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# THE MENTAL HEALTH OF KURDISH WOMEN SURVIVING MIGRATION

by

Choman Hardi

This report is an account of the research carried out for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

# Abstract

This research is a qualitative study of the mental health of Kurdish women refugees in the UK. It focuses on the difficulties faced by twenty women, the factors that help them cope and the opportunities they have in the UK. Their length of stay varies from one and a half to over ten years. The research has recorded their narratives and experiences of seeking asylum, settling down, acculturation, possible discrimination and the opportunities they have access to. One of the conclusions of this research is that a holistic approach is required to deal with the needs of refugees as articulated by themselves.

Despite the difficulties that these women face in the UK, many of them are strong and vibrant individuals who have adopted new ways of living and adjusted to the new country successfully. In this study great variety has been found between women's experiences of migration countering homogenising discourse on refugees. Great variety was also found regarding women's life choices, countering stereotypes of Muslim, Middle Eastern women.

The fieldwork for this study commenced in December 2001 and ended January 2003. It began in London and extended to Hull where some refugees are dispersed.



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# Chapter one - Introduction

## Introduction

The issue of asylum and the welfare of asylum seekers have proved to be some of the most controversial topics in the past decade. We are increasingly confronted with the interconnectedness of events throughout the world. In the past the reality of war and its social and economical consequences in a remote developing country affected its people and possibly the neighbouring countries: now it affects the world at large. One such way that the world is affected by these issues, is through the rising number of asylum applications in the western countries. The increasing number of asylum seekers is causing great concerns for the host countries. This is partly due to the strain on resources required to deal with the increasing demand for social security benefits, housing, and jobs (Berry, 2001), and partly because of the racial tension that has arisen between the native population and the newcomers. The latter issue has become increasingly salient in the light of 11th September 2001.

Asylum is an issue of great importance in the modern world. This research does not entertain the reasons why asylum applications have augmented so rapidly. Nor does it intend to investigate the consequences of this increase on the general population of the host countries. It concentrates on the consequences of seeking asylum for a group of refugees. This research investigates the ways in which migration affects the mental health of Kurdish women refugees in Britain.

The Kurds are distributed between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria. The participants of this research come from Iraq and Iran. This is because there are two main dialects of Kurdish: Sorani which is spoken in Iraq and Iran and Kurmanji which is spoken in Turkey and Syria. The two dialects are radically different such that although communication may be possible, it is not without misunderstanding. I speak Sorani and although I was born in Iraq, I have lived an equal number of years in Iraq and Iran before coming to the UK in 1993. The participants speak the same dialect as myself and come from the two countries I

have lived in. The participants share a similar history of ethnic oppression. There is also a shared history of war and violence between the two countries because of the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988).

The term asylum seeker refers to a person who has applied for asylum and is waiting for her application to be determined. The term refugee refers to people who have legally obtained the right to refuge. In this study I will refer to participants as refugees and immigrants because the term asylum seeker has negative associations. I will only use this term if it is useful in a legal sense and when a particular problem is affecting asylum seekers specifically.

This first chapter provides a broad definition of mental health- one which is useful to this research, outlines the notions which are important to this research, locating this study within current research on the mental health of refugees, and specifies where I stand in relation to the study. Chapter two is dedicated to reviewing the literature in this field. The factors that affect the mental health of migrants are outlined here; these include immediate changes that they experience and how these affect identity and sense of belonging which in turn have consequences for mental health. Chapter three deals with methodology: the research rationale, the sample, the issues which are explored in this study and the research methods. Chapter four concentrates on the research context. In chapter five I outline my findings and finally in six I draw conclusions about the consequences of migration for the mental health of Kurdish women in the UK.

## Defining Mental Health

For the purpose of this research the following wide interpretation of mental health is used:

> 'Mental health is the capacity of the individual, the group and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective well-being, the optimal development of individual and collective goals consistent with justice and the attainment and preservation of conditions of fundamental equality.' (World Health Organization, 1981, cited in WHO, 2000)

The advantage of this definition as stated by WHO is that it:

1 highlights the network of relationships that determine mental health- the factors that determine health operate on multiple levels.
2 goes beyond the biological and the individual.
3 acknowledges the important role that social context plays.
4 highlights the importance of justice and equality in determining mental well-being. (WHO, 2000)

The recognition of the link between the social, psychological and the physical is essentially a holistic approach to mental health. This is consistent with what Watters (2001) describes as: 'a move from Cartesian dualism towards a more holistic approach incorporating mind and body' (Watters, 2001:1713). Watters (2001) explains that instead of imposing a dualism which seeks to define whether a person is suffering from a physiological or a psychological problem, there is a recognition that stressful life events not only lead to depression and anxiety but also to physical ill health. The author goes on to point out that, 'in many cultures a direct and explicit relationship is seen to exist between physiological problems and emotional and social problems.' (Watters, 2001:1713). In this sense, stressful changes in a person's social environment may lead to mental as well as physical ill health.

The above definition does not make any explicit reference to gender, nonetheless, gender impacts on mental health at all the levels of individual, group and environment, and particularly in the existing differences in the delivery of justice and equality.

There are many reasons why a gendered approach to the mental health of refugees is necessary, for example, women's vulnerability to violence, including sexual violence; the balance of power favouring men and subordinating women which leads to differences in their ability to cope with risks and manage their lives; and women's unpaid labour which puts them at a disadvantage and leads to economic dependency (WHO, 2000, Williams, 2004a). There is also evidence of gender differences in symptom development: depression and anxiety are more common in women (internalisation) whereas men are more likely to develop substance misuse and antisocial behaviour (externalisation). (Lengua and Stormshak, 2000).

Gender and race are both important to this research because both gender issues and being a member of an ethnic minority influence the experiences of refugee women. As Weber (1998) points out:

> "Race, class, gender and sexuality are... socially constructed power relations that simultaneously operate at both macro and micro levels of society". (Weber, 1998:13)

Race and gender are categories that are socially constructed to restrict some people while privileging others (Weber, 1998). In this sense being 'White' is privileged and being 'Other' is not, being 'Male' is privileged and being 'Female' is not. Thus refugee women are typically disadvantaged in respect of their gender and ethnicity. Refugees and asylum seekers, however, are more disadvantaged than other members of the ethnic communities for many reasons. First of all, members of the ethnic community have citizenship rights and freedom of movement, whilst refugee and asylum seekers are deprived of these rights. Secondly, ethnic groups have established communities and support networks whereas refugee groups are relatively new and do not benefit from such establishments. Finally, refugees are perceived by the host community as 'bogus asylum seeker' and 'economic migrants' who put strain on the country's resources (Refugees in the Media Project, 08/09/04). In many ways there is more social stigma attached to being a refugee as compared to being a member of other ethnic minorities.

## Migration and its consequences- outlining the issues

Migration has great implications for the mental health of refugees. The different ways in which migration affects the mental health of refugee women include: feeling hopeless as a result of ending up in a situation where the individual has no control; loss of a way of life and meaningful relationships; adaptational requirements such as learning a new language, settling down and rebuilding support network; discrimination and social stigma; culture shock; the stress of acculturation and the consequences of acculturation within the ethnic community. I will introduce these issues in turn.

## *Helplessness*

The first way in which migration affects mental health is particularly significant for asylum seekers. When an asylum seeker enters the country, typically she has to wait for her asylum application to be processed, she has to wait to be dispersed to a town where she can settle down, then to be allowed to take language classes and to requalify or find a job. Throughout this waiting, she learns that there is hardly anything she can do to speed up this process. She does not have any control over her situation. This is very similar to what Hiroto and Seligman (1975) named 'Learned Helplessness'. These authors found that helplessness involves learning that one has no control over events. This helplessness, Hiroto and Seligman (1975) point out, can be the cause of depression when the individual is exposed to unpleasant situations where she has no control. Having no control hinders a natural response to ameliorating the unpleasant situation and this is an immediate consequence of seeking asylum.

## *Loss*

Migration entails geographical separation from the place of birth, a home, familiar environment, routines, friends and family (Veer, 1998:3). It entails starting from scratch. The losses may be so great that they impede a person's capacity to cope. The person may go through a process of bereavement which can take years. At the extreme level the experienced loss leaves the person in a state of depression. Many new migrants cope by telling themselves that one day, they will return home. This hope helps individuals to see the end of their loss, to imagine a reunion with the homeland and loved ones. However, these thoughts and hopes do not predict future behaviour (Castle and Miller, 1998).

## *Adaptation*

Most refugees do not speak the language of the host country upon arrival. Not only this, many of them have qualifications and experience that are not recognised in the country of exile. This is why the process of settlement can be very stressful as the individual has to learn the new language, and to requalify or train in order to obtain employment. Adaptation

also includes getting used to the new physical and social environment, re-establishing support networks and settling down in a home. Doing all of this in the absence of friends and family can be very stressful (Veer, 1998:9).

## *Discrimination and social stigma*

The social stigma around being a refugee can leave individuals with low self-esteem. Refugees are generally perceived as people who feed off the system (Palmer, 01/12/02, RAM, 03/03/03) and some government policies make the situation worse. The voucher system, for example, which was introduced in 1999 and removed in 2002, singled asylum seekers out in supermarkets. Being singled out in this way often made individuals feel vulnerable. Some of the staff at supermarket tills were not familiar with the vouchers and processing them took longer, delaying other customers, further stigmatising asylum seekers.

The UK media has a history of attacking asylum seekers and this has increased in the recent years. Asylum seekers are described as 'bogus' applicants who take advantage of Britain being a 'soft touch' and the problems of the public services are said to be due to 'the flood' of asylum seekers into the country (Browne, 07/08/02). This has reinforced a hostile environment for asylum seekers and led to increasing racial attacks throughout the country (Barkham, 27/08/99).

## *Culture shock and acculturation*

Culture shock takes place when the refugee comes from a culture which is radically different from the culture of the host country. This is particularly true of the participants of this research who belong to a Middle Eastern communal culture with hierarchical gender roles and values, and end up in an individualistic society where there is much greater equality between the genders. In communal societies, an individual's goals or happiness can be sacrificed to the advantage of, or for the coherence of, the family, group and society. Although this may seem imposed on individuals, it is actually internalised so that if a person thinks of her personal happiness before that of her family or community, she feels selfish and even guilty (Comas-Diaz, 1987). When a woman from such a communal

society moves to a society that does not have such strict commitments to family and community, she may feel confused and anxious. This is particularly true in relation to gender roles and sexuality. In the Middle East women are absolute nurturers within their families even if they are employed, partially disabled or elderly. Some sacrifice their career to look after their husband and children. western women, on the other hand, have achieved great progress in terms of gender roles and sexuality. The freedom of western women may cause confusion for refugee women.

Exposure to new values is the beginning of the long process of acculturation which may take years and even generations to complete (Phinney, 1990). In this sense the refugee may struggle for years and even all her life in terms of feeling at home with the new culture. Acculturation can also have dangerous consequences for women.

## *Dangers of acculturation*

Acculturation can have dangerous consequences for refugee women within the ethnic community. This is particularly true if the woman integrates or assimilates into the host culture. Women who allow themselves more freedom than the ethnic community allows, face difficulties. From my own experiences I know that some women drink alcohol without daring to do so among their families or communities. Even when they have a glass of wine with friends, they are always careful not to be seen by others who might gossip or spread rumours about them.

The danger of acculturation in an extreme form is that of Honour Killing. In the last decade a number of Muslim women in the West have been killed by their father, brother or uncles. The main reason for most such murders is having a boyfriend or becoming sexually active prior to marriage.

## *Summary*

A combination of factors puts refugee women at particular risk of mental ill health as compared to other minority groups. Even though individuals may view migration positively, the immediate subjective response to migration is often that of being

overwhelmed by feelings of loss, powerlessness and shock. It takes time to come to terms with the change of position from citizens in the home country to 'bogus' asylum seekers in the host country, and to the great change to social and economical status. Acculturation may seem like the key but it can have dangerous consequences for refugee women.

## My experience

I came to this country in my late teens and this research is in part inspired by my own experiences as a young refugee woman as well as the experiences of other refugee women I have known through my life here. Also having worked in the Home Office as an interpreter with asylum seekers, I am familiar with some of the legal issues faced by the newly arrived.

Upon arrival in the UK, throughout the loneliness and loss I experienced, my community was the only source of support and social interaction which was accessible to me. I realise now that some refugee women who are dispersed to isolated towns in the UK may not have access to their own communities. In my experience, hearing somebody speak my language was sometimes enough to form a friendship with them. The language barrier was the first obstacle which isolated me from the outside world, slowed me down and deprived me from doing the things I wanted to do most such as going to University and reading poetry.

The second factor which made me cling to my community even more was the cultural differences I experienced through my interactions with the outside world. I found it extremely rude that people you knew would eat before your eyes and never, even as a way of being polite, offer you a bit of their food. In school I found it shocking how the students openly blamed their parents and complained about their families, how the 'me' was at the centre and there was no consideration for the 'us' which was essential for me. I felt that I was in a selfish, individualistic society where family ties and respect for the elderly were diminishing. Later, as I slowly mastered the language and interacted with the outside world enough, I found some positive aspects. Some good practices, I thought, were equality between the genders and respect for people's privacy and space. At this stage I found that my community created great pressure on me to stick to traditional practices and sacrifice

the goals which did not suit the patriarchal society. In other words, I came to see myself as an individual whose happiness was impeded by a group and then I decided to cherish what I used to perceive as selfish individualism.

I believe my whole life in this country has been a means of finding the middle way between the two cultures and at certain times, depending on what is going on in my personal life as well as the outside world, I have favoured one and been distant from the other. This process has not ended, as I am still trying to find a way of life which encompasses good values from both societies and this is not easy. I have experienced conflict with British society which sometimes exerts great pressure to adapt. There are also times of conflict with my own family and ethnic community, and even within myself.

In my first few years I suffered a great deal of recurrent depression and anxiety. At times I still have anxiety attacks when I feel that I am a foreigner in this country as well as in my own country as a result of the changes I have gone through. Sometimes I worry that I may even become a foreigner in my own home as my husband is English and my children may be more influenced by the values in this culture.

## The women who are the focus of this research

This research concentrates on the mental health of women like myself who have been uprooted and are divided between two cultures. I am aware that not everyone's experiences are similar to mine. There are differences in the life stages, and the social and economical positions of young women, mothers, and older women. There are also differences between women of the same age group, occupying the same positions. Therefore I aim to be open to all the possible experiences, and to be on my guard against interpreting things from my own perspective.

The women in this research are Kurdish from Iraq and Iran. By focusing on Kurdish women I hope to be able to gain a better insight into the lives of a small group of women and draw more specific conclusions.

## The location of this study within current research

According to Veer (1998) there are three phases of traumatisation for refugees. The first phase is when the person experiences increased oppression in his homeland before he is personally targeted. In the second phase the individual becomes a victim of torture, terror, and the deprivations experienced during escape when he attempts to resettle in a safe country and seek asylum. The latter is important because most refugees have passed through or lived in a neighbouring country before arriving at the country of refuge. The third phase involves life in exile when the person is experiencing the after effects of his traumatic experiences in the past, the uncertainty of future while waiting to hear from asylum authorities, the problems of adaptation to a new culture, and the possible experiences of racism and discrimination.

Generally speaking, research on refugees has two shortcomings. First of all, more attention has been paid to refugees' 'traumatic experiences' before arriving and after at the country of refuge (Watters, 2001; Ager, 1993). This seems to be partly because migration advocates encourage the perception of refugees as a traumatised group to support the refugee case. Also because torture, rape, imprisonment, and trauma are considered more serious immediate harms that directly affect the mental health of refugees. But as Eastmond (1998) points out the assumption that certain individuals are traumatised simply because they are refugees is ill founded.

Secondly, refugees are represented as a homogenous and genderless group (Wahlbeck, 1999, Watters, 2001). Often the findings of a study based on a group of refugees are generalised to apply to all. These generalisations inform the public discourse on refugees. They also lead to the illusion that refugees must have similar needs which in turn influences service provision to this group. Eastmond (1998) points to the importance of challenging the generalisations made about refugees. In this sense research should "capture the political and cultural dynamics, as well as the diversity of social experience, behind such social constructions." (Eastmond 1998:179).

In this research I concentrate on the implications of arriving at the country of refuge for a group of women. In particular coping with loss as a result of uprootedness, "the never

ending problems of adaptation to a different culture", the "recurring experiences of racism and xenophobia" (Veer, 1998:9) as well as the opportunities that may become available in exile. There are also a great number of disappointments to live through. For example, if a person has escaped war and has come to Britain in search of safety, s/he may experience a different kind of danger, that of racial attacks and racism in general. If s/he has come in search of a new life with a better standard of living, most likely s/he will be disappointed in the first few years of her life in exile. In short, there are plenty of disappointments but also some opportunities awaiting refugees. Some of the opportunities that are open to them can in themselves cause more complications for refugee women.

In a review of fifty-nine studies using forty-seven questionnaires to measure the health of refugee women in the West (most of which were conducted in the 1990s) Gagnon et al. (2004: 112) found that, 'few high quality tools are available to measure concepts relevant to resettling refugee women's health.' This research aims to gather reliable evidence about the mental health implications of displacement for a group of refugee women. This is essentially a practical approach. At the heart of this research lies the fact that we cannot change the past and what has happened to these women, but there is a possibility that we can affect their present and futures. For example, it may be possible to promote mental health amongst this group of women by addressing isolation, powerlessness, and social stigma as well as by identifying and nurturing their strength.

## Summary

The definition of mental health used in this study is that provided by World Health Organisation (1981). According to this definition mental health is the capacity of the individual, group and environment to interact in ways which promote the subjective well-being of the person. It is the development of the individual-and-group goals in a manner consistent with justice and equality. This is a broad definition which recognises how the factors that determine mental health operate on multiple levels. It recognises the importance of factors such as social context, justice and equality for mental health and hence is well suited to this research.

Seeking asylum results in losing control, even if temporarily, over the course events that follow, such as the length of time it takes to be granted asylum and set up a home. It also entails disorientation when the familiar environment and way of life is replaced by an alien one. Deprivation from social support which was accessible in the home country goes hand in hand with isolation in the host country as a result of language barriers and cultural differences. Exposure to a new culture may lead to confusion especially when the host community exerts pressure on the individual to acculturate. Acculturation can have its own dangerous consequences, especially for women within their ethnic communities. Migrant women may be caught between the sexism of their own community and racism of the host community (Espin, 1996). The combination of these factors with other factors in the home country, such as possible past trauma, put these women at higher risks for mental ill health.

# Chapter Two - Literature Review

## Introduction

In this chapter I will first outline the notions which are important to this study and then go on to review the literature on them. Literature in the field of migration, psychology, and mental health has informed this research.

Due to the relatively scarce material on refugee women, some of the literature reviewed here deals with refugees in general and also with women from ethnic minorities. The relevance of literature on ethnic minority women to the study of refugee women lies in the fact that both migrant and refugee women live between two, sometimes substantially different, cultures. Both ethnic minority and refugee women are perceived as cultural transmitters of valuable norms within their own communities (Dasgupta, 1998). The latter is one of the reasons why women in these communities are subjected to strict forms of control as compared with men.

The literature review consists of four parts. I have decided to explore the concepts of identity, culture and their relationship in the first section of the literature review. This is mainly because in order to understand some of the changes that women experience as a result of their displacement, we need to first understand the relationship between culture and identity. The second part of this literature review looks at the sources of stress which include the immediate changes that refugees experience as a result of being uprooted and the further complications associated with refugee women settling down in their new country. In the third section, issues related to stress and coping are explored and finally empowerment for refugee women is considered in the last section.

## Being uprooted

The issues that affect the well-being of refugees during their lives in exile are discussed here. The concepts that are essential to the research are those of: identity, culture, ethnic community, discrimination, loss, adaptation, stress, and coping. This is because, arguably, being uprooted entails the following:

1. Each individual has a unique identity and arrives at the new place with a particular history, religion, culture, and way of living.

2. Leaving the homeland entails substantial loss which can be disorienting. This includes: loss of economic resources, social status, support networks, and in general loss of what Hartman (1964) named "the average expectable environment".

3. Arriving in exile requires mastering a great number of tasks which are essential for adaptation. These are likely to include: learning a new language; becoming familiar with the physical environment which may be much larger than what is familiar; setting up a new home which takes much longer in the light of the dispersal system in the UK; requalifying and finding employment; and re-establishing support networks.

4. Arriving in a new social environment means exposure to different sets of believes, values, and ways of living: this is often called 'culture shock' (Veer, 1998:23).

5. Exposure to new ways of living may create pressure to adapt, in particular when there are new opportunities to be taken advantage of, and hence acculturation. Such changes will impact on identity (Marsella et al., 1994).

6. Adopting a new identity may lead to conflict between the individual and other members of her family or ethnic community (Espin, 1996).

7. Experiencing discrimination and oppression when the individual becomes a member of an ethnic minority in the host country (Parvanta, 1992, Wahlbeck,

1999).

8. Coping with the stress that arises from loss, adaptation and discrimination.

9. Mental health problems can result from stress, isolation, powerlessness, division between two cultures and oppression. The latter is particularly important for refugee women who suffer double oppression in respect of their gender and their ethnicity.

This part of the literature review is designed to explore the above notions. Since the relationship between culture and identity is only one of the important aspects of migration, the review of the literature on these notions is not comprehensive.

## Identity formation and Acculturation

In this section I focus on the study of the different influences on identity formation and the trajectories of acculturation. I then consider some markers of acculturation for women.

### *Culture and Identity*

Studying culture, identity and their relationship helps explain the process of acculturation during displacement when the individual is exposed to a new culture. I will first define culture and then go on to talk about its influence on identity. According to Fernando (1991):

> "Culture may be described in terms of accumulation of knowledge among people constituting a social group, of conceptual structures that determine the total reality of life within which people live and die" (Fernando, 1991:9).

He goes on to say that culture refers to child rearing habits, family systems and ethical values or attitudes common to a group- a mixture of behaviour and cognition (Fernando, 1991:10). In this sense culture consists of a complex set of beliefs and values, and the

patterns of behaviour and rituals influenced by these beliefs and values. This is not to argue that knowing about an individual's culture will tell us how she will behave in certain situations. There is no determinism involved. But generally speaking, knowing about a person's culture will provide us with information about whether or not certain behaviour is considered normal in her culture. This is of great importance in cases of an individual's cultural maladjustment which can lead to stress, anxiety and generally mental ill- health.

Fernando (1991) points out that culture is characterised by behaviour and attitudes, determined by upbringing and choice, and perceived as changeable (Fernando, 1991:10). The latter is particularly important as it allows individuals who are brought up in one culture but exposed to another, to change some aspects of their own culture. Light (1992) provides a perfect example of this when she reports the activities of a group of Guatemalan women in a refugee camp in South Mexico. This group although dealing with women's subordination by rejecting traditional gender roles, were simultaneously concerned with the loss of their traditional culture. The author explains how Guatemalan women could change some aspect of their culture without dissociating themselves from it altogether:

> "As a product of the human community, the culture of every society is dynamic and fluid- able to be changed and be shaped. If a social order no longer adequately reflects a group's needs and values, a new social order can emerge to take its place, without necessarily destroying the existing cultural base." (Light, 1992:306)

The question here arises as to what is the relationship between a person's identity and her culture? Soddy (1961) describes identity as personality or individuality. The term is used in a group as well as an individual sense, recognising the interdependence of the group and the individual. Identity of an individual, according to Soddy (1961), is a property that is inalienable from him/her but in another sense, an individual's identity is only needed and only possible, when s/he is a member of a group. In this sense an individual's identity is shaped by the values, beliefs and rituals, i.e. the culture, she shares with the group. Identification with a group's norms, values, and practices is essential to identity formation. This is because identification is one of the "earliest stages in the process of identity formation" (Soddy, 1961:5), it is one of the ways in which an individual attains identity.

But identity also refers to the individual's personality. Seward (1958) points out that the innermost core of personality is a feeling of identity. Thus it also includes those features and characteristics that make him/her an unique individual. Accordingly a person's identity is partly shaped by the values of the group she belongs to, but also includes more specific characteristics.

Bader (2001) argues that definitions of identity need not refer to cultural practices at all. For example, Bader (2001) points out, people who are dominated, discriminated and excluded can form a collective identity based on protest against these practices. The author argues that this shows how collective identity need not be based on a common culture. A good example for this may be women from different ethnic backgrounds getting together to fight oppression. In this case it seems that culture is not at the basis of defining identity. However, women build separate groups for fighting oppression, and hence you hear about Kurdish women's groups, Arabic women's groups, and so on. This is because although women agree that gender oppression is universal, they also agree that they themselves are different and what is true and important for one group may not be so for another. It was black feminists who started talking about difference and since then, there has been increasing awareness amongst feminists that women from different cultural backgrounds may want different things. In these ways the importance of culture and ethnicity is recognised.

In summary, most of the time definitions of identity are influenced by some aspects of culture. But what are the other influences on shaping a person's identity?

## *Gender and identity*

Worell and Remer (1992) point to some important influences on identity formation. An individual, according to Worell and Remer, is a member of multiple groups. These groups can be defined by categories such as age, gender, sexuality, ethnic origin, cultural identity, religious orientation, employment and education. Membership of any group, the authors point out, is accompanied by implicit or explicit norms and standards that may define and structure the person's beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations and interpersonal relationships. Thus these categories influence a person's identity.

An important issue is brought up by Worell and Remer (1992) who suggest that some group memberships can place the individual at personal risk for categorical assignment to low social status, destructive cultural stereotypes and societal discrimination. As a result individuals from these groups may experience powerlessness, social stigma and exclusion. This has important implications for the participants of this study who experience social stigma and powerlessness because of their gender and their status as refugees. Being female, a core component of women's identity, means being a member of the oppressed gender group. A Muslim woman from the Middle East will have grown up in a male-dominant culture. This implies that generally there are more opportunities for men and the culture practices double-standard treatments. These factors get reflected in her image of the world and of herself. For example, according to Islamic law, two women witnesses together are equal to one male witness in court (such law is practiced in Iran and Iraq). And although according to Islamic law no man or woman is allowed to drink alcohol or have sex before marriage, culturally it is only the women who are not allowed to do so. Women are not allowed to move out of their parental home until they are married. These norms are sometimes internalised by women even though they restrict their choices and limit their opportunities. This is best described by Egan & Perry (2001) as felt pressure to adapt feminine roles. That is, being pressurised by parents, peers and self to conform to gender stereotypes. This felt pressure is proved to be negatively associated with adjustment (Egan & Perry, 2001). In their study with children aged 8-12 years, Egan and Perry (2001) found that the negative effects of felt pressure on adjustment were more evident for girls as compared to boys. The authors suggest two factors that might have contributed to this negative effect for girls. First of all, girls are more likely than boys to take to heart the social feedback of other people, owing to their desire to maintain interpersonal relatedness, so they internalise self-limiting social actions more regularly than boys. The second factor was suggested to be that male typed traits generally bring more prestige and rewards than female-typed traits; hence girls who give in to felt pressure may never develop agentic competencies which are crucial for facing difficult challenges in life. Rampage (1991) also points out that patterns of child rearing discourage independence in girls, teaching them to believe that happiness is only to be found in selfless service to others. Social norms and expectations regarding appropriate female behaviour, rather than biology, discourage women from seeing themselves as capable and independent knowers, able to make choices about their lives regardless of the approval or disapproval of others.

A consequence of the recognition that women have difficulty living at the centre of their own lives has been the recent phenomenon of giving women a diagnosis of co-dependency because they put others' needs ahead of their own and do not feel entitled to pursue their own goals. Rampage (1991) points out that this labels women sick when they are exhibiting the traits which are culturally expected of them as proper female behaviour. Since it is true that women are trained to believe that it is appropriate to live in the service of others, husbands and children, and inappropriate to live at the centre of their own lives, it is hardly fair to tell them that they are sick for doing precisely what they have been trained to do. From childhood women are taught to adopt feminine roles and those who do not give in to such pressure are usually disliked by their peers (Egan and Perry, 2001). Those who do give in, do not develop important instrumental competencies which promote effective coping.

There are, of course, differences in how Muslim women identify with the roles assigned to them within their societies. Part of their identity is determined by their attitude towards these norms and whether or not they accept them. But the structure of the society limits women's reactions when rejecting such values. Jack (1991) suggested that women influenced by cultural norms and gender-roles, adopt a gender-specific schema called 'silencing the self' which influences their choices of behaviour in intimate relationships. Silencing one's thoughts and emotions and exhibiting self-sacrificing behaviour in an effort to maintain an intimate relationship characterise this schema. Silencing the self has been found to be related to depression in women (Jack, 1991). Jack suggested women become depressed:

> '... not by the loss of a relationship, but by the recognition that they have lost themselves in trying to establish an intimacy that was never attained' (Jack, 1991:27).

Jack and Dill (1992) found that the schema is activated most often in interpersonal contexts wherein women's needs and freedom of expression are devalued. It develops within a society that 'discounts femininity itself- its knowledge, its perspectives, its values' (Jack 1991:33).

Thus, women who detest the subordination imposed on them by their communities may strategically adopt silencing the self-schema, or might take comfort in the company and support of other like-minded women. The latter is a way of coping which is reported to be more linked with women: social and emotional support (Billings & Moos, 1981, cited in Folkman et al. 1986). Another option, however, is to try to change these norms and actively take part in bringing about social change. However, this is not an easy course of action when feminist activities can be one of the reasons why women are forced to flee their countries. Within fundamentalist states the persecution of such women is a common occurrence:

> "Persecution against 'deviant' women by fundamentalist groups is... a common means employed to stop the spread of liberal Islam. To illustrate, in Algeria the present civil war is, in part, a war against women." (Elmadmad, 1999:264)

This highlights the dangers that women may experience if they are to play an active role in fighting gender oppression within their home countries. Many refugee women, however, may have fled their homeland because of their husband's, father's, or brother's actions and beliefs. This is pointed out by Elmadmad (1999) who says that women are "victims of men's wars", and that they suffer most from armed conflict even when they play no part in it. In such settings women can be targeted to punish men or even the whole community.

In summary, Muslim women experience low status in their societies. There are restrictions on their behaviour, movements, appearance and clothing (Espin, 1996, Elmadmad, 1999). It is important to note, however, that refugee women do not suffer merely in terms of their gender. The significance of group membership for identity is particularly important because of the implications it has for the identity of displaced individuals. For such individuals the group they belong to has also changed position- if they used to belong to the majority group in their country, in exile they belong to a minority group which is oppressed in many ways. Worell and Remer (1992) point to the importance of this when they say:

> "It is critical to recognise the implicit power imbalance that occurs when the client's important identities lie with culturally oppressed groups." (Worell and Remer, 1992:279)

Such a shift has great consequences for the person's identity and sense of integrity. The identity of the person is influenced by the status and the norms of the ethnic community in the host country.

## *Ethnic identity*

So far I have examined the importance of culture and gender for the formation of a person's identity. I shall now consider the concept of ethnicity and its influences on identity formation. Race and culture, according to Fernando (1991), are no longer linked to geographical locations or types of environment. This is because many societies, such as Britain, are both multicultural and multiracial. The concepts of race and culture are being combined into that of ethnicity, which is seen as a term that avoids the negative meaning attributed to the word 'race' and the limitations implicit in using the term 'culture'. Thus members of an ethnic group:

> "... are thought by themselves and/ or others to share a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture" (Fernando, 1991:10).

Ethnicity, Fernando suggests, is characterised by sense of belonging and group identity, determined by social pressure and psychological need, and perceived as partially changeable. It is important, however, to note that although ethnicity is usually seen as an attribute of 'minority groups', social scientists argue that everybody has ethnicity defined as a sense of group belonging, based on ideas of common origins, history, culture, experience and values (Castles and. Miller, 1998:30). Because these ideas change only very slowly, ethnicity has durability over generations and even centuries. But that does not mean that ethnic consciousness and culture within a group are homogeneous and static.

In multicultural Britain, the notion of ethnicity is regularly paired with the notion of minority. In this sense immigrant and refugee communities are considered 'ethnic

minorities' in Britain. Worell and Remer (1992) explain the notion of 'ethnic minority' rather nicely when they say:

> "The term ethnic refers to inclusion in a group through a common nationality, cultural heritage, or race... The concept of minority refers not to relative members but to relative degree of oppression and powerlessness within a dominant culture." (Worell and Remer, 1992:280)

Thus, a person is said to be a member of an ethnic minority when she shares some aspects of culture and heritage with a disadvantaged minority group. The concept of the ethnic minority always implies some degree of marginalisation or exclusion leading to situations of actual or potential conflict.

Evidence suggests that as length of stay increases, migrant groups develop their own social and economic infrastructure: places of worship, community centres, cultural activities, shops, professionals such as lawyers and doctors (Dasgupta, 1998, Castle and Miller, 1998). Outcomes of migrant settlement can vary depending on the actions of the state and population of the host society. This is clearly expressed by Berry (2001) when he says that the dominant group, i.e. the host society, plays a powerful role 'in influencing the way in which... acculturation would take place.' (Berry, 2001:620). In this sense immigrant groups and individuals are not free to choose how they want to engage with the host society and their choices 'may be constrained by the orientations of the receiving society' (Berry, 2001:618). Members of the host society, the author points out, need to change in order to accommodate immigrants. In this sense a mutual accommodation is required for the creation of a multicultural society:

> 'This strategy requires immigrants.. to adopt the basic values of the receiving society, and at the same time the receiving society must be prepared to adapt national institutions (e.g., education, health, justice, labour) to better meet the needs of all groups now living together in the larger plural society.' (Berry, 2001:619)

In this sense, at one extreme, openness to settlement, granting of citizenship and gradual acceptance of cultural diversity may allow the formation of ethnic communities. At the

other extreme refusal of citizenship, denial of rights to settlers and rejection of cultural diversity may lead to formation of ethnic minorities (see below, page 35). In the first case, immigrants and their children are seen 'as an integral part of a society willing to reshape its culture and identity' (Castles and Miller, 1998:29). In the second, immigrants are excluded and marginalised, so that they live on the fringe of a society which is determined to preserve its own culture and homogeneous identity. Most countries, according to Castle and Miller (1998), fit between the two.

It is important to note that although critics of immigration portray ethnic minorities as a threat to economic well-being, public order and national identity, these ethnic minorities may in fact be the creation of the same people who fear them. This is because an ethnic minority is the product of both other-definition (the host country) and self-definition (Castles and Miller, 1998:30). Other-definition usually means ascription of undesirable characteristics, negative stereotypes, and assignment to inferior social positions by dominant groups. Self definition refers to the consciousness of group members of belonging together on the basis of shared cultural and social characteristics. Some minorities may be constructed mainly through processes of exclusion, that is, the racism of the majority. This is best explained by Berry (2001) when he says that it is the ingroup favouritism and prejudice of the host society which leads to outgroup rejection and the ascription of stereotypes to the immigrant communities. Then, Berry points out, intergroup perceptions and attitudes are reciprocated and the relationship becomes self sustaining (Berry, 2001:628). Other minorities may be constituted on the basis of cultural and historical consciousness or ethnic identity among their members.

Dasgupta's (1998) study with the Indian Asian community in the USA is relevant to this research because individuals in the Asian Indian communities are similarly divided between their ethnic culture and the western culture. This community, like the Kurdish community, has well defined inequalities between the genders. Similarly, it is a collective community where individuals are expected to sacrifice their desires for the collective goals of the group. In her study, Dasgupta (1998) found that no matter how well adjusted Indian Asians are in the USA, they insist on keeping ties with their cultural heritage. The links are maintained 'physically' through visiting homeland regularly, and 'psychologically' by recreating Indian culture in the host country. They also renew their commitment to their birth culture through founding religious institutions, social gatherings and cultural

associations. In other words the ethnic community plays an important role in keeping the individual (whether asylum seeker or immigrant) in touch with her home culture. Yet the host culture too exerts its own influences.

## *Cultural identity*

According to Berry (2001) cultural identity refers to the beliefs and attitudes people have about themselves in relation to their home culture when they are in contact with an outside culture. Hence how people think of themselves is constructed along two dimensions. These are: identification with one's ethnic culture, and identification with the host culture. The question that arises here is: if, identity is influenced by culture and the host culture imposes pressure on individuals to adapt, how is it possible for identity to change?

Soddy (1961) suggests that the answer lies in the concepts of continuity, coherence, and flexibility. Soddy (1961:4) suggests that identity is a continuum and its loss is not an all or nothing phenomenon: some qualities can be lost without any damage to the identity of the person. Flexibility allows for change and the need for a coherent identity can provide some of the impetus. For example, if a woman comes to believe something which contradicts previously held beliefs, she will experience cognitive dissonance. To achieve coherence again in her cognitive system, she may have to relinquish some of her prior beliefs.

There are, of course, great differences in individual's capacity to adopt a new identity. These differences can be due to the characteristics of the individual, such as their flexibility, as well as the characteristics of the host society, for example, the openness of the society to accepting strangers (see pages 28-29 and 35).

In summary, research on identity and culture shows that both culture and identity are changeable. It is possible for a woman to change identity without her culture changing and visa versa. In the first case through adopting a new identity, the individual becomes detached from her own culture, and in the latter case she remains the same, disregarding the changes that have taken place in her birth culture. Bader (2001) illustrates this clearly when he says:

> "Cultural practices may be relatively stable whereas definitions of individual and collective identities may change rapidly, or vice versa, definitions of ethnic religious collective identities may be relatively stable whereas cultural and religious practices are changing." (Bader, 2001:260-1)

Accordingly a refugee woman may acculturate and in doing so distance herself from her birth culture and ethnic community, or else the ethnic community, usually through the second and third generations, may change while the individual maintains the same values, ignoring the change.

So far I have considered the relationships between identity, culture and ethnic community. The changeability of these concepts has also been discussed. The question that will now be considered concerns the relevance of these concepts for refugees and their mental health.

## *Identity transformation*

It is understandable, Veer (1998) suggests, that refugees because of living under repression and violence, and subsequently being forced to leave their familiar cultural environment, may be struggling with identity problems. These problems may manifest themselves as:

> "... a sense of confusion about standards and values; irresolution, even in trivial matter; ideological doubts; loss of future perspective." (Veer, 1998: 39-40).

Identity problems, Veer (1998) points out, may result in apathy and self-destructive behaviour. In some cases the complaints, symptoms and behaviour of refugees become more understandable when these are evaluated against the background of identity problems. It is also important to note that for most refugees this is their first experience in an industrialised country, and traditional social patterns often become confused (Friedman, 1992).

The next question is: how is identity influenced when exposed to a new culture? In other words, how do refugees develop new identities in the country of refuge? As noted above (page 30) individuals who are exposed to two different sets of values will choose one as

opposed to the other depending on their approval and devotion to that particular value. The person may adopt a new value because she disapproves at the old one. Berry (2001) points out that every attitude of the person may be a candidate for change and the transition involves both 'culture shedding' and 'culture learning' (Berry, 2001:621). But when and how does she come to view some aspects of her culture in a negative light?

In the case of women who may already be critical of some aspects of their birth culture, traditional gender-roles for example, it is easier to see how they could develop new identities. In some cases new identities might have been already formed in the home country and find expression in the country of exile. Women who devalue certain norms of their culture and have already adopted more positive identities, may be restricted in expressing their new values and beliefs in a closed community. Only in exile can they be themselves and act and talk as their true selves. This may be particularly true in the case of homosexual women who 'come out' in exile (Espin, 1996). However, a woman's outlook on her birth culture may change if she finds herself in a hostile cultural environment. This can be explained in terms of a model of identity development proposed by Cross (1980). Cross (1980) summarised the Thomas (1970, 1971) and Cross (1971) models of 'the process of becoming black' and reviewed the studies conducted in the USA to validate these models. Cross (1980) then put forth the following model which involves five sequential stages:

1 Pre-encounter, in which the individual attempts to assimilate herself into the dominant culture, with the consequent negative self-evaluation.
2 Encounter: in which she becomes aware of and angry towards her cultural oppression.
3 Immersion in which she becomes immersed and takes pride in her ethnicity and hostile toward the dominant culture.
4 Internalisation in which she integrates the two perspectives.
5 Internalisation/ commitment, in which she becomes active to achieve positive community change. (Cross, 1980)

At the fifth stage, a distinction was made between those who internalise the new identity but discontinue involvement in the process, and those who continued and became social activists (Cross, 1980:86).

Cross's (1980) model describes the transformation of the identity of a group of immigrants from African Caribbean to Black. This, although specific to the African American community, can be a useful guide to the study of ethnic identity formation amongst other immigrant groups. The first stage of Cross's (1980) model seems to represent those individuals who are unhappy about their own identity and group memberships and thus try to assimilate into a group which they consider better than their own. This valuing 'the other', i.e. the western culture, higher than 'the self', i.e. the birth culture, seems to temporarily reverse when the individual experiences oppression during encounter. Thus a woman who is already unsatisfied with traditional gender roles in her culture, for example, may be more liable to identify with western values of equality and this reflects Cross's (1980) pre-encounter stage. However she may also face racism during encounter, and in self-defence she may cling to home culture (Castle and Miller, 1998, & Berry, 2001). She may realise that although western women enjoy more freedom than her, they are still struggling in many ways. For example, although it is a great achievement that women are no longer only housewives and that they can go out to work, nonetheless many end up doing two full time jobs. The refugee woman may also find out that as much as she does not approve of men's attitudes in her birth culture, they are at least committed to having a family and bringing up children, something which may not be evident in many young western men. In this sense it can take a long time for a woman to be able to integrate positive aspects from both cultures.

Where individuals are not critical of their own culture, the development of a new identity may be slightly different. Phinney's (1990) model may explain these cases better. Phinney (1990) examined the commonalities among various models of ethnic identity formation and proposed a three-step model of ethnic identity development. The first stage is known as un-examined ethnic identity, the second, exploration and the last, consolidation. Unlike Cross (1980), Phinney (1990) suggests that in the first stage, the ethnic minority group unquestionably conforms to its own values. As acculturation progresses, the second phase appears where the individual begins to explore her relationship with the dominant culture. The third phase involves incorporation of identity that may combine both cultures, and yet exhibit uniquely individualistic characteristics. In this sense traditionalism or clinging to old values, beliefs and behaviours, is considered to be the earliest stage of the trajectory of acculturation. However, Phinney (1990) points out, this development process is neither

static nor linear. External as well as internal pressures to change and adjust mark the immigrant experience.

Cross's (1980) model differs from Phinney's (1990) in its pre-encounter stage. But as I pointed out earlier, the models might be representing different starting points for identity development. Both models agree that individuals go through different stages of identity development; however Phinney (1990) seems to recognise that the integration of both perspectives, or combining both cultures as Phinney calls it, might take generations to achieve. Thus, understanding a woman's placement along this identity continuum may be helpful in understanding her attitudes and behaviours and the level of stress she experiences. The latter is particularly true because there is evidence (see below, pages 36-37) that the different trajectories, i.e. whether a person is a traditionalist, assmiliationist or bicultural, are associated with different levels of stress (LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton, 1993, Berry, 2001).

Phinney's (1990) review provides contradictory results about the influence of gender on ethnic identity; gender seems to have different influences on ethnic identity in the different groups studied. Black women in the USA and Irish girls in England showed higher ethnic identification as compared to males, but this pattern was reversed for the Jewish community in Canada (Phinney, 1990:509). Thus it is important to be aware of the diversity and try not to apply the findings of a study of one ethnic community to another.

## *The trajectories of acculturation*

Berry (2001) defines acculturation to be a process which involves two or more groups, with consequences for both. However, the author points out, the experiences have a greater impact on the non-dominant group and its members. On the individual level, Wong-Reger & Quintana (1987) point out, acculturation:

> '... refers to changes in people's social and work activities as well as in their thinking patterns, values, and self-identification.' (Wong-Reger & Quintana, 1987:346)

Berry (2001) identifies four trajectories of acculturation. These are: assimilation, separation, marginalisation, and integration. In this sense there are several patterns of identification for individuals who live between two cultures. Assimilation is sometimes called over-adjustment because in this type of coping the person identifies with the new culture and does not maintain links with her own minority culture (Berry, 2001, Veer, 1998). At the opposite extreme there is separation which is also called traditionalism, and this takes place when "minorities reject the majority culture and retain their ethnic affiliation." (Wong-Reger & Quintana, 1987:346).

The third trajectory is marginality where neither culture gives the individual reasons to identify, and hence she becomes decultured or marginalized (Berry, 2001, Veer, 1998, Wong-Reger & Quintana, 1987). On the other hand, integration or biculturalism is defined by identification with the values of both home and host cultures. This may be achieved by synthesising the two cultures or by maintaining separate spheres of interaction. Thus the person feels comfortable within her own culture as well as the majority culture, and this creates a feeling of belonging and being at home which is positive and least stressful (Wong-Reger & Quintana, 1987).

Acculturation takes place because minorities due to their small numbers, low status, lack of power and visibility, are expected to conform to the majority. Initially it was believed that although there will be individual differences in acculturation, depending on the flexibility of the individual, their age, gender, employment and education, the mere exposure to a different culture would result in acculturation. Now it is generally recognised that institutional barriers such as lack of opportunity, discrimination, residential segregation, use of stereotypes to justify discrimination and intolerance for ethnic differences, work in opposition to acculturation (Castle and Miller, 1998, Berry, 2001). Refugees may be clustered together in certain areas, Hackney and Haringey in London for example (Wahlbeck, 1999:134), which separates them from the main stream and hence makes it difficult to acculturate. Host countries may also use differential treatments towards different minorities. For example, in the 1960's the Turks were encouraged to migrate to Germany as workers. The second and third generation Turks are still considered migrants whereas the Jews of the former Soviet Union are welcomed to Germany and given full citizenship rights to increase Germany's Jewish population (Stewart et al. 2001). Hence acculturation is now rightly perceived as a process in which minority groups or individuals

as well as the host culture or institutions play a part. Discrimination, Berry (2001) points out, affects the refugee's pattern of adaptation. When ethnic groups are forced to live in ghettos and reinforce their own culture, they are accused of being un-integrateable. Below I will talk about how the different acculturation trajectories are thought to be related to mental health.

## *Studies on acculturation*

There are very few studies on the acculturation of refugee women and I shall rely on other studies carried out with immigrant communities who like refugee communities experience changes as a result of exposure to a different culture.

In their study of the acculturation of two immigrant groups in the USA Wong-Reger & Quintana (1987) found that most Southeast Asians were either separatists or biculturalists whereas Hispanic immigrants were mostly assimilated or Anglo-biased biculturalists. These findings support the cultural similarity hypothesis. According to this hypothesis individuals who come from a similar culture to the host culture (the Hispanic immigrants in this case) will assimilate more easily (Berry, 1986). When checking for satisfaction Wong-Reger & Quintana (1987) also found that biculturalists were most satisfied, followed by assimilationists and finally by separatists. In this sense, this study indicates that the best pattern of adjustment is biculturalism because this amounts to the least amount of stress and hence better mental health. Separation or traditionalism is found to be least adaptive.

In their review of the literature on different patterns of acculturation LaFromboise et al. (1993) proposed that biculturalists are competent in both home and host cultures, have positive attitude towards both, fit comfortably between the two, can communicate fluently and behave appropriately in both cultures. This is why, the authors speculate, such individuals have better physical and mental health. The authors argue that because biculturalism means maintaining a positive identification with one's birth culture and developing a positive identification with the new culture, it is associated with less stress and less conflict in a multicultural environment. Conversely, deculturation is associated

with a higher risk for psychological distress because it involves rejecting both ethnic groups. Seward (1958) speaking of deculturation (ambivalence) says:

> "Confusion is often added to ambivalence... At the extreme of confusion we find the person who has lost whatever identification he once had." (Seward, 1958: 8)

Separation which involves identification with the original culture and rejection of the host group, and assimilation, which involves rejection of the original group and identification with the host group, have also been argued to cause stress in a pluralistic society, although less than deculturation (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Similarly, in a review of acculturation studies Berry (1986) found traditionalism to be associated with high acculturative stress whereas integration with the least stress. Krishnan and Berry (1992, cited in Dasgupta (1998)) also found that assimilationists experienced higher acculturative stress compared to the integrationists who maintained values of both culture. Considering the important role that the community plays in the lives of immigrants, the anxiety felt by first generation immigrants who assimilate is understood.

There are inconsistencies regarding the least adaptive strategy. Wong-Reger & Quintana (1987) and Berry (1986) found separatism or traditionalism to be most stressful whereas LaFromboise et al. (1993) argue that deculturation or marginality is most stressful. There are also inconsistent findings regarding the most adaptive strategy. In their study with Anglophone students in university of Ottawa in Canada, Damji et al. (1996) found that bicultural students scored highest on stress as compared to other students. However, in a review of more recent studies Berry (2001) argues that the following pattern is widely found in the literature:

> '... bicultural identities and integrationist attitudes predict... better psychological adaptation... with separated and marginalised identities being associated with least favourable outcomes.' (Berry, 2001:627)

This, according to Berry, forms a basis for policy development supporting bicultural identities, integrationist attitudes and multicultural institutions in plural societies. In this

sense there seems to be enough evidence suggesting that biculturalism is the most adaptive strategy which amounts to least stress.

## *Markers of Acculturation for Women*

Some factors have been reported to be connected with identity changes for immigrant and refugee women, these include clothing, dating practices, sexuality, and intermarriage. Espin (1996) mentions the link between clothing and identity; she quotes Barbara Schreier (1994) who set up an exhibition of acculturation and clothing because she believed clothing is "an identifiable symbol of a changing consciousness". Schreier, explaining the reason why she focused her exhibition on women's clothing, wrote:

> "The decision... was based on the long-standing relationship women have had with their appearance... even though men considered issues of clothing, they did not record them with the same iconographic vocabulary as did women. Female immigrants discuss clothing in their memories, oral histories, and correspondence as pivotal markers of their journey and remembered objects of desire." (Schreier, 1994, cited in Espin, 1996)

Espin (1996) then goes on to make the important point that because the influence of gender on ethnic identity is not considered properly, aspects of acculturation which are expressed through women's choice of clothing are usually ignored. It is not questioned why women place importance on their clothing and appearance as a statement of their relation to acculturation. This is because, Espin (1996) suggests, women are defined and define themselves through physical appearance. Clothing, fashion, weight, and other issues related to appearance mediate connections or disconnections between mothers and daughters.

Thus clothing can be grounds for intergenerational conflict for young women, or conflict with the community in general. It is important, however, to note that changes in the style of clothing do not have to be as obvious as is the case of Asian women who choose between dressing western or preserving ethnic clothing. Even in those cultures where women do not wear traditional clothing except on occasions (Kurdish outfits during celebrations for

example), there can be changes in dressing style. For example, by wearing shorter skirts, sleeveless tops, bare back and open collar dresses. In this sense, although the style has not changed in the sense of wearing jeans instead of silvar-kumis, it has changed in the sense of being more exposing and more relaxed. The new freedom young immigrant women acquire from being wage-earners can express itself through the clothes they wear and through the refusal to accept parental control over their clothing and sexuality. It is therefore not surprising that in Iran:

> "The work of Islamic revolution has, at least in symbolic terms, turned into "a veiling revolution"." (Elmadmad, 1999:265)

Another marker of acculturation which is also a locus of intergenerational conflict is dating. Dasgupta (1998) directs attention to the Asian Indian community's concern with the practice of dating in the USA. This concern and rejection of dating is based on two counts, these are sexuality and the possibility of marital integration. Parents may resist intermarriage by refusing to allow their children to date and mix freely with their western peers; a restriction that seems to be more pronounced for females than males. This is because the popular definition of a good girl in these cultures is one who does not date, is calm and patient, and marries a man who her parents approve (Dasgupta, 1998). In his research with Asian Indian families in the USA, Mani (1992) also observes that the fear of dating is gendered and that judgements are made on the basis of a double standard. Although parents do not approve of mixed marriages there are no serious attempts to control men's sexuality: it is women's behaviour that is the focus of attention:

> "Women are quite frequently policed with the stick of tradition: it is women who are called on to preserve the ways of the old country." (Mani, 1992:13, cited in Dasgupta, 1998:964).

In relation to women's sexuality, Espin (1996) points out that for parents and young women alike, acculturation and sexuality are seen as closely connected, hence the preoccupation with clothing, appearance and sexuality. This is why, Espin (1996) argues, the religious men and those whom she names 'the self appointed guardians of morality and tradition' (Espin, 1996:89) are so concerned with women's roles and sexual behaviour.

