De-constructing Fathering: Exploring the Experience of an Immigrant Lone Parent

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Authors' Note

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Abstract

Lone fathers of immigrant backgrounds are dealing with multiple, interrelated stressors. These stressors stem from challenges associated with settlement, familial and cultural constraints as well as stereotypical constructs relating to fathering expectations (Doherty, Kouneski & Erickson, 1998). This paper explores the experience of an Afghani immigrant lone parent through a deconstructed view of fathering (caught between liberalism and androcentrism). An examination of an asset-based approach as a tool of integration will also be discussed. The case study reaffirms the multiple-layered vulnerabilities and stress of lone fathering and suggests an asset-based framework to support integration and well-being of immigrant lone parents.

Keywords: Asset-based approach, lone parent, fathering, sustainable livelihood, integration, and immigration

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Introduction

Canada's lone-parent population has been steadily increasing and has nearly doubled in the last 50 years to represent 16.3% of all families in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012a). Nearly one fifth (19.3%) of children aged 14 and under lived with lone parents (up from 18% in 2001). This constant growth and the complexity of individuals' contexts and needs have impacted the definition of family and are now of concern to policy makers (Ambert, 2006; Smith & Hamon, 2012). While female-led, lone-parent families are more prevalent, the rate of growth for lone-father families exceeds that of lone-mother families. Factors influencing the rise in lone father households include recent changes in the legal system allowing fathers to gain custody and evolving public opinion on the role of fathers as caregivers and not simply breadwinners (Pew Research Center, 2013b, p. 3). From 2001 to 2011, Canada had seen an increase of male-led lone-parent families from 245,825 to 327,545 (Statistics Canada, 2012). There are studies describing the challenges of lone fatherhood; however, there is a scarcity of research resources focusing on the distinct characteristics and challenges of lone immigrant fathers in Canada.

Amar, an Afghani refugee of Hazara descent (a minority group from Afghanistan), came to Canada in 2012. Two years later, his family was reunited with him. Unfortunately, shortly after his family arrived in Canada, his wife passed away leaving three boys and two girls in his sole care. The loss of his wife compounded the challenges he was already experiencing with settlement and integration. The sudden transition to lone parenthood presented major challenges for Amar including difficulty sustaining the Afghani-Hazaran values and way of life, finding suitable child care, and dealing with concerns around, food security, stable housing, family income and household chores. Amar's employability and ability to navigate systems and

resource support were also affected by his limited English speaking skills, a lack of emotional and physical support and limited mobility due to chronic pain in his leg and ears caused by war-related injuries.

McKeown (2000) identifies four main barriers that are experienced by lone fathers: ideological barriers, legal barriers, income support barriers, and an absence of family support services. Amar faced a duality of parenting worlds. While he found Canada to be a safe place for his family, he also dealt with conflicting ideologies and values between his current and past realities. Amar's Hazaran upbringing was reflected in his fathering style and views that the father is man and voice of the household. However, his children challenged that view as they claimed their rights to speak and be listened to, and his daughters claimed equal voice and rights with their male siblings. Amar felt unable to perform the mothering role and was afraid of the humiliation he would face if he was not able to uphold the androcentric expectations of his community. He also faced the social stigma of being less able to perform parenting roles as a result of his struggle to balance the worlds of parenting, (DeJean, McGeorge, & Stone Carlson, 2012).

While Amar lived in refugee camps he dreamt of a better life in Canada. He did not know that poverty also exists in Canada, particularly among lone parents. In 2011, 19% of lone-father and 34% of lone-mother families lived on low income. The median after-tax income in 2011 was $50,627 for lone-father families and $40,554 for lone-mother families, compared to $83,881 for couples with children (Milan, 2015, p. 16). After his family arrived in Canada, Amar relied on government disability support and the Canada child benefit. While he realized that he was living in poverty in Canada, he also expressed gratitude to the Canadian government

for accepting him and his family. He remained hopeful that he would overcome poverty, as he pursued potential employment or expanding sources of income.

Amar first came to Aspen for housing support through the Sustainable Family Program. At intake it became apparent that he had multiple concerns beyond housing support. He needed a job or other sources of income, skills in resource navigation, counseling, and connection with his community through a holistic and sustainable framework of support. Using a Sustainable Livelihood framework, [1]Amar actively worked with the research team in identifying areas of strengths and opportunities of his current circumstance and in the eventual development of an asset-based framework used to map out his assets and goals.

