

## **Refugee Mental Health during the Asylum Waiting Process: A Qualitative Study of Turkish and Canadian Contexts**

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**Abstract.** While the literature suggests that forced migration negatively affects mental health, fewer studies focus on the mental health of refugee claimants waiting to be granted asylum. In addition, despite the high numbers of refugee claimants in the Global South, fewer studies compare refugee experiences globally. This study attempts to fill these gaps by addressing the mental health of refugee claimants from Iran during the asylum waiting process. Focusing on the Turkish and Canadian contexts, this study asks the following questions: How does the waiting process affect Iranian refugees' mental health and wellbeing? How do their lived experiences of mental health and wellbeing differ based on the country of temporary asylum? In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Iranian refugees. Nine of them spent their waiting process in Türkiye, and six others spent it in Canada. The analysis results showed that the waiting process is characterized by a sense of temporariness, lack of belonging, precarity, and uncertainty of the future, which lead to adverse mental health outcomes.

**Keywords:** Iranian refugees, mental health, refugees in Canada, asylum waiting process

### **Introduction**

Canada is commonly known and represented as a welcoming country for refugees (UNHCR Canada 2019) as well as one of the major countries of refugee resettlement (Labman 2019). However, most refugees seek asylum in their country's neighbors first (Moore and Shellman 2006), resulting in Türkiye being the host of the largest refugee population globally (European Commission 2021). Most of the refugees in Türkiye are temporary asylum seekers, who are referred to a third country by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) once their refugee status is granted (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). The process of waiting for status determination and resettlement can last five years or longer. (Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018). Many of those who spent a waiting process in Türkiye become resettled in Canada (Labman 2019; Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018) as government-sponsored refugees (Government of Canada, n.d.). Those who apply for a refugee status directly in Canada also spend a waiting process as refugee claimants, before being granted a permanent status by the Immigration and Refugee Board (UNHCR Canada 2019). While in general these periods are characterized by uncertainty and limbo (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017), less is known about the mental health impacts of the waiting process on refugees. In addition, global comparative studies are not frequent in the refugee mental health literature. This study attempts to address these gaps by asking the following questions: How does the waiting process affect Iranian refugees' mental health and wellbeing? How do their lived experiences of mental health and wellbeing differ based on the country of temporary asylum? The methodological perspective and research results will be discussed in the rest of this paper, concluded with recommendations.

## **Methods**

This study uses a qualitative phenomenological framework, which focuses on the significance of the subjective lived experience (Mapp 2008). A phenomenological framework makes it possible to prioritize refugees' own narratives about their experiences and to create a discursive space for those who are willing to tell their own stories through interviews (Dyck and McLaren 2004). As a non-refugee Iranian who was raised in Türkiye and lived in Canada, the subjective position of the researcher was simultaneously an outsider and insider. This position had complex consequences during the recruitment and interview phases. Speaking Farsi and having cultural knowledge about Iranian migrant life in Türkiye and Canada made it easier to build a rapport with the participants. At the same time, the researcher's nationality has reinforced Iranian migrants' widespread and well-documented mistrust towards other members of their community (Bailey 2008; Darvishpour 1999). This mistrust, alongside the conditions imposed by the COVID-19 Pandemic preventing face-to-face contact, made it challenging to recruit a large number of participants.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted online or through the phone with fifteen Iranian refugees in British Columbia between May 2020-February 2021. Nine participants had spent a waiting process in Türkiye, while six others came to Canada directly from Iran. At the time of the interviews, four of them were still going through their waiting process in Canada. All of the participants left Iran during or after Summer 2009 when a post-election uprising led to increasing political pressure and a subsequent migration trend (Rivetti 2013; Salushev 2014).

The sample consists of nine women and six men, including a gay man and a lesbian woman. The ages of the participants were between 29 and 64 at the time of the interviews. In terms of ethnic identity, six participants were Persian, four of them were Azerbaijani Turks, three of them were Gilaki, one was a Bakhtiari, and another one was half Azerbaijani-half Persian. Six of the participants had children, and five of them came to Canada together with their children. Participants' names and detailed personal information were not included in the study results to protect anonymity and confidentiality. An ethics approval was received from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) before the start of the participant recruitment. Both verbal and written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews.

