

Religion and Resiliency Among Female Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Holders

by

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all of the Special Immigrant Visa Holders and their family members who have served our country and helped the United States Army.

## Abstract

## Religion and Resiliency Among Female Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Holders

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This thesis analyzed the relationship between the religiosity of four newly-arrived female Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders in the Dallas area and its impact on their resiliency, coping, and outlook on their new lives in the United States. The research was conducted through a phenomenological qualitative approach, which allowed the researcher to capture the lived experiences, feelings, and meanings that female SIVs attach to certain phenomena in their social environment (Husserl, 2012). The study hoped to add to the existing evidence-based research and knowledge on the efficacy, or lack thereof, of using religion as a coping mechanism.

## Introduction

According to Sharif (2002), Afghanistan has a long history of political turmoil and unrest, which has resulted in conservative gender norms and values. An example of this would be the Taliban establishing a fundamentalist, military regime in Afghanistan in 1994. The Taliban's oppressive reign resulted in gender-based discrimination such as not allowing girls to go to school, which then severely crippled the human capital and infrastructure of Afghanistan. Women were viewed to have only one role in society and that was taking care of the family. In addition to restricting educational opportunities, the Taliban also abolished many personal freedoms of women such as driving, working, and going out in public. A lack of gender equality and education for women became the norm during the seven-year reign of the Taliban and the residual, cultural norm of contemporary Afghanistan – especially in rural areas where the Taliban is still present. That being said, the contemporary remnants and ramifications reach far beyond the rural areas of Afghanistan (Sharif, 2002).

The 2016 United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index (HDI), a composite statistical measure of life expectancy, education, and per capita income, shows Afghanistan as being the fifteenth least developed country in the world. On a scale from one to one hundred, Afghanistan scores 47.9. The HDI is even lower for females at 34.8. Rates of education are significantly poorer than in comparable nations, especially in regard to female education. Afghanistan's adult literacy rate is only 38.2 percent and Afghanistan's mean years of schooling is only 3.5 years the equivalent of a third-grade education. This number is even lower for females at only 1.6 years, the equivalent of less than a second-grade education (United Nations Development Program: Human Development Reports, 2016).

Lack of education and other opportunities for advancement has resulted in a gross national income of only \$511 per capita among Afghan women (United Nations Development Program: Human Development Reports, 2016). Further, women make up only 19.1 percent of the workforce of Afghanistan. That translates to a 66.7 percent gender inequality level on the Gender Inequality Index (GII), “a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market” (United Nations Development Program: Human Development Reports, 2016).

As previously mentioned, all of the above can be directly attributed to the political totalitarian and oppressive regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan (Sharif, 2002). The War on Terror was initiated following the 9/11 attack on the United States in order to curtail the oppressive and violent impact that the Taliban had in Afghanistan and the region (Browne, 2016). In order to fight the Taliban, The United States army relied on local Afghans for their services as interpreters and translators (Runion, 2007). In part due to their assistance, the US Army was able to remove the Taliban from political power in Afghanistan in 2001. Many of the Afghans who had assisted the US Army were granted Special Immigrant Visas by the United States government in exchange for their service, which allowed them and their families to seek refuge in America (Browne, 2016; Runion, 2007).

The purpose of the study, then, was to explore how the religiosity of four newly-arrived female Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders impacted their coping and resilience within the context of resettlement. There is still much to learn about the role of religion in helping newly-arrived Afghan SIV women cope with stressors inherent in the resettlement experience, but this thesis aimed to put a dent in the existing knowledge gap. The proposed qualitative study

attempted to gain insight into the lived experiences of women in an urban enclave located in Dallas, TX.

## Literature Review

### Afghan Special Immigrant Visas

As demonstrated by Abramson (2015) and Radford and Krogstad (2017), an Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) is a permanent visa granted by the United States government to Afghan interpreters who helped the United States army in the War on Terror in Afghanistan for at least a 12-month period. This status is granted to Afghan nationals under the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009. Through the principal applicant, the spouse and children of the interpreter also qualify as special immigrants. This visa is aimed to grant refuge to those that are otherwise in harm's way. Special Immigrant Visa holders' and their family members' lives are at risk due to their part in the wars. Terrorist groups such as the Taliban often kidnap, torture, and kill these individuals because of their "traitorous" acts.

Although Special Immigrant Visa holders (SIVs) are very similar to refugees in terms of the benefits that they receive and their resettlement process once they arrive into the United States, SIVs and refugees are different when it comes to the basis on which they are seeking refuge (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2018).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines a refugee as a person who owing to 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 or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018).

In the case of SIVs, refuge is granted on the basis of their role in the War on Terror with the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, whereas refugees are persecuted due to one of the five categories above (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2018; United States Department of State - Department of Consular Affairs, 2018). Although both SIVs and refugees have to wait five years before being eligible for citizenship; SIVs receive their permanent resident status and Green Cards one month after they arrive in the United States, whereas refugees have to wait for a full year until they are eligible to apply for their permanent resident status and Green Cards (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018). Finally, refugees must have fled their country of origin to a neighboring country in order to seek refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, whereas SIVs can seek SIV status from within their country of origin from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2018; United States Department of State - Department of Consular Affairs, 2018).

**Afghan Special Immigrant Visas granted by the United States.** In 2017, the United States allocated 1,500 Afghan Special Immigrant Visas, with an additional 2,500 visas being allocated through an omnibus legislation proposed and passed by Congress in May 2017 (Cooper, 2017; United States Department of State - Department of Consular Affairs, 2018). This number was increased to 3,500 Afghan Special Immigrant Visas for 2018 (United States Department of State - Department of Consular Affairs, 2018).

These numbers may seem large, but they only account for 1% of the immigrant visas that the United States awarded between 2007 and 2017 (Radford & Krogstad, 2017). The numbers also do not meet the current need as the last known estimate of the number of Afghan Special

Immigrant Visas needed comes from July 2017 and it included over 11,000 Afghan principal applicants and 13,000 family members (Cooper, 2017).

### **Characteristics of Resettled Afghan SIVs**

**Religion.** Afghan SIVs generally tend to be Muslims and adhere to the religion of Islam, as 99.7% of Afghans are Muslim (Central Intelligence Agency – The World Factbook, 2018; Guest, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2018). Islam is a monotheistic religion that originated in the city of Mecca in Arabia in the 7th century. Although western scholars sometimes attribute Muhammad as the religion's founder, this is highly contested by members inside the faith. Their belief is that Muhammad is the prophet of God and that God revealed the religion of Islam unto Muhammad. These revelations make up Islam's holy book, the *Qur'an*. To Muslims, Islam is not only a belief system that prescribes rituals and prayers, it is also a social way of life. To them, it prescribes ethics, values, morals, and virtues (Koenig & Al Shohaib, 2014).

**Language.** Richard Tapper (1983) defined Afghan society as one that is composed of strong kinship ties with culturally distinct customs, dialects, and origins. There is a wide array of ethnicities that make up Afghan societies such as Pashtun, Dardic, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Baloch, Turkmens, Pamiris, and Kyrgyz. That being said, a majority of Afghans are of the Pashtun ethnicity (Central Intelligence Agency – The World Factbook, 2018; Guest, 2010). Therefore, 95% of Afghans speak either Dari or Pashto, which are both official languages of Afghanistan (Central Intelligence Agency – The World Factbook, 2018; Guest, 2010). Dari and Pashto are very similar and can be viewed as being Persian dialects or of Persian.

