman's (2009) study which analyzed the acculturation process of women refugees from many different home countries who resettled in North Dakota and Minnesota. Similar to this study, Okgigbo et al's participants stated that government support needed to be offered for more than eight months, and the women refugees found very similar barriers, stemming from a lack of public transportation and a language barrier.

In addition, Yako and Biswas (2013) discovered similar findings in their study of Iraqi refugees (both Muslim and Christian) in Detroit, Michigan, and St. Louis, Missouri. Again, the participants complained about the limited resettlement support from the agencies and a lack of understanding of their needs. Okgigbo, Reiersen and Stowman (2009) and Yako and Biswas (2013) uncovered similar findings to this study in regard to government and resettlement agencies, even though their populations were either from different countries or resettled in a different location.

Hanna (2011) studied Iraqi male and female refugees (without a religious designation) in El Cajon, California, and found similar shortcomings in support from the U.S. government and NGOs, such as inadequate cash support due to the high cost of living. However, Hanna (2013) found that the refugees, even with good educational backgrounds in Iraq, could not find employment in their profession since their education credentials were not accepted in the United States. This last point did not come up among the five Iraqi participants in my study, but that could have been due to the women assuming a traditional female role and staying at home in Iraq once they married and had children. Except for Nadya (who was still in her early twenties), all my participants

married young and had children back home in Iraq. Thus, if I had included males in my study, I might have had findings more similar to Hanna (2013).

However, Nezer (2013) observed in his study in resettled refugees in Tennessee that the local government resisted taking on those refugees by putting a moratorium on newly arrived refugees if the absorption in the community had been met. Even though my participants had to suffer from insufficient government support, I did not observe any resistance from local governments in the communities I studied, especially in El Cajon where thousands of Iraqi refugees lived. I was very involved in the community, spent a great deal of time, and even met the mayor; but at no point did I observe this hostility and resistance that Nezer (2013) observed by the Tennessee local government.

National versus Religious Identity

In my research, almost all of the participants identified with their religious rather than national identity. For Iraqis, this meant that they identified more as Chaldean than as Iraqi or American; the same applied to the Iranian participants who by and large identified as Baha'i first and only later as Iranian or American. Similarly, in Williams' (2009) study of Iranian Baha'i refugee women in Melbourne, Australia, the researcher found that all the women primarily identified as Baha'i rather than Australian or Iranian. This finding was identical to my own, even though my study was conducted on a different continent.

Higher Degree of Independence as Women

Both Mohanty (1984, 1991) and Spivak (1988) discuss the image of the average Third World woman, who Mohanty (1984, 1991) claims, is usually portrayed as uneducated, sexually oppressed, and ignorant. Spivak (1988) introduces the concept of

the subaltern in describing the Third World woman, “as female is even more in the shadow” (p. 287).

As my research findings suggest, the realities of Third World women who come as resettled refugees to the United States are complex. In fact, many of the Iraqi and Iranian women whom I interviewed are highly educated or skilled. Two of the Iranian women held Master degrees, one a law degree and another working toward her Bachelors. In the Iraqi community one participant held a Bachelor degree, another was working toward a Bachelor degree.

Even the women who did not finish higher education degrees have become professionals on some level. For example, Khalida opened a day care center out of her home while raising five children and is currently pursuing a pharmacy technician certificate at a community college, and Wasan was the sole breadwinner in the family, with two children still in school and her husband too sick to work. None of these women could accurately be described as in the “shadow” (Spivak, 1988, p. 287), marginalized or ignorant as they were pursuing higher education, professional training, and were supporting their family’s financially.

However, it is important to remember that while both groups of women in this study found greater independence in the United States, they did not do so because they were necessarily influenced by Western or American standard of feminism. In other words, their ideologies did not necessarily change; instead their “material realities” shifted as Mohanty (1984, 1991) would say, meaning that their geographic and economic contexts changed. Khalida and Wasan decided to return to work out of financial need (material reality), not because they believed entering the workforce led to the

emancipation of women. Similarly, some of the Iranian refugees were not necessarily influenced by American or Western ideals of feminism, but decided to attain a Bachelor's or Master's degree. It is very much in the tradition of female Baha'i in Iran to be educated and equal to men. However, government restrictions prohibit Baha'i to study at any of the universities in Iran (with the exception of BIHE). As touched upon in Chapter IV, the education of girls is central in the Baha'i tradition. As Sanam stated in one of her interviews

My grandfather sent one of the kids abroad and they send a girl. In the Baha'i culture, men and women are equal, but in Iran society they are not equal, women have half rights for everything. For example, if a woman gets divorced the child goes to the father first, women get half of inheritance than men. However, all these regulations are different in Baha'i culture: Baha'i get equal inheritance and a child will be with both parents equally in case they divorce.

