IMMIGRANT IDENTITY AND THE NONPROFIT:
A CASE STUDY OF THE
AFGHAN WOMEN’S ORGANIZATION

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Immigrant Identity and the Nonprofit: 
A Case Study of the Afghan Women’s Organization

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Abstract

This paper will be of interest to researchers focusing on immigrant identity theory and its application to actual lived experience. The paper functions on two levels. First, it attempts to “bring theory to life” by using a case study approach with women connected as staff, volunteers, and clients involved with a Toronto-based community service agency, the Afghan Women’s Organization (AWO). Using both assimilationist and retentionist approaches, the paper creates a dialogue between these theories and the lived experience of seven Afghan Muslim women. Second, the paper investigates the ways in which this nonprofit organization has leveraged Citizenship and Immigration funding, to deliver assimilationist services such as English language acquisition to a multi-ethnic client base, and created spaces where retentionist activities for Afghan women and youth take place.

The paper examines a number of themes that developed during the course of the interviews. These included: Afghan ethnic identity in Afghanistan and its ‘translation’ in Canada, cultural gaps experienced by Afghan Canadian youth as a result of the Canadian public school socialization processes, transnational identity and an exploration of these women’s identities centred in their roles as wives and mothers, but who, through the AWO, also have taken on roles as individuals serving their community as citizens.

Key Words: Immigrant, Nonprofit, Women, Identity, Muslim, Afghan Women’s Organization

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Introduction ............................................................. Page 1
In the twenty-first century, immigration will be Canada’s primary source of population growth. The success with which new immigrants settle, find jobs, and participate in their communities, and the success with which communities adjust to increasing diversity, in part, will determine the productivity and stability of our communities.

Nonprofit organizations are a relatively new area for academic inquiry. Nonprofits delivering settlement services play a significant role in helping both immigrants and communities adjust. The processes by which new immigrants negotiate their identity are an integral part of the adjustment process. This research project explored two aspects of immigrant identity. First, it evaluated the fit between several theories of immigrant identity and the ongoing identity shifts negotiated by the women connected with the Afghan Women’s Organization (AWO), as they continued their adjustment to life in Toronto. In what ways does the experience of these Afghan refugees challenge or support these theories? Second, this research project considered what role nonprofit organizations play in key aspects of immigrant settlement: the formation processes of ethnic identity, connection with one’s own immigrant community, cross-cultural engagement, and democratic participation in society.

Settlement programs funded by the Federal government and the provinces are essentially assimilationist, with a focus on English or French language acquisition. Two Federal programs account for most of this activity: Language Instruction to Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and the Integration and Settlement Assistance Programme (ISAP). While government-funded programs are the most publicly visible settlement activity, a great deal more is going on. Nonprofit agencies delivering settlement services create spaces where new immigrants engage with staff and volunteers. Such services, thus, provide opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges. These encounters take place both inside and outside of the officially-funded program framework. Immigrants serve as volunteers on boards, assisting with program delivery or volunteering at community events sponsored by these organizations. The involvement of immigrants through volunteerism creates spaces for cross-cultural exchanges and for building social capital,1 quite apart from the planned outcomes of the formally-sanctioned programs. This paper investigated these “invisible spaces” of interaction.

The Afghan Women’s Organization (hereafter referred to as the AWO), has deliberately fostered these “invisible spaces.” It provides settlement services to newcomers of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, and receives most of its funding from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). AWO staff and volunteers spend most of their time engaged in activities geared towards the settlement of new immigrants, ostensibly focused on programs of assimilation, such as learning the language of the dominant group.

To its credit, the AWO has been successful in leveraging its CIC funding to provide programs for Afghan women and children in Toronto. The rent at its four centres is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. When CIC programs are not running, AWO staff volunteer their time delivering programs specific to the needs of Afghan women and children. These programs, run on a shoestring,

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1 Social Capital, according to Putnam (2000) was independently invented six times over the twentieth century. “James S. Coleman put the term firmly and finally on the intellectual agenda in the 1980’s.” (Putnam 2000, 19). Social Capital refers to the mutual trust between actors and their participation in organizations in a community. Communities with large amounts of social capital can more easily respond to outside influences and better utilize the talents of the community. This is due to the level of trust and the degree of interconnection within community. (Lemieux 2001)
would seem to support an Afghan ethnic group identity in an urban Canadian context. Ironically, these programs serve a cultural preservationist function, and exist by piggybacking on the CIC-funded spaces provided by the assimilationist-oriented government policy.

The AWO also serves Afghan women within the framework of CIC-funded programs through paid employment. About forty Afghan women provide childcare services for LINC and ISAP program participants who themselves come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In my association with the AWO over the last few years, I have come to see the paid employment of these Afghan women as an informal program of the AWO, one in which Afghan ethnic identity is negotiated through contact with other immigrants via employment outside the home. Volunteer work at the AWO also provides spaces for ethnic affirmation and cross-cultural exchange. With volunteers and clients from diverse cultures and languages, the AWO creates for itself an environment for cross-cultural exchange where the Afghan women are the primary ethnic group.

Afghan refugees began arriving in Canada in significant numbers in the late 1980’s. Demographically, most Afghans in Canada are first-generation immigrants, with a small percentage of second-generation Afghan-Canadian youth. As such, the AWO presents us with a unique opportunity to observe immigrant group identity formation in its early stages within an urban environment that is racially and ethnically diverse. This interrogation requires an appreciation of the social, economic and political setting which has shaped the life of Afghan refugees coming to Canada, an understanding of the policy framework that delivers the settlement programs to these refugees once they arrive in Canada, and an orientation to environmental conditions affecting the nonprofit sector in Canada, which is responsible for delivering most of the settlement services.
Identity formation is a complex, multi-layered process by which individuals come to see themselves, or are seen by others, as being the same as or different from others. Identity is made visible through the groups with whom we affiliate, our consumer choices, values, and behaviour. A key aspect of identity concerns our relationships. Our identity may be self-determined, and/or determined by those with whom we do or do not associate. Cultural, religious, economic, and political forces, and our relationships with each other, are the primary drivers that shape our identity, acting on us to influence our sense of ourselves. At the same time, we respond to these forces as free agents, resisting or embracing them.

To understand the process of identity retention or re-creation by the Afghan refugee women studied here, the reader needs an understanding of the homeland circumstances that shaped their identity before they arrived in Canada. It is, therefore, necessary to survey the conditions and circumstances of Afghan women in the refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran or as displaced persons within Afghanistan. This survey helps to clarify the challenges these women face in settling here in Canada, by gaining an understanding of the experiences and skills they bring with them.

We start with the geography of Afghanistan, a conflict-torn country about the size of Texas (or Manitoba in Canadian terms), with a population of about 28 million people (Médecins Sans Frontières Canada 2002). Afghanistan shares borders with six other countries (Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan). Its strategic location can facilitate or impede trade in the region. For example, it is considered an ideal route for the transportation of gas and oil to China.
Throughout much of its history it has been a pawn in games played by world superpowers, often serving as a buffer zone. In the nineteenth century the British attempted to mitigate Russian influence there, and in the twentieth century the US took on this role.

The average life expectancy in Afghanistan is about 46 years, and the literacy rate estimate for 1999 was 47.2 per cent for men and 15 per cent for women (Médecins Sans Frontières Canada 2002, 4). There are at least 55 distinct ethnic groups living in Afghanistan. Pashto and Dari are the two primary languages spoken, alongside numerous dialects and minority languages (Orywal 1986). The relative proportion of the primary ethnic groups is, Pashtun 38 per cent, Tajik 25 per cent, Hazara 19 per cent, Uzebek 6 per cent, with numerous minority groups claiming the remaining 12 per cent (Médecins Sans Frontières Canada 2002, 4).