Methodology

Aspen researchers conducted a case study over the course of eighteen months to examine the participant's lone fatherhood experience in the wake of widowhood. This transition process completely transformed his life from a traditional patriarchal family structure and androcentric ideology to playing the dual roles of mother and father to his four children. This study explores and introduces an asset-based wheel framework to identify the key areas of negotiations and deconstruction of lone fathering as informed by Amar's experience of culturally-specific fathering being challenged by parenting structures and expectations of Canadian society. The research team worked with the participant in identifying areas of fathering negotiations, which were clustered into contextual themes: intersecting vulnerabilities, the dividing lines between

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[1] Sustainable Livelihood is a confluence of assets, goals (outcomes) and strategies that people adopt in response to the forces in their respective social and physical milieus. Aspen's strength-based approach is client-led, emphasizing the client's determination, and focuses on outcomes and strengths that can be used to deal with current and future challenges and to gain stability. Creating an atmosphere of respect, cultural sensitivity, engagement and collaboration is embedded in Aspen's asset-based work with clients.

spirituality and culture, balancing mothering and fathering, persisting safety and security

challenges, the ironies of social connection, and the protracted integration process.

The Sustainable Livelihoods (SL)[2] framework is a methodical concept employed in this

study. Together with the participant, the research team identified asset areas using the

sustainable livelihood framework: physical, social, human, personal, and financial assets. The

identified themes were then reviewed and a new asset-wheel was developed to address the

specific areas of concern identified during the thematic negotiations. The asset-wheel (Figures 1

and 2) also guided the development of the participant's goals and service plan.

Discussion

The asset wheel evolved through discussions focused on asset areas that support parents

transitioning to lone-parenthood. It offers an approach for individuals working within a

multicultural setting to link individual client strengths while drawing from person, family,

community, spirit, and culture. Six thematic negotiations (Figure 1) and six asset areas (Figure

2) evolved from the study. Each key area evolved as part of the conversations, case notes and

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[2] SL was originally developed as an anti-poverty approach to building sustainable well-being. Existing studies on SL have often focused on third-world settings and been economically oriented. The UK Department for International Development used the term Sustainable Livelihood (SL) as a framework to support its work in developing countries. The United Nations broadly defines SL as a means of living and being resilient to shocks and stresses which does not adversely affect the environment (Singh & Gilman, 1999; Meikle, Ramasut & Walker, 2001). While SL is most commonly viewed through an economic lens it can also be viewed as an interaction model of asset capital (De Haan, 2000; Moser & Dani, 2008). SL frameworks have historically been concerned with addressing basic economic needs, however, they may overlook or understate areas such as cultural belonging, spirituality, mental health, and psycho-emotive needs (e.g. self-worth and self-esteem), which are also important aspects of a sustainable life. Building on the notion of asset development, Aspen works with people to discover their capacities and goals. Using a strength-based approach, it builds people's resilience and reduces layers of vulnerabilities. In particular, it has identified outcome areas which are fundamental in leading clients toward sustainable livelihoods and futures, i.e. reducing vulnerability; increasing well-being; increasing access to income and resources; increasing housing stability; food security; and community development or engagement.

transcripts of interviews. The flexibility of the asset wheel makes it easily adaptable to service

providers and their participants.

This paper suggests that asset-based support is vital to the integration of immigrants in

recognizing the value of the experiences, skills and capacities that newcomers bring to Canada.

An asset-based approach can help immigrants map out their strengths in a Canadian context as

one of the starting points to integration. It enables the self-identification of attributes upon which

immigrants can build, a process which has the potential to bring about positive changes in their

own lives as well as lasting contributions to Canadian society.

Immigrant families negotiate with their new environment and are continually beset by

situations pushing them to deconstruct traditional parenting worldviews, beliefs, values, and

practices. For immigrant lone parents like Amar, his fathering negotiations focused on building

assets and capacities (overcoming vulnerabilities), finding a common ground of beliefs and new

culture, working on a positive parenting (mothering and fathering), building a safe and secure

family environment, building a web of social connection, and creating routes to integration and

settlement. Table 1 provides a summary of the participant's negotiation areas, assets,

vulnerabilities, and discerned actions.

Furthermore, evidenced by the narratives of Amar, the experiences of his children

manifest negotiations of a dual and a conflicting world of values, tradition, and practices.

Studies indicate that first generation immigrant families, as well as second generation children,

are continually perplexed by two (often conflicting) worlds: between the beliefs, values, and

practices of the old and the new home (Kwak, 2003; Hebert & Alama, 2008; Alama, 2009); that

immigrant adolescents face the challenge of finding and defining themselves in a new context

and their parents struggle to know how to support them or coach them through this change (Kruzykowski, 2011).