In other words, even though independence and equality of women is an established norm in the Baha'i community in Iran, this norm cannot be practiced under the current restrictive government policies and societal influences. Thus, greater independence of women for Baha'i women is only possible abroad at this moment in time.

Recommendations

The next section presents recommendations for policy changes in the United States regarding the resettlement of refugees as well as recommendations for possible further research.

Recommendations for Policy Changes in the United States

Based upon my research study, I would like to make the following five recommendations for policy changes in the U.S. that would better assist women refugees to adjust in the United States after resettling.

1) As mentioned in Chapter IV, some participants mentioned that the sponsor for some of the refugees, typically a family member who has been in the United States for a while, has many responsibilities regarding the resettlement process. For instance, sponsors are required to drive newly arrived refugees to their appointments with the resettlement agencies as well as to help in the apartment and job search. However, even though this help is badly needed by the refugees, to make this the responsibility of the sponsor is often overly demanding, as sponsors have jobs, families, and personal commitments. Especially in an area with limited public transportation, such as San Diego, this responsibility could cause issues; for example, sponsors often need to drive long distances to help their newly arrived family members.

2) As already stated in Chapter IV, most participants' wishes were granted in regard to the resettlement location. However, Wasan complained about not being able to resettle to Canada where her extended family lives, which meant she and her family could not benefit from the much needed support and company. It is crucial to always honor the preferences of the refugees in terms of the country and state where they would like to resettle. To not pay attention to these needs only results in a disservice to both the refugees and the country of resettlement if a refugee is unhappy because of his or her location.

3) Also previously discussed in Chapter IV, government support in regard to financial aid to refugees spans for only eight months, after which the refugee must go on welfare if without employment or only limited employment. I believe it is crucial to extend this support beyond a period of eight months. In that short time, the refugees realistically cannot master the English language, find employment, and also heal from the mental and physical trauma incurred in their home countries.

4) Resettlement agencies, such as IRC and Catholic Charities, need to do more to support the newly arrived refugees more thoroughly. As mentioned in Chapter IV, many refugees complained about the limited support from these organizations. Recommendations for more intense support could include a job placement service that would specifically target jobs that newly arrived refugees could do with a limited amount of English and formal education.

5) The government and resettlement agencies currently have a “one size fits all” resettlement support system. However, not only do refugee groups differ tremendously from group to group, but also have different experiences based upon the region of relocation in the United States. For instance, the needs of the Iraqi and Iranian refugees whom I interviewed varied greatly since they had very different backgrounds. However, the resettlement support plan currently provided by the U.S. government through the resettlement agencies like IRC and Catholic Charities does not account for these differences. Instead the support is the same for a refugee who comes directly from her home country as for someone who lived in a refugee camp for decades.

Furthermore, significant regional differences exist between states and cities. For example, a refugee living in Michigan will most likely pay less rent and have a lower cost

of living than will a refugee in San Diego or the Bay Area. Yet the financial support that refugees receive throughout the US is the same. Thus, my recommendation is to tailor the support more specifically in response to the needs of different groups and regions of the United States.

Recommendations for Further Research

Listed below are my recommendations for further research:

1) In further research, it would be interesting to have a larger sample in both the Chaldean and Baha'i refugee communities. My sample population was fairly limited for each of the groups, as I only focused to interview five participants from each group, since my goal was to do in depth oral history interviews with a small group. However, this methodology makes it impossible to generalize findings. Consequently, it would be interesting to target a larger population in order to use mixed methods with both a qualitative and quantitative dimension. For example, questionnaires could be given to a larger population in each community to answer questions about identity or the impact of the government and NGO's. In this way, the study could be triangulated, and the qualitative interviews would provide details to supplement the quantitative results.

2) Follow up interviews of the women in each of the groups over time would help to document their life changes and socioeconomic progress. Many of the refugees interviewed arrived to the U.S. only in the last few years. It would be beneficial to see how the lives of newly transplanted participants developed over time and what kind of education or professional progress they were able to achieve.