These different ethnic groups share a common religion. Nearly all Afghans are Muslim (84 per cent Sunni and 15 per cent Shi’a, with under 1 per cent for other religions). According to Maley (2002, 9), the two schools, Sunni (orthodox) and Shi’a (heterodox), “have at times fierce intergroup antagonisms, with variations in doctrine and ritual seen as heresies.” Within each of these two religious sects, practices range from ultra orthodox to more liberal approaches. Maley (2002, 10) notes this dynamic: “This Islam of the intelligentsia was and is different from the Islam of the village prayer-leader or mullah, and this is central to an understanding of the dynamics of the Afghanistan conflict.” Typically the more liberal traditions occur in urban areas and the more conservative in rural areas.

The violence that has produced the refugee population derives from both ethnic intolerance and conflicts over land by various groups in the context of the use of force to settle disputes. Other sources for conflict have included devastating economic and political interference by Russia, the US, Pakistan, and other countries in the region. This interference has taken the form of provision of arms to various mujahedeen factions and warlords, and the strategic provision of aid, delivered sometimes without protest, through resource-hungry NGO. Decades of conflict have resulted in hundreds of thousands of men killed, leaving over hundreds of thousands of widows and orphans who must rely on family members or international aid for sustenance. Landmines still cause countless injuries and deaths.

Gender has become highly politicized in Afghanistan. Traditional values in the many ethnic cultures there, bolstered by conservative interpretations of the Qur’an, have greatly restricted the role of women in comparison to western cultures. Women have traditionally been responsible for child rearing, including imparting religious instruction, meal preparation, and managing the home. To put this in perspective, Canadian women have had the right to vote since 1918. The expanding role of

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2 The word ‘tribe’ is also used in the literature and in the media to describe these groups. I have struggled with using “tribe” as a label. See the discussion of this later in this paper. Anthony Smith defines an ethnic group as one that has “a collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, association with a particular territory and a sense of solidarity” (Smith 1986, 22-31).

3 The first province that allowed women to vote was Manitoba in 1916. The last province was Quebec in 1940 and finally the North West Territories in 1951. Federally women got the vote when The Women’s Franchise Act 1918 which received Royal Assent on May 24, 1918. Library of Parliament. Information and Documentation Branch: http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/about/process/House/asp/WomenVote.asp Accessed June 12, 2003.
women outside the home in the Western world was moved along in part, by the need for women to work in Canadian factories during World War II.

In Afghanistan during the 1960s and 1970s, women made gradual inroads in the political sphere. “The 1964 constitution enfranchised women when it outlawed discrimination; by 1977 the twenty-member Constitutional Advisory Committee had two women and the 400 member Loya Jirga, a dozen” (Dupree 1991, as quoted in Cammack 1999, 95). During the 1970s, in the cities at least, more women gained access to education and work. Afghan women then made up ten per cent of the student population (Cammack 1999, 95).

The role of women, however, did not expand in most rural areas. Urban/rural differences figure as key tensions in Afghan society, particularly with regard to the role of women. Value systems in rural areas have subjected women to more severe restrictions of mobility, dress, and role in society.

Before the period of Taliban rule, women in rural areas would rarely work outside the home. In the cities, some women did have jobs, though the freedom to work varied, depending on the edicts of local authorities. Restrictions on women in terms of mobility, education, access to work, and dress are highly contextualized in Afghanistan. For example, in Herat (pre-Taliban), a more liberal city, women could work, but in many other smaller cities and towns they could not (Cammack 1999).

The migration of refugees across the Afghan border as well as internal displacement is entirely due to violence and not to economic factors such as famine (Rubin 1996, 2-3). In 1989 when the Soviets departed, refugees numbered 6.1 million (Médecins Sans Frontières Canada 2002, 4). Their displacement stemmed from internal violence as mujahedeen, warlords, and government forces fought for control. Refugee numbers had increased tenfold since Soviet troops first entered Afghanistan in late 1979.

When the Soviets withdrew in 1989, they left a Communist president, Dr. Mohammad Najibullah, in power. The mujahedeen and the warlords continued to fight both each other and government forces. In 1992, a coalition of mujahedeen parties took Kabul and replaced the Communist government. With its fall, about half of the 1.5 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan returned home. Many internally-displaced people also attempted to move back to their former villages. The hardships facing these returned refugees included a landscape strewn with land mines, a weak economy, and a lack of social services. The motivations for returning included fear of land being stolen by other returnees, aid packages from NGO, and a UN-led reconstruction program (Cammack 1999, 98).

The Taliban probably became established in early 1994. Pashtun form the ethnic majority of the Taliban; its first members were religious students in Kandahar. Their initial motivation was to address corrupt practices of the mujahedeen. As they moved through the country, young people from refugee camps and rural areas joined them (Marsden 1998, 43-44). “The Taliban were not simply an example of villagers coming to the cities. Their values were not the values of the village, but the values of the villages as interpreted by refugee camp dwellers or madrassa students who typically had not known normal village life” (Malley 2002, 223 – italics in the original).

4 The literal translation from Arabic for Mujahedeen is “holy warriors.”
Thus far, I have portrayed an account of life in Afghanistan that does not begin to reflect the horrendous violence and fear still present in this war-torn country. Perhaps a short passage from the recent autobiography *My Forbidden Face* will serve as a placeholder for the devastation and agony that was a routine daily occurrence under the Taliban:

A bit farther on, we pass four women. Suddenly a black 4 X 4 brakes to a halt next to them with a hellish screech: *Talibs* leap from the vehicle brandishing their cable whips and without a word of explanation begin flogging these women even though they’re hidden by their *chadris*. They scream, but no one comes to their rescue. Then they try to runaway, pursued by their tormentors, who keep whipping them savagely. I see blood dripping on the women’s shoes (Latifa 2001, 51).

Afghanistan has faced nearly insurmountable obstacles to centralized governmental control and any meaningful capacity for policy implementation due to the complex relationships between ethnic groups, *mujahedeen* parties, and warlords. Negotiations for power involve a complex web of deal-making and violence. Even the Taliban only achieved control of about 90 per cent of the country, and the current interim government requires international peacekeeping troops to maintain a measure of tenuous stability (Malley 2002).

NGOs faced difficult decisions around the preservation of women’s programs, and found themselves playing a high-stakes game of negotiation with local or central authorities (Cammack 1999). Adeena Niazi, Executive Director of the Afghan Women’s Organization, described to me during an interview in 1999 a creative solution by an NGO partnered with the AWO. When the local authorities said the girls could not attend school, the project staff told these authorities that if the girls could not attend school, then they would no longer feed the boys. The local authorities decided to look the other way and let the girls attend school. Clearly the proxy representatives of the Taliban were not consistent in their imposition of such restrictions. This inconsistency provided opportunities for nonprofit organizations to carry out their work.