While parenting may be universal, it is shaped by family dynamics, circumstances, cultural beliefs and traditions (Chuang & Costigan, 2018). Amar's transition into a different culture challenged the parenting roles he learned in Afghanistan. This study affirms the previous work of Kwak (2003) that the duality of parenting can cause strain and greater discontent between parents and their children. It also confirms the theory of 'transnationalization of values' (Alama, 2009) or the living up to cultural standards of the previous home (Afghanistan) that often face challenging negotiations with the adhered beliefs, values, and social structures and systems of the new home (Canada). In a global perspective, the mobility and migration of families who are seeking asylum or migrating to territories or countries, the issue on duality and conflicting parenting practices have implications around family policies and programs. More so, for migrant lone parents who are balancing mothering and fathering roles, parenting has become a more challenging experience with children growing up in a different socio-economic and political contexts, lifestyles and values.

Amar's fathering negotiation is a macrocosm of two conflicting worlds. Coming from an androcentric worldview of parenting roles between mothering and fathering, it was particularly challenging for him to navigate their original cultural values and household expectations in a Western world. Studies indicate that traditional views on gender roles and androcentrism will generally shift to find a middle-ground between one's cultural values and new western liberal influences. This shift occurs at different rates of ease and can often cause stress during transition and integration (Inglehart & Norris, 2009). This rate and ease would most likely vary depending on the country of origin and the strength of the individual's attachment to conservative values.

Amar would therefore have to learn the responsibilities of the mother. His household

negotiations would include learning the recipes and cooking skills, which he was not accustomed

to. Living under a government subsidy, his negotiations likewise include understanding the

Canadian service systems and resource navigation to reduce vulnerabilities.

Negotiation of subsistence

Prior to connecting with Aspen, Amar and his children were on the brink of homelessness

and had very limited access to basic needs support and limited connection with community.

Aspen worked with Amar through their Sustainable Families program in order to facilitate

gaining access to secure and stable housing and financial support for him and his children. Aspen

staff actively sought out the Calgary Housing Subsidy and Disability Assistance Subsidy to

ensure that the overall household income was sustainable. Amar was also assisted in securing the

Child Care Tax benefits and the Universal Child Care Tax benefits available through the federal

government. Concurrently, Aspen family strategists worked with Amar on goal setting and asset

mapping. Amar identified areas for improvement in the Lone Parent Asset Wheel such as

opportunities to support financial stability.

As a lone parent, Amar faced many challenges including issues related to home

budgeting, mobility and family health; growth stages of children; managing household chores;

and balancing personal and family life. In describing his caregiving experience as a lone parent,

he talked about challenges in seeking and receiving support in parenting and child care. He said:

> My children have a lot of needs. I cannot possibly support them
>
> just by myself. Sometimes they do not understand why I cannot
>
> provide what they want. Now it's good. Last winter, I did not
>
> understand the children. It was a very hard time for me. The

children are starting to understand me; I am starting to understand

their needs. When they first came from Pakistan, this transition of

six months was very hard for me.

Amar presented with multiple intersecting vulnerabilities such as insufficient income,

limited parenting skills, unreliable child care, social isolation, grief, trauma and emotional

difficulties, mental health concerns and risk of involvement with child services. In addition, he

experienced challenges associated with being an immigrant, including issues of integration and

settlement. He also required support in developing skills in conversational English, which had

been a significant barrier to his ability to navigate systems, gain employment and establish a

network of supports in the community. Government child subsidies have never been enough to

support a family of five. Without an inadequate income, Amar worried about his family and his

ability to provide them with parental care and the basic necessities of life:

I have to play the role of a mother and a father to my children. I

struggle every day to fulfill these roles. Even just finding the bus

stop is challenging enough, let alone accessing any other services. I

just try to do as much as I can; we go to the swimming pool hall. I

am disappointed in myself because I do not provide everything that

I want to.

There are studies that indicate that fathers who are meeting their financial responsibilities

have a more stable economic structure in the household with improved academic achievement

and reduced delinquency and crime in comparison to other households experiencing poverty.

Unemployment of immigrants can impact the fiscal cost particularly in the area of health and

social welfare (Teelucksingh and Galabuzi 2005).