The interview questions consisted of two parts, the first of them attempting to obtain information about participants' migration trajectories, and the second one focusing on health trajectories. These included asking about their mental health and well-being during the waiting process in Türkiye or Canada, factors and incidents affecting their mental health during that process, as well as the presence of social support and community support. The interviews were transcribed and coded by the researcher using Dedoose, an online analysis software for qualitative and mixed methods (Salmona, Lieber, and Kaczynski 2019).

## **Results**

A majority of the research participants (n=9) spent a waiting process in Türkiye, before being resettled in Canada. This process ranged from 19 months (n=2) to 5 years (n=2). The Turkish asylum laws assign asylum-seekers to specific towns, named 'satellite cities', where they are prohibited from arbitrarily leaving (Ustubici and Karadag 2020, 11). The participants of this research have spent their waiting processes in six different towns which are Bolu, Denizli, Eskisehir, Kayseri (n=3), Van, and Yalova (n=2). The other six participants had spent, or were spending, a waiting process in Canada, at the time of the interviews. For two of them, the waiting

process had lasted three years.

All participants, except one (F, 64) described the waiting process as the most challenging phase of their migration trajectory, characterized by a sense of temporariness, lack of belonging, precarity, and uncertainty of the future. Four general themes emerged from the interviews, characterizing the Iranian refugees' lived experiences of mental health and wellbeing during the waiting processes in Türkiye and Canada. These themes are categorized as trauma; grief and depression; stress, worry, and anxiety; social isolation, and economic challenges.

### **Trauma**

In the context of this study, trauma refers to deeply distressing events shaping the Iranian refugees' mental health and wellbeing during the migration trajectories. The participants' lived experiences of trauma in Türkiye and Canada are reviewed below.

#### *Türkiye*

A majority of participants who sought asylum in Türkiye mentioned the impact of trauma on their mental health and wellbeing. This included the impact of pre-migration traumatic events experienced in Iran and those experienced during the migration trajectory. An example of the impact of pre-migration trauma can be seen in the lived experience of a participant (F, 41) whose husband was a political prisoner in Iran. In the interviews, she shared the traumatizing effects of the encounters she had with Iranian judicial and police authorities, with whom she had to regularly deal due to her husband's political activism. She reported facing sexual harassment by these authorities, which left her mentally and physically distressed during her time as an asylum seeker in Türkiye. She described going through visible physical symptoms when recalling these traumas during her refugee application interviews, as below.

"At those times (in Türkiye) I used to always feel faint... You know, it really affected me very badly. It was to the extent that whenever I repeated them, all my body would shiver. I remember that when we were at the UNHCR office, when I was talking to them, all my body was shaking and it was like I constantly had to interrupt my own talk." (F, 41)

Some Iranian refugees experienced the migration itself as a traumatic incident due to the restricted and involuntary nature of refugee migration. One of the participants (M, 34), who left Iran by crossing the land border to Türkiye illegally through human smugglers, mentioned that the physical conditions during the border crossing, as well as the behavior of human smugglers and fear of being caught, were traumatizing. He described the physical and emotional hardships of the process as below:

"My journey to Türkiye was very uneasy, it was very stressful, it was not comfortable... Crossing that mountain... not even normal, I mean, it was scary. Because first of all, you are crossing the border illegally as a fugitive, and this has its own stress and fear by itself... Then, in the second place, the journey itself is not easy either, that is, your relationship with the smuggler, your relationship with the smuggler from Türkiye is not very secure either, it isn't an easy one." (M, 34)

Even those who didn't go through traumatic incidents had witnessed deeply distressing or violent incidents within their local Iranian refugee communities in Türkiye. One of the most significant examples of this situation is the case of a participant (F, 54) whose neighbor's child was taken hostage and later killed by her father, who was also an Iranian refugee. The participant described going through an intense emotional and mental toll because of this incident, as the main provider of emotional and practical support to the child's mother both before and after the homicide.