**Gender Norms.** According to Likpka (2014) and Sharif (2002), culturally, Afghans typically abide by traditional gender norms and values. In fact, a survey of Muslims in 39 countries found that Afghans are more conservative on women's issues compared to Muslims in

other nations. Nearly 94% of the Afghans surveyed, both men and women, said that the wife must always obey her husband. As previously mentioned, these conservative ideologies can be seen as the remnants of the oppressive regime of the Taliban, which severely restricted women's rights and created a patriarchal society. The regime codified laws that did not allow women to leave their homes without a male or get an education (Lipka, 2014; Sharif, 2002).

**Resettlement and Challenges.** As Kim and Kim (2014) and Gabbard (2005) demonstrate, the initial resettlement period can be a very stressful time for newly-arrived refugees and SIVs. Many times, these populations are coming here with nothing but the clothes on their back (Gabbard, 2005). Therefore, when they do arrive here, they are not only trying to get acclimated culturally, linguistically, and economically; but they are doing so with very limited financial assistance (Wachter, Heffron, Snyder, Nsonwu, & Busch-Armendariz, 2016; Worthington, 2001).

Through their study, Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, and Teboh (2011) demonstrated that the stress of resettlement exponentially increases when the initial three to six-month assistance period ends. The family is often times left to fend for themselves. Ideally with some support systems and at least one person who is working fulltime. Even so, one can imagine how a single income might not be sufficient to support a family. This is exactly the situation that Afghan SIVs deal with because women usually do not work, but rather stay at home to take care of children and other household chores. The cause of this can be a lack of affordable childcare or traditional or conservative value systems. Regardless, this is sure to lead to feelings of isolation and solitude as humans are social beings (Nitulescu, 2016).

## **Resiliency and Coping**

Resilience is defined as having good psychological functioning despite the presence of risk factors and stressors in one's life that would threaten adaptation or cause distress (Doty, 2010). Coping mechanisms play a large role in resiliency. Coping is a dynamic process consisting of thoughts and behaviors that individuals use to manage the demands of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping and the mechanisms used to for it can be positive or negative (Boswall & Akash, 2015; El-Khani, Ulph, Peters, & Calam, 2017). Positive coping mechanisms include protective and promotive factors such as positive environmental, social and interpersonal, and individual and intrapersonal factors (Huenink & Porterfield, 2016; Jenson & Fraser, 2016). Examples of these include positive friends, family, support groups, physical activity, positive attitudes and behaviors, and social and cultural constructs such as religion (Huenink & Porterfield, 2016; Jenson & Fraser, 2016). Negative coping mechanisms include risk factors such as negative environmental, social and interpersonal, and individual and intrapersonal factors (Lake, Fuller, Rastall, & Usman, 2017). These include avoidance, drugs, alcohol, poor diet, and lack of sleep (Lake, Fuller, Rastall, & Usman, 2017).

**Religious coping.** The use of religion as a coping mechanism is highly prevalent, especially among the refugee population (Boswall & Akash, 2015; El-Khani, Ulph, Peters, & Calam, 2017).

Using religion as a coping mechanism has shown mixed results when it comes to positive and negative outcomes (Amer, Hovey, Fox, & Rezcallah, 2008). On the one hand, the use of religion has shown to result in decreased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and grief symptoms, and incidence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and elevated attitudes, positive reframing, increased hope, higher levels of optimism, and increased resiliency (Boswall & Akash,

2015; El-Khani, Ulph, Peters, & Calam, 2017). On the other hand, it has shown to result in decreased levels of hope, optimism, overall mental health and increased personal blame, complacency, and guilt, depression, and hopelessness (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Krause & Hayward, 2015). The negative outcomes usually stem from religious individuals believing that they are being punished by God, that they deserve what is happening to them, that God is testing their faith, and/or that they have been abandoned by God (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Krause & Hayward, 2015).

One particular study by Amer, Horvey, Fox, and Rezcallah (2008) showed that religious coping did not predict outcome measures related to acculturation stress and depression among Arab Muslim Americans. This study also claimed that there were some forms of religious coping among Muslims that were beneficial to their health and well-being, but there were also other forms that appeared to be harmful. The positive forms included increased hope and optimism and the negative forms included a sense of acceptance of the current situation and a feeling of lack of control over one's life (Amer, Hovey, Fox, & Rezcallah, 2008).

### **Literature Conclusion**

The available literature on the subject matter highlighted key characteristics of the target population, challenges that they face in their newly resettled lives, and the effectiveness of using religion as a source of resiliency and coping. The literature showed how Afghan SIV women tend to come from traditionally conservative backgrounds, which correlates to them typically not working in the United States (Likpka, 2014; Sharif, 2002). However, research also demonstrated how the population bears stressors that come with being newly-resettled in the United States such as culture shock, language barriers, feelings of isolation, and difficulties acclimating and assimilating (Kim & Kim, 2014; Gabbard, 2005). The literature also highlighted the fact that

there are mixed results in regard to the efficacy of using religion as a positive coping mechanism and a source of resiliency and hope (Amer, Hovey, Fox, & Rezcallah, 2008).

With that being said, it is important to note that there is very little research available on the subject matter pertaining to SIVs (Abramson, 2015; Bruno, 2015). For example, there is no literature on the lived experiences of Afghan SIV women. Research is also lacking when it comes to demonstrating whether or not these women rely on religion as a source of resiliency, comfort, and hope during the turbulent initial resettlement period. This study will thus aim to help to fill that void in literature. It will not only showcase the lived experiences of Afghan SIV women and the challenges that they face during the initial resettlement period, it will also describe whether or not they use religion as a positive coping mechanism in these times of need. The study will add to research showing the efficacy, or lack thereof, of using religion as a positive coping mechanism.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of the study was to explore how the religiosity of newly-arrived female Afghan SIVs impacts their coping and resilience within the context of resettlement. There is still much to learn about role of religion in helping newly-arrived Afghan SIV women cope with stressors inherent in the resettlement experience. This qualitative study provides insight into the lived experiences of women in an urban enclave located in Dallas, TX.

### **Target Population and Sampling**

The target population for this study was newly-arrived female Afghan SIVs resettled in Dallas who were between the ages of 18 and 64 years old and had lived in Dallas for less than 24 months. The rationale behind the parameter of 24 months was that those who have been in the United States longer than 2 years may not have still been going through the initial challenges of resettlement that come with being completely new to a foreign country. Children 17 and younger, elders who are 65 years old or older, pregnant women, and women with physical or mental disabilities were excluded from this study.

Potential participants were identified through the refugee resettlement agency of Catholic Charities Dallas. It consisted of the researcher's former clients whose cases had closed. The fact that the researcher works at Catholic Charities Dallas and that the participants of the study were his former clients, made the population easily accessible to him. Therefore, this study used a convenience and purposeful sample. The researcher reached out to 12 potential participants to explain the study to them using a female interpreter and ask them if they wished to be a part of it. 5 declined, 3 did not answer, and 4 gave their permission to be a part of the study. Therefore, the sample size of 4 participants was used for this study.

The justification for focusing on the researcher's former clients was due to the population's traditional and conservative cultures. The researcher's former clients were already familiar and comfortable with the researcher as they already knew him. This not only served to allow the participants to be more open to taking part in the study and responsive to the researcher's questions, but also served to get permission from the participants' husbands to conduct the study with their wives as they would be more willing to give permission to someone from the opposite sex, if they knew them (Aseel, 2003).

The ethical ramifications of the researcher working at Catholic Charities Dallas and the participants being his former clients were minimized by only selecting former clients whose cases had already closed. This ensured voluntary participation, rather than coerced participation. Although participants were no longer receiving any benefits or services from Catholic Charities Dallas, they were made aware that their relationship with Catholic Charities Dallas was not dependent on their participation in this study, or a lack thereof. Written and verbal permission to access Catholic Charities Dallas' clients had also been acquired from the director of the Refugee Resettlement Department at Catholic Charities Dallas (Appendix B).