Such circumstances framed the lives of Afghan women prior to their arrival in Canada. Afghan refugees do not come to Canada directly from Afghanistan, but by way of third countries, notably Pakistan or India. Women immigrating to Toronto represent this wide range of circumstances: urban or rural living, liberal or more traditional cultural and religious beliefs, Tajik, Hazara, or Pashtun ethnic group, Dari or Pashto speaking. Once in Toronto, each immigrant with her unique talents, needs, and aspirations, must make numerous adjustments to create a healthy and productive life here. These women’s success depends, in part, on the network of support organizations from the public, private and nonprofit sectors delivering services to immigrants. For the most part, these organizations that must work within the confines of a legislative framework established essentially for the purpose of providing Canadian employers with a supply of workers for our expansionist capitalist economy.

**Adopted Home**

My initial title for this section was “Host Country,” which I have come to regard as highly problematic. The term, enshrined in a Federal Government initiative called the “Host Program,”
attempts to engage nonprofit organizations in a process of matching established Canadians with new immigrants to both promote multiculturalism and support the settlement of newcomers. Without question, the design of the program reflects the perspective of the dominant culture through its emphasis on the role of host. The role of host implies a corresponding role for the guest. Of necessity, host/guest relationships are governed by rules that the host adopts to manage the relationship of the guest. This metaphor aptly describes the legal circumstances of immigrants in Canada. There is a whole legislative framework that determines who may work, go to school, vote, and live in this free land we call Canada. The primary pieces of Federal legislation that govern the immigrant-state relationship are: *The Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (in effect since June 28, 2002 and replacing the 25 year old *Immigration Act*), *The Multiculturalism Act* (1988), and *The Citizenship Act* (1985).

“Adopted Home,” on the other hand, implies a decision on the part of the newcomer to resettle. Even this of course is not inclusive of individuals who arrived “by accident;” for example, at the whim of an immigration officer competing with immigration officers from other nations for needed workers or the refugee whose destination may be determined by others. With this caveat, “Adopted Home” perhaps does express at least the aspirations, if not the reality, of many immigrants coming to Canada. For those I interviewed at the AWO, despite their varied success in settling here, and despite, for some, a continued interest and active engagement in the issues of their home country, they do feel they have found a new home in Canada.

To be sure, a broad-brush approach can hardly “capture” the lives of Afghan women in Canada. The information above concerning the economic and political history of Afghanistan can only provide us with a sketch of the conditions affecting their lives. Afghan women’s individual experiences precipitate individual issues and needs, and government settlement policy will never deal effectively with all of the individual needs of immigrants. However, since settlement services in Canada are delivered primarily by nonprofit organizations, the expertise gained by such organizations through their interactions with the members of particular groups allows more nuanced attention to the specifically contextualized needs of immigrants. As one example, the women managing the AWO have lived in Afghanistan and, like the clients they serve, have been dislocated to Pakistan and India prior to coming to Canada. These women have the expertise to respond to the highly contextualized needs of the Afghan immigrants they serve. But even a nonprofit with the necessary expertise must deliver programs that are generalized to some extent because, with the exception of one-on-one counseling services, most programs are delivered to groups.

Afghan refugees settling in Toronto arrive in one of the most diverse communities in the world. Almost half of all immigrants settle in Ontario, the majority of those in the GTA (Galloway 2003a). According to Adeena and other staff at the AWO, the Afghan community in Toronto is, to some extent, a microcosm of the same differing languages, cultures, and beliefs that exist in Afghanistan. How do these differences impinge on the success of settlement here? By which mechanisms do Afghan women find support within their own community and in broader Canadian civil society?

The remainder of this section briefly surveys two aspects that shape the delivery of settlement services in Canada: 1) the legislative framework governing immigration in Canada and 2) the nonprofit sector, which provides many of the settlement services through funding by all three levels of government (Federal, Provincial, and Municipal).
The Immigration Legislative Framework

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed history of immigration policy in Canada. However, as past policy reflects the result of societal values and the negotiation of various groups with stakes in the immigration business, (the private sector, citizens, and the public sector), a sampling of this history is in order.

The first refugees came to Canada between 1775 and 1784, when about 50,000 United Empire Loyalists arrived from the U.S. (Knowles 1997). Unlike today’s refugees, these newcomers shared a British heritage and value system. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, refugees have continued to come to Canada, and their presence has always engendered controversy among some segments of the Canadian population. The reactions from two of Canada’s three founding peoples (the English and the French) to waves of immigrants during the twentieth century include multiple examples of racial discrimination.

Perhaps Canada’s most disturbing immigration policy occurred prior to the World War II when European Jews were prevented from coming here despite significant pressure from the Canadian Jewish community and increasing confirmation of Nazi human rights atrocities. This highly unfair and discriminatory policy contributed to the deaths of millions of Jews (Kelly and Trebilcock 1998, 16; Abella and Troper 1982).

Canada’s immigration-policy history includes countless examples of discriminatory practices. For example, 1885 saw passage of an Act to Restrict and Regulate Chinese Immigration which imposed a nation-wide Head Tax of $50; in 1903 British Columbia increased this to $500 (Knowles 1997). The tradition of blatant racial discrimination in immigration legislation continued until 1962, when Ellen Fairclough, then-Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, eliminated racial discrimination by introducing a point system based on skills and education, rather than country of origin (Knowles, 1997). The point system, however, has not so much eliminated discriminatory practices, as merely made them less visible. Increasingly, the point system has been geared to favour the most highly educated and those who already speak English or French. Interestingly, an analysis I completed of Citizenship and Immigration Canada data from 1996 to 1998 showed that Quebec, which has its own immigration policy, took in three times more refugees as a percentage of total immigration than did the rest of Canada during this interval, 24 per cent for Quebec versus 8.6 per cent for the rest of Canada (Norquay 2000, 7). Is this an accident? Does this suggest that the Quebec government is more compassionate? Does Quebec drop language preferences for refugee status immigrants? A review of immigration statistics over a longer period of time, in the context of Quebec immigration policy might suggest some answers.

Troper (1993, 266) pointed out that “in 1960 Canada operated twenty-seven immigration offices outside North America. Twenty-four in Europe, 1 in Israel and two in Asia; there was not one in all of black Africa or South America.” So access to locations where one could apply was somewhat comparable to women’s access to abortion in Canada today, which varies from province to province and from urban to rural locations. Evidence also exists of the unequal application of immigration policy. Donkor (2000) noted an example of a black Caribbean nurse admitted into Canada who needed “extra” qualifications and performed work that no white nurses would do (Donkor 2000, 15).
Citizenship and Immigration Canada currently allows refugees to enter Canada under three programs: government sponsored, privately sponsored, and Landed in Canada. The government criteria for acceptance are quite restrictive as the following language from the CIC website shows:

CIC selects refugees who are seeking resettlement in Canada. To be eligible, they must have no alternative, such as voluntary repatriation, resettlement in their country of asylum or resettlement to a third country, or there must be no possibility of such an alternative within a reasonable period of time. (Source: http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/resettle-1.html Accessed May 19, 2003)

Over fifty per cent of all refugees settling in Canada come to Ontario, and most of these settle in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Refugees come to Canada in one of three ways: 1) sponsored by nonprofit organizations, 2) sponsored by individuals, and 3) as government-selected refugees. In addition, some refugees make their way here by sea or from the US (a route now eliminated by a controversial agreement with the US government that prevents refugees from accessing our refugee application process if they come via the US).

Census data from 2001 suggests that there are presently about 25,000 Afghans are living in Canada, of whom about 3,000 were born here. In Toronto, 13,645 people reported being of Afghan ethnic background in 2001. Of those, 1,000 were born here. The gender split is even, with 6,735 Afghan women living in Toronto. By contrast, the total number of Afghans in Canada prior to 1980 numbered less than 350 according to the CIC data.

