Title: For better, for worse: Iranian women migrants’ marriages post- migration

Authors: Dr Farnaz Zirakbash and A.Professor Karen Farquharson

Address: Faculty of Life and Social Sciences
Swinburne University of Technology
1 John Street, Hawthorn Campus
Melbourne-VIC
Email: farnazzirakbash@swin.edu.au

Word count: 2936
Abstract

This study investigates whether changes of circumstances and contexts affect individuals’ patterns of interaction with their spouse. We focus on the impact of migration on the marriages of women of Iranian backgrounds who migrated to Australia after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The results of this study indicate that after migration the women gained new societal rights. Having rights empowered the women in their relationship with their partners, enabling them to negotiate changes to the relationship that were not available to them in Iran.

Key words: Iran, gender, migration, and family

Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of Iranian women migrants to Melbourne, Australia. We examine whether and how migration affected the migrants’ relationships with their spouses. The following section discusses how migration affects families in general and Iranian migrant families in particular. This is followed by a description of the research methods and
the findings of the project. We argue that the act of migration to Australia enabled the participants to make active decisions regarding their marriages, decisions that were not available to them in Iran. Those who were unhappy in their marriages were able to either renegotiate their relationship or leave.

**Migration and the Family**

Social institutions such as family and marriage are the product of the social environment, its norms, cultural values, ethnic identification and religion. Moving away from those socio-cultural norms, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, leads individuals to seek new strategies to cope with the new circumstances. One of the challenges of migration is how to negotiate changes to family norms and gender role expectations. These changes are particularly difficult to manage because they are not only about individual adjustment to the new location but are also about relationships with intimates. ‘Social Roles, including family and gender roles, are never fixed. They are negotiated within the new circumstances and are renegotiated if there is any further change in those circumstances’ (Mahdi 1999: 51).

Migration research has examined sources of family disharmony post migration. Trovato argues that the ‘rapid social change’ of migration reduces harmony in families and may weaken the family values developed prior to migration (1986: 208). The bigger the changes, the greater the weakening of the family, increase in individualism and possibility of marriage termination (Trovato 1986: 208). As migration is a complete life change, it alters the couple’s
previous ways of dealing with disagreements and also it changes the attractions to the marriage that may have existed in the old life (Ben-David and Lavee 1994: 133-146). After migration couples negotiate new ways of being in their marriage that align with the new cultural environment.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution led to a huge emigration of Iranians, both voluntarily and involuntarily, to Western countries including Australia (Ali 2008). Many Iranian families experience post migration relationship problems due to stress from new social norms and expectations, pressures of cultural adjustment, financial responsibilities, leaving behind loved ones and a lack of family support, nostalgia, and changes to status and identity (Darvishpour 1992, Nasehi 1995, Shahidian 1999, Mahdi 1999, Mahdi 2002, Ahmadi 2003). Changes in spousal roles may also play an important part in family tensions post migration. Although both Iranian men and women living in the United States seem to have gained economically, women seem to have gained more than men in a social sense (Mahdi 1999, Mahdi 2002). While men lost much of the power and authority they enjoyed in Iran, women gained autonomy, social respect, and a clearer sense of their sexuality, individuality and identity (Mahdi 1999: 75). It seems that gender has had a larger influence on these migrants’ new identities than other variables.

In Western countries like the United States, many Iranian women migrants, specifically those who were middle class professionals, were appreciative of their newfound freedoms; from the mandatory veil, strict dress code and sexual apartheid (Tohidi 1993: 184). For these migrants:
‘the opportunity to become self-reliant and to develop a personal identity is often considered the most positive consequence of migration’ (Tohidi 1993: 184). Despite their satisfaction with their new lives, Iranian women migrants were still subjected to criticism from commentators who accuse them for causing marital instability, becoming ‘Americanized’ (gharbzadeh), and losing their ‘originality’ (esalat) and ‘Iranian female virtues -- including obedience, chastity, patience and self-denial’ (Tohidi 1993: 194-195). Despite these criticisms, the act of migration appears to have had a positive impact on Iranian women, who found it empowering.

Drawing upon individual experiences, this study explores whether changes in conditions can challenge patriarchal domination. Living away from home and familiar culture can shift individual aspirations toward gender equality and freedom of choice. This study explores the impact of migration on women who have moved from Iran to Melbourne, Australia. It asks: how has migration affected the relationships between the women and their partners?