### **Procedures**

A list of potential participants was formed through the database that Catholic Charities Dallas uses to track its clients. A report was run that sifted through clients by date of arrival, ethnicity, gender, and case manager – thus allowing the search to be narrowed down to the researcher's former female Afghan SIV clients who fit his parameters of inclusion mentioned above.

Next, the researcher and a female, volunteer interpreter called the potential participants to explain the study and retrieve verbal permission to take part in the study through phone

interviews. This was done through a direct interpretation of a recruitment script (Appendix D). The rationale behind a female interpreter was to mitigate the gender difference between the researcher and the participants. In the researcher's experience, it is not only culturally appropriate to use a female interpreter for female participants, but the population is also much more open with females than males in general interactions.

As mentioned above, if permission was acquired from the potential participant, permission was also sought from her husband for his wife's participation in the study (Aseel, 2003). The spousal permission script can be found in Appendix D. This was only done if the participant agreed first, herself. If the participant did not agree, she was thanked for her time and there was no conversation with the husband. The purpose of this was to eliminate coercion. Additionally, if there would have been a situation where a participant wanted to take part in the study, but her husband did not give her permission to do so, the study would not have been conducted with that participant. This would be done in order to keep the safety of the subject above all else.

The rationale behind using phone interviews was to maximize participation and obtain quality data. Phone interviews took place with the participant being in their own home. From the researcher's experience with working with this population, they usually do not leave their homes without their husbands. They also have young, non-school-aged children. Using the phone interviews not only eliminated their burden to have to go out of their own home, but also of having to find childcare. It was also believed that the participants would be more open to sharing in the comfort of their own homes and over the phone as they would feel more safe and secure. This is modeled after a study that showed how patients receiving in-home mental health counseling were far more receptive and responsive than those that received traditional outpatient

counseling services (Love, Mueller, Tolman, and Ka Powell, 2013). Additionally, since the method chosen for data collection was phenomenology, which is geared towards extracting lived experiences from participants, it can be argued that there was no better setting than the participants' natural environments to have them share their lived experiences from.

If the participant was willing to take part in the study and verbal permission was retrieved, a phone interview was scheduled. The phone interview took place on a Saturday. The participants were in their respective homes and the researcher and interpreter were in a booked, private conference room on the University of Texas at Arlington campus. This was done in order to maintain privacy, security, and confidentiality.

The phone interviews commenced with the interpreter seeking permission to turn on the tape recorder. She then introduced the study and its goals through a direct and verbal interpretation of the consent form (Appendix C). This was also when verbal consent was sought from the participants. The rationale behind a verbal consent process was to have the participants be best-informed about the study since most of the participants were illiterate. Interviews lasted approximately one hour each, during which the researcher typed up observations in the form of typed field notes. The interpretation was done live. Meaning, the interpreter verbally relayed the participants' responses to each question right after it was given. This allowed the researcher to attribute participants' fluctuations in the tone to particular questions and answers.

Immediately following the interviews, the recordings and typed field notes were uploaded onto a password-protected file on the UTA server through UTA Box. The recordings were then deleted from the tape recorder. Immediately afterwards, the voice recordings were transcribed and once again stored in the same encrypted file on the UTA server. Once transcriptions were

complete, the voice recordings were deleted from the server. The transcripts will be kept on the server for three years, as per IRB guidelines.

Next and also on the same day and in the same location, the researcher summarized each interview (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999). Once these summaries were finished, the researcher called the participants back with the interpreter in order to verify the accuracy of the summaries. The interpreter directly and literally interpreted the researcher's summaries of the interviews to the participants and the participants were asked to verify whether or not the summaries were accurate. The participants were also told to identify any inaccuracies and give the correct accounts of them to the researcher through the interpreter. Once the accuracies of the summaries were verified and adjustments were made, the summaries and transcripts were stripped of identifiable data and stored on the UTA server. This was done in order to maximize privacy, security, confidentiality, and allow the data to be accessible from the researcher's home for data explication and the final writeup. Finally, the researcher took part in data explication and completed the final writeup of the study's findings.

### **Ethical and Security Considerations**

There are always ethical questions that arise when working with human subjects. Working with a vulnerable population such as SIVs added even more cautionary steps and measures that were needed to be taken to protect them. Therefore, before doing this study, the researcher considered the following things to make sure he was not violating the rights of others.

First and foremost, he made sure to obtain approval for his study from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at Arlington. The stamped IRB approval letter with a protocol number of 2018-0583 is attached in Appendix A. Next, he obtained the informed consent of all his participants. This came from making sure that the participants knew what the

study entailed and the potential risks and benefits from being a part of it in their own language through the use of an interpreter. Consent was sought verbally in order to make sure the decision to participate was best-informed as most of the participants were illiterate. Verbal and written permission had also been acquired from the director of the Refugee Resettlement Department at Catholic Charities Dallas to access its client database and use its clients for participation in the study (Appendix B).

The researcher gave the volunteer interpreter a brief orientation consisting of Social Work ethics and values. She was made aware of the fact that she had to uphold these ethics and values during and after the study – especially in regard to privacy and confidentiality. The interpreter was also qualified to interpret for this study because of the extensive training that she had received through Catholic Charities Dallas' interpreter training program. This training not only consisted of proper interpretation techniques, but also of interpretation ethics and values.

To ensure that participation in the study was completely voluntary and that the participants felt no pressure to take part in it, the researcher only used his former clients whose cases had closed with him and the agency. This ensured that the participants' cases, cash assistance options, nor any service or resource were dependent on them signing up for the study. In other words, resettlement services and participation in the study were mutually exclusive. Although attrition is never good for the results of a study, the participants were made aware that anyone who wished to withdraw from the study could do so at any time and without penalty. They were also made aware that their future relationship with Catholic Charities Dallas or the researcher would not be impacted by their participation, or lack thereof, in this study.

Privacy and confidentiality were given utmost priority. Confidentiality was maintained by making sure that identifying information of the participants was not made available to anyone

outside of the study. As mentioned above, the volunteer interpreter was made aware that she needed to strictly uphold confidentiality.

Data was kept safe and secure. As mentioned above, the interview recordings were promptly transcribed and kept on an encrypted, password-protected file on the UTA server through UTA Box. The field notes were also kept in the same encrypted file.

The researcher was sure to uphold the values and ethics of the profession of Social Work. The study upheld the ethics and values of dignity and self-worth of all people. This was accomplished by respecting all participants and treating them as autonomous agents completely capable of making their own informed decisions. The researcher maintained social justice by not looking down on the population simply because of language barriers, socioeconomic status, or cultural differences. The researcher upheld the value of integrity by not only remaining honest, truthful, and responsible towards the participants, but also with the results of the study itself. Human relationships were professionally maintained by the researcher by treating his participants as partners in this study.

The researcher upheld the social work value of beneficence by minimizing all possible harms and trying to maximize all potential benefits for his participants. Although it was not directly tied to the research itself, this took the form of offering the participants proper referrals to certain programs when sensed a need for certain services based on the participants' responses. An example of this was when he offered to refer one participant's husband to Employment Services within the Refugee Resettlement department of Catholic Charities Dallas after learning that he was laid off during the interview.

Cultural competence and sensitivity were also essential factors when dealing with the target population. The researcher has vast experience and knowledge of Afghan culture through

his work as a Refugee Resettlement Case Manager. The researcher used this experience to take steps such as using a female interpreter to conduct interviews. Abiding by cultural norms, the researcher also obtained verbal permission of the husbands of his participants for their participation in the study (Aseel, 2003).