An analysis of CIC refugee admission data as of 1999, showed that, by country of origin, refugees from Afghanistan ranked third in 1996, fourth in 1997, and fifth in 1998 in terms of total numbers admitted to Canada (Norquay 2000, 7). CIC immigration statistics for 2001 show 2,916 Afghan refugees admitted, more than any other refugee group, and representing about ten per cent of all refugees admitted to Canada that year. A detailed analysis over a much longer period of time would be required to draw any conclusions from this, but it appears to me that Canada’s practice shows a responsiveness to increasing admissions of refugees whose status is the result of new conflicts. Afghan refugees since the time of the Russian occupation have made up over 50 per cent of the world’s refugee population, yet in the period from 1996 through 1998 the Canadian government was admitting fewer and fewer Afghan refugees as it responded to more recent conflicts. Is it possible, now that Afghanistan is back in the news, that the Canadian government is again taking notice and admitting more Afghan refugees?

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From an English Canada perspective, we could conclude that the French also had ethnicity and the English, well they were not ethnic, they were just the English.

From a policy perspective, Canada’s settlement programs have always been geared in favour of men. Immigration policy focuses on those who do paid work outside the home – that is, the new crop of taxpayers. Free access to a higher level of English language acquisition is available to immigrants who must learn English in order to succeed in the job market. These programs are not available to women working at home. In addition, day-care (if its use would be permitted by the Afghan husband) is poorly funded. Many ESL programs are not equipped to deal with people who are illiterate, yet illiteracy is an issue in ESL programs, particularly in the case of refugees who are coming from war-torn countries where public services, such as public education, have been disrupted.

What is the impact of a seemingly shortsighted policy that restricts access to language programs here for those the government perceives as “non-workers”? How does this impede their ability to integrate and participate in society? How effectively can the nonprofit organization in Canada moderate the effects of policy gaps that affect the settlement of Afghan women here? Do innovations by nonprofits address these gaps? The Afghan Women’s Organization, as I will elaborate later in this paper, has indeed found a way of leveraging CIC funding to provide employment for Afghan women in support of its ESL programs. This arrangement enables some forty women to gain Canadian work experience and practice their English language skills.

When asked to identify key aspects of Canadian identity, Canadians today might point to two things of which many of us are proud: our health care system and our multiculturalism policy. The Canadian policy on multiculturalism is a major policy area that shapes much of the public discourse on ethnic identity and culture in Canada. Multiculturalism in Canada operates within a bilingual (French/English) frame. The idea began under the Pearson government, but finally became official policy under Trudeau in 1971. Four principles underlie this understanding of multiculturalism: 1) Equality of status amongst cultures; 2) Canadian identity as ethno-cultural pluralism; 3) Greater choice of cultural traits/lifestyles as a positive factor in shaping a society; and 4) Protection of civil and human rights. The official recognition of ethnicity, once restricted to English and French, was extended to all groups. The Mulroney Government passed The Multiculturalism Act in 1988. This legislation also created the Heritage Language Institute, the Foundation for Race Relations, and the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship (Dorais, Foster, and Stockely 1994).

Multiculturalism was, in part, a response to the so called “third force” of non-British, non-French, and non-aboriginal Canadians, and provided a “more inclusionary definition to Canadian citizenship” (Abu-Laban and Stasiulis 1994, 365). While often embraced by the media as a national celebration of cultural difference, multiculturalism has not been without critics. Abu-Laban and Stasiulis (1994, 367) observed that some academics from Quebec: “viewed the policy as undermining, or at the least complicating, the claims to nationhood of the Quebecois and/or French Canadians. By severing culture from language, multiculturalism policy rejected the ‘two nations’ thesis . . . and reduced the status of French Canadians from that of ‘founding people’ to the same rank as the ‘other ethnic groups.’” Bannerji (1997, 13), by contrast, suggested: “multiculturalism is itself a vehicle for racialization. It establishes Anglo-Canadian culture as the ethnic core culture while ‘tolerating’ and hierarchically arranging others around it as ‘multiculture.’” Wade (2001), in his examination of racial identity and nationalism in Latin America, concluded:

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8 From an English Canada perspective, we could conclude that the French also had ethnicity and the English, well they were not ethnic, they were just the English.
The inclusion of blacks and indigenous people, as explicitly different, is meant to signify a move towards pluralist democracy as a universal good. The idea is that everyone has the right to be recognized as different. But this claim exists in tension with the particularist tendency which means that specific categories are privileged, rather than others. In many cases it continues to those who are already privileged. . . . [T]here appears to be now a coordinated state-led project of inclusion, processes of exclusion continue very effectively without being driven directly by the state (Wade, 200, 861).

While academe continues to criticize multiculturalism, the public (with exception, perhaps, of the non-immigrant French-speaking population in Quebec) and the media, continue to sing its praises, bolstered by much “banner waving” by the Federal government. Multiculturalism is not a vehicle for addressing issues of racism, but the Federal government uses it successfully to sweep issues of race under the carpet. Issues of race cannot be addressed merely through a simplistic celebration of difference.

Nonprofit Organizations and Neoliberal Ideology

As my paper deals with a specific nonprofit organization, an environmental scan of nonprofit/government relations in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is relevant to this study. The relationship between the nonprofit sector and the state in Canada has been defined, to a large degree, by the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601.9 While each province has developed its own approach, this British legislation has provided the framework that the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA) uses to confer charitable status to some 74,000 nonprofits.10 The charitable designation conferred by CCRA has essentially created an underclass of nonprofit organizations that cannot give tax-exempt receipts for donations. As the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency has a “behind closed doors” process for assessing nonprofit organizations as to their legitimacy as “charities” under the Income Tax Act, it would be difficult to research how they go about making these assessments. There does seem, however, to be a pattern of exclusion for nonprofits that focus on specific ethnic groups, which typically cannot gain charitable status because they do not serve the wider “community” or because of their advocacy role for one particular ethnic group.

In the late 1970s, the Keynesian ideology that had blossomed in the 1960s, with its collectivist values and emphasis on community, was being swept aside by neoliberal values that favoured individualism and competitiveness. This change was brought on, in part, by globalization. Evans and

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9 Under the Elizabethan Poor Law a charity was involved in: relief of poverty, advancement of education, advancement of religion or other purposes beneficial to the community not falling on the other three purposes (http://www.ccabc.bc.ca/publications/Co-opCharityLaw.pdf accessed on July 21, 2003). Charities in Canada must meet these broad requirements as interpreted, often controversially, by Canada Customs and Revenue Agency. For example, the Fraser Institute is a registered charity that is considered by some to be neo-conservative propaganda organization, while the Council of Canadians is considered a lobby group and does not have charitable status.

10 In 1996 there were 74,027 registered charities in Canada (Day and Devlin 1997, 5). It is estimated that perhaps 200,000 organizations exist within the nonprofit sector (Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector 1998, 4).
Wekerle (1997) provided a critique of the changing relationship between Canadian citizens and their government:

Globalization, restructuring, and downsizing are redefining the relationship between Canadians and their governments, and these have particular impacts on women. The mounting influence of international regulatory bodies, the increased concern of government and the private sector about the ‘flight’ of capital, and the primacy placed on the need to be more competitive, lead to an identification of social spending as the problem, rather than part of the solution to the inequities of unregulated markets. Gone is the belief in the corrective potential of government intervention that characterized the postwar period (Evans and Wekerle 1997, 6).