3) Further research on Chaldean women should include a comparative analysis of recently arrived refugee women with past generations of refugees who came earlier to the

United States. I met many women who came decades ago to San Diego as refugees, such as many of the Ladies of Hope board members, and most of these women and their families were very established financially in San Diego with stable jobs or family businesses. In contrast, all of the newly arrived women I interviewed and met were so far all low income and dependent on government help, even if they were educated or in the process of obtaining a degree. It would be fascinating to see how refugees who arrived decades ago might differ in their attitudes, opinions and experiences in comparison with the newly arrived ones.

4) A comparative study on how refugees from the same groups fare in other countries of resettlement, such as Germany, Australia or Scandinavian countries, would be helpful. It would be of great interest to see how the refugees' lives would differ and how each group would adjust similarly or differently in those countries. Each of these countries offer different support systems to resettled refugees (as mentioned above under policy recommendations); many countries are much more generous and supportive than the U.S. Thus, it would be enlightening to compare how refugees in these countries adjust in these respective countries as compared to the United States.

5) After transcribing, coding and analyzing the data, I continually wondered about the requirements for a newly arrived refugee to make a successful societal transition. How did Sanam and Azar, who came to the United States with barely any English skills and worked retail jobs, become a successful lawyer and architect respectively? Why were some refugees not able to break out of the cycle of being dependent on welfare system and government support for a long time after coming to the United States, while others seemed to be thriving and establish themselves in professional careers? Many variables

affect why one person thrives and another struggles; however, I was able to make several observations during my research as to what allowed a person to facilitate the transition. Stemming from my observations in the community, the number one factor was willingness and effort to acquire the English language, followed by the willingness and motivation to get an education and the extent of mental/emotional trauma.

Personal Reflections

In this section, I discuss my personal reflections on how I encountered difficulties with gaining access and trust to the Chaldean population in San Diego.

Building Trust with Participants

At the beginning of my research journey a year and a half ago when I began making initial contacts in the two communities, I did not expect the interview process to be this challenging. In the Iranian community it was relatively easy to find participants, even very enthusiastic participants, who wanted to share their story. Some Iranian participants had told their story before in media interviews or TED talks, and all of the participants were very comfortable with not only conveying personal experiences but also trusting me. Each and every one I interviewed offered to put me in touch with more relatives or friends who also had come as refugees to the United States.

In the Iraqi community, however, it was much more challenging to even find people who would be willing to be interviewed. I met many potential participants who were very willing to simply talk to me. But when I explained the data collection process in more detail (for example, telling the potential participants that the interviews would be audio recorded, showing them the consent forms, and explaining that the interviews

would be used for my dissertation and might even be published), many Iraqis shied away from going on the record. I was even asked whether I worked for the U.S. government or welfare office.

Not only was there an initial mistrust on the Iraqis' side, but also it was challenging to find people in the Iraqi community who spoke enough English to understand me and reply. I did use a translator twice, once for one of the Iranians and once for one of the Iraqis. However, I strongly felt on each of those occasions that important details of the interviews were lost in translation. As a result, I tried to interview only those women who spoke enough English to communicate. I spent about two and a half months altogether in San Diego, with breaks in between. Each time I flew down for about a week to meet new people, cultivate the contacts, and then returned again a few weeks later for the proper interviews.

I was lucky enough to find Ladies of Hope, which helped put me in touch with many potential participants. As mentioned in Chapter III, Nada Mati, the president, and several other board members connected me with recently arrived refugees from the last few years. If I had not had this close contact with Ladies of Hope, I would have found it next to impossible to find people to interview. I benefited from the trust that the refugees had in Nada and her fellow board members. One of the board members knew I had a hard time recruiting participants, and I asked her whether my being from such a different culture was a disadvantage. To my surprise, she responded that being an outsider was actually an advantage. She told me that even though she was a Chaldean former refugee who has worked with refugees for over 20 years in El Cajon, they still mistrust her. She

told me that Iraqi Chaldeans have mistrust not only of outsiders, but also of their own community members, sometimes even more so.