In mapping Amar's assets and strengths, he noted most specifically his ability to maintain positive self-esteem while managing daily life despite the lack of another caregiver, the struggle of juggling the family schedule, and having to face his daily challenges. His love for his children motivated him to find a stable source of income for the family. Amar believed that his children would not go hungry and he was open to learning about the Canadian system and seeking support from groups or individuals who could guide him in accessing resources. Amar also experienced the everyday challenges of settlement and acculturation. Financial stability, child care, and transportation were other significant struggles he had to overcome. However, Amar's positive attitude and resiliency allowed him to seek out opportunities for growth, development and adaptation to new communities and environments. Despite the identified challenges, Amar viewed his time during the transition to lone parenthood as positive. He expressed a genuine trust in institutional and natural supports in the community.

Negotiation of fathering and mothering

In his new role of lone parent and primary caregiver, Amar adopted new responsibilities. In the wake of widowhood, Amar attempted to balance the dual roles of father and mother as he worked towards financial stability, academic achievement and emotional stability in his household. Lone fathers, like Amar, may undergo uneasiness fulfilling the expressive parent role. Amar's emotional investment in, attachment to and provision of resources for his children were associated with his desire to see his children grow and transition to successful adults. He stated:

> With my youngest son, I believe it was most challenging because
>
> he was so young when I left. He didn't know what a father was.
>
> When I first met him he told me that 'I didn't know him'. Most

nights he would cry and I just stayed up, listening and just couldn't

sleep because this was a very new thing for me. That and the

financial part of it, just not being able to provide what they thought

was appropriate.

Traditional models of male parenting do not consider the role that the child's

developmental stage plays in the development of fatherhood. Amar saw his children as the sole

focus of concern and he wanted to do the best he could for them. The settlement and

development of his children gave him a sense of purpose and focus as he established his life in

Canada which represents a bi-directionality of the father-child relationship. He stated:

I sometimes lie awake at night, because I know I cannot provide

for the kids, I am not working, I am worried that child welfare will

take my kids away because I don't have that established

relationship, I can't provide for them.

Lone parenting requires sacrifice and adaptations to one's life. Previous studies suggest

that some men address their personal struggles with gendered roles (mothering and fathering) by

changing how they view and conduct these roles, while others attempt to dismiss or ignore them

altogether (Williams 2009; Alama 2009). Those who attempt to change their role perspectives

and adopt a generalized "maternal" lifestyle do so by replacing or altering the maternal-nurturing

aspects of daily life with more risk taking, fun and physical/sports/outdoor activities and with

less indoor make believe, art, crafts, etc. (Doucet, 2004). Maintaining this balance is a constant

struggle, as well as a form of stress that lone mothers tend not to have (Coles, 2015). For Amar, a

shift to accept new responsibilities and new activities was a necessity. His motivation to do the

best for his children speaks, in part, to his resilience and self-esteem. Despite his past

experiences and his cultural understanding of fatherhood, Amar was able to take on the activities

involved in a traditional 'mothering' role and incorporate them into his own life. He explained:

> When the children lost their mother, it was really difficult. They
>
> didn't even know what I looked like or who I was. My children
>
> have such a deep love for their mother, and to see me being around
>
> reminds them of her. At first, this relationship was really
>
> challenging and very hard on both the children and me but I just
>
> tried to spend time with them and tried to provide whatever needs
>
> that they had, so you know you could build up a relationship and
>
> trust. Each child is unique with unique personalities.

When asked to discuss the emotional struggles of lone parenthood and widowhood, Amar

acknowledged that there were moments of his day where he struggled with being a lone parent.

He explained that in his culture, it is customary for a widow to remarry for the sake of his

children. Amar, however, did not feel that for his family, this would have been the right thing to

do. He said:

> Being a widow is very hard for me because I miss my wife. We
>
> were neighbours, we grew up together, and we were married until
>
> the end of her life. I feel like I am dismissed now. I think about my
>
> children and that they don't have a mother. This is just
>
> heartbreaking.

Additionally, Amar explained that he feels that one should not spend too much time

considering the emotional struggles as he has a huge responsibility on his shoulders. He was

happy that his children are with him and that they too can have better opportunities in Canada:

> I want to give time to my children. I want to be here for them and
>
> listen to them. The children are happier to talk to me now. They
>
> want to tell me about their plans and their troubles. I want to give
>
> them the best I can. I want them to be the best they can be.