Currently, we are witnessing how women, their role, and above all control over them have become central to the agenda of Islamic fundamentalists (Elmadmad, 1999). As Espin (1996) argues this is why when immigrant communities are overwhelmed with rejection and racism:

> "The self appointed" leaders have always found fertile ground from which to control women's sexuality in the name of preserving tradition. Women's obedience is advocated as a type of "steadying influence". (Espin, 1996:89)

It is significant that groups that are changing through the process of acculturation focus on preserving tradition almost exclusively through the gender roles and lives of women. Women's roles commonly become the bastion of traditions. In her study with Asian Indian families Dasgupta (1998) found that immigrants practice their own gender ideologies in the country of residence- the USA in this case. This is because the maintenance of traditions and identity have been placed on South Asian women's shoulders. As keepers of traditions, therefore, the roles of second-generation daughters are monitored more strictly than those of sons. In this sense fear of westernisation plays a large role in imposing such limitations on the female gender role.

The acculturation process opens up different possibilities for women than for men, particularly with reference to gender roles and sexual behaviour. Espin (1996) reports that among immigrant women in the USA who come from traditional societies, sexuality is frequently associated with becoming americanised. In these societies there are myths about American women being free with sex, and hence to become americanised may be equated with becoming sexually promiscuous. During the acculturation process sexuality often becomes the focus of the parent's fears and the girl's desires. Conversely, newly encountered gender relations, combined with greater access to paid employment for women, may create possibilities to live a new lifestyle. This way of life may have been previously unavailable in the home culture. Here the traditional power structure of the family may be changed (Espin, 1996); crossing borders through migration may provide women with the space and permission to cross boundaries and transform their sexuality and gender roles. However as I have already noted such transformation is also associated with risks for women, and is a more complicated process for them as compared to men.

The above studies point to some important markers of acculturation for immigrant and refugee women. All these studies also point to the dangers inherent in such acculturation. It seems that clothing, dating, sexuality and intermarriage are connected. For example, dressing western causes intergenerational conflict because parents know that dressing western is one aspect of acculturation which is associated with dating, sexuality and possibly mixed marriage. Yet young women who do acculturate in such ways are faced with great resistance and pressure from their families and ethnic communities. In the last few years it has become public knowledge that a number of immigrant and refugee women have been killed by their families because of dishonour. One such example is Fadime Sahindal, the Kurdish girl in Sweden who was killed by her family on the 21 January 2002. Her father and brother killed Fadima because she refused an arranged marriage and chose a Swedish partner. She had already reported her father and brother to the police because they had threatened to kill her. Her father was in custody for a year and when he was released, Fadima spent most of her time hiding. Finally, she was killed while she secretly visited her sister. Premarital sex or 'sexual misconduct' can lead to the death of young women in exile. This phenomenon is called "Honour killing" which is not restricted to the Kurdish community but affects South Asian, Middle Eastern and North African communities amongst others (Distcheid, July 2003). Kulwicki (2002) defines this to be:

> '... crime committed against women by their male family members because the women had violated the honour of their family... [by] alleged sexual misconduct.' (Kulwicki, 2002:77, 82)

Women may be killed in this manner to clear the family's name of shame. A woman is said to bring shame on her family if she commits adultery, if she has a sexual relationship prior to marriage, or if a widowed/divorced woman becomes pregnant. In some cases women are killed for less severe reasons, such as refraining from an arranged marriage, or refusing to be part of the tradition which is called 'exchange of brides'. She may be killed because her refusal is interpreted to mean she is having a relationship with someone else.

Another marker of acculturation for women from Muslim backgrounds is drinking alcohol. From my own experiences, the women I know are divided into drinkers and non-drinkers.

Those who drink are much more liberal and are more integrated into the host culture than those who do not. Other issues such as eating pork, attitude towards relationships, marriage and divorce are also important markers of change. There is a gap in research concerning the acculturation of Muslim women refugees and immigrants, and this is an area I will explore in this research.

## *Conclusions about acculturation*

The identity of displaced individuals is affected by the exposure to a new culture. When refugees arrive at the country of exile, exposure to different standards as well as pressure from the outside culture cause them to acculturate. The process of acculturation is mediated by integration policies of the host country and the attitudes of the host community towards the minority group (Berry, 2001). Exclusion, residential segregation and racism may lead to the creation of ethnic minorities with low social status (Castle and Miller, 1998). Such groups are then criticised for not integrating into the host culture. Refugee women may also experience pressure from their communities to maintain the old way of life.

Research identifies four trajectories of acculturation: traditionalism, biculturalism, assimilation and deculturation (Berry, 2001). Healthy adaptation is that which leads to the least amount of stress and anxiety. The latter seems to be achieved through biculturalism (Berry, 2001). This involves feeling at home in both cultures and adopting a way of life which benefits from the positive values in both cultures. But adopting western values may lead to other complications for these women within their family and communities. Hence, although the person may intend to maximise healthy adaptation, she may not be able to do so due to factors involving both home and host communities.

I shall now consider the sources of stress that refugee women encounter and what is known about the ways in which they cope.

# Sources of stress

This part of the literature review explores the different sources of stress for refugee women on arrival in the new country and while settling down.

## *Arrival*

This section is divided into three parts. First, I will consider the implications of lack of power and the waiting that asylum seekers are exposed to whilst their application for asylum is processed. Second, I will explore the losses experienced by refugee women. Third, I will focus attention on the requirements of adaptation.

### Helplessness

Prolonged waiting is a feature of seeking asylum. This is partly because the immigration policy in the UK has used deterrence strategies (Watters, 2001). During the last few years there have been regular changes in asylum and immigration law. Many of the changes have been to make asylum policy firmer because Britain was perceived to be a 'soft touch' (Robinson 2003:14). The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (see appendix 2.1) replaced the cash entitlements of asylum seekers by vouchers. Along with vouchers came the 'dispersal system' whereby asylum seekers were dispersed to designated areas, away from London and the South-East. The asylum seekers were dispersed purely on the basis of availability of accommodation. The capacity of services, including health care services, was not taken into account (Johnson, 2003). A lack of staff training and interpreters made it more difficult for the dispersal areas to cope with the large number and the diversity of the newcomers (Johnson, 2003). Watters (2002) reports that asylum seekers express strong feelings of disempowerment due to the bureaucratic processes and in particular the dispersal system. The author points out that some asylum seekers fear dispersal because of the visibility they have outside London and some experience racist abuse on the street because of this.

More recently, section 55 of the Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 made some asylum seekers destitute. According to section 55 of the new Act, in country applicants should convince immigration caseworkers that they have applied for asylum within seventy two hours of arrival in the UK. I was an interpreter during many interviews held by the Home Office and met many asylum seekers who were denied state support because they were not able to prove they had arrived at the date they claimed to have arrived. These interviews were usually very long, full of repetitive questions about the applicant's journey to the UK, their date of arrival, the kind of lorry they arrived in and whether they could prove any of the things they were 'claiming'. Overall, there has been a progressive decrease in asylum seekers' rights although the voucher scheme, which caused inconvenience and loss of self-esteem to many, has been discontinued and section 55 of the 2002 Act, has been overturned by the High Court. Asylum seekers are thus often unable to settle in areas where they may have established communities which could help them in the process of settlement. They have been subjected to many changes of the asylum law over which they have no power and they face a bureaucratic system which is intentionally insensitive to their needs (Postero, 1992). Watters (2002) points out that initially, 'when mix ups occurred, these were... assumed to be the result of a laborious and ill coordinated process. However, when bureaucratic muddles continued and intensified over time perceptions changed towards regarding the entire system as working in a deliberate way against the individual' (Watters, 2002:28-29). Such processes and practices are extremely disempowering and contribute to the physical and psychological vulnerabilities of refugees (Burstow, 1992), though as yet little is known about the differential impact on women.

Another factor which may contribute to the prolonged waiting is Home Office incompetence. I started working as an interpreter in the Home Office in December 2000 when they were recruiting interpreters to deal with the large backlog which needed to be cleared before the 2001 General Election. Through my work, I met many asylum seekers who had been in the UK for three years or longer, waiting to be called for an immigration interview. At times, applicants' files were lost by the Home Office and this meant they had to spend many years waiting. It was as recently as 2002 that the Immigration and Nationality Directorate became fully computerised and finally had a national electronic database. The government had been worried about multiple applications which could not be detected without such a computer system. There is now less fraud and files do not get lost but it does not necessarily follow that the waiting time has shortened. Even now, there

are times when I walk into an interview room to find an applicant who has lived in the country for four or five years and is only just being interviewed. In such cases, especially for those from Iraq, the situation in their country has changed drastically and their reasons for claiming asylum are no longer viable.

The waiting is probably the most difficult stage of the period of settlement. Postero (1992) points out that asylum seekers who have left their own countries behind and have often undertaken long, exhausting journeys to the country of refuge are unprepared for the 'long process' of seeking asylum. Being granted asylum means feeling protected, being allowed to settle, having more rights in the country of refuge and being allowed to study or work legally. This allows people, 'to begin the long process of normalising their lives.' (Postero, 1992:156). Conversely, as Veer (1998) notes:

> 'Not being able to make any real plans for the future may lead to serious psychological problems.' (Veer, 1998:21)

Veer (1998) argues that the stress arising from applying for asylum can be comparable to that arising from traumatic experiences of imprisonment and possible torture. Complications in the asylum process- being refused asylum or mislaid paperwork- cause feelings of powerlessness and anger. This is mainly because such events 'can only be endured' (Veer, 1998:22). This lack of control over unpleasant circumstances is very similar to what Hiroto and Seligman (1975) named 'learned helplessness'. The core ideas of the theory were 'learning', 'expectation' and 'motivation': when people learn that they cannot expect the unpleasant situation to change, they lose motivation to do anything. This helplessness, Hiroto and Seligman (1975) point out, is the cause of depression because having no control impedes the common impulse to try to change the situation and make it more suitable for the self. Thus behavioural coping strategies are not available to the self and the only option is emotional coping strategies. It is important to note that this lack of control is a defining characteristic of the process of seeking asylum.

Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale (1978) later reformulated the helplessness theory to take account of the different attribution styles. They suggested that depression is more likely to be long lasting if the person believes the situation is stable and unchanging; if the person

believes it is global and affects everything then depression will be general; and finally if the cause of the depression is believed to be personal then it will be accompanied with low self esteem. Such attributions are likely to be common amongst asylum seekers, especially those who believe that the awful circumstances they face are due to their migration and not to the bureaucratic system in which they find themselves. They may blame themselves for coming here rather than the system that mistreats them. The events are viewed as stable over a period of time because asylum seekers know changing the situation is dependant on someone else's decision. They just have to 'endure' it. The effects are global because they influence every aspect of the person's life. In this sense there is a sense of powerlessness and feeling trapped which contributes to feeling depressed.

Maier et al. (2000) point out that although the helplessness theory does not explain everything about depression, it has been a useful guide and has been consistently confirmed over the last few decades. Helplessness theory has also led to the development of a 'positive psychology' which is based on the assumption that if depression arises because of negative interpretations of uncontrollable bad events, it must be possible to train people to look at events in a more optimistic fashion. Although there is some evidence that this can work in practice Maier et al. (2000) argue strongly that the role of reality must not be ignored:

> 'One would not want to stroll into Lebanon, Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia, or West Philadelphia and advise their residents simply to be more optimistic in their outlooks. A positive social science needs to encourage appropriate changes in social conditions so that optimism can exist as a viable worldview.' (Maier et al. 2000: 23)

In this sense, the authors remind us that although asylum seekers can be helped to think more positively about their situation, by making remarks such as: 'At least you are out of danger here', 'At least you are healthy', 'This will all pass'- it is important not to underestimate the role reality plays in how asylum seekers feel. Schwartz (2000) also makes this point when he says that people are often miserable for very good reasons, and by helping people develop a positive attribution style, we only make them happy without very good reasons. Schwartz (2000) then stresses that he would rather make people happy

for good reasons and in the case of those experiencing unpleasant events, this will imply changing the unpleasant events and not only their perception of them.

Being an asylum seeker is like living in limbo. The person feels insecure, has limited rights and is deprived of freedom of movement and work. Lack of control over events and prolonged waiting can lead to depression.

### Loss

Being uprooted entails great losses, such as loss of socioeconomic status, support networks, employment and qualifications. Perhaps the experienced loss is most clearly explained by Espin (1992) when she says that this loss does not only include the big things such as loss of country, family and way of life, but also includes more subtle things. She mentions the absence of familiar everyday smells, daily routines and generally lack of "the average expectable environment" (Hartmann, 1964, cited in Espin, 1992) where the person knows where she is, is familiar with the environment and feels safe and secure. The absence of these little things, Espin (1992) maintains, become a constant reminder of being uprooted and these can be most disorienting and disruptive of the person's previously established identity.

A Guatemalan refugee in Mexico describes this very eloquently:

> "To force one into exile is not an act of torture or murder, but an act of orphanage, leaving the victim with the yearning, the memory, the impotence, the affection for what is left behind. The thirst of the exile is not physical; it is a thirst for affections, for beloved landscapes, family traditions, local customs. While prisoners are kept in a jail with walls, the exiles' cell is the space beyond their country's borders." (Aron, 1992:185)

Tracking the mental health experiences of ten asylum seekers over six months, Watters (2002) found that all the asylum seekers experienced a 'profound sense of loss' which included loss of homeland, family and friends, and personal identity. Being a refugee implies material and psychological losses as well as material and psychological

impediments to recovery. But what are the specific resources that Kurdish women become deprived of in exile?

From my own experience, growing up in the Kurdish regions of Iraq (Southern Kurdistan) and Iran (eastern Kurdistan), I can say that the main social difference between these regions and Britain is that Kurdish people are much more involved in each other's lives. Although this has its disadvantages, it brings about a strongly knit society were people are regularly helped by their family, relatives, neighbours and friends. Here are some of the common ways that women help each other on daily basis.

Working women normally leave their young children to be looked after by women in their own family or their in-laws; sometimes good neighbours can play the same role. When a woman gives birth, a friend or a relative comes and sees to her house for the first couple of weeks, until she herself is fit enough to get about and manage on her own. Even then, it is common that for the first child the new mother gets an older woman staying with her for forty days until she gets used to washing, dressing and feeding the baby.

There is a sense of safety and security in the communities, such that there is no need for a woman to accompany her child to school. Most children go to school without parental help. This is partly due to the fact that normally children go to schools that are walking distance away from their homes. Young children or children starting at new schools may be accompanied by a neighbour's child or a relative who goes to the same school. The sense of community and safety is also reflected in the fact that most children can spend a few hours a day outdoors in the neighbourhood. The children get to play together, and the mothers are free to do their housework or whatever else they need to do. In more rural areas the mothers themselves can sit outdoors with their fellow neighbours, where they chat, or do their knitting and sewing. It is during these informal chats and regular meetings that women provide informal counselling to each other. They get to talk about their worries and problems; they get sympathy, advice and encouragement from other women.

Another form of meeting and sharing among the middle class in Suleymania, Southern Kurdistan, for example, is what they call 'Qubul'. Qubul is a gathering of women and children where a circle of friends take turns in inviting the whole group to their home. The host cooks a lot of food, the children meet and play in the garden, the women have an

occasion to dress up and have a good time. Qubul normally starts from the afternoon and is closed to men so that the women are free to talk.

Parvanta (1992) places great importance on the kind of support that women receive in their daily lives back in their home countries. She argues that such support is neither attainable in the country of exile nor replaceable. She points out that while working with refugee women, care providers must ask themselves: how does the refugee woman handle the move from a culture of extended families and large support groups to one of nuclear families and lack of community support? She then concludes:

> "Professional social service workers and relief agencies, while essential and well meaning, cannot match or replace the family, customs, and symbols with which one's psyche has bonded for one's whole life so far. Thus to be more useful to refugees, service deliverers in the host country need to have in addition to clinical skills, an understanding of and respect for cultural differences." (Parvanta, 1992:127)

Research suggests that social support is likely to be protective against stressors (Ager, 1993, Veer, 1998), and generally beneficial to mental health. Support provided by family or friends, works to sustain the individual through difficult times and provides her with a sense of belonging and security. Support can be emotional or instrumental (Biggam and Power, 1997), it can also be provided by different groups. Each individual has a number of support networks at each time, some based on kin relationships, others on friendship and others still on important acquaintances. Social support has also been identified as a factor which reduces the psychological vulnerabilities of migrants, though the benefit of social support is difficult to quantify conclusively

Ager et al. (2002) attempted to assess the importance of social support for the mental health of refugees, and found some indication that activities which 'bridged' the gap between refugees and the host country were valued over the provision of mental health services. However, the actual effect of such activities could not be assessed conclusively due to complexity of the research question and the need for a much larger and more long term research sample. Nevertheless, their research demonstrates the difficulties in producing robust data on a topic as vague and complex as social support. Watters (2002)

stresses that although social contact with members of the home culture can act as a buffer to the stresses of migration it cannot be assumed that all asylum seekers feel the same way. Some asylum seekers might be suspicious of other individuals from their country and may feel vulnerable around them.

Perhaps the best scenario is that described by Ager (1993) when he says efforts should be made to maintain the refugees' cultural identities and networks (through co-ethnic contact) while at the same time encouraging a positive relationship between refugees and the host country to support acculturation. In other words, social interaction with members of the host community is as important as interaction with members of the ethnic community. This is because interaction with members of the host community works as 'a bridge' into the host country's customs and practices. (Ager, 2002:79)

Additionally, migration entails other losses such as loss of status, culture and employment. Professional refugee women may lose their respected jobs. Stein (1986) points out that during the initial period of arrival in the host country, refugees have to confront the reality of what they have lost:

> 'From a high occupational and social status at home they will plunge downwards in the new land- from professional to menial, from elite to an impoverished minority.' (Stein, 1986:14)

This loss of socioeconomic status has been found to have negative consequences for the mental health of refugees, especially those who are over forty years of age (Tan et al, 1990). Parvanta (1992) also stresses how change to socioeconomic status makes the individual feel vulnerable and depressed. This is because some individuals have gone from relatively comfortable living conditions in their country to poverty and uncertain economic security by receiving minimal benefits or having badly paid jobs in the western countries. The author also points out the loss of self esteem associated with becoming a member of a stigmatised group in the country of refuge. These losses leave the person in a state of grief which Stein (1986) suggests can have three identifiable stages. These stages are: conservatism when the refugee holds on to the past as a defence mechanism; bereavement when the person mourns the acknowledged loss; and innovation when the person moves beyond the loss and develops a new pattern of life (Stein, 1986:20). Bereavement is

probably the most difficult stage of this process when the person realises and acknowledges what she has lost and mourns for it.

Refugee women are deprived of a whole world where they belonged, and were familiar with the environment, the weather, the sounds and smells as well as the people. It is deprivation of the feasts and celebrations which were occasions for the gathering of friends and relatives. It is leaving the meaningful relationships behind as well as losing their homes and culture. Even in the case of women who disapprove of certain aspects of their birth culture, there are other aspects which they may miss, such as cooperation, warmth, and humour. Refugees also lose the respected positions they had in their own communities. This is also associated with the loss of material status and employment. The great losses experienced at this stage are accompanied by the requirements of adapting to a new culture.

### Adaptation

Initially, most refugees view arriving at a new country positively (Veer, 1998; Tang and O'Brien, 1990). This provides the opportunity to start life afresh, away from the problems, fears and limitations that have impeded their happiness and wellbeing in their home countries. The first few years, however, are full of challenges and problems of a different kind: the endless process of adapting to a different world. The problems faced by new arrivals include: needing to learn a new language, disorientation in a new and sometimes much larger environment, unfamiliarity with the new system and culture, needing to requalify in order to find a job in some cases, and generally existing between two cultures. This process is difficult because a great number of tasks should be mastered in the absence of support network and the little things that affect the person's sense of confidence and security. All the necessary tasks put pressure on the person and result in stress.

Herbst (1992) talks about the difficulties of learning a new language when the person is depressed or traumatised. In her study with Cambodian women in the USA, she found that they often fail to learn English although they faithfully attend classes for long periods. Herbst suggests that as these women have experienced torture in their original country and feel very isolated and lonely in the host country, they may have memory and concentration problems which prevent them from learning English (Herbst, 1992:145). Not speaking

fluent English, Herbst points out, prevents these women from finding a job that pays well. Similarly, in their study with Thai women in Australia Jirojwong and Manderson (2001) found that lack of English proficiency, lack of recognition of their previous qualifications and unemployment delayed the process of settlement and caused anxiety, frustration and disappointment. Both Cambodian and Thai languages are radically different from English and this may be another factor which contributes to the difficulty of learning English, especially later on in life.

The area where refugees live can also have a negative influence on their wellbeing. Herbst (1992) points out that not having well paid jobs means that Cambodian women are forced to settle in high crime areas in the USA where the ongoing threat of violence reminds them of war and the insecurities in their home country. Women in these conditions find it more difficult to settle down and recreate a new life for themselves. Wahlback (1999) specifically identified housing as a problem for refugees. In his research with Kurdish people he found the housing situation in London to be 'dreadful' (Wahlback, 1999:98). This arises because local councils do not have enough accommodation to house people and the price of private accommodation is really high:

> 'The houses and flats that are available are generally of low standard and are usually smaller than those the families have been used to in Kurdistan.' (Wahlback, 1999:98)

The majority of the families in Kurdistan, be it in Iran or Iraq, live in houses and have gardens of their own. The move from a spacious house to a small flat which may not be in a good condition is likely to erode the happiness and wellbeing of individuals. When I arrived in the UK, I spent four months living in one bedroom with my parents and nephew in my sister's house until we managed to apply for housing benefits and move out. This was probably the most difficult period for me: I had no privacy and it felt very claustrophobic to live in such a small place.

Tang and O'Brien (1990) talked about the effect of employment on the mental wellbeing of refugees. In their study with the Indochinese refugees in the USA, Tang and O'Brien (1990) found that refugees normally take jobs which do not match their abilities and training. The authors defined this state as 'status inconsistency' where highly professional

individuals may end up taking low status and badly paid jobs because of language barriers or age. Similarly, Jirojwong et al. (2001) found that educated Thai women often ended up being cooks, taking in ironing and domestic cleaning. The incongruence increased vulnerability to depression and other psycho-social malfunctions (Tan et al, 1990:1446).

Berry (2001) explains that the structure of economic institutions in the host countries excludes immigrant qualifications and experience and this leads to a situation where neither the immigrant nor the host society are able to benefit from the refugee's expertise. In the UK organisations such as the Refugee Council provide good support and information to refugees. There are also more specialised services such as Refugees into Jobs (RIJ, 2003) by the Brent Council. According to RIB (2003) professional refugees are often bewildered by the UK labour market and have little knowledge of how to sell their skills to a potential employer. This organisation helps refugees transfer their qualifications, provides information, training and small grants to professional refugees in the Boroughs of Brent, Harrow, Hammersmith & Fulham and Ealing. It also provides voluntary placements in order to gain skills and experience which may lead to finding work. From the date of its establishment in 1997 to date, RIJ has been able to help 3000 refugees to gain skills and training, 700 of these have been able to gain employment as a result. However, this service is particularly targeted at doctors, dentists, nurses, pharmacists and health workers. Recently, they have tried to help teachers to benefit from UK's education system. This service though essential is limited and localised. Thinking that from 1997, only 700 refugees have been able to find work through this project can show how small the project is. It is necessary to have more regular and long term services throughout the UK. It is also important to have long term evaluation for the projects.

It is widely acknowledged that the majority of the world's refugees are in the poorer third-world countries. This is why those refugees who make it to the industrialised western countries may believe that they should feel grateful and lucky and that they have no right to complain about their situations. This lack of entitlement to complaining and feeling guilty adds to their burden and stress. This is eloquently described by Siegel (1992), when she speaks of a childhood full of displacement:

> 'No one ever spoke of the challenges and the separations, the difficulties inherent in... moving from one school system to a new one. I was aware only of being privileged and very very lucky. The message I got over and over again... was that I had much to be thankful for and nothing to complain about... Fifty years later, as I write this paper, I still feel the strange mixture of privilege and pain and I still think of myself as self-indulgent, if not down-right selfish and arrogant when I write or talk about the realities of my refugee and immigrant past. How can I presume to raise my voice among those who have suffered so much more and been so much more cruelly displaced and persecuted.' (Siegel, 1992:107).

In summary, the challenge of adaptation for each woman refugee is to get used to the new life, learn the language, adapt to new accommodation and find employment. She also needs to find her way around the new system and acculturate. Her social position and lifestyle may also expose her to further challenges and risks.

## *Gender relations and family life*

It is possible to identify groups of refugee women whose social position and relationships pose particular risks for their psychological wellbeing throughout their lives in exile.

### Married women

Those women who are mothers have the task of passing on culturally valuable norms to their children when there is a dominant outside culture which exerts its own pressure on the children. Bylund (1992) describes a form of role reversal that happens to women and their children. Initially, refugee women may rely on their children's ability to learn the language and the culture of the new country, their speed in acculturation at first being welcomed by their parents. Indeed, parents may become dependant on their children as interpreters as well as guides when it comes to finding places and hospitals. Later, however, when this speed in adaptation leads to having friends of a different sex or adopting western values, the parents' attitudes change completely, especially "if a girl reaches sexual maturity." (Bylund, 1992:59). Intergenerational conflict becomes more acute due to migration. In her study with Soviet, Vietnamese and American families,

Simon (1986) found that Vietnamese, Soviet and American daughters had similar aspirations for education, occupational achievement, choice of spouse and number of children. Furthermore, Vietnamese daughters were least like their mothers in their aspirations followed by Soviet daughters and it was American daughters' aspirations that were closest to their mothers'. In short, immigrant daughters end up having similar aspirations to their peers while the mothers have different agenda and hopes for them.

There is also evidence that racism affects the conceptualisation and practice of motherhood. Bank-Wallace and Parks (2001) found that some African American mothers in the USA went to great lengths to protect their daughters from the prominent racism around them. For example, they provided their daughters with beautiful black dolls (instead of blonde ones) and positive storybooks about black people, and tried to make them feel good about their hair and their looks. In these ways mothers spent time and energy preparing their daughters and protecting them from possible racism in their environments. The authors point out that these tasks require extra energy on top of the usual responsibilities of mothers, draining the women and causing stress and exhaustion. Even in the absence of racism mothers have more responsibilities in exile. For example, my niece goes to a predominantly Caucasian nursery in a small town in Germany. She keeps asking her mother: 'Why am I not blonde?' Although this has nothing to do with direct racism, it is very much due to being surrounded by others who look different. At the age of five, she prefers blonde hair to black and keeps asking her mother to dye her hair. It has been difficult for both my niece and my sister who keeps trying to tell her young daughter that she is beautiful regardless of being dark haired. These are issues that some refugee mothers have to address and deal with.

For some refugee women there are other difficult changes that further complicate their lives, such as the consequences of possible role reversals. Migration can influence the status of men and women in different ways. A man may lose his job and therefore his role as the breadwinner while a woman may find work and become more active outside the realm of her household. This, however, reverses the socially constructed power relationship that the couple is familiar with (Weber, 1998). This is particularly true in the case of women who have arrived in exile before their husbands. This has given them the opportunity to learn the language, settle down and sometimes find work before their husbands arrive. Some men find this more difficult to cope with than others. Some men

take pride in their wife's success but still feel sorry for themselves. Others may become violent and abusive towards their wives as a result of this change of position. Hence a woman may have to cope with domestic violence which might be something that she has not experienced before life in exile. In some cases, even when a woman becomes employed, she may still be responsible for the children's upbringing and house work. Thus, the opportunity to work leads to having two full-time jobs resulting in exhaustion and stress. The effect of migration on a woman's relationship with her husband is extremely important. If her husband does not support her, a married woman might not be able to learn the language or work. The husband might try to prevent her by becoming more violent, refusing to help with the house work, refusing to take care of the children while she is outdoors, pressurising the women to have another child to keep her in the house, and generally trying to control her. Bylund (1992) found that capable women who came from traditional families where husbands make the important decisions and the women have to obey, have more difficulty in exile. This is because the woman learns the language and understands the new environment sooner than her husband and this depresses him and makes him feel insecure. Bylund (1992:57) describes the case of a Kurdish family in the USA where the man constantly puts his wife down because he is well aware that she is more capable than him and he takes to gambling.

The implications of domestic violence will now be considered in more depth.

### Abused women

Domestic abuse seems to be universal, affecting women from most cultures. It is similar to torture in that it disempowers, isolates, inserts control over, and leaves the person weak, with low self-esteem, and generally psychologically traumatised (Dutton, 1992). Unlike torture, however, domestic violence takes place at the micro level. It is an individual who tortures another, and the abuser is the person to whom the abused is closest. i.e. the man she loves and has chosen to live with. A woman's choice to have a relationship with a man usually implies that she thinks she will be happy with him, that she feels secure and safe in his company. In the case of domestic violence, the general expectation of such security and safety is not satisfied. It is that same person who becomes the source of her unhappiness. Violence, as well as shattering the woman keeps her trapped in the relationship. This is because of the nature of abuse and what has been named 'the cycle of violence' (Burstow,

1992, Dutton, 1992; 1998) which is suggested to have a number of identifiable phases. The first phase is the "tension building" phase, where the man does things which on previous occasions have been followed by violence, such as being moody, having a particular "look in the eye", or forcing her to eat something when she keeps saying she does not want it (Dutton, 1992, p.6). This phase is followed by violence; when the man abuses the woman by beating and possibly raping her. Violence is typically followed by the "contrition phase" (Dutton, 1998, p.57), in which the man is regretful, he apologises for his behaviour, and promises not to repeat it again. And then the cycle starts again, the 'contrition period' is followed by another tension building phase and so on. The contrition period keeps the woman hoping. She may believe that the regretful, loving behaviour is the real person, not the abusive behaviour. During the loving phase many women forgive their partners and excuse him.

An abused woman uses a great number of strategies to avoid violence and protect herself from it. Burstow (1992) stresses that despite the learned hopelessness that can take place, battered women are not passive victims. A woman is highly likely to be using a range of strategies to escape violence. Dutton (1992) mentions the following: seeking legal help from lawyers or police, formal help from social workers and medical professionals, informal help through talking to friends and family, or escape behaviours such as leaving the abuser, hiding and filing a divorce. A woman might leave and not return to the abuser. On the other hand, she may leave and come back a number of times while she keeps assessing things, or she may stay in the relationship and try to achieve change from within. The latter is crucial as many women choose to stay within a relationship or even if they leave, after having been in a shelter, they choose to go back to the relationship.

Peled et al. (2000) point out that the woman's choice to stay with her abuser normally causes conflict and confusion for social workers or therapists who are trying to help the women escape the abuse. Women who stay are commonly characterised as incompetent, weak and lacking coping skills, all of which further victimise the person and contribute to her powerlessness (Peled et al., 2000). Burstow (1992) believes that it is very important to understand the reasons why women stay within abusive relationships:

> "She remains because she still harbours some hope and/or because she does not know what else to do. She remains because she has bought the line that children need their father.... She remains because family is central to her. She remains because she loves this man... she stays because her culture and community dictate wifely obedience.... She stays because she has no money, no one to help her, no way to earn a living, and no place to go... she stays because he always found her, dragged her back, and beat her whenever she escaped in the past. She stays because the alternative is loneliness and abject poverty." (Burstow, 1992:152).

By highlighting the role of community and culture Burstow (1992) alerts us to the specific vulnerabilities of refugee women and women from ethnic communities. For example, although in Islam divorce is permitted, culturally it is very difficult for a woman to obtain a divorce. Many families would rather see their daughter suffer instead of seeing her break free from an abusive relationship by getting divorced. Thus, for a woman to go as far as getting divorced might mean that she has to break from her own community and family at the same time (Choudry, 1996:2). This is extremely difficult for those women who are brought up believing in the holiness of family and the superiority of the collective goals over the individual's happiness.

Bhatti-Sinclair (1994) casts further light on these issues in her study with abused Asian women in the UK. She pointed out the most critical factor in the lives of these women is racism. A battered woman from an ethnic community may not report the abuse because she wants to protect her husband from the possible racism of the police and institutions. Some women also reported finding the police less than sympathetic: "you Indian people are all the same, the women never say anything if we take it any further". The author also found that some of the women who stayed in shelters were confronted by racism from the white women in the refuge. In these overcrowded shelters they found no place for privacy and prayer and no special cooking facilities. The women in Bhatti-Sinclair's (1994) study pointed to different reasons why they stayed in the abusive marriage, some of these were: lack of knowledge of alternatives and relevant provision, low self esteem, lack of confidence, and also the fact that for many Asian women the thought of life outside the structure of marriage and family is not a desirable one. The author also found that the abuser makes sure that the woman does not create any meaningful bonds by preventing her

from going out, leaving the area where there is community support for the woman, withholding money and freedom of movement. All of these prevent the women from creating a support network and thus having access to some help and advice. For those who do have their family around, some of these families are traditional and do not support their daughter's choice to leave her marriage, thus further powerlessness for the woman.

In a related study with Pakistani women in the UK, Choudry (1996) found that lack of understanding about the specific cultural concerns of this group of abused women had a serious impact on the quality of statutory and voluntary services. The Pakistani women in Choudry's (1996) study had all married men who were resident in the UK; this meant the women did not speak any English, did not have any family in the UK and were not familiar with their rights and entitlements. Often they ended up staying with their abusive husbands because within the Pakistani community divorce would be considered a dishonour. The women only sought help when the abuser was attacking them. At times they called domestic violence units out of office hours and were faced with answer machines. Contacting the police was also difficult because of language barriers. Choudry (1996) also noted that the police were reluctant to intervene in domestic matters within the Asian community out of fear and respect for cultural sensitivities.

There are a number of important similarities between the women in these studies and refugee women in abusive relationships. They too are constrained by language and cultural barriers and find themselves in an environment where there are few culturally sensitive services or options for housing. Furthermore, while their home life is abusive it may offer some protection against the racism in the wider society. However, there is no research exploring these issues for this group of women living in Britain.

### Lone women

Women who arrive in exile as single mothers, have to cope with the absence of a father for their children and a breadwinner for the family. These women may faithfully stick to the values they have inherited from their cultures- that good mothers should not remarry but dedicate their lives to bringing up their children- yet be deprived of the help that is provided by their cultures, namely the support of extended family, friends and neighbours in caring for their children. In her paper on women in exile and their children Bylund

(1992) interviews a woman who has three teenage children and her husband has died while living in the USA. The woman, Bylund points out, depended on her husband for a great part of disciplining her children. When her husband died she developed severe somatic pain and depression and felt that she could not manage her children alone. The children themselves needed a lot of help coping with their father's loss but they could not turn to their mother because she had become dependant on them. The author argues that this woman has a dependant personality (Bylund, 1992:56). But as Rampage (1991) points out this is hardly fair given that women are trained from childhood to exhibit feminine behaviour which excludes independence. According to Rampage (1991) patterns of child rearing discourage independence in girls such that they have limited opportunities to develop instrumental competencies that promote effectual coping (see section on gender and identity, page 23-26).

Later, when the children grow older and relate to the western culture because of their schooling and friends, these women may blame themselves and consider themselves having failed in bringing up their children in a way consistent with traditional culture.

### Older Women

Older women are possibly the group that finds life most difficult in exile (Yee, 1992), losing their homes, well established circle of friendships and neighbourhood networks. Older women refugees may experience difficulties learning a new language which may keep them dependent on their families and ethnic community for support and social relationships. This dependency is likely to be one way as younger members of their family and community may be busy working and less able to spend time taking care of them. Everyday life also becomes more complicated. In Kurdistan, fresh fruit and vegetable stalls come to the neighbourhood every morning, and breakfast bread is delivered to the doorsteps. In the host country women may travel long journeys to get the right ingredients for their food. Bad health and language barriers may also make it difficult for them to get out and do their own shopping, making them dependent on other people.

Elderly refugee women lose the respected positions they held in their own communities as the wise mother, grandmother, or great aunt. In many of the eastern and Middle Eastern communities older people live with their children and grandchildren, thus they do not feel

lonely and left behind. Elderly people are not put into nursing homes even if they cannot take care of themselves anymore, but are looked after and looked up to. They play a role in socialising their grandchildren, telling them stories, and making toys for them. In exile older women may be unable to create new means of making themselves feel useful, leading to low self esteem, loneliness and powerlessness (Yee, 1992).

In her study with older Asian women in the USA, Yee (1992) found that these women had a difficult time dealing with their conflicting roles in the American culture, especially their gender roles within the family and community. As a group, older Asian women are more traditional than younger generations even within their own family. Therefore, the pressure in American society that encourages female liberation is in direct conflict with their own upbringing. This cultural clash may create uncomfortable feelings concerning their gender role within a marriage and the family. Yee (1992) points out that the degree of the difficulty may depend on the nature of the traditional gender role of the homeland, the particular gender role of the individual woman, and her expectations and the family's expectations of her.

Older women are also less likely to find employment due to age biases, lack of English speaking abilities and transferable job skills. The function of many older women in their homeland is one of grandchild care and housekeeping. However with the assimilation and rapid acculturation of their grandchildren in the host country, even this role diminishes.

Unable to learn the new language and in conflict with younger members of their own family, elderly refugee women are psychologically vulnerable. Their social status diminishes drastically and because of language problems or possible bad health they may be unable to get out and make friends with members of their own community.

### Young Women

As previously discussed (page 40), young refugee women are likely to experience pressure from their community to maintain traditional culture. Dasgupta reports Kibria's (1987) study with Vietnamese women refugees in the USA who concludes:

> "... women experience singular conflicts that generate from contradiction between patriarchal family ideologies and personal bids for autonomy" (Kibria, 1987 cited in Dasgupta, 1998:969).

Hence the desire to adopt more egalitarian gender roles can cause conflicts between the woman and her family and/or ethnic community. This becomes more important in the light of the fact that there are likely to be new opportunities for refugee women such as employment and education. From my own experience I know that for younger women who have come with their parents problems may arise if, for example, the girl wants to go to a university in a different city away from where her parents live. Letting their daughter live in residential halls where girls and boys live together terrifies some families. They worry that their daughter might become sexually active and end up marrying someone from a different religion and culture. Families and communities work harder at disciplining their daughters and controlling them (Dasgupta, 1998).

Migration augments intergenerational conflict (Simon, 1986, see page 54). This is mainly because the younger generation acculturates rapidly, leaving the older generation behind (Yee, 1992). Younger individuals adjust, learn the language and may adopt values of the host culture when the older generation either does not have the opportunity to do so or refuses to do it. The Kurdish elderly are known for their old ways and for hanging on to the old values. They are estranged by some of the new generation's choices and their reaction is to gossip about people, reclaiming power and exerting pressure on younger people to observe the ways of the old country. There is sometimes great conflict within families who have two generations of women in the UK. We are constantly being told by our mothers not to wear low collar dresses or shorts and not to joke with men. We are urged to be submissive towards our husbands and to respect and forgive people even if they hurt us.

The situation is worse for those young women who have male siblings or cousins. Young males may not experience restriction on their lives, even if they engage in culturally inappropriate behaviour such as clubbing, dating, and even being promiscuous. Through my own acquaintance with some Kurdish families, I have met young Kurdish girls who complain about the double standard treatments they experience within their families. Last year after the war in Iraq, while on my way to visit home, I met a Kurdish family who were

going back for good. The family had a 16 year old daughter and a 14 year old son. The daughter told me that her family found out that she had a boyfriend and this, she believed, was the main reason why they decided to leave for good. I asked her whether she was sad. She told me she was not: 'At least my father didn't kill me', she said. She then told me how terrified she had been when Heshu Yunis was murdered by her father in 2002. This girl seemed resilient; she told me that she could not leave her boyfriend as long as she lived in London. Hence going back meant ending the relationship, escaping danger and possibly starting a better life.

Young women who have male siblings may feel angry with parents because of the differential treatment. Sometimes they fight back by leading a secret life and pretending to be 'good'. Dasgupta (1998) mentions a study of dating and arranged marriages conducted by Motwani (no date is given) which clearly points to young women leading secret lives in the Asian Indian community. 60% of the total youngsters surveyed favoured both dating and choosing their own partners. 25% of girls wanted to date but restrained themselves, reporting that they did so because of parent's disapproval and prohibitions. A further 50% of girls were dating without their parent's knowledge; leading a double life as a way of dealing with the pressures and restrictions.

It should be noted that women may experience restrictions on their sexuality before migration as well as in the context of their communities after migration. Bekker et al. (1992) speak of young Muslim women in the Netherlands who have lost their virginity and desperately seek help from professionals to reconstruct the hymen when they are being forced into arranged marriages. The authors report that some of these women feel suicidal as they realise the significance of not being a virgin within their communities. In this sense women feel the greatest amount of pressure for preserving traditional attitudes and disregard for these values can put their lives in danger (see Honour Killing, page 41).

There is also the evident risk of sexual exploitation of immigrant women in the host country (Holt, 03/02/02, Hopkins, 14/12/02). There are increasing numbers of women who have been trafficked into western Europe after being deceived by agents and smugglers. They have been made to believe that they will be able to pay back their debts by working as waitresses, servants, and cleaners. When they arrive, they find out that they have to turn to prostitution in order to pay the network of agents and pimps. There is a growing market

for cheap, exotic prostitutes which the smugglers exploit. This is another form of oppression and exploitation specific to women migrants. Prostitution may even be forced on women who have fled their homeland but end up living in refugee camps in a neighbouring country before they can settle in a safe western country. It has been reported that because of the overcrowdedness and scarce resources some refugee women become prostitutes to survive these camps (Elmadmad, 1999).

In exile, young refugee women may also experience exclusion and racism. Espin (1996) explains this very well when she speaks of immigrant women struggling to survive the racism of the host culture and sexism of the home culture.

In this sense, although migration may open up new possibilities for young women refugees, taking advantage of these possibilities may cause further complications. Seeking egalitarian gender roles, sexual freedom, and generally taking advantage of employment and education opportunities can create problems for women within their families. Intergenerational conflict, domestic violence and honour killing are examples of the kinds of problems that may arise. Women who suffer from the sexism within their community and family structures, may nevertheless feel obliged to defend them in the face of racism. Muslim women in the West may be stigmatised because of their religion and culture, the very things which they themselves suffer from and struggle with.

I will explore the ways that women cope with the stresses they experience in exile.

## Stress and coping

It is relevant at this point to define stress. Folkman et al.'s (1986) definition is as follows:

> "Stress is conceptualised as a relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and as endangering well-being". (Folkman et al., 1986)

As noted above (Pages 43-50), after arriving in the UK refugees have to cope with waiting, loss and the task of adaptation. Later, while settling down, they face other dilemmas and complications in their lives (pages 54-64). These changes are challenging for the person, depriving her of the usual resources available to her and making it more difficult to cope.

There is also evidence that stress is related to ill health (Watters, 2001). However Cooper et al. (1999) argue that since there has been no satisfactory demonstration of the mechanisms by which causation operates and because of the difficulty in measuring an elusive concept such as health, 'the relationship between stress and health remains at the level of 'links' and 'associations' between specific types and degrees of stress and certain mental and/or physical ailments' (Cooper et al., 1999:12). There are clearly links between stress and health and in many cultures it is believed that there is a direct relationship between physiological problems and emotional and social problems (Watters, 2001:1713).

In terms of coping, Folkman & Lazarus (1986) define this as the person's cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage the internal and external demands of the situation. They suggest that coping has two major functions: dealing with the problem that is causing distress (problem focused coping) and regulating emotion (emotionally focused coping). According to the cognitive theory of psychological stress and coping presented by Folkman & Lazarus (1980, 1985, cited in Folkman et al. 1986) people use both types of coping in all stressful situations. First, a person evaluates the situation to see if it contains harms or benefits for her, if the situation is highly complex and needs a lot of effort to prevent harm then she becomes stressed. Judging the situation to be highly harmful she then evaluates her options in dealing with the situation, and she does this by making use of a range of cognitive and behavioural options that correct the situation as well as emotionally protect her.

It seems to me, however, that people cannot always use both types of coping. In cases where the person has control over the situation she may use both strategies to cope, but when the situation cannot be changed she only has the choice of emotionally focused coping. Applying this analysis to refugees, the process of dealing with waiting and loss is more to do with regulating one's emotions in order to accept the situation, whereas in coping with the endless tasks of adaptation, the person must engage in both behavioural coping strategies (taking language classes for example) and emotional coping ones.

Emotionally focused coping can involve activities with a cognitive component, such as discussing problems with others, consciously trying to stop thinking about certain experiences, consciously trying to avoid or get over certain negative feelings, and looking at the funny side of problematic situations. A person who has experienced a great loss can, by talking about it, by consciously making an effort to look at the bright side of things, and generally regulating her emotions, try to come to terms with her loss. This also applies to refugees who are waiting to hear from their asylum claims and may be living in detention centres or camps. For this group of refugees who do not have any control over their situation, no behavioural coping option is available to them. For example, they cannot try to learn the language because they are not allowed to take lessons. The dispersal system also makes it difficult to find support; refugees may be dispersed four to five times before they are settled in some remote part of the country, away from the ethnic community and interpreters that could help them. The only available option is to try to think positively and avoid negative feelings. But as Schwartz (2000) points out this is mainly treating the symptoms and not the cause. The author suggests that often people have good reasons to be unhappy. To make them feel better, it is the situation which needs to be dealt with instead of training individuals to think more positively (see page 46). Unsurprisingly, when examining the relationship between coping and personality Lengua and Stormshak (2000) found that an external locus of control (having no control over unpleasant events) predicts more avoidant strategies and higher levels of depression and antisocial behaviour. This finding is consistent with Hiroto and Seligman's (1975) theory of learned helplessness. Individuals who experience lack of control over unpleasant events are far more likely to experience depression as compared to those who have control (page 45). Thus, refugees by virtue of being at the mercy of the British bureaucratic system when they arrive, experience stress and possibly depression.

## *Refugee Coping*

How do refugees deal with the stresses they are exposed to? In order to answer this question it is useful to identify the different factors that influence coping in such situations. These include personality, demographic variables, and the so-called protective factors.

## Personality and Coping

Ferguson (2001) conducted a study with undergraduate students in order to establish the relationship between personality and coping. The study tested for the relationship between coping and the personality factors of Neuroticism, Extroversion, and Psychoticism. The results showed that three sets of dispositional coping behaviours are related to three of the main domains of personality. While coping with loss, a person may be first, in denial about her loss and avoid thinking about it (seen to be associated with neurotic introverts). Secondly, she may use positive reinterpretation of the situation, for example reminding herself that it could have been worse or by seeking instrumental social support (associated with extroversion). Thirdly, she can turn to alcohol (psychoticism). There are also indications from this research that active planning behaviour (behavioural coping) may be associated with conscientiousness. On the last point, Lengua and Stormshak (2000) found that achievement orientation predicted higher levels of active coping and lower levels of avoidant coping. This supports Ferguson's (2001) suggestion that active coping behaviour may be related to conscientiousness. However, this study does not take into account control over the situation which makes a great difference to the coping options available. The importance of taking into account the type of stress as well as other factors is emphasised by Saldańa's (1992) review of the literature:

> "Literature on individuals who cope successfully with stress implies that pre-existing factors such as personality traits and prior functioning must be linked to more current information about the types of stress encountered, supports used, and behavioural or attitudinal approaches adopted to deal with stresses ... equally important, however, are the types and qualities of supports that were available and utilised during times of highest stress..." (Saldańa, 1992:27)

In short coping with a situation depends on personality traits as well as how extreme the stress is (coping with moving house is easier than coping with moving country) and the kind of resources available to cope with the situation. Even a conscientious person's coping ability can be- at least temporarily- impaired as a result of subjection to extreme trauma. Hence the use of different coping strategies is a function of personality and situational factors and coping strategies are best predicted when the effects of both person and

situation factors are taken into account. While dealing with refugee women it is important to keep in mind all the interacting factors that may help them cope.

## The 'Demographic variables' and Coping

### Age

Ghaffarian (1998) in her study with Iranian immigrants in the USA found a positive correlation between age and acculturation- the younger the individual the easier the acculturation. Younger Iranians had higher levels of cultural shift and incorporation, and lower levels of cultural resistance as compared to older Iranians.

Younger immigrants may assimilate faster into the new society because they are more open to learning the ways of the new society. Older immigrants rely more on their past experiences, are not open to new learning experiences and hence adjust less. Accordingly younger people find adaptation less stressful. This can be partly due to the fact that a young person's character is in the process of formation and also because young refugees have fewer responsibilities. A young person who has not yet gone to university need not worry about requalifying or finding work in a context where language and cultural barriers place her at a disadvantage. However, this ability of young people to adapt, places them at a disadvantage in a different way. The risk for them is that they will acculturate and adapt much more quickly than their families and older individuals from their ethnic communities which can create inter-generational conflict and stress (see pages 38-39, 54).

Yee (1992) points out that although refugees as a group face multiple adjustment problems, the elderly experience more difficulty adapting to life in the USA. They have less adaptive skills to allow adjustment to the new culture even with the passage of time. This translates into a potential for mental health and adjustment difficulties.

Yee (1992) also found that a significant number of younger refugees make adequate adaptation with the passage of time. By contrast the passage of time may create more difficulties for refugee elders with their own families and dealing with society at large. In Yee's studies (1989, 1990, cited in Yee, 1992) middle aged and elderly refugees who are looked after by younger family members experience serious emotional problems ten to fifteen years after migration.

Thus if an elderly refugee woman is illiterate and has limited opportunity to learn a new language (which means she cannot find friends in that language), she can become isolated. If she has witnessed the death of family members, she is much more likely to feel hopeless and develop depression. But how do refugee women cope when compared to their fellow men?

## Gender

Ager (1993) cites a study (Westermeyer, 1986) which suggests that women refugees are more isolated at home which means that they "adjust behaviour and expectations far more slowly if at all". He goes on to explain these findings as follows:

> "The special needs of refugee women are generally related to their lack of power in relations with men; women are at greater risk of experiencing certain forms of violence (e.g. rape), have poorer access to assistance resources in camp and related settings, and are more likely by virtue of non-access to employment to remain dependant and isolated following resettlement." (Ager, 1993)

Hence, women's inferior position in the power relationships within the family and community put them at a disadvantage. These same issues justify a gendered approach to mental health (see page 9).

Ghaffarian (1998) also investigated gender differences in the acculturation of Iranians resident in the USA. She found that Iranian men acculturate more than Iranian women. This, she suggests is because men spend more time outside the home and have greater exposure to acculturative influences. Furthermore, men are not required to alter their gender roles significantly in relation to work and family whereas women experience new gender roles and have to go through great changes in order to adapt to society. The author found that the men of this study had better mental health as compared to their women counterparts, a finding that supports the view that there is a positive association between mental health and acculturation (see pages 36-38).

In her study with Indian Asian communities in the USA, Dasgupta (1998) found that among the second-generation young adults, daughters were much higher in anxiety than sons. She concludes that this is not surprising given:

> "... the burden of negotiating the new world is borne disproportionately by women, whose behaviour and desires real or imagined become the litmus test for the South Asian community's anxieties or sense of well-being" (Mani, 1992:13, reported in Dasgupta, 1998:966).

There is also evidence that there are gender differences within the general population in the use of coping strategies. Females, according to Lengua & Stormshack (2000) seem to favour social support, emotion-focused coping and avoidant strategies. Males, on the other hand, seem to favour stress release through antisocial behaviour, drugs or alcohol. There are, however, inconsistent findings concerning gender differences in the use of problem focused or active coping (Lengua & Stormshack, 2000). Also, different coping strategies appear to be more or less adaptive ways of dealing with stress. Some strategies are associated with lower levels of psychological symptoms, such as cognitive decision-making or active strategies (Lengua & Stormshack, 2000).

In summary, there are reported acculturation differences between men and women, suggesting that the process of acculturation is more stressful for refugee women. This is found to be caused by the social pressure on women in order to satisfy their traditional gender roles. These pressures are also reported to limit women's choices and opportunities to acculturate and expose them to higher levels of stress. There are also reported gender differences in the use of coping strategies, with women being more liable to internalising problems and men, externalising these problems. However, these studies have a number of limitations. First, a refugee woman may be isolated upon her arrival in a new country but this does not mean that she will stay isolated and thus the findings of these studies (Ager, 1993, and Ghaffarian, 1998) might only be true for the early stages of refugeehood. Second, the studies seem to represent some refugee women but the results should not be generalised to all. From my experience as a refugee woman and as an interpreter who works with Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees I have observed otherwise. For example, I have found that it is generally women because of their social orientation and involvement

in their children's schooling, who learn the new language faster, acculturate, and take advantage of the new opportunities. In doing so, they encounter problems with their families and ethnic communities. It is generally the men who find it most difficult to adapt because in accepting new norms and values they lose their dominant positions. In this research I hope to further explore these issues.

## Education

Gaffarian (1998) found a positive relationship between levels of education and acculturation in the USA. The author suggests that this is because higher education is a powerful way in which refugees are exposed to the culture of the host country. Even refugees who completed their higher education in Iran, Ghaffarian points out, are likely to have been exposed to the USA and other western cultures because "ideas from those cultures were incorporated to some extent, in the Iranian system of education" (Ghaffarian, 1998:652). The author, however, is referring to Iranian system of education before 1980s. That is, before the Islamic government changed the westernised system in Iran.