The nonprofit sector has seen huge changes as governments downloaded or abandoned social programs to bring deficits (caused in part by abnormally high interest rates) in line. Evans and Shields (2002), examined the loss of autonomy and commercialization of the sector, a consequence of policy driven by neoliberal values. This has resulted in the blurring of responsibility between the government and nonprofit sectors for not only service delivery, but also the creation of social policy.

Increased pressure on nonprofits due to downloading and resource constraints precipitated a need for the state and the nonprofit sector to redefine their relationship. The Canadian government has agreed to an ongoing discussion with the nonprofit sector to rework this relationship. These discussions, led by a coalition of nonprofit organizations called the Voluntary Sector Roundtable, have taken place since 1998. To date, the discussion has included accountability of the sector itself, the definition of charity, and the nature of government support for nonprofit organizations, given the ongoing neoliberal ideological frame. These discussions may actually serve the Federal government in its quest to reestablish its image as supportive of pro-active social policy. I would suggest that these new efforts at relationship-building may simply reflect the government’s attempt to recover credibility lost in the carnage that resulted from the demise of many organizations whose funding it had previously cut off.

Not all of the impacts of neoliberalism are necessarily negative. Some organizations have responded to the increased emphasis on accountability, and the move towards contract funding (for specific deliverables), by moving towards more formal governance structures (with boards of directors, executive director positions, and so on), by-laws, and more clearly defined roles and responsibilities for staff and volunteers. East End Literacy and the Afghan Women’s Organization, for example, have, in recent years, moved from collective-based to Executive Director-led structures. Nonprofit organizations face the key challenge of finding ways to preserve existing organizational values, arising as they did from collective decision-making and bottom-up strategizing, in these new, more-formally structured and accountable organizations. The Afghan Women’s Organization was not successful in its first bid to become a charitable organization. One of the difficulties was its advocacy role, which must be limited to 10 per cent of an organization’s resources, a requirement of all registered charities. Only in the last two years of its eleven-year history has the AWO managed to find funding for an executive director, currently a part-time position held by its founder and past president, Adeena Niazi.

Nonprofit organizations must operate within the strictures of Canada’s legislative framework, which determines what settlement objectives are to be met, and by neoliberal political ideology, the primary force that, for the past twenty-five years, has shaped relations between government bodies at all levels and the nonprofit sector. My research focuses on the invisible (and often non-funded) spaces
created by a nonprofit organization as it finds ways of addressing concerns other than the primary settlement objectives of government funding bodies.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for the present paper is informed by my experience from an eight-month strategic planning project that I undertook with the AWO beginning in January, 2000. During that time, I worked with staff, volunteers, and board members to develop a five-year strategic plan. The data collection for this project involved planning meetings, two days of facilitated discussion with representatives from all areas of their organization, and a consolidation meeting to reflect on the results. A key insight of the earlier project made it clear that, while the group setting produced vigorous discussion, one-on-one interviews would have provided additional data, as the confidentiality of responses could have been assured. This insight informs the present paper’s research methodology which relies on a review of secondary sources and data collected through interviews.

Literature Review

This involved a focus on the following areas: 1) Immigrant identity and Gender. Here I focused on the dynamics of immigrant identity formation as individuals, as an ethnic group, and in affiliation with nonprofit organizations. Gendered differences, with an emphasis on women’s immigrant experience and identity, also figured significantly; 2) Nonprofit studies. Here I focused on the current legal framework in Canada, on current forces such as neo-liberalism, and on the recent concerns of funding bodies about accountability; 3) Afghan Social, Economic, and Political History. The literature under this heading enhanced my understanding of circumstances in Afghanistan and the refugee camps in Pakistan for the interviews; 4) Government Policy. A review of current immigration policy along with analysis of the policy by academic researchers, provided an outline of the policy framework within which the settlement services are delivered. I also used materials such as documents produced by the AWO about their programs (including financial information, annual reports, and the like) and Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Statistics Canada information on Afghan immigration to Canada.

Individual Interviews

The AWO was very gracious and open to my conducting the research with them. In the winter of 2000, when I worked with the AWO to develop a strategic plan for their organization, a rapport and a measure of trust was built up. This previous work enabled me to gain the level of access I needed to conduct my present research. That having been said, each time I came to the AWO, I felt very much a privileged outsider who was being allowed access through some sense of trust that I didn’t fully comprehend.
I interviewed seven women and one man to get a cross-section of people who were involved at the AWO in different ways as staff (full and part-time), volunteers, and clients. I also wanted some representation by younger women under thirty, as the voice of young women surfaced as a theme during the earlier strategic planning project. I wanted to interview women who had been in Canada for a sufficient time to have engaged in the identity-negotiation processes, and requested that they be immigrants with at least five years of experience living in Canada. The eight Afghans I interviewed had university or college education and were from the middle or upper classes in Afghanistan. I had not specified class as a criterion, but the women selected for me shared these characteristics in common. Moreover, all were refugees and first-generation immigrants. To explore what boundary might exist between Afghans as a distinct ethnic group and Afghans as part of a larger Muslim community, a theme promoted in the media, I also interviewed two non-Afghan Muslim Canadians who were not connected with the AWO. One was Muslim, the other was a photographer, a non-Afghan of Jewish background who was the creator of a photo essay on Afghans in Toronto. From this latter interviewee I got a sense of how a Canadian of immigrant parents perceived and related to Afghans not connected to the AWO.

With the exception of Adeena Niazi, the AWO’s Executive Director, I have assigned a number to each of the participants to protect their identity (see Appendix A for a summary of the interview participants and their role at the AWO). Of the 10 interviewees, only five allowed me to tape their interviews. For the others, I took detailed notes on my Palm keyboard. The interviews of the seven Afghan women and one man began with the use of a survey instrument I had created to capture some of the details of their life circumstances before coming to Canada (see Appendix B). I used the data obtained from this instrument as basis for further questions during the interview.

My role as an outside researcher who was given access and afforded a measure of trust, invites reference to discussions of insiders and outsiders in the research literature on the sociology of knowledge. Merton (1972) critiqued the insider/outsider binary as it figures in the sociology of knowledge. He unpacked “insiderism” and suggested that it is actually a form of credentialism, a credentialism that is assigned rather than achieved.

In its strong version, the argument holds that, as a matter of social epistemology, only (italics in original) black historians can truly understand black history and only (italics in original) black ethnologists can understand black culture, . . . and so on (Merton 1972, 13).

According to the doctrine of the Insider, the Outsider, no matter how careful and talented, is excluded in principle from gaining access to the social and cultural truth (Merton 1972, 15).

Merton (1972) suggested that Max Weber’s notion of Wertbeziehung is less severe. Weber claimed that differing social locations would affect the questions asked, hence the focus of the investigation. He went on to point out that we are not all ‘single status,’ that gender, race, ethnicity, class all intersect so we are in some cases both insiders and outsiders. For example, a ‘white’ woman conducting research at the AWO would be an insider because she is a woman, but an outsider because she is non-Afghan. Merton invoked Francis Bacon’s four Idols (sources of false opinion) as evidence of a long history of thought that questions the “corrupting influence of group loyalties” (Merton 1972, 30). He argued that Bacon, “[undertook] to tell how the immediate social world in which we live seriously limits what we are prepared to perceive and how we are prepared to perceive it” (Merton
1972, 30). He suggested: “It is the stranger, too, who finds what is familiar to the group significantly unfamiliar and so is prompted to raise questions for inquiry less apt to be raised at all by Insiders” (Merton 1972, 33). Merton asked that we consider not being bound by either perspective, but that we consider how Insider and Outsider traditions can interact with each other in the “process of truth seeking” (Merton 1972, 33). For me, being an outsider with respect to the Afghan women I interviewed, I had to acknowledge not only the limitations of my cultural and gendered perspective, but also that I may have had important insights as things that appeared ‘normal’ to the insiders might have caught my interest.