Negotiation of caregiving

Lone fathers are able to serve the emotional or interpersonal needs of the children that are typically met by the mother; however, these attempts may not be sufficient according to their own personal perceptions as the struggle between stereotypical gender roles continue (Wolff, Pak, Meeske, Worden, & Katz, 2010). Amar discussed the challenges of raising his daughter without another female figure in the family and his concerns regarding the emotional needs of his daughter. He went to a parenting class but felt awkward being a lone father in a group of mothers. He stated:

> Denise told me about some classes that helped me learn about
>
> being a father. They were helpful. I wish there were more of these
>
> classes just for fathers, I felt uncomfortable with all the women.

Amar sought help from his female cousin to guide and teach his daughter, to support her needs, and to be a female role model for her. He considered it an accomplishment, as a lone father, to provide access to a female influence for his daughter.

Low financial stability, unemployment and limited community supports are often daunting experiences. This is especially true when combined with the challenges of lone parenting as a recently widowed father taking on a 'mothering' role. Amar hoped to sponsor his mother to emigrate from Afghanistan to help him with the caregiving role and support him through his transition to lone parenthood.   This support would enable him to access English as

Secondary Language (ESL) resources, obtain employment, and increase his income. He

explained:

> I am just waiting for my mom to come here and then after my
>
> mother comes, my plan is to have more freedom and just be, you
>
> know that, have a good peace of mind that my children are safe
>
> and that they are just taken care of, that they are being taken care
>
> of and I can move forward with that.

The "lived" experience of a refugee father transitioning to lone fatherhood is complex.

Amar struggled to preserve the balance between his personal understanding of fatherhood as a

provider and maintaining the financial security of the household. His desire to see his children

grow into healthy, successful adults had not changed. He wanted his children to remain

connected to his cultural values and heritage. He expressed the challenges of lacking an

additional caregiver and his desire to have a female influence for his daughters. During this shift,

the children struggled to accept him as the primary caregiver. They did not like his cooking, and

they found that they could not talk to him about their personal concerns and fears. Throughout

the transition period, his personal conceptualization of fatherhood shifted to a dual role of father

and mother with increasing paternal engagement in all facets of family dynamics. Over time,

however, Amar established attachment and connections with his children.

Ciabattari (2007) suggests that achieving a work-family balance involves addressing

issues with family coming before work, such as taking time off for illness and childcare issues

(family to work spillover), as well as work impeding on time with family and daily family

balance (work to family spillover). These conflicts can often impede and discourage lone parents

from engaging in work outside of the home and increase their reliance on social services.

Similarly, without sufficient childcare and variable childcare schedules in and outside of the

home, Amar did not have the physical resources to pursue literacy classes or employment.

Moreover, there can be tensions between parents and children as children integrate and

adopt "Canadian" values which may be at odds with their own cultural values. Kilbride et al.

(2000) found that immigrant and refugee youth felt pulled in opposite directions, between what

seemed to be irreconcilable values or cultures, and a desire to adapt and fit in to their new

homeland. This exacerbated the tension between parents and youth associated with the

challenges of settlement.   Much as Amar faced settlement difficulties, his children also faced

challenges as they settled in Canada. He strongly believed that his children need to embrace his

tradition at home. He said:

> Bringing up a child is a family responsibility. Parents need to teach
>
> their children with the tradition and values. As the father of my
>
> children, it is my responsibility to build strong morals and tradition
>
> in the family. It cannot come from outside you know, it should be
>
> from family and parents, so it would be a huge help to have my
>
> own family here to support me because it's a very lonely process. I
>
> want a family to rely on, someone who can support me --- that the
>
> hardest part.

While single fathering presents many challenges, the children are also exposed to several

risks. A study by Gelles (1989) found that children in single parent families were more likely to

be exposed to abuse and neglect; a distinction, however, was not made between mother and

father households. Several studies also indicate that academic achievement is higher for children

in two-parent households than their single-parent counterpart (Downey, 1994). A study by

Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington (1992) suggests that children from single father families only marginally outperform children from single-mother families. Daughters of single fathers also reported distinct challenges in seeking support from their fathers especially as they developed into adolescents, as young girls often look to their mothers for guidance and support (Kalman, 2003).