### **Study Design**

According to Husserl (2012), a phenomenological qualitative research design allows a researcher to capture the lived experiences, feelings, and meanings that people attach to certain phenomena in their social environment. This was precisely the goal of this study – to capture the unique experiences of participants with and the meaning that they give to resettlement, religiosity, and resilience and how these phenomena manifest themselves in the participants' lived experiences. Therefore, the phenomenological qualitative design had been chosen for this study. A qualitative research design was also chosen because of its ability to draw out participants' attitudes and behaviors in their natural settings (Engel & Schutt, 2014). The data was collected by conducting phone interviews when the participants would be in their own homes (natural settings).

Additionally, data was collected through 'memoing.' This was where the researcher recorded observations during interviews in the form of field notes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This afforded the researcher an opportunity to take part in 'bracketing,' which is where the researcher makes himself aware of his preconceptions and suppositions in order to abstain (*epoché*) from attributing them to the participant (Husserl, 2012). It is only then that the researcher can truly enter into the participant's lifeworld as an experiencing interpreter (Moustakas, 1994).

The preliminary questions of the interview allowed the researcher to better understand the participants and their lives. Native language and English proficiency level enabled the researcher to gauge the extent to which he can effectively communicate with the participant in English and whether or not he needed to utilize the interpreter. The next round of questions such as education level, marital status, number of children, and occupation allowed a better understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. They also enabled the researcher to identify any potential stressors in the lives of the participants.

In order to get richer descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of resettlement and its impact as a stressor, the interviewer asked the participants to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about their new lives in the United States, struggles that they were facing, and any obstacles and barriers that they foresee in the future.

Religiosity of the participants was gauged through questions that brought out aspects such as frequency of religious expression and activity. The questions were geared towards gaining a better understanding of the use of religion as a coping mechanism and a tool for resiliency. The participants were asked for a personal account of the impact that religion has or does not have on their lives, coping, resiliency, and outlook on their newly-resettled lives in the United States. The participants were also asked how their faith impacts the way they live in the United States and if they faced any challenges as a result of their faith. Lastly, as a follow-up question, the participants were asked if there was anything else that they wanted to mention or share.

### **Data Explication**

Groenewald (2004) cautions against the heading 'Data Analysis.' Therefore, the heading for this section has been changed to 'Data Explication.' The rationale behind this is the fact that

analysis means breaking something down into parts, but this would result in a loss of the phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, researchers should study a phenomenon systematically to identify essential relationships within the context of the whole (Groenewald, 2004).

The model used was a simplified version of Hycner's (1999) 5-step explication process proposed by Groenewald (2004). These 5 steps include: 1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction, 2. Delineating units of meaning, 3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes, 4. Summarizing each interview, validating it and where necessary modifying it, and 5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary (Hycner, 1999).

Step one or bracketing during data explication entails the researcher making himself aware of his preconceptions and personal views in order to abstain (*epoché*) from attributing them to the data (Husserl, 2012; Hycner, 1999). Phenomenological reduction is a deliberate and purposeful opening of the researcher to the phenomenon in its own right and meaning (Hycner, 1999). This was done by repeatedly reviewing transcriptions in order to become familiarized with what the participants were saying in a holistic sense (Groenewald, 2004).

According to Hycner (1999), step two consists of delineating units of meaning. This is where data that illuminates the phenomenon in question is isolated and extracted from each interview. To do this, the researcher considered the literal content, the significance and frequency of it, and how it was stated (Groenewald, 2004). The researcher was aided in identifying units of meaning as his data came from answers to his interview schedule (Appendix E).

The researcher then completed step three by taking the significant data of the interviews and grouping them into clusters of central themes (Groenewald, 2004). This is what Hycner

(1999) refers to clustering of units of meaning to form themes. The researcher did this by grouping similar questions and answers from his interview schedule into themes.

According to Hycner (1999) and Groenewald (2004), step four is where the researcher creates a summary of each interview that incorporates all the themes elicited from its data. This was done by the researcher by calling the participants back with the interpreter to have them validate whether or not the summary accurately captured the essence of their interview. If necessary, modifications were made to the summary.

Lastly, step five is where the researcher creates a composite summary of the themes from all the interviews – special attention is given to similarities and differences in the data (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999). The researcher will thoroughly follow this step as it is stated above.

## Results

Four newly-arrived female Afghan SIVs were interviewed for this study. This section of the thesis will be dedicated to analyzing the interview data from these four participants through Groenewald's (2004) simplified version of Hycner's (1999) five-step explication process.

Firstly, the researcher white-boarded all possible the preconceptions and personal views that he had of the population, topic, and research in order to first bracket them and then abstain (*epoché*) from attributing them to the data (Groenewald 2004; Husserl, 2012; Hycner, 1999). This included deductions from his professional experiences and interactions with the population as their former case managers. Examples of this were the views that the participants were culturally traditional and conservative, that they mainly stayed at home, and that they are religious and use religion positively as a coping mechanism. This allowed the researcher to open himself to the phenomenon in its own right and meaning (Hycner, 1999).

The second and third steps were combined. First, units of meaning were delineated from the transcribed interview data (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999). This was done by carefully reading and re-reading each transcript to gain a thorough understanding of the participants' perspectives on the given subject. From this, he completed step three, which was where he took the significant data of the interviews and grouped them into clusters of central themes (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999). These clustered themes included resettlement challenges, religiosity, and resiliency.

During step four, the researcher created a summary of each interview that incorporated all the delineated units of meaning and clustered themes mentioned above. The summaries were created using the direct quotes of the participants and thus, they are in the first person. The

researcher also described each participant's lived experience and demographics through a story. These summaries, lived experiences, and demographic stories are below.

## **Rani**

**Rani's Story.** Rani is a 19-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter. Rani and her family immigrated to Dallas in February of 2017 from Afghanistan. Her husband interpreted for the US Army in the War on Terror from 2008 to 2013. As a result of this, he was viewed as a traitor by the Taliban and he and his family received various death threats. Fearing for their lives and the life of their unborn daughter, they applied for a Special Immigrant Visa to the US in 2014. Their application was approved in 2016.

Rani completed some elementary school, but was forced to quit due to Taliban restrictions on female education. Her husband, who is 16 years older, completed high school. Rani's wish for her daughter is to attain the education that she was never able to receive herself. Since coming here, Rani has been attending ESL classes and taking care of her family as a stay-at-home mother. She would like to start working part-time after she develops English proficiency and daughter starts attending preschool. This stems from the economic hardships her family has faced since immigrating to Dallas. Lastly, she described herself as being religious, but someone who mainly relies on herself for strength with some support from God.

**Summary for Rani.** Although I am religious, I do not believe religion is the main derivation of strength, support, courage, or resiliency for a person. Instead, I believe a person is in full control of his or her own mental and emotional health and has to work hard to get to a level of resiliency him or herself. I rely more on my family members of strength and courage. I used to text and call family members in Afghanistan often to help with the feelings of isolation. My resettlement experience has been moderately stressful. This stress stemmed mainly from

economic challenges and concerns for my family. My religion does not really impact my outlook on my new life in the United States or impact how I live. This is because my faith has not changed. Therefore, I live life regularly. I pray and take care of my family regularly.

**Memo for Rani.** Rani seemed relatively calm throughout the interview. There was no background noise, so the researcher was unsure if there was anyone else at home. No fluctuations in tone were noticed throughout the duration of the interview.

### **Masum**

**Masum's Story.** Masum is a 26-year-old mother of five girls. Her daughters are nine, eight, six, and four years old (twins). Her and her family moved to Dallas in October of 2016 from Afghanistan. Her husband, who is 11 years older than her, worked for the US Army in the War on Terror from 2009 to 2016 as a warehouse attendant. This is unique in the sense that Special Immigrant Visas are usually only granted to interpreters. Nonetheless, as a result of this work, he was viewed as a traitor by the Taliban and his life and the lives of his family members were in danger. They applied for a Special Immigrant Visa to the US in 2014 and their application was approved in 2016.