Interviewing as a research tool can be problematic for several reasons. Researchers must be aware of the power dynamics of the environment in which the research is conducted. The most obvious problem was that I am male and that male/female relations are being re-negotiated in some parts of the Muslim diaspora. Some observations I made during the interviews revealed something about this insider/outsider dynamic in the research process.11 My Christian background I saw as being less problematic, though, since 9/11, this may have become more important than it normally would have been. My identity as a gay man perhaps was more problematic. I have not attempted to cover up this identity, but neither have I disclosed it. A Muslim student with whom I became friends during my studies at Ryerson, ended contact with me when I told him I was gay. This surprised me, given my assumptions about the purpose and effect of education on one’s capacity to become open to new areas of inquiry. It would not be appropriate for me to generalize, but this experience alerted me to the charged status of my gay identity for those holding conservative religious beliefs, whether Christian or Muslim. Nevertheless, the interviews provided a rich learning experience. These people opened up their lives to me, at least to some extent, and I recorded their stories.

I learned a lot about interviewing as a research technique during this project. In reviewing the tapes and the detailed notes, I discovered that I was, at times, “leading the witness” and suggesting possible answers while framing them as questions. In the theoretical discussions that follow, the reader will see examples of this flaw. As I went along, I got better at asking open-ended questions, but I found that with some candidates, the level of English skills caused me to want to “rescue” the interviewee and suggest a range of answers. I also found that with the interviewees who were confident in their English, I had a less formal interview: the exchange became more of a discussion in which I could range more flexibly among the questions.

Sometimes my questions were misinterpreted. This, however, often led to more interesting answers and led to further questions in a different direction. There seems to be a huge element of luck, or perhaps fate, in an interview process. One interview was held with two people because one had very limited English skills. Many of her responses were a translation into English facilitated by her friend, the other interview candidate. I got far less information from this candidate than I would have had had language differences not been a factor.

11 For example, a staff member had kindly provided some hot tea and cookies that I could offer to the interview candidates. However none of the interviewees accepted my offer of tea. One interviewee poured me some tea. I noticed the one man I interviewed, while he didn’t accept tea from me he did accept tea from the women staff after the interview was over. Is this about me being male, and it not being appropriate for me to pour tea? Is it about power relationships? For example, as the interviewer I am in the dominant position. Does pouring tea reinforce that? I asked AWO Executive Director Adeena Niazi about this later. She said that Afghan men do serve tea, that it might be a cultural politeness that was operating here.
Another problematic dynamic in interviewing is the extent to which the interviewee wants to provide the answer she/he thinks the interviewer is looking for. For example, since I am clearly from the dominant culture and gender, I wondered if the interviewees were more eager to guess at what I wanted to hear and just give me that? Could my position as a civil servant also be affecting this dynamic – though not all interview candidates were aware of this status? The above considerations suggest some of the difficulties with collecting data from an interview process.

The Afghan Women’s Organization

Almost four decades ago, Breton (1964, 1991) suggested that the level of ethnic institutional completeness had a huge impact on the degree and pace of assimilation of immigrants into the dominant culture. Ethnic-specific institutions, such as churches, social service organizations, and newspapers, serve as anchors for ethnic identity and, thus, slow down acculturation, essentially serving as enablers of ethnic identity. Research has suggested that the existence of the first ethnic institution has a greater effect than subsequent ethnic institutions on attracting newcomers to form social networks with members of their own ethnic group (Breton 1964). While there were other Afghan organizations at the time the AWO was founded, it was the first organization in Toronto providing services specifically to Afghan women. Before launching into a discussion of identity issues and the role of the AWO, the reader will need an orientation to the organization, its history, organizational structure, and programs.

Background

The Afghan Women’s Organization is officially known as the “Afghan Women’s Counselling and Integration Community Support Organization” (AWCICS0). Adeena Niazi told me that the AWO began in January, 1990 with a three month, Integration and Settlement Assistance Programme (ISAP) grant. Two staff worked in a space provided by a community organization. The initial program was a success, and another successful grant application followed. AWCICS0 incorporated in June of 1990. It is not a charity, however, under the Revenue Canada Act. The informal name, Afghan Women’s Organization, is used routinely. To a westerner, the name of the AWO suggests that the organization might market itself as an overtly feminist one, but the AWO does not self-identify as a feminist organization, even though its members’ interests and some of its programs overlap with many feminist agendas. But feminism is relational to culture. Those of us looking for more obvious signs of a feminist focus may miss the subtlety of the AWO’s agenda. Western feminist analysis typically extends beyond issues such as access to services, to power structures of female to male relationships, including the notion of an individual’s personal agency and of choice in traditional roles. The AWO, by contrast, assumes a context of women’s roles as mothers and as wives. Yet, the staff and volunteers are themselves working outside the home and the context of the family.

The originating members, Adeena Niazi and members of the Women’s Committee of the Afghan Association of Ontario, had a keen passion and driving purpose both to support the settlement and integration of Afghan women and their families into Canadian culture and to find ways to achieve equity for Afghan women in Afghanistan (interview with Adeena Niazi in 2000). This passion
continues to drive the organization. During the Strategic Planning project in 2000 a formal Mission statement was developed:

The AWO is a nonprofit organization committed to assisting vulnerable Afghans in Canada, in refugee camps and in Afghanistan. The AWO promotes the successful settlement of Afghan refugees in Canada through advocacy and a wide range of settlement services, which it delivers primarily in the Greater Toronto Area, but throughout the country as well. The AWO also provides assistance and protection to refugees and to internally displaced and vulnerable people in Afghanistan, through advocacy, relief, education and income-generation projects and through sponsorship to Canada.

In all its work, the AWO is committed to non-discrimination, equality and providing services that are culturally sensitive and designed to meet the particular needs of the Afghan community (Norquay 2000, 12). Initially, the organization focused on ESL training for women, a key component of successful settlement in Ontario. LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) funding has supported AWO’s ESL programs since 1993. In 1992, AWCICSO organized its first national conference, which provided an opportunity to explore issues facing Afghan women and their families in Afghanistan. Additional national conferences were held in 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000 and 2002. In 2000, a conference held at York University gave birth to the National Coalition group “Women in Support of Afghan Women.” The AWO plays a leadership role and collaborates with other nonprofit organizations that focus on Afghan women, refugee, and settlement issues. These numerous organizational connections reflect the desire of the AWO staff and volunteers to engage as citizens with other citizens - Afghan and non-Afghan - both in Canada and in Afghanistan. The alliance formed, for example, by the national coalition group, Women in Support of Women in Afghanistan, reflects a gender-based, multicultural coalition of citizens working together across the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and class in support of Afghan women.