"We went to the home and they (the police) opened the door, and we saw that the child was dead. See, this is a big nightmare in my life. For four months I was...I was even losing my mental balance. I felt extremely bad... My whole body still shakes when I remember this." (F, 54)

After the incident, this participant had to testify in the Turkish court against the father, in his close physical presence. She described her feelings of fear and distress during that process, in the following way.

"You wouldn't even believe it, but even though I took two anti-stress pills and this kind of stuff before it, my whole body was shaking...I had such a bad feeling, such a bad situation. A strange fear and terror took my whole body. I was almost going to faint because of how bad I was feeling." (F, 54)

### *Canada*

Traumas experienced in Iran, which led or contributed to the migration decision-making, often shaped refugees' mental health during the waiting process in Canada. In these cases, refugees arrived in Canada under the impact of the trauma, which reduced their capacity to cope with additional mental health challenges such as stress and uncertainty. For example, a participant who claimed refugee status in Canada due to gender-based violence (F, 37), reported harassment and threats by her former fiancé as a traumatizing experience. In another case, a participant went through trauma when trying to navigate the healthcare system in Canada, through which she was diagnosed with a disability. She commented about being upset with the "cold attitude" of a doctor who diagnosed her with a lifetime disability, after "ignoring her complaints and symptoms for a long time".

"I mean when she told that to me, I became really upset. And she was cold, and I was on the edge of crying. I started to cry and I just told her that I don't know what to say. I mean, what kind of doctor is this? You are a doctor, so you should do your job!" (F, 38)

Underlining the contrast between her physical health in Iran and Canada, the participant commented:

"I think these are even more traumatic for me because I was always a very healthy person in Iran...Both mentally and physically. Maybe it's because we experienced the conditions of war back there. Maybe living in Iran made us suffer a bit more, but I was a very healthy person physically, I mean, I didn't have any problems anywhere in my body. My body wasn't disabled. It wasn't fragile. Nothing bad had happened to me in a physical sense." (F, 38)

### **Grief and Depression**

A majority of the participants (n=14) mentioned experiencing grief, characterizing their emotional response to loss, as well as depression or intense sadness, during the waiting processes in Türkiye or Canada.



### *Türkiye*

Several Iranian refugees mentioned dealing with grief during their waiting process in Türkiye, often due to the loss of a close person. For some, these losses were often linked with traumatic events experienced before migration. For example, one of the participants had experienced a miscarriage as a result of the police violence during a house raid in Iran.

Another participant (M, 42), has lost his young brother just before leaving Iran, who was a political activist executed by the Iranian government. As a result, he has reported dealing with intense feelings of grief, sorrow, rage, and vengeance, even after leaving Türkiye for Canada. In his words, refugees “carry their issues with themselves while leaving their countries behind”. In some other cases, refugees experience grief in the context of refugee migration where it is impossible to visit their loved ones who live in their home country before their death, and participate in their funeral. One of the participants (M, 40) reported the loss of his mother, which not only affected himself but also his teenage son in an emotionally intense way.

### *Canada*

In the context of refugee migration, the notion of grief can be applied not only to the loss of loved ones, but also to the loss of ‘home’ and the previous sense of self. The loss of ‘home’ is often connected with belongings that are inside the home, some of which cannot be carried by the individuals throughout their migration trajectories. Thus, grieving for more abstract and symbolic losses of home and the previous sense of self become intertwined with longing for the material objects or belongings that are left behind in one’s previous home. For example, a participant (F, 37) reported sadness due to having to leave her artwork in the house of their parents and relatives in Iran.

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t bring any of my art supplies or artwork here. Because my sister and her family requested some stuff, and then we had some personal stuff which was necessary, so we didn’t have any place left for additional stuff...Still, when I call Iran after a few months (of being here), my mom tells me what I’m going to do with ‘these stuff’ and whether she should throw them into the garbage or not. She’s talking about my artwork and sculptures! I tell her that she’s going to give me a stroke, (I say) please don’t even touch them or I will die, they mean the whole life for me!” (F, 37)

### ***Stress, Worry, and Anxiety***

For a majority of the participants (n=14) the waiting process was associated with the uncertainty of the future, therefore a feeling of lack of control and agency. These, in turn, led to adverse mental health consequences characterized by stress, worry, and anxiety for the Iranian refugees.