Masum received no formal or informal schooling in Afghanistan. When asked why, she said girls were not allowed to go to school or be educated in Afghanistan. Masum is proud of her daughters and wants them to get the best education that they can possibly get. Masum regularly attends ESL classes and takes care of her family as a stay-at-home mother. She described herself as being a devout Muslim. She has gone through various different challenges in the US and has relied heavily on her faith to overcome them.

**Summary for Masum.** I would say I am pretty religious. I pray five times a day. I have faced many challenges here in America. For example, I had a miscarriage three months ago. I

also miss my friends and family back home in Afghanistan. I am also worried about my girls here since the culture is so different. I do not want them to lose sight of their own culture and abandon it for American values. This is how my religion impacts my outlook here in the United States. I want my children to continue practicing their faith. That being said, I am happy to be here. My family is safe, which was my greatest concern and is now my greatest joy. I was also not allowed to go to school in Afghanistan, but here, I am allowed to go attend ESL classes and get an education. I rely heavily on religion for strength, support, courage, and resiliency. I pray and ask God to help with all my stress and worries. It gives me great hope. God knows how to best take care of me. I also rely on my husband and family for happiness and support.

**Memo for Masum.** Participant seemed relatively calm throughout the interview. There was occasional background noise of children and the television. There was a minor fluctuation in the participant's tone when she revealed that she had a miscarriage three months ago. Participant mentioned that her husband was just laid off from work and is looking for employment again. Researcher made a note to offer to refer the participant to Catholic Charities Dallas' Intensive Case Management department if she needed mental health counseling. He also made a note to offer to refer her husband to the Employment Services of CCD's Refugee Resettlement Department in case he needed help finding a job.

### **Amreen**

**Amreen's Story.** Amreen is a 33-year-old mother of a two-year-old daughter and a six-month-old son. Her and her family resettled in Dallas in June of 2017. Her husband interpreted for the US Army in the War on Terror from 2011 to 2017. As a result of this, his life and his family's safety were in danger from Taliban threats. Due to this, they applied for a Special Immigrant Visa to the US in 2012. The visa application was approved in 2017.

Amreen's story is very unique as it is unlike any of the other participants of this study. The researcher has also never encountered anyone with such a unique story as hers in his two years as a Refugee Resettlement Case Manager. Amreen's family had moved to Iran when she was an infant where her father was the Afghan ambassador. Her father was transferred to Tripoli when she was 10. At the age of 13, her family moved to the United Kingdom, where Amreen grew up in a Western civilization and culture. Because of this, she was able to obtain the education that she would not have been able to get had she stayed in Afghanistan. Amreen received her Bachelor's degree in Graphic Design in 2010. She is fluent in British English. As such, she did not require an interpreter to complete this interview. Amreen returned to Afghanistan in 2011 where she met and married her husband, who was studying to become a doctor and worked as an interpreter for the US army. Aside from the safety and security of her family, her wish for immigrating here was for her daughter to get the same education that she was so privileged to receive.

Amreen is a stay-at-home mom who says motherhood has changed her and that she might start working when her kids are older. She says her resettlement experience has been not been very stressful as she has had the support of her friends, family, and Catholic Charities Dallas here. Lastly, she described herself as being religious, but someone who does not exclusively rely on religion as a coping mechanism. She also relies heavily on her family for strength and support. Amreen says that she has the added responsibility of being a representative of her faith in America" and to show what it is really about, rather than media's portrayal of it.

**Summary for Amreen.** I am a practicing Muslim and I try to go to the mosque whenever I can. I am trying to instill my faith in my little one so that she does not lose it being so far from home. My resettlement experience has been very good. Catholic Charities Dallas supported me

and my family a lot. The only real challenge I felt was living far away from family and friends back in Afghanistan. My religion helps me overcome difficulties and cope with things rationally and respectfully. It gives me the inner peace and tranquility that nothing else can give. My religion does not cause me to live any differently in the United States. I live life normally. I would say, however, that I am more self-aware of myself and my actions as I feel like I represent my religion here. I also rely on my family for resiliency as I can trust them more than anyone else in the world.

**Memo for Amreen.** Participant was throughout the interview. There was no background noise, so the researcher was not sure if anyone else was home. The participant's tone seemed to become more cheerful when she spoke of her family and instilling her faith in her young daughter. Lastly, the interviewer was able to sense some pride in her voice when she described herself as a representative of her faith in America.

### **Khushbu**

**Khushbu's Story.** Khushbu is a 39-year-old mother of seven children – a 18-year-old son, 16-year-old daughter, 15-year-old son, a 14-year-old son, a nine-year-old son, and a four-year-old son. Her and her family immigrated to Dallas in October of 2016 from Afghanistan. Her husband worked for the US Army in the War on Terror from 2005 to 2016 as a driver of US army trucks carrying soldiers and equipment. Similar to Masum, this is unique since Special Immigrant Visas are predominately granted to interpreters. Nonetheless, as a result of his service, he was viewed as a traitor by the Taliban and just like the other participant, his life and his family members' lives were in danger. They applied for a Special Immigrant Visa to the US in 2012 and their application was approved in 2016.

Khushbu received no education in Afghanistan. When asked why, she said it was just not the norm. Khushbu is a stay-at-home mom. She described herself as being a devout Muslim who prays five times a day. She said she has not really gone through many resettlement challenges and attributes this to her faith in God. She also says that she relies on Him in times of difficulties and uncertainty and He knows best.

**Summary for Khushbu.** I believe I am pretty religious. My resettlement experience has been pretty good. I am happy that my family is safe and that my kids are getting a good education. I just want my kids to be good people. My family helps support my and makes me happy. I use religion to gain patience, support, and help from God. This is especially true if I am worried about something. Prayer gives my heart and mind comfort. Location does not impact my faith. I am firm to it regardless. Therefore, my faith has remained constant in the resettlement process and I have not had to change anything in my beliefs, values, practices, or customs being in the United States.

**Memo for Khushbu.** There was no background noise. The researcher noticed fluctuations in tone that he attributed to being hopeful and self-assuring were noticed when participant was describing how religion plays a role in her resiliency and gives her hope and comfort. General happiness and relief was also felt when she described how her family is now safe.

## **Discussion**

Step five of Groenewald (2004) and Hycner's (1999) five-step data explication process will be treated like the conclusion of this thesis as step five calls for a composite summary of the themes from the interviews. This will be done in a comparative fashion using the three identified themes of religiosity, resiliency, and resettlement challenges.

Before doing so, however, the researcher will analyze each of the participants' experiences separately using the same themes.

### **Analysis for Rani**

The data for Rani points to an almost self-reliant individual when it comes to resiliency. The reason the researcher would not consider her completely self-reliant would be the fact that she still attributed seeking some support from her faith and family. Unlike the other participants who primarily attributed their resiliency to their faith and secondly to their family, Rani predominately attributed her resiliency to her own mental health – while reliance on her family seemed secondary and faith being tertiary. Nonetheless, she did self-proclaim to being religious and praying five times a day and attributed a certain significance to seeking help from God in times of need. In terms of resettlement challenges, her main resettlement stressors stemmed from economic concerns. She mentioned how much faster the lifestyle was here compared to in Afghanistan and how her husband missing just one day of work had such dire consequences on her household's finances.