Over the years, the AWO has increased its client base, the diversity of its services, the number of its local offices, (now four in the GTA), the size of its annual budget, and its visibility and leadership in the community (interview with Adeena Niazi in 2000). Currently, it provides a wide array of settlement services to about 4300 clients. The list of services includes: ESL, orientation to Canada, counseling, job search skills, translation and advocacy (AWO 2001/2002 Annual Report). After 11 September 2001, the AWO secured funding for a project to address negative media images of Muslim women. Other programs include a sponsorship program for refugees and a cultural heritage program

12 These include: Canadian Council for Refugees, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), Canadian Council for Muslim Women; leadership role/founding members: Canadian Coalition in support of Afghan Women. AWO also works closely with Canadian Centre with Victims of Torture (Adeena Niazi is a board member of this organization); Canadian Partnership of Afghanistan (based in Ottawa). Ms. Niazi also is a member of the Advisory Committee on Rights and Democracy, Steering committee of Culture Link (Host program), Board member of Women in Transition; Refugee Law Office - steering committee member, Overseas organizations: member of Afghan Women’s Network.

13 This project was called: “Muslim Women: Improving Portrayals in Canadian Media, Influencing Media Practices, Building Media Advocacy Strategies.”
for youth. In 1995, in cooperation with the Afghan Youth Organization, the AWO developed a wife assault public-education program. The AWO also has fostered community development projects; for example, the Afghan Women’s Catering business, which has been thriving since 1996. A complete list of programs can be found in Appendix C. Of the 4300 clients served in 2001/2002, just 755 were Afghan refugees; the others were non-Afghan refugees and immigrants (AWO 2001/2002 Annual Report).

AWO services follow two streams. Its original purpose was to focus specifically on Afghan women. However, Federal government funding favours organizations that deliver services to all immigrants (that is, those with a multi-cultural client base) so, while its ESL and other settlement service programs do attract Afghans, both women and men, the majority of clients are non-Afghan. Despite the multi-ethnic emphasis of CIC funding, the AWO has had success in gaining some funding for specific projects for Afghan women. For example, a recent grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was secured for projects in support of women in Afghanistan.

One woman I interviewed explained to me that the AWO was different from women’s organizations in Afghanistan because the AWO serves male clients as well. The provision of services to men, engages Afghan Canadian men in helpful and non-threatening ways, and so garners support among them for the Afghan women who use the AWO’s services.

Organizational Structure

Presently, the AWO has ten full-time staff involved in managing and delivering the various settlement programs and forty-one part-time staff. Most of the latter provide child-care services for clients using AWO’s services, but they also provide some administrative support and class instruction. The organizational chart (Appendix D) shows the AWO’s accountability structure. At present, the AWO has a membership base of over 600 Afghan Canadians.

In brief, the Executive Director, Adeena Niazi, who is the Founder and past-President, leads the strategic and day-to-day coordination and planning activities. The board of directors meets every six weeks, and provides advice to the Executive Director. Staff are present at board meetings when needed. The founder describes the environment as “like a family” – characterized by closeness, sharing, and respect. The staff share the administrative work, including the grant application process. Program managers invariably work on grant applications for their programs, but sometimes a consultant is hired to do this, or other staff help out. Both staff and volunteers carry out the administrative work needed to support program delivery. Volunteers provide direct service, peer assistance (youth groups), event planning, staffing of community events, and outreach to clients. They also serve on committees or the board.

While my research focused on the identity formation processes and concerns of the women I interviewed, it was within the frame of their involvement at the AWO from which I launched my interrogation. A large black sign on the door of the AWO’s head office states: “Funded by the Government of Canada through the Department of Citizenship and Immigration.” The sign seems to suggest that the Federal Government owns or controls the AWO. An understanding of the AWO as it has been shaped both by the CIC funding and by its attempts to work around, and even with, this traditional settlement focus, is what makes the interplay between immigrant identity theory and the
lived experience of these Afghan Canadian women, in the spaces created by the AWO where identity is negotiated, so rich a field of investigation.

**Immigrant Identity and the Nonprofit Organization**

**Introduction**

The problem with theory is that it often lacks reference to a specific context. Does a theory “play out” the same way in Canada, the US, and Britain, or does the context of the existing society, determined, in part, by social and cultural policies around immigrants and settlement, mean that theories are more true in one country and less true when applied to another? And what about in Montreal versus in Toronto?

In this section, I stage a dialogue between various theories of ethnic identity and actual lived experience as reported to me by the people I interviewed at the AWO. I engage the theory and apply it to a specific ethnic group (Afghan), gender (female), geographic location (the GTA) and site (the Afghan Women’s Organization). My purpose was two-fold. On the one hand, I was attempting to “bring the theories to life” in order to understand them better by looking at their assumptions and inner tensions. On the other hand, I was interested in how the AWO provided opportunities for staff, volunteers, and clients to shape identity, both individually and collectively. I thus attempted to highlight the importance of nonprofit agencies as spaces where citizens might be able to work out their identities.

Researchers working in the area of immigrant identity and settlement have operated on the assumption that the dominant society (in Canada, it is Anglo, white and Christian) plays a major role in immigrant identity. Researchers, however, have differed on the question of what processes and to what extent immigrants have been able to achieve a state of integration. While integration has been variously defined, in this project it has been taken to mean that immigrants have gained the ability to provide for their families through access to employment, housing, public institutions, and services (for example, education for children), and by participating in their communities. Integration as such does not assume equal access, but merely access. Interestingly, the AWO’s formal name (Afghan Women’s Counselling and Integration Community Support Organization) uses the term “integration” rather than assimilation, which implies a loss of one’s culture. AWO Executive Director Adeena Niazi told me that integration to her meant “settling” while retaining cultural values, and that the choice of the word “integration” in AWO’s name was deliberate.

Individual identity, minority group identity, and the dominant society’s perceptions of ethnic identity are interrelated aspects of immigrant identity. Stuart Hall posited that identities are the result of exclusionary processes and are constructed through difference (Hall 1996). Burlet suggested that this implies that “identity is positional and not fixed” (Burlet, 1998, 273). What do theories of the process by which immigrants retain, reconstruct, or negotiate their identities, say about the shifting nature of homeland values, cultural beliefs, and symbols, especially when these constructs become situated in the dominant culture of the adopted country? And, indeed, how do my interviewees speak of such matters?
Two primary approaches have been used to determine patterns of immigrant adaptation. Gans (1997) described these as *acculturationist* (espousing an assimilationist framework) and *retentionist* (espousing a pluralist framework). Metaphorical explorations of these two approaches have served some researchers in unpacking these terms. For example, (Handlin 1972) suggested that assimilation is associated with the image of ‘the uprooted,’ and (Bodnar 1985) spoke of cultural pluralism as implying ‘the transplanted’ (as quoted by Kivisto 2001, 568).

Assimilation theory developed first. In the 1910s, Robert Park first proposed this framework (Gans 1997). Two aspects of assimilation, acculturation and “structural assimilation,” formed part of Milton Gordon’s seven-dimension framework of assimilation (Alba and Nee, 1997). To Gordon, acculturation concerned the process of a minority group adopting “cultural patterns” of the dominant culture. Some aspects of culture, such as religion, proved more resistant to acculturation than other aspects. Gordon viewed dominant culture as being unaffected by the acculturation of immigrant groups. He viewed it, fundamentally, as a one-way process whereby the minority group adopted the cultural attributes of the dominant culture (Alba and Nee 1997). This stood in contrast to the “melting-pot” framework. The latter has been promoted by the popular media in the US, and, for a time, by some academic researchers. It suggested that the minority/dominant culture relationship was two-way, with minorities also having an impact on the nature of dominant culture.