Negotiation of belief and culture

The definition of a father is variable across cultures and across time. While some fathers may have been raised with a traditional conception of fatherhood as a "breadwinner" or provider, others may have an altered conception of fatherhood. The cultural understandings, roles and symbols that immigrants bring with them from their home countries are critical in understanding immigrant family life. Traditional roles and symbols in the country of origin have a powerful influence in shaping family values and norms as well as patterns of behavior that develop in the new setting. Traditional gendered roles impacted Amar's values, skills and understanding of fatherhood:

> In my country, fathers are there to work and provide for the family.
>
> The mother of the children is available for the children to
>
> understand their emotional and physical troubles. The children are
>
> beginning to understand that I am both like their father and mother.
>
> I am working for my children. In ten years, I want the children to
>
> say "Father is working for me, now he is good; he speaks English,
>
> good reading, writing." The most stressful part of the whole
>
> process is not being able to provide for them. The money that I get
>
> from welfare it isn't that much, so it's a learning process, I'm still

learning to balance between providing and getting to know the kids

and the relationship is getting better.

Society's expectations, rules, and customs concerning gender and household roles continue to be influenced by historical, economical, and political changes as well as religious beliefs. Families who migrate to a new country tend to preserve their unique cultural values, norms and traditions (Ali, Fazil, Bywaters, Wallace, & Singh, 2001; Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). For example, the view of the Afghani family as characterized by an authoritarian male and a dependent female (Bozett & Hanson, 1991) is still very relevant and is far from changing in the face of urbanization and acculturation. Cultural differences in defining the role of a father therefore became an important consideration in defining the parenting style and responsibilities of Amar's transition to lone parenthood.

Studies suggest that the father's emotional investment in, attachment to, and provision of resources for children, amidst significant personal and family challenges, are all associated with the intent of enhancing the well-being, cognitive development, and social competence of young children (Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995; Amato & Rivera, 1999). Amar's parenting style, built in persistence and self-confidence, will increasingly shape his children's attachments, social-emotional competencies, linguistic and cognitive attainments, and orientation to family and work. He states:

My father taught me to have positive self-esteem… at the end of

the day that is all we have and I would like to pass on this wisdom

to my own children.

The change in role to primary caregiver can bring stigma to fathers who are perceived as weak and submissive within their own communities because they are not subscribing to traditional gender norms of being the family breadwinner (Wolff et al., 2010). Amar faced transition challenges with the significant shift from fatherwork (provider – a 'traditional' Afghani role) to motherwork role (caregiving and house chores) (Alama, 2009). He struggled with a constant need to be the "breadwinner" and throughout the parenting shift he grappled with the feeling that he no longer fit the traditional masculine role (Coles, 2009). Balancing these external stressors can make immigrant fathers even more vulnerable, as compared to non-immigrant fathers.

Amar expressed an interest in developing his ethnic and spiritual social network in Calgary. He believed that increasing his children's exposure to the Afghani-Hazara community and activities could sustain their religious and cultural rootedness. According to Amar, ensuring a strong cultural foundation through access to the Hazara tradition, mores, religiosity, education, and ways of life was a significant part of what he would consider to be a successful transition to lone parenting.

Amar also wanted to blend his traditional Muslim culture with Canadian society. While he appreciated the sense of freedom and liberalism of Canadian society, he still wanted his children to observe Islamic traditions such as eating "halal" foods. He wanted his children to have traditional Afghani foods as wells as Afghani kitchen wares and utensils, but access to these in Calgary is limited and costly. At most times, his cultural practices were at odds with his household and food budget. While he was open to his children enjoying McDonald's or A&W burgers, he felt the traditional dishes were also critical in establishing balance in the household. He said:

> If my mother was here, the children would have an influence from
>
> our culture and she would be able to help Suzy grow up. Suzy
>
> needs the presence of a woman as she grows. I am just a man, how
>
> can I raise a girl on my own?

> With my mother here, the children would have someone to talk to.
>
> They will have a traditional influence, someone they know and
>
> someone they have lived with before. She can teach the Quran and
>
> she can also cook for the kids, all the things they used to eat. My
>
> mom will help the children understand my culture. She will help
>
> me in talking with them.

Research has shown that having a support network helps alleviate many of the struggles of lone parents. The presence of additional supports, in the form of a family member or a stronger community support network, would allow Amar to share the load of daily challenges and responsibilities. Amar looked forward to his mother's arrival in Canada because her presence would ensure that the basic needs of child care, traditional influence and parenting were better supported.

Furthermore, Amar experienced cultural barriers around employment opportunities due to his low level conversational English, limited transportation, chronic pain in his legs, and post-war trauma. Additionally, Amar was unable to attend English as the Second Language (ESL) because he is the primary caregiver to his children. He had no additional help and was unable to afford childcare. He said:

I do not want my children to ask me in ten years: Why are you not

working? Why don't you have any money? Everything I do is for

my children.