Research Methods

In order to answer this research question we employed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research enables the exploration of “how?” questions by attempting to study social phenomena as they appear in the field and the ways that people interpret them (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). In-depth interviews were held with 26 women between the ages of 25 and 50
who had migrated from Iran to Melbourne. All participants were migrated after the Islamic revolution of 1979 and their duration of stay in Australia was between two to 15 years.

All the participants were married and they were Australian citizens at the time of the interview. Most women had been married for more than two years, with the shortest marriage duration being one year and the longest 20 years. Out of 26 women in this study, six were divorced at the time of interview. This number was particularly depending on the length of marriage and the time since migration. These six women were married more than 10 years and been in Australia more than four years. This is particularly important because 12 of participants who got married in Iran shortly before their migration and lived in Australia only more than two years, were stayed intact in their marriages at the time of interview but were unhappy and initiated thinking critically about their marriage.

Participants in this project were individuals and they were all recruited in snowballing or word mouth technique. The interviews occurred between August 2010 to September 2011. The questioned were designed open-ended in order to provide the opportunity for the participants to answer some questions briefly, or if they wished, express themselves with a longer explanation. Depending on the personal feelings, therefore, the length of the interviews was between 30 minutes to two hours. The participants were all educated worked in professional roles. Professional women were chosen because, as a group, they tend to be more engaged in the market and public spheres due to their higher education. This leads to a greater awareness of the new possibilities and alternative options.
Interviews were transcribed and transcripts were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis allows for a narrative to emerge out of participants’ personal accounts, so the emphasis is on content, hence, ‘what is said’ as oppose to ‘how’ or ‘for what purpose’ (Riessman 2008: 53-54). Despite the fact that interviewing a small number of individuals only in Melbourne was one of the limitations of this study, it provided a fuller understanding and detailed information of this group of women’s unique experiences.

Results: Rights and Agency

There were two related themes in the participants’ discussions of the impact of migration on their marriages. First, most participants found that migration changed their views about the position of women in the family and in society. Their new views empowered them to make decisions around their relationships that were not possible in Iran. In particular, the participants said they had ‘rights’ in Australia that they did not have in Iran. This opened up the possibility for them to renegotiate their relationships where they were not satisfying. The second theme was that migration to Australia enabled the participants to exercise an agency in their relationships that they had not had access to in Iran. In fact, among the newfound rights, majority of participants emphasised particularly on the ‘right’ to exercise agency in relation to decisions about their relationship and their position of a woman in the family. Marriages that had not been happy could be dissolved or renegotiated after migration.
Many of the participants said that they had rights in Australia that they did not have in Iran. How they handled those rights in the context of their marriage depended on their particular marital circumstances. After migration the women were able to actively make decisions about their lives that they had not had the power to enact in Iran. Migration and having rights enabled them to exercise agency in their lives. Having new rights had a different impact for those whose marriages were strong than for those whose marriages were less solid. For those participants in solid marriages, development of their rights and agency strengthened the marriage, provided their partner also developed a respect for them. For participants in unhappy partnerships, migration enabled them to renegotiate their relationship or leave.

For Shila (41) and her husband, the move to Australia and the realization that she had equal rights to men as a ‘human’ and a ‘woman’ improved her already strong marriage:

> We both learned a lot from the culture and society here. My husband learned how to respect me and I learned that as a human and a woman I have the same rights as well as him. In Iran we don’t know that we have rights as well as men. […] Iranian men, don’t know how to show their love and how to respect a woman. They don’t know that women have some rights as well as them.

In Australia Shila learned that as a ‘woman’ she has rights. These rights shifted her husband’s view of her. Australian culture helped her husband to learn about equality between men and women, and this in turn helped him learn how to express his love and respect her. For Shila, once a person knows that women have equal rights to men, they must be respect women similarly to men. Her framing of her situation was that she and her husband did not know that women should be treated equally in Iran; therefore they did not expect it or enact it. Once
they knew, their behaviour had to change. This was not necessarily the case for the other participants.

Roya (33) also had a solid marriage. One year after they migrated to Australia, Roya’s husband went back to Iran for a visit, and then asked her to return to Iran. Her newfound agency is apparent in how she dealt with his request:

…He promised me to provide me a good life in Iran if I go back. I said that I need three days to think. After three days my answer was ‘NO’. I was sort of just establishing my new life in Australia […] so, I said I am not going to quit my path here and I am not coming back!

Roya’s husband returned to Australia after that, and they continue to have a solid relationship. Nevertheless, when asked what she would have done if her husband had decided to stay in Iran, Roya responded emphatically:

I would have definitely stayed in Australia. I knew that if I were back, nothing would have changed. You always romanticize it when you are away from your country. […] I knew the things that I was missing were just because I was away from them.