### **Analysis for Masum**

Masum would be the participant that has gone through the most resettlement challenges. From her miscarriage to her husband losing his job, she has had tremendous stressors in her life thus far. That being said, she is also the participant who seems to be the most resilient out of the

group as she has overcome so many trials and tribulations. Masum seems to get the strength and courage to rebound from these obstacles through her faith and belief that God knows what is best for her. Her faith, therefore, becomes a source of hope. Masum's main concerns were geared towards her daughters – she wants them to retain their ethnic values and culture, rather than simply assimilate or pick up certain Western cultural habits such as alcohol consumption and dating. Masum also finds comfort and solace in her husband and children. They were a source of strength for her after her miscarriage.

### **Analysis for Amreen**

Amreen is the participant with the most unique story. It was interesting to see the perspective of an individual who had grown up in both Afghani culture as well as Western culture. Although her story is unique, her perspective was relatively similar to that of the other participants in regard to a reliance on faith for resiliency. Amreen seemed to face significantly less resettlement challenges – especially in regard to fitting in. This may be due to that fact that she was brought up in the United Kingdom – a similar cultural environment as the United States. It can also be because she has had experience immigrating and starting her life over at various points through her father's job. Lastly, one can also attribute this to the fact that she did not have a language barrier, unlike the other participants, since she was fluent in English. Her education and upbringing did seem to add a sense of confidence in her, that the other participants seemed to be lacking and searching for in their faith and families. That being said, Amreen still echoed the sentiment of relying on her faith and family for support and courage.

### **Analysis for Khushbu**

Khushbu seemed to extremely sheltered from the outside world – and she seemed okay with that. Her entire life revolves around her family and even attributed to having no resettlement

challenges due to her family's support. She was immensely grateful to God for the safety of her family. She constantly recited the *Shahadah*, which is the proclamation of faith in Islam. It translates to "there is no God but God and Muhammad is His messenger." It was apparent that this mantra was not only a proclamation of faith for her, but also a source of resilience and an attestation of her appreciation. It can be argued that she relies equally on her family as she does on religion for her resiliency. She mentioned how although she cannot read the Qur'an in Arabic, she prays five times a day and is steadfast on her faith.

### **Composite Comparative Summary**

All participants self-disclosed to being religious and devout Muslims and followers of Islam. All four participants claimed that they take part in ritualistic prayer five times a day. All participants also attributed gaining some level of personal strength, courage, and resiliency from their religious devotion, practice, meditation, supplication, and belief in God. This sentiment was echoed by Masum when she was asked if she uses religion to cope with resettlement challenges or stressors. "Yes, I pray to God and ask. I pray regularly. I even meditate. I cannot read the *Qur'an*, but I ask God to help with stress and worries. Praying to *Allah* gives me strength, courage, and hope to make it easier."

One participant, however, claimed that her resiliency, strength, comfort, and support were primarily derived from herself. According to her, a person controls his or her own mental and emotional health and wellbeing, rather than religion.

In addition to religion, a key component of all the participants' resiliency, support, and strength, was their family. They reported relying on their family members for solace, both here and abroad, by sharing their thoughts and feelings with them through electronic and personal

communications. This brought them personal peace. It can be argued that the second-most influential factor in the participants' resiliency was their familial support.

In terms of resettlement challenges, the data pointed to similarities such as difficulties acclimating to a foreign environment exacerbated by language barriers. They also reported feeling some degree of isolation as they reported missing their friends and family back home in Afghanistan. A major arching concern for all participants were economic in nature. The participants also reported a general concern for their children in terms of adhering to their faith and values in a Western civilization. Practices such as alcohol consumption and dating were brought up as concerns. In contrast to this worry, they all reported having tremendous comfort from knowing that their kids were safe in the United States compared to back home in Afghanistan. None of the participants reported that they faced any personal challenges due to their religion or that their faith was impacting how they live their life in the United States. Instead, they have remained steadfast to their faith and have lived their lives as they would have in Afghanistan.

### Limitations

This study had several limitations which were outside the researcher's control. They were mainly due to the limited time that the researcher had to complete the study as the IRB approval process took much longer than expected.

One such limitation was the fact that only 4 out of the 12 potential participants recruited for the study gave permission and consented to take part in it. This can be attributed to several competing factors. First, it could be because of the fact that the researcher had to disclose that he was legally required to report any signs of abuse. However, the researcher does not believe this was the main contributing factor. Instead, he believes the factors that he will list now have more merit and likelihood of being the contributing factor. Second, it could be that the potential participants were not comfortable enough taking part in the study conducted by a male researcher due to traditionally cultural values. Third, they might not have been as comfortable taking part in the master's-level thesis research because of their own lack of education and illiteracy. Fourth, this could have been because they were not personally comfortable taking part in a research study that is on such a personal topic as religiosity.

These limitations could possibly have been reduced or eliminated with a different research design. Maybe a focus group would have built more confidence and mitigated the gender difference more. This could also have built comfort and had a cathartic impact. The researcher could have built more of a rapport with the participants by attending a community event such as an *iftar* dinner. This is where Muslims break their fast together during the month of Ramadan. The researcher could also have recruited an *Imam* (a religious leader of a mosque) to champion his study and help recruit for it by mentioning it in his *khutbah* (sermon).

Another limitation this study had was the fact that the participants could not be interviewed in an isolated location. Therefore, the presence of family members and husbands during the interview could have possibly influenced the participants' answers to the researcher's questions. For example, if spouses were in the same room during the interview, it would be understandably hard for participants to mention any challenges or stressors that stemmed from domestic issues. Therefore, this study would ideally be conducted in a strictly private and confidential space where the participant can freely share challenges without worrying about potential repercussions.

Other limitations came from the fact that the IRB only allowed the researcher to complete interviews over the phone, rather than in-person. This did not allow the researcher to personally observe the participants' behaviors and attitudes in their natural setting during the interview. Therefore, the qualitative substance of 'memoing' and field notes was limited since the researcher could only make note of what he heard, rather than what he would have been able to visually observe, sense, and feel. "An interview mainly depends on observation, which enables the researcher or worker to notice things people usually will not disclose, through observing their non-verbal language and face features" (Al-Qdah & Lacroix, 2017, p. 623). Therefore, although the researcher was able to pick up on some fluctuations in the tone of voice of some of the participants, it was very hard for him to figure out what they were feeling throughout the interview and how they reacted to certain questions since he was not able to visually observe their body language and facial expressions.

That being said, this limitation could have actually benefited the researcher as well. For example, since his physical presence was not felt, participants may have been more open with

their answers than they might have been in front of him. This can be especially true of sensitive topics such as miscarriage.

Lastly, a limitation that could have occurred but did not, was the fact that potential participants who wanted to participate in the study whose husbands did not give them permission to do so would not have been able to participate or be interviewed.

### **Relevance to Social Work**

Regardless of the limitations, there is still a plethora of reasons why this research is important to social workers and to the field of Social Work itself. One such reason is because of the contemporary political landscape and the fact that issues of immigration and refugee/SIV resettlement are at the forefront of it. This is evidenced in the countless executive orders trying to ban refugees, immigrants, and SIVs (Exec. Order No. 13769; Exec. Order No. 13780).

Another reason why the study is relevant to the field of social work is because it provides a voice to a vulnerable population – thereby empowering them. The study hopes to showcase the resiliency among Afghan women. A trait which the population can spread to their neighborhoods, communities, and societies. Social workers can even use the findings of this study to create certain interventions that can supplement the use of religion as a coping mechanism for Afghan women. Lastly, social workers can use this research to advocate for policies and legislation that allow more Special Immigrant Visas to be allocated and thereby allow for more SIV families to have access to the life-saving refuge that they need.

This thesis is relevant to social work as it not only adds to the existing evidence-based research on the use of religion as a coping mechanism, but it also creates evidence-based research as there are no current studies that demonstrate the impact of using religion as a coping mechanism among female Afghan SIVs.