In their study with Thai women in Australia, Jirojwong et al. (2001) also found that women who are least educated and least proficient in English are most at risk for psychological distress. In other words education seems to help acculturation. This might be because being more educated will help learning the language faster and may even help finding a job. On the other hand, my observations suggest that the less educated and less ambitious individuals may have less exposure to the host country and are thus protected from racism and discrimination. Kurdish housewives may be isolated for a while until they make friends with other women like themselves within the community, but being at home can also be protective against other problems. There are refugees who manage to survive on the fringe of the British society by only working and mingling with their compatriots, who do not feel the need to break this circle and mingle with the host community. However, these individuals may encounter particular conflict and stress within their family should they have children who are unlikely to share their parents attitudes to acculturation.

## Past experience

Herbst (1992) reports a study of a community-based centre for the rehabilitation of Cambodian women suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The women who contributed to the study had lived in camps in Thailand for an average of four years before

resettling in the USA. All of them had suffered from traumatic experiences in their homeland and then suffered again in the refugee camp in Thailand. These factors affected them in the following manner. They all had low self esteem, flat affect with detachment, feelings of not living a long life, avoidance of memories and feelings, nightmares, flashbacks and somatic complaints. Their memory and attention problems prevented them from learning English and adjusting to the new environment. Thus because of their history these women had psychological and somatic symptoms which impeded their ability to adapt as they might have done under normal circumstances. In such instances, as Postero (1992) argues, it is important to provide a safe and trusting environment that will enable refugees to slowly reveal and overcome the painful experiences they had survived.

Roe (1992) describes the situation of women who are forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, yet remain in settings of war and violence. These women experience terror, family instabilities and sexual vulnerabilities. Sexual humiliation and threats of rape are common experiences of displaced women in such settings (Amnesty International, 1991, cited in Roe, 1992). Rape in settings of armed conflict is used for many purposes; it is used for physical torture and humiliation, reprisal, and the demonstration of power. The rape victim typically feels lonely, hopeless, humiliated, lacking in self-esteem and victimised. Accordingly, many women survivors of rape and torture may already suffer from psychological problems before arrival in the country of exile. Understandably, arriving with such traumatic histories can impede a woman's ability to adapt and adjust.

In summary, these studies show that a history of past trauma is highly likely to influence a woman refugee's capacity to adjust to a new environment.

### 'Protective Factors' and Coping

It is important to stress that the risk of mental ill-health is not related to exposure to stressors in a unilinear fashion, but may be affected by a range of personal and social factors. The factors that help the individual cope with stress are usually referred to as 'protective factors' (Ager, 1993). There are a number of protective factors that help individuals cope with stress. These are: family integration, social support, and religious affiliation and/or political ideology (Ager,1993). Research shows that individuals who are within their own stable families (Ager, 1993), have contact with other members of their

own communities (Beiser et al., 1989), have faith in some religion or ideology (McCallin and Fozzard 1990, cited in Ager, 1993), and have positive copings styles, have a lower risk of mental ill health when stressed.

In his review of studies on protective factors, Ager (1993) cites two studies which suggest that Mozambican refugee women living with their extended family demonstrate significantly better psychological adjustment than others. He then concludes that family integration and attachment are protective factors. These studies indicate the importance of family as a form of support network for these women, by providing childcare, for example. However, the conclusions cannot be generalised to all refugee women. While strongly integrated families may provide a great deal of strength and comfort to individuals facing stress, this may not always be true. Family, like other forms of authority, supports an individual who adheres to the rules and norms practiced by that family. If, on the other hand, the individual rebels against these norms and demands more rights than so far granted, the family may become oppressive and thus another form of stress for the individual. To illustrate, a young refugee woman may have to go against her family's wishes to take advantage of work or education opportunities. The results of any study with a group of refugee women must not be overgeneralised. Even refugee women of the same ethnic group are diverse and more attention should be paid to the complexity and diversity of their experiences.

Ager (1993), also points to social support as an ameliorative factor. He says:

> "Social support by enhancing a sense of identity and belongingness protects against the stresses of sociocultural adjustment rather more potently than against the effects of trauma and deprivation." (Ager, 1993)

However, this result was not replicated by Ager et al. (2002) when they attempted to assess the importance of social support for the mental health of refugees (see page 49). This could not be assessed conclusively due to the difficulties in measuring social support.

Additionally, Ager (1993) notes that there is evidence that religious affiliation and political ideology can offer protection against stress. This is because "its primary effect may... be

concerned with the provision of a form of ideology with respect to which psychological coping mechanisms may be structured" (Ager, 1993:15). Watters (2003) notes similar findings regarding religion. The author found that some asylum seekers take comfort in praying, meditating or participating in church, mosque and temples.

I want to emphasise that most of this literature is limited in its applicability to women because it focuses on male refugees (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 1999). Arguably, each of these protective factors should be tested for the different refugee groups as defined by important factors such as gender, age, and religion before making any generalisations. Indeed, what proves to be a protective factor for a man (for example having links with his ethnic community) may be an impeding factor for a woman who wants to exceed the boundaries set by her community. An obvious implication of the modest literature on women refugees is that it does not take into account the variety of women's experiences and it is not always appropriate to generalise findings to the population of concern here, i.e. Kurdish women refugees.

## *Conclusion about Coping*

Available evidence suggests that there is great diversity in how refugees cope with the stress associated with migration. Variables include personality factors, age, sex, history, and the protective factors to which they have access. Personality characteristics can influence the coping behaviours engaged in, and some of these coping behaviours are more useful for coping with stress. Younger people find adaptation less stressful than older ones. People who have access to their own families or friends seem to cope better, as do those who have faith in some kind of ideology. Generally, older people, those who are isolated and unwell may suffer more than others. The importance of the above findings is that they highlight how complex a person's coping system is and how much it is influenced by situational factors. However, it is important to remember that these findings might not be applicable to all refugees. In this study I will try to find evidence for the above factors.

# Empowerment

In this section I will talk about the importance of empowerment and explore three ways which refugee women may be empowered: narrative therapy, the creation of women's groups and taking advantage of the opportunities in exile.

The experience of a lack of power over one's environment and the inability to control the course of events are of great importance when we are looking at refugee women (see page 45). This is particularly because as women this group already experience powerlessnesss within their families and intimate relationships (see pages 23-27, 58), so losing control over the environment and becoming a member of a stigmatised minority further disempowers them. This is significant because the exercise of power through agency and freedom in pursuing one's goals are central to the human existence:

> 'Our human existence is predicted on our ability to project meaning, to embark on projects, to create world. As subjects we are forever creating and re-creating the world by making new choices and by ordering what is around us.' (Burstow, 1992: chapter 1)

Accordingly, an understanding of the very particular ways in which refugee women are disempowered is crucial if we are to work for their empowerment.

According to Weber (1998) race and gender are socially constructed power relationships which empower one group and disempower another (see page 10). However, these concepts are deeply embedded in our everyday lives and internalised by people, along with ideologically determined explanations for these social relations (Weber, 1998:13). Burstow (1992) refers to this when she says that on top of the damage inherent in oppression, women are damaged by the myths they are fed to cover up the oppression. Women, Burstow points out, internalise these myths and lies. This, the author argues, confuses women, it undermines and humiliates them. Swan (1998) explains this by saying that the discourse and practice of power act to construct certain meanings which can be understood in terms of stories we hear about ourselves. For example, there can be many reasons why a child catches a cold but the story that dominates for the mother is that of her negligence.

Swan (1998) argues that this is constructed in the mother's life experience within her community where mothers are seen as nurturers that take absolute care of their children, protect them and make sure nothing goes wrong. Women are told that this is part of their nature as women and as mothers. Women who fail to do what is expected of them and what they perceive to be their duty, feel guilty. This is why narrative is important (Aron, 1992, Burstow, 1992, Espin, 1992, Swan, 1998).

Narrative therapy helps explore other possible meanings of the situation by revealing the social construction of these expectations as opposed to seeing them as unchangeable rules of nature. This method also helps women shed light on the positive stories of survival and agency that have been overshadowed by internalised negative interpretations. Thus, refugee women can feel empowered by talking about their lives and telling their stories. They recover incidents of creation and strength that might be forgotten in the light of other negative stories, which they have come to believe about themselves. For example, refugee women experience great obstacles in the first stages of their settlement and because of this they might feel hopeless and depressed. These are not personality traits but a natural reaction to what they have lived through (Herbst, 1992). It is important for these women to recognise this and also to recall times when they have been strong and active. Herbst (1992) reports that Cambodian women who talked about their lives felt empowered and in control. The author argues that by asking women to talk about their histories, it is implied that their negative feelings and experiences are only part of their lives. It also reminds them that 'they are strong, they have survived' (Herbst, 1992:148). Kowalenko (1988) states:

> 'Language externalises as nothing else can... it represents human experience as it has been or is being lived... data from the individual's life are retrieved and pressures are relieved thereby increasing self control.' (Kowalenko, 1988, cited in Herbst, 1992:148)

Swan (1998) worked with Aboriginal women who belong to a highly stigmatised group. She points to the importance of narrative for reclaiming their voice and fighting negative stereotypes of their people. The author points to stories of strength and survival which have been marginalised and overshadowed by the dominant group. This gave the women an opportunity to break free from destructive stories and enabled them to see themselves

differently and take pride in who they were. In this way, narrative therapy has the potential to help the person understand her situation, come to terms with it, draw on her inner strength and history in order to construct a more positive image of herself, and hence enhance self esteem and empowerment. It should also be evident that the values and understandings of the interviewer/therapist are crucial determinants of their ability to support the empowerment of a woman through conversation (Burstow, 1992, Espin, 1992, Swan, 1998).

There is also evidence that the creation of groups is empowering for displaced women (Light, 1992, Roe, 1992). Roe (1992) points out that empowerment can occur for displaced women who build new communities which do not reflect the traditional power structure of the past. In the new communities, Roe points out, women are not assigned support positions but share the idea of creation and leadership with men. In this sense, displaced women can organise themselves according to their needs and priorities. Women's groups are important because of the supportive environment they create when they can utilise their strength to fight oppression together. Women's groups can function as a support network or take on more political aims. In the first case, when women get together in a safe space, they typically bond and help each other by talking and laughing together. In my role as a writer I was commissioned by the Thurrock County Council to work with a group of refugee women in January 2003. The project which was called 'A Different Light' was designed to help these women think more positively about where they lived. Through reading poetry and writing about their experiences over six sessions, the women grew close to each other. They wrote poems and talked about their childhoods and their current experiences. At the performance which marked the end of the project, they all read in their mother tongues and I read the translations of their work. The women felt supported and empowered by sharing their experiences with each other and later with a big audience in a theatre. The literature (e.g. DeChant, 1996; Harris, 1998) suggests that these processes are central to effective group work with women, and that they are more easily created when the members are disadvantaged than when they are privileged (Williams, 2004a).

Other groups may have more political aims and aspire to bring about change for women of the community and back in the home country. There are many Kurdish women's organisations in Britain one of which is Kurdish Women's Action against Honour Killing (KWAHK). This group has managed to utilise the energy and inputs of a group of women

to expose, condemn and fight violence and discrimination experienced by Kurdish women both in the Diaspora and in their homeland. KWAHK has played a great role in publicising cases of violence against Kurdish women nationally and internationally. Representatives of the group have presented papers in numerous conferences held in New York, Washington, London and Sweden which were organised by high profile international organisations (see www.kwahk.com). KWAHK also held the first Kurdish Women's conference on violence and honour killing in Paris, February 2002. It has also supported women's groups back in Iraqi Kurdistan to put pressure on the Kurdish Regional Authorities to change articles of Iraqi penal court regarding honour killing, which permits men to kill women for reasons of honour or otherwise. It was due to KWAHK's campaigns and pressures from within that the Kurdish Regional government made these articles redundant in 2000 and 2001. Consequently it is now illegal for a man in Iraqi Kurdistan to kill a woman for reasons of adultery or dishonour, neither can he get a second wife unless his first wife agrees. This type of collective struggle for women's rights and gender equality is another important way that women become active agents in their lives.

The third means of empowerment for refugee women is through taking advantage of the opportunities that are available to them in exile. Despite the difficulties faced and the adjustments required to cope with the new life, migration can open many doors to women. Women migrants can take advantage of education and employment opportunities that may have not been open to them in their home countries. Economical independence can lead to a greater form of independence in general. Thus, although displacement creates challenges for many, refugee women are not passive victims but active survivors who respond to the pressures upon them and take advantage of the opportunities (Burstow, 1998, Watters, 2001). Migration may provide possibilities for a new lifestyle and the traditional family structure may be changed (Espin, 1996, see page 40). This point is stated very clearly in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Executive Committee's Report on Refugee Women:

> While displacement created obstacles to empowerment for refugee women, it also creates opportunities. Every day, displaced women... overcome traditional roles that inhibit their participation in economic and political life, challenging customs

and traditions out of sheer necessity, in order to continue to provide for themselves and their families. (UNHCR, 2001a)

The traditional family structure can be changed through women starting paid employment which may have not been possible before migration. There is space to escape from some oppressive traditions and experience more freedom. In the Kurdish community, women seem to integrate more than men (see page 70-71). After overcoming the initial difficulties, they are open to take advantage of new possibilities, to revise their cultural values or feel freer to express their views.

The above examples illustrate three potential routes for the empowerment of Kurdish women refugees: conversations that affirm their lives and experiences; group work and collective action; and employment and education opportunities that are available in exile. All these routes allow women to draw on their inner strength, by understanding and processing what has happened and remembering how they have coped in the past, and by working together for the reconstruction of their lives and communities. This is because, oppression and being uprooted reflect in all aspects of being a human being at the micro and macro level. That is why it is important when working with refugee women to understand their culture and experiences, so that help is provided which is culturally and individually relevant.

## Summary

Lack of power is at the core of the problems asylum seekers experience in the host country. While her asylum application is being processed a woman may feel insecure and anxious about the future. Realising that she cannot change or control the situation may lead to depression (Hiroto and Seligman, 1975). Arriving at the country of refuge also entails great losses for the individual which may take time to come to terms with (Stein, 1986). While waiting and coping with loss, the person can only engage in emotionally focused coping because these unpleasant circumstances 'can only be endured' (Veer, 1998:22).

Migration is also the beginning of a long process of adaptation. Not speaking English delays the process of settlement and prevents people from finding appropriate employment (Herbst, 1992, and Jirojwong et al., 2001). There is evidence that refugees take up manual jobs which do not match their abilities and qualifications (Tang and O'Brien, 1990, Jirojwong et al., 2001). This increases vulnerability to depression and psycho-social malfunctioning. The person may engage in behavioural coping strategies such as taking classes, training courses and looking for employment. A number of factors influence refugee coping such as personality, age, gender, education, past experience and the presence of protective factors such as family and social support. There is evidence that determined individuals (Lengua and Stormshak, 2000) who are young (Ghaffarian, 1998, Yee, 1992) and educated (Ghaffarian, 1998, Jirojwong et al., 2001), who do not have a history of trauma (Herbst, 1992) and are supported by family, ideology or religion, will cope better. In this sense, traumatised elderly women with limited education who are isolated are most vulnerable to mental ill health.

Later, even when the person's legal status is determined and she is able to adapt, a woman might experience other problems. Role reversals, intergenerational conflict, abuse, and the role of mothers as the only care givers to their children in exile may cause stress and exhaustion.

Identity changes and acculturation are also reported to be associated with stress (Veer, 1998). There are four trajectories of acculturation (Berry, 2000); biculturalism, traditionalism, assimiliation and marginality. There is evidence that biculturalists are less prone to stress (LaFromboise et al. 1993, Berry, 2000). Yet acculturation has negative consequences for refugee women. There is evidence that women migrants are expected to preserve tradition as a result of which they report high levels of stress (Dasgupta, 1998, Espin, 1996). Refugee women may be empowered by talking about their experiences, forming women's groups and taking advantage opportunities in exile. Crossing borders through migration, some women may transform their gender roles and established better lives in exile.

# Chapter three - Research aims & methods

## Introduction

This chapter consists of four sections that address the research aims, procedures, methods and my approach to the difficulties that arose during data collection.

## Research Aims

In the light of the scarce research on refugee women, I believe it is important to establish one thing and this is that there are no patterns and standard ways of coping with displacement and uprootedness. In this research, I have attempted to shed light on the complexity and plurality of refugee women's experiences. Refugee women, even from the same ethnic community, are very diverse with great differences in how they experience and cope with becoming a refugee in Britain. I have aimed to identify the different factors that play a role in causing distress for this group of refugees as well as the factors that help them cope. I hope that this will help improve the services available for women in particular the mental health services that need to be more sensitive to their diverse needs.

I have provided a detailed description of individual stories of Kurdish women refugees. This attempts to challenge 'homogenising... refugees into a single pathologised identity' (Watters, 2001:1710). Portraying detailed experiences of a small group of women and contextualising their stories also helps to counter stereotypes of this group. Wahlbeck (1999) points out that Kurdish refugees: 'constitute a very heterogeneous group' (Wahlbeck, 1999:5). This focus on women as individuals is important to recognise participants as 'subjects in their own right, instead of mere dependant variables ruled by the social structure.' (Wahlbeck 1999:191). My broad objective has been to provide a true presentation of the individuals as they define their lives and the world around them, hence staying loyal to their perceptions and experiences.

After the dispersal system in 1999, many asylum seeking families and individuals were dispersed away from London and the Southeast, to other parts of Britain. I wanted to compare the experiences of women who live in London with those who live in a dispersal area to check how social context affects the wellbeing of refugee women. I researched about the dispersal towns to find a good comparison to London in order to interview some women who have settled there.

I also aimed to demonstrate that the problems and dilemmas faced by refugee women do not end when their asylum application is accepted and they are allowed to stay. Not having legal status in this country is probably one of the most distressing things that refugees face, but even after obtaining this, there are many other difficulties that cause distress. Migration leads to change of status, loneliness, culture shock, potential role reversals and more acute intergenerational conflict. I thus interviewed women who have been resident in the UK for different lengths of time. I hope that, amongst other things, this research can bring home the continuous negotiations that women undertake in order to find a space where they are reasonably free and safe without cutting ties with the community. From my own experience I know that identity and sense of belonging are continuously changing, sometimes creating great pressure and uncertainties as to where one stands in relations to one's own community and the host community. Through listening to the detailed stories of twenty Kurdish women refugees' internal and external journeys I hope to have shown how some of these women are constantly compromising and negotiating and those who do not learn to do so may be putting themselves at serious risk.

More specifically I aimed to cast light on the psychological consequences of the lives of women refugees at two stages: first, on arrival into the country; and second during the period of "settling down" or acculturating. I have explored a number of themes within this framework.

## *Arrival*

The literature reviewed above and my own observations suggest that there are a number of sources of stress for women refugees on arrival to the UK. These include:

i. Their legal status and the psychological consequences of prolonged periods of waiting.
ii. The affect of being dispersed to a place where there is no established ethnic community and organisations that could help women resettle.
iii. The losses associated with leaving their homelands.
iv. The adaptation tasks required for economic and psychological survival in the UK.
v. "Culture shock" - the psychological impact of life in a new country.
vi. The consequence of becoming a member of a group which is socially stigmatised.

I'm also interested in the resources that women draw upon to cope with the above problems which may include:

i. Emotional and practical support provided informally by family and the local community as well as the legal and official support formally provided by refugee workers, interpreters, lawyers and community centres.
ii. The implications of her age, education, and prior history.

## *Gender relations and family life*

Women refugees encounter further challenges during the process of 'settling down' when their new lives precipitate changes in gender relations and family life. These opportunities arise because of greater access to education, employment, and gender equality. It is possible to identify a number of ways in which these changes may impact on their lives and experiences:

i. Exposure to a new system of values and pressures for acculturation can lead to shifts and change in identity.

ii. Survival in British society can result in role reversals, including those between married couples as well as between women and their children.
iii. Women refugees may experience real difficulties passing on central cultural norms to the next generation because of the influence of mainstream education and entertainment on their children.
iv. The pressures of acculturation can lead to conflict and violence within families: available evidence suggest that young women and married women are particularly at risk.

An exploration of the above issues helps build a shared understanding of the complicated network of events that change, mark and shape the lives of Kurdish women in the UK. This will help us understand the life stressors these women are exposed to, and which places them at jeopardy for mental ill health. It will also identify their strength and the coping strategies that facilitate survival.

## The sample

I have observed and interviewed twenty Kurdish women of different ages and different family status, in different stages of their migration process, and with various occupations and levels of faith and education. I started recruiting participants by talking about my research to my friends and acquaintances. I also spoke to the Kurdish Cultural Centre and the Kurdish Association and asked them to talk to their clients about my research. These centres introduced me to some women who were interested in taking part in this research. I used a snowballing technique as some women were able to direct me to others who wished to take part.

## Choice of research procedures

The aim of this study was to get detailed and contextual information about a small group of people, hence qualitative methods were the most appropriate form of inquiry. Qualitative research is relevant because:

> 'It aims to study people in their natural social settings and to collect naturally occurring data. The focus is on the meanings the participants in the study setting attach to their social world... qualitative research describes in words rather than numbers the qualities of social phenomena.' (Bowling, 1997:312)

Qualitative research is useful to 'the study of social relations' (Flick, 2002:2), as well as the diversity, locality and temporality of experiences. In the social sciences there is growing awareness of the importance of starting from the bottom as opposed to starting from theories that are then tested and verified. This is because the exactness of the models in the natural sciences does not fit the complexities and the diversity of social life and this is one shortcoming of quantitative research. Thus, the study of subjective meanings and everyday experiences is essential. This is clearly expressed by Flick when he says:

> 'Qualitative research takes into account that viewpoints and practices in the field are different because of the different subjective perspectives and social backgrounds related to them' (Flick, 2002:6).

Also, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research considers the researcher's communications with the participants as part of the data that will then be analysed. Thus instead of trying to minimise these effects, the researcher's reflections and participant's reactions and hesitations are also considered important.

Bowling (1997) points to the superiority of qualitative research over quantitative ones when it comes to the study of areas where there is little or no familiarity with the field, or when the issues are sensitive and complex (p.312). These issues clearly apply to my chosen area of study.

One shortcoming of qualitative research as compared with quantitative research, especially in the case of single researcher, is the possibility of the results being influenced by the researcher's bias and mistaken perceptions. This can be avoided by using two or more methods in order to check validity. Hence, I have noted my feelings and interpretations while collecting data and my observations and notes will be reintegrated back into the transcripts. Mays and Pope (1996) provide a checklist in order to check the accuracy and

thoroughness of a qualitative research study. This includes issues of choosing a diverse sample, describing the fieldwork in detail, and presentation of enough raw data as evidence for the interpretation (cited in Bowling, 1997:314).

It is important, therefore, to use more than one method and to have a diverse sample. In this study I have used observation and narrative methods. I hope that by spending time with the individuals and in particular spending time with them in their natural settings (their own homes, work place or refugee community events), I have achieved a thorough understanding of their joys and difficulties as well as the influences that shape their lives. I met each participant at least twice. Spending time informally led to the creation of trust which eased the in-depth data collection through narratives. I shall describe each of these methods in turn.

## Research Methods

The research methods were selected because they are non-intrusive and personally validating and potentially empowering. The participants were told that participation is by choice such that they could stop at any time and withdraw from the research. I also stressed that although I'm interested in their lives within their family and communities the decision to talk about certain issues and refrain from others, is theirs. In this sense participants could feel in control of the situation, withholding information about some aspects of their lives. Participant observation and in depth interviews are relevant methods for this study as they have allowed me to focus on a small group of individuals. These methods allowed the participants to define themselves within the social setting of their family and communities, they allowed them 'to articulate their own experiences in their own terms and to identify their own priorities in terms of service provision' (Watters, 2001:1710).

### *Participant observation*

The importance of participant observation lies in the fact that experiencing events and witnessing situations rather than relying on accounts of them provide an understanding of what people think, and thus give us an insight into understanding situations better.

Practices and physical space are only accessible through observation, and although narrative is an important tool for data collection, it merely makes the accounts of events, practices and circumstances accessible instead of the things themselves. The difference becomes clearer when we compare a person's account of where they live to actually seeing the place. In this sense observation allows the researcher to see how things actually are and how they are experienced by the participant.

I myself am part of the refugee field as I have come to the UK as a refugee myself and have an understanding of the circumstances surrounding seeking asylum. I also work as an interpreter and am involved in the community as an individual and a writer. During participant observation I made it clear to the participants that I'm interested in their daily experiences from the point of view of my research. In this sense observation in this study was overt. The participants were informed that I'm interested in spending time with them as part of data collection for the research.

Observation was also unstructured. Unlike quantitative observations, observations were made and definitions were postponed until a pattern or lack of one was observed. Thus a grounded theory approach was used (Bowling, 1997). Beginning with observing the social setting helps reveal the aspects that might be of interest. According to Rosaldo (1989:19) however well prepared a researcher may be, they may still lack the experience or personal attributes to understand what their subjects are telling them. I kept this in mind while spending time in the field and I made notes about the environments and events, postponing definitions and being open to other interpretations as the situations unravelled.

Questioning was kept to a minimum at this stage. Observing the women in their homes, their interactions with others, their relationships, understandings and the interpretations of those around them was crucial. This, together with accounts of their lives, created a better understanding of the changes in their lives and the difficulties they encountered. Also by observing the participants within their families and circles we can find out who provides supports and who adds to their burdens.

More specifically during participant observation, I collected information about the following:

i. Their homes and neighbourhoods. This is important because living in an old and damp flat, for example, could have unpleasant effects on the wellbeing of participants. Whether or not they live in a safe area and have enough space in their homes may have important implications for feeling safe and happy.
ii. The everyday activities they engaged in. This provided clues to how they spent their time and whether or not they spent most of their day doing nothing. Having plenty of time may lead to excessive thinking, boredom and loneliness.
iii. Their style of clothing. This was important for two reasons: first, because it provided information about their economical situation, whether they had enough money to buy new clothes; and secondly it provided information about whether they were religious, traditional, or westernised.
iv. Their relationship with their families (if they have any), their friendships and non-friendships (who are considered friends and why). Finding out about these relationships provided clues to the social support that individuals had access to.

I did not offer payment to participants for taking part in this research, though I made sure that their involvement did not cost them any money. So, if I met a participant in a café, I paid for their coffee. The decision not to offer payment was mainly because I recruited participants through personal contacts and relationships. I also believe and hope that the most positive outcome for participants has been the experience of taking part and talking about their lives. As noted above (page 76-77) most people find talking about their personal histories and experiences 'cathartic' (Espin, 1992). As Christians (2000:145) notes "social science research enables people to come to terms with their everyday experience" and accordingly should be a positive and empowering experience in itself. This research model aimed to promote the empowerment of refugees through its process.

It is recognised that participant observation has a number of limitations, these include: observer bias, reactive effects and representativeness of observations (Bowling, 1997). I tackled these problems as follows:

## Validity

### Reducing observer bias

Observer bias is a systematic difference between a true situation and that observed owing to observer variation in perceptions, and interpretations. Observation requires accuracy in perception of detail in order to reduce the tendency to report interpreted events rather than the events themselves. Methods to test for observer bias involve inter-observer comparisons, which is not possible in this research. Instead, I reduced observer bias by conscious reflection, making an effort to record things as they were and as they occurred. I also checked with participants that I had understood the situation and was open to be corrected by them.

### Reducing reactive effects

This is called the Hawthorne effect, where people change in some way simply as a result of being studied (Bowling, 1997). Although the effect of the observer is reported to decrease over time, there is always potential for a reactive effect even when an observer is well integrated into a setting. I was alert to this possibility throughout data collection. Through spending time with the participants I hope to have achieved a mutual understanding and a more balanced relationship, this is important to reduce reactive effects.

### Representative-ness of the observations

I spent as much time as possible with the participants, to ensure that different days were included and that data was comprehensive. This was to enhance the validity and reliability of the observations. It was essential to know how typical the observed events and interactions are. It was also important to spend enough time in the research setting to overcome the reactive effects of the observer's presence and for me to become aware of my own biases and assumptions.

In this sense, during participant observation, I was looking for clues about the women's support network, identity changes and how they spent their time in the UK. I hope that through spending enough time in the field and checking my perceptions with the participant, I have been able to reduce the problems associated with participant observation.

## *Narrative*

Narrative method is an important tool for this research for two reasons. First of all, as pointed out by Aron (1992) testimony can have therapeutic effects (see also pages 76-77). According to Aron this tool has been successfully employed by women, especially Latin American women, to challenge oppressive power structures and to re-appropriate for themselves and their communities the moral standards and the social order taken away by the repression. One reason why particularly women have used the testimony so effectively is because:

> "It validates personal experience as a basis for truth and knowledge, and personal morality as a standard for public virtue. These are historically feminist principles, invoked now as a truth for the whole community." (Aron,1992:175-6)

Narrative promotes a new, accurate understanding of objective conditions that derives from personal experiences yet exceeds the boundaries of the individual psyche. A woman's testimony about the injustice she may be experiencing is self empowering. This is because telling one's story is an exercise of free expression. This reclaiming the right to speak can be healing. Some of the women who agreed to take part in this research benefited by speaking out about what they have suffered in their home country and what they endure in exile. Communicating one's story is a great way of externalising the internalised oppression, be it gender or ethnic oppression.

However, Aron (1992), points out that for telling one's story to be therapeutic it must be voluntary. The person must be motivated to communicate one's story to others. Telling one's story is therapeutic only if the narrator feels it is. At a conference on the mental health of refugees, a refugee worker pointed out to me that there were clear differences between refugee women who wanted to talk about their lives and those who did not want to talk and preferred massage therapy instead. This is probably one shortcoming of this research: only those who are happy to talk have taken part in this study. The perspective of those refugee women who do not want to talk about their experiences is missing.

The second reason why narrative is an important tool for this research is due to the fact that a great part of our knowledge of the world comes through the stories we hear. Rampage (1991) points out that women learn about appropriate values and norms through the cultural and family stories. The narrative method is an appropriate tool for studying the stories that have guided and have been internalised by this group of women as well as the stories they tell about their own lives.

The basic characteristics of a narrative method is that it is a face-to-face in-depth interview using an interview schedule with the topics listed but with few specific questions and no fixed questions. Hermanns (1995) describes a narrative as follows:

> 'First the initial situation is outlined (how everything started), then the events relevant to the narrative are selected from the whole host of experiences and presented as a coherent progression of events (how things developed), and finally the situation at the end of the development is presented (what became).' (Hermanns, 1995: 183, cited in Flick, 2002).

The focus of this research is the lives of a group of Kurdish women post-migration and flight. Hence, I have not inquired into the reasons for flight or the flight itself. In this sense, I have not recorded stories of possible trauma and torture in the home country. Nevertheless, some of the women have spoken about their experiences back home and I have tried to acknowledge their stories. The participants were asked to describe what happened when they arrived in the UK and what is happening now. Then more specific questions were asked to obtain more depth. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995, cited in Bowling, 1997) there are three basic types of qualitative interview questions: main questions with which to begin and guide conversation, probes to clarify answers and to request further information, and follow up questions which pursue the implications of replies to main questions. Main questions are those which act as devices for covering the events or processes of interest. Probing questions are requests for extension such as 'can you tell me more about...', 'is there anything else...?', 'what happened then?' Probing questions can be encouragement questions such as 'Yes?', 'Go on'. Or example questions such as 'can you give me an example?' Follow-up questions focus on issues that are important to the subject of study, and can simply be 'would you talk a bit more about...?'

The main questions I used to elicit key information were as follows:

1 What did you find most difficult when you arrived in the UK?
2 What opportunities do you have access to in this country?
3 What do you think of the services that are available to you as a woman and as a refugee?
4 What and who has helped you cope with your new life?
5 How do you compare your home culture with the new culture?
6 Have you experienced any racism since living in this country?

The interviews were semi structured to provide the opportunity to talk about whatever the women considered important, and also to remain silent about some issues if that was what they wished. I audiotaped the interviews with participant's permission, and then transcribed the content. Although this was a time consuming process it is an appropriate method for complex subjects and for subjects about which little is known. At the end of each interview I turned the recorder off and asked the participant whether she had anything else to add. Bowling (1997:320) points out that researchers are familiar with remarks such as: 'Don't write this down, but...'

Because I wanted participants to speak frankly to me about their lives, I had to create the conditions which would enable them to do so. Cornwell (1984, cited in Bowling, 1997) found that even when using qualitative interviewing techniques people only revealed their public accounts and it was not until they were interviewed several times, and began to regard the research as part of their lives that they revealed their true feelings and beliefs to the interviewer. This demonstrates how important the bonding and familiarity is between researcher and participants in qualitative research. I have used a feminist approach by being open to answer questions about myself and hence achieving a more equal relationship with the participants. This was essential for building trust and achieving more depth.

There is inevitably potential for interviewer bias in qualitative interviews. I hope to have reduced this by tape-recording the interviews and by clarifying possible ambiguities in the transcripts with the participants. There is also the problem of representation but this

research is essentially about the differences of experience, so I have tried to include all the different issues that were raised by the participants.

Transcripts were then content analysed to inform the development of understanding and theory; extracts were then used illustratively. Transcripts were coded line by line to identify possible themes, and if a theme occurred twice or more then it was considered significant and used as a category for analysing the data. Counter examples were also reported to avoid making generalisations and hence obtaining more credible results. Transcription and coding were undertaken during the interviewing period. I did not use any computer programmes to analyse the content but relied on my repeated readings of the text. Conceptual categories and themes for coding were derived directly from analysing the interview material. Some of the categories and themes were generated during the process of conducting and reading the interviews.

## Researching sensitive topics

I anticipated a number of difficulties during data collection for this research, these will now be described along with an account of how I dealt with them.

When using qualitative interviewing for research topics which are highly personal, threatening or confidential, the interview can be stressful for the participant. I tried to minimise this problem by: spending time with the participants; building a trusting relationship with the participants before asking probing questions; being open about myself and my journey as a refugee in this country; and by answering questions about the use and scope of this research.

I started with general questions about the immediate difficulties of arriving in exile. More personal questions about the participant's support network, relationship with her husband, and possible conflict with her family or community were kept to the end, unless the participant herself talked about these issues. In this sense some of the topics of the research gradually emerged over the course of the interview. This may raise the issue of informed consent but I kept stressing to the participant that she is free to refrain from answering any

question she does not feel comfortable with. Obtaining consent in this context was the outcome of a developmental process (Lee, 1993). Disclosure of sensitive information was usually only possible once trust was established between the participant and myself. Then consent became implicit.

Another anticipated problem was that sometimes participants did not want to talk about issues of interest to me. This was particularly true in the case of talking about the role their husbands played in helping them cope with life in exile, helping them raise the children and supporting them in their ambitions. I respected their silences and did not push them to talk; such silences were very telling in themselves. It is important to recognise that this difficulty sometimes arose because I am an insider; because I belong to the same community and might know others who know the participant. The participants were sometimes wary of sharing personal information about themselves, in case the word goes round. Accordingly, I emphasised that the research is confidential, and that I could provide them with a copy of their interview if they wished, so that they could correct, refine or delete information. I reassured participants that if they had any complaints and did not want to talk to me about it, they could contact my supervisor. Finally, each participant was asked to sign a letter of consent and was given information in Kurdish about how to complain.

Some participants were also concerned about being identifiable in the written up reports: identification carries with it the risk of sanctions or stigma from various sources. I reassured each participant that any information that she felt could identify her will be removed or changed (including names). It also made it clear to all the women that participation is voluntary and they can withdraw at any stage, and that she is not obliged to disclose information which makes her feel exposed or vulnerable. The concept of 'choice' was stressed throughout the research relationships. This was also important in terms of empowering the participants.

The balance of power was another anticipated difficulty. Participants who felt powerless and vulnerable were more likely to perceive me as a privileged woman in control of her own life. I tried to minimise this polarity through emphasising our commonality by, for example, using 'we-statements' and 'us-statements' to express solidarity. The importance of these statements lies in the fact that they identified our commonality as refugee women,

proclaiming our bonds, and empathising with the participant (Burstow, 1992, pp. 51). I tried to listen, understand, sympathise, and not to be judgmental. In so doing, I communicated to the participants that I am trustworthy and will not abuse the privileges of my position. I drew on our similarities and instead of a one-way relationship where only the participant provides information about herself and thus perceives herself as a subject, I was open to build a relationship of trust and friendship such that if the participant wanted to know something about me, I responded to her need to know and feel equal.

Another issue that I believed may arise was that some participants may try to guess what I'm looking for and tell me what I wanted to hear. Thus, I explained to the participants that I did not expect a particular story or way of feeling, that I acknowledge how people react and feel differently when they are displaced, and that I'm interested in all the different stories and ways of feeling and being. I explained my belief that there is no legitimate or illegitimate story, that her feelings and thoughts were as important as those of the next person.

## Summary

In this study I aim to represent the diversity of Kurdish women's experiences in the UK and to portray participants as the unique individuals they are (Wahlbeck, 1999). I also aim to study the importance of social context and demonstrate that the problems associated with migration do not have a clearly defined end. More specifically I want to identify the different sources of stress and the factors that facilitate survival in order to cast light on the psychological consequences of the women's migration to the UK.

I have chosen participant observation and narrative methods to collect data about the lives of twenty Kurdish women. These methods were chosen because of their usefulness for the in depth study of a small group of people in their natural settings. While observing participants there may be mistaken perceptions due to observer bias, reactive effects and non-representativeness of an observation (Bowling, 1997). I reduced observer bias by making a conscious effort to record things as they were and checking with participants that I have understood the situation. Spending time with the participant and reaching a mutual

understanding also helped reduce reactive effects. To find out how representative an observation was, I tried to spend time with the participants to determine how typical an event or situation was. The narrative method is in itself empowering because there is evidence that telling one's story has therapeutic qualities (Aron, 1992), it is also an appropriate tool for collecting women's stories (Rampage, 1991). The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. The transcripts were then coded and extracts were used illustratively. The balance of power during the interview was addressed by being open to talk about myself and hence establishing a more balanced relationship with the participants. The issue of confidentiality and choice was also stressed throughout data collection. The participants were consulted to clarify ambiguities in the transcripts and their boundaries and silences were respected. In the next chapter I will talk about the research context and the participants.

# Chapter four- Research Context

## Introduction

In this chapter I will describe the process of data collection and introduce the women who took part. Data collection for this study began in December 2001 and ended January 2003.

## Recruiting Women to the Study

Dutton et al. (2003) point out that the effectiveness of recruitment has important implications for the validity of results. I tried to recruit a variety of participants from different age groups, background, education, position and with different levels of faith. Initially, I tried to interview some young single women aged 16- 25 years who lived with their families. This group became particularly important when a 17 year old Kurdish girl, Heshu Yunis, was killed by her own father in an act known as "honour killing". I tried to interview one of her friends and tried to talk to people of that age group who knew her. I wanted to interview a 17 year old girl who was friends with Heshu. Although the girl herself seemed interested in taking part, her mother did not allow her. At one point she told me "my daughter is young, she may have secrets and may have made mistakes and I don't want you to know about them or record them". Although this appeared to be in the daughter's interest it may have been an attempt to protect the whole family and its reputation. Another young girl who was a 19 year old university student immediately agreed to take part. I called her up a number of times to arrange a meeting until finally she told me that she had taken up a part time job and she did not have time to meet me at all. This also seemed more imposed by her family than being her choice.

I also wanted to include women of different levels of faith and approached two women who are more traditional Muslims than the rest of the participants as they wear headscarves, but both of them refused after much hesitation. There was generally a lot of

hesitation especially from women who did not know me. They were worried that if they disclose personal information, I may relate it to other members of the community. It took time and much talking about the nature of my research and also it took time for the women to get to know me and trust me. Generally, while conducting this research, my father's name has been a door opener. My father is a well known and much respected Kurdish poet, most people who did not know who I was, were happy to talk to me when they found out who my father was. Still this research is not without shortcomings. Some points of view and perspectives are greatly missing such as those of threatened young women and more religious women.

Twelve participants knew me or had heard about me before they agreed to take part in my research. Some of the participants consist of my own friends and colleagues. I made contact with ten women who live in London personally and another two were introduced to me through mutual friends. The Kurdish Cultural Centre and the Kurdish Association helped me get in touch with four women in London and a Kurdish caseworker in Hull introduced me to a woman there who became my gatekeeper and introduced me to the last three participants.

Sixteen of the participants live in London and the last four were amongst those dispersed to Hull. Through talking to many asylum seekers, interpreters and Kurdish community centres I found that Hull is a good contrast to London. There is evidence that Hull is one of the most deprived towns in England (Urban Renaissance, 2001). It has higher unemployment, lower education rate, lower income and higher crime rate.

## The Sample

Twenty women have been interviewed in this study. Seventeen of these women are from Iraqi Kurdistan, one seems to be from Iranian Kurdistan but says she is from Iraq, and the other two are from Iranian Kurdistan. All but one of them referred to back home as Kurdistan, not Iraq nor Iran. Five of the participants have lived in the UK for four years or less, the others have lived here longer and are well established. By well established I mean that they have learnt the language, have achieved refugee status or citizenship rights and are currently working or studying.

Out of the sixteen participants from London seven of them are British or western (European and American) citizens, this means they have lived in the west for seven years or longer. Eight of them have refugee status and one is an asylum seeker. The women who have lived here longer were obviously more reliant on their memories when telling me stories about the process of arriving and applying for asylum. This means they have had time to reflect on their pasts and maybe even review what they think was happening to them at that stage.

Most of the women were very eloquent. Despite the fact that 12 of these women spoke fluent English, they all preferred their interviews to be in Kurdish. Most of the women know each other or of each other, some of them are friends. The demography of these women is as shown in Table A.

***Table A: Background Characteristics of the Participants from London.***

| | **Age** | **Legal Status** | **Marital Status** | **No. of Children** | **Past Edu-Cation** | **Past Occupation** | **Current Occupation** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Henar | 25 | Refugee | Single | 0 | Sec. school | Student | Student |
| Shireen | 25 | Asylum Seeker | Single | 0 | Institute | TV presenter | Voluntary documentary maker |
| Lana | 29 | US. Cit. | Married | 0 | BA | UN | IT |
| Jhala | 35 | Refugee | Divorced | 0 | BA | Lawyer | Community worker |
| Leena | 35 | Eur. Cit. | Married * | 1 | Sec. school | Student | Interpreter |
| Hana | 35 | Brit. Cit. | Married | 1 | Bsc | New graduate | Community worker |
| Tanya | 35 | Refugee | Married | 4 | Institute | Teacher | Student |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Miriam | 36 | Brit. Cit. | Divorced | 1 | Basic | Guerilla forces | Interpreter |
| Naz | 37 | Brit. Cit | Married | 2 | Institute | Teacher | House wife |
| Shiela | 39 | Refugee | Married | 5 | Basic | House wife | House wife |
| Salma | 42 | Refugee | Married | 2 | Basic | House wife | Student |
| Zara | 43 | Refugee | Married | 2 | Basic | House wife | Student |
| Dila | 50 | Refugee | Single | 0 | Institute | Teacher | Student |
| Layla | 52 | Brit. Cit. | Divorced | 2 | BA | Teacher | Interpreter |
| Fadya | 68 | Refugee | Widowed | 8 | Basic | House wife | House wife |
| Runak | 69 | Brit. Cit. | Married | 10 | None | House wife | House wife |

Where Brit.Cit. means British citizen, US. Cit. means American citizen, and Eur.Cit. means European citizen.

*= previously married and divorced

Currently six of these women are employed, three of them work as interpreters, two of them are community workers, and the last one is an IT manager.

Two of the married women arrived in Britain with their children before their husbands. One woman arrived under the family reunion law when her husband was granted asylum and another two came only when they married Kurdish men who were citizens here.

I interviewed four women from Hull. Their background and characteristics are presented in Table B. Two of these women have left behind some of their children back home and one of them in particularly distressed about this. Three of these women have applied for

asylum and the last one came under the family reunion law. One woman has had a stroke and has been left with a disability.

***Table B: Background Characteristics of the Participants From Hull***

| | Age | Legal Status | Marital Status | No. of Childr en | Past Educati on | Past Occupati on | Current Occupati on |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shino | 34 | ELR | Married | 0 | Institute | Nurse | House wife |
| Reza n | 36 | A. Ref | Married | 1 | BA | Lawyer | House wife |
| Gula n | 52 | Refug ee | Married | 4 | Institute | Retired Civ. Servant | House wife |
| Hali ma | 56 | ELR | Separat ed | 8 | Basic | House wife | House wife |

Where A.Ref means Asylum refused, ELR means Exceptional Leave to Remain.

A total of fifteen women in the sample have experienced seeking asylum, four women have followed their husbands who were refugees or British citizens here, and one of them, Lana, was granted asylum by the UN while she was living in Turkey and then went to settle in America.

## Dealing with difficulties

In order to reduce the effects of observer bias I often checked the meaning of my observations with the participants. On one occasion, one woman whose husband has lost his first wife and four children in an Iraqi government operation against the rural Kurdish area, had a large, framed picture of her husband's missing children in the sitting room. She

was nine months pregnant when I interviewed her and the picture had been put on the wall by her husband only a few months earlier. I thought this must be upsetting for her and her two daughters and asked her about this. She told me she was upset not for herself or her daughters but for her husband and thought that having their picture before his eyes every day, must be a painful reminder. On the other hand, she said, this was all he had left from them and she understood how he wanted them to be present, even if in a symbolic way. She corrected my perception of the situation. On another occasion, I was surprised to be confronted by my own prejudices. When I was planning to visit a traditional family with low levels of education: the woman is a housewife and her husband is a car mechanic, I assumed that the husband does not help his wife look after their children. On my first visit to their house, on a Saturday, I sat with the participant in the sitting room. Her husband came and welcomed me and then took the children, including the twins, to the next room. The whole thing seemed very natural and the participant seemed used to this. Later, when I interviewed her during our second encounter, she confirmed this by saying her husband helps her a great deal and this is why she does not feel stressed about having twins in the UK. This showed me how much, without my own awareness, I was stereotyping this family.

I also wanted to check the representativeness of observations by recording different days and times when possible. In the case of one participant, her husband sat with us throughout the course of our first interaction. He came home a few minutes after I arrived. He had brought his young son back from nursery and said that the teachers nearly did not allow him to bring his son home, because they have never met him before. I withheld judgement about his presence and talked to both of them about my research. He questioned me about my family and whether I was married or single. Between my first visit and the second one, I telephoned the participant twice. Both times her husband answered the phone and passed it on to her. On one occasion she quietly told me that her husband was not supportive of her studying and finding work. When I went to visit her for the second time, it was ten in the morning and five minutes later her husband who was asleep until then, came down and joined us. He sat through the interview and when I finished, he told me off for wasting their time and questioning his wife about personal things. Later, when she accompanied me to the door, she told me she would feel more comfortable to talk if we meet in her college. When I phoned her later to arrange a visit in her college, her husband was not pleasant and insisted that there was no need to have another meeting. I concluded that her husband was

not supportive of her participation in the study and felt threatened when she was questioned about her life and experiences, and I decided not to attempt a further meeting as it seemed likely to cause problems.

Initially, I thought it will be easier to use participant observation with those who have newly arrived in this country. I assumed they have plenty of time on their hands and thought that they might not have built social networks and may be glad of the company and help. This did not prove to be the case. Even those participants who are relatively new and do not work yet are extremely busy learning the language, looking after their children, getting to know the system and engaging in social interactions. Those I met more regularly were the women I was friends with even though they have set up a life here, were working and had a large network of friends (see Appendix 3). I was able to meet each participant from Hull twice only. The first time I went to see them and talked about my research and found out about where and how they lived. The second time I returned to carry out the interviews. I also telephoned each of them between the two meetings, talking generally about how they are and what they have been doing. My role in the research relationships was to help in any way I could. On one occasion I was asked to complete a Jobseeker's Allowance form. I was also asked to interpret letters from the Home Office, doctors and the council. Because of my work as an interpreter, I was asked about the procedures of seeking asylum, the appeal system and their rights and entitlements. To others I was another acquaintance to talk to in the community gatherings.

Generally, married women did not talk about their husbands very much and this in itself was considered data. At times I wanted to ask the women more personal questions regarding details of their lives. For example, I wanted to find out how many of the women in this sample consumed alcohol, but except from one case, I usually sensed a barrier to asking these questions and remained silent.

A number of times participants burst into tears during the interview. This was particularly true when talking about the death of family members back home and in one case, when talking about being childless. The women who were new in the country also cried when talking about how difficult life has been. The participants felt comfortable enough to talk and cry about these issues and in many cases I ended up crying with them. This was mainly due to their vivid and graphic descriptions of the things they cried about. There was also a

lot of laughter. Many times participants who talked about difficulties of the past laughed about the ironic side of things and I laughed with them. I have cried and laughed with these women on many occasions and this, I believe, strengthened my relationship with them. It made me become more like a friend, not just a researcher who in interested in finding data for her PhD. Many of the women did ask me about myself, whether I was married or had any children. Two of the participants expressed their approval of my doing a PhD, one of them wished she was younger to achieve her ambitions in studying. Another warned me not to have any children until I finish my studies and fulfil some of my dreams. I was also asked about my father and a few times I sat through rehearsals of his poetry by the participants. I found my father's name helpful in different ways during this research. In one sense, it reassured the participants that I come from 'a good family'. It also gave them security that I cannot hide from them and if anything went wrong, they could always find me and complain about me in the community. Also, speaking of their problems made some women, especially the asylum seekers, feel sad about their situation. They talked about crying a lot and believed that crying helps them cope with their emotions. Some of them believed that if they did not cry they would be bottled up and would fall ill. Since I came here as a refugee woman myself we had this point in common and this helped me in being sensitive and compassionate to their problems as well as to the emotional difficulties they experience when expressing these problems.

## Summary

In this study I spent time with and interviewed women of different ages and occupations. I interviewed sixteen women from London and four from Hull. Three of the women used to be students, two of these are now working and one is still a student. Nine participants used to be employed back home and now only three of these are in paid employment. The lawyer has become a community worker, the teacher has become an interpreter, and the UN worker is now an IT manager. Three of the women who were previously teachers are not working anymore, two of them are still studying language and computers and the other is now a housewife. Six women used to be housewives, two of whom are now students trying to learn the language and taking vocational courses to find work, three of them are elderly and the last one has remained a housewife. In this sense there have been great

changes in the lives and positions of these women as compared to back home. Some women who were employed are now unable to work and others who used to be housewives may find employment. But this change of status is only one of the transformations that women experience by coming to the UK. In the next chapter I will examine the difficulties these women have reported as a result of coming to the UK, how they have managed to cope and how the opportunities to work and study have transformed their lives and affected their mental health.

# Chapter Five - Findings

## Introduction

The women in this study allowed me into their lives and narrated their migration stories to me. As the research progressed and the participants' stories unfolded, I discovered similarities and links between the different journeys. In this chapter, I will first report their accounts of the immediate problems that they have faced on arrival in the UK and then, in the second section, I will look at the longer term problems associated with settling down. In the third part, I will describe the factors and resources which were reported to have helped them cope in their new lives, borrowing their words to illustrate some of the points. Besides the migration journey, another journey was being related by these women. This journey was about the changes of perception and views as their length of stay and exposure to the new culture increased. I will thus look at their identity shifts, their acculturation and how they constantly compare and consider values from the two cultures in the fourth section. Despite the difficulties and challenges they have faced, these women acknowledged the positive aspects of their new lives. They appreciated the greater freedom and more opportunities that migration to the UK provided. I will report these stories in the last section of this chapter.

## Arrival

This section consists of three parts. Newly separated from their immediate family and in the mercy of the bureaucratic asylum system in the UK, women described their feelings and thoughts. They also talked about the health problems which they believed were due to the difficulties they faced in the first stage of their new lives. These issues will be explored in the first part of this chapter. In the second section, the women talked about what they longed for in exile. This part will relate, in their own words, the way of life and the support which were taken for granted back in their home countries and now seemed so essential.

Finally, the women talked about the different tasks each of them had to perform in order to re-establish her life in the new country.

## *Immediate consequences of seeking asylum*

### Helplessness

Seeking asylum means waiting for months or even years. The woman has to wait until her asylum application is processed, until she is accommodated, until she can take courses to learn the new language, until she can set up a new home, re-establish support networks and start working. It was noted earlier (pages 45-46) that there are significant risks of depression for women at this time, and indeed participants in this study reported feeling sad and passive while their asylum application was being processed. This was mainly due to the long wait, uncertainty about the future and their lack of power and control over the course of events. Under normal circumstances individuals will attempt to change an unpleasant situation to make it suitable for themselves. Seeking asylum takes away this ability. The suspension a person feels leads to other projects and sometimes life itself being put on hold until the decision is made on her asylum claim. Six participants were particularly articulate about this state of suspense. I will give an account of their stories.