### *Türkiye*

For asylum seekers in Türkiye, the waiting process starts right after the refugee application, while its ending time is indefinite, depending on various institutional and political factors going beyond the control of the individuals (Biehl, 2015). One participant described the daily life impacts of this temporariness and lack of control as below:

“In Türkiye, our situation was as if we were left hanging in the air, we couldn’t take action about anything...I’m talking about even renting a house and buying furniture..Every day when we used to go shopping, even when we wanted to buy some basic cutlery, we wouldn’t feel comfortable about buying anything. We would tell ourselves that ‘well, I might have to leave these

here and move (to the country of resettlement) after a few months or a year... 'And that wasn't only about spending money, the fact is that we could only bring two pieces of luggage with us, not heavier than 23 kilograms." (M, 34b)

Even after one's refugee claim is accepted by the UNHCR, national and global events can affect the country quotas and assignment of a receiving country to refugees. Multiple participants have mentioned the impacts of the Syrian refugee crisis, the American elections, and Trump's immigration policy changes in their migration trajectories, unexpectedly extending their waiting processes in Türkiye. For example, a gay refugee whose case was assigned to Canada had to wait more than two years to hear back from the Canadian Embassy.

"In Türkiye, my process with the UN has finished in one year... Actually, they sent my case file to the Canadian Embassy after eight months... but that coincided with the (beginning of the) Trudeau government, and the (Syrian) refugee crisis, and these sort of things... So the Canadian government stopped receiving (Iranian) refugees... For exactly 27 and half months, every day, every day except the weekends, I was waiting for a call from the Canadian embassy... For almost two and half years I waited for that call." (M, 34b)

Another participant (M, 40) described how the delays in his migration process affected his feelings about the future, even after he was resettled in Canada:

"Well, imagine that you are constantly waiting and preparing yourself for receiving news, telling yourself that 'Well I'll be going to Canada', and then they call you referring you to the USA, so you prepare yourself again, this time for going to the USA, and then again... So here we are now. So that's why I feel like no one ever knows what will also happen tomorrow." (40, M)

Once they enter Türkiye, asylum seekers' towns of residence are assigned by the Turkish government based on the available spaces or quotas, unless the asylum seeker has a first-degree relative living in one of the satellite towns. Thus, asylum seekers have minimal agency in choosing their towns of residence during the waiting process in Türkiye. Iranian asylum seekers are not allowed to leave the satellite town that they are assigned without applying for and obtaining official permission (Turkish: 'izin'). They have to regularly provide signatures in the local police stations to prove residency (Ustubici and Karadag 2020, 11).

Still, some asylum seekers do live in larger cities with better living conditions and only visit their satellite towns to provide signatures. One of the participants who lived in such a situation described his exhaustion from the constant sense of fear, worry, and anxiety.

Comparing his situation with other migrants who were among his circle of friends, he mentioned that rather than being excited about his country of destination, his main motivation was to be freed of the restrictions shaping his daily life in Türkiye.

"I wasn't excited at all and it really didn't matter for me where I would go... I just knew that I wanted to get rid of the uncertainty... I wanted to know what I am going to do with my life... I wanted to have a proper legal status so I wouldn't constantly act like a fugitive... I wouldn't fear from police anymore... I wouldn't be forced to go (back) to another town for providing a signature anymore... Or (I wouldn't be forced to) obtain permission for leaving the town, and constantly worry about being caught by the police (when you are out of the satellite town without permission)" (M, 35)

Worrying about accompanying children, and relatives back in Iran, is another feeling that was mentioned by three participants, as a factor perpetuating stress and declining mental health. A participant shared her feelings of worry about her child who witnessed their persecution before migration, as below.