I am not sure exactly where this mistrust comes from within the community, but I observed that the Chaldean Iraqi community in El Cajon was not as unified as it seemed on the first view. In my first trips trying to connect to the community, all I saw were tens of thousands of Iraqi Chaldeans in East San Diego. I met initially more Chaldeans who came to the United States many decades ago, most of whom were very established financially and professionally. The segment of the Chaldean population who came earlier either own small businesses like liquor stores and gas stations, or are professionals. Many are financially very established and like to show off their success by the cars they drive or the clothes and jewelry that they wear.

Initially, I had a very naïve and romanticized view of the Chaldean community, and my first impression was that the more successful, established Chaldeans helped the new arrives who were struggling to make a new life in California. Poor newly arrived refugees live only a few streets down the very well-to-do Chaldeans, and yet I believed in the strong unity of the community. Nevertheless, the more I got to know the community, the more I also saw cracks in how the community was not as unified and monolithic as I had originally perceived.

Conclusion

This dissertation was the toughest and, at the same time, the most rewarding part of my doctoral path during the last five years. I must admit that I struggled at many different stages of this journey, from selecting the participant groups and narrowing down my topic, to preparing my proposal over one year ago to establishing trust in the

Chaldean community. I wavered many times to give up and throw in the towel, but I knew at the end of the day that this was not an option. I had the rare opportunity that few people have: to immerse myself in another culture and try to understand two different refugee groups, not only different from each other but also different from myself and my own background, religion, and ethnicity. Ultimately, I found it incredibly rewarding to meet and interact with my 10 participants, their families, and their wider communities.

This opportunity made me a better human being and instilled more empathy, compassion, and deep respect in me for my participants' courage to share their stories. Many of the participants I am able to call my friends at this point, and I am still in touch with most of them up to this day via text message, Facebook, or even the occasional catching up in person. I truly hope my dissertation will bring some good to this world, and I pray that the policies regarding refugees will change in the United States at some point. Hopefully, my dissertation can contribute a tiny bit to that goal. I would like to end my dissertation with an inspiring quote from Antonio Guterres (2005), formerly the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: "While every refugee's story is different and their anguish personal, they all share a common thread of uncommon courage – the courage not only to survive, but to persevere and rebuild their shattered lives" (para. 9).

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Appendix A:

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Nicole Ludwig, a graduate student in the Department of International and Multicultural Education Department at University of San Francisco . The faculty supervisor for this study is Prof. Susan Katz, Professor in the Department of International and Multicultural Education at University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to 1) document the life experiences of women refugees from Iraq and Iran before and after being resettled in the United States. 2) To identify strategies and coping mechanisms that the participants found effective in facilitating the transition to their new home.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen: You will be interviewed two or three times . In the interviews, the researcher will ask you questions about your life back in your home country, your motivations for seeking resettlement in the US, and your experiences after arriving in the United States.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve being interviewed two or three times over the course of several months. The first interview will be the longest (at least one hour), and one or two follow up interviews will be conducted (ranging from 15-45 minutes). The interviews for the study will take place in public spaces/or your home (as preferred by the participant) in the San Francisco Bay Area and El Cajon, Southern California.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

We do not anticipate any risks or discomforts to you from participating in this research. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS

The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are that underrepresented voices of female refugees from Iran and Iraq will be heard and represented in detail, due to the oral history methodology. This will help bring visibility to you and your community.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, the participants will be able to pick their own synonym names for protection of their identity. Only the researcher will have access to the real identities and it will not be shared to anyone else.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Nicole Ludwig at 415 912 0512 or nsludwig@gmail.com. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing IRBPHS@usfca.edu, or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE

Appendix B:

Interview Questions:

1. What circumstances and experiences caused you to leave Iran/Iraq and seek resettlement in the United States?
2. How was your life before the invasion of 2003/ before the overthrow of the Shah in 1979?
3. What caused you to choose the United States and the Bay Area/San Diego as your preferred resettlement destination?
4. How was your experience with UNHCR in the third country? Did UNHCR meet all your needs during this time? Did UNHCR give you financial help?
5. How did your U.S. government help in your transition to a new country? How do you feel about the government support provided in the United States?
6. How did your local NGO/resettlement organization help in your transition to a new country?
7. b. How did your local community help you in acclimating in the US?
8. How has moving to the US impacted your identity?
9. Tell me about your overall experience in the United States so far.
10. Did your role as a woman in your family change as a result of moving to the United States? What kind of actions do you do different as a woman in the United States compared to your home country?
11. Under which circumstances could you imagine to repatriate to your country?