Rezan is in her mid-thirties and has a very strong character. She has been living in Britain for three and a half years. She and her husband were amongst the first Kurdish families dispersed to Hull in 2000. Her asylum application was refused and she is still waiting to hear from her appeal. Rezan described her situation in the following manner:

> It has been very difficult. Sometimes we feel extremely hopeless and about to collapse, but what can we do. Nothing is in our own hands. What can we do?

This has made her feel a sense of injustice; she believes the government 'does not treat everyone equally'. It seems to her that the rule changes from one Immigration Officer to the next one. This sense of injustice was particularly due to a failure to notify her husband that his asylum application was refused and the family did not appeal for a long time because they were not aware of this refusal. Feeling that the system is unjust and that the

rule changes from one person to the next implies that Rezan views the cause of her situation to be external. She does not have low self esteem because she does not view the cause to be internal 'it's not my fault'. Nonetheless, the situation is having detrimental effects on her well-being:

> Not knowing about my fate in this country has made me feel very depressed. I cannot move forward and do anything, I don't have any control over my life. I don't know what will happen to us. We have been here for nearly four years and we feel mentally very unstable. Each day a new legislation is issued... sometimes we are told that we will be allowed to stay, other times they say you should prepare to be deported. So I don't know what will happen to us. I feel very sad but we have no power.

Rezan cannot move forward because understandably she views the cause of her problem to be global, it affects every aspect of her life. She perceives the situation to be stable as it has been like that for three and a half years and maybe for much longer. Not being granted asylum influences everything else in her life, and her feelings of depression are pervasive.

Another participant who arrived with her two sons, without her husband, was refused asylum and lost her first appeal. Salma came to London with her two sons in 1999:

> I was refused asylum a few times. This really affected my mental state, especially because I had no family to encourage and support me. I found these things very difficult.

She received her first rejection after one year, and six months later her first appeal failed. It was only in the High Court that she was granted asylum, this took another six months. She lived with uncertainty for two years and cared for her two sons alone as she was not able to bring her husband over:

> This really affected me, I was really desperate. It really affected every aspect of my life, I couldn't smile... I cried all the time. (She puts stress on the words): All the

time. I used to sit in the hotel room and cry. I didn't cry before my children, I used to wait until they were asleep and then cry.

Salma also perceived the cause of the situation to be global because it affected 'every aspect' of her life. Her depression was pervasive and overwhelming: she cried much of the time.

A third participant is still waiting to hear from her asylum claim. Shireen is a woman in her twenties who lives in London with her sister's family and her mother. She has been in Britain for a year and a half but has no news of her application. She believes that being refused is better than not knowing:

> If you are refused at least you know what is going on but I have no idea... if you have asylum you can relax, work legally, and find permanent accommodation. But if you don't have anything you are disappointed every day.

Shino lives in Hull and is in her mid-thirties. I saw her twice and both times she started crying when she talked about how she felt. She waited for a year and a half before she was called for her immigration interview. During this period she visited her MP a number of times and told him she was 'going crazy'. She now has 'Exceptional Leave to Remain' (see Appendix 2, 2). But because of changes to Immigration law and the recent changes in Iraq, she fears she may eventually be deported, 'I don't know what will happen.... I don't know.' Waiting to be called for her immigration interview she was crying all the time. She believed the cause of her problem was both external and global:

> I was very very miserable... twenty four hours a day I was preoccupied... I was going crazy... I kept wondering what my fate will be, a woman on my own living here like this... I have no one... I kept wondering why I'm not being called for an interview... why doesn't anyone ask about me? They didn't even ask me why I had come... they didn't distinguish between me and the young men who are here... and people kept getting responses and I was waiting with no clue. I kept thinking how could they not care about me as a single woman... how difficult a situation that is... they didn't care. It took a long time. I kept crying.

Jhala who used to be a lawyer back home arrived in her late twenties. She and her younger sister arrived in England in 1997 and it took four years for her to be granted 'Exceptional Leave to Remain'. With her sister, they spent over three years living in different hostels. During this period her sister, who was the last child in a sheltered family, had a breakdown and was hospitalised. Jhala herself suffered a great deal but had to carry on for her sister's sake. Not having refugee status also delayed her plans to re-qualify or at least study in her own field. She had to wait for three years before she was accepted as a home student:

> Three years after my arrival I started an MA in European Union law. This was the first time I started having faith in myself again. For three years I felt that my hands were tied.

This experience of 'having [her] hands tied' eroded her self confidence and belief in her own decision-making. She regretted coming to the UK and instead of blaming the asylum system, she blamed herself. The cause was perceived as internal, global and stable.

Henar was also granted Exceptional Leave to Remain after four years. She arrived in her late teens and managed to learn English and complete an access course within two years. She wanted to go to university but could not go until her asylum application was processed. Henar investigated paying for her own education two years after she had arrived and found that she had to pay £7000. She did not have the money so she had to wait. She spent that year 'not doing anything'. Whilst waiting to go to university, she developed back problems which made her bed-ridden for four months. She seemed to have suffered from depression during this year though she never mentioned this word herself:

> I didn't do anything. It was very difficult, I wasn't used to staying at home. I got really bored.

What kept Henar going was the fact that she had an offer from a university and was hoping to start her degree in the third year. In this sense although global factors affected her entitlement to studying and working, she did not believe they were stable. She believed the situation would be resolved and that soon she would be able to study again.

It is both understandable and evident that when a woman's legal status is not determined her sense of security and hope are undermined. She feels that her hands are 'tied' and feels trapped in the situation. Whether depression is associated with low self esteem seems to depend on the person's causal attribution style. In line with the predictions of 'learned helplessness' theory (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978), those women who blame themselves for coming to the UK instead of blaming the system for the awful condition they find themselves in, were more likely to have low self esteem. All the six women viewed the cause of the situation to be global because not having legal status deprived them of many other rights, such as employment, education and movement. Feeling helpless, depressed and passive are understandable reactions to this difficult situation.

### Dispersal

The dispersal system was designed to reduce pressure on London and the South East by distributing refugees all over the country (see Appendix 2, 1). The capacity of services, in particular health services, was not taken into account (Johnson, 2003). The four dispersed participants who contributed to this research were all living in Hull at the time of the interviews. Two of them talked about their experiences of dispersal. I will also include Zara's account here; she arrived when the dispersal system was in place but ended up in London. Zara was told she would be dispersed on arrival in Dover with her two sons:

> I told them that I only spoke Kurdish and Arabic and asked whether they could send me to a place where I could build a life with the help of the community. I was very worried about not speaking the language and ending up somewhere that no one spoke my language. They told me that it's not up to me to decide where to go; they will choose a place for me and let me know.

The next day, Zara arrived in London and got in touch with the Kurdish Association and this, according to Zara, is the reason why she managed to 'settle down sooner' (see page 206).

Rezan came with her husband in 2000. She described how according to the new law, people were dispersed after two weeks of staying in Dover. The names of people were put next to the places where they would go and this list was hung on the wall:

> On the fifteenth day we came here on a coach. The coach had different people in it, some were transferred to Glasgow or other cities, and some to Hull. There were many young men in Hull but we were the first family... there were no other families. It was really difficult, very very difficult.

Then Rezan went on to talk about some of the difficulties:

> At the time we had vouchers and they had time of expiry on them. We didn't even know how to shop and where to go to exchange them. When we were given this flat we had nothing, we went to the shops. In the shops we were shown where Safeway was. I spoke little English and had to keep asking people on the street where this and that place was.

Rezan and her husband experienced racism in Hull. Being new in the country, she did not know that the host population perceived them as a threat to the limited resources they enjoyed. She was shocked to be sworn at on the street, in particular in the evenings during the weekend. She did not know that these times were most dangerous because people got drunk and were more abusive (see page 226). Similarly, Shino also experienced racism in Hull and her house was attacked a number of times before the police intervened (see page 227).

Halima is in her mid-fifties and came to Britain in 2000 with her ten year old daughter (see Appendix 1, 4). She found arriving in Hull 'very difficult' because she did not know anyone who could help her. Language barriers also had a detrimental effect on her access to the information and health services (Johnson, 2003) that she needed because she had recently suffered from a stroke:

> Most of my things got delayed because I knew no one who could help me. I had post and I'm illiterate, so it would just lie there... I didn't know anything... I had

> doctor's appointments and other things but I didn't know about any of it until much later... all my things were delayed because of this... there was no one to help, no Kurdish person, no interpreters.

Three years on when I visited Hull I found the situation had improved with the opening of a Kurdish Information and Advocacy Centre (KIAC). The main KIAC office is based in London and in 2002 they opened a branch in Hull. The employees are themselves newcomers who were dispersed to Hull. They have received training in order to carry out their work. KIAC is part of HAST which is the Hull Asylum Support Team, involving people from the different communities. There are also many other organisations that help refugees and asylum seekers and provide interpreters. The participants mentioned an organisation named ARCO and the different churches. I visited the Princes Avenue Methodist Church which in mid 2000 as a response to the newcomers set up a project called Open Doors. The project opened the doors of the church to the new communities every Thursday. Originally, there were many young male asylum seekers in Hull and the project aimed to welcome them to the region. There was table tennis, games, and tea and coffee available for anyone who wanted them. The centre has now become a place where families mingle. An interpreter is available on a voluntary basis in order to help the people communicate with the organisers and with the other services available. These other services are: Citizen's Advice Bureau, a nursery nurse and a baby clinic. The project is funded by the church and the Health Trust. The purpose of the project is to have a place where asylum seekers can befriend people, get advice and receive practical help with clothes, funds for college and even food. One of the participants reported that she regularly goes to the projects set up by the different churches, she finds them friendly and it is good opportunity for her to socialise and sometimes sort out official matters with the help of their interpreters.

The 1999 Asylum Act dispersed asylum seekers first and then tried to set up the infrastructure to cope with the newcomers (Johnson, 2003). The new initiatives were only set up in response to the asylum seekers' presence, catching up with them instead of being set up in advance to prepare for their arrival. In this sense, the first waves of asylum seekers were most isolated, without help from interpreters or community centres. They were battling against a huge bureaucratic system.

### Fractured relationships and families

Migration may lead to families being separated from each other. Sometimes the man departs first leaving behind his wife and children. Other times it is the mother with her children that escape, leaving her husband and even some of the children behind. This may be due to lack of sufficient finances for the whole family to travel together, it may be due to the separation of families on route to the country of refuge or back in the home country due to the political situation. In this study some of the participants have arrived and left their husbands behind; some had left children behind; whilst others had followed their husbands to the UK.

Gulan has been living in Hull for nine months only. She had followed her husband who had been in Britain for three years. When he was granted refugee status, he applied under the family reunion law to bring over his wife and two sons. Gulan and her younger son were allowed entry to the UK but her elder son's application was turned down. Gulan and her husband were hoping very much that their sons will be able to arrive safely and start a good life for themselves. Although Gulan is generally happy and satisfied, especially after being reunited with her husband, she is very concerned about her elder son. She blames the Immigration Officer for this separation:

> The officer said he didn't believe that my son was seventeen, apparently he is too big. But he's only turning eighteen at the end of this month. This was awful, really really awful. It has been a big blow.

Halima came with her young daughter and left six children behind, three of whom are under 18 years old. Leaving in a rush and with limited money she was not able to bring all of them with her. Halima also believed the route was dangerous and she would not be able to manage her children alone. She thus hoped that she would be able to bring them over under the family reunion law. After a long wait she was granted Exceptional Leave to Remain which does not permit her to bring her children to the UK. She does not even have a travel document yet so she is unable to go back to see them. During the interview she burst into tears three times. When she left her children behind she never imagined she would be apart from them for so long. She feels guilty; she thinks she is a bad mother

because she has fled to a better place without them. This indicates that she is using an internal attribution style (it's my fault) and perceives the situation to be stable.

Runak is a woman in her late sixties; she came to Britain with her husband 12 years ago and left her 17 year old daughter behind in Turkey due to events beyond their control. One and a half years later the family managed to fundraise for their young daughter to join them. Runak suffered a great deal and she is still remembered for crying all the time:

> The most awful thing was that I had left my youngest daughter behind and after a few days I started feeling it. I had left her with her brother in Turkey. This was really awful and I really regretted coming without her. My daughter didn't arrive for longer than a year... I was really sad, wherever I went I cried, wherever I went I remembered my daughter and kept saying if only she was with me, things would have been so good. This really depressed me.

Both Halima and Runak blamed themselves rather than external events for leaving their children behind which contributed to their depression and low self-esteem.

Salma came with her two sons without her husband. She talked about the difficulties of being a single parent. Back home Salma was a housewife and had a lot of help from her husband and family (see Appendix 1, 15). She felt totally lost without her husband:

> All the work that needs to be done when you are alone with two kids! Things really weren't easy without my husband, he came three years after we arrived. It was so difficult to move from one country to another when you don't speak the language, from one culture to another where things are extremely different.

Sheila on the other hand was left behind by her husband in her hometown. She had three children and during the time he was gone, she had to carry on as if nothing was missing. She still needed to tend to guests and look after her children and not show her sadness:

> It was very difficult. Sometimes your child would fall ill and you had to take her to the hospital alone. You had to keep up the same life when he wasn't there, like

> having guests and things... life is awful without a husband, I hope no one will experience it... Sometimes I myself would fall ill, my husband's nephew was with me... I was too shy to tell him what was wrong with me... sometimes I really needed a back massage and couldn't ask him... it was very difficult.

Layla managed to join her husband two years after he arrived in the UK (Appendix 1, 8). During these two years she spent four months hiding in Kurdistan and the rest of the time she lived on the Iranian border, in Iran and then Syria. When she was in Tehran, she used to call him every week:

> It was very difficult especially during the cold winter when I would have to get up and queue for the post office in Tehran in order to talk to him. Sometimes I was there for three hours in order to talk to him for a few minutes. The lines were bad so it took time to get through. Then when I would finally manage to get through to him, sometimes it was early in the morning and he was annoyed that I would wake him so early (she laughed realising the comedy of the past).

Six of the women in this study were separated from their immediate families before or during their flight into the country of exile. This separation lasted more than a year in each case and two of the participants are still without their immediate family. This has caused them a lot of stress and anxiety. Some of the women felt guilty and remorseful for leaving their children behind. Two of them thought of themselves as bad mothers because of their role in the separation, blaming themselves for a situation that did not involve any choice on their behalf. These women (Halima and Runak) were more depressed than the others who seemed to have accepted that these separations had external causes (Gulan, Sheila, Layla and Salma).

### Health problems

There is evidence that refugees develop health problems, including mental health problems due to the stress they experience in their new lives (Watters, 2001; Yazar and Littlewood, 2001). In this study three participants reported developing health problems after arriving in the UK and another woman had health problems on arrival that became worse. Some of the

health problems were psychosomatic symptoms which they believed to be related to how they felt. For example, Salma spoke about being ill a number of times and relating that to the stress and sadness she felt when she came here. Once she was hospitalised for severe bronchitis and she also had an operation. She reported falling ill more often than normal, and believed that this was 'the result of stress and problems.' She told her doctor that she was feeling depressed and falling ill because she was unhappy. Even now, three and a half years later, when her husband is with her, she sometimes does not feel like herself:

> Suddenly something comes over me. I feel totally hopeless and feel like I have no life and no options.

Her doctor was very understanding and told her that it was normal to feel depressed in this situation. She was reminded that life had been very difficult for her in the last few years. Salma cried a lot in the first two years:

> I have never experienced anything like this back home. It's only since I came here. I was never like that back home.

Henar came to the UK in her late teens with her mother, following her four brothers who were living in London (see Appendix 1, 6). After getting over the initial excitement of being here, she felt very lonely because everyone else was working when she had a lot of time on her hands:

> The first year is okay, you are still reasonably happy, your main problem is language. In the second year I started feeling really homesick.

Henar developed intense back problems which seem to have been a reaction to her suspense and loneliness. She was in bed with backache for four months and spent the rest of the year not doing anything.

Shino lives in Hull and is living with her husband secretly because they have applied for asylum separately, his asylum application was rejected and she was granted Exceptional Leave to Remain. When I first met her with her husband, I thought they were from Iranian

Kurdistan, but she stressed that they were both from Iraq. It seems that they both pretend to be from Iraq because this is what they have told the authorities. This has affected her health. It seems that having to tell lies to everyone is making her depressed. She cries a lot:

> If I don't cry my throat tenses up and it feels as though I will suffocate... I cry lots and lots.. after crying I feel a little better.

Shino had back problems back home but it has got much worse here. She keeps falling ill:

> I'm very unwell, I keep going to the doctor... I used to go to the doctor and he kept examining me, now finally I have physiotherapy every week or every fortnight. I'm a little better after these sessions for a day or two then it is the same again. I have medications and I keep going to the doctor... I manage with painkillers.

Halima had a stroke in Turkey before she came here as a result of which her left hand and foot are still not functioning properly (Appendix 1, 4). She has limited sensation in her left hand and drags her left foot along. She believes the problems she has encountered as a refugee have slowed down her recovery:

> I feel that when I'm not unhappy, if I don't think about problems, my hand starts moving again. My main problem is that of my children.

Four of the women in this research reported health problems which they attribute to their mental state. They all believe that unhappiness and stress has caused them to fall ill more than they used to back home. The physical and mental health of these women is closely related to the difficulties they face as newcomers to this country.

### Seeking asylum: in summary

Six of the women reported negative feelings whilst waiting to hear from their asylum applications. Rezan felt 'extremely hopeless' and 'about to collapse'. Salma was 'desperate', she 'cried all the time'. Shireen felt 'disappointed every day'. Shino was 'very miserable' and 'kept crying'. Jhala felt that her 'hands were tied' and for three years she

'had low self esteem'. Henar was 'not doing anything' for a whole year and got 'really bored'. In other words, the waiting and lack of power made these women feel sad, trapped, and desperate; it made them cry. Most of them seemed to have been depressed although they didn't use this word themselves.

Two out of the four dispersed women reported feeling lonely and without any support due to being dispersed to Hull. Rezan found it 'very difficult' particularly because they had 'vouchers' at the time and 'didn't know how to exchange them'. Halima pointed out that she 'didn't know anything' and 'there was no one to help' her. It delayed her access to health care when she most needed it. Ending up in a place without the help of community centres and other organisations, the participants felt very much alone, struggling to find their way around and dealing with their daily lives.

Six women were separated from immediate members of their families before or when they arrived in the UK. Gulan stressed that this 'has been a big blow'. Halima was crying and feeling guilty. Runak found it 'most awful', she 'regretted coming without' her daughter, and she 'cried all the time'. Salma found it 'difficult'. Both Sheila and Layla found it 'very difficult'. The six women found the separation very hard. Two of them who had left their children behind spoke of feeling guilty and regretful for allowing the separation to take place.

Four women reported health problems which they believed were due to the difficulties they faced in their new lives. Salma kept falling ill and felt 'totally hopeless'; she 'suffered' from a bad 'mental state'. Henar developed 'back problems' and was 'bedridden' for four months. Shino is 'very unwell', having regular 'physiotherapy' and she manages with 'painkillers'. Halima believes her recovery is slowed down due to her unhappiness.

In summary for 10 of the women in the study, that is half the sample, the process of seeking asylum itself was the source of considerable distress, making them fall ill and feel sad.

## *Loss*

### Status

Two informants spoke of loss of status linked to their paid work. Shireen is a young asylum seeker who had achieved a good name and reputation for herself through her work back home. She was an actress who had taken part in numerous theatre festivals. She also won a prize for the best cartoon actress and was also a popular TV presenter of two programmes on one of the satellite channels. She talked about becoming a 'nobody' when she came here. Shireen stressed that her work made her:

> ... a well known character in my own country such that anywhere I went people knew me. It wasn't just recognising a face, people used to know me for the good work I did.... But when I came to Europe, like many others, no one knew me, no one said this is the woman who does so and so... This created a big gap for me. I suffered from depression, really. I came from all that hype into this nobodiness. I found it very very difficult.

Jhala talked about her change of status, from a lawyer to a person whose experience and qualifications were not recognised, and from a married woman to a single, lonely woman:

> My arriving here didn't just mean coming from one environment and culture into another but also my own status changed, I had lost my job, was separated from family and friends and also my marriage was over. This is why I lost the confidence I had in being able to re-qualify, find a job and re-establish my life here. Things were more difficult than I thought.

In summary, both women linked loss of status attached to their employment and marital status to feelings of depression and lack of self esteem.

## Social support

There is evidence that lack of social support is directly related to mental ill health (Ager, 1993, Biggam and Power 1997, Veer, 1998). The women in this research readily described the ways in which they felt deprived of different kinds of support while in exile, and seven of them talked about the emotional consequences of not receiving any support. Most of them talked about missing the mixture of emotional and instrumental support that was readily available in their home countries. For example, new mothers traditionally get a lot of support from their families. They normally have their mother, sister or a friend, staying with them and helping them while they bond with their baby. Hana was deprived of all of this and had to stay at home looking after her daughter for one and a half years:

> I got extremely depressed because there was no one to help me... I was really exhausted because my husband was never at home. Even at the beginning he could not take any time off. I was totally on my own from the first day. It was a new thing, being alone with a little baby. I was very stressed and scared most of the time. Sometimes when she was unwell and I was alone I really didn't know what to do with her. It was all so difficult because of lack of help. You also have the other responsibilities like looking after the house. As a Kurdish woman you have many guests, sometimes for dinner. When you have a baby everyone comes to see you, it becomes very crowded. No one really appreciates your situation and your baby's situation. For three months I was psychologically not a human being anymore. The process of giving birth itself drained me. I didn't have any energy left. It's also an overwhelming experience; you suddenly become responsible for another human being. I was scared and I felt lonely. It was very difficult. But on the other hand it also has its own pleasures. It's the pleasures that keep you going otherwise you will go crazy with the difficulties of the beginning.

Naz was also newly married when she came here (see Appendix 1, 12). She talked about not having anyone to talk to:

> Sometimes here when you have a problem with your husband you don't know who to talk to about it. Sometimes you have worries which you don't want to talk to him about but you have no choice because there's no one else. Back home you're

amongst your relatives. If you have a problem you can go out and see your family and talk to someone. Who can you talk to here? Even when you go out the people don't speak your language and they are not very social. You can't talk to anyone.

Naz went on to talk about the numerous social occasions back home which helped people 'forget' about their problems. She suggested that these outings worked as intermediaries that help you ignore problems and keep things in proportion:

> Back home there are so many occasions for going out with family... when someone buys a new home you go to say congratulations, when someone has a new baby, when they get married... there are many social visits and by attending them your mood changes and you forget about your problem. Here you are alone so much you keep thinking about it and sometimes it becomes bigger than it should.

Naz also talked about the lack of supportive neighbourhoods in the UK; she felt this very strongly when her father died. She said that if she had been back home the neighbours would have come to stay with her and they would have looked after her house for her, cooked and tended to the guests while she was mourning:

> When my father died people came here every day. We played the Qur'an but my neighbour didn't even ask what was going on. She didn't know and didn't ask. Relationships are very cold here. When you see such things you really dislike life in this country. My husband feels the same.

Tanya (see Appendix 1, 19) spoke of her isolation when she arrived here:

> I was very lonely. The changes were many... I married and came here straight away. I didn't speak the language; I didn't know the environment, the people. Everything suddenly changes and you have a great responsibility as I wasn't alone... I was very lonely looking after the kids and tending to their needs.

She then remembered how when they were here they nearly missed celebrating Eid (Islamic feast) which normally would have been a big family and social occasion:

> I remember the first Eid we were here, we didn't even know it was Eid, this is how cut off from our things we were. Later, a friend called and told us it was Eid. Back home we used to prepare for weeks before Eid. So I quickly started cooking. These things have their own effect socially, not having a job, not speaking the language, not having friends. All the support and help you get back home is missing when you come here.

Henar came in her late teens, she had many friends back home and a lot of time to visit and receive friends and family:

> Here... you see less of people. Even Kurdish people you see less because everyone is busy working... and when you first come here you have a lot of time on your hands and you are still very warm in creating and maintaining social relationships. After a while you too cool down and you acquire the social traits of this country. At first however you want to see people all the time. But people can't see you, so you feel sad. And then you experience all sorts of longing for your country.

Henar described how this loneliness made her miss home:

> In the second year I started feeling really homesick. I missed my friends and recalled my life back there, my history. I have lived there for seventeen years of my life so it was difficult to suddenly leave everything behind. The first year everything is new, you are exploring things, changing things... but when you get used to this, you start missing the past... Back home life was socially better. You have many friends around you, all the people are your people. You feel secure because you know your surrounding... you never get bored. Even though we didn't work and our school was half a day only, we would get home and then go out to see neighbours, friends and family. The day went by so quickly. Here it's the opposite: you are alone and feel alone but at the same time you can work and study and go out to do these things.

Salma has two children and she received a lot of help from her family when she was raising them back home:

> My mother and sister helped me a lot. I didn't even feel that I had two young kids. Sometimes my children would go and stay with my family for a week. My younger one was very much raised by my sister. When I think about how things were and how they are now, it's really really difficult.

Salma then went on to talk about her children, how they remember the large family and miss it. Her older son keeps begging her to go back to Iran, she keeps telling him they cannot go back.

Rezan who lives in Hull talked about social life as one of the good things in Kurdistan and she dislikes the way relationships are weaker in this country:

> We had so many family and friendly gatherings; we've lost all of that. We don't see each other often, there is little time. You cannot get together like you did in Kurdistan.

She then went on to give possible reasons for the loneliness Kurdish people feel in Britain. Partly, she pointed out, it is because people are busier here and they do not have as much time to socialise:

> Secondly whether we like it or not, we are in exile... there are fewer Kurdish people, they are all busy. Also some English people are quite racist, they don't like to mix with you, they are not interested. They don't even know if you are an asylum seeker, a refugee, a person who is meant to be deported... they call everyone asylum seeker... for example, I don't have asylum but I have friends who have been granted asylum but English people look at both of us the same way. They don't think that this person is in exile, is alone, she may have problems. We have experienced many problems and insults...

Shino misses her family and cries a lot:

(She sighs) I feel lonely... some days I just sit here and feel that if I don't cry I will go crazy... I even told the doctor a few days ago, I cry a lot (she sheds a few tears)... the doctor said it's better to cry and get it out of my system, otherwise I might fall ill.... I cry lots and lots... you've left your family behind, you are in exile... you've left your ill mother behind... I have left my children... many problems.

In summary, seven women readily identified lack of social support as a source of stress and distress. Such support is particularly important at challenging times of life, for example, on becoming a mother, being bereaved and during the process of migration itself. Support can be practical or emotional; most of the time the women talk about a combination of instrumental and emotional support. It is being deprived of the support they had back in their countries combined with the host community's aloofness, lack of interest in, and suspicion of the newcomers which makes these women feel totally alone.

### Employment

Nine of the research participants used to be in paid employment back home, but at the time of this research only two were employed in the fields of their own choice. Dila and Naz have not been able to find work, despite trying very hard. Rezan is still an asylum seeker and, therefore, not allowed to work. Shino is currently depressed but hopes to requalify as a nurse when she feels better. Jhala is not working in her own field and has given up on the hope of requalifying as a lawyer. Shireen is doing voluntary work in her own field. Tanya is doing a course in English and computing in the hope of finding work. The respondents repeatedly described not being able to work as a source of stress. Here, I will draw upon Naz and Dila's stories to illustrate some of the common themes in their conversations. Specific difficulties linked to the process of finding work are explored in a later section (see pages 151-154).

Naz used to work as a teacher back home. She had always wanted to become a teacher but under Saddam's rule, she could only become a teacher if she joined the Ba'ath party. When the situation changed (see Appendix 1, 12), she happily started teaching on a minimal salary. Naz loved her job and when she came here, she was hoping to be able to teach again but things turned out to be more difficult than she thought (page 153). She talked about not working and how it affects her:

> I don't work. I receive social security benefits but I'm not happy. I would rather work than sit at home and be paid. Back home because I worked I was quite happy. It's not about money, I know very well that if I work I will pay all my income towards bills, tax and housing but I still don't like to sit at home and get money. I sometimes feel like I will go crazy.

Dila had worked for 25 years before coming to London (pages 151-152). She has found not having a job very difficult and depressing. She believes that the Social Security system makes people lazy, and that if she had worked from the beginning, when she arrived five years ago, she would not have become depressed. She would have 'remained active'. Dila said. 'I wish there were no benefits. I would have started work and would have found better jobs by now.'

> I could say that my depression was 70% due to not having a job. Being redundant has really depressed me. I used to be very capable and brave but this depression has made me hopeless. I really can't step forward... I feel little because of not being able to get a job, I start having doubts about myself. I don't know what to think. Sometimes I tell myself I have to be strong, no one knows how long I will live, maybe I will live long and I shouldn't live like this. But suddenly I feel down again, then I start again.

Loss of meaningful work has a great effect on the lives of these women. As Naz points out, even if women may earn the same as they earn while on benefits, it is the integrity of working, creating and taking part in the society that is missing. It is feeling that one has no important impact in the world that makes some of these participants feel extremely down.

### A simple and relaxed way of life

For some participants life back home was much simpler. Salma, for example, comes from a little town in Iranian Kurdistan. She was a housewife and had a very sheltered life:

> I personally have never done any work outside the house. I have no experience in any work because I was a housewife really. I had two kids and my husband

> worked, I was at home. I didn't even do shopping back home. My husband used to do that. As you know in Iran men do the outside work and...women didn't go out much. Especially Kurdish people who are particularly oppressed and may have no substantial education. I had never been to an office before, I was at home and that's why when I came here I found it extremely difficult.

Hana on the other hand is from one of the main Kurdish cities in Iraqi Kurdistan where women worked. Still she found life in London very difficult. Life used to be simpler; places were more manageable in size. Hana explained how every day she spends four hours commuting to and from work. Understandably she found this exhausting and explained how finishing work at five, she is still feeling okay but by the time she gets home, she has 'no energy left' and she 'can't be bothered'. She compared this to back home and mentioned that although she was still a student and did not work yet, she grew up with the concept of starting work at 8 in the morning and finishing at 3-3.30, where work was only '20-30 minutes away' from home. Hana also thought office work was less stressful in Kurdistan. There were no strict deadlines and targets like there are here; there was less urgency and therefore less stress. She then spoke about how living in a materialistic world complicates life in another way:

> Back home the standard of living is pretty standard for most people, it's not like here. Here you like to have things, you want things, and you have more requests. People around you have many things and you want to be like them. I believe for me life is much more difficult here. If you think about it from all the different aspects, from going out to buying clothes and furniture, everything is so materialistic. Back home things were not so competitive and hence not so nerve racking. It is the constant competition that makes life so much more demanding. Back home only students compete but here there is competition everywhere. They compete in relation to their jobs or houses, everything. Each person wants to achieve more than the other. The way we have been raised, we are used to doing things in our own good time, there is no pressure: you finish primary school and go to secondary school, then university and then work. In short there are no such ambitions but here there are. Sometimes you can't achieve them and this is really difficult.

Coming from less materialistic and more communal societies has its own advantages. As Salma and Hana point out, life is easier in many respects. People have more time and there is less competition. Arriving at a larger, more competitive and complicated environment is the source of stress and exhaustion.

### Bereavement

When asked what they have found most difficult while living in the UK, four participants talked about the death of family members back home. Grieving for a loved one is difficult at any stage of one's life, but especially so when the person who has died is far away and one is left to grieve alone without the support of family and friends. Being far away from the deceased at the time of death seems to make the migrant feel guilty. She finds it harder to accept death and finds it more difficult to have closure or move on.

Miriam came to this country in her late teens with her six months old daughter. Shortly after arriving here her mother had died but her family did not tell her in order to 'protect' her as she was finding her new life very hard. Her older sister finally decided to write her a detailed letter about her mother's death seven months after it happened. As the last child Miriam was very close to her mother and she was both devastated by the news and angry for not being told immediately. Miriam who described herself as a 'newly separated, single mother in a strange country', became so depressed that she could not look after herself or her daughter:

> When my mother died I really struggled. I gave up cleaning the house, the plates and cups were all dirty, if someone came to see me there was no clean cup to have a tea. I was really depressed, it was very difficult. Once my daughter had crawled down to the road and I wasn't even aware... I was still very depressed, the slightest noise at night would wake me up, I was going crazy. Sometimes I would lose my temper with my daughter, who was just one year old and would shout at her. It was awful.

Naz's father died a few months before I interviewed her: she was pregnant when she found this out. Her family told her husband first because Naz had been very close to her father. Traditionally, bad news is only broken when the person has company. Her husband then

had to make sure some of her friends were around before he told her. He later admitted that he 'didn't dare' to tell her when she was alone with him because 'he was worried about how [she] would take it':

> ... he finally said 'it's your father'. When he told me this (her shoulders shake from crying and I get tissue for both of us) I started beating myself... they were trying to hold my hands, they kept saying, 'don't, for the sake of the baby'... I fainted a few times... (she keeps crying)... it was the worst news I have ever heard in my life. I can't imagine anything worse happening. I hope no one hears such awful news... my father's death was the worst thing that has ever happened to me... I find it very difficult... he was never ill, it was such a sudden death.

Naz pointed out that it is only during such times you really feel that you live in exile, this is when you feel 'really alone', that 'there is no one.' Naz cried again when she talked about phoning her mother that day who was also 'in a state so many thousands of miles away'.

In a similar situation, Zara's close brother had died while she was in London with her children. Since her husband was not with her, her family decided not to tell her until she was reunited with him. Only much later, when Zara's husband arrived, did he eventually tell her the truth. He kept quiet for a month until eventually her family insisted that he tells her:

> Eventually I was mourning for him and this caused them to mourn him again back home... this is one of the things that really affected me while I have been in exile. Later, my mother told me that she was worried about me finding out because they were all together but I was on my own. It was really difficult. Even now when I phone and ask about family and relatives, sometimes I don't believe them when they say everyone is alright.

Another participant's life in exile was shaped and changed by grief. Dila is a single woman in her early fifties. She was very close to her older sister who had a very bad marriage and suffered a lot in her life. Her sister was diagnosed with cancer about three years ago and Dila with her other sister in London worked night and day to save money and bring their

sister over for treatment. Eventually, their ill sister arrived in Sweden but it was too late, she was dying painfully. Dila and her other sister remained with her over her last days. Since then Dila wears top to toe black and she has stopped dying her hair and socialising. She was already suffering from depression before her sister died, and she deteriorated to the point that she used mental health services for over a year. In this year she stopped taking her language course and concentrated on her garden. More recently Dila has been seen out and about, making jokes and trying to live, and she has recently started taking her language course again.

### Lack of knowledge about services and dependency

Six participants talked about not being aware about the services that are/were available to them as asylum seekers and refugees. In all instances this led to their becoming dependant on other individuals who sometimes misled or misguided them.

Miriam who came in 1990 said that unlike now there were not many organisations that could advise asylum seekers. She had no idea what she was entitled to and what her rights were. This resulted in her being pressurised to live in a flat which was in a terrible condition:

> When I was offered the flat I didn't want to take it because it was awful but the man told me if I don't take it I will never be housed. I accepted it out of fear. I lived there for a year and hardly had a good night's sleep while living there; the dampness was making me ill, I worried the ants would enter my daughter's ears, I could hardly keep food out anywhere, it was in an awful state. So there was no one to tell me what help and services were available. The friends I had didn't know much themselves and sometimes gave the wrong advice and information.

Tanya arrived with her husband and two step-children in 1996. She described how it felt like doing everything on their own, with no help from anyone:

> When we arrived... my husband had to go into colleges himself to ask them about what was available. We had no guidance. He had to find out about language courses for me and school for the children.

Tanya also pointed out that she did not know which colleges would provide a crèche for her young child while she studied. She asked a college near her home whether such a service was available, they told her it was not and she took this to mean that it would never be available. Later, that same college started providing this service but she only found out about it 'a year after it had started'.

Dila arrived in 1997 and felt that there was no guidance to direct people. She felt that they 'house you in a hostel and forget about you.' Dila believes that during the first six months when a person is not allowed to work, they should at least be allowed to take language and vocational courses to prepare them for the new system. She felt that studying English 13 hours a week is not enough to learn the language quickly.

Zara came in 1999 and ended up taking her children to parks every day because they were bored. Many days it was raining or cold but she still had to take them to a park because the three of them lived in a room in a hostel and the children felt very claustrophobic. She told me that there were many good things she did not know about and one of them was libraries. If she had known this before she would have taken her children to the library on cold and rainy days. She also did not know that instead of buying expensive books for herself and her children she could borrow books from the library:

> This I have found most difficult, there was no one to guide you and advise you about these daily things. I knew no one who could tell me such things. Now whenever I see someone who has newly arrived I don't want them to suffer and I want to tell them everything. The problem was there was no one, no one to show me how to go about things and tell me what to do.

Zara felt very fortunate to be told by her children's school that she should take her children to the GP and make sure they get their vaccinations. She wishes there were more of these helpful and important tips.

In the absence of reliable information about how services and systems work, a number of participants described their dependency on friends and acquaintances who gave them poor advice, or who in some instances exploited their vulnerability. For example, Jhala believes that staying with her friend and listening to her advice impeded her progress. Her friend housed Jhala and her sister and while at the time Jhala took this to be a favour in retrospect she felt exploited. The friend was being paid by the housing office for giving the two sisters a room each when they were actually sharing a room with the friend's young daughter. They were babysitting for her and cleaning and cooking in her house because she worked. She also misinformed Jhala about the Kurdish community in London:

> She totally manipulated me for the four months. All that time I only knew her daughter's school, and she kept discouraging us from going out because she said we will be lost... and finally she found me a job. I worked there for 52 hours and eventually the employer didn't pay me as he said I didn't have National Insurance Number... I got to know an English man in the Social Services who advised me on some things and she told people that I had a relationship with this man. She just created so many problems, I was so disappointed and for a while I thought the whole Kurdish community is like that so I kept away.

This bad experience made Jhala feel that the best way forward was to make friends with non-Kurds. She then became friends with a man who shared their flat but this too proved fruitless. The sisters were in debt because of coming here so they worked illegally for a while and saved £800 to pay back some of their debts and saved some money for studying. Unfortunately, the non-Kurdish friend they trusted took the money and they 'couldn't even report him' because the money was collected illegally. Still, Jhala argued, 'every experience has its own price' and she believes that the damage caused by her Kurdish friend was much greater than the £800 which was stolen from them. This made Jhala think that she should not trust anyone because she believes:

> The caring and friendship and innocence we have back home does not exist here. So I also understood why some English people have phobias about foreigners, people can turn out to be anything.

Miriam also was terribly unfamiliar with the system and was nearly misled by a friend at the beginning of her life here. She is still confused about the friend's intentions in giving the advice:

> When I came I didn't have a pushchair for my child, one of them took me to 'Mothercare' and said that I could take a pushchair from there... I now don't know whether she encouraged me to steal or she was just stupid and didn't know anything... If I had listened to her I probably would've got in trouble with the police and the Social Services might have taken my daughter away from me.

Dila felt that some Kurdish people thought they were doing her a big favour by giving her advice and they expected her to be 'grateful forever.' She also believed that people do not necessarily give the wrong advice 'out of meanness' but because they have misunderstood and 'think all people have the same problems':

> When you are new you don't know about any of this. Each person tells you something which they have learnt from their personal experience not from being familiar with the system here. When you don't know the system you face many difficulties.

Hana had a Bsc in Economics and Management back home. Due to lack of advice from outside agencies and feeling vulnerable she relied on her husband's advice on what to study. On arrival she felt lost and confused about what to do:

> ... when you first come you feel that you don't know anything, you totally put yourself at the mercy of others whom you think know better... I didn't want to study economics, I didn't like it. I wanted to do teaching. He (husband) told me that I wasn't patient enough. I liked to work in a bank, I took some courses in banking and finance. Nothing awful happened by taking his opinion but I wish I had listened to myself instead, but then again I didn't lose anything.

In this sense not being familiar with the system was repeatedly mentioned as a source of stress. The participants did not have help with the daily things in life and were unaware of

their rights. They suffered because of a lack of advice from governmental agencies and this meant they sometimes made the wrong choices. It also meant that they were dependent on other people's advice and guidance. This made them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation.

### Summary: participants experience of loss

Two women talked about the difficulties associated with loss of status. Shireen who was a famous young woman became a 'nobody' and found this very difficult. Jhala found the change of status very difficult: from a lawyer to unemployed, from a married woman with a large family to a single woman alone. It made her lose faith in herself.

Seven women talked about the effects of loss of social support. Hana had a baby and there was no one to help her. She became 'extremely depressed.' Naz talked about not having anyone to talk to when she has problems with her husband, she felt very much 'alone'. This loneliness has meant that she keeps thinking about her problems and sometimes they are blown out of proportion. Tanya remembered their first Eid and how they nearly missed celebrating it because they were so isolated. She felt very 'lonely' with 'no friends' and 'no support'. Henar talked about how suddenly she was in a new social environment where people did not have time to see each other regularly. She felt 'sad' and 'alone'. Salma had been a housewife back in her country and had a lot of support raising her children. Suddenly she became a single mother in exile, without any help and found this 'really difficult'. Rezan talked about the social gatherings back home and how all of that has been lost, she feels 'alone'. Shino misses her family and cries all the time. She feels 'lonely' and sometimes thinks she 'will go crazy'.

Two women talked about loss of employment. Naz was a teacher and now she's been paid to stay at home. She is 'not happy' and sometimes thinks she will 'go crazy'. Dila was very active back home, she did a few jobs at the same time and loved being active. She mentioned how her depression has been '70% due to not having a job', because this has made her 'doubt herself' and feel 'down'.

Two women talked about the loss of a relaxed way of life. Salma talked about being a housewife and then suddenly having to deal with forms and letters as well as the practical

daily things. She has found this 'extremely difficult'. Hana talked about how work places back home were 20-25 minutes away while now she spends four hours commuting to and from work every day. She has found working eight hours a day 'exhausting'.

Four women lost members of the family back home while they were in the UK. When Miriam's mother died, she got so 'depressed' that she gave up cleaning her house or cooking. She thought she would 'go crazy'. Naz still cries about her father's sudden death. This has been 'the worst news' in her life, she has felt 'awful'. Zara's brother died in his thirties. His death has 'affected' her most when she has been in exile. Dila's sister died and five years on, she still wears black. She got really 'depressed' and for a couple of years disappeared from the community altogether.

Six women talked about not being familiar with the system as a cause of stress. In some cases it lead to being exploited by others or at least given the wrong advice. Miriam found that there was no one to tell her 'what help and services were available'. This meant she had to rely on other people who sometimes gave her the wrong advice. Tanya motioned having 'no guidance' and having to find their way around on their own. Dila felt that in this country 'they house you in a hostel and forget about you'. She was offered wrong advice by members of the community. Zara regrets not knowing about libraries when she was living in a hostel with her children and kept having to take them to the park. She thought that here is 'no one to guide you and advise you'. Jhala was in a very weak position when she arrived and was 'manipulated' by a so called 'friend'. Hana felt that when you arrive 'you don't know anything' and 'you are at the mercy of others'.

In summary, eight of the women in this study talked freely about the effects of losses experienced at this early stage of migration i.e. status and employment, lack of social support, loss of a relaxed way of life, a family member back home and lack of knowledge about the services in the UK. These women felt isolated, lonely and depressed. They had low self esteem and felt exhausted, and several women thought they would go crazy.

## *Adaptational tasks*

Upon arriving in exile, refugees are typically overwhelmed by the number of new things they need to learn in order to settle down in their new environment. Initially, the challenges are to make a home, learn the language and either re-qualify or take training courses in order to find a job. The other tasks are socio-psychological such as becoming familiar with the system and the culture; this includes learning to behave appropriately, making friends and settling down.

Some of the participants felt very much overwhelmed by what they needed to achieve in order to settle down in the UK. Miriam talked about the exhaustion she experienced when she was a young single mother missing her family and had to achieve so much. She found the number of tasks she had to master overwhelming. She started a language course soon after she arrived but she couldn't progress as fast as she wanted because:

> I found the language very difficult, I found the city too big, I couldn't concentrate. I missed my family.

Hana ended up not doing anything for four months because she was missing her family and friends and she found the changes too many. Back home she was the last daughter who had just graduated from university and suddenly she was a newly married woman in London without any family of her own:

> ... everything was so different and new here.... you know, I mean.... it's like being in a state of depression. You can't be bothered to do anything.

This state of being overwhelmed and not having the energy to 'bother' with things may be common among asylum seekers. Common themes in the women's accounts of their adaptational tasks will now be identified.

### Becoming familiar with the new physical environment

Most of the women have come from Kurdish cities where there were no trains and undergrounds, and getting used to transport system was reported to be a significant challenge.

Jhala spoke about the difficulties of getting used to London. She was a well established lawyer back home and arrived in the UK in her late twenties, newly divorced. One of the things that made her feel overwhelmed was the vastness of London. She found the means of transport too complicated and for 'four months' she 'did not know how to use the tube or trains', she felt 'blind and hopeless.'

Tanya did not dare to 'go out on [her] own'. For the first few months she did not go out unless in the company of her husband. She kept feeling she would get lost and never find her way back.

Runak and Fadya came to the UK as older women in their fifties and sixties respectively. They found the buses and tubes impossible at first (see pages 174, 176). Fadya learnt sufficient English to get by but Runak experienced particular difficulties because she was illiterate. She depended on cues such as shops to know where to get off the buses. She also learnt to recognise the buses through the shapes of their numbers rather than through the numbers themselves.

In summary, getting used to city life was easier for the younger participants because they had more mastering of the language. In contrast, Runak continues to be reliant on buses for transport because she has not found a way of recognising the different tube stations.

### Accommodation

It is acknowledged that sometimes the housing situation for refugees is 'dreadful' (Wahlback, 1999) because council flats are often in very bad condition, and offer much smaller space than refugees are used to. When the respondents in this study were asked about their accommodation ten women talked about its negative effects on their lives.

Miriam who was a Kurdish fighter back home spent most of her life between the age of 13 to 17 living in the mountainous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Having lived in villages surrounded by mountains and cliffs, she found the hotel room in London unbearable. She described how the closed space stopped her singing:

> I used to sing, I had a good voice, after finishing work I would go to the mountain and sing.... since I've come here I have never sang again. I can't, it feels as if somebody is holding me by my throat when I try. Sometimes, I go to the park which is nice. Then I can at least try to sing a little... From the open sky and mountains and rivers I came to a room with a window which had a concrete wall right before it. I was supposed to be lucky though as I had my own toilet and bathroom.

The hotel room where Miriam initially stayed with her daughter was tiny. There was a tiny space next to her bed where she spread a duvet for her daughter to crawl upon. She cooked in the kitchen and kept running back to the room to check on her daughter. Before she came to the UK, Miriam's daughter was looked after by the peshmarga (Kurdish freedom fighters) who loved and pampered her. Suddenly, she had to look after her daughter alone, in a tiny space. She recalled how sometimes when she tried to get into the room her daughter was right behind the door and she could not get in. She was always scared that the 'door will hit her or that she will get trapped in there'. Having come straight from the mountains of Kurdistan, Miriam was also worried that her daughter would catch some disease especially because no light came into the room. In the room next to theirs there was a man who was very ill and Miriam, being only seventeen, was scared of 'passing by his room' especially because his door was always open and 'you could smell urine'. Later, when she left this hotel and was given accommodation, her new flat was 'decaying' from the inside although it looked fine from the outside. The walls were damp and ants were attacking everything. This constantly worried Miriam and she rarely had a good night's sleep. It was only after one year of living there that she became sufficiently familiar with the system to complain:

> They finally gave me another accommodation which was much better than the first one. It needed cleaning of course but it was a much newer flat...the previous flat was decaying.

Layla came with her two sons to join her husband who had been in London for two years. When they arrived, her husband abandoned them in a room and went to live elsewhere:

> It was very dirty with a single bed. There was another bed where the mattress had a hole and the bed itself had a hole so I and my younger son had to sleep on the single mattress. My older son used to sleep on the sofa. He (husband) had given us some cushions and two duvets without covers. The room itself was extremely dirty and full of hairs. Every day I would scrape loads of hair out from the carpet. It seemed that many single men had lived there without really cleaning it and the landlord too hadn't bothered with it. I felt like crying every day... my younger son was a very bad sleeper and many times he would kick me in his sleep. I spent many nights awake there.

Dila spent her first few months in a hostel that smelt really bad. She was then transferred to a better hostel where her sister was living. She stayed in the second hostel for two years and during this period she became depressed. What Dila found most difficult was sharing the bathroom and kitchen with others. She also found it difficult that some of the young women brought their boyfriends to the reception room for sex. Coming from a closed society and never having been married, Dila found this very difficult to cope with. She learnt to knock on the door before going into the reception. Dila pointed out that in hostels, where many strangers end up living together, sometimes things become complicated because of conflicts of interest. When she wanted to use the reception room and watch TV, someone else wanted to use it for a different purpose, and since neither of them owned the place sometimes there was uncertainty about who has the right to do what. Eventually, Dila was given 'proper' accommodation:

> The main reason why I was given accommodation faster was because I had severe depression. Also because I was older than the rest and I also worked voluntarily for them...I really believe that it's impossible to live happily in a hostel for more than

six months; it's like a hotel. If I had this place (her flat) from the start maybe I wouldn't have got so depressed and would've even worked.

Naz has two children and was nine months pregnant at the time of the interview. The family lives in a small one bedroom flat in North London and the tiny space has made her feel depressed. They have lived in this one bedroom accommodation for seven years. She pointed out that soon there will be five of them who live in a one bedroom flat. She got to a stage that she wanted to see a doctor about this; she was feeling very claustrophobic and down. She believes it has influenced her young daughter's growth:

> Till now my second daughter sleeps in her cot. She is five years old now, the cot is for three years maximum, she doesn't fit in it anymore. Many times she comes to sleep next to us on the double bed but now because I'm pregnant it's more difficult because she moves at night and sometimes kicks. I don't dare let her sleep next to me. Now her father sleeps in the sitting room, she sleeps in her sister's bed and her sister sleeps next to me. This one is a little older, she doesn't kick. This is one of the biggest problems in this country. Council properties are small and the workers are not very helpful. Both my husband and my daughter have asthma, they cough at night and wake the little one. I have seen a lawyer many times... we have been waiting to be housed for seven years.

Naz also talked about how having a small place affects their social life and how in contrast to back home, having guests can be extremely stressful:

> Sometimes you really want someone to visit you, you invite them, they come with their children and you have your own children. Trapped in this room and hallway our heads are about to explode yet we can't let them (the children) go and play outside for a minute.

Sheila was living in a small one bedroom flat with her husband, three children and her brother in law. When she gave birth to twin boys, they were then put into a hostel but this had its own difficulties because the whole family was crammed in two rooms. Each room had a few beds in it. The kitchen was downstairs and Sheila had to run up and down the

stairs when she was cooking because of her twin babies. The family stayed in the hostel for three months and Sheila was getting 'really exhausted'. After this, they were given a four-bedroom house and she is much happier now.

Fadya, who is in her early seventies, talked about the difficulties of sharing bathroom and toilet with others when she was living in a hotel room. Culturally people wash after using the toilet and Fadya found the hostel difficult because people did not 'pay attention' to cleanliness and left the toilet filthy. The shower was also full of hair and left in a mess. However, Fadya found the toilet seats much easier than the toilets back home where you have to squat. At her age this kind of toilet puts less strain on the knees and she preferred them to the ones back home 'conditioned on its being clean and not shared'.

Fadya also talked about the difficulties in gaining accommodation. She was housed in good permanent accommodation seven years after arrival. She explained how the last hotel room was full of insects. She had complained about this a number of times and once specialist people came and sprayed the room, but it did not seem to make much difference. There were also bed-bugs in the furniture; she and her daughter had many bites and were constantly scratching themselves. Fadya and her daughter were rehoused after a year and a half in these circumstances and only through hiring a lawyer and getting the Kurdish community organisations involved. The new accommodation was much cleaner but she had to climb 44 stairs to get to it and there were no lifts in the building. She fell from the stairs twice and it took four years and the efforts of her lawyer, doctor and Kurdish organisations before she and her daughter were rehoused again. She is now happy with her accommodation which is on the 12$^{th}$ floor of a block that has good lifts.