### **Future Implications**

An implication of this study can be that social workers can use it to have research-based evidence to advocate for continued and on-going support services and programs for Special Immigrant families after the initial resettlement period. The need for this was not only noted in the participant who reported having a miscarriage a year after her case had closed with Catholic Charities Dallas, but also in the study done by Mitschke, Mitschke, Slater, and Teboh (2011). The same participant's husband had just been laid off from work recently and had been searching for a job. Lastly, another participant reported that her and her family were still having difficulty properly responding to mail. This, again, one year after their case had been closed and exited by Catholic Charities Dallas. There is definitely a lack of support felt by the participants after the resettlement agencies close their cases and rightfully so as they are expected to be fully self-sufficient within a very short three to six-month time period after arrival to the United States.

Therefore, practice-wise, social workers can work to create an increased continuum of care by implementing mentoring programs to start at case closure and last for approximately one year after case closure. Mentors would be instrumental in reinforcing key messages and practices in the families that might have otherwise been forgotten due to the initial stressors of the resettlement period and a greater concern for immediate, basic needs during that time. This can be exemplified by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. During the initial resettlement period, the family is much too concerned with taking care of their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, education, and work. They do not have a lot of time to get used to some of the intricacies of American life such as checking mail and laundry machine usage.

A research-based implication can be to build off the content of this thesis and expand it into to a doctoral dissertation. The research, evidence, and knowledge base surrounding the

population of Special Immigrant Visa holders could be much improved if this study would be expanded to become a transformative, mixed method design that would not only track the lives of the participants longitudinally throughout time and collect data at several points, but also work to create some sort of intervention to solve their problems. It would be useful to see how the use of religion as a coping mechanism increases or decreases throughout time or in certain situations. The data would also be diverse in that it would include qualitative journaling as well as quantitative statistics. Qualitative journaling could be used to bring in rich descriptions of the exact times that the participants turned to religion to cope and what specific stressor caused them to do so. An example of an intervention is exemplified in the above-mentioned practice-based implication.

Policy-wise, social workers can advocate for an increased number of Special Immigrant Visas granted to SIV families in order to afford them the life-saving refuge that they so direly need. In addition to this, they can advocate for faster processing times of the visa applications. As seen by the results above, the average processing time for an SIV application was two years. A lot can happen in two years. The threats the participants that these participants received were very real – they experienced the Taliban fulfilling these promises on a daily basis. The participants, their husbands, and their children could easily have been harmed, kidnapped, raped, tortured, or even murdered before their visa was approved and processed.

Another policy implication could be to use these participants and their stories to advocate for an end of the Trump Administration's travel bans and an increase in the number of refugees allowed into the United States. The study can also be used to terminate the practice of separating and detaining individuals at the border. At the end of the day, all of these vulnerable populations

are simply in need of life-saving refuge from terror similar to that which the Taliban brings to Afghanistan.

### **Credibility Statement**

One of the reasons why the researcher is qualified to conduct this research is because of the theory-based knowledge and skills that he has gained through his graduate studies in the field of Social Work. Another reason why the researcher is qualified to conduct this study on SIVs is due to his extensive professional background and experience in working with them. He has been working at Catholic Charities Dallas as a Refugee Resettlement Case Manager for almost two years. He is also currently interning at the International Rescue Committee for his advanced Communities and Administrative Practice field placement. Through these placements, he has gained the skillsets, knowledge, and cultural competence necessary to work with vulnerable and ethnically diverse populations.

## Appendix A

## Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



June 25, 2018

Sahil Gilani  
 Dr. Diane Mitschke  
 School of Social Work  
 The University of Texas at Arlington  
 Box 19129

**Protocol Number:** 2018-0583

**Protocol Title:** *Religiosity and Resiliency Among Female Afghan SIVs*

**APPROVAL OF MINIMAL RISK HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH WITHOUT FEDERAL FUNDING**

The University of Texas Arlington Institutional Review Board (UTA IRB) or designee has reviewed your protocol and made the determination that this research study involving human subjects is approved in accordance with UT Arlington's [Standard Operating Procedures \(SOPs\)](#) for minimal risk research. You are therefore authorized to begin the research as of June 25, 2018.

Note that this project is not covered by UTA's Federalwide Assurance (FWA) and the researcher has indicated it will not receive federal funding. You must inform Regulatory Services **immediately** if the project may or will receive federal funding in the future, as this will require that the protocol be re-reviewed in accordance with the federal regulations for the protection of human subjects.

**As Principal Investigator of this IRB approved study, the following items are your responsibility throughout the life of the study:**

**UNANTICIPATED ADVERSE EVENTS**

Please be advised that as the Principal Investigator, you are required to report local adverse (unanticipated) events to The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services within 24 hours of the occurrence or upon acknowledgement of the occurrence.

**INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

The IRB approved version of the informed consent document (ICD) must be used when prospectively enrolling volunteer participants into the study. Unless otherwise determined by the IRB, all signed consent forms must be securely maintained on the UT Arlington campus for the duration of the study plus a minimum of three years after the completion of all study procedures (including data analysis). The complete study record is subject to inspection and/or audit during this time period by entities including but not limited to the UT Arlington IRB, Regulatory Services staff, OHRP, FDA, and by study sponsors (as applicable).

**REGULATORY SERVICES  
 SERVICES**

The University of Texas at Arlington, Center for Innovation  
 202 E. Border Street, Ste. 201, Arlington, Texas 76010, Box#19188  
 (T) 817-272-3723 (F) 817-272-5808 (E) [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu) (W) [www.uta.edu/ra](http://www.uta.edu/ra)

**MODIFICATIONS TO THE APPROVED PROTOCOL**

All proposed changes must be submitted via the electronic submission system and approved prior to implementation, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject. Modifications include but are not limited to: Changes in protocol personnel, changes in proposed study procedures, and/or updates to data collection instruments. Failure to obtain prior approval for modifications is considered an issue of non-compliance and will be subject to review and deliberation by the IRB which could result in the suspension/termination of the protocol.

**ANNUAL CHECK-IN EMAIL / STUDY CLOSURE**

Although annual continuing review is not required for this study, you will receive an email around the anniversary date of your initial approval date to remind you of these responsibilities. Please notify Regulatory Services once your study is completed to begin the required 3-year research record retention period.

**HUMAN SUBJECTS TRAINING**

All investigators and personnel identified in the protocol must have documented Human Subjects Protection (HSP) training on file prior to study approval. HSP completion certificates are valid for 3 years from completion date; the PI is responsible for ensuring that study personnel maintain all appropriate training(s) for the duration of the study.

**CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS**

The UT Arlington Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services appreciates your continuing commitment to the protection of human research subjects. Should you have questions or require further assistance, please contact Regulatory Services at [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu) or 817-272-3723.

## Appendix B

## Catholic Charities Dallas Permission Letter

**CATHOLIC CHARITIES DALLAS****Refugee Services**

1421 W. Mockingbird Lane, Dallas, TX 75247

214.553.9909 phone 214.347.7199 fax

[www.ccdallas.org](http://www.ccdallas.org)

May 2, 2018

To whom it may concern,

This letter serves as confirmation that Sahil Gilani can access the clients of Catholic Charities Dallas' Refugee Resettlement Program for his thesis on Religiosity and Resiliency. The clients will be allowed to choose whether or not they want to participate through their own freewill. The services and assistance that Catholic Charities Dallas' Refugee Resettlement Program provides its clients are not dependent on the clients' participation in this study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Avril Knox".