Luckily for Roya, the separation made her relationship even stronger. However, for a majority of the participants in this study, migration led to their relationship becoming further apart.
Iranian-Islamic culture views divorce as a tragedy and a last resort, especially when there is a child in the marriage. While divorce is not a desirable outcome in Australia, it is socially acceptable to be divorced, and family law favours women, particularly in terms of child custody arrangements. Emancipation from the stigmas and taboos attached to divorced women in Iran, economic independence and awareness of their rights empowered some of the participants to leave their relationship. Kati, (41) initially became closer to her husband after migrating, but this did not last: ‘when problems and pressures of real life began, we both started to become grumpy and it raised arguments and challenges’. For Kati, migration opened up new opportunities for both her and her husband:

> The environment of Australia opened my husband’s eyes to see other women more freely; he didn’t have this chance in Iran and of course in that little city that we were living […]. He was like a blind man that suddenly his eyes opened. He started drinking every night! […].

Kati finally initiated a divorced from her husband. She struggled with the decision to divorce. Even though she had been unhappy in her marriage from its inception, she was going against a lifetime of Iranian norms around marriage:

> After 10 years of my marriage when I was already in Australia, I thought, I have had enough! But like many other Iranian women who think they should come with a white dress to their husband’s house and leave with a white dress¹, I was trying to push my thoughts away […]. Three years after that thought, I finally decided to separate.
It took Kati three years after migration to leave her husband, but if she had stayed in Iran she would not have left him at all. Being in an environment where she had the right to make such decisions enabled her to leave an unhappy marriage.

Arezou (50) was also not happy with her marriage from the start. Her husband was unemployed for most of her married life in Iran, which he attributed to a lack of opportunities in Iran. She pushed for the family to migrate because it would give her husband the chance to prove himself, and give her the opportunity to leave if he did not. She felt she could not initiate a divorce in Iran: ‘because I wanted my children…I could not have them if I was divorced in Iran’.

After migration Arezou’s husband and relationship did not improve. However one of the key changes to her relationship after migration was that her husband: ‘could not be as dominant as he used to be in Iran’. She initiated a divorce. The Western context gave her power in the relationship that she could not access in Iran. Ghaffarian (1998) suggested that pre-existing tensions in a marriage might worsen post migration as a result of men and women’s diverse approaches to acculturation to Western culture. For Kati and Arezou their pre-existing marital problems worsened after migration, resulting in divorce. Both were happy that they had divorced.
Other participants echoed Kati and Arezou in their willingness to leave their marriages if they did not improve. The realisation that in Australia they had the right to equality and the right to make decisions for themselves about their marriages empowered them. They evoked the language of ‘rights’ in their discussions of what had changed for them after migration. This idea of ‘rights’ as something they had not had in Iran but were entitled to in Australia made them unwilling to contemplate returning to Iran.

Family ties in Iran were still a factor in some participants’ decision-making around their marriages. Taraneh (31), for example, lives apart from her husband but has not divorced him because neither she nor her husband want to tell their parents that the marriage had failed. Although Taraneh was emancipated to make decisions for her life, her cultural background and family living in Iran still affected her in Australia. She hid her life in Australia from her parents and in-laws because her life choices are not acceptable in Iran. She still visits her husband and speaks with his family regularly to create an illusion of happiness.

Discussion

 Individuals change their social roles in response to changes in circumstances and contexts (Mahdi 1999, Rajiva 2013). In marriage, migration can disrupt previous patterns of interaction between couples (Ben-David and Lavee 1994, Ahmadi 2003, Gopalkrishnan and Babacan 2007). Migration to Australia changed the participants’ views on marriage, enabling them to renegotiate or exit their marriages if they chose to. Whereas in Iran divorce is seen as
unacceptable (Hojat et al. 2000), once that they settled in Australia several participants actively chose to end their marriage in the hopes of finding a better life.

There were two related themes in the participants’ discussions of the impact of migration on their marriages. First, most participants found that migration and the knowledge that they had rights as Australian citizens changed their views on the position of women in the family and in society. Second, this gave them power/agency to make decisions around their relationships that were not possible in Iran. The participants were able to renegotiate their relationships to make them more satisfying, and they were able to leave if that was not possible.

Notes:

1 The second white dress refers to death. In Islamic culture the corpse is in a white clean sheet for burial. This is a common expression in Iranian culture means as a married woman you only leave your husband’s house when you die.
References