"My first child was too young, he was two and half years old when we left Iran. He used to be harmed a lot during our detentions. He used to fear a lot when they used to come to our



house to search for it. To torture us more, they wouldn't allow us to keep the child away from that surrounding. The child always thought that they were thieves who came to our house. He always talks about remembering a thief. These (incidents) were so difficult for me, (and) to take care of this child in such a situation. I myself was also affected a lot, both physically and mentally." (F, 41)

Another participant (M, 40) also mentioned feeling worried about his children's mental health and wellbeing. In his case, the worry was intertwined with feelings of intense guilt for 'dragging his children and wife' with himself, since his political activism led them to leave Iran.

#### *Canada*

For those who spent their waiting process in Canada, stress during that phase was impacted by the language barrier and communication issues. For them, the COVID-19 Pandemic led to further isolation, uncertainty, and delays in the paperwork. Feelings of worry were reported to be more intense by refugees who have left Iran just before or during the Pandemic, therefore worrying about the life of their loved ones who have experienced the Pandemic most severely in Iran. A participant reported her lived experience in the following words.

"It doubled everything in effect...The virus, my nephew's illness, both of these doubled everything else. So in these ten months, I ended up tolerating twenty months' worth of stress, you know? Some people say that the first two years are difficult, but for me, it was like I had double the amount of stress in these ten months, as if I had experienced those two years already. Anyway...I'm just praying for finding a job, and nothing else is too important for me." (F, 52)

#### **Social Isolation and Economic Challenges**

A majority of the Iranian refugees (n=10) reported experiencing social isolation and loneliness in various phases of their migration trajectories, while all of them (n=15) mentioned going through economic challenges which negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing.

#### *Türkiye*

The Iranian refugees in Türkiye were legally not allowed to work or seek registered, formal employment. This lack of employment, alongside the lengthy processes of waiting, led to challenges for all participants seeking asylum in Türkiye. One of the participants expressed his lived experience in the following words.

"The process was long and difficult...Plus, imagine that in those 5 years we didn't have work permits, and we weren't receiving any financial assistance from the Turkish government, and I had to feed a family with two children... With the living costs in Türkiye, so just imagine the mess!" (M, 40).

In the absence of work permits and formal employment opportunities, A majority of participants (n=8) mentioned working informally or voluntarily in Türkiye. Despite not having any social rights or contract because of the informal and unregistered nature of informal employment, working provided the participants not only with economic means but also with opportunities for socialization and gaining respect in the community. For example, two participants (M, 34; F, 64) mentioned working for the local Turkish immigration police as Farsi-Turkish interpreters informally. Two others (M, 34; F, 41) recounted their experiences of voluntarily collaborating with the local Turkish NGO branches working with Iranian and Afghan asylum seekers. One participant stated:

"I used to be the one who brought the newcomer asylum seekers to their doctor appointments in Türkiye because I learned the Turkish language. The police used to call me and say "Abla gel" (Turkish: Come here, sister). I used to work there as an interpreter. For example

when they detained trafficked Afghan asylum seekers. I would be their interpreter. I can't tell you how much the police respected me. They (Turkish people) loved me so much, regardless of where I went...From hospitals to various doctor clinics. All doctors used to know me because I used to bring them (newcomer asylum seekers) to different doctors." (F, 64)

Another interviewee commented:

"I used to work at the office of ASAM (Association of Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants)...That NGO was like a bridge between the UN and the asylum seekers...I mostly worked there as a volunteer...My intention was both to keep myself busy and also to be able to provide some help to the newcomer asylum seekers." (F, 41)

While this participant mentioned eagerly and easily learning Turkish, partially due to her ethnic Azerbaijani Turkic background, her husband's experience was significantly different as he (M, 42) described below:

"In my workplace, there used to be around 40 or 50 Turkish people..and I learned the language from them. Actually..it is an interesting or rather sad story..but now that I think about it, it was a good experience..but it was sad during the first days...As you know, the younger generation of Türkiye is not good with migrants at all...So they used to insult us a lot..and it's interesting that I actually tried to learn Turkish in less than two months. The only reason for me to learn Turkish quickly was that I wanted to respond to their insults. So that's why I learned Turkish." (M, 42)