On the other hand, Salma with her two sons were immediately placed in a good hotel. She had her own toilet and kitchen and lived with her children in one big room. Five months later she was accommodated in a very old flat. The furniture and carpet in the flat were very old; I could smell them when I interviewed the family at this address. She told me how she has to keep a window open most of the time otherwise the room will stink. She has also had other problems with the flat. Last winter the boiler broke down and she had no heating or hot water for three months. She was 'going crazy phoning them all the time', referring to the council. She had to talk to a lawyer and complain that she has two young children and one of them has a kidney problem. The day before the matter came to court

the council sent five men to fix the boiler. She asked for compensation as she had been using electric heaters throughout the winter and they paid her £150 though she had spent much more.

Zara arrived with her two young children and ended up in a hotel soon after arriving. Her hotel managers were Egyptian but they refused to speak to her in Arabic. Her room was above the reception and the managers complained about the noise of her children running around:

> This period was awful because my window was right on the main street. When I opened the window the sound of the cars and the pollution gave me a headache but when I closed them it was too hot. I was sharing bathroom, toilet and kitchen with others. Some of them were very dirty. This went on for five months and it was the worst time I have had in this country.

Rezan lives in Hull and she talked about homes back home and how they are built on large surface areas. When arriving in Britain she was amazed how so many flats can be built on top of each other occupying a tiny area of 50 or 60 square metres. She compared her home here to back home:

> My kitchen is two to three metres squared. Back home my kitchen alone was the size of this house, my cellar was as big. But you feel such shrinking of surfaces here. My flat is very very old, I really dislike it and I have a young daughter but because of our low income we can't move and I have been here for the past four years. Where you live really affects your life, for example it affects your social life, you cannot have a couple of families around at the same time, the sitting room is tiny, the kitchen is tiny. You cannot do much in a small place like this.

Shino who has health problems reported that her accommodation is unsuitable to her health needs:

> I have a housing problem.. I have a problem with dampness, it's damp in the kitchen, the bathroom, the bedroom.. I'm unwell, how could they ignore this

dampness, it's really making me sick. If I close the door and window in the bedroom, the walls all sweat... this is how things are.

In summary, accommodation was reported to be a great source of stress. Firstly, all the participants had lived in houses with large gardens back in their home countries. This meant they experienced a sudden 'shrinking of surfaces' upon arrival in the UK which affected their mental and social life. Secondly, sharing the bathroom and toilet with others whilst in hotels, caused a lot of anxiety. Finally, but of equal importance, living in smelly, damp and dirty places had resulted in women feeling both anxious and very miserable. They were concerned about their own and their children's welfare.

### Learning the language

Researchers report that younger refugees find it easier to learn a new language compared to those who are older (Ghaffarian, 1998, and Lee, 1992). Depressed or traumatised individuals may also find it difficult to learn a new language because of the associated memory and concentration problems (Herbst, 1992). How fast a new language is picked up can also depend on the person's past education (Ghaffarian, 1998). Another factor that may also influence learning the language may be personality. Driven and determined personalities may manage better than others, though personality itself can be influenced by a woman's situation and experience (Saldaña, 1992:27). Some of the participants in this study came here hardly speaking any English, others were familiar with English and spoke a little, and only two women, Layla and Lana, were fluent before arrival. Not speaking the language was particularly difficult for those women who had been active or working back home and most of them reported a negative effect on their confidence and self esteem.

Henar learnt quickly because she was very young. She came here in her late teens feeling quite confident about her spoken English and was 'shocked' when she realised she 'didn't understand anything' and no one understood her because of her accent. This made her feel that she had to start from scratch:

I learnt reasonably quickly. After the first couple of months which were difficult I could do my own things like go to offices and official places... it was easier partly

> because I was used to hearing English words... I always listened to people on the road and in buses, this with the course helped me very much. I wasn't perfect and still had problems, I still do but I wasn't in the stage of not being able to manage my own things.

Tanya arrived in her late twenties. She came to London with her husband and two step children seven years ago speaking very little English. She described her fears about not speaking the language and being a stranger in a huge city. Initially, she was housebound for months, losing faith in herself:

> I knew a little bit of English through school but I could not speak at all. I was scared. I wouldn't answer the door... I went to college in the first month but I kept hoping that no one will ask me any questions or try to talk to me. I think it took me about six months to be able to go out on my own and have some faith in myself and if someone asked me for directions on the street I could either help or say that I didn't know. Then I was able to do shopping, and gradually I got better until I was able to answer the phone or the door.

Tanya found studying four hours a day was not enough to learn the language quickly. Also, two years after arriving she had a baby, quickly followed by another. This made it more difficult for her to attend classes regularly as she had less time to study.

Naz was in her late twenties and her learning English has also been interrupted by having babies. Her husband had lost his ex-wife and four children in the Anfal campaigns of the Iraqi government so he desperately wanted children and Naz was already pregnant when she arrived in London. She spoke a little English when she arrived as she was a teacher and had studied English one lesson a week in school. After arriving she studied in a college for two and a half months before she stopped to have her first baby. When her daughter was six months old she started studying English again, she went two afternoons a week when her husband looked after the baby while she was going to college. She complained that without much social interaction with English speakers it has been hard for her to improve her English by doing a course two afternoons a week:

> Sometimes I would go one day a week instead of two. As you know it's difficult when you have a baby and I used to breastfeed her. That year went by like that... Also because I had no social interaction it was more difficult to improve my English.

Naz was soon pregnant again and stopped classes to have her second baby. Going to college regularly became more difficult as her commitments increased.

In a similar situation, Sheila, who has been living in the UK for three years, studied English for a short while and then had complications during her pregnancy and stopped going to college. She was pregnant with twins in her early thirties and this was her fourth pregnancy:

> I didn't speak any English when I came here. I only went to college to learn English for one month so I still haven't learnt English... I would like to learn very much. I hope that when my children are a little older and when they don't need me so much then I can go to college and learn.

Dila came in her early forties. She was a very active and cheerful woman but became very depressed for long periods after she came here. She started learning English with great enthusiasm but not being able to work, having to learn a new language in her forties, not being familiar with the system and losing her beloved sister, got her down. Her attempts at learning English were interrupted by periods of depression when she was unable to do anything. Seven years on, she is still trying to become fluent English, in the hope of going to university:

> I'm doing another English language course. Learning the language is not easy. When I talk, I can tell when I'm making a mistake, it's awful. I was afraid to talk for ages and especially afraid of writing in English. I've become braver recently. I have exams in June. I hope to study if I can.

From my observations, I know one factor which has helped Dila improve her English proficiency is that she has many supportive English friends. She spends Christmas and

Easter with her friends and sometimes goes on holiday with them. This seems to have a positive influence on her ability to speak; she has 'become braver'.

In accordance with Herbst's (1992) findings, Salma, who arrived alone with her two sons, described how feeling stressed, depressed and desperate at times made it difficult for her to learn English:

> I was extremely slow and this was partly because I was so busy thinking about other things, my head was full and this slowed my learning down. I really couldn't concentrate on anything. Everything is interrelated, life is not easy here, you understand? Because of this I suffered from all sorts of problems including this mental state.

Zara was in a similar situation to Salma. She too had limited education back home and had come to England with her two sons. She had been prevented from getting conventional education by her father. Later during the Iraqi literacy campaign she learnt how to read and write (see Appendix 1, 20). The disadvantages she experienced back home made her very determined and she rushed a great deal to learn English (see page 197). Her enthusiasm for learning made her read every letter she received and to look up the words she did not know or she asked people. In this sense her positive and determined personality helped her learn reasonably quickly (Lengua and Stormshak, 2000):

> I tried so hard that I kept thinking the language course I was doing was not enough and I should do another one at the same time (laughing). I was in such a rush because I kept thinking four hours a week is nothing. The teacher knew that I was good so she told me that from September I should take a higher course.

Zara was a single mother at the time- her husband was only able to join them three years later - and there were obstacles to her language learning. Her younger son was just under four and not eligible for a full time nursery place. She was helped by the Kurdish Association as well as her son's nursery school which took her situation and requests into consideration and registered her son on a full-time basis. Zara's determination to learn

English is probably a good example of the immigrant's rush to build a better life for herself.

Halima who is in her mid-fifties had had a stroke on her way to Britain as a result of which her health is still affected. She very much wants to try to learn English but is not able to because of her health problems. Her ability to learn has also been impaired by leaving her children behind. This preoccupies her most of the time and slows her down (Herbst, 1992):

> I cannot go out regularly, especially if it is cold, I can't take it. If I could go my English would have improved very quickly. Sometimes I talk to the nurses. When I go to the doctors the nurses keep saying that I should depend on myself and talk to them directly but I tell them my English is not good. If I could of course I would use it, I know a little bit but I cannot have a conversation with anyone. I can do shopping... my brain is still quite good but my problems make it difficult for me to learn or to get better, especially my children. My main problem is my children, they are left behind back there.

Rezan was a lawyer back home with a reasonable knowledge of English. She found the language courses in Hull too basic and gave up going to them. The courses were targeted at complete beginners at the stage of 'this is an egg and this is an orange and good morning'. As a law student she had studied two subjects in English and eventually, she decided to teach herself English at home:

> I mostly depended on the dictionary, I found this better. When I went to college I found out that the level was very basic... I told them that I was a law graduate. I went for a couple of months and when I realised the level will not change, I felt I didn't need this so I started teaching myself at home. I was memorising words, mingling with people... I can't say I'm very good now but I can deal with my own needs. I had some English friends and I picked up many words from them. I wanted to learn obviously; even in Kurdistan I knew that English is a very useful language. I'm okay now.

Jhala suffered from racism from her teacher when she was doing an advanced English course (see section on discrimination, pages 223-224). These experiences affected Jhala so much that she lost interest in learning English altogether:

> Before this I had always thought learning English correctly is as important as driving competently and swimming, I believed it was an absolute necessity but through the classes I totally lost interest in the language. English became an enemy, I hated it. The first three years I learnt all the awful words, racist words, swear words. So I lost motivation.

In this sense different factors can influence how fast a person will learn a new language. In this study age, education, past history, present stressors, personality and experience of racism were all found to be factors that influence learning and motivation to learn. The participants pointed out that being depressed or stressed, having young children, bad health, lack of interaction with native speakers and discrimination can impede a person's progress in learning the language. Having difficulty learning English also affected self esteem and confidence so that they were afraid to talk in case they made a mistake (Tanya and Dila). Some participants have felt frustrated about the length of time it has taken to learn English (Naz). Those who spoke English when they came and those who learnt reasonably quickly (Henar and Zara) were generally happier about themselves and felt more confident.

### Education, training and requalifying

Stein (1986:15) talks about the refugee's 'impressive drive to recover what has been lost' in the first two years. This is when the person goes to school, changes jobs and moves house repeatedly, striving for a better life. However, realising that she cannot work in her own field or in the field she chooses means that her 'drive and determination wane, discouragement sets in and the refugee is resigned to the changes in {her} life and status' (Stein, 1986:15). Five of the women who took part in this research are graduates and five of them had completed Institutes of Higher Education which qualified them for employment in their different fields. Two of them were also secondary school students. Many of the women informants started studying in Britain so that they could find work. Some found this easier than others depending on their previous profession, age and current

circumstances. Those who were already graduates or practicing a profession back home found requalifying and finding a job in their own field more difficult than those who were younger or without employment back home.

Henar came in her late teens hoping to study journalism. She soon realised that journalism needs excellent English and is very competitive even for native speakers. She is now studying computers. She spoke about the difficulties she had adjusting to the British education system. It took her a long time to go to university; she studied English for a few months and then did an access course to give herself a better chance for going to university. Two months after starting the access course she stopped because she found it too difficult. She found the system very difficult because back home 'school involves knowing the books by heart and then taking exams' whereas here 'it involves researching and writing':

> I found assignments very difficult, I still find them difficult but I am a bit more used to them. That year I just couldn't do it and left it. The year after I went back and did the access course in another college. But because I didn't have asylum, I couldn't go to university so I waited that year.

Henar is now finishing her degree in computing. Even though she came at a young age, she still felt that she had to re-adjust her expectations when choosing her degree.

Zara has been in the country for three and a half years and she is constantly taking new courses and trying to get training in order to obtain work. She worked so hard that although she had achieved only basic education back home, she obtained a distinction in her Mathematics course. Besides preparing to study travel and tourism she also found out about interpreting courses. She was teased by her friends in college who said she had 'a complex' and wanted to collect certificates for as many courses as possible. Zara is devoting a lot of energy to gaining the right qualifications in order to find a job in the future.

Hana was a graduate of Economics and Administration. After learning English, she completed many courses. She did a course in business, another in technology, one in

banking and another in finance, and when she was still unable to find a job, she started a post graduate degree in Economics. After finishing this MA, she worked in a trading company but found this very difficult because the hours were long and the job was very stressful. After two years of working in this company she stopped and had a baby and sometimes worked as an interpreter. She now works part time in a Kurdish Community Centre, and although the work is not in her field she finds it less stressful. It has taken her over five years to settle down in a job.

As mentioned earlier, Jhala, who used to be a lawyer, enquired about requalifying but found out it would be like starting from scratch. Three years after she arrived, she started an MA in European Union law and it was only at this stage that she 'started having faith' in herself again. Jhala worked voluntarily as an interpreter for the Kurdish Community Centres and later as an elderly person's officer. She is currently doing another law course and though she has given up the idea of working as a lawyer in Britain, she hopes to use the knowledge back home (Iraqi Kurdistan) as she is planning to return when the situation is more stable.

Rezan was also a lawyer back home and now lives in Hull with her husband and young daughter. She too hoped to work in her own field but is finding this extremely difficult. She was told to become fluent in English and then try to requalify:

> I can't requalify. Even back home as you know lawyers have a different standard of language, you have to defend people, your language needs to be stronger than most people, you have to know all the jargon and legal tricks... here I'm at a very basic language level. I cannot imagine how I could go to court and defend a person in a language that's not my own, learn the laws all over again... I find this very difficult.

Layla came in her mid thirties. She taught English in a secondary school in Baghdad where teachers were very much respected and had authority. She found students rude and vulgar in London and that teachers have no power in the system. She then studied in the evenings for a postgraduate diploma and then an MA in translation and interpreting:

> I studied for the first year and started work as an interpreter. I was very confused for a while; I completed one year of the course but I didn't take the exam. I worked for a year as an interpreter. I was freelance. It was very difficult, they would pay me £10 per hour but some days I only had a couple of hours work and had to travel long distances to the place where I was needed. Most of my time was spent travelling. But I went back and finally took my exam.

These six participants have struggled to find relevant training or education courses and also to make the right choices about their careers. Zara and Rezan who are reasonably new in the country are still struggling with finding appropriate training courses to find employment. Both Layla and Jhala have had to change the course of their careers. Four of the above women have gone into great lengths to take courses and regain some of their lost status. This supports Stein's (1986) idea that refugees are determined to regain what has been lost. But, realising the difficulties associated with this means that they settle for something else and give up on their initial ambitions. Both Jhala and Rezan have given up on the idea of requalifying as lawyers, Henar is studying computers instead of journalism and Hana has a job unrelated to her qualifications and previous experience. Resigning 'to the changes in {her} life and status' (Stein, 1986:15) may be difficult to start with. But as time goes on, she realises that she has done the best she could in difficult circumstances. Jhala, for example, takes pride in her job.

### Finding work

Tang and O'Brien (1990) found that refugees who have lower status jobs compared to their past employment may suffer from depression and other psycho-social malfunctions (Tang and O'Brien, 1990:1446). As noted above (page 125), out of the nine previously employed women, only three of them are currently in paid employment. On the other hand, two of the women who were students back home are now employed. Finding work has been very difficult for some of the participants, especially those who came at a later stage in their lives. For example, Dila had worked for 25 years before coming to London, as PE teacher, tennis instructor and aid worker. She feels her biggest problem is obtaining work and has found not having a job very depressing. Dila believes that her age adds to the difficulties of finding employment. The only work available to her is physical labour, such as working in a factory or a supermarket, which she is not strong enough to do. She tried voluntary work

as a way to enter the system but reported that she was given 'very unimportant, trivial things' like being 'put on the reception desk at evenings in a place that hardly anyone visited'. Consequently she did not get the opportunity to improve her English of find a job.

According to Dila there are a number of reasons why people like her cannot find work in the UK: they have qualifications which are not recognised here; they have work experience in another country without any proof; and despite the capacity to speak many different languages, (Kurdish, Arabic and Torkman in her own case) a lack of fluency in English. She believes that people laugh about her insistence that she does have a lot of experience and has the right qualifications, simply because these were not obtained in Britain. Meanwhile, any qualification from here would be very much appreciated in Kurdistan and would carry a lot of credit. She has got very depressed thinking about these issues. Dila is determined to take more language courses and then go to university. She wants to do this just so that when she applies for a 'good job' she will not be told that she does not have the right qualifications, good command of English or experience:

> I wish that wish of mine would come true and I would have a proper job here even if for six months, to live off my own efforts. Just as my wish came true in seeing the flag of Kurdistan on the BBC (during the last gulf war). That was a dream come true, I wish this dream would also come true.

However, Dila also realises that time is not on her side, 'I may be a little old to do all the things I want'. She is in her early fifties.

After finishing the MA in European Union law, Jhala started working in a community centre. She was unsure that she would get the job when she applied for it:

> The MA itself wasn't as big an achievement for me as finding a good job was. This is how unconfident I was till then. Now that I am in the job I feel that I really undermined myself. I could have done this job a year after my arrival. It would have been difficult from the point of view of language but I would have managed. Sometimes, it is only when you enter the system that you realise you should've

aimed higher or that the system has undermined you. Having an accent is a problem as a foreigner when you apply for jobs.

Naz had graduated back home and then trained to become a teacher; her commitment to her profession was very evident (see Appendix 1, 12). She hoped to take up the same profession in the UK. She took some English courses and then enquired about the possibility of teaching. She was told that she needs to be fluent in English before trying to do anything else and she studied English for one more year. Her English improved but her grammar was still quite poor. After having her second baby she got depressed because she hated staying at home like that, without a job. After a while, when her baby was a little older, she became more enthusiastic about requalifying and teaching again. She then found out that she needed to get a university degree and then take up further training in order to be allowed to teach. Because of her family commitments and her age this was out of the question and she felt that her husband and children come first. Naz then found out about alternatives and the college advised her to take the Health and Social Care course as this would allow her to work as a classroom assistant. She liked the idea and decided to do the course because she 'like[d] working with children'. At the same time she started working voluntarily in a school as a classroom assistant. She finished her course and started looking for a job but unfortunately the law changed that year. As a result of some incidents involving assistant teachers, it was decided that more qualifications were required in order to become a classroom assistant. She was disappointed and stopped doing anything for a while. Then she sought further qualifications to become a nursery nurse because the classroom assistant course was not available in the college near her. Naz studied for four months and then went back home for a few months because she and her husband were feeling very homesick. Because of this trip, she lost that year. She then started working for a supply agency; she had to get a police disclosure and register with an agency to fill in for absent teachers every now and then. She needed two references and could only provide one from her previous voluntary work. Fortunately, the agency took account of her experience in raising two children and 'motherhood became a reference' for her. She was hoping that after a few months of doing this work, she would be able to find permanent work. However, she was offered work only four times in the course of a few months and felt that the money was unfairly divided; she was paid £28 and the agency took £22. Still she did not mind because she was hoping to find something permanent. Then she found out

through a friend that the classroom assistant course has started in the college near her. She signed up to do the course but found it very difficult. Naz tried very hard to do well in the course, she even had help from a friend who had completed the same course. However, a few months after starting, her teacher told her that she was not good enough to finish the course. She tried to argue that she had been interviewed by the college and they believed she was capable of doing this course and that is why she had started the course. She was annoyed that she had spent a few months working hard only to be told she was not good enough:

> It was sad because I worked so hard in those months... some nights I would be working until 12 in the night. Unfortunately, during this time our computer was broken so I couldn't do it on the computer and at least get a spell check done. So I handwrote everything. I would wait till the children slept at around 9 or ten, then I would start studying and doing my homework. My husband used to moan about me working so hard, he kept saying 'as if you are doing GCSEs'. I told him that even those men whose wives work don't moan as much. I worked really hard that's why when the teacher told me those things I was really hurt and left.

Despite all her efforts Naz still has not managed to find work. She survives on benefits and is very unhappy about this because she 'would rather work than sit at home and be paid'. Naz says, she was happy working.

Being able to work was a dominant theme in conversations with the women in this study. Those participants who worked in their home country and encountered difficulties finding employment in the UK, reported feeling frustrated, depressed and sometimes angry. Dila in particular felt sorry for herself for not having her past experience and skills validated, for not being believed and for having her culture devalued in relation to the UK. Meanwhile, Naz has tried many different training courses and further qualifications to become a nursery nurse which is close to her previous profession of teaching. She feels angry that her teacher discouraged her from completing the course; she has been disappointed time and again. Jhala now works and realises that she undermined herself while she was looking for a job. While working may not mean better financial status, it was preferable to living off benefits which made both Dila and Naz feel devalued and useless.

### Exploitation: working in the black market

Some of the participants coped with the difficulties of finding work by working in the black market to pay off their debts or to support their families back home. Some have worked in the hope of saving up to study or to build a better future. They ended up doing physical labour for very little money and many times they were abused by their employers.

Jhala had acquired some debts from her journey. She needed to start thinking of paying them back. She first applied to work in McDonalds and other such restaurants but was not accepted. Eventually she started working in a coffee shop illegally. The sheer physical labour 'emotionally and mentally exhausted' her, she knew all the time that the job did not suit her. But on top of that the exhaustion drained her so much that it left her 'no energy to learn and study'. She believes that carrying out such work affected her mental abilities, it slowed her down dramatically. She also got depressed about the environment as her boss and the other colleagues were not good to her, she was being undermined all the time:

> When you agree to do such primitive physical work you also lose faith in yourself and your future opportunities. It sets a standard for you. But of course this is unavoidable because as an asylum seeker you don't have much of an income, you need to work to have a slightly better standard of life. The employers in the black market exploit people. It really resembles relationship between slave and master... The fact that employers actually know that you are educated, they constantly try to undermine you, they have complexes and they know that you don't know much about how things work in the market, that you are probably academically excellent but don't know about how such jobs work so they take advantage.

Leena was recently divorced and came to the UK as a European citizen. She had to wait to receive a National Insurance Number (NIN) before she could work legally. In the meantime to avoid staying at home and thinking about things too much she started working in a flower shop illegally but hated the work; she had a much better job in Sweden and found her new job and position very difficult:

> I had to work very hard for very little money and felt exploited. Then I got the NIN and started working properly.

O the other hand, Dila felt lucky as she started working in an Iranian restaurant. She began by saying that most people get humiliated in the black market but she was fortunate to work in a place where she was being treated well. Her employer was a woman of a similar age and Dila had a good relationship with her. She worked in the kitchen making salads, preparing vegetables and washing the dishes. Although Dila had had important jobs back home, she did not mind working in a kitchen. The problem started when her legs started hurting, she was in her late forties, her days were very long and she spent many hours standing. She needed money because she had debts to pay back and also needed to support her sister back home who had cancer. She was generally poor and for the first six months she could not afford to buy any clothes for herself; she had two sets of clothes which she kept washing and wearing again. She had a T-Shirt which was given to her and she wore it without realising what was written on it: 'Look but don't touch'. She had to stop wearing it. Working in the restaurant for a few months gave her the opportunity to spend £100 on clothes and underwear. Eventually, she had to stop working because of the problem with her legs.

Some refugees work in the black market because of desperation and debt. In the black market they get exploited, working long hours for very little money, and if they encounter problems in their work place they cannot report them to anyone. Three women in this study talked about working in the black market. Two of them felt exploited by their bosses and one of them felt that by working in a place like that she lost faith in herself because she set herself such a low standard. Two of the women found the physical labour exhausting. Still, working in the black market can be useful for some people (e.g. Dila) who have no other means of working legally.

### Single-motherhood

Five of the women came to Britain as single mothers or became single mothers when they came here. They all reported that this was more difficult than being a single mother back home where they had access to help from family, friends and neighbours and were familiar with the system. Arriving in the UK as single mothers, they had many more tasks to do in order to look after their children, such as finding appropriate schools, taking them to school every day, and looking after all of them when one of them fell ill. Some examples of the difficulties are given below.

Layla came to follow her husband, but was immediately abandoned by him and had to look after her children alone. She had been a single mother back home for two years but that was much easier. Fortunately, Layla spoke English, unlike most of the other women in the study. She remained in the room where her husband had left them for a couple of months until she discovered that she could apply for accommodation through the council. She was then placed in a hostel where she met other people and asked them about schools for her two sons. Her older son was accepted in a school nearby but the younger one's school was a long way away. She had to take a bus and then there was a 25 minute walk from the end of the bus route. She complained that she could not manage this every day, she had to cook and look after both of them and try to take some courses at the same time. A few months later she found a closer school and this made her life much easier.

Miriam was newly separated when she came with her daughter who was six months old. When she arrived here, she did not know how to raise her child. Miriam seems to feel constantly guilty about things she should have done but did not know. For example, her daughter was nine months old and she had never given her any water not knowing that she was supposed to. One day she came in to see a friend giving her daughter water and she said to her friend 'don't please, don't give her water'. Her friend turned to her with surprise saying, 'Don't tell me that you never give her any water'. She had spent most of her time from the age of thirteen in the mountains with other peshmarga so she never learnt what she was supposed to do:

> How does one learn these things? It's either through other people who know about it or through books; I had access to neither. And I was only seventeen.

She felt stressed when her daughter fell ill and her friends were too busy to help her. Her daughter had an uneven skull so she took her to the doctor in London. After examination the doctor told her that her daughter's skull does not seem to be growing and this terrified Miriam. At the time she still did not speak English and depended on friends for interpreting. She is still very hurt remembering how her friend made a big fuss about coming to the hospital with her to find out what is wrong with her daughter. This was mainly because her friend was learning how to drive and working at the same time and was

reluctant to give time to help her. Miriam kept thinking 'Does this mean that her lesson is more important to her than my daughter's life?' She also feels extremely guilty that she started taking language classes too early and let her daughter be looked after by others. She keeps feeling that she should have looked after her daughter herself because her daughter was:

> ... a little baby who does not have a father, relatives, cousins, only her mother, and the mother leaves her to pursue other things. I was stupid.

Despite all the guilt Miriam feels, her daughter seems to be a calm young girl who is very close to her mother. Most of the time, during the interview, she sat leaning on Miriam, smiling and looking as if she had heard all these stories before.

Salma's husband was affiliated with the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and he fled to Iraq. She had to leave Iran with her two sons because they were at risk of being targeted by the authorities due to her husband's involvements. She arrived with her sons aged five and eight years, speaking no English. The Kurdish Association helped her find a school for her children but she realised that her older son has problems doing his homework. The younger one settled down much sooner and started learning with everyone else, but the older one had fallen behind. He could not speak and could not do his homework. She herself was unable to help him and felt useless:

> There was no one to help my older son with his homework except from his teacher... I went to see her a few times. I didn't speak English so I took a woman friend from Iran who interpreted for me. I wanted to find out how he was doing. I was very concerned about him at the beginning, he was very shy and moving from one language to another, from one culture to another is really difficult for children of that age.

Salma reported crying a lot when her children went to bed. She did not want them to feel depressed or anxious. She was particularly concerned about her first son, not only because of the difficulties of settling in but also because he missed his father very much and kept asking her whether his father would be coming. This was particularly difficult because they

could not even get in touch with her husband and the son could not even talk to him to be reassured. He also missed his friends and found it difficult to make friends in the new school. Having studied for a few years in Iran, he found the new education system very difficult. It was only through the good teacher's support that he managed to pull through.

Zara arrived in Dover in a similar situation. Her sons were six and four years old. She was allocated a hostel in London and soon tried to find out about schooling for her children. She talked to some Kurdish people who were living in the hostel and had been in the country longer than her. A Kurdish woman was taking her children to a school nearby and told Zara to try that same school for her children (see page 204). This school was fully booked because it was near the end of the academic year, but they gave her the address of another school. Zara then found the school by asking people for directions and then she talked to them with her broken English. She was not shy about talking, she communicated with them and her children were accepted. She met Salma through this school. Her six year old started school full-time but the younger one was accepted on part-time basis, from nine to eleven thirty every day. The process of getting the children to and from their schools was complicated:

> I couldn't leave my children in the hostel even for a few minutes. Twice a day I had to take my little one out, first I took him to school and then brought him back. Then the second time to get my older son. We did all of this on foot. Then I finally got a pram for toddlers.... The hostel was on a main road and the journeys were through a lot of traffic. I think this is why my little son developed asthma soon afterwards. It was so bad (she smiles) that although he was very young, he would complain and say: Why do you bring me with you every day? Don't you know I find this journey annoying? (She laughs). Although he was just talking, he really expressed his annoyance. I told him that there was nothing I could do. I just couldn't leave him in the hostel even for a few minutes. Even when I did shopping, I had to take them with me. Throughout that cold winter, I had to wrap them up in clothes and take them with me.

Being on her own meant that Zara had to entertain them all the time. Living in a small room in the hostel, they constantly got bored and wanted to be taken out. Zara ended up taking them out to the park every day, in the wind and rain. She got to know all the parks:

> Whether I was ill or had a headache or tired, they didn't care, they expected me to stay there.

Sometimes, whilst they played and ran around, she wept quietly. She felt lonely and exhausted. She had a cousin, a young man who was a student and rented a room with other students. Every time her children saw him they wanted to go to his place, they did not like the hostel. It was particularly difficult for them because their room was above the reception and Zara had to keep reminding them not to run around and not to make too much noise. The children were constantly restricted and unused to the tiny space. The only time Zara had to deal with practicalities like shopping was when the children were in school and when school finished she had to entertain them constantly.

Zara also pointed out how, with her husband being absent, she had to look after herself to avoid falling ill. She constantly worried about this and knew that if she fell ill there would be no one to look after her children nor to make her a 'bowl of soup'. Her younger son developed asthma and once she had to take him to hospital by ambulance. On this occasion she had to wake her older son and take him to her friend Salma's in the same ambulance that was taking her younger son to hospital:

> These were very difficult times. I kept praying that they wouldn't fall ill at night because if one of them was ill, I didn't know what to do with the other one. I was worried because Salma may not be at home each time this happens. During the day whenever one of them was ill, I immediately took them to the emergency doctor. I didn't want it to get worse through the night. Of course in the emergency section you may end up waiting for hours but I preferred that to nights. If my husband was around, he could have looked after the other one, he would've been with me, I wouldn't have been alone.

Zara also developed a fear of losing her children. When she was new in the country, some people warned her that sometimes young children are kidnapped. She was constantly looking out for them and losing sight of them for one minute would make her 'panic'. Even now, when their father takes them out, she constantly tells him to look after them and be careful. Once her husband got angry and said: 'Do you think I won't look after them?' She then explained that it was not about him, it is just that: 'This country is like the sea, when you lose something or someone you will never find them again.'

While being a single parent can be difficult for anyone at any stage of their lives, it is particularly difficult for women who are asylum seekers. This is mainly because they are cut off from their familiar environment and deprived of support provided by extended family and friends. Language and cultural barriers play an important role in further complicating their lives. The participants reported feeling exhausted, lonely and anxious about their children. Some of them also felt guilty for leaving their children to be looked after by others, for having to work. Some of these women only survived this period in their lives with enormous courage, determination and hard work. No matter how awful they felt, they tried to keep their children happy, to take them out and pretend that everything was okay. Finding schools, helping their children settle down, entertaining and looking after them are only part of the first stage of getting used to their new roles as sole caregivers for their children. Below (pages 167-171) I will explore the further problems that women encounter while raising their children in exile.

### Conclusion about adaptation

Two of the participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the sheer range of things they needed to get used to and the tasks they had to perform in order to settle down. Miriam found the language 'too difficult' and the city 'too big'. She 'missed' her family and could not concentrate. Hana said everything was 'different and new' and she lost motivation to do anything. It was like being 'in a state of depression'.

Four women found the new physical environment difficult to adjust to. Jhala was shocked by the vastness of London, she found getting around 'too complicated'. Tanya did not dare to go out alone, she lost confidence in herself. Fadya and Runak had difficulty finding their

way around because of being older and having literacy problems. It took time to learn how to identify and use the buses and their routes.

Ten women talked about the affect of accommodation on their happiness and well-being. Living in a tiny space made Miriam incapable of singing, she felt inhibited and claustrophobic. Rezan pointed out that living in a small flat had a negative influence on her social life, she could not accommodate two families at the same time and could not invite guests like she used to back home. Naz also lives in a tiny one bedroom flat with her husband and two young children and her daughter still sleeps in her cot even though she is five years old now. Another reported problem was living in 'dirty', 'smelly' and 'decaying' homes. Layla felt like crying every day because her first accommodation was extremely dirty. Salma's place smells because the furniture and the carpet are too old. Living in a flat which was 'decaying' made Miriam sleepless, she lost her appetite and was worried about her young daughter's health. Four women talked about the difficulties of living in shared accommodation. Fadya who is elderly found sharing a bathroom and kitchen particularly difficult. Dila complained about lack of privacy in these environments and how sometimes there is confusion about who has the right to do what in the shared spaces such as kitchen and reception room. Sheila had to cook on the ground floor and keep an eye on her children upstairs, she was feeling exhausted. Zara and her two sons lived in a room above the reception and the hotel managers kept complaining that her children were making too much noise.

Eight women complained about the difficulties of learning a new language due to their age, status and gender roles. Sheila, Naz and Tanya had young children who needed constant caring for. Zara reported that becoming a single mother meant having less time to attend classes and to study. Salma and Dila's memory and concentration problems, due to depression, impeded learning. Dila also found learning difficult because of her age. Hailma's age and health problems led to being isolated and not being able to attend classes. Racism made Jhala lose motivation in learning while Naz pointed out that a lack of social interaction with English speakers delayed learning. Rezan who lives in Hull had to teach herself because the English courses were directed at total beginners. Being young (Henar), having a determined personality (Zara), and social interaction with native speakers (Dila) seem to help learning.

Six women have talked about the education and training courses they have undertaken in order to find work. Both Jhala and Rezan who are lawyers by profession have been unable to requalify because the process is lengthy and it involves speaking excellent English. Both women feel they are not young anymore and there is no point requalifying if they cannot find work later. Rezan has become a housewife and Jhala is working in a community centre. Not speaking fluent English also made Henar change the course of her studies and she now studies computing instead of journalism. Hana was confused when she arrived and lacked direction. She did an MA and took some courses but now works in a community centre. Zara also seems to be taking different courses, ranging from interpreting, to Mathematics, and computers. She hopes to find work through these courses. Layla has changed the course of her career by choice.

Three participants have talked about the negative influences of not finding work. Dila and Naz have found not having a job 'depressing' and Jhala who now works has realised that she constantly 'undermined' herself and her abilities before she found work.

Three women reported having worked in the black market. Jhala and Leena felt very 'exploited', working very hard for very little money. Jhala also talked about 'losing faith' in herself and 'future opportunities' when she was doing this work. Dila on the other hand had good employers and was happy to have some extra cash to buy herself clothes and help her ill sister. However, she developed leg pain because of standing on her feet for long hours and had to give it up.

Four women arrived here as single mothers. Layla had to ask people about where to take her children to school. She had to take them to school every day and found this difficult when she was trying to take courses at the same time. However, she was better off than most people as she spoke English. Miriam was a young single mother and 'didn't know how to look after' her baby daughter. She feels guilty and thinks she has been a bad mother, especially because she spent a couple of days a week learning English and her daughter was looked after by others. Salma worried about her older son in particular because he found it more difficult to adjust. He was struggling with homework and she felt guilty because she was not able to help him. Zara also found taking her children to school every day exhausting. She was particularly stressed if one of them was ill because she did

not know 'what to do with the other one' and was constantly worried about falling ill herself. She also felt exhausted having to entertain her children every day.

In summary, a total of sixteen women spoke about the difficulties they encountered in adapting to the new environment, and also the psychological impacts upon them which included feeling overwhelmed, depressed, tearful and undermined.

## Gender relations and family life

The problems associated with migration do not end. So far I have spoken only of the first phase of these problems, but even when a person's legal status is determined, when she comes to terms with her losses and adapts, there are problems of a different kind. Migration can lead to major changes in women's lives but this leads to other complications. Some of the changes may be negative, like losing a sense of belonging to a larger community, but some are positive such as having more opportunities, studying and working. I will now describe what the women in this study had to say about the ways in which these changes influenced, changed and sometimes reversed the power relationships in their lives.

### *Married women*

There is evidence that employment opportunities for women may lead to role reversals that can complicate a woman's relationship with her husband (Bylund, 1992, Weber, 1998). Hana, who came here because she married a man who was well established in the UK, seems to be aware of the potential complications. During her first few months she felt very lonely because he worked 50-60 hours a week. Although her husband did not expect her to stay at home and encouraged her to take courses, to get a job and be successful, he hardly ever took time off work in order to help her adjust to her new life. He did not help her learn English but expected her to learn quickly and get on with her life. Hana stated that some men want their wives to be successful because they want a trophy to show off. However, she believed that they will neither help their wives to succeed nor will they like it if she becomes more successful than themselves. She seemed to imply that if the woman did

become very successful, her husband may try to stop her. Hana herself is not career orientated and ambitious since becoming a mother and this appears to suit her husband as well and keep their relationship stable.

Tanya's story, on the other hand, is very different. Her husband was a well known doctor back home. Now he is not working and spends most of his time at home. Both times that I went to speak to her he was at home and sat with us throughout the interviews. Tanya had married her husband in difficult circumstances: he had just lost his wife and had two young children. She was experiencing troubles in her own life so when he proposed to her she hastily agreed and together they came to the UK. Tanya did not have time to take language courses. She then had two babies of her own and spent many years at home looking after them and her stepchildren. When I first met her, she asked me whether I had any children and when I said I did not, she said that was good. She advised me not to have any children because this would delay all my projects. She then said she wished she was young enough to do A-Levels as she would work hard and achieve many things. Tanya and her husband have had many problems and twice they nearly separated. The main reason why they have stayed together is their children. Part of Tanya's problem is caused by her husband's inability to work whilst Tanya has many ambitions and this makes her husband feel insecure. Once, while talking on the phone, she quickly told me that her husband has not been supportive of her working and studying. She did not want me to ask her any questions about this when he was around and suggested meeting in her college to talk freely. On my second visit after I interviewed her about arriving in exile and her initial difficulties, her husband told me off and became quite aggressive. He told me that no one would agree to my going into their homes, asking their wives private questions and recording their voice. I explained that if Tanya does not want to take part I could give them the tape and forget about her contribution. She tried to mediate between us and said it is okay and that she had agreed to take part. When I left them that day, she came to the door to say goodbye and whispered, 'don't worry about him, he is paranoid.' She confirmed that she would like to meet me at some stage on her own, something that her husband did not approve of. After much thought I decided not to meet Tanya again as I felt that any further contact with me would create problems for her with her husband. I have not seen her since, but I know through a mutual friend that she is unhappy and is being restricted by her husband. She feels that her husband wanted children because he wanted to 'tie' her hands not because he wants children. Tanya's situation is an example of the kind of changes that emerge when in

a new environment a woman wants to take advantage of the opportunities now available to her, while her husband, who may have lost his own status, feels threatened by this.

I wanted to interview a friend, Baran, who is a doctor and whose husband used to be a very successful lawyer back home. Unfortunately, she did not agree to take part in this research because she is very busy and also because she did not want to talk about her problems. She has been able to work here and her husband has been looking after the children. Although her husband is very supportive, and would never stop her from working, he is depressed because he has become 'a house husband'. His perception of himself as economically useless has influenced their relationship in many ways. For example, he does not feel comfortable buying clothes for himself because he always thinks of the money as his wife's money. The family have had many problems because of his unhappiness and currently, since the fall of Saddam's regime, he is thinking about going home for good. This is something his wife is uncertain about because she feels the country is still not stable enough; she does not want to take her children back without having guarantees for their safety and for good schooling. He may go home when their last child becomes a full time student, and Baran feels that she cannot ask him to stay because he is very unhappy living in the UK. Although their relationship is good, his going away may make things more complicated and they cannot make up their minds about what to do.

Salma used to be a housewife and in Iranian Kurdistan she was helped by her family, particularly her husband who even did the shopping for her. She arrived in the UK three years before he did, and now speaks English and is taking courses while he is struggling and experiencing culture shock. Salma experienced many difficulties and was depressed for a long time before her husband arrived. I then asked her whether things had become easier since her husband arrived. She smiled a disappointed smile and said:

> Ehh (she laughs) what can I say? (I smile sympathetically). In some ways, because he doesn't speak the language, everything is still on my shoulders, even his needs and requirements... I have to do everything myself, everything is in my name and I have to interpret for him (she laughs quietly). In some other ways it's great that he's come for myself and the children. We are happier and feel more secure but in other ways it's difficult for me. He's really new.

In this sense, he has become another burden for her. She then showed me the Jobseeker's Allowance form which she had to fill in for him. Before her husband came she imagined that things would become much easier. Now that he is here, he is very much dependant on her and neither of them are used to this. She seemed a little disappointed.

Women, who as a result of migration, have aspirations to study or work might be reversing the previous power structure within the family where the man was the main provider. Even in those cases where both partners were in paid work back home, the fact that the man may not find work in exile complicates life. The man may be unhappy and feel sorry for himself. He may try to restrict his wife and feel threatened by her success. In either case, this affects their happiness together and it may lead to further complications in life.

## *Mothers*

Bank-Wallace and Parks (2001) stress that protecting, nurturing and preparing children to be active members in the society are central maternal responsibilities. Migration can further complicate the role of women as mothers. If previously mothers were the main care provider for their children within a circle of carers, in exile they become the sole carer. This includes practical as well as cultural matters. This transformation from being an important figure in a network of carers for children to being the only carer creates great pressure for these women. Fadya talked very clearly about co-caring for children when she was back home:

> If my neighbour went somewhere she would leave her children with me until she came back... it wasn't just me doing it, we were all doing this... We never differentiated between their children and our own. We took part in raising them.

In exile, however, many of the young mothers end up without any support in raising their children even when they do have family around. For example, Hana has her parents, sister, brother and her husband in London. She also has some cousins and their families. Yet, she never gets the support that families would give each other back home. She has found motherhood very stressful (see page 121) and although she wants to have another child, she cannot see herself coping. Hana expressed her frustration at the fact that, unlike back

home, having a large family around does not amount to having help with raising your child. This is mainly because 'everyone is busy... even when they are not working'. She talked about her mother and aunt who do not work but spend most of their time doing their own daily chores. Shopping, for example, has become more complicated, according to Hana. To do their shopping 'they have to go a long way to get to the shops', especially because 'people from our culture like their food and want their special ingredients'. This is why they go out of their way to get these things and cook their traditional food. Her mother, Hana explained, has more responsibilities now. Back home, she never bothered with shopping as her husband dealt with it but now she has to travel long distances to satisfy her needs. Consequently, her mother does not have time to help in raising her granddaughter. Hana's experience with motherhood has been really difficult and she is also aware of not being able to help her parents because she is very busy with her own life:

> At the moment I have lots of problems with my daughter. When I want to go out with my husband, or when I need to visit a friend in hospital, I don't know where to leave her... so you feel sad, you feel sad because there are so many of your family and relatives around you and no one can do anything to help you. Nor can you help them. It's depressing.

Mothers also worry about passing on culturally important values to their children. Dasgupta (1998) in her study with Asian Indian people pointed out that the maintenance of traditions and identity have historically been placed on women's shoulders. As keepers of tradition, women struggle to pass on their culture to their children. Bank-Wallace and Parks (2001) also point out that the extra energy women spend to protect their children from possible racism and other problems while living in a dominant culture, causes stress and exhaustion. Soon after their children start school, the women realise that the children are becoming anglicised very quickly and that as their English improves their Kurdish deteriorates. When the children settle down in school and get familiar with the new codes of conduct, their cultural values start shifting towards western. Mother tongue can be a problem for some Kurdish children who live in the West and many families take their children to weekend schools in order to learn how to read and write in Kurdish. Indeed, four of the seven women whose children are of schooling age take their children to weekend Kurdish schools. Layla's sons are now both in their early twenties. They speak

fluent Kurdish and can read and write. During one of my conversations with her she told me how difficult it was to convey some values of the Kurdish culture to her children. She took her children to the Kurdish school every Saturday for a few years. This meant that she had to give up her days off, days when she could have socialised, in order to ensure her children spoke proper Kurdish and were able to read and write. The school was good because they had a music teacher who taught them Kurdish hymns and they were able to mingle with other Kurdish children and meet other adults.

Salma and Zara have adopted a similar strategy. I met both of them in a Kurdish school that is managed by one of the Kurdish community centres. The women come to the location and often stay around all day, talking to each other, helping each other do their homework and generally chatting and having a laugh while their children learn Kurdish. Some families come and drop their children in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon. When I first met Salma and Zara I asked them why they thought it necessary to bring their children to the school. They both agreed that if they did not, their children would end up talking solely in English. Tanya's children also went to a Kurdish school. In order to make sure his children learnt Kurdish their father, who is a doctor by profession, started teaching in the Saturday school. The older two are both capable of writing letters in Kurdish to their uncles and aunts. Zara discovered that there are many children's books in English so, to counterbalance the dominant stories and language, she contacted her family and they sent her a few Kurdish storybooks. All three families also have access to Kurdish satellite television channels which helps their children keep in touch with their home culture.

Another area for potential problems is religion: it requires a lot of effort from families to bring up their children as Muslims in a non-Islamic culture. Many of the women in this study celebrate Christmas because they do not want their children to be deprived of it. At the same time, celebrating Eid has become more difficult. Traditionally on Eid all the family gets together, wearing their new clothes, cooking a feast for breakfast, kissing each other and giving the children jejnana, which is money to buy whatever they like. On these days there are also funfairs in every neighbourhood, and neighbours and relatives visit each other. It is hard to keep the traditions going when the large family is not there anymore and the funfairs and neighbourhoods are not the same. Still, many Kurdish families keep up the routine of celebrating Eid, cooking a big meal for breakfast and instead of visiting each

other, they ring each other to say happy Eid. The satellite channels are a great help again because special programmes are put on for Eid and the images of people celebrating back home are brought to everyone's homes. Some families may insist that their children learn to pray and read the Qura'n. In such cases the parents find an Imam that may be able to educate their children. None of the women I have interviewed have gone into so much detail. They do, however, want their children to think of themselves as Muslim, know about the general rules, not eat pork and celebrate the Islamic occasions. Tanya pointed this out when she said:

> They know we are Muslim, they know about the Islamic fiestas. They know some of the short verses of Qura'n. At the Kurdish school they were even taught how to do ablution before prayer. They also know that Muslims shouldn't drink alcohol. In the last few years more members of the family have come over so we get together, the children speak in Kurdish, say 'Jajin pirzor be'. They like Kurdish events and parties.

Some mothers are also greatly concerned about their children's sexuality. This is particularly true if the family has daughters rather than sons. Within the Kurdish community it is not shameful if someone's son has a girlfriend, but it is a great taboo if their daughter is perceived to have a relationship or be sexually active. I shall come back to this point in the section talking about young women (pages 180-190).

Kurdish language and identity may become even more significant for people who intermarry. Lana who does not have any children is married to an English man. She talked about wanting her child to be Kurdish and how difficult that may be. She pointed out that she would rather have her children looked after by a Kurdish woman, preferably her own mother, than send them to nursery in the UK. This is particularly because, 'My language is very important to me; I want my child to speak my language' Lana said. She also wants her children to have a similar upbringing to herself, inheriting the same values. Lana then talked about the difficulties of raising a child the Kurdish way. 'This is a difficult society to bring up children', she said. This is particularly because the children 'will be leaning towards the western culture' rather than the Kurdish. Lana does not want her children to take on some of the codes of this society, for example, she does not want her daughters to

have boyfriends when they are too young, to smoke or take drugs. Lana is also very close to her family and likes her children to value family and respect the elderly, values which she thinks are missing in British culture. Although Lana has married an English man, she said that she wanted her children to be 'Kurdish first and then English' with a Kurdish name. The main reason for this, according to Lana, is that she does not have her own nation state and in this sense she needs a stronger identity than her husband. This seems to me to be making an important point; the weaker identity has a stronger will to survive. From her perspective Kurdish identity is endangered but English identity is not:

> He [her husband] doesn't need an identity. He has his powerful country, I don't. I don't have an identity as such so I need to have children and raise them Kurdish. I feel strongly about these issues, he doesn't that much.

Lana is particularly happy that her husband understands what she wants and accepts it. The issue of maintaining a strong identity is more important in this community because their identity has constantly been threatened throughout history. This may be another reason why intermarriages are frowned on. When I married an English man there was a lot of disapproval from the community. Some people had said 'what a shame, from such a patriotic father comes a daughter that abandons her Kurdish identity'. This is almost more important than religious differences for some individuals within the community. The pressure is also more focused upon young women because they are expected to continue and transfer cultural values.

Mothers struggle on their own, trying to pass on their language, culture and religion to their children in the face of a dominant society which exerts its own pressures on the children. The dominant society, with its schools and media, its storybooks and celebrations of Christmas, with its liberal values about the rights of children over their parents, has seductive qualities for immigrant children. They experience a move from the strict Kurdish schools where pupils are not allowed to talk during lessons to the freer and sometimes chaotic schools of the UK, from strict family values to a more relaxed outside world, and from a language (Kurdish) that is spoken by a small number of people in their immediate surroundings to another (English) which dominates their education, friendships and

entertainment. This is why mothers need to work harder if they want their children to preserve their Kurdish identity.

## *Abused women*

Two women in this research talked about experiencing abuse at the hands of their husbands. This was more difficult for Leena because she was very young and did not have any family who could help her deal with the abuse. In contrast, Layla felt empowered by being away from the community and being able to leave the man without any interference. Soon after arriving in London, Layla (see Appendix 1, 8) found out that her husband was buying a place elsewhere though he kept denying this. He also lied about being away on a training course and when she confronted him about his lies he got really angry:

> I told him all of this. He got furious and called me a bitch for opening his post. I told him it was my right to know. He got up and beat me. The children were not back yet. He had beaten me once before back home. He was always very bad tempered and controlling, so I just used to avoid him when he was angry. Also, when we were back home he didn't dare to beat me lots because we had family and relatives who could sort him out but I guess he thought I was alone and hopeless here. He picked up my big dictionary and threw it at my head. I still have a bump on this side of my head. Then he attacked me, kicking me on the floor. I started bleeding although my period wasn't due.

Layla realised her husband was having an affair and wanted to buy a property to move in with his new girlfriend. He denied this many times yet he did not want to move back with them or take any responsibility for his children. After she was beaten by him a few times, she saw a doctor who encouraged her to file for a divorce:

> He knocked at the door, I didn't open it immediately so he started kicking the door and when I opened it he started kicking and slapping me for not opening the door to him. Then he dragged me by my hair to the phone and said if you are brave, call the police. I was so furious I took my slippers off and started hitting him back with it. I shouted that he had learnt from childhood that he needed to be beaten by slippers

> before he's disciplined. I had only kept him until then because he was the father of my children. I slapped him on his face a few times. Then I went to the lawyer... This is when I went to a lawyer and he got me an injunction which forbade him to come.

Layla had to make this decision on her own; she realised that the situation was getting worse and finally decided to end her bad marriage. After the injunction her husband did not bother her so much, though he did come and see his children a few times. He spoke to them and tried to gain their sympathy by saying that their mother was throwing him out; it took the children a while to realise what was happening. Although Layla went ahead with her decision she did not talk about it with anyone for a long time. Even when her younger brother came to visit her she did not tell him that she was getting divorced; she said she did not want to bother anyone. It is possible that she also remained quiet because she did not want her brother to interfere or try to get them back together.

Leena, who used to live with her ex-husband in Sweden, was also in an extremely abusive relationship for seven years. Many times her husband threatened to cut her to pieces and throw her into the river if she ever attempted to leave him. Once she was six months pregnant when he started beating her and she subsequently lost the baby. Still, Leena said to me, she did not want to be unfair about him as there were times that he was good to her and they were happy. The dynamics of their relationship resembled what researchers have called the 'circle of violence' (Dutton, 1992). Leena who had no family in Sweden stayed with her husband until members of her family arrived in the UK who then supported her to leave her abusive husband. She keeps saying how grateful she is to her family and that without their love and support leaving her husband would have been much more difficult. She is now remarried and very happy.

In both of the above cases, the women have managed to leave their abusive partners. Layla was able to do so because she was in the UK, spoke fluent English and was not worried about gossip and blackmailing anymore (see page 238). In contrast Leena was able to achieve this due to her family's support.

## *Older Women*

There is evidence that elderly women may be particularly vulnerable in exile (Yee, 1992). How older women cope depends very much on their health, family support and the quality of community life. Fadya, for example, is in her late sixties and when I asked her what she found difficult when she came here, she spoke about the isolation she experience in her new life:

> I found it difficult that I didn't speak any English. Travelling and finding my way was very difficult. I didn't know how to get out and visit people. I ended up staying at home most of the time and got really bored.