For many immigrants and refugees, language barrier is one of the main obstacles in

accessing, receiving, and utilizing immigration and settlement services in Canada. The work of

Welterlin and LaRue (2007) suggests that despite the use of translators, families who have

limited proficiency in English may still feel uncomfortable and frustrated trying to obtain

information about community resources and services. The language barrier impeded Amar's

ability to access financial literacy support, such as low income subsidies and benefits, because of

a lack of understanding of the services available. While Amar was aware that there were new

subsidies he was eligible for, he did not understand how and when to access the services. It took

him a considerable amount of time to learn about government subsidies and how to budget and

prioritize spending. Amar also felt unable to fully support the health needs of his children

because he found it difficult to understand the diagnosis or prescriptions from doctors. He had to

seek help from translators but one was not always readily available.

It is important to understand the role of culture and the conceptualization of fatherhood as

traditions and practices that inform resiliency, parenting styles, and the fathers' emotional

investment in the family. For Amar, his "lived" experience began and was propelled by access to

his heritage, religious and cultural links. His cultural attitude informed his worldview and

defined his role, behaviours and expectations as an immigrant father in a new country. Amar

credited his ability to transition to lone fatherhood to his own father and grandfather, both of

whom were critical in the development of his strong value system and protective nature. This

cultural upbringing suggests a different resilience in the face of challenges. Alongside his strong

need to maintain his role as the protector and provider, Amar was also able to expand his own

conception of fatherhood and adapt to the challenges of his new role of primary caregiver.

Negotiation of safety and security

Refugees who come to Canada carry with them their experience of trauma; feelings of

insecurity and trauma complicate their resettlement experiences. Some refugees may have been

subject to intimidation, violence, and harassment from a variety of groups and individuals. The

healing process takes time, but a supportive and positive environment and systems can help them

build on their own strengths. Living in a stable home and in a safe and welcoming community

significantly impacts immigrants' integration and settlement experiences. Service providers may

consider utilizing trauma-informed principles such as increasing empathy, compassionate care,

grounding, and de-escalation to create security in relationships, communities and a stable

environment. Amar states:

> The thing you have to understand about people coming from places
>
> of war like Afghanistan is, they bring their fears and insecurities
>
> with them. They carry those memories with them and continue to
>
> feel isolated and scared; it is very difficult for them to trust others.
>
> These research meetings have created a space where I can trust and
>
> feel comfortable asking for support. I feel secure sharing my story
>
> here.

Amar was pleased with the improvement in his physical safety and his ability to live

away from threats, intimidation and violence.   Once his physical safety was provided for, he was

able to focus his attention on reducing economic vulnerability and food insecurity by building his

financial assets. He wanted to get a house, a place he considers a safe haven: "my long term goal

is to buy a house and have one place where my children can grow...I know it will take a long

time but I want my children to feel safe here."

Negotiation of belonging

Recent immigrants in Canada often face the difficult reality of loneliness and social

isolation. Building social networks and navigating systems in a new environment can be a

difficult experience. Social support is a basic determinant of health and is as vital to maintaining

well-being as food, shelter, income, and access to health care and social opportunities. The

amount of stress that a parent feels and how they cope with this stress is influenced by the level

of their support network. Social networks can influence parents' feelings of success and can

enhance parents' ability to cope with their situations (Respler-Herman, Mowder, Yasik, &

Shamah, 2011). Support networks may include family and kin, friends, teachers, neighbors,

significant others and groups that are able to provide a variety of supports including emotional,

spiritual, financial, child care, and emergency assistance. Social networks may also include

community programs that provide social support for parents and families (Coles, 2015). The

community itself should be at the forefront in helping its own members, since the best comfort

comes from people who have survived similar experiences and share the same culture, beliefs

and values.

Newcomers may experience feelings of isolation and alienation, often linked to cultural

differences and experiences of discrimination and racism. Lone and low income parents like

Amar tend to be more socially isolated, but the presence of supports and utilizing these supports

has been shown to reduce stress, increase overall contentment and increase engagement with

children (Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Crosier et al. (2007) also spoke of financial hardship and

lack of social support as factors which negatively impact the mental health of lone parents.

Amar felt that it had been easier for him to get around and socialize with others when he first came to Canada alone as refugee. However, when his children immigrated he felt he had lost some of his freedom. He said:

> Before the children came here, I was living like a single person, it
>
> was much easier for me to go out, meet people and socialize but
>
> after I became a lone father, I lost a little bit of my freedom… My
>
> heart is for the children and I want to be with them. But I need to
>
> learn more about parenting. I have never been a father before, let
>
> alone a lone father. I feel more comfortable now with my parenting
>
> skills but I still don't have as much freedom to go out and meet
>
> people or get an education.