Avril Knox, MSW  
Director of Refugee Services, Catholic Charities Dallas

## Appendix C

## Consent Form

**UT Arlington**  
**Informed Consent Document – Written Version**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Sahil Gilani, MSW student  
469-544-3255  
[Sahil.gilani@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:Sahil.gilani@mavs.uta.edu)

**FACULTY ADVISOR**

Diane Mitschke, UTA School of Social Work  
[Dianemitschke@uta.edu](mailto:Dianemitschke@uta.edu)

**TITLE OF PROJECT**

Religion and Resiliency Among Female Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Holders

**INTRODUCTION**

Hi, my name is Sahil and this is my interpreter, Mariam. You are being asked to participate in a research study through the University of Texas at Arlington about religion and resiliency amongst female Afghan SIVs. It is in no way tied to Catholic Charities Dallas. The participants of this study are female Afghan SIVs who are between the ages of 18 and 64, who are not pregnant, and who do not have any physical or mental disabilities. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will have no impact on your relationship with Catholic Charities Dallas. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand. Just so you are not confused, I will refer to myself as the researcher.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of the study is to explore if and how newly-arrived female Afghan SIVs use religion as a source of strength, hope, support, coping, and resilience in their newly-resettled lives in the United States of America.

The researcher is doing this research study for his Master's of Social Work thesis at the University of Texas at Arlington.

**DURATION**

The initial interview will approximately last approximately one hour. A follow-up session can last anywhere between 5 and 30 minutes.

**NUMBER OF SUBJECTS**

The number of participants for this research ranges anywhere between 2 and 15 people.

**PROCEDURES**

The procedures which will involve you as a research subject include:

1. Participating in a phone interview by answering questions.
2. Participating in a follow up phone call to verify the interview was summarized accurately.

**UT Arlington**  
**Informed Consent Document – Written Version**

I will ask you questions and the interpreter will translate those questions to you. She will also translate your answers and any questions you may have. The interview will be recorded using a tape recorder. The reason for this is so that the researcher does not forget or miss out on important details.

Shortly after the interview (on the same day), the researcher will call you again with the interpreter. The interpreter will directly and literally interpret the researcher's summary of your interview to you and you will be asked to verify whether or not it is accurate. You will also be told to identify any inaccuracies and give the correct accounts of them to the researcher through the interpreter.

**POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

A potential benefit to you can include a therapeutic experience of sharing your experiences with someone else. Also, the knowledge gained from it will help the field of Social Work and society at large. The knowledge gained from this study will show the benefits, or lack of benefits, of using religion as a source of strength, support, hope, coping, and resilience. The study will also allow society to see who STVs are, what brings them to America, some of the challenges that they face, and how similar they are to normal people living normal lives. This is especially important at a time when there are so many anti-immigrant and anti-refugee attitudes in American society and government.

**POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are no real risks to this study. The data will only be used for the purposes of the thesis and be kept safe and secure at all time. The data will also all be deleted at the completion of the thesis. You might get a little emotional when talking about some of the challenges and obstacles that you are facing. If this is the case, please let me know and we can take a break from the interview. You can also ask to skip the question or stop the interview at any time at no consequence.

**COMPENSATION**

You will not receive any sort of compensation for your participation in this study.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

**UT Arlington**  
**Informed Consent Document – Written Version**

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. The results of this study will not be published and/or presented at meetings without your consent. Your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

The recordings will be downloaded into an encrypted file on the UTA server immediately follow the interview. Right after they are downloaded, the recordings will be deleted from the tape recorder. Then, the voice recordings will be typed word-for-word and kept in the same encrypted file. At this point, the recordings will be deleted from the file/server. The typed notes that the researcher takes during your interview will also be kept in the same encrypted file. All of this will occur on the same day.

All identifying information will be changed and therefore, you will not be linked to the data.

**CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS**

Questions about this research study may be directed to myself or my teacher in the Social Work Department at the University of Texas at Arlington, Diane Mitschke. Her email address is [dianemitschke@uta.edu](mailto:dianemitschke@uta.edu). Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu).

**As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

**CONSENT**

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

**UT Arlington**  
**Informed Consent Document – Written Version**

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

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**SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER**

**DATE**

## Appendix D

### Recruitment Script

Hi, my name is Mariam. I am calling for Sahil Gilani. He is calling you because he is doing a research study for school. He is currently getting his master's degree in Social Work and is required to do a thesis. He was wondering if you could be a part of the study? This study has nothing at all to do with Catholic Charities Dallas. It is being conducted through the University of Texas at Arlington. The title of the study is Religiosity and Resiliency Among Female Afghan SIVs. Sahil's thesis advisor's name is Dr. Diane Mitschke. As such, choosing to participate or declining to participate will have no impact on any relationship with Catholic Charities Dallas. That being said, he is interested in learning about how Afghani SIV women use their religion as a source of strength, resilience, strength, coping, and hope in the context of resettlement to the United States. It is optional, but he would like to assure you that your information would be kept strictly confidential. It would involve a recorded phone interview that would last approximately one hour. Just keep in mind that Sahil will have to report any signs of suspected abuse per Texas state law. Would you be interested in participating?

\*If no,\* then... Thank you for your time. Take care. Bye.

\*If yes,\* then... Great! May I also talk to your husband to get his permission for your participation? Thank you.

\*If yes,\* then... Ask husband for permission.

Hello sir, my name is Mariam. I am calling for Sahil Gilani. He is calling you because he is doing a research study for school. He is currently getting his master's degree in Social Work and is required to do a thesis. He was wondering if you could be a part of the study? This study has nothing at all to do with Catholic Charities Dallas. It is being conducted through the

University of Texas at Arlington. The title of the study is Religiosity and Resiliency Among Female Afghan SIVs. Sahil's thesis advisor's name is Dr. Diane Mitschke. That being said, he is interested in learning about how Afghani SIV women use their religion as a source of strength, resilience, strength, coping, and hope in the context of resettlement to the United States. Therefore, he is asking you for permission for us to interview your wife. Participation is completely optional and choosing to participate or declining to participate will have no impact on any relationship with Catholic Charities Dallas. The interview would last approximately one hour. We would do it over the phone and it would be recorded. Just keep in mind that Sahil will have to report any signs of suspected abuse per Texas state law. Is it okay for your wife to participate?

\*If yes,\* then.... Great! (Schedule interview date and time).

Lastly, should you or your wife have any other questions or need to reschedule the interview, Sahil Gilani can be contacted by phone at 469-544-3255 or you can email him at [SGilani1991@gmail.com](mailto:SGilani1991@gmail.com).

Appendix E  
Interview Schedule

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you been in the United States?
3. What is your native language?
4. How would you describe your English proficiency level (none, poor, fair, fluent)?
5. Would you like to use an interpreter for this interview?
6. What is your education level?
7. What is your marital status?
8. Do you have children? If so, how many?
9. Do you currently work?
10. Are you religious?
11. What is your religious affiliation?
12. How many times in a day would you say you take part in religious or spiritual activities?
13. Can you describe your resettlement experience in the United States thus far?
14. Have there been specific challenges that you have encountered?
15. Do you have any worries about your future or the future of your family?
16. On a scale from 0 to 10 (0 being not stressful and 10 being very stressful), how stressful has resettlement been for you and your family?
17. How do you cope or deal with the stress, worries, and/or challenges?
18. Do you use religion at all to cope or deal with the stress, worries, and/or challenges? If so, how?
19. Would you consider yourself as being resilient?

20. Do you believe religion plays a role in your resiliency? If so, how?
21. Do you use religion as a coping mechanism and/or a source of support and comfort? If so, how?
22. Does religion impact your mental and emotional health and wellbeing? If so, how?
23. How does religion impact your outlook on your new life here in the United States?
24. How does your faith impact the way you live your life in the United States?
25. Are there any challenges that you face in America due to your religion?
26. Is there anything else you would like to share?
27. Do you have any questions?

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