Amongst the elderly Kurdish community, Fadya is one of the very few who has learnt a bit of English. She talked about the difficulties of learning English in her sixties:

> I took a language course for six months. It was to teach basic reading and writing so that I can read where the buses are going and their numbers and so on. I also needed to do this in order to do my own shopping, to be able to read prices. Through this I learnt some things and got used to things. It was three days a week... There were other people but I was the only aged person amongst them.... but the teacher was Kurdish and also an acquaintance. Many times he slowed down and helped me. He helped me by repeating the things again for me, as you know at this age we learn things slower.

Fadya compared social life back home with here and talked about the sense of community and togetherness which she misses here. Upon arrival she felt that 'no one was really interested, no one asked [her] who [she] was, where [she] came from, what [she] was doing'. She felt 'very sad':

> Social life back there was much much much much better than here. People were very warm to each other... your neighbours were like your siblings. Some nights I wouldn't close the gate till 12 because the neighbours kept coming and going. We

> gathered together until late and drank tea and had fun... time was spent having fun. The days and nights passed very fast. My neighbours called on me without calling in advance... We were very happy, social life was very very very good. Even if you didn't have relatives, your neighbours played the same role if not better... but when we came here I found out that things are not like that... social life is very cold, people are distant... no one asks the other how they are... no one wants to visit the other... the Kurds are not like that, they are still like how they were in Suleimanya. We have built a life here and we visit each other... I was talking about people of these countries, they can't be bothered to say hello or talk to anyone, they don't help anyone... but it wasn't like that back home. People always watched over each other. If anyone had problems or crisis people would go to see them, they helped with the problem and helped the person pull through... people of Europe don't help anyone else.

Fadya's children take turns seeing her every week. She is living with her daughter and has four sons in London, all of whom work or study. Each son visits once a week on a different day so that she will not be on her own, and Fadya also visits them and her friends. She makes an effort not to be on her own for long. Fadya then talked about how Kurdish elders, or at least those who are well enough, have built a similar lifestyle for themselves:

> We see a lot of each other, especially us the elderly. Not the young people, they are busy working and studying. Life is very difficult here, young people are always busy working. Although they like to have the same social life and go out like before, they can't. They want to be like how they were, close friends who help each other out... they still help each other out but because of their busy lives they can't do it as much as they would like to. They spend a lot of time on the phone. But we, elderly people, don't have much to do. We visit each other. When there is a wake we let each other know and go together. In groups we go to picnics... we also meet twice a week, once in the Kurdish Cultural Centre and once in the Kurdish Association. We gather there and have a good time and keep our tradition of seeing each other and chatting. We have re-established our lives similar to how it was back home... So I don't get too lonely.

Runak came in her late fifties eleven years ago, her husband was already well into his seventies. For the first year and a half they lived with her daughter's family, and she found it difficult when they moved out; 'all the shopping and work was on [her] own shoulders'. Her husband did not have good health and could not help her. Runak is illiterate; she does not read or write even in her mother tongue. Unlike Fadya, she did not even try to learn English, she believed she could not learn anything. However, her faith has helped her survive; she told me that she is grateful to God because 'just by recognising the signs, [she] came to learn and recognise all the different buses.' After overcoming her initial shock at the vastness of the place and thinking that she would never find her way around it, she gradually learnt to discriminate between the numbers of the different buses and in every area she used a shop or a place as her landmark. In this way she knew where to get off. But she found all of this really exhausting. She could not read prices so she just picked up what she needed and hoped that it would not be worth more than £20. She could not carry more than that anyway.

Runak had left following the first Gulf war and despite the no-fly zone set up for the Kurds, the situation was not stable and there was great poverty and deprivation. Consequently, Runak worried about her four children back home, all of whom had families of their own. She was constantly anxious about them and saved money from her benefits to help them and their children. She felt guilty every time she ate good food or was in a party as she kept wondering how they were living.

Runak also talked about the isolation and loneliness she felt while living in London. She pointed out that this country makes people so busy they do not have time to see their parents regularly. Her daughter used to work full time which meant she would leave around seven in the morning and get home around six in the evening. This meant whenever she did visit her parents, she was in a rush and exhausted:

> Back home we have huge gardens and many good neighbours. Here these things don't exist; your neighbours are not bothered whether you are dead or alive. Back home when you go out of your front door everybody greets you. These things don't exist here and it's really difficult. I still find it difficult. But it has been okay because our daughters have been here. Also there are many Kurdish people.

Despite all of this, she feels grateful that there are good services for the elderly in this country. The flu vaccination every autumn, the free transport, and also the help she gets from strangers who assist her take her shopping trolley on the bus. She also pointed out that although the flats are too tiny here and hardly anyone has a garden, at least the flats are centrally heated. Runak managed to make some friends whom she is very close to and tries to visit people and go out in order to avoid isolation. She too was a regular member of one of the Kurdish elderly club:

> Every Friday I went there, it was good. I would leave food for my husband and go. I always prepared him food which he didn't need to heat up. I didn't want him to turn the cooker on, it worried me. So I would prepare food for him and go to the KCC from the morning and came back late in the afternoon. I found my way there and gradually I was able to go and come back on my own regardless of being illiterate. I'm very proud of this (she giggles shyly).

She also learnt the way to her friend's house, but not how to ring the bell of her friend's flat as she lives in a block and the doorbell system is complicated. Runak manages by arriving at an agreed time and calling out for the friend to open the door. Her friend was educated back home and is able to read in English and travel by train and tube while Runak is restricted to buses. She has never used tubes or trains on her own. She cannot even dial telephone numbers and has coped with this by storing over twenty numbers of family and friends on her phone. Each time her daughters visit, Runak asks them to dial the numbers of some of her friends for her who are not stored in her telephone. Sometimes her daughters, who are usually tired when they come to see her, complain about this banal request.

Another worry for Runak is the fact that her husband is not happy in London; he is in his early eighties and does not have good health. He stays at home most of the time and only sees people when they visit him:

> My husband has been really unhappy. The thing that keeps him going is that he still reads a lot. If he wasn't reading, he would go crazy here. He likes reading. All the

> newspapers he receives, the Arabic file, the Kurdish newspapers, he reads every page of these. Also the satellite Kurdish channels have been very good for us, it brought us entertainment and peace of mind. Before they started, we never understood the British channels. I'm most dependent on these because at least he could read but I can't do anything like that. The last six or seven years have been very good because of the satellite channels.

Runak and her husband went back to Iraqi Kurdistan after the last war. They are now back in London but are considering moving back for good. Her husband wants to go home, he does not want to die away from his homeland:

> I like being back home very much. I still have some of my children there and friends and relatives. People know my husband and many people come to see him. They come to interview him or welcome him back... although he's quite old now and he can't be bothered to talk for long. Even our health was better back home.

On the other hand, Halima lives in Hull and does not benefit from the elderly clubs that are set up in London. She is fifty six years old and because of health problems is very much house-bound. She needs help around the house and her son and ten year old daughter provide that. Halima has suffered a great deal as a result of her isolation, bad health, and powerlessness:

> You come to a new country, disabled and not speaking the language with no one to help you... I live too far away from people... The Kurdish people live on the other side of Hull... I get up in the morning and take my daughter to school. She needs tending to in the morning. Then I come home and do some housework. Today I had some guests and it will take me two days to clear up the house again. Then I pray and then I have to go and bring her home. I go out twice to take her and bring her back. I have complained about distance from the community many times... I live too far away from people. This is why I have asked to be rehoused close to the area where there are Kurdish people. It's good to be close to people even if you choose not to mingle with them.

Her requests for being rehoused have not been met because, according to the council, she is disabled and needs ground floor accommodation with disability access. So far they have not been able to find a place like that close to the Kurdish district.

Halima is also particularly distressed about leaving behind three children (see Appendix 1, 4). Three years after arrival she has been granted "Exceptional Leave to Remain" and this does not allow her bring her children over. She cries a lot and has been hoping to get a travel document so that at least she can go and see them. She feels rather desperate and finds the system too complex and unhelpful:

> They don't allow my children to come here. They don't change this awful place for me. For example, the doctor has changed my medication and I'm worried about it. I have to spend Monday dealing with that. I don't know if it is the pharmacist that has changed my medication or the doctor... I have to deal with this, things keep changing, it's too much...

Halima's young daughter has become her interpreter. She regularly has doctor's appointments and sometimes takes her young daughter with her:

> I ask them for an interpreter and I sometimes take this one with me... (looking at her daughter). If you talk to her in English, her English is better than her Kurdish now...If she doesn't go to school for one day she gets bored.

She also thinks of her daughter as a friend:

> I cry a lot. She tries to cheer me up. Sometimes I fall asleep crying (she cries again). She's good, like a friend. She says such grown up things (smiles). She is my friend.

This is another form of role reversal where a child suddenly becomes the interpreter for her parent and has to support her (Bylund, 1992). Although Halima does not seem to realise this now, she depends a lot on her young daughter. The daughter will grow up here and may have different cultural values. This may create further problems when the daughter

becomes a teenager or a young woman. She may then be put under pressure to conform to her mother's wishes and this is how mother-daughter conflicts can be intensified by migration (see page 54).

In summary, this study reaffirms that older women are a particularly vulnerable group of refugees. Amongst this group, those who are educated and have learnt a bit of English, such as Fadya, manage to adjust better to their new environment than those who are illiterate (Runak). Halima, who is both illiterate and in bad health, seems to be particularly isolated and vulnerable. Fadya and Runak who live in London have many friends and also mingle through the Kurdish community's projects for the elderly. These clubs are only set up in London and hence older Kurdish women who live in other towns and cities are deprived of these opportunities.

## *Young Women*

There is evidence that young women can face pressure from their ethnic community to maintain traditional culture (Dasgupta, 1998). Those who attempt to escape traditional gender roles, for example, may be opposed by their own families as well as other members of the ethnic community, leading to stress. Also, behaving in a manner that is not typical to one's culture is reported to be associated with anxiety and stress (Fernando, 1991). While collecting data for this research I tried to interview younger women (16-25) especially because of Heshu Yunis's murder. Despite my efforts, I was not able to interview anyone from this age group (see page 97). Heshu was murdered while I was collecting data for this study. I decided that it was important to include her story even though none of her friends agreed to talk to me. Finally, I managed to have a meeting with the detective inspector who dealt with Heshu's case, Mr Brent Hyatt of the Metropolitan Police. Due to difficulties in finding young women who were willing to talk freely with me instead I draw upon my interview with the detective who led the inquiry into the "honour killing" of Heshu.

### Honour Killing

On 12 October 2002, at 6.30 p.m. there was a 999 call reporting that a man had fallen from a balcony and was critically injured in Acton. When the police arrived, Abdulla Yunis,

Heshu's father, was barely conscious and was mumbling something. He had the flat keys in his pocket. The police then went up to the flat, a 3 bedroom maisonette, and opened the door which had been locked from outside. There was blood on the stairs and the floor. Heshu was found on the second floor covered in blood next to the bath-tub with seventeen stab wounds, some of which were defence wounds on her lower arm, palms and back. She had been stabbed in her chest and the knife had been pulled through her throat. The bathroom lock had been broken, which indicated that she had tried to lock herself in the bathroom but her father managed to break it. There was evidence that she had tried to get up after her throat was cut: she bled to death fifteen minutes later.

Heshu came to London when she was three years old and had two male siblings. She grew up here and was very much a Londoner. Her father who was renowned for his involvement in the Kurdish revolution was nicknamed 'the communist'. He was not a traditional Muslim and came to the UK in the early nineties in the hope of setting up a good life for himself and his family. Fourteen years later, he killed his only daughter because he believed her behaviour brought him dishonour.

In the year before Heshu's death, her family discovered she had a boyfriend. When she was found dead, many families whose children were friends with her were certain that her father had killed her himself. There were rumours that he had received a letter telling him that his daughter is pregnant. This was not proved by the investigation later, instead it was found that Heshu suffered from regular beating by her father and sustained bruises. She was also taken back to Iraqi Kurdistan in July- August 2002, as the family wanted to force her into an arranged marriage. Heshu was extremely unhappy and talked to her friends about her problems. She also regularly talked into her camcorder about her unhappiness. When she was in Kurdistan, she talked into the camera, saying that they were not allowing her to go out and were forcing her to marry someone. She then burst into tears. There is also evidence that she was taken for a medical examination in Kurdistan to determine whether she was a virgin. For an unknown reason, the marriage did not go ahead and Heshu was threatened by her father who put a gun to her head, her brother intervened and the family then returned to London. On the day she was killed, Heshu was planning to run away. She had written a letter to her father apologising for not being the kind of daughter he wanted. The family suspected that she was planning to leave and locked her away at home that day. From the window of her room, she dropped a few notes, hoping one of the

neighbours would see it and come to rescue her. The notes were not seen by anyone until it was too late. She was talking on her mobile when she was attacked by her father.

This is a tragic example of the dangers some women face if they refrain from behaving according to tradition. This is also an extreme example of intergenerational conflict in the absence of appropriate mediators who could foresee and prevent this crime. It was known within the community that Heshu did not realise how serious her situation was. She had told some of her friends that although her father was bad tempered and aggressive, she did not believe that he would kill her because he loved her too much.

### Intermarriage

Another area of potential problem is the intermarriage of young daughters. There are many intermarriages within the Kurdish society in the West, some dating back to forty years ago. Almost all of these were of Kurdish men marrying non-Kurdish, sometimes non-Muslim women. This is considered acceptable partly because according to Islamic law a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman because his children would be Muslim like their father. However, if a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim man, the children will have a different faith. This does seem rather strange considering the fact that it is women who raise children and it is them who may or may not teach their children religious ideology. Within the Kurdish society the latter type of intermarriages is rapidly increasing. Whilst sections of the community, especially the elderly and more religious groups, do not approve, the majority are accepting and some people consider it a brave decision.

Runak's daughter was initially married to a Kurdish man. She spent five years being unhappily married because her family did not approve of her getting divorced. Finally, she got divorced and later she married an English man. Runak found her daughter's remarriage 'very difficult' because of gossip. She felt in some ways outcast by her elderly friends:

> They gossiped lots because my daughter didn't marry a Kurdish person... our people found it unacceptable, they didn't like it. Many times they said that her father is such a well known man, how could the daughter of such a man marry an English person? I sometimes defended her but of course I disliked their talk and felt uncomfortable about it... people never told me face to face, my friends told me

about it later. They kept saying how can so and so's daughter marry an English person?

Personally, Runak felt better that her daughter has got remarried as she thinks of marriage as security. By being married, according to Runak, her daughter would evade constant questioning and suspicion of the community. She felt that the initial bad will towards her daughter for marrying an English man would eventually die down and she would be accepted again as a woman who is doing the right thing: having a family. Runak felt that she can now stop worrying about her daughter and return to her country.

Lana who came from the USA met her English husband there (see Appendix 1, 7). The couple then came back to London, his home town. She talked about the difficulties of finding a marriage that would please everyone in the family:

> I went to many Kurdish parties and told my father, here they all are; find me someone that I would like. I didn't like any of them, what could I do? He wanted me to marry a Kurdish man of course. I personally wasn't bothered. I didn't think about western men but when I started working and mingling with them I realised that they are not so different from us. They respected me and were interested in the Kurdish issue. They used to come to my home, eat Kurdish food, and listen to Kurdish music... I had male and female friends and they weren't that different from us. The reason why I didn't think of western men at first was that I thought they may look down at me, but I realised that it wasn't like that. I realised if I value myself and my culture, they too will value me.... For a couple of years I didn't meet anyone. I even came to England and Europe and didn't meet any Kurdish person I liked. They kept telling me about this and that man, but none of it worked out. On the other hand there were other men at work. I still wasn't sure. Then I met David and it all made sense. It was obvious that he was the right person.

Lana was fortunate because her family trusted her and allowed her to have male friends. She dated David and would go out with him and come home late in the evenings. Her family did not mind as long as she kept them informed about her whereabouts. Also,

having her own salary and car helped. Still, they were surprised when she told them that she wanted to marry David and gaining their approval on this took some time:

> Gradually they were convinced, it took a lot of dialogue... I think being in the USA helped because there weren't many Kurdish families, hence fewer problems. My parents also heard about the many divorces within the Kurdish families. I think having open-minded, educated parents helped a great deal. I was talking to them. I reassured them it's not because I dislike Kurds, it's just that I haven't met anyone and I have met Dave instead. I also reminded them how I had gone out with a couple of Kurdish guys but it hadn't worked. What could I do? I told them surely just to be with a Kurdish man, they wouldn't want me to marry someone that I wouldn't be happy with. I didn't need that. I also kept telling them about how good and suitable David was, bla bla bla. Finally they agreed but my mother set the condition that he has to convert to Islam. I told her that I wasn't a Muslim myself, why did she want him to convert? She said it would bring her peace of mind. David agreed immediately. I had told him that it would be a struggle and it would take time and he told me that he was willing to do anything they required of him. He knew that I wasn't willing to let go of my parents in order to marry him. I'm too close to my family and I wouldn't want to lose them for anything. So I told him if they didn't agree we will stay friends... We went to an Imam (we both laugh) and laughed about his accent when he was repeating the Kalima in Arabic... (More laughs)... It was all happy.

The above examples show that the Kurdish community, like many communities, is not homogenous in its practices. While Heshu was killed for having a boyfriend, Lana's and Runak's daughter's marriages to English men were accepted by their families. Families like Lana's and Runak's are more open to dialogue about such issues and it is possible to reach an agreement. Generally, the anxiety dies down when the family get to know the person and find out that their daughter will be happy with him.

### Alcohol, clothing and gossip

Schreier (1994, cited in Espin, 1996) stressed that clothing is "an identifiable symbol of a changing consciousness". Clothing can thus be grounds for intergenerational conflict for

young women, or conflict with the community in general. From spending time with the participants I have noticed that they dress differently if they go to a Kurdish event as compared to a non-Kurdish friend's birthday party, for example. Dressing conservatively to Kurdish events is a way of avoiding gossip and confrontation with the community. In her study with the Asian community in the USA, Espin (1996) found that parents dislike their daughters dressing western because they know that dressing western is one aspect of acculturation which is associated with dating, sexuality and possibly mixed marriage.

Another problem that young women may face is the taboo associated with women drinking. Although drinking is prohibited for both Muslim men and women, culturally it is acceptable for men to drink but not so for women. None of the women who contributed to this research drink heavily but some have a glass of wine with their meals and when going out with friends. Lana was the only woman I felt comfortable enough to explore this issue with in detail. I asked her whether she drank before members of the community as I know some of the women drink only with trusted friends and try to hide it from other members of the community. Lana was very open, she replied:

> If they are my guests then yes. Maybe not outside, it depends on who I am with and how much I know them. I am careful, we all need to be before the rest of the community. It's just respecting their views. I'm sure when they know that I am married to a western man, they must also know that such things are normal for me. When I don't drink it's not because I am worried about what they would say about me. I don't care about such things, it's just that I respect them. I am not going to shock and embarrass an old man by drinking before him. I keep him happy in this way. But I don't really care about gossip.

Henar who is a young woman in her mid twenties argued that she has many rights, some of which she chooses not to practice. I asked her to give me some examples and she said:

> For example having a boyfriend, it's my right but I don't practice it. Maybe this has been partly because I have been busy studying and I don't want to distract myself. Secondly, I want to think about having a boyfriend only when I'm thinking of getting married... I also don't wear clothes which are too revealing when I go to

> Kurdish events. I wear such things for other occasions when I go out with my friends. I don't wear them to Kurdish occasions because everyone stares and everyone talks. I wear something more acceptable and I wear my bare dresses elsewhere.

Henar avoids being seen with young men because she knows that if anyone sees her, they would automatically assume he is her boyfriend. On the other hand, she feels very strong because she has her family who support and believe in her. Henar pointed out that as a woman, she is discriminated against outside but not inside her own family. She feels confident at home that even if people say something bad about her, her brothers would not get angry or punish her:

> Because of this I'm not scared but I don't like people talking about me. I try not to do things which the Kurdish community finds unacceptable when I'm among them. I don't want to have a bad reputation because of these things.

Henar pointed out that because she does not feel restricted by her family, she feels more relaxed about these issues. According to Henar, the more restricted girls are the more they want to break the barriers. She also believes that the Kurdish community is worse in Britain when compared to back home. Gossip is much worse in the Kurdish community here, according to Henar. This is because 'back home there were groups of families who knew each other and only mingled with each other' which meant that families socialised with other families who had similar values. However, 'in exile people don't have that choice' and all sorts of mentalities mingle together.

Fadya, when talking about the Kurdish elderly clubs, confirmed this by saying how she disagrees with some of them who like to gossip about people. She also pointed to the differential treatment of girls and boys by most families. She considers herself to be much more open-minded than people who go there 'to gossip':

> When a girl marries a western person they bad mouth her: she's ignoring her society and leaving her religion, why has she married an English man? Even when

> a girl marries an easterner like a Pakistani, they bad mouth her because she hasn't got married within her own culture... They are always talking about such things.

Both Henar and Lana are fortunate to come from open-minded families. Some Kurdish girls are restricted by their families and are not allowed to go on school trips, stay out in the night or have relationships. This can result in the girls leading secret lives. Young women have to be extremely careful because they can get in serious trouble if they are found out.

Gossip seems to play a big role in the lives of people within the community. Even those families who are open-minded themselves worry about what people might say. When I got married, my mother was terrified of what people might say to her and she avoided meeting people for a few months. Knowing that people are gossiping about someone, or suspecting that they might, seems to cause a lot of distress and was mentioned many times by the participants.

### Intergenerational conflict

There is evidence that intergenerational conflict may be augmented through migration (Simon, 1986). Hana who has a young daughter spoke a lot about her relationship with her mother. Much of her life, Hana did not have any choice over the things that happened to her. She has been angry with her mother's weakness before her father. She is angry too when she sometimes sees herself repeating the same mistake. She is particularly angry about the limited freedom of choice she had and how her family had the power to refuse a suitor and accept another. She feels these things more strongly now that she has a young daughter herself. Hana wants her daughter to have more freedom and more chances than she herself had:

> I just hope I won't be a replica of my own mother and sister, so that I can give a better life to my daughter. Not complete freedom, I don't believe in that, but I will let her do all the things she likes to do, provided they don't harm her... I don't want my daughter to grow up and be concerned about making me happy and satisfied first. No, it doesn't work that way. But we were raised like that and taught like that.

Hana reported that all her life she had felt that she needed to make her mother happy. She then explained that while she still feels the same, she is not happy about it anymore. Since becoming a mother, she has confronted her parents about the restrictions they imposed on her life:

> I tell my parents angrily, I shout at them. And whenever something like that happens, one of them the blood sugar level rises, the other one starts crying. (She laughs briefly). Then you feel sorry for them. (She then speaks in English): What can you do? They want you to be happy but not really. They want themselves to be happy. (In Kurdish): Do you understand? (In English): It's a lot of things, it's a chain. They want to be happy for so and so reason. They support me in the things I want, but at the same time when I look at their faces, I know that that's not what they want. Again I go back to the same old me and do what they want.

The way Hana kept changing between Kurdish and English seemed to be an indication of her dual identity and how different she is from her mother. She feels comfortable in a language which is not accessible to her mother and this has its own implications for the gap between mother and daughter. She also speaks mostly in English with her daughter when she can only speak Kurdish with her mother. Hana (speaking in English) then went on to explain that although she is trying to be happy, she has become very possessive over her daughter:

> I'm making the most of things but I've become.... you know, like a tiger with her cub, if somebody tries to do something to the cub, the way the tiger would react. That's the way I feel about my daughter. My husband or anyone else cannot interfere. I don't care what she decides, I hope that I will remain like this. I'm planning to stay right there besides her. I won't accept that what happened to me would happen to her. I will do what it takes. (Back to Kurdish): I feel that I have the strength to do this. Sometimes if she does something and her father tells her off.... (In English): no way, she is not going to be controlled. A lot of people tell me I'm very weak with her. But I want to be weak and I want her to be strong. Weakness has always been in my life but not in hers. She controls me, that's fine by me... Because I want this to be part of her nature, not to be controlling, what I

> mean is for her to be strong. (In Kurdish): You know! I want her to prove herself. Sometimes her father says she should do this and this, you know? Like sports, tennis. I tell him whatever it is that she will do, she will choose to do it, and you cannot make her do anything. She will do as she desires, even if that was becoming a tailor. (English): I don't care, I just want her to be happy. So that's why I don't want another child yet. Because emotionally I will feel drained. At the moment I can only handle one. (She stops here and looks very determined).

Runak mentioned how she had many problems with her daughter. Her daughter arrived in the UK in her late teens. She was rebellious and strong headed. Runak found it extremely difficult to accept and accommodate her daughter's demands. Her daughter wanted to go on school trips, stay out in the evenings and sometimes stay a night with her friends. Despite Runak's and her husband's wishes, her daughter decided to go to a good university away from London. She was really worried about this and spoke to her other children and asked them to persuade her to get married. In a trip back to the Kurdish Autonomous Region the siblings talked to their young sister in an attempt to convince her to get married. This went hand in hand with many marriage proposals by young men in their home town. The daughter felt confused and in that rush agreed to get married. Five years later, she was blaming her mother and wanted to get divorced. She was unhappy. Runak found this very difficult. Initially, the idea of her daughter's marriage was to protect her from other possibilities. Her divorce meant all sorts of other possibilities were open to her again. She tried hard to dissuade her daughter, crying every day, sometimes threatening her that she will never talk to her again and other times begging her to stick it out:

> She got married and then divorced, this was really difficult, I felt very sad about it... For three months, it felt like I would go crazy because according to our traditions this is very wrong, it's really awful... Back home divorce is a big thing. It is really difficult to accept and is a really big shame for the family. But nowadays there are many people who live in Europe and there are couples who have been married for thirty years when they suddenly divorce.

Runak has come a long way to accept her daughter's choices:

> Sometimes we had problems with my daughter but we got used to things (she smiles). Obviously when a person comes here, they change, things are different... I may have changed too. There are things back home for example, if a girl wore something a little bit exposing, I personally disliked it very much. Now since I have been here I find it normal. Back home for some women it wasn't even acceptable to not cover their heads but now they wear nude clothes and I find it okay.

Migration provides opportunities and possibilities to young women which takes them away from their traditional ways of living. Most of the time when there are two or more generations of women of the same family in the UK, there are clashes and conflicts which are stressful for both sides. Sometimes these problems can be resolved after much dialogue, such as Runak's acceptance of her daughter's choices. Other times the problem may linger, affecting the next generation like Hana's case. Hana has formed a strong reaction against her mother's submissiveness to her father, her continuous pressure and power over Hana's life and the possible continuation of her mother inside her. She wants to give her daughter a lot of control and freedom. How far Hana will succeed and what will become of her relationship with her daughter remains to be seen.

### *In summary: gender relations and family life*

Migration may lead to role reversals for married women. The consequences of this depend on the woman's ambitions and her husband's attitude and position in exile. Hana is not ambitious and it may be because of this that her husband is not threatened by her working. Her husband has encouraged Hana to work and he himself has a high status job. Hana seems to be aware that should she become more ambitious her husband may try to make it difficult for her because, according to Hana, men do not like their wives to become more successful than themselves. Tanya's husband has lost his position as a doctor and is threatened by his wife's ambitions. He does not help her in the house which seems to be his way of showing disapproval. Salma who had limited education used to be dependant on her husband back home but arriving in the UK three years before him, he has become dependant on her. I never met her husband but it was obvious that Salma finds this role reversal difficult because when she was alone with her children, she kept thinking that when her husband arrives life would become easier. This has not been the case so far.

Mothers seem to become sole caregivers to their children in exile as opposed to being the main person in a network of caregivers. Women may also struggle to pass on their language and culture to their children in the presence of the dominant British culture. Four women have taken their children to the Kurdish weekend schools to make sure their children speak, read and write in Kurdish. They have also found the Kurdish satellite channels useful because it keeps their children informed about where they come from.

Two women have escaped their abusive marriages. Leena was able to leave her husband only because her family supported her. She left Sweden where she was living with her husband and came to the UK to join her mother and siblings. On the other hand, Layla was able to leave her husband because she was living in the UK. She felt freer and less restricted by gossip and traditional norms of the society.

Older women were helped by members of their own family and the Kurdish community. The Kurdish satellite channels keep them in touch with home and provide news of the world and entertainment in Kurdish. The Kurdish elderly clubs in London have also been very useful for Fadya and Runak. On the other hand, Halima has struggled with bad health and isolation. She is also separated from her children and has no refugee status, this seems to affect her recovery.

In extreme cases young women may be the subject of honour killing. In this study two women have intermarried (Lana and Runak's daughter) and this has only been accepted by the families after dialogue and compromise. Both men have converted to Islam to gain the family's approval, although the young women themselves do not consider themselves Muslim. Young women are restricted by gossip and stigmatisation. They dress more conservatively for Kurdish events, do not drink in public and avoid being seen with their male friends or boyfriends. Intergenerational conflict seems to become stronger in exile. Young women may change in exile and reflect on the differences between themselves and their mothers. This may lead to confrontation (Hana) and it may influence the relationship with the next generation (Hana's daughter). Older women may find their daughter's choices difficult to cope with. Whether or not a mother comes to terms with her daughter's unconventional choices seems to partly depend on the daughter's efforts to explain herself

and compromise. Lana and Runak's daughter have both been able to maintain their relationship with their mothers while choosing a different life from them.

## Coping

In the course of our conversations the participants identified a range of factors and resources that helped them cope with the demands of their new life.

### *The demographic variables*

#### Age

Interestingly, younger women did not mention their age; it was those who were older who thought it was an important issue. Jhala, for example, believed that her age held her back in requalifying and settling in:

> Many times I felt that it is too late for me to start again, I came here when I was 28-29 years old. I kept seeing that people my age were at least working in law firms whereas I was struggling with English language. All of these were emotionally traumatising.

Dila came in her mid-forties and believes her age has been an obstacle to finding work here. Dila has been very depressed because of not having a job:

> I think that whatever degree I have, it will be still difficult to find a job because of my age and lack of work experience in this country... at the moment I have found this [English course] to do and it's also an escape from my depression, to have a goal. I want to push myself and have hope.

Individuals of retirement age have a different story. In Halima's case the significance of growing older is that it is linked with bad health, and increased dependency on others for support. She reported being visited by nurses every week who help her with her medical

situation. She complained about her location, isolation and loneliness. She has minimal contact with both the Kurdish and the host community and she cannot imagine how she could learn English and cope on her own.

Age seems to play a big role while coping with migration, the older the individual, the harder it seems for her to adjust and cope. Learning a new language seems to get more difficult with age. In the UK, age seems to be an important factor when applying for jobs; older individuals find it more difficult to enter the job market. Elderly individuals have their own problems adjusting to the new country. There is more support for the elderly group in London through the Kurdish elderly clubs which give them an opportunity to get out of the house and socialise. Such services are still missing in dispersal towns such as Hull.

### Gender

Despite evidence suggesting that women are more isolated than men and therefore adjust slower (Ager, 1993; Ghaffarian, 1998) the experiences of the women in this study were different. Gender influences many aspects of our lives and the impact of migration on gender can be a positive experience for some women. For many women, it was the first time they were alone and able to make decisions without outside interferences. Jhala, for example, described her experiences in the following way:

> As an asylum seeker I had many problems. As a woman it was good for me to be on my own. Probably this was the reason why I was able to face the great pressures on me because when you are on your own, you have less pressure and you can do what you want and think and stand on your own feet. Being alone meant that I didn't have to think as someone's daughter or wife or sister. Obviously, some such restrictions are still there because I don't want to cut ties with my own community, but on the personal level it was easier to be alone.

Still, being a single woman from a male dominated culture, she felt lonely and experienced some restrictions:

> As a woman although you feel very happy determining your own life and making your choices, you also feel sad. You feel sad because on top of the fact that you don't have company and the good things that come in a relationship, you're still not totally free because you come from a certain culture. If you want to keep ties with your own community you need to compromise many things. Obviously, the fact that you can exist between two cultures has its own privileges but sometimes culture clash causes you lots of difficulty and confusion. For people who want to stay here for good and are not bothered by maintaining links with their own community the equation is different, it is easier. But for me it hasn't been so easy.

Dila believed her life is much better in exile. She was a single woman who lived with her sister. Back home, her friends thought that not being married meant she was free:

> My life is much easier here. Back home I wasn't at all free. They (her friends) thought I was free, they didn't know that I was paying a heavy price for my relative freedom and wasn't really free. I was neither free at home nor in the society.

She described the censorship she imposed on herself back home and the guilt she felt for thinking forbidden thoughts:

> I used to feel bad for thinking about certain things and never dared to mention them. When I was told about sex properly, a particular incident which cleared things up for me was a teacher friend who had invited a few of us and showed us a pornographic film. This was the first time I ever saw such thing. I was shocked. I used to wonder why people got married, why animals didn't. I concluded it must be about being with someone you loved and having sex with them. But I never dared to say anything to anyone.

Dila then described an incident back home which made her aware that her neighbours viewed her and her sister as 'hopeless women':

> People felt sorry for us and talked about us. We were considered powerless. When I came here I was happy to be away from all the family, I really was tired of all the control and interference, and I was really fed up.

This is why when she arrived here, although her sister was in the UK, the same sister she lived with back home, she wanted to live separately:

> When I arrived, my sister suggested getting a place together, I said no way. She looked at me in a strange way. She misunderstood me. She thinks that I don't want to live with her. She didn't understand that I want to be free and I also want her to be free. I thought this was best for both of us. I also wanted to be financially independent. I want to live for myself.

Lana described her experiences back home, coming from a liberal family but living amongst a restrictive society:

> My father had given us a lot of freedom. We knew what to do with the freedom though. We didn't do anything stupid. For example, we used to wear tight trousers and we liked western music and liked disco and dance. We imitated the western stars such as Madonna. The society back then could not accept such behaviour. They used to badmouth us, look at us in a disrespectful way and the young men used to comment on the street. Back home girls are something to look at, do something to, try to touch or chat up.... these things were awful. I used to fight a lot. Whenever I noticed that a man was about to touch me up, I would prepare for him, hold his hand at the right moment and shout at him. Girls back home don't do such things because they are shy. They worry about their reputation, they don't want anyone to know that a man has touched them or tried to touch them, they just take it quietly. We didn't, we used to fight and argue with people over such things, it was difficult.

This is why coming to the West for Lana has meant getting away from being an object of control. She feels free living in the West.

The above examples seem to counter the findings of some researchers who argue that women experience migration to be more stressful than men and they adjust slower. This shows that there is great diversity amongst women refugees in general and even amongst those who are from the same community. Elderly women and less educated women from traditional families may well find it more difficult to adapt compared to their men who have an opportunity to go out, work and mingle with the host community, but this should not be generalised to all refugee women.

## Education

According to Ghaffarian (1998) and Rambaut (1989, cited in Lee, 1992) the more educated refugees are, the more acculturated and adjusted they are. In this study, this factor seems to have different effects for different people. Initially, more educated women did not necessarily find it easier to adapt because having a qualifications which are not recognised here caused a great deal of anxiety. For example, Jhala, who was a lawyer back home, felt that she could never requalify because of her age, language and cultural barriers. Dila who had worked in different fields before she came here got really depressed because she felt she was old and would never master the language in time.

One of the ways that previous education has been helpful for women is through speaking English or at least being familiar with English. Those who have been educated at university level are more familiar with English and may find it easier to learn. Layla was an English teacher in Baghdad and this made it easier for her to start taking courses and find employment. However, having minimal education does not necessarily mean being more unhappy in the new country. Sheila had minimal education back home and although she does not speak English yet, she is very happy to be reunited with her husband who has become much kinder to her in exile. She had twin babies a year after she arrived and her older children along with her husband help her look after her babies. Through her husband's contacts she has also found a few friendships. In this sense she lives very much within her family and community without making an effort to adjust or find her way in the new culture. It may be the case that when her children are grown up, Sheila will start learning the language and attempt to get a job. In this sense, she might have a delayed response to migration but at this moment in her life, she is content.

Being educated may help in preparing the women for changes, some of which were overwhelming. It may also help in terms of familiarity with western culture and the English language. According to this study being educated does not necessarily mean finding it easier to adjust. Some women decide to live on the fringe of the British society and seem to be happy that way.

### Personality

Ferguson (2001) argued that some personality traits are helpful when coping with stressful events in life. For example, extroverts may use emotional coping strategies such as reminding themselves that it could have been worse or by seeking instrumental social support. Lengua and Stormshak (2000) also found that individuals who are achievement orientated use higher levels of active coping and lower levels of avoidant coping. The findings of this study also suggest that personality seems to play a role in helping some women cope with their new lives. Determined and hard working characters (achievement orientated) are more likely to push themselves in difficult situations. For example, Zara learnt literacy though sheer determination back in Kurdistan. She was seventeen when she joined the literacy classes in the 1970s and later she sat through the biology, Mathematics and physics classes provided by her older brother to help her younger sisters who went to school. She even tried to learn English in Kurdistan, but her father did not allow her because he believed that if she could read and write and help her children with their homework it was enough. However, it was this kind of determination that helped Zara learn the new language quickly. It seems that this woman's past experience helped her in being determined to learn English as well. She worked really hard and her positive and determined personality helped her cope because she kept reminding herself that things will change even while she was struggling to look after her two children, especially when one of them fell ill:

> I tried not to get too stressed out. I kept telling myself that it's temporary, it will end and he [her husband] will be here. I really was tired and tried hard to look after my children and learn the language.

This also helped her cope with the death of her beloved brother, who was 39 years old:

> It's awful; such things are awful when they happen. Still I don't let things get on top of me because I accept that this is life and such things happen. It's difficult. I know that if anything happens to me people have to carry on, no one will mourn forever and everyone should work hard in their lives. You have to study, work, cook, and shop... if I don't shop for one day, my children won't be able to eat and no one will come to help me. Sometimes sorrow really pushes you hard but sometimes it pushes you to work harder, to take refuge in studying, do things and try harder. It's a way of escaping problems.

Jhala is also a very strong character. She works hard and takes things seriously. She too felt similar sentiments when facing difficulty:

> You need to survive and sometimes you become stubborn and want to prove something to yourself and to others, these feelings give you some motivation and energy.

Gulan keeps reminding herself that she has to accept that things are difficult sometimes. She believes that it is not right to cry all the time, people have to manage:

> You have to accept that you have come here and have left your family behind and it's not going to be easy. The most loved person is your mother and you've left her, it's your siblings and you've left them... what can we do, when you come here you have to be prepared for such things...You have to accept that you're not going to be with your family all your life... now that we are here we have to accept these things and live with them.

Being determined and positive may help women survive the difficulties of exile but it is possible for such an individual to experience too much stress and lose her positive attitude. Dila for example talked about being 'brave' but in this country she felt she had become 'useless'. It is thus important to remember that personality may play a role in the way women cope but other factors in their lives are also important.

## *The protective factors*

There is evidence that some factors help women cope with the stresses they face in exile. Some of these are reported to be family integration, social support and religious or political ideology (Ager, 1993). I will explore some of the factors that have helped the women in this study cope with the changes in their lives. The things that have helped these women, vary and what may have been useful for one woman may not be so for another. Dila took comfort in the garden, though this was not mentioned by anyone else in the study:

> The most important thing was that the new hostel had a garden. You know that I love gardens. They put me in charge of the garden; they told me that they will provide the income to do it up. This was great, it really made a difference to things at this stage and I felt much better, my life became calmer.

Below I will talk about other factors that have helped some of the women survive.

### Babies

Rezan struggled to have children back in Kurdistan (see page 230). Two and a half years after arriving in the UK she gave birth to a girl who is now nearly one year old and is walking around. She is very affectionate and cuddles her mother most of the time. Her daughter's birth has been 'wonderful'; she is like 'a friend' to Rezan. This has helped her cope with her situation by bringing joy into her life. Sometimes she plays and laughs with her daughter and at least temporarily forgets about the difficulties she is facing.

Runak who has lived in London for 11 years came when she was in her late fifties. She is illiterate and does not speak English and ended up living with her eldest daughter's family for a while. On arrival she had left her young daughter behind and took comfort in her eldest daughter's young son:

> My daughter here had a son who was ten months old. If it wasn't because of him I would have gone crazy. I looked after him, I raised him myself, he was with me most of the time and he made me smile. Until about a year and a half later when my

other daughter arrived and I separated from my daughter and we had our own accommodation. But I still looked after him because my daughter worked and she brought him to me every day.

This was very important for Runak because she felt useful and needed. Her dream of looking after grandchildren was fulfilled. Looking after the baby occupied her and teaching him to talk in Kurdish, telling him stories and taking him shopping brought her a lot of joy.

Tanya came with her two young step children and looking after them helped her cope. After talking about the initial difficulties she faced upon arrival, she added:

> The two kids helped me lots, I was busy looking after them so I wasn't extremely lonely. The little one was very young, he was very sweet.

There is a Kurdish saying which says 'the house where there is a child, the devil is faraway'. It is believed the innocence that a child brings to a home and the effort that goes into looking after her, keep the inhabitants busy, happy and it distract them from gossip and bad will towards other individuals. Three women in this research have taken refuge in looking after young children and it has made them happy. However, this may not have the same effect on everyone. Hana, for example, found becoming a mother extremely stressful (see page 121).

### Family support

As Ager (1993) and others have noted individuals who are surrounded by their families have a lower risk of mental ill health when stressed. Seven women in this study talked about the help or lack of help they received from their families and how it affected their coping. For example, Shireen lives with her sister and her mother and has found her family very supportive:

> My family helps me a lot. They really look after me because they know how well I was doing back home... from the beginning my family told me don't even think about working, we have brought you here so you can enjoy life, this was very good.

> My nephew who is younger than me has helped me lots with the language. He takes me to places, helps me find things. He introduced me to many things. My family has been the greatest help to me. They helped me reach this stage where I feel better and I'm working again and to a certain extent enjoying life here.

Jhala found the presence of her younger sister very supportive. This is despite the fact that her sister was ten years younger and got clinically depressed and hospitalised a couple of times during their first two years in London:

> One thing that helped me lots was the fact that I had my sister with me. I had freshly come out of a very bad experience in my life when I arrived here. So my sister's presence, I believe, helped me lots from an emotional point of view. Especially because when you come out you become emotionally much more sensitive, you miss your family and homeland. My sister was a good compensation for all of this.

In this sense close knit families that do not become a prison for women are reported to be comforting. Another example of this was provided by Lana who comes from a middle class Kurdish family, both her parents are educated and open minded (see Appendix 1, 7). She talked about how close family ties protected her from feeling exiled or alone:

> I'm very close to my family; I talk to them every day. We are all very close and concerned about each other... I'm close to my aunts and cousins too. My father loves me and trusts me very much. May be this is why I haven't felt exiled. I had my good family; it must be very difficult without. I believe that you can be happy anywhere as long as you have your family. Any place is heaven when you are with your loved ones.

For Runak who came to the UK later on in life (see Apeendix1, 14) her daughters and members of the ethnic community have been very helpful:

> My daughters helped me a lot, they did everything for me. My elder daughter had a car so she did most of the big shopping for me, I would just buy daily things. She

got me rice and oil and other things. She visited us whenever she could and for a long time I didn't have a washing machine, she took our clothes and washed them for us... when my daughter left (she went back home) it was our friends who did the big shopping for us. They are very good.

But families are not supportive to everyone. In fact they sometimes create more pressure for some individuals. Heshu's case (see page 180-182) is a painful reminder of how oppressive a family can be. A less extreme example was provided by Miriam whose sisters arrived three and four years after her. Being a single mother she expected the presence of her sisters to have a good effect on her daughter, and was disappointed to find them unloving towards the girl and insensitive to her needs:

Her husband knows very well that my daughter has not experienced what it is like to have a father and to have a man's love. He should've felt the urge to be kind to my daughter without being asked. But even my own sister does not understand these things. I told her that at least if they are not being kind to my daughter, you should at least tell your husband that he shouldn't be over-demonstrative towards his daughters before my daughter who has never had such love. She said that I was jealous of her husband's relationship with her daughters... Any support that I have to ask for I don't want. It's different of course when there are things we are legally entitled to and apply to get them. This is different from the kinds of support and love we expect within our friends and families and we don't get them.

Layla did not have anyone in the UK except from her husband who was not supportive in any way (see Appendix 1, 8). Being new to the country and unfamiliar with the system, she asked her husband to find a school for the children:

He said I should find out for myself, I should ask the hotel manager. He kept saying 'Weren't you an English teacher? Can't you do these things yourself?' I told him that although I knew English I wasn't familiar with the places, if they give me an address, I wouldn't be able to find it. Then he said: 'Go to WH Smith and buy an A to Z, then you can find the place'. I didn't know what WH Smith was. He said it was a shop on the streets. I should just go on the street and look until I see one (she

> laughs). And then I asked him what an A-Z is? He said it was a book with maps of London. I asked how I could use it. He said 'Learn, you're supposed to have a brain, you were the English teacher' (she laughs again remembering how unhelpful he was. We both burst into laughter). He kept saying just buy it and learn it, use your brain and like me you'll learn how to use it... although he had a car, I had to do shopping myself. The supermarket was very far away. Sometimes I did my shopping in stages because I wasn't able to carry all of it back.

As a result she had to find accommodation, a school for her children, and to look after them on her own while taking courses and finding a job. Additionally, her husband never really moved in with them, never took any financial responsibility for them although he was working in a good company, and he became abusive. She finally got divorced from her husband a few years after her arrival.

On the other hand, some of the husbands who were less educated seemed more supportive of their wives in exile. Sheila came here a couple of years after her husband was granted asylum; he is a car mechanic who has always worked hard but had not completed his education back home. They had three children before and a year after Sheila arrived, they had twin boys. I asked Sheila whether life was easier or more difficult when compared to back home. She said:

> From a social point of view life is easier. There are things which are better. Husbands for example help their wives more and they pay their wives more attention (she giggles). My husband appreciates that I am alone and have no relatives or neighbours to give me a hand with things, he understands that I have no one to visit and talk to.

Her husband washes the babies and changes their nappies, things he has never done for the other children, he also takes the older children to school in the morning so that she will not have to worry about these things:

> Their father takes them in the morning and in the afternoon my elder son who is now seventeen, brings them back... I don't have to worry about these things... Except from the separation from family and friends, life is generally better.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that families can be supportive to individuals in exile, but this is not always the case. Some families in themselves become another source of pressure for the individual, they can be unloving and insensitive (Miriam and Layla) or oppressive and dangerous (Heshu). It is therefore important not to generalise about what is supportive for refugees.

### Community support

There is evidence that individuals who have contact with other members of their own communities cope better with stress (Beiser et al., 1989). Two participants reported being helped by members of the community who have also arrived in the UK as refugees. For example, Zara was helped by other women asylum seekers like herself whom she got to know in her hotel:

> I met some Kurdish people in the hotel. One of them was a Kurdish woman from Khanaqeen who was taking her children to school... she told me that I could go to the school that her children went to... It was through my children's school that I made friends with Salma. She was taking her children to the same school. We exchanged a few words and then she told me that she attended an English course which was run by the school and asked whether I was interested. I was very pleased because I wanted to learn very quickly. I went every Monday and Wednesday.

Salma spoke about how both members of the community and the community organisations helped her during difficult times:

> I had health problems and so did my son. I had a throat operation for my gland so my children stayed with a friend of mine for five days. She was a very good woman, took them to school every day and brought them back... then my younger

son had to have a kidney operation as well... Kurdish people have helped me here, especially the Kurdish Association.

However, some women in this study experienced their ethnic community as a source of pressure. Jhala avoided the community because of her personal circumstances:

> My problem was that my marriage had just broken down when I came here. At the beginning I kept avoiding my own community... I didn't want to become too close to anyone because I didn't want my problem to be discussed. So I didn't know many people from the community... I rediscovered the community when I actually exceeded my personal problem and overcome it myself. Then I could talk about my story as if it was someone else's, I wasn't hurt by it anymore. I could talk about it objectively without looking pained by it or feeling embarrassed.

I would agree that members of the ethnic community can indeed be very helpful at times of distress. The communal values of cooperation and warmth make the community sympathetic and supportive to those who are distressed or new to the country. A number of times I have attended Kurdish parties and celebrations and was given a lift home by Kurdish people who were until that moment strangers to me. Many times during my trips abroad I have met Kurdish men and women whom I have instantly related to and laughed with. However, this closeness and warmth can also become oppressive because the same values can justify invading a person's privacy and asking them questions about issues they may not want to talk about. Accordingly, some individuals try to avoid the community when they have recently got divorced, when they have problems or are depressed.

### Organisational support

The women in this group were divided in their descriptions of the usefulness of formal organisations. They talked about refugee community organisations, support from social service departments and local churches. I will first talk about those who valued organisational support.

The Kurdish Cultural Centre and the Kurdish Association have set up two elderly clubs which have been very good for the elderly members of the community. Fadya spoke positively about this:

> I go there to see people and socialise. Tuesday I go to the Kurdish Association and Friday to the Kurdish Cultural Centre. So I don't get too lonely. It's nice because we all know each other and it's a practice of our own social traditions... I like that.

She also mentioned how the Kurdish organisations have helped her deal with her housing and council problems and sometimes seeing her doctor:

> The elderly caseworker in the Kurdish Association has helped me for my housing claim. She came with me twice and has been a good advocate. The Kurdish Cultural Centre too was very helpful. Most of the time when I need to see my GP my own children come with me to interpret but if they are all busy then the Kurdish Association has provided me with interpreters.

Runak and Salma were also helped by the Kurdish Cultural Centre and the Kurdish Association who provided them with interpreters, helped them complete necessary forms and generally supported them when they went asking for help.

Zara has been helped by the Kurdish Association. They helped her find accommodation and provided her with interpreters and completed necessary forms for her:

> I believe these Kurdish organisations are very necessary for refugees. It's just that people who come here don't speak English and also are not familiar with the rules and regulations. They told me that I had to find a lawyer and fill in my asylum application form and so on. They came with me everywhere.

Miriam who came many years ago found the Social Services department very useful:

> A couple of months after my arrival a friend of mine told me about an office called Social Services. I can't remember how I went about it but they came and helped me. It was a woman who helped me, they provided me with a child minder. The woman was very nice. I now know that Social Services do not do such things, but they did it for me, maybe because they knew I was alone and my child was very small.

The Social Services had also supported her to change to better accommodation:

> They finally gave me another accommodation which was much better than the first one... The Social Services were very good, they even found a nursery for my daughter. When she was two years old they managed to put her into a nursery for me although normally that's not possible.

However, Miriam had a different kind of experience with a community organisation:

> There was an Iranian community centre. Once I went there at the beginning for housing... they were so cold and awful to me, I thought I will never ever go seeking help from them again. I found it insulting. I'm a very independent and proud person normally but I needed help at that stage and they were very unpleasant.

Dila also made some unfavourable comments about some community centres:

> I think they've become commercial. When I go to a computer course I expect to learn something which I will be able to use in this country not back home. The only concession was that these courses are provided in your mother tongue, but what's the use if you can't learn anything from them? If these projects are not revised they're just a waste of resources and of people's time.

She then gave some reasons why she thought the computing project did not work:

> The computer course was held in a community centre, it was like going to a tea house. Typical of the Middle Eastern communities, attention was paid to a few people, ignoring the others. There were no social workers present to find out about the problems. I had many problems at the time and tried to talk to the teacher, but because he had no knowledge of psychology and wasn't really a teacher, he wasn't able to understand me. They should make sure that whoever teaches on these courses is professionally trained; if not, at least they should have a social worker present with him. These things should be done properly not just to put up a façade of progress and work. I went there for six months and still didn't learn Word Processing properly. Also in our community centres they really discriminate. This is why I've kept away although I know it's not good for me.

The participants from Hull where also helped by individuals from certain organisations. For example, Rezan said:

> There was an organisation called ARCO and there was a woman called Nina, she likes Kurdish people very much and they have given her a Kurdish name, we call her Shina. They helped asylum seekers from all aspects. They dealt with those whose application was rejected, those who had employment card, those who were granted asylum and were entitled to different benefits and accommodation. Shina helped me in many ways.

Gulan talked about some organisations and churches that help asylum seekers in Hull:

> There is a woman who is nearly my age, she is English and she became friends with me. She's been very very good to me. She introduced me to one of the churches and opened my eyes to many things. There are other Churches and organisations who help people a lot. They come with you wherever you need to go, if you don't understand something or can't fill in a form, they do it for you. I personally am very pleased with these organisations... some of them are religious just like back home. Although their prophet is Jesus and mine is Muhammad I really like the people.