Aspen works to connect immigrants to ethno-cultural groups and social events, with the ultimate goal of enhancing integration through network building. Amar's case worker at Aspen along with the research team work with him in building his social and economic assets by connecting him with community resources, settlement and counseling services, language and skills programs and assisting him as he learned to navigate health and educational systems. Amar stated:

> For all of my life, I have been an immigrant, being here and there
>
> in different countries, so one of the most important factors was a
>
> countries experience, because I can adapt myself with the new
>
> situation and even if it has been tougher for other relatives.
>
> Supports from Aspen workers like Denise and Karl that helped me
>
> in getting a house, learning how to grocery shop, finding a place I

can learn English and I really appreciate the fact that Canada helps

people to come here, it provides them the security and just

supports to be able to settle.

With the support of Aspen, Amar successfully expanded his community network in

Calgary. He explained:

For me, it is very important to be closer to the Canadian population

and make these connections. I don't want to be isolated here. I just

want to get out of the house, out of my shell and go out in the

community. Talk to people and ask them questions. Learn from

them and find support through them. So this is the most important

thing. Being in the community -- be sociable, not just stay in your

own community.

For immigrants and refugees, a more appropriate social support can function as a

"springboard" to build social relations and facilitate access to employment, education and other

basic needs. Amar said: "according to my experience, Canadians are supporting me and many

other people who are newcomers that are coming here." Social support enabled Amar to cope

with and manage the challenges of settlement and integration. It is a key determinant of

sustainable well-being during major transition periods for immigrants and refugees.

Summary

Refugees and immigrants come into their new life in Canada with tremendous hopes and

expectations. Experiences of social exclusion, financial instability, social isolation and

uncertainty have a profoundly negative impact on individuals, family and friends. The provision

of settlement and integration services is essential to ensuring the effective settlement of

newcomers.

Many immigrants and refugees require settlement services when they first arrive that may

include linguistic and culturally-appropriate health and social services throughout their years of

adaptation. Findings from this investigation point to a number of structural constraints in social

and health care services that impede the establishment of sustainable livelihoods for immigrant

lone fathers. Stewart, Barron, Brown, and Hartwell (2006) point to disparities in access to

institutional service according to gender, age, race, income, language, and immigrant status.

Inequity in access to these services limits disadvantaged groups from fully utilizing social and

health care services. In this investigation, low literacy, systems navigation, and limited

transportation were among the barriers impeding access to social services. For a recent

immigrant going through parenting and cultural shifts, childcare, transportation, and budgeting or

financial management assistance are important areas of support.

Access to resources and the ability to navigate systems could help recent immigrants

move toward a sustainable future. For example, Amar needed the support to navigate and access

information and resources. He needed to understand systems like medical visits or doctor

appointments and access to transportation. He recognized the necessity of having a car so he

could transport his children to and from school and appointments, buy groceries, drive to work,

and attend cultural and religious activities. This is of special relevance as new immigrant

families may settle in peripheral areas of cities (where rent is cheaper), while services are mainly

located centrally.

Amar expressed a lack of awareness of services as a result of language and economic

limitations, social isolation and inadequate information from organizational agencies or

government. He also expressed that cultural barriers and stigma from accessing low income

agencies and services can be a mitigating factor to support-seeking efforts. This is not a new

concept as some immigrant families may experience "distress and lowered perceptions of self" in

relation to the use of social services, but points out that other literature has stated that the use of

these services creates resilience and feelings of independence and security (Maupin, Brophy-

Herb, Schiffman, & Bocknek, 2010).

It is important for service providers to build rapport and trust with immigrant fathers in

support of the optimal development of their children. Service providers can educate themselves

on the economic and language barriers of newcomer immigrant families, as well as the gendered

perceptions felt by fathers, and take extra time to make lone parents feel comfortable. This will

promote better relationships, enable parents to perceive and interact with the social services

system more positively, and ultimately benefit the well-being of children. Through

conversations about daily life, financial security, balancing childcare and parenting, spirituality,

skills development and other facets of the asset wheel, Aspen has found support for a shared,

collaborative model of client service delivery. When developing solutions to the challenges

faced by an immigrant lone father, a more sustainable approach of settlement and integration is

produced when the clients' assets are taken into consideration.

Acknowledgement

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