Alongside the interactions with the Turkish society, relations with the other members of the Iranian asylum seeker community were also significant in shaping the participants' experiences during the waiting process. Several participants (n=6) mentioned being close 'like a family' with other Iranian asylum seekers spending the waiting process in the same town with them. They have mentioned taking different kinds of community leadership roles and engaging in activities of solidarity such as collecting funds or providing emotional support for the community members in need. One of the participants commented:

"I was under a lot of pressure...Not only me, but those around me were in the same situation as well... And I had become something like their mom, I had to constantly comfort everyone...In Türkiye, I had four or five close friends that actually became like my family. I mean, in fact, they were closer than the family. At the end of the day we were all far away from our families, some of us hadn't seen them for one or two years. But with these people, we were near each other every day from the morning until night." (M, 34b)

Another participant (54, F) commented on her supportive role for a refugee neighbor of hers, who had lost her kidnapped child due to a family tragedy that made news in Türkiye. She mentioned helping her during the tragedy despite not belonging to the same religious community. Recalling other refugees' praise for her support, she commented:

"I felt a sense of responsibility. If one doesn't become useful in this kind of time, it wouldn't make sense to be with each other during good times as everyone can do that...The important thing is to help and rescue each other during hardship." (F, 54)

She talked about eventually gaining a community organizer role, in the following words:

"It made me feel useful in Türkiye. Feeling that I can solve someone's problems, or help someone. There were many newcomer refugees who, for example, didn't have money. The (refugee) folks in Kayseri, were sincere folks and they respected me. For example, when they wanted to go to the Bazaar, I would tell them 'Guys, we have newcomer compatriots who don't have money, who have problems, let's help them. Let's each of us buy something for their home



from the Bazaar and bring it here and help them..". So one would bring 5 Turkish liras, another one would bring 10...Everyone would help with so much kindness." (F, 54)

In sum, the participants mentioned having close ties, supportive relationships, feelings of productivity, and a sense of purpose through their relationships within the Iranian community. It can be argued that through these interactions, the participants have attempted to overcome the lack of support created by the absence of active official and non-governmental organizations.

### *Canada*

In contrast with asylum seekers in Türkiye, refugee claimants in Canada were allowed to legally seek employment and work, or receive financial assistance in the absence of employment, if eligible. However, accessing financial help was not always a straightforward process for the Iranian refugees. A participant shared the challenges that she faced while navigating the welfare system during the waiting process as below:

"I got a social worker and they (the government) gave me 500 dollars a month...But I actually lost that (right to financial assistance) after a short time. And I'm actually so glad that it's over...Because at that time my (English) language wasn't strong and I didn't have an interpreter...The social worker used to sit behind glass and she was very distant to me... After starting to work, and receiving a check, she issued a fine to me! They told me that I haven't reported it (as my income). At that moment I was actually living in a shelter. I mean, because of my housing problems I ended up returning to shelter...So imagine, they issued a fine of 1000 dollars for me who is a refugee." (F, 38)

This participant mentioned having complex feelings about receiving financial assistance from the government, in the following words.

"I always advocated about not being dependent on the state, and encouraged my refugee friends to get out of the welfare system... but as a friend says to me that apparently the system is so fucked up that we actually deserved to stay in the system and keep receiving welfare. But it seems like it (the system) doesn't appreciate what we have done. You know, unfortunately, nobody here appreciates characteristics such as honesty and hard work that we brought with us from our home country." (F, 38)

In addition, a majority of the participants who spent the waiting process in Canada (n=5) mentioned that facing barriers during their search for employment was the most challenging aspect of their lived experiences. For several participants (n=4) these barriers were tied to employers' request for proof of Canadian work and education experience. As a result, participants have faced a social erasure of their past job experience, credential, and occupational status. Multiple participants (n=5) have mentioned experiencing severe downward mobility or sharp ups and downs in their occupational history, in connection with their migration trajectory. For example, a refugee claimant (F, 29) who used to work in the public sector as a psychologist in Iran ended up working as a busser in an Iranian grill house after moving to Canada. Another participant, who was a lawyer in Iran, mentioned doing manual labor in the construction sector in Canada, due to his lack of Canadian credentials and official language proficiency. He commented:

"Well, this is a first-world country, you should work every day like a machine, otherwise, you know... (sarcastic tone). I work 8 hours a day...Including Sunday...It's really hard to do manual labor here. You end up being left behind in life because, during your free time you're so tired that you become like a dead body, you can just sleep at home until the next day. What kind of life is this? When someone migrates to a place, regardless of its reasons, one of the most important things is to raise one's living standards. I can't keep working from early morning until evening and

then sleep like a dead body and go back to work again. Is this my standard (of living) now? It shouldn't be...Otherwise, I have my own house and own car in Iran, so what's the point (of living in Canada)?" (M, 40)

Employers' expectations of Canadian credentials become more challenging to navigate for older refugees, who can feel like they have fallen behind or that they have less time to achieve new credentials. A participant described her experience as below:

"When I came here I realized that they don't accept my documents or past experience at all, and I have to start from zero at this age...I mean I was shocked, I didn't think that it was going to be like that... Although everyone tells me that I can follow up in the upcoming years and later work in my own field, but well, in the end, I'm not a 20-year-old young folk who can wait five more years..." (F, 52)

For these participants, the transition from life in Iran to being a refugee claimant in Canada is embodied subsequently through the impact of manual labor and fatigue, as well as the self-perception of having an aging body. These experiences are also connected with the lived time and temporality as one constantly looks back into, and reconsiders their past experiences, credentials, and/or living standards while assessing future options and prospects. In some cases, these assessments were based on comparisons of one's past in Iran and present situation in Canada which resulted in feelings of remorse. One participant expressed the downward socioeconomic mobility that she experienced during the waiting process as below:

"When I came here, the first thing that I ended up remembering and thinking about was an Afghan woman, who was a maid in our home (in Iran)...And I felt like 'well, this woman has been suffering a lot' and I said to myself that now...I just felt that at that moment I was finally able to understand her. So imagine how (hard) my experience was here that I ended up thinking like that." (F, 38)

Another participant commented:

"We didn't have any job in the first 3 months...Until obtaining our work permit. Those 3 months were too stressful for me, way too much...I can say that I was even remorseful, at the beginning...I was always saying that at least there (in Iran) I had my job, at least I had my family there, we were able to have a cup of tea or have a chit-chat so I could ease the pressure on me...Here I can't do that." (F, 29)

This participant's comparison of her living conditions in Canada and Iran doesn't only focus on her employment issues but also underlines the absence of close family providing emotional support. Nevertheless, almost all of the participants who claimed refugee status in Canada ( $n=5$ ) already had one or more close relatives or family members there before leaving Iran. As a result of this community presence, in addition to the language barrier, none of the participants had formed close social relationships and friendships with Canadians from other backgrounds during the waiting process. Two of them (F, 40 and F, 37) mentioned perceiving Canadians as distant, cold, and 'too different from Iranians', mentioning that they don't see close relationships possible. One of these participants (F, 40) mentioned a brief casual interaction with her neighbors, where they didn't respond to her small talk as warmly as she expected: "*I felt like they don't want to be friends with us. Maybe they are racist. We would have been much warmer to them if they were in our country*".

While the presence of close family members, as well as a large Iranian community in Canada, had helped the participants to cope with social isolation, many participants mentioned problems that they had experienced with fellow community members. They often reported uncomfortable and complex interactions with the other members of the Iranian community, shaped

by multilayered moral and character-based judgements. Two participants (F, 38; F, 37) mentioned avoiding close interactions with the other members of the community during the waiting process in Canada, due to the widespread mistrust and anti-refugee stigma that they faced from other Iranian migrants.