She then went on to say:

> There is another organisation called Erica and members of the organisation visit us twice a week, even if one of them is on holiday they send another person instead. They make our lives easier. I have had knee problems for a long time now and yesterday one of them came with me and sat with me. From 4 o'clock we were at the doctor's till ten to six, she was with me all the time. I told them that I had been to the doctor with my husband a few times and the doctor keeps prescribing painkillers, so one of them came with me. This time the doctor gave me a bandage for my leg and in two weeks they will take me again, give me an injection in the knee and take X-rays. When she came with me, the doctor was much better.

Certain organisations provide essential services to refugees and asylum seekers, often in the form of giving advice on their rights and entitlements. They also represent migrants and advocate them in official matters which they themselves are unable to do because of language barriers and a lack of knowledge about services. This does not mean that these services are always efficient and flawless. Mistakes and problems do arise and when they do, they seem to cause a lot of anxiety for the service users. This is why it is essential for services to listen to refugees and that their feedback should be taken into consideration to improve services further.

## *In summary: coping*

In this study age, gender and education were mentioned as factors that influence coping. Older individuals mentioned their age as a barrier in the way of requalifying and finding work. However, despite previous research findings, being female does not necessarily imply coping badly. Three participants felt empowered as women because they were on their own for the first time and had more freedom, confidence and control over their lives. They found migration full of possibilities and sometimes excitement. Past education was helpful in some ways because it meant familiarity with English language and culture which helped them to learn the language and eased culture shock. However, it also meant that highly qualified women had to start from scratch in their new lives. Sheila who had limited

education back home is living on the fringe of the British society, she does not mingle and sticks to her Kurdish friends but she seems happy.

A strong, determined and positive personality seems to help coping. Three participants perceived their new lives as a new challenge and worked hard at adjusting to it.

A number of protective factors were mentioned by participants such as looking after young children, having family members around, community support and organisational support. However, some women found the presence of family (Miriam and Layla) and community (Jhala) unhelpful. Dila and Miriam also had negative experiences with two community centres. In this sense although these factors may be protective for some women, they are not protective for all. In fact they can be a hindrance.

## Culture, Identity, and Acculturation

### *Ethnic identity and culture*

How the participants define themselves and who they are is dependant on many factors. Jhala's identity transformation seems to be similar to Cross's (1980) theory of 'becoming black'. Before she arrives in the UK (pre-encounter stage), Jhala reported feeling alienated in her own culture and identifying with the western culture. This was partly due to her disagreeing with traditional gender roles within her family and in the society:

> When I was in Kurdistan I always felt exiled within my own family and society. I felt like a stranger many times. This is very strange because many people used to tell me that I would feel more at home in the West.

During encounter (the second stage in Cross's model) she became aware and angry of her oppression as a foreigner in this country:

> When you come here and you see how people and their rights are respected, you don't expect discrimination in such a world. Of course the western system with all

> its advantages over our system is not the ideal you expected and there are still many forms of discrimination. This realisation makes you revise your perception of your own community.

As a reaction to the discrimination she experienced, Jhala clung on to her home culture (the third stage):

> The pains I have felt as a hopeless asylum seeker have pushed me in the direction of rediscovering my own culture and embracing many aspects of it. My own integration in this society lead to my rediscovering my own... When I came here, I only found peace again when I made peace with my own community again... More than before I feel Kurdish and eastern.

Her identity, as Kurdish and eastern, is shaped by her experiences in London:

> I feel that as a refugee you always feel vulnerable so it causes you to embrace your own culture and values.

Eventually Jhala was able to find positive values in the host culture. She values privacy, space and what women have achieved in this country (the fourth stage of Cross's 1980 model). She now identifies with and feels at home in both cultures and has become bicultural:

> I feel that there are certain things which are international. They have nothing to do with West or East. They are more related to humanity, I do feel more humanitarian and this is because here there is more democracy and human rights, and some of these values are ignored where we come from. But the warmth and social connectedness of our community, the romanticism does not exist here. When you join these together you have a more humane and more international experience.

She also exhibits the last stage of Cross' (1980) model when the individual becomes active in bringing about social change and attempts to educate others:

> I now see myself as a Kurdish woman much more than I did back home. I also feel that I have a message; I'm a Kurdish woman who has a responsibility towards educating others about how we are and what we are.

Jhala clearly voices her happiness about being bicultural, supporting Wong-Reger & Quintana's (1987) study which suggested that biculturalists are most satisfied:

> People like us are privileged, we have two cultures and we can choose the best values from both. I try to be selective.

LaFromboise et al. (1993) also propose that people who can identify with both groups and are flexible in their identity should experience less stress, whereas people whose identity is rigid should experience more stress, especially in a multicultural environment.

Dila was also critical of some aspects of her home culture. She was single and was aware of her position in the society as a powerless single woman (see pages 194-195). In contrast, she believes the host culture has many positive values which are missing in her home culture:

> There are many values and things which I think we should have, just like here. We should've had these things because they have lived in our country, why haven't we adopted these good values?

Although Dila has found a place to live between the two cultures, she is more lenient towards the values of the host culture. Her position seems to be that of assimilation (Berry, 2001; Veer, 1998). She believes that even bad practices in this culture are more changeable than in her home culture:

> The problems that exist in our culture are much more difficult to resolve, they need a long time to shift. Whereas here, it's more possible to change things to better. For example, corruption and homelessness are not as bad as back home.

Another sign of Dila's assimilation is that she has many English friends and does not mingle with the Kurdish community that much. She goes on holiday with her English friends, is happy to celebrate Christmas and Easter with them, and has stopped celebrating Eid. At the same time she feels pressure from the Kurdish community and some aspects of her acculturation have lead to more complications for her:

> One day I was wearing short trousers down to here (she points to her knees), a woman who lives in this area walked pass me and since then she doesn't even say hello to me, she thinks I'm a whore. She finds my behaviour unethical whereas she can lie to the Social Services all the time. Her husband is gone back home and both of them still receive social security here, this is not immoral... Sometimes I just don't want to know about anyone else because it upsets me... I feel that the further away I am from everyone, the better. It's awful of course because you need your own community, you can't live without it but you get hurt. They interfere with your life all the time and believe that what they know and do is the truth and the best thing.

In this sense although she has assimilated in many ways, she still cares about what Kurdish people think of her and this causes her stress (Krishnan and Berry,1992, cited in Dasgupta,1998)).

Although Gulan has been living in Hull for a short time (see Appendix 1, 3), nonetheless she is well integrated and has accepted the new ways of life here, as such she disproves Sue and Sue's (1971, cited in Dasgupta, 1998) theory that new immigrants are mostly traditionalists. She goes to church every Saturday although she is Muslim. She approves of her new society for its free health services and the services provided to refugees. She also approves of the way people do not interfere in each other's lives and of their tolerance. At the same time she criticises her home culture, for the high prices the doctors charged people in their private clinics back home, for the corruption and nepotism, and also for the gossip in the community and constant interferences in everyone's lives. She seems to be assimilating rather rapidly, disproving Cross's (1980) model. She has also accepted that her son may have a girlfriend soon; he may integrate into the new society and change and these are things which Gulan believes she has to accept because she has come here.

However, she may not have said the same thing if this had been her daughter instead of her son, indeed Gulan married her daughter off who was in her early twenties before she came to the UK. Gulan is happy in Hull and feels comfortable with accepting the host culture but is being criticised for this by her community. She hides some of her views from the community and in this sense is exposed to pressure and stress. Krishnan and Berry (1992, cited in Dasgupta (1998)) found that it was assimilationists who experienced higher acculturative stress compared to the integrationists who maintained values of both cultures. Considering the important role that the community plays in the lives of immigrants, the anxiety felt by Kurdish women who assimilate is understood.

Miriam on the other hand is from Iranian Kurdistan and was a guerrilla in the armed struggle in Iraqi Kurdistan before she came to England. She described her sense of belonging in the following manner:

> I personally don't have any attachments to Iraq, Iran or here. I have no country.

This sense of not belonging seems to be very much alive for her, she feels alienated and at times confused about where she belongs. Her experiences seem to suggest her acculturation has lead to marginalisation where neither culture has given her reasons to identify (Wong-Reger & Quintana, 1987; Veer, 1998; Berry, 2001):

> I have no attachment to Iran, I left it when I was thirteen... Sometimes when I think about it, I really don't know where I belong.

Seward (1958) stressed that deculturation is associated with a higher risk for psychological distress, because it involves rejecting both ethnic groups (LaFromboise et al., 1993; Berry, 2001). This might be one of the reasons why Miriam is generally unhappy. When I first met her four years ago she seemed depressed. At times, Miriam is really forward and liberal in her views but on other occasions she has surprised me by her conservatism. Once I heard her have a disagreement with someone about homosexuality, she argued that it was abnormal to be in love with a person of the same sex. At the same time she believes in sexual freedom. Sometimes she is very critical of the Kurdish culture and tries to distance herself from it, other times she is critical of what she perceives as western culture and she

seems confused. Miriam relates her lack of sense of belonging to several factors. One reason being that she was only 13 years old when she was uprooted from Iran to join her family in Iraq. Then, after a period of working for a communist organisation she fled to Britain at a young age with her young daughter:

> When as a child, at an age where you have formed attachments to a place, you are uprooted from it; you will be a stranger wherever you go. Although I was still living in Kurdistan in Iraq, the way I was treated by the people was that they always considered me an Iranian Kurd. I was never considered just as a Kurd or just another human being. Do you understand what I'm saying? And here, you yourself know it's the same. No matter how many years you've been here, you're always a foreigner. It's never yours.

She points out that another reason for her lack of belonging may be to do with realising how small the whole world is:

> I sometimes sit down and think about things, when I was young and would say 'Kurdistan' or the name of my own city it felt like the whole world to me. Then I grew a little older and used to think of Iran as the world. When you come here.... one day I realised that I live on a planet which is this small in the world (she makes a small gesture with her hand). This is how things change. Maybe even if I stayed in Kurdistan I would've come to the same conclusion. But living in a different environment, knowing different people from different cultures, when you encounter new experiences, your eyes open more and you come to know yourself better. There, I lived in an environment where I couldn't get to know myself; I was a child who had left home fleeing oppression. Whereas here, everything is there for you to get to know yourself, your abilities and wishes and needs. You don't speak the language, you can't go out, you have a little baby. Many problems... You have time to sit down and think about your life and the things you've done.

Shireen, on the other hand, is new in London and at the moment the negative values in the host culture are more visible to her than the positive values. Currently, she cannot

comprehend sexual freedom from an early age. She is encountering the new culture and exploring it (Phinney, 1990):

> I feel their feeling is temporary here, I feel their love is temporary... this is how it feels to me. For example, a young man from college told me that he's had three girlfriends so far and has not married any of them. I asked him which one he loved he said none of them. He said he hopes to have a few more experiences until the age of 35. I feel things are temporary here. I feel neither girls nor boys feel that love is holy. I have seen Kurdish men who have waited for the one they loved for years, a girl waited for the one she loved for ten years. And when they have eventually got married, they have been very happy... I have many wonderful examples. I know some bad ones too.... but I think I would be happier with a Kurdish man because he knows who I am and I know who he is.

She describes herself as very much Kurdish and, although she recognises good values in this culture, she prefers her home culture. Shireen's pattern of adaptation is very much a traditionalist (Wong-Reger & Quintana, 1987:346). She prefers her home culture to the host culture and feels unhappy here:

> I felt alive there. I don't feel alive here. I don't want to lie to you, I'm happy now that I'm sitting with you because you are Kurdish, you understand me and know all the things I know but I can't stay in this country because of its beautiful buildings and things... these are the things that have deceived some people... I can't stay here for beautiful buildings and clothes... I can't do these things. I can't smoke a cigarette here or drink alcohol because I reject these things. The society I grew up in rejected these things and however long I stay here I won't change... even though there are many negative things back home, I love it, this is how I have grown up, I accept it... my love takes me back... I hope to return eventually.

She points out that she cannot marry anyone but a Kurdish man:

> He definitely has to be Kurdish. As I told you before I cannot act... probably only in my dreams could I be with a foreign man. This is how I am because I have lived in

my country until the age of 24 and the emotions that I feel and expect I can only get from there. I think the man I want can only be Kurdish.

Rezan is also very Kurdish; she has lived in Hull for nearly four years and believes the Kurdish culture is much more positive than the British:

> We respect our own culture very much. We value our heritage, for example the simplest thing is if we have old pottery we value it greatly. We have many historical anniversaries but here, I don't know but they don't seem to respect culture and heritage that much... there aren't any important anniversaries or galleries of their heritage.
>
> I have some English friends and I tell them that back home our relationships are so strong that if a neighbour goes to the shops or goes out, she leaves her child with her neighbour. They immediately tell me that they too were like that about twenty, twenty five years ago... they say they used to be a strong knit community like us, but now these networks are very weak.

Shino is also very Kurdish but more prone to accepting some British values:

> There are differences... there are good and bad things, but as you know our ancestors have said when you go to a blind man's town you need to cover your eyes. We need to be like them... I mean accept some of their things... though certain things will never change... we will always cook our Kurdish food... we will never become like them. Even if we live here a hundred years.

In summary, the women in this study had different patterns of acculturation. Whether an individual is bicultural, assimilationist, marginal or traditionalist depends on their past history and current experiences in the new country. It may also depend on the length of time they have spent in this country. It is important to remember that identity shifts and changes are continuous and if I interview these women now, a year after the initial interviews, they might identify themselves differently. Jhala's acculturation pattern supports Cross's (1980) model. The other participants exhibit different patterns, three of

them identify with their home culture more than the host culture pre-and post- encounter. Two of them who have always been critical of their home culture have assimilated rapidly. One is marginalised and the other is bicultural.

### *Culture shock*

Witnessing cultural differences can be a stressful experience and result in feelings of confusion, anxiety and depression (Veer, 1998: 39-40). I found that the participants in this study had been surprised and at times uncomfortable and anxious about the cultural differences they have witnessed. For example, Dila found the differences between her home culture and the host culture difficult to cope with:

> Back home our gate was always open; anyone could knock and come in. Every hour people passed by. Some people wouldn't even knock on the gate, they would come as far as your room and then give you a shout. Here when you want to meet someone, even when you call a week before, she tells you I can see you in two months time. When you're new here this is very difficult. I knew some people and thought that when I need to move house or generally need help, they would come and help me, but this was very different. I'm talking about English people here.

She then went on to give examples about how shocked she had been with some of the British practices:

> A friend of mine her grandma died, they had helped me lots when I arrived here, I spent my first Christmas with that family. I felt like a member of the family really, so I phoned her when her grandma died and asked her whether I should go down to be with them. She said that they weren't ready. I thought, what does it mean to be ready? Our culture is very different. She said that they hadn't decided when to have the funeral. I thought this was strange, after a week they phoned me and said she will be buried in ten days. When I went I saw them dressed in their best, as if it was a party, all in suits and hats. They had made a big meal too and drank champagne. They talked about everything but the late grandma. They talked about life and what

they will do next. This kept me wondering for a month, I just couldn't comprehend why they are like that and we are not.

Coming to contact with such different practices, Dila had started comparing the two cultures:

I remembered how when my mother died and my father back home, everyone suddenly came into the house. In this sudden invasion some of our things were stolen, both my parents were bedridden for a few months before they died so we were all very tired when they died. When they died we were in mourning for 40 days, the bones of my legs were aching because of sitting down to receive people, crying and hitting myself to let everyone know that I was upset. When someone dies back home, you've suddenly lost something that meant everything to you. If people don't stay with you and surround you to comfort you, you'll probably be damaged psychologically. On the other hand, suddenly all these people invade your home, you're gob smacked, you don't know what to do, you don't know what you want. You don't have time or space to think about what you want or what the dead person had wanted. Nothing is according to your wish or the late person's. It's the people who have come who will decide.

These thoughts caused Dila a lot of anxiety:

I got very depressed about the cultural differences between us and this country. I really much want us to adopt the good traditions here, so that even if it's too late for me to use them in my life, others may use them and benefit from them.

Shireen has found some of the values in the host culture shocking and repulsive:

There are no family ties, they all live separately, girls separate and boys separate, the parents live alone... I feel very sad for the elderly people here. I feel they are very lonely. It's loneliness that makes them get to the bus stop in the cold, get on the bus and have a tour and not return to their homes until the evening. We are not like that, we respect our parents, we live with them until we get married. I don't

like the way children are raised. For example a 17 year old girl or boy has experienced all the joys there are in life, this is sad. She's experienced all the pleasures, she's seen all the films... you feel at 20 they are finished, they have no joy, at 22 life is complete... back home it's all stages, you finish university first, then you get a job, you earn money and then you think about marriage. Here, the girlfriend and boyfriend business starts too early, they start too early. I dislike this.

Rezan has also been surprised to find a lack of religious ideology in Hull and this is why she believes having sex before marriage is so normal in the West. She is cynical about such freedom:

Even here those who are practising Christians are much better than those who don't have a religion... when they say 'I have no God or religion', this has bad consequences... something that I dislike and find unacceptable is their sexuality. They say it's a free country and people are free to explore their sexuality but I see young girls, 12 or 13 years old, I see them pregnant... I think this is mostly due to lack of religion. There is also loss of respect for one's parents... I have relationships with English women, most of them are divorced, I think that 80% of women in this country are divorced; I don't think this is good. These are the things I find bad. I feel like a stranger amongst this and it's even bad for themselves... Some English people tell me that love is forbidden in our culture, I tell them that love is much more valued in our culture, we take it seriously. The difference is we take steps and do things in the right order (school and then marriage), but if a girl becomes sexually active at 12, you tell me how can she finish her studies? How could a pregnant young teenager go to university? There are things like this which I don't like. Before I came to this country I thought there were no illiterate people in this country but now I see many people... When I was working in the bakery one of the workers asked me to write: rug. I asked her couldn't she write it herself, she said she couldn't. She said she was illiterate! Imagine, I'm an immigrant from a so called backward country and an English person wants me to write something for her.

In summary, on encountering the host culture, participants discover some norms and values which they find shocking. Sometimes they reject the new values absolutely, like Shireen and Rezan rejecting sexual freedom. Other times the new values confuse the newcomer, making her reflect on her home values and comparing them (Dila). In both cases the participants found the differences difficult to cope with.

### *Pressure from ethnic community*

Sometimes adopting new beliefs and adapting to the host culture can lead to stigmatisation by the ethnic community. In such cases the individual goes through identity transformation while her culture remains the same (Bader, 2001:260-1) and this exerts pressure on her. Gulan, for example, got to know a religious organisation that helped her adapt to her new life. As a result of this she visits the church every Saturday but has to hide this from the community and sometimes feels frustrated with her people:

> Sometimes I hide the fact that I go there, they ask me where I was on Saturday and I say I went into the centre. I'm not supposed to go, 'How could you go to church?' they say. Or they make such a big deal about Halal meat. A family had a wake and because of that they had many guests and bought a lot of Halal meat. People were saying, there is no Halal meat left... I say to them, you have come here and live on this country's benefits, don't you use that money for food? Well the money comes from all sorts of businesses paying tax, some of which you may not approve of... what is the difference between the meat and the money? Okay, they tell you the chicken is Halal, but how do you know how they kill the chicken... it's all done through factories anyway.

Gulan went on to describe a family who have started wearing scarves when they arrived in Hull and are pressurising her to do the same:

> Now they all wear the scarves, they never used to. All the women and the girls criticise me. They say 'You're old, why don't you wear the scarf?' I say, I don't want to. It is not by force, is it?

Gulan talked about the Kurdish community in Hull:

> It would be good to mingle if we just stop gossiping about each other as we used to back home... there are still some families who live in a similar manner. Now most families have decided to mingle with a couple of trusted families only, to avoid lots of problems. The less contact you have with some people, the better. Honestly, I have told many people that back home we had family, relatives, friends and neighbours so we could afford to gossip, but now we don't have many people around us, maybe we could stop gossiping and just get on with each other. Maybe we can learn something from the people here. Okay, in this country the family bonds are looser, they are not as concerned about each other as we are, but on the other hand they live very simply, they are good. Many things are not a problem, they don't have high expectations and they don't blow things out of proportion. I personally like it here.

Henar who comes from an open-minded family does not wear revealing clothes for Kurdish events and avoids being seen with young men to prevent the community gossiping about her (see pages 185-186). She insists that it is not because her brothers will tell her off but because she because she does not like 'to have a bad reputation'.

Some women in this study drink alcohol with their close family and friends. Most of the women hide this fact from members of the community (see page 185). This is because women who drink do not have a good reputation and are subjected to gossip and stigmatisation. Some women also dress more conservatively when attending Kurdish occasions and keep their courtships secret. But it is not only younger women who are worried about being badmouthed. Fadya too, who is in her late sixties keeps some of her views to herself. Compared to the rest of her friends, she is more liberal and because of this she is sometimes targeted by the others.

The Kurdish community can be a great source of stress when women make non-traditional choices for living. Choices of clothing, drinking alcohol, mixed marriages, dating and generally adopting new values and codes of behaviour are considered unacceptable by

parts of the community. Those women who make non-traditional choices may keep a low profile at times to avoid problems with reputation.

## *Racism, integration and having English friends*

Racism can exclude and stigmatise individuals such that they lose interest in acculturating (Castles and Miller, 1998), it also causes anxiety and stress (Burstow, 1992). I asked the participants whether they had encountered any discrimination since they had been in this country. Jhala reported a few instances where she felt she was exposed to racism or racist attitudes when she was taking advanced English classes:

> I had a very bad teacher of English. She really enjoyed putting me down... She once even asked me: 'Had you seen TV before coming here?' She told me this before the class. Another time she told me: 'Have you ever used the book called 'How to use your brain'?'. This is how blatant it was, not just sensing hostility but actually experiencing it... I told her: I had studied law and not even in my mother tongue but in Arabic and that I have never had any problems so I don't know why she thinks that of me. I was so upset; I had to walk out.... She never even apologised, she eased it but she never apologised. I will never forget this, it's one of the most awful experiences I've had here.

Jhala also talked about discrimination in her work place:

> I started voluntary work in a charity organisation which did advocacy work for elderly people. There, I found out that all the voluntary people were foreigners or ethnic minorities, and all the paid staff were English. Even there, I was doing advocacy, I would take on a case, any problem that an elderly might have, and they trusted me enough to deal with the case on my own. But when I applied for a proper job there, they said my language wasn't good enough, that they couldn't give me paid work. I just lost faith in myself absolutely. I felt that my own expectations were very false.

These experiences made Jhala reflect on the concept of integration, she felt very hurt and angry:

> I started thinking that there is no such thing called integration. I felt that there was no such thing as a receptive society which could welcome you. Not only it doesn't welcome you but it constantly attacks you and criticises you until you lose all confidence in yourself.

I also asked the participants whether they had any English friends and the reasons why some of them did not. Leena believed that in London, you just do not meet English people:

> Here you cannot really integrate, partly because the society here is much more diverse and fractional than many other societies. In Sweden, for example, there is only Swedish society so it's easier to mingle with one unit. But in London who could I choose to mingle with? We don't even meet enough English people to integrate with them.

Sometimes people can be extra sensitive towards what they see and how they interpret it. Leena gave such an example about her young son. She told me the following story:

> It was the first time that my son came out of the flat. The people who live in these buildings are mostly English. My son came out and saw our neighbour's child who is the same age as himself and the neighbour's dog... My son walked towards them and kept trying to play with them but both the dog and the little boy ignored him. My son tried to stroke the dog and even the dog was running away from him (she laughs and continues), I found this very strange. It happened before our door.

She then concluded the following:

> At this moment I felt how foreign we were in this place that even a dog could discriminate between our children and theirs.

This conclusion from a one off event where a dog and a young boy refuse to play with her son may seem too much. However, this comes within the context of her experiences that they, as a refugee family, are different and treated differently by the others.

The attitude is very different when it comes to women who do not have direct contact with the society here. Fadya is elderly and her encounters with non-Kurds and English people are limited to the street. She talked about how pleased she is about being able to wear her Kurdish clothes:

> This is the good thing about Britain... people can wear whatever they like. They have good values of course, they are not a warm nation but the good thing is they never look at people or comment on what they wear. Sometimes, people have looked at me and even have said that they like my clothes... no one has said anything awful about my clothes and I am very pleased that I can wear them. I don't want to change my clothes. Young people didn't even wear traditional clothes back home... only for special occasions... but for my generation, we are used to it and I don't want to change it... I haven't encountered any negative attitudes from anyone here. I haven't had much contact anyway and I haven't encountered anything on the street.

Henar who is in her mid-twenties said:

> All this time I have been here I haven't known an English person. The ones I have got to know have been Italian, Pakistani and so on... It is probably due to the places where I have worked... where I studied most of the people were eastern because they were all learning English. The place where I worked, people were mainly originally from Pakistan. In my university there are many Indians, black people, Asians, Somalis... you don't see many English people, you can count them on the fingers of one hand. So I have not encountered many English people. It's probably also because I have a few friends whom I have known from back home and I hang around with them and am not concerned about making other friends.... but even the places I have worked at, there haven't been any English people.

It is widely recognised that racism and stigmatisation is much worse in the dispersal areas (Watters, 2002), and that dispersal towns and villages are often run down places with high unemployment. The native people are not welcoming to asylum seekers who according to the media are flooding the country and collapsing the system. For example, Rezan's experiences of the people on the street in Hull have been very negative:

> One day me and my husband wanted to go for a walk in the evening... at first we didn't know that Saturday and Sunday evenings they go out and get drunk, they go to clubs and discos... sometimes we walked before a bar and suddenly somebody would start swearing at us, telling us to fuck off and things like that. Once just before a pub they stopped us and kept saying, go back, leave... there have been many insults like this. He should be asking his government why I have come here, he should find out that there is a good reason that has forced me out... English people think of themselves as very clever but they know nothing about international politics and events... many of them, especially the young ones don't know anything about us. Many times I have been asked whether I'm a gipsy, I keep saying that I too have a country with a culture and history... but they ask me whether I had TV back home... sometimes I smile and play dumb, saying no I didn't have one. Some English people, their level of knowledge and intelligence is zero... they don't understand, they are not aware, especially the ones I see on the street. There maybe very good people in other professional places and universities but I haven't met them, these are the kinds of people I have met on the streets. Drunk people who have questioned me about my identity and told me to go back to my country. Most of the time I don't reply to any of this, I think if a person doesn't know then I cannot make him understand.

Gulan also lives in Hull, a place known within the Kurdish community for being rough and full of racial abuse. She talks about how things stand:

> Sometimes, in the evening they cordon a road just like our curfews, until the police come... sometimes there are a lot of problems with young groups of men... other times it is quiet. It has got better now, apparently it used to be awful. My husband was in a hotel near Hull for over six weeks, they said they would transfer him to

> Hull and for a while he resisted coming here. At the end he had to, they gave him no other choice. He had heard of the people in Hull being racist and not welcoming... they are quite strict the people of Hull, they don't like dark haired people. Some of them of course are nice, they are getting used to us... One day my son was coming home from school, a car stopped full of English boys, they swore at him and between themselves they were debating whether to beat him up. Fortunately one of them said that they should leave him alone, he hasn't done anything.

Shino also has also had bad experiences in Hull:

> When I was new here and had NASS accommodation, they bothered me every night. They would knock on the door and window... once in the middle of the night they broke my kitchen window violently... they swore at me... after a few times of complaining the Police gave me a little machine, they said whenever someone bothers me I should just press a button and they will be here. A few times the police came... after a couple of months of the police coming round to the house, the harassment stopped. It must have been the neighbours who knew that I was a refugee... but when they saw the police a few times, they stopped... the police didn't see anyone. As soon as they would start knocking or swearing, I would press the button and the police would come around immediately... it sometimes took a couple of minutes for them to arrive.

In summary, racism has caused several of the research participants a great deal of stress. They felt victimised, angry and disappointed, and it caused them to have low self esteem. The housewives and older women seemed to be protected from such attitudes. In London it was those women who mingled through work or study that reported experiencing discrimination. This was different from those participants who lived in Hull, one of whom had encountered racial attacks in her own home and the other on the street.

## *In summary: Culture, identity and acculturation*

An individual's pattern of acculturation seems to depend on her commitment to values of her home culture and attitude towards the values of the new culture. Those individuals who were critical of their home culture are more prone to assimilating. Dila and Gulan both disliked the lack of privacy, prominent gossip, and lack of freedom for women. They have both embraced the new culture which does not have these problems. The experience of racism seems to influence acculturation such that a woman may revise her relationship with her home culture. Both Jhala and Rezan have experienced racism and felt angry. Jhala was critical of her home culture while Rezan was not. This is why when they experienced racism, Jhala temporarily embraced her home culture and Rezan retreated to it even more. Now, Jhala is bicultural and seems to support Cross's (1980) theory of identity change. Rezan and Shireen are both traditionalist because they both approve of their home culture and disagree with sexual freedom and disrespect for the elderly here. Miriam is decultured and seems to be most unhappy supporting Berry's (2001) conclusion. This seems to make sense if a feeling of belonging to any culture is a protection in some way whereas not belonging to any culture makes individuals feel excluded and maybe confused.

Three participants experienced culture shock. After getting over the initial shock over space, privacy and funeral norms, Dila believes that these values are better than the values in her home culture. On the other hand the shock has made Rezan and Shireen retreat to their home culture even more.

The ethnic community seems to exert pressure on women who adopt new values. This means that women may have to hide some of their practices and remain silent about some of their views to avoid gossip and stigmatisation.

Three women reported experiencing racism directly. There seems to be more racism in Hull which is a dispersal town. Leena and Hanar also reported not having English friends because they do not meet English people to mingle with. Gulan and Dila, who are both assimilated, have more English friends than the others.

## What Kurdish women gain by coming to the UK

Migration though an overwhelmingly difficult experience is not entirely negative. Here, I will talk about some positive aspects of migration for these women ranging from good services available to women, empowerment through work and opportunities and also freedom from some oppressive traditions of the home culture.

### *Services for women and children*

Five participants expressed their approval of the health services and in particular the services provided to women in the UK. This is mainly because they believed that these services are missing in their home countries. For example, Zara talked about the services for women in the following manner:

> I am really pleased with their medical services for women. Anything related to women's health, they take very seriously. For example, the smears test. Many countries don't have such service and it's really important. Anything related to pregnancy, contraception and so on is really good. They really look after women here.

But, Zara went on to say:

> Hospital appointments are difficult. First of all the GP sees you a number of times until they are sure that you really have something worth referring. When you are referred to see a specialist, it may take months and if you are desperate, there is nothing you could do. Still health services are better for women, we didn't have all this specialised care.

Halima is ill and has been helped by health care visitors in Hull:

> Someone visits me every week to make sure I use the right medication and do my tests... I have diabetes and high blood pressure as well as my stroke. Before, they

used to come twice a day to make sure I'm okay, then they came once a day and now it's once a week.

Rezan gave birth prematurely back home and the baby did not survive. After this she was unable to have a baby for several years. The doctors back home told her it was because she is too fat, she felt extremely depressed and guilty but could not lose weight. She had a different experience of the doctors in Hull:

> I went to the doctors, they did the relevant tests for me and I asked whether my weight has anything to do with not conceiving or whether my womb was blocked by fat (an expression used in Kurdistan). He said it has nothing to do with it and recommended that I do yoga. He told me because I had lost my first child, this has psychologically affected me. The doctor said if I just relax and stop thinking about it, it will happen. He was right, his suggestion was very good, it wasn't even expensive... I went to the yoga classes and stopped worrying. I became a volunteer interpreter for the organisations... in this way I stayed busy and didn't think about pregnancy very much so without any medication or anything I got pregnant and I now have a daughter. When she was born I was very happy with the services, there is a big difference between here and back home in terms of services, especially for giving birth. They really look after you especially if it is your first baby... They really were good to me, in the hospital there were three nurses, they kept saying 'good girl, good girl' to me, they really made me feel better. I think using good language and kind words is important in any stage in life but particularly when you are in pain... however old you are... Back home when I gave birth they kept moaning that I should hurry up and relieve them but this wasn't the case here, they didn't rush me.

Sheila had three children when she arrived and gave birth to twin boys in London:

> The services are much better here as compared to Kurdistan. When I was pregnant, I felt very sad and sometimes scared because I had no one around to help me. But the midwife, nurses and doctors were very nice to me, they were like sisters to me. It's not like that back home, they scream at you if you make any noise... I went

> with my sister in law when she was giving birth and the midwife was hitting her on the thigh, they kept shouting that she should push harder and rush... things are much better here. Doctors are better and the services are also better for the children... Everything a baby needs is ready and available here, you can get everything from the shops. Many times we couldn't get nappies back home which meant that we had to hand-wash everything. We also used to put babies in the cradle, this too was more work.

In summary, the above participants were happy with the specialised medical services provided for women. Comparing the services in the UK with those in Kurdistan, they concluded that issues related to birth, children's needs and women's health in general are very good here. Halima is also given a lot of support by health visitors in Hull who check on her regularly to make sure she is taking her medications properly.

### *Life for the better*

Some of the participants are also happy to be here because they feel safer, less stressed and have more control over their own lives. Life is better for some of them within their families. For example, despite the fact that Shino cries a lot and misses her family she appreciates being here:

> You know that wherever you are, nowhere will ever take the place of your homeland. You are so much happier in your own homeland, you are more relaxed, in many ways you are happier... but sometimes I feel secure and say that my life is better here.... at least there is no danger... I'm more free... there is no external problem.

Sheila was a housewife back home and this meant she had guests all the time. She now has five children and does not feel as tired as she did back home:

> People generally have more guests back home, it's a regular thing. Sometimes, one group leaves and they are still at the door when another group comes... they don't

> even let you know before they come. Sometimes men used to come to see my husband at 11 in the night and stay till one in the morning.

But now she does not have so many guests and can look after herself and her children. Having many visitors also meant a lot of interferences in their lives, now that they live in London, her husband has more time for them and they are happier:

> Here, I feel it's easier. For example, I had my twins here but I feel that I'm not as exhausted as I was when I raised my other children back home. Although I have been alone, my other children would go to school in the morning and my husband would go to work, I have been alone but I have managed better than I used to back home. In Kurdistan your life is not yours, there are too many other things interfering with your decisions. I had many guests then and many times when I was busy cooking for them in the kitchen my children would fall or something would happen to them because I wasn't free to look after them properly.

Living in the UK can be lonely for many women who are new to it but it can also be a blessing because life is more secure and food and other requirements are abundant. There is also less interference by others.

## *Opportunities for women and empowerment*

Four women in this study talked about the opportunities they have in the UK. For example, Henar compared her home country with the UK in the following manner:

> There are better employment and education opportunities as well as having an opportunity to understand the world because you mingle with many different kinds of people ... Back home even in your own office (if you were working) you could only mingle with the girls. Here you mingle with both genders through work... You get to know different kinds of people and you become experienced. Back home girls don't have any confidence, we don't know much about people and their psychology. Young women don't get to learn how to react in complex social

environments. Here, you get more confident and handle things better and can be accounted responsible. I believe you can achieve many things here if you have time and if you want to, there are many opportunities.

Lana initially went to the USA and then came here. She described her experiences in both countries:

There are many good things. Back home we saw opportunities on TV, here, they are a reality. You can go and do whatever it is that you want. Many things- the simplest thing is going out. In Kurdistan you couldn't go out at night, it wasn't safe. As a woman it was difficult to live alone, here it is not. Education, or vocational courses, you could study whatever you like. This is the same with jobs. Back home there were limited job opportunities, when I finished studying I could only become a teacher, I didn't like it so I didn't do it, luckily the UN came and I started working for them. Here you can do any job even if your qualification is in a different field. You can do what you like.

Zara talked about the opportunity to study which she had always longed for:

I have more opportunities here, first thing is to be able to study. This has always been one of my dreams and back home I wasn't able to. It was all due to the norms of the society and how individuals are shaped by it. I have every opportunity here. I thought that I have missed the opportunity but now I'm fulfilling my dream. Sometimes I think if only I had these opportunities ten to fifteen years ago, I would have achieved so much more. I had better memory and concentration then but now not just because of age but also because of the responsibilities I have, children and home, problems back home... it's true that we don't live in Kurdistan anymore but sometimes their problems and their worries live with us much stronger.

Jhala feels that she has benefited from coming here because some of her old beliefs about gender issues are confirmed. She feels more comfortable expressing her views and she is more aware:

> In Kurdistan one of my problems was that as a woman I didn't know whether the things I was feeling was just due to how I am or that I was right in feeling that as a woman I'm being discriminated against. I always felt that something was wrong in our society but I wasn't sure. Sometimes reading Nawal al Saadawi's (an Egyptian feminist) books made me feel better that I wasn't alone in feeling what I felt, that I'm not abnormal or rebellious for no reason. Reading her books reassured me that there was discrimination between men and women and that it was wrong. But when I came to Britain I became more confident about what I felt, I realised that it is abnormal not to feel the way I did. Coming to a new country, learning a new language, getting to know different people and living in a place like London opens your horizons much more. It's possible that you have certain reservations towards certain groups of people for some reason but when you come here and have one to one contact with them, you become more open minded. You learn about a democratic system, you learn how to stand up for yourself. You realise that in this system there are many more alternatives than there are in your own country. These are all good opportunities, having access to internet and a wider range of media and communication keeps you in touch with a big network of things. I'm not really active in working with women but having been able to talk about certain women's issues on a few occasions and gaining knowledge about the activities that go on in this field is all due to being here. Awareness in the West is also on a different level, you become more aware of people's rights and needs.

The above women have found many opportunities in the UK, such as employment, education and training. They have also had an opportunity to interact with different kinds of people, to work and study in mixed gender environments and hence to become more confident and accountable. Jhala has also found an opportunity to become more aware of human rights issues and to gain a better understanding of the world.

### *Work as empowerment*

The first few years are probably the most difficult years of migration. When individuals learn the language, become familiar with the system and find work, they feel more in control of their lives and less helpless. Some of the research participants talked about

employment a great deal. To illustrate, Jhala felt powerless in her first few years in London. She now works in a Kurdish community centre carrying out advocacy work for Kurdish asylum seekers and in particular the elderly:

> One thing that I'm happy about in my present job is that to a good extent I can fight back here. I help people who are in the same position that I was. I was so vulnerable, unaware and weak. Now I fight for my clients.... I now know what the system can offer so I fight to force those departments who do not do their job properly to do what the law requires them to do. Sometimes, I do this through communication and other times I'm having to fight for it.

Leena works as an interpreter. She started as an observer interpreter working with a lawyer and now interprets for court and police. She has obtained the required qualifications and feels more confident in her job:

> Two months ago I went to the Old Bailey, there was a murder case. A few interpreters were called up but didn't want to do it; they thought the case was too complicated. I thought I will give it a shot and see how I get on... The case took four weeks; I spent many days in court. I carried on and succeeded in doing my job... About a year ago I wouldn't have had the confidence to do these things but now I'm much better.

Holding down a good job in a foreign language makes these women feel satisfied. They take pride in their jobs and feel useful and important. Doing a job well is a way of being empowered for a group who have lost their important positions back home and have started from scratch in this country.

### *Freedom from traditions*

Espin (1996) pointed out that in exile the traditional power structure of the family may change. Crossing borders through migration may provide women with the space and permission to cross boundaries and transform their sexuality and gender roles. However,

such transformation is associated with risks for women. The women I know are divided into drinkers and non-drinkers (see pages 185, 216). Those who drink are much more liberal and seem to be more integrated than those who do not. Other issues such as eating pork, becoming sexually active, attitude towards relationships, marriage and divorce are also important markers of change. Some of the women in this research had experienced sexism within their own communities (see page 213) and coming to the UK entails having alternatives and potentially greater freedom. Jhala feels freer in the private domain but still feels restricted within the Kurdish community:

> When it comes to my own friends I'm quite free and they respect and accept me because they're also going through the same things as I. I think we understand each other and we respect each other, I don't feel the need to explain myself and my freedom to them and they never expect such thing either. But when it comes to the community, especially traditional people then there is a certain hypocrisy in my attitude. The issue is that to a certain extent I'm not as brave as I could be and total freedom I guess comes when you have conquered your reservations and fears, but I haven't done that. I still fear people's responses and sometimes I try to understand them. I feel part of the fear is just respect for and acceptance of the people and their tradition.

Henar spoke about how gossip restricted girls at home and how they were watched all the time. Girls back home could not stay out in the night because all the neighbours would know and they would start talking. She pointed out that the only time young girls could go out in the night was when they had male company. In London Henar can come and go as she likes, go out with her friends and feel more 'free'.

Gulan talked about the ease of life in the West when you do not have to worry about what people say about you:

> It's awful to be poor back home. In Suleimanya if you are loaded, it's great, if you are not, it's really difficult. This is because we gossip about each other a lot, we blame each other... for example, this top (she touches her top), you can wear it for three years here, no one would even notice, but back home they would notice and

talk and analyse. They would say: don't you have another top? Won't you get another one? Life is much simpler here. Back home there is so much gossip. I have been wearing the same shoes here for the whole time, no one has mentioned it. These things are great. Back home there is so much blame, for example if you don't visit someone for a while they say, why aren't you coming? Why have you become so cruel? What is wrong? You just want to say, I have been busy... or... if you have a problem in your family, the whole neighbourhood finds out... Whatever you have for dinner, everyone knows about it... If your husband goes away you have to ask someone to stay with you, you can't be alone. I don't know, here there is less of that, more peace of mind.

Dila has never married (see Appendix 1, 1) and when she was back home, she was forced to live with her older sister who was also unmarried. Now she can live alone:

No one understands me when I say I love being in this country, why? Because I have come to be free in this country, to live alone and do as I want. It may be too late but still at least when I sit down I can say what I think and do as I please, back home I didn't even have the freedom to do that. A man who was a relative once came to the door and I was praying that he would leave without being noticed at our door. Especially because my sister was not at home and I was a young single woman being visited by a young man who was there about a quarrel anyway, but I was scared about what people might think. I was worried that they might say he's come to see me alone. My fear was not of people talking but of becoming a problem for my brothers. As you know social issues and gossip can have dangerous consequences. I'm very happy to be here and live away from my own culture... My family will be very happy if I go back, I have a home there, but even here people from my community badmouth me, so what hope do I have back there?

Lana says she likes living in the West:

It is good because no one is looking at me, I can come and go freely. I can go shopping without being watched, dress as I like, study, and work without anyone

> censuring my behaviour and talking about me. No questions! I'm really pleased. Things are getting better back home but it's never like here, it needs a long time.

From my observations, I have also noticed that those women who have found new freedoms in the UK kiss their male friends just as they do their female friends. Traditionally, people of different sexes do not kiss each other. In exile, despite the older generation's disapproval, some Kurdish men and women hug and kiss.

Two participants have been able to get divorced and both of them believe this would have been much more difficult to do back home. Leena (see pages 172-173) was able to escape an abusive marriage:

> When I got divorced I felt as if I had just opened the door of the prison and escaped. For years I felt like I'm imprisoned for life, that I have no hope of escaping. I kept crying and thinking that's it, I will never be free of it again.

Layla had been in a bad marriage back home for many years. She wanted a divorce in Iraq but had not gone through with it for the following reasons: firstly, for her children's sake. Secondly, because her father was in the Iraqi opposition and she was worried that her husband would blackmail her. Thirdly, because of gossip and finally, divorced women live restricted lives and are forced to live with a married brother or sister. When Layla came here with her young children she found her husband worse than he had been back home, having an affair, lying to her and hiding things:

> This time I said, I didn't have any of those fears anymore and I would leave him. I had no more fear of the government or people gossiping about me so this time it would be final. I told him that there was one strand of hair keeping us together and I had kept that connection because of our children, if anything goes wrong that connection will be lost forever. He said that I was a coward; I would never be able to do such thing. I said, okay, I will prove to him how cowardly I am.

Sheila who is from a less educated background talks about how life has changed for better here. She can now go out with her husband arm in arm without being badmouthed. She

feels that her husband has relaxed much more since he has been here and he is much more supportive, as a result of which she is happier. She talked about how it was back home:

> Sometimes you were walking with your husband arm in arm having a good time back home and then he would see a friend and quietly tell you to take your arm out (she laughs). He didn't want his friend to see him like that, he may have accused him of being a softie with his wife... these kinds of things exist in Kurdistan. The man is restricted by other people and he doesn't want people to badmouth him. But here the husband sees that doing such things is not considered bad, it's not embarrassing for him to be seen with me arm in arm. These things are normal here.

Zara, who lived in a small town in Kurdistan, talked about escaping community pressure:

> I'm very much free, a freedom rare of its kind. Although even back home I was quite free, my husband always encouraged me to do things. But of course whether you wanted or not there were times when the community would exert its own pressures on you so you didn't have the freedom you have here. Even your own family were affected by it. When you went out people had their eyes on you, they watched what you did, where you went, when you came back. Here, this freedom is not comparable to what we had back home.

In summary, living in the UK has given these women the opportunity to be free from gossip and community pressure. They can go out, dress as they like, have privacy, get divorced and feel more satisfied with their lives and their families.

## *In summary: what Kurdish women gain by coming to the UK*

Despite the difficulties of life in exile, some women talked about the positive aspects of their new lives. Four women talked about the better services which are available to women. These were reported to be the care provided by health visitors, the smear test, issues related to contraception, pregnancy and birth, and the many products available for babies.

Two women said that their lives were better in the UK because they felt safer and had more freedom. One of them also pointed out that having fewer visitors in the UK meant that she had more time tending to her own family which was what she preferred doing.

Four women talked about the opportunities they have in the UK. These include employment, education, vocational courses and training. One woman pointed out that the interaction with more people from both genders meant that she felt more confident and socially more knowledgeable. She believed these things are essential for character development and an enhanced sense of social responsibility.

Two women felt empowered because of the work they did. They took pride in their jobs and this made them feel confident and satisfied.

Nine women talked about the freedom they enjoyed in the UK. This included freedom of clothing, drinking, going out, having more privacy and less interference, and escaping gossip. One woman also mentioned being allowed to live alone as an opportunity. The women felt that there was more freedom and less control. Living in the UK meant that they were not watched or questioned as they were back home. Two women were also able to get divorced more easily because they lived in the West. One woman reported feeling happy because of escaping from the traditional norms that restricted women and their husbands.

## Summary: findings

In this study, I have explored the difficulties faced by twenty Kurdish women post migration to the UK. I also found out about the factors and resources that helped them cope and the opportunities they enjoyed.

Refugees in the UK experience continual disempowerment when subjected to deterrent immigration policies (see pages 107-113); loss (pages 120-135) and the overwhelming requirements of adaptation (pages 136-161). Refugee women may also experience further problems within their families and ethnic communities when integration and adopting new identities lead to pressure to maintain traditional culture. Some women may experience

role reversals, domestic violence and more acute intergenerational conflict (pages 164-190). Becoming a member of a minority ethnic community may itself be associated with stress because of stigmatisation and racism (pages 223-227). In this sense, the relationships between the individual, her ethnic group and the environment are unlikely to be optimal, and there may be an increased vulnerability to mental and physical health problems. I will summarise the mental health findings of this research below.

## *Sadness*

In this study sixteen participants reported feeling sad and six of these reported crying and/or cried during the interview. Amongst this group only six women used the word 'depressed'. The rest described themselves as feeling 'sad', 'hopeless', and suffering from a 'mental state'. The participants reported that a combination of factors made them feel sad, these included:

1 Not knowing about their future in the UK and complications with their asylum application.
2 Leaving members of the immediate family behind.
3 Loss of support, feeling lonely and isolated.
4 Death of a family member back home.
5 Loss of status and becoming a 'nobody'.
6 Feeling overwhelmed by the numerous tasks required to adapt to the new country.
7 Unemployment, learning English and difficulties with requalifying.
8 Becoming a single mother.
9 Unsuitable accommodation and resulting complications.
10 Culture shock and acculturation difficulties.
11 Intergenerational conflict.
12 Feeling trapped in an abusive marriage.
13 Racism and sexism.

Some of these factors, such as bereavement, racism, unemployment, abusive marriage and intergenerational conflict may influence a woman's life at any stage of her life in exile. Others are risks specifically associated with the early stages.

## *Disappointment*

Seven women reported being disappointed. A number of factors contributed to their disappointment and made them feel angry:

1 Not having legal status.
2 Not being able to find work despite trying hard.
3 Being discouraged from completing a course.
4 Husband's arrival not making life easier.
5 The presence of her family in the UK not amounting to any help or support.
6 Community centres not providing an appropriate service.
7 Her qualifications not being recognised.
8 Being raised by parents who made her a dependant woman.
9 Being misled by friends.
10 Experiencing discrimination.

In summary, when women's expectations of the situation, their own family and the society are not met, they feel disappointed. Sometimes this disappointment is accompanied with anger which may have no outlet. The woman may feel sorry for herself and angry with her situation without having any power to change things.

## *Illness*

Three participants reported falling ill and another reported making a slow recovery because of unhappiness. All of them believed that their persistent health problems were due to the difficult situation and how depressed they were feeling. One woman was told by her doctor that it is better to cry otherwise she will be bottled up and fall ill.

The four women believed that their health problems were directly related to the difficulties they encountered as refugees in the UK.

In summary, the stresses arising from migration can put women at risk of mental and physical ill health. Generally speaking, any change in life, such as a change of job or

moving house, may cause stress, and migration entails numerous changes. Even those of us who have not been uprooted may be able to relate to the feeling of loss and longing that migrants experience for their homelands. The process of growing up is in itself a form of being exiled from a time and place of the past. As adults, we have left behind our family homes where we grew up with our parents and siblings. The place where we were born and grew up may have ceased to exist. Our parents may not be in this world anymore. Our school friends, neighbours and relatives might have all moved on. Most individuals may experience a sense of nostalgia for their childhood, a time which is associated with being carefree for many people. I believe that displacement is a more complex and more extreme form of this general sense of exile which is familiar to most people. It is a longing for a time and a place which will never be recreated, even if we return back to our own countries and rebuild our destroyed homes.

# Chapter six – Conclusions

## Introduction

This study is the result of spending time with and collecting narratives of twenty Kurdish women from Iraq and Iran who are currently living in the UK. Some of these women are new in the country and others are well established but the changes due to migration continue to influence their lives. In this chapter, I outline the important findings of this research with particular attention given to their significance for mental health. I also consider the limitations of this research, the value of qualitative methodology, and reappraise this study in relation to current research. I conclude by arguing for a holistic approach to mental health.

## Key findings

### *The influence of migration on mental health*

According to the definition of mental health used in this research (see page 8) there is a network of inter-relationships between the person, the groups she belongs to and her environment such that when these relationships are not optimal to the attainment of her goals, she is prone to mental ill health (WHO, 2000). In this sense, social context is essential for the well-being of individuals. Watters (2001) also points out that social problems and adverse circumstances may lead to depression, anxiety and also to physical ill health. Migration entails rupture in the person's social and physical environment, in her pursuit of goals and in her continuity and history. It is separation from the groups she belonged to and the replacement of the familiar with a new world full of uncertainties. This is why migration has consequences for the mental health of refugees. The person has to make an effort to find new groups with which to identify and to engage with her environment in new ways. The initial reaction to these changes is bewilderment and shock.

Some women reported not daring to go out alone and losing motivation to do anything. Separation from the familiar environment and deprivation from the support and comfort of friends and family (Veer, 1998, Watters, 2002) is accompanied by the challenges of adapting to a new world (Postero, 1992, Veer, 1998). Probably the most difficult stage of this process is when the individual's asylum claim has not been processed or when it is turned down. This is because at this stage she is denied the right to make choices and move towards restoring her life. For example, some of the denied rights include freedom of movement, relocation to better accommodation, learning English and finding employment. Probably an image which best portrays a person's experience during this period is that of the pinned down butterfly in Nabokov's Lolita (1955). The person, like the pinned down butterfly, is not quite dead but neither is she alive. She has lost her past life but is denied the right to start another, she is removed from her history but unable to connect with her future. She is being kept in a state of suspense, not knowing whether she will be freed or not. This is what researchers describe as 'learned helplessness' where the person realises that she has no power and no control over the unpleasant experiences she endures, that there is nothing she can do to reclaim her life. At this point she is most vulnerable to depression (Hiroto and Seligman, 1975; Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978).

The dispersal system made it more difficult for asylum seekers to settle down because they were located in deprived towns away from their own communities. This was accompanied by the demonisation of refugees in the British media which created a hostile environment for refugees. They had higher visibility outside London (Watters, 2002) and were sometimes targeted by the threatened locals. Under these circumstances they were unable to found new support networks, neither were they able to access support from the host community because of language and cultural barriers. In this study, those women who were sent to Hull through the first waves of the dispersal system were particularly isolated, lonely and desperate. Elderly women with bad health were particularly vulnerable and powerless. Asylum seekers who lived in London had a similar experience initially but this soon changed. This is because even though they were deprived of participation in the new society, they had the large Kurdish community as a source of comfort (see Zara's case, pages 204, 206). The community becomes a cultural pivot and it provides advice, warmth and support which are essential for feeling that one belongs. The more isolated individuals were, the more they talked about the importance of having access to their own community (Halima, page 178).