### Discussion

While in general participants have associated the waiting process with uncertainty and being in limbo, there are significant differences in spending the waiting process in Canada compared to waiting in Türkiye. The first and the most tangible difference was that while all participants who had spent the waiting process in Türkiye have complained about the lack of work permits and financial assistantships there, the economic conditions are less restricted for the refugee claimants in Canada. In addition to being able to obtain a work permit and become employed, refugee claimants in Canada were also eligible for getting regular financial assistance, which several participants (n=3) mentioned receiving.

The second difference between spending the waiting process in Canada and Türkiye is that those claiming refugee status in Canada already lived in their country of destination.

Thus, unlike those in Türkiye, they did not have to expect to hear about their country of resettlement and go through the process of moving to a third country. As a result, compared to the resettled refugees, those who claim refugee status in Canada have time to adjust and acculturate before becoming permanent residents. Still, despite not having to deal with the additional uncertainty of their country of resettlement, those who move to Canada from Iran go through a sharp transition, which was described as “*a move from hell to heaven*” by one of the participants (F, 52).

Finally, the relational aspect of participants' lived experiences, that is, their interactions with local and Iranian communities were significantly different between those who waited for the asylum decision in Türkiye and Canada. Participants reported uncomfortable interactions with other Iranians in Canada, which led them to avoid building relationships with the members of the community. In contrast, participants had close relations with other Iranian refugees in Türkiye which were described as “*becoming like a family*” by four of them. Similarly, a majority of those applying for asylum in Türkiye (n=6) reported having friendly relationships with the local Turks, while those who spent the waiting process in Canada mentioned extremely limited or no contact with local Canadians.

It can be argued that participants' conceptualizations of cultural proximity and difference play a role in building and sustaining close relationships with locals. Indeed, four of those (M, 34a, M, 34b; M, 35; F, 41) who reported close relationships with Turks came from Iran's own Azerbaijani Turkish ethnic community, which has linguistic and cultural similarities with Türkiye's ethnic Turks (Salehi and Neysani 2017). In comparison, several participants mentioned perceiving Canadians as “distant”, “cold”, and “too different from Iranians” (F, 40; F, 37). These differences, in turn, led to contrasting experiences of social and community support for the Iranian refugees in Türkiye and Canada.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study used a phenomenological perspective to discuss the Iranian refugees' lived experiences during the asylum waiting processes in Türkiye and Canada. The interview results illustrated that for the Iranian refugees, the waiting process is characterized by uncertainty, precarity, and temporariness. Thus, the waiting process affects Iranian refugees' mental health

and wellbeing through four broad issues which are trauma; grief and depression; stress, worry, and anxiety; social isolation, and economic challenges. Despite these common issues, the social, economic, and policy-related context of the country of asylum also shapes the Iranian refugees' lived experiences. First, refugees were not granted work permits or financial assistance while waiting for obtaining their status in Türkiye, in contrast with Canada where they could be employed. Second, those spending the waiting process in Canada were not expecting to be referred to a third country, while refugees in Türkiye had to deal with the uncertainties about their country of resettlement even after their refugee status was granted. Finally, refugees spending the waiting process in Türkiye had stronger social and community support as they had close relationships with both the other Iranians and local Turks, while those in Canada reported minimum or no interactions with Canadians, and negative experiences with other Iranians.

While this study contributes to the literature by presenting rare empirical data, it is important to acknowledge the limitations. First, the sample size of the study is limited to fifteen people. Both due to its phenomenological framework, as well as its small sample size, this study does not claim to provide generalizable findings. Second, despite being relatively diverse, the sample is not representative of all different ethnic, religious, and political categories of Iran and it does not include any Kurdish, Arab, or Sunni Muslim individuals. The experiences of individuals with these backgrounds could be significantly different than the others in Türkiye, due to socio-political reasons including the presence of local Kurdish, Arab, and Sunni populations there. Thus, future research can look into the experiences of a larger and more representative group from Iran to better compare refugee experiences in Türkiye and Canada. Finally, not all of the research participants were at the same point in their migration trajectories during the interviews. Those who spent the waiting process in Türkiye had already been resettled, while four participants were still going through their waiting process in Canada. Future research can be conducted in an international comparative setting, in order to compare and contrast the experiences of refugees living in Türkiye and Canada during the same time period.

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