But even when individuals are granted asylum, even when they are able to settle down and integrate, there are other problems that influence their well-being such as sexism and racism.

## *Living with Racism and Sexism*

The problems arising from migration continue to influence Kurdish women's lives. Even when the women cope with the loss and adaptation, they may be exposed to other problems. When exposed to a new culture the individual may start questioning some of her own values and adopt new beliefs (Berry, 2001, Veer, 1998, see pages 210-212). Acculturation seems to be the key to some of the problems that Kurdish women refugees may face in the UK. Depending on their past history and present experience individuals may acculturate in one of the following manners: they may integrate, assimilate, separate (traditionalism) or become marginalised (decultured) (Berry, 2001). A woman may go through the different trajectories during her life in exile depending on her experience with her home and host cultures. There is evidence that integration is the healthiest form of adaptation and marginalisation is the least adaptive (LaFromboise et al., 1993, Berry, 2001). This was supported by this study (see Jhala's case, pages 210-212 and Miriam's case, pages 214-215). Belonging to a group seems to be supportive because the individual will share values with others, can turn to them for help, and can have a point of reference against which to judge her beliefs and values. This sense of belonging can be protective against stressors. Individuals who live between two cultures may maximise their well-being and rootedness if they feel at home in both cultures and share values with both. Marginalisation, on the other hand, describes an individual who belongs to nowhere and feels at home nowhere. Such individuals may feel confused and lonely, being rejected by the different groups and ending without support.

Acculturation together with the opportunity to be employed can allow women to change their gender roles and challenge the traditional power structure in their family and community (Espin, 1996, UNHCR, 2001a). However, they may experience other complications as a result of their acculturation and adaptation, which includes difficulties within their families and communities. For example, employment opportunities for women

may be accompanied by the redundancy of their husbands leading to role reversal (Bylund, 1992, Weber, 1998) as in the case of Tanya (page 165). In such cases the man may feel threatened by his wife's ambitions and try to make it difficult for her to succeed, or a woman may end up having two full-time jobs and feeling exhausted.

The ethnic community may exert pressure on women to continue traditional culture. Women may try to cope with this by hiding aspects of their lives from the community to avoid stigmatisation. Younger women may date and drink in secret; they may also dress more conservatively when going to Kurdish events (see pages 180-190). This study found that gossip played an important role in controlling women. Most of the women feared gossip and tried to avoid being gossiped about. Even those women whose families allow them to mingle with both genders, date and stay out with friends, are careful not to be seen by members of the community because being seen with a male university friend may be confused with having a boyfriend. A young woman reported being very careful because she does not like to have a bad reputation (page 185).

Older women who are more open minded may also need to be careful to avoid confrontation with the community. One woman who goes to church every Saturday in order to mingle, hides this fact from the community (page 221). An elderly woman who is more liberal than her friends also reported hiding some of her views to avoid stigmatisation (Fadya, page 187). She clearly addressed the sexism of the community when she said:

> If they see a girl with a man... all of them tell each other that they saw that girl with such and such... this is when the boys are allowed to freely befriend any woman they like... the parents even show off if the woman is English and hope that people see them together.

Generally speaking, young Kurdish men are allowed to go clubbing, live alone, drink alcohol, be blasphemous, intermarry, have girlfriends and have children outside marriage whereas Kurdish girls may be stigmatised not just for being perceived as sexually free but even if they marry outside the community. Whether the man is Muslim or not, intermarriage is frowned on for women. There are women who intermarry and succeed in maintaining ties with the community but this relationship takes time to establish and it is

only possible if the girl's family support her choice. This does not exclude the woman being disliked by certain others however patriotic and good she proves to be.

Prevailing sexism within the family and the community may make it difficult for women to achieve their aspirations. Women may be facing resistance from their husbands and/or their families. Women may also face great resistance and pressure from the community. But sexism is not the only problem that Kurdish women face in the UK. Integration into the host society and taking part in the work force does not exclude being targeted by racism. In fact, entering the British system may make these women more vulnerable and exposed to racism. In this study, housewives and elderly women who live in London seem to be more protected against racism because they do not have as much contact with the host society. Working women and women who are studying may face barriers and attitudes of which they would be otherwise unaware (pages 223-227).

Racism seems to be worse for the women who lived in the dispersal area. One participant was targeted on the street by individuals who shouted abuse at her and told her to go home a number of times. Another was targeted at her home when certain people (possibly her neighbours) kept knocking on her door and mouthing abuse. Once they broke her kitchen window violently and the harassment only stopped because the police came around a number of times. Discrimination like this influences how people think about their birth culture and makes them revise their relationship with the host culture (Berry, 2001, Castles and Miller, 1998, Cross, 1980). Wahlbeck (1999) points out that:

> Racism and discrimination are clearly obstacles to both assimilation and integration because of the boundaries and structures of exclusion they create. (Wahlbeck, 1999:19)

Three women in this study reported embracing their home culture after experiencing racism in the UK. This supports the belief that the more stigmatised individuals feel in their social environment, the more likely they are to feel angry, excluded and well disposed towards their home culture. It is not surprising that those refugee women who live with sexism and racism experience anxiety and uncertainty as to where they belong. Espin (1996) explains this best when she says:

> Immigrant women, have several mountains on their back, the two most obvious ones being the heritage of tradition and the oppression from outside.... The racism of the dominant society makes the retrenchment into tradition appear to be justifiable, while the rigidities of tradition appear to justify the racist/ prejudicial treatment of the dominant society... the two mountains reinforce and encourage each other... the effect of racism and sexism is not only felt as pressure from outside, but also becomes internalised like all forms of oppression are. (Espin, 1996:92)

As Worell and Remer (1992) also noted women from minority groups often face a combination of risk factors that multiplies their total life stressors, and places them at additional jeopardy for illness and hospitalisation.

## *Diversity*

Migration is generally a difficult experience because of all the changes it implies and the different choices that become available. However, this study found great differences between women in the ways they experienced and coped with these demands and in the Kurdish community where these women live, and this in turn has implications for their lives and well-being.

### The experience of migration

In this study all the women have experienced loss as a result of leaving their homelands, and this was particularly acute for those women who had also suffered bereavement (see pages 120-134). Most of the women also experienced adaptation problems such as learning a new language, becoming familiar with the new system and culture and in some cases finding work (see pages 136-161). However, there were differences in how women experience displacement and these will now be considered.

Women who were passionate about their jobs back home found life in the UK particularly difficult because of losing their respected positions (see pages 125-126, 151-154). Their success in their jobs and being recognised as hardworking and active women seem to have

given these women enormous satisfaction and pride. In exile, they became redundant and unrecognised and they felt useless; it was a painful process working through this and finding meaningful employment.

The fifteen women who had applied for asylum also suffered from the bureaucratic process which made them feel powerless and insecure about their status and future (see pages 98-103). Understandably, those women who had not been accorded refugee status were very distressed, as this creates uncertainties for the future, introduces painful delays in plans for re-uniting their families, and in some instances meant lying to authorities (page 107).

There was evidence that elderly women found life particularly difficult in the UK but again there were differences between Hull and London (see pages 155-160). The elderly women who lived in London were vulnerable and distressed when they were new in the country, but as time passed they benefited from access to the large Kurdish community and Kurdish clubs for the elderly. Being illiterate also prevents women from attempting to learn English, and women who are educated and have their children around them seem to adjust better. The elderly women who lived in London found ways of getting around and were well supported by the community organisations and by individuals from the Kurdish community. Those who lived in Hull talked about lack of community support, interpreters and organisations that could help them (see page 103). Lack of language proficiency and health problems meant restricted movement and limited access to health care services (see page 159).

Single mothers were also particularly vulnerable and distressed about looking after their children alone (140-144). Young mothers seemed to have found coping more difficult than others (see Miriam's case, page 140). Two single mothers in this study were exactly in the same situation: they had two sons, had left their husbands behind, arrived around the same time and had limited education back home. One of them seems to have coped better because she perceived her new situation as challenging but also full of potential and possibilities (see Zara's case, page 175). Her strong will and aspirations to make use of the new opportunities helped her to cope.

Women who were left by their husbands back home and arrived in the UK under the family reunion law seemed to be satisfied in their new lives (see Gulan, page 187, and

Sheila, page 174, 206). Being reunited with their husbands and having refugee status seems to make them feel secure. They liked living in the UK because they felt protected from gossip and outside interferences into their private lives. One of the women also mentioned that her husband is more supportive in the UK because back home he was restricted by the society which blamed men who were soft and supportive to their wives.

The young women who come from supportive and liberal families also had a positive experience of migration. Free from oppressive traditions and supported by their families they explore the different possibilities in the new culture and feel in control, strong and happy (see Henar's case, page 165, and Lana, page 163). Family seems to play as essential role in women's lives; if the family is traditional and restrictive the new possibilities can only make the young woman's life more complicated.

The women for whom marriage and migration to the UK coincided, seemed to find life particularly difficult (Tanya, page 111). Experiencing the sudden change of status, from young single women to responsible married women, alongside migration and lack of support has been very stressful. The experience was even more difficult for those who married men long established in the UK who could not take time off to help their wives to adjust to the new life (Hana, pages 122 and 147).

The new country can be a refuge from oppressive gender expectations of the home culture (pages 204-207). Two women in this study were able to escape abusive marriages as a result of migration. In one case this was only possible through the family's support (Leena, page 205-206), in the other case the woman made a decision on her own (Layla, page 206). Away from gossip and the stigmatisation of divorced women, she was able to break free from her relationship.

In this sense, how women experience migration depends on a number of factors. Evidence from this study suggest that effective coping is related to age, health, background, personality, their position and status in the UK and the resources and help they have access to (pages 170-184). Some women seem to be less damaged by exile, others have been luckier in their new lives. For example, two women (Zara and Salma) arrived when the dispersal system was in place but ended up living in London and this has played a big role in their ability to settle down with the help of Kurdish community and the organisations.

## Within the community

Another important finding of this study is the diversity amongst the Kurdish community. I have spoken about Heshu Yunis who was murdered while I was collecting data for this study (see page 161). This is an extreme example of possible consequences of women's acculturation and how it affects their lives within the family. This is not to say that honour killing is a common occurrence within the Kurdish Diaspora. In this research, I interviewed women whose unconventional choices had been accepted by their family and community.

A young woman's intermarriage was accepted by her family after they got to know the man she had chosen (page 163). Her family's acceptance of her choice has made her feel closer to them. She takes pride in her family and her connection with them is very strong. Intermarriage, as this woman pointed out, is an umbrella for many other changes such as clothing, drinking and liberal views. She is able to maintain links with the community while marrying outside it. The man and his family have become great supporters of the Kurds and this woman is active in raising awareness about and promoting the Kurdish issue. This has led to being accepted by the community who perceive her as a woman who not only did not lose her identity but also has gained support for the cause.

An elderly woman in this study has also been able to accept her daughter's divorce from a Kurdish man and later marriage to an English man (page 162). This has not been easy for her because of being gossiped about by her elderly friends who condemned her daughter's second marriage. However, the situation has improved since her daughter's husband made an effort to attend Kurdish events and to learn the language, and most of her friends now think well of the new son-in-law.

In my own case, my family, particularly my parents, were initially unhappy about my marriage to an English man. It was due to my brothers' support back home that my parents accepted my marriage. Now, although my parents still cannot communicate with my husband because of language barriers, they like him and want us to stay with them every week. Recently, when I published my first collection of poetry in English, the Kurdish community centres joined hands to organise a launch for my book in October 2004. During the launch I had great support from members of the community who were also warm to my

husband. Later, I had many supportive emails and texts from some of the men and women who had not heard me read before. To me this was a sign of being accepted and respected.

In summary, this study found that how women cope in exile and what they are able to achieve depends partly on the support they have from their families and whether or not they are being restricted by family and community. This diversity advantaged some women and disadvantaged others.

## *Power, powerlessness and empowerment*

Immigration policy has been designed to limit the numbers of asylum applications in the UK and to restrict the impact of asylum seekers on the public services (Watters, 2002). The State exerts control over asylum seekers by restricting their mobility, accommodating them in specific places through the dispersal system and by refusing them permission to work. Feeling powerless in the context of these constraints was reported by different participants. Some of the factors that contributed to their feeling powerless include, the process of applying for asylum, being denied the right to work or not finding work, being denied the right of relocation to areas of choice and exposure to sexism and racism.

Six participants described the period when their asylum application was not determined as disempowering (pages 97-101). Not knowing about the results of their application meant they lived in a state of suspense and could not make plans for the future: those whose application was rejected were particularly vulnerable. The participants reported feeling powerless, hopeless, depressed and angry. This was mainly because not having legal status in the UK influenced their entitlements to housing, benefits, and the right to study or work. What they found most difficult was that there was nothing they could do about their situation. Several women reported urging their lawyer to write to the Home Office, and turning to their MPs as these were the only things they could do.

Five participants reported feeling blocked because of not working. Finding work has been very difficult for some of the participants, especially those who came at a later stage in their lives. Some women also reported feeling angry and frustrated that their previous experience and qualifications were not valued in the UK. If they wanted to work, they

needed to start from scratch and again this was described as more difficult by the older women (Dila, page 114). I have also noted above (see pages 114) how women described the disempowering effects of sexism and racism on their lives.

In this study, I found that women felt empowered through talking about their experiences. Despite crying when talking about the loss of their loved ones back home and the difficulties they have experienced as asylum seekers, the women were generally resilient when talking about their experiences. They were very eloquent in expressing themselves and clearly valued having their lives and experiences validated. Talking about their problems also helped them to shift blame from themselves and instead to condemn the system which exposed them to all the stress and the individuals who targeted them through racism and sexism.

It was evident in the study that women refugees are empowered by studying, working and changing their traditional gender roles (see pages 201-207). This research highlights the importance of employment for the well-being of refugees. Working seems to help individuals to restore self-confidence and feel useful. It also reduces their reliance on other individuals and provides an opportunity to participate in their new society. In this sense being able to work seems to help adaptation in the new country and the rebuilding of a sense of belonging. One woman also talked about having the opportunity to mix with both genders during her studies and work. This meant that she felt more confident in herself and in dealing with the complexities of her new life.

Nine women also talked about escaping discriminatory tradition and having more freedom in the UK. This gave them the opportunity to live alone, date, drink, intermarry, escape abusive marriages and generally feel empowered by the choices they had (see pages 204-207).

In summary, while there are clearly identifiable sources of disempowerment in the lives of refugee women, there are also routes by which they may find freedom and empowerment through their life in exile.

## *Resilience*

Despite the difficulties they face due to their migration to the UK the majority of the women in this sample are healthy and strong. Some of the women are empowered and happy individuals. These women are not passive victims but active survivors who respond to the pressures upon them (Watters, 2001). Faced with poverty and hardship and not having permission to work some women in this study have, at least for a while, resorted to illegal means of getting around the system such as working in the black market. This is the kind of activity which Williams (2004b:264) calls 'crimes of necessity'. The women have worked in order to pay back their debts, help ill family members back home and simply to live. Despite coming at a late age some women in this study have found work in this country. All of them have had to work hard to get to this stage. Some of them have taken training courses and have worked voluntarily in order to find paid employment. One woman is working voluntarily and two more are working hard to improve their English and find employment. All these women are hard working and struggling – in some instances successfully - to regain their lost status.

One way that the women in this study cope with their stressful lives is through laughter. Despite their difficulties they laugh a lot and tell jokes. For example, they laugh about sexism in their own community, and at the apparent aloofness in the British community. Another way of dealing with the difficulties is by dancing; the Kurdish community itself is renowned for its singing and dancing. Several women in this study seem to enjoy dancing whenever the opportunity arises. They also seem to have a great passion for life.

I found at least half the women in the study very strong and eloquent. Indeed it is possible that the experience of migration has made them stronger and more exponent about their beliefs. One participant feels privileged because she can choose the best values from two cultures and feel at home in both. She also reported feeling stronger in expressing her views and denouncing racism and sexism (see Jhala's case page 186). Another who did not have conventional schooling has managed to learn English, take courses and get a distinction in her Mathematics course (see Zara's case, page 133).

In summary, most of the women who took part in this research had worked hard to survive their losses, adjust to their new lives and regain their lost status. Those able to maintain contact with their ethnic community had access to the warmth and support which was invaluable at times of distress. Integration into the British society and culture also created opportunities for greater independence and for changing their gender roles. Additionally, having access to two cultures and two communities means having the possibility to take refuge in one of them if the other becomes temporarily abusive or difficult. The experience of exile may be initially shattering but most women are able to recover their strength and are further empowered by surviving the experience. As noted by Williams (2004b):

> Individual motivations, of course, cannot be generalised but this group of participants at least, are united by their desire to regain what they have lost. (Williams, 2004b p266)

The women in this study demonstrated that they were capable of managing their lives and recovering their previous status. Some women even managed to build a better life for themselves and their families. There was no indication that they aspired to be dependant on the host country. This is important because their strength should be nurtured and they should be allowed to participant in the British society. It is the restrictions they experience in their lives in exile, be it regarding their legal status, right to work, freedom of movement, and right to equality, which become obstacles on their way to becoming valuable, active citizens.

## Implications for services

Refugees do not participate in the policy-making process and are generally stereotyped. The treatment of refugees as a homogenous group misrepresents them and hence works against the effectiveness of policy and services. As shown in this research, the reality of refugee social worlds is very different from the dominant pictures of refugees either as manipulative individuals who come to the UK because of the generous benefits system or as mere dependant, powerless, exiles. As Gagnon et al. (2004: 144) point out, 'incorrect generalisations can have widespread ripple effects in the scientific community and in

society at large that can be difficult to control. These errors can lead to the development and implication of incorrect interventions and policies.' This is why it is important for policy makers to have access to reliable information about the needs and vulnerability factors that influence the health of refugee women. This research is an attempt to allow a group of refugee women who on the receiving side of the immigration policies to speak out about their experiences and identify their needs.

Many of the participants in this research are skilled and motivated to participate and engage in British society. It is, therefore, in everyone's interests for the strengths of refugees to be nurtured rather than undermined. There is also a need for provision to be made for those refugees who for reasons of bad health, old age or disability may be unable to actively engage with the UK when they arrive. The object of public policy should be to promote the well-being of all residents of the country and to further their goals including providing appropriate services that protect the vulnerable.

## *Social contact*

The women in this study highlighted the importance of social contact. Seven of them reported feeling lonely, isolated, and lacking social support when they were new in the country (see pages 110-113). Isolation and lack of social support was described as a source of stress by the participants. Contact with members of the community seems to be supportive for some women. Single mothers were helped by other members of the community: women who had been in the country for longer and who guided them through the system and helped them look after their children when they themselves were unwell (see page 180-181).

Social contact with members of the ethnic community seems to be more important for the elderly who are isolated from the host society because of language and cultural barriers. Learning to get around has been essential for elderly women in London who reported feeling happier since they have been able to visit friends and attend community events. An elderly woman who lives in Hull complained that she is too far away from the neighbourhood where the Kurds have gathered (page 159). Because of her health problems she is not able to go out much and is very much isolated, this is why she wants to be

housed near the community. However, a younger woman feared that the community would be oppressive towards her because she was newly divorced and avoided contact with people (Jhala, page 181-182). In this sense contact with other members of the community should be facilitated for those who find such contact useful but should not be automatically assumed desirable for all.

Contact with the host society was also mentioned positively. Two women who live in Hull (Gulan and Runak, see page 183) talked about knowing English people who have helped them practice their English and have become friends to them. One woman said that her friend has introduced her to organisations and people who could help her officially. A participant spoke favourably of a woman who works in a charity organisation and 'likes Kurdish people'. Because of her kindness toward the community, she has been given a Kurdish name (page 183). This woman encouraged the participant to become a voluntary interpreter and this gave her good self esteem.

A participant who has found the Kurdish community oppressive towards her as a woman is happy to have British friends who do not judge or undermine her and are kind to her (Dila, page 172). Another participant expressed her desire for more social interaction with members of the host society. She believes that without much social interaction it is difficult to improve her English by doing a course two afternoons a week (Naz, page 129). Two women reported that they do not meet enough English people and have no non-Kurdish friends. One of them argued that she cannot really integrate into the British society as she does not meet English people (Leena, page 195). The other also pointed out that she has not met many English people because where she has studied and worked most people have been Asians or Black (Henar, page 196).

In this sense there is evidence to support Ager's (2002) suggestion that while a refugee's culture should be recognised and attempts made to help preserve her networks within the community, efforts should also be made to help her interact with the host society because this will help acculturation.

## *Organisational support*

Four women from London reported being helped by the Kurdish community organisations (pages 181-184). The organisations helped them with their asylum and housing claims, provided them with interpreters when necessary and helped them register with doctor surgeries. Two women reported negative experiences with an Iranian and a Kurdish community centre. One of them argued that sometimes people who work in these places do not have proper training. One woman was supported by the Social Services and was grateful for the help she received from them (page 183).

Two participants from Hull talked about the charity organisations that have helped them. They mentioned the Churches, KIAC and ARCO (page 183). One woman who had health problems was also helped by the health visitors in Hull who checked on her every day when she was recovering from her stroke. She is still supported by them, they now visit her once a week (page 200).

Charity organisations and community centres are valuable resources for asylum seekers who are unfamiliar with the language and system. This does not mean they have no shortcomings. Sometimes community centres are overstretched with limited resources. They may mistakenly employ individuals who are not well trained or qualified. I worked in a Kurdish community centre for a few months and found the job very stressful. I was supposed to be outreach health officer but ended up dealing with immigration, lawyers, housing and other issues about which I knew little. While we were seeing clients in the centre, refurbishment work was being carried out and we had to carry on working in the noise and dust that surrounded us. Sometimes bad management of these centres drives professional people away, leaving the place to deteriorate. Funding is also a great problem. The elderly officer of the Kurdish Association was without a job for one year because of funding problems. Despite the good work carried out by such centres, the government does not provide them with permanent funding, leaving them in a state of limbo at times. There is also a lot of competition for funds between the different community centres making things even more difficult.

## *Advice*

Six women complained about not being aware of the services which were available to them. For example, there was no one to tell them where to go to learn English and how to register their children for school. One of them who did not know about her rights was bullied into accepting accommodation which was in a very bad condition (Miriam, page 118). Another woman felt that there was no guidance to direct people: 'They house you in a hostel and forget about you' (page 118). She argued that during the first six months when a person is not allowed to work, she should at least be allowed to take language and vocational courses to prepare her for her new life. She felt that studying English 13 hours a week is not enough to learn the language quickly. Another participant did not know about the everyday services available in the UK. For example, she did not know about public libraries to take her children and borrow books (Zara, page 118). She ended up taking her children to the park every day, whether cold or rainy. She felt very fortunate to be told by her children's school that she should take her children to the GP and make sure they get their vaccinations. She wishes that there were more of these helpful and important tips.

Some of the women in this study recognised and reflected on the risks they encountered at this stage of their migration. One woman pointed out that as an asylum seeker she was very 'hopeless' and 'vulnerable' (page 185). Another woman also reported being confused because she said when you first come to the UK you feel that you do not know anything, you totally put yourself at the mercy of others whom you think know better. Difficulties in accessing good quality information resulted in some of the women wasting time and energy following poor advice in matters relating to their asylum application, work and studies. The participants hence believe that they would have benefited by knowing about their rights in this country, about public services in general as well as the specific provision for refugee women, and the normal opportunities for anybody to study and get career guidance.

In the case of young women such as Heshu who seem to be in danger because of their unconventional choices, more specialised services are needed. Such problems require not only talking to and advising the young woman but also her family. At the moment such women are offered legal protection and their removal from their families are facilitated.

But we know from the case of Fadima Kendal in Sweden that such protection may only delay the danger. Despite hiding from her family and taking her brother and father to court, Fadima was eventually killed by her father. This is why it is vital that refugee community organisations consult with refugee women so that they can work more effectively on their behalf. This will help them to provide information and advice on specialised women's and children's services.

In this sense it is important to provide advice in the following areas:

1 Information about their rights and entitlements.
2 Information on how to cope with racism and sexism.
3 Information on how to cope with violence and threats of honour killing.
4 Information about the available services specific to refugees from both the state and the voluntary sectors.
5 Information about public services essential to their immediate needs and everyday life.
6 Information about other public services generally.
7 Career advice and information about training courses and studies.
8 Help and guidance in preparing Curriculum Vitae and advice about job interviews.

I have noted above that employment is a crucial determinant of the well-being of women refugees. It is therefore, important to note that voluntary work was not a successful avenue to employment for the women in the study. The three women who did voluntary work in order to find paid employment were all disappointed with the process. One of them worked as a voluntary elderly person's officer and was trusted to do all the work on her own but when she applied for paid employment in the same organisation, they did not give her the job (page 195). Another woman worked voluntarily in a school in order to become a teaching assistant and unfortunately she was unable to do the right course and could not get a job despite all her efforts to obtain experience through voluntary work (page 137). The third was given voluntary work on a reception desk in a quiet place where no one visited and consequently she was not able to improve her English or gain any experience which could help her find work, so she stopped working there (page 135).

## The strengths and weaknesses

Research about refugees and their mental health has worked towards 'homogenising... refugees into a single pathologised identity' (Watters, 2001:1710). This study challenges this perception. The narrative approach was essential for giving everyone a voice and allowing them to define and describe themselves, their world and their problems in the context of their experience. Additionally, through using participant observation, I was able to collect information about things which the participants may not have felt comfortable to address directly, such as clothing, drinking and support provided by their husbands.

Much of the current research, especially that commissioned by the Home Office (Choudry, 1996, Johnson, 2003) is highly focused on producing defined research outcomes and to answering specific questions. Studies like this which give insight into the details of people's lives therefore provide an important counterbalance.

Being an insider was useful in a number of ways. Firstly, I did not need an interpreter and was able to interview women who had newly arrived in the country and did not speak English. Secondly, I'm aware of the difference within the community and from early on, I knew that I needed to represent women from the different factions. Some women in this research are well respected despite breaking traditional norms because of the good work they do within the community and because of promoting the Kurdish issue in the UK. Others are from more traditional backgrounds. Thirdly, being an insider meant I had things in common with the participants which was important especially at the beginning of this research when we were able to talk in general and sometimes discuss news of back home and the political situation there. This helped to quickly establish trust and friendship between us. Finally, being a woman has helped me to become friends with the participants. I have laughed a lot with these participants and cried with them when listening to their accounts of loss, oppression and bereavement.

The aim of this study was to provide a comprehensive overview of Kurdish women's experiences of migration which allowed them to articulate their concerns and priorities. However, the methodologies used will have excluded those women who did not feel able to, or could not speak about their lives and experiences. It is possible therefore, that the

study did not include refugee women who were most oppressed or experiencing the most extreme distress. There were other limitations in the sampling for the study. Despite my efforts to include the points of view of young women (16-25 years of age) and more religious women, I was not able to interview anyone in these positions.

Finally, due to lack of time and opportunity I was not able to explore the significance of one of the routes to empowerment identified in the literature, that is, empowerment through women's groups. My work as a writer with groups of refugees supported the view that women's groups work to empower women by creating support groups and by providing them with a platform to fight oppression and change the traditional gender values (Herbst, 1992, Roe, 1992). I was not able to elaborate on this point by investigating the role of Kurdish women's groups for empowerment.

## Reappraising

This study makes a number of contributions to the research literature in this field. For example, despite evidence suggesting women refugees find it more difficult to cope with migration as compared with men refugees (Ager, 1993, Ghaffarian, 1998), I have found that some refugee women feel empowered by being alone for the first time in their lives and feeling free to explore different possibilities (see pages 171-173).

According to Ager (1993) and Veer (1998) contact with members of the community is supportive of refugees. However, I found that although contact with the community was desired by many women, some avoided it. This is mainly because although the Kurdish community is warm and supportive to individuals at times of distress, it can also be intrusive when women are going through personal crisis (pages 181-182). Similar findings were found regarding the supportiveness of family. For most women in this study the presence of family has been supportive. However, a minority found their families unhelpful and a source of stress and disappointment (see Miriam's case, page 178). In the case of Heshu and Fadima, their families were the source of distress and violence and eventually led to their deaths. As such these findings, illustrate the risks of over-generalising.

It is generally claimed that education helps adjustment and coping (Ghaffarian, 1998). However, in this research I have found that while education may help women become familiar with English language and the western culture it should not be thought of as an unequivocally positive factor in adaptation. An educated woman may need to or want to requalify in order to work in her own field and this becomes a further task which complicates adaptation. Women with limited education may live on the fringe of the British society but this does not mean they are unhappy. These women may network with other women in similar conditions and manage to maintain their way of living without major crisis. Additionally, having limited education and staying at home can offer some protection against racism. It is of course, highly likely that these women will have a delayed response to migration when their children grow up in the UK and adopt values which they cannot accept.

## Conclusion

During the period I was collecting data for this study there were many negative reports about refugees in the British media. Refugees were identified as parasites on the system who strain the country's resources and economy. They were portrayed as cunning and manipulative people who managed to secure great resources by applying for asylum and pretending to be traumatised. In this research I have observed twenty Kurdish women and recorded their stories to give these women a voice and counter the mega-narrative woven by the British media. I have revealed some of the difficulties that refugees face when they arrive in the UK. The women in this study have suffered from multiple stressors such as the long bureaucratic process of applying for asylum, adjustment to the new country and culture in the absence of support from friends and family and the effects of sexism and racism on their lives. I found them strong survivors with amazing ability to enjoy life and be successful despite all the negative stories that surround them. They are hardworking and vibrant with great internal resources (Watters, 2001:1710). Despite all the difficulties they face, migration was not a completely negative experience for all the women. There are opportunities to be explored and experiences to be gained. Living between two cultures,

some women are able to choose the best values from both and have a more humane and enriched life and experience.

By providing a detailed insight into the struggles faced by Kurdish women refugees and by shedding light on the personal and community resources available to them, I hope to have contributed to a more accurate understanding of the lives of refugees. I have noted differences amongst the women in this study in how they cope and deal with difficult changes in their lives. Within this small sample I also found a great range of lifestyles, for example, some women choose to abide by tradition and others have achieved freedom and self determination without cutting ties with the community.

Facilitating the women to talk about themselves and the difficulties they experienced as refugees enabled me to identify factors that affect their mental health and psychological well-being. In their own words they identified these factors as being rooted in powerlessness, in not knowing the system, being mislead, being unemployed and feeling isolated. I have argued here for a woman-centred and holistic approach to addressing these problems, one that is developed in close collaboration with women themselves. This approach would support the evident resilience of this group of women and make a significant contribution to preventing psychological distress and to promoting their psychological well-being.

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# Appendix 1

## *Biographies of the women*

1. **Dila** is in her early fifties and has never been married. She came to the UK in 1997 and now lives in London. She was a P.E. teacher in Iraqi Kurdistan and has also worked there for Save the Children when the Safe Haven was established in 1992. When she arrived in the UK, Dila was hopeful that she would learn the language quickly and find a job. She has been disappointed with finding a job and is still taking language courses to improve her English. Disappointed with not finding work, shocked about the new culture and feeling sorry for herself, Dila suffered from depression on and off from the first year of her arrival. This all got worse when one of her sisters, who she was very close to, died of cancer five years ago. She still wears black because of this and has let her hair grow grey. Dila came to the UK because her older sister was already living here. Both of them lived together back home as they were both single women and it's not desirable for women to live alone in Kurdistan. Now they live apart here and Dila keeps away from the community. She has been hurt by people's comments about her depression. She loves gardening and in her flat she has a big back garden which she cultivates and works on every day. She is also renting an allotment to plant vegetables in the hope to set up a little business. She has a clean one bedroom flat which has been decorated beautifully. Some of her furniture has been given to her by friends and family.

2. **Fadya** is in her late sixties and came to the UK with her daughter in 1997. She was educated in Iraqi Kurdistan where she was born into an elite family. Her father was a poet and he gave her a lot of freedom. As a young girl, she even worked with her father in his shop and he was criticised for this. Fadya's husband died many years ago. She has seven sons and one daughter. All her sons are living separately and the daughter, who is the youngest, lives with her in London. Most of her children live in Britain and she has some grandchildren. Her sons are very loving to her and their

sister. When she came here, Fadya took some lessons and learned a little English to give herself a better chance in her new life. For many years she lived in unsuitable accommodation and has recently been given a flat which she is happier with. I have known Fadya for a few years as she is a friend of my mother. She is a very active woman and very open minded. To the extent that she sometimes has to hide her views from the group of Kurdish elderly that she mingles with. The interview took place in her house.

3. **Gulan** is in her early fifties and came to the UK two years ago following her husband who had been granted refugee status. She lives in Hull. She was a civil servant in Iraqi Kurdistan but had retired just before she came to Britain. She has four children, two boys and two girls. Her daughters are married and live back home, her sons are teenagers, one of them is seventeen and the other is fourteen. At the time of the interview, only the fourteen year old son was able to come because the British officer who interviewed them in Syria did not believe that the older son is only seventeen. Both of her sons look older than they are. Gulan is happy about being reunited with her husband and living in Hull, but she was initially worried about her older son. Recently through MP's intervention, her son was able to join them and they are very happy. She goes to classes to learn English and has made friends with non-Kurds. Having found the Kurdish community oppressive, she approves of the new society and feels safe and happy.

4. **Halima** is in her mid-fifties and came to the UK with her young daughter in 2000. She now lives with her daughter and son in Hull. She has health problems and had a stroke in Turkey which has left her with a disability. Her speaking is still affected by her condition, although she has recovered a great deal since her stroke. She has left six children behind, three of whom are under the age of 18. There are rumours that she fled from her husband of many years though she has never talked about him. Her daughter goes to school and is a bright smiley girl who has to help her mother cope. Halima's asylum application was not processed for three years and this made her very depressed as she was hoping to bring her young children over. She was granted Exceptional Leave to Remain which will not permit her to bring them over. Now she is waiting impatiently to be given a travel document so that she can go back to Iraq and see her children.

5. **Hana** is in her thirties and came to the UK in 1993 because she married her husband who is a Kurdish scientist. I met Hana three times, once on a quick visit to her home in London and twice in her work place. Her three bedroom flat is beautifully decorated and is very much like a show home. It is obvious that her husband is wealthy. Her three year old daughter is beautiful and seems very stubborn. Hana repeatedly cut her sentences short to attend to her and what she wanted. Hana had just graduated when she got married and came here. She felt very depressed in the first few months because she was lonely and her husband worked 50-60 hours a week. She lacked direction, but then took her husband's advice and did an MA in economics which she did not enjoy. Hana feels angry with her family and her husband at times. She believes that she has not achieved any of the things she wanted to do because of their constant interference and requests. Most of her life, she went along with what her family decided or chose for her and this continued with her husband. All of this has made her feel angry and disappointed. As a result of which she wants her daughter to be independent and free. She constantly argues with her family and husband whenever it comes to her daughter. Her family think the little girl is spoilt and she thinks they are trying to control her daughter and determine her life as they did in her own case. Throughout the interview Hana avoided talking about her husband directly but the silence was telling about their relationship. She cannot leave him, even though she does not seem very happy with him. Hana is beautiful and cheerful and works in a Kurdish community centre part time.

6. **Henar** is in her mid twenties and came to the UK with her mother (Fadya) in 1997. She was a secondary school student when she came and is now doing a degree in computing. She lives with her mother in London. She has seven brothers, four of whom live in London. Her brothers are very open-minded so her life is not as difficult as it could have been. She is quiet and very calm. I have known her for a couple of years. The interview took place in her home while her mother was coming and going. She said she had nothing to hide from her mother so didn't mind her being present. Henar is really calm and confident. She has learnt lots from her experiences of living in London where she works and studies in mixed gender environments and has more freedom.

7. **Jhala** is a 35 year old who arrived in the UK in 1997 with her younger sister. She was a lawyer in Iraqi Kurdistan. Now she is trying to re-qualify and studies part time. She works in a community centre. She was married to an influential man whom she was very much in love with. He betrayed her and got remarried to a younger woman. She hardly talks about her ex-husband. There is a sense of fear in her silence as well as a loyalty because he is related to her. Jhala experienced racism when she was studying English and later when she was working voluntarily. Her younger sister fell ill a number of times and was clinically depressed for long periods. She was taken advantage of by some old and new friends. Her asylum application was not dealt with for four years and then she was granted Exceptional Leave to Remain. She struggled a lot in these years. She is independent but very much committed to her Kurdish identity. She hopes to go back to Kurdistan.

8. **Lana** is a young woman in her late twenties. She originally migrated to the US with her father in 1994. Her family then followed them. She worked as a UN interpreter in Iraqi Kurdistan. She comes from a very liberal family who allowed her more freedom than was desirable in the community. She felt targeted and alienated back home as a result of the freedom she enjoyed. She worked in the USA and met her English husband there. They came to England two years ago and they are planning to go back to the US. She is independent, determined and intelligent. She is a member of the Referendum for Kurdistan committee and plays an active role in promoting the Kurdish cause. The interview took place in her home which was entirely decorated by her. She and her husband are renting a beautiful two bedroom in London.

9. **Layla** is a 52 year old mother of two young men. Her sons are in their early twenties. She came in 1989, following her husband who arrived in the UK two years earlier. Her children's father had come on a scholarship from Iraq and decided to not go back there. This made life difficult for Layla who was teaching and living in Baghdad at the time. As a result of this, and to hide the fact that her husband had no intention of returning, she took a year's leave from her school and moved to Suleimanya, her home town where she went into hiding, supported by a kind family. Eventually, she had to make arrangements to leave because if the

government had found her she and her children would have be arrested because of her husband's failure to return. She lived in Iran and Syria for a while before arriving in London. Her marriage had never been good but she stayed with her husband for three reasons. First of all, for her children's sake. Secondly, because her father was involved in the Kurdish opposition and she was worried that her husband would blackmail her if she left him, and thirdly because socially, divorce was considered a taboo and she would be marginalised and criticised if she did. Soon after arriving in the UK, her husband dumped them in a single room and said that he was working but didn't earn enough to look after them. For nearly a year he avoided living with them. Layla had to apply for accommodation from the council, put her children to school and found work on her own. He refused to take any responsibility for them and only visited them some weekends. Eventually she found out that he was having an affair and buying a house. When she confronted him about this, he started beating her for spying on him. He beat her a number of times until she eventually decided to file for a divorce. She has been a single mother for a long time. Currently she works as an interpreter with Kurdish asylum seekers. She has a good sense of humour and although she fasts and sometimes prays, she's not at all strict. Her house is colourful and full of plants.

10. **Leena** is a 35 year old mother of a toddler who came to the UK in 1993. She had been married once before and lived in Sweden with her ex-husband for six years. In Sweden, she was newly married, young and lone in a new country and soon she realised that her husband had a very bad temper. He beat her many times in their time together. Once she was six months pregnant when he beat her and she had a miscarriage. She was terrified of leaving him because he kept threatening that he would kill her. Eventually more members of her family came to UK and with their support she managed to get divorced. She moved in with her mother and sisters in London. After one year she got remarried and now works as an interpreter within the community. She is an optimistic and a chirpy character. She dresses casually and her house is nicely decorated with Kurdish objects and pictures.

11. **Miriam** is a 36 year old single mother. She arrived in the UK in 1990 when her daughter was six months old and now lives in London. Before that she was in the mountains as a Kurdish freedom fighter against Iranian government. After the

Iranian revolution in 1979, she joined the resistance with her family at the age of thirteen. At the age of 15 she joined a left wing organisation and remained with them until she left. She met the father of her child in the mountains and was separated from him just before she came to the UK. Miriam looks serious most of the time and doesn't smile much. She does not bother about her appearance and drinks in public. Miriam engages in arguments and discussions a lot. She is critical and seems to disapprove and disagree most of the time. She does not feel that she belongs anywhere. Miriam has two older sisters in the UK who arrived a few years after she settled here. Having suffered from brining up her daughter up alone, she was hoping that the presence of her sisters would be good for her and her daughter. She was disappointed to find otherwise. They were unhelpful and not kind to her daughter.

12. **Naz** is 37 years old and has two daughters. She was nine months pregnant when I interviewed her and later gave birth to a boy. She came to the UK in 1996 when she married her husband who was resident in London. Naz always wanted to be a teacher but under the Iraqi rule, only those who were members of the Ba'ath party could teach. Later, in 1992, under UN protection, the Kurdish Regional Government was established. Furious with the new set up, the Iraqi government withdrew all civil servants and withheld salaries from the Kurdish region. Many of the teachers who were members of the Ba'ath party, left the Kurdish region under Saddam's instructions. This was planned to deliver a big blow to the new Kurdish administration. Soon, the Kurdish government was asking people to come forward and teach, even if they didn't have sufficient training, in order to make sure the schools didn't close down. It was at this time that she went forward and became a teacher. Naz has spent many years in London trying to become a nursery nurse or a teacher assistant without much luck. Naz's husband lost his previous wife and four children in the Anfal campaign (an ethnic cleansing campaign carried out by the Iraqi government in 1988 when 182,00 people went missing). A photo of the four missing children is hung in the sitting room. Her husband was a freedom fighter for many years and as a result of that he sustained many injuries and is partially disabled. Naz is over ten years younger than her husband. She is a jolly, kind person who loves her husband dearly. The interview was carried out in her home while her children were playing in the playground outside their house and her

husband was attending the garden.

13. **Rezan** is 36 and lives in Hull with her husband and daughter. She came to the UK in 2000 and her asylum application was refused. Rezan was a lawyer back home and married to a businessman. She was well off and had a huge house. She had had a stillborn child many years ago and since then she had not been able to conceive. It was only in the UK and under doctor's instructions that she was able to conceive. Now Rezan and her husband are unemployed. She has worked voluntarily as an interpreter and previously in shops and supermarkets. She believes that she cannot requalify. When I first went to see Rezan, her husband and her brother were suspicious about me and my research. I had to explain everything a few times and kept stressing that she does not have to answer any questions if she does not want to. She herself agreed to take part immediately. When she started talking I realised that she wanted to speak up about the difficulties she has been facing as an asylum seeker. She expanded on my questions and talked eloquently for a long time.

14. **Runak** is a woman in her late sixties. She came to Britain with her husband in 1992 and lived in London. Recently she went back to her hometown after the last war in Iraq. Initially she lived with her eldest child who has her own family in London. Later, when her younger daughter came to London, she separated from her elder daughter's family. She has had ten children who live in different countries. Three of them are still living back home. Her husband is in his eighties and is a well respected man in the community. Runak's daughter was married to a Kurdish man but got divorced after five years. She found this very difficult to cope with and tried very hard to persuade and even pressurise her daughter to not get divorced. Later, her daughter got married to an English man and this was even more difficult. She was worried that her husband and children would disown her daughter. She made a lot of effort to talk to her husband and negotiate with her daughters to keep the family together on this matter. The interview took place after her journey back to Kurdistan. Runak is illiterate but is known in the community to have managed travelling around London on buses. She looks after her husband who is quite frail now.

15. **Salma** is 42 and came to the UK with her two sons in 1999. She came without her

husband from Iranian Kurdistan and now lives in London. Her husband was able to join them three years later. Her asylum application was initially refused. Her first appeal was also rejected and only at the tribunal was she granted asylum. She has had minimal education back home and used to be a housewife. She was supported by her husband, sister and mother. This and being alone with her children, in the face of a highly bureaucratic system made her depressed for long periods. I first met her in a Sunday Kurdish school where many parents take their children to learn Kurdish. One of the Kurdish community centres has set up this school and they advised me to go along and talk to the mothers who come there and socialise together until their children finished their school every Sunday. I spoke about my research to the women and three of them gave me their phone numbers and showed interest. I went to her house and her sons were watching TV in the other room. Her husband was outside. Her home seems to be in a bad condition and her furniture smells. She said she had to always keep the windows open. After finishing the interview she asked me to fill in a form for her, her husband's Jobseeker's Allowance. She kept hoping that when her husband arrived, he would help her in practical matters and she would cope better. However, as she speaks English and is more familiar with the system, he has become dependant on her.

16. **Sheila** is 39 and came to London in 2001. She arrived two years after her husband who was granted asylum. She had three children in Iraqi Kurdistan and gave birth to twins in London. She was a housewife back home and is now looking after her twins. She hopes to learn English and find a job when her children are a little older. Migration has had good consequences for Sheila as her husband has mellowed and helps her in the house more than he used to back home. I was introduced to Sheila by Naz. The two families mingle and visit each other every now and then. I phoned Sheila the first time after Naz had told her about me. She seemed to have a busy household as there was a lot noise in the background. She invited me to visit her at home on a Saturday afternoon. Her daughter, who is about 8 or 9 years old, opened the door to me. Sheila came and directed me to their sitting room. They live in a four bedroom house in a quiet area. They had the Kurdish satellite channel on. The decoration was very simple, no objects or plants. Sheila told me that her twins keep reaching out for things and playing with them so she has limited ornaments. After a few minutes, her husband came to welcome me and the daughter brought

me some orange juice. Sheial had one of her twin boys on her lap and the other one was playing in the corner. Her husband then took the twins and his daughter next door so that we could talk in peace. He seemed really pleasant and calm, and was not suspicious of me. My first visit was brief. I told her about my research and gave her the letter of consent to read in her own time. The second time, I was in Naz's house when Sheila's husband called and said they would like to come around. This was when I interviewed her. Although it was not planned that way but worked very well. They were all very relaxed and Naz sat with us with the twins while the other children were playing in the hallway.

17. **Shino** is 34 and came to the UK in 2000. Shino worked as a nurse back home and is known for crying a lot and saying that she misses her family. She now lives in Hull with her husband. The couple applied for asylum separately and he was rejected while she was granted Exceptional Leave to Remain. She told me that the Home Office doesn't know about her husband being here. She has applied for asylum claiming that she left a husband and four children behind. This is because he had come here first, his asylum application being rejected in Germany. He had come to England and applied for asylum. Later, Shino came and applied stating that she had no one in England. As a result the couple live together secretly. Also both Shino and her husband seem to be Kurdish from Iran, yet they both claim that they are from Iraq. This is because they claimed this when they came to the UK. Now they live the lie and insist even within the Kurdish community, who do not believe them that they are from Iraq. In the interview she said that she is a single woman who left her four children behind, while her husband was sitting with us. After switching the recorder off, I asked her why she said such things and she said because that is what she had said to the authorities, showing her distrust of me recording her voice. Before the interview, I had read the letter of consent to her with her husband and she agreed to take part.

18. **Shireen** is 25 and she came to Britain in 2001. She is still waiting to hear from her asylum application. Shireen worked as a TV presenter and actress. She was very well respected back home and had a lot of freedom. She finds the Kurdish community in London is worse than back home in terms of gossip and restricting young women's movements. Shireen is single and now lives with her sister's

family and her mother. She keeps talking about returning home. She is now working voluntarily for the Kurdish satellite channels, recording events in London and making documentaries.

19. **Tanya** is 35 and came to the UK with her husband and two young step children in 1996. She used to be a teacher back home. Tanya married her husband when she was disappointed in love. He was a doctor whose wife had just died and he had two young children. She married him and came to the UK. The children do not know she is not their biological mother. Their father is planning to tell them the truth when they are a little older but so far he does not think that it is a good idea. Soon after arriving she had two boys of her own and she has been mothering four children. Tanya is not happy with her husband and although he sat through my meetings with her, she managed to let me know she is unhappy and seems to regret getting married to him. She wished she was young enough to do A-Levels to study and work hard. She has been taking many courses and trainings and hopes to find a job eventually. Tanya has a lovely home, very clean, many beautiful plants. They have the satellite channels like most Kurdish families in order to receive Kurdish and Arabic news and programs.

20. **Zara** is 43 and has two sons. She dresses very simply and does not wear any make up or jewellery. She looks like a strong, independent, educated woman when she has actually not had official education. Her father prevented her and her older sister from going to school. However during the Iraqi literacy campaign of the early 1980s she joined a school and learnt how to read and write. She passed the classes with great success. At the time she was 17 and had hoped to study further as the government opened a six month English course for those who did well in the literacy class, giving them an opportunity to go to university eventually. Unfortunately her father did not allow her. Later, when her younger sisters were studying Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry in school, she used to join them doing their homework. Her older brother who was then at university used to help them with these subjects and Zara sat through these lessons and familiarised herself with the subjects. At the age of 25 she got married to her cousin who encouraged her to study again but she reckoned it was a little late and had children instead. I met her in the Kurdish Sunday school where she takes her two sons to learn

Kurdish. When I told the women about my research, she was the first one who said: since you are a Kurdish girl doing a Phd we should all help you succeed. She is a charismatic woman. She invited me to her home for the interview. Her flat is a nice two bedroom place in a seemingly safe area. When I went, her children were playing with the neighbour's children in the garden before the flats. We sat down and had a chat about my research, her life and then we started the interview while her sons kept coming in and going out.

# 21.Appendix 2

## *1. The dispersal system*

In 1999, the Immigration and Asylum Act dispersed asylum seekers and removed cash from their entitlements. The new Act was designed to reduce pressure on London and the South East by distributing asylum seekers all of over the country. The downfall was that the dispersal areas were deprived towns which did not have proper infrastructure to accommodate the newcomers. The government targeted these areas because they were less densely populated with more empty and cheap properties. Places such as Hull, New Castle and Thanet became target dispersal areas. There was a shortage of doctors, schools, employment and services in general. There was also lack of interpreters and community centres that could help the asylum seekers settle down. The host communities were more hostile to the newcomers, perceiving them as a threat to the limited resources available. Individuals who were part of the first waves of dispersal were most isolated. In the new Bill money was replaced by vouchers and these were only exchangeable at designated supermarkets.

To make the 1999 Act more official, the government created the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). This was an umbrella organisation which provided the asylum seekers with vouchers and accommodation in the dispersal areas. Individuals were told that should they refuse to settle in the place which is designated to them, they will be denied any state support.

## *2. Exceptional Leave to Remain*

Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) means being granted temporary stay in the UK for four years. This used to be granted to asylum seekers whose applications did not meet the criteria for refugee status but it was not possible to remove them back to their country. The reasons for not being able to deport the person included political reasons such as instability and war in the person's home country and more personal factors such as an asylum

seeker's need for medical treatment in the UK. A person who is granted ELR does not have the right to family reunion. It used to be the case that virtually all people who were granted ELR were eventually given Indefinite Leave to Remain. However, according the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) caseworkers started to overuse the ELR when they felt unsure whether to grant or refuse somebody. In order to help them and simply to reduce the number being given ELR, more stringent categorisation was introduced in 2003. Someone is granted Humanitarian Protection (HP) when they are refused but nevertheless face undue risk on currently being returned due to a civil war in their home country, for example. Discretionary Leave (DL) is given when somebody does not qualify for asylum or leave under normal criteria, but yet there are compelling reasons for them to remain in the UK due to old age, or severed ill health, for example, or even simply having been stuck in Britain's immigration system for an unreasonable amount of time.

# Appendix 3

## *Meeting participants*

The table below presents the number of times I saw each participant and where I met them. It also provides details of when I interviewed them.

| | Meeting one | Meeting two | Meeting three | Meeting four |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dila | In her home, dinner with friends | In her home (Interview) | In her home (Interview) | In her friend's boat |
| Fadya | In a Kurdish community event | In her home | | |
| Gulan | In her home, Hull | In her home, Hull (Interview) | | |
| Halima | In her home, Hull | In her home, Hull (Interview) | | |
| Hana | In her home | In her work place with Jhala | In her work place (Interview) | |
| Henar | In a Kurdish community event | In her home (Interview) | | |
| Jhala | In her work place | In her home | In her work place (Interview) | In her birthday party |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lana | In a Kurdish meeting | In a mutual friend's house | In her home (Interview) | In Jhala's birthday party |
| Layla | In her work place | In her home (Interview) | In a community event with her sons | |
| Leena | In her work place | In a restaurant | In her home (Interview) | |
| Miriam | In her work place | In her home (Interview) | In her party | |
| Naz | In my mother's home | In her home (Interview) | In her home | |
| Rezan | In her home, Hull | In her home, Hull (Interview) | | |
| Runak | In a Kurdish event | In her home (Interview) | In her home, dinner | |
| Salma | In the Kurdish school | In her home (Interview) | | |
| Sheila | In her home | In Naz's place (Interview) | | |
| Shino | In her home, Hull | In her home, Hull (Interview) | | |
| Shireen | In a community event | In a café (Interview) | Kurdish fashion show, making a programme | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tanya | In her home | In her home (Interview) | | |
| Zara | In the Kurdish school | In her home (Interview) | | |