The second major framework for the study of immigrant adaptation, the pluralist/multiculturalist approach, focused on the experiences of the excluded minority (Zhou 1997). To pluralists, cultural retention was the normative predisposition. Some of the reasons advanced in support of the argument that cultural retention was the primary dynamic in adaptation processes of immigrants included the existence of ethnically-based organizations, strong cultural ties to religion, and also to family whenever the language of the home country was maintained by the second generation in order to maintain communication with parents. Retentionists, argued Zhou (1997), have no interest in whether retention is voluntary or involuntary.

A number of researchers have attempted to reconcile the assimilationist and pluralist approaches. Gans (1997) argued that the social, economic, and political differences between the “old” and “new” immigrant waves, and the differences in the researcher’s own perspectives figured as the primary determinants of why these two frameworks of immigrant settlement patterns became established.

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14 For example there was a 1931 film starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. It included tunes, with lyrics by Ira Gershwin, such as “Welcome to the Melting Pot. George Gershwin, inspired by Chopin’s 24 Preludes, began composing his own collection of preludes that were to have been titled “The Great American Melting Pot. These were not completed before his death.

15 An example of involuntary retention would be the need to communicate with parents who have not learned English or French.

16 “Old” immigration refers to European immigration while “new” immigration refers to the non-European and primarily non-white immigration pattern that has become the dominant characteristic of late twentieth century. Economic differences such as a rapidly expanding economy during the “old” immigration compared to slowly expanding economy during the “new” immigration and the fact that skilled labour became an increasing focus of immigration policy in Canada and other differences are seen as affecting rates of acculturation and assimilation.
Gans (1997) asserted that assimilation processes were, perhaps, merely more visible to the first researchers to focus on immigrant settlement. Few researchers who studied the “old” immigration spoke the immigrants’ languages. Gans argued that they were outsiders of primarily white Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, and suggested that most of the research was done with second-generation immigrants. Acculturation would likely have been more visible in the second generation than ethnic retention. Rapid economic growth would have pulled greater numbers of immigrants into workplaces of the dominant culture rather than ethnic enclaves, resulting in faster rates of assimilation. Many researchers of “new” immigrants are insiders because they speak the language of the groups they study, and so the first generation can be more readily studied. As insiders these researchers may espouse retentionist values which are reflected in the questions they ask and the data that is collected (Gans 1997).

I found Gans’ discussion on researchers suggestive in that my research engages “new” immigrants; but, in profile, I resemble his “old” immigrant researcher in view of my ethnically dissimilar background. Yet, I was not looking at second-generation immigrants, but at first-generation immigrants. I also benefitted from the fact that I went into these interviews with an understanding of both the assimilationist and retentionist sides of ethnic identity theory.

Caroline Nagel in her article, “Constructing difference and sameness: the politics of assimilation in London’s Arab communities,” created a dialogue between assimilationist approaches and the pluralist focus on race and cultural identity differences. She argued that British researchers can learn from the assimilationist theorists (she refers to US researchers), as constructions of difference by individuals invariably also involve constructions of sameness. She defined assimilation as “observable, material processes of accommodation of and conformity to dominant norms. It is in this respect profoundly political rather than ecological or ‘natural’” (Nagel 2002, 259).

Prior to the interviews, I attempted to place myself in what I see as a continuum between the assimilationist and pluralist approaches. Both traditions have merit in explaining the societal forces affecting identity construction and negotiation. With respect to employment, education, and language acquisition, assimilationist forces are at work. Yet individuals often choose to retain some cultural traditions, values, and symbols. For example, the women at the AWO all wear Western-style dress, and during the interviews this was the first thing mentioned to me about how Canada was different from present-day Afghanistan. Clair Dwyer, in her 1999 article “Veiled meanings: Young British Muslim women and the negotiation of differences,” looked at how the veil was a contested symbol for identities of young British Muslim women (Dwyer 1999). She theorized identity as contextual and relational, rather than fixed. She critiqued the symbolic meaning of the veil in past times as a dominant signifier for Islam, as a symbol of Islamic backwardness and primitivism, as a symbol of culture and nationalism (Dwyer 1999, 7). In the British context, the veil is understood as ‘ethnic identity’ and, therefore, is protected by law (Dwyer 1999, 8). The women I interviewed at the AWO came from middle and upper-class urban families in Afghanistan, where they worked outside the home. In the pre-Taliban years, they wore Western-style dress, and once in Canada returned to it. Western-style dress for these women seems to be a signifier of freedom, of choosing an identity. There may, however, be a more practical reason for adopting Western-style dress. A recent study funded by both the municipal and federal levels of government found significant discrimination for job applicants who wore the Hijab (Smith 2002).

A number of themes developed from the interviews. Some were determined by the questions I decided to ask. For example, I wanted to know to what extent these women had a sense of being
rooted in two places (Canada and Afghanistan), and how this related to theories of transnational identity. Other themes, for example Mothers’ Day celebrations and AWO organized picnics were not events I even knew about, but as the first few interviewees mentioned them, I asked all the candidates about these events. For the remainder of this paper I lead with the interview data, and create a dialogue organized by the themes that surfaced in the interviews. This dialogue interplays the stories I heard with the connections I make to the various immigrant identity theories.

Family

For the seven Afghan women I interviewed, I had a clear sense of their identity as being located primarily within the family. These women were mothers and wives first.

Rob: Are you in contact with your family? Do they live near you?

Interviewee 5: I’m living in Etobicoke. One of my sisters and one of my brothers, they have their houses, one is in Pickering and one in Ajax. Two of my sisters are in Scarborough. My parents and my other brothers, they are also in Scarborough.

Rob: Do you get together regularly?17

Interviewee 5: Oh yes, every weekend. We might go to my parents or they might come to my place or my brother and sister. One of my brothers is married, she is not Afghan she is from Trinidad. . . . We just want to keep our relationship the way that we used to be. This was my dad and my mom’s big push to be together as much as we can. I know everyone is busy. . . . We have to call my parents every day. This is part of respect. We want to find out how they are. We call each other on weekdays.

Rob: Does your family get together with other Afghan families?

Interviewee 5: I have lots of relatives and we have lots of friends here. . . . If it is a party and we want to have more fun, or more dance, or something we will invite my aunts and uncles and some other Afghans who are close, very close.

To Interviewee 5, the importance of family was central to her identity. Three generations get together every weekend despite the distance to travel, despite the busyness of life. All of the Afghan interviewees, when they spoke of friends, spoke in terms of families, that friendships take place between families or between individuals within the context of their family. What effect does this have on acculturation, or assimilation? Do immigrants with a culture that is centered around family retain their cultural identity more readily than immigrants where the sense of being an individual is stronger?

Afghan Ethnicity in Afghanistan and How This “Translates” in Toronto

17 This is an example of where I should have asked a more open-ended question such as “Describe your interaction with your family.”
One of the areas I wanted to look at was whether Afghan immigrants had a sense of themselves as being Afghans or whether there was a sense of being rooted in their Afghan ethnic group (Tajik, Hazaras, Pashtun, and so forth). I was also interested in how this sense of ethnic identity based on “tribal” group, if it existed, translated from Afghanistan to the Canadian context.

A key concept of the pluralist camp is “ethnicity,” or ethnic identity. Isajiw argued that theories of ethnic identity were either objective, involving real phenomena, or subjective, in that individuals identified themselves as being different (Isajiw 1974, 115). “Ethnicity” suggests that identity has a double boundary, “a boundary from within, maintained by the socialization process, and a boundary from without established by the process of inter-group relations” (Isajiw 1974, 122). With Isajiw in mind, what was happening between these ethnic groups in Afghanistan and to what extent was it being reproduced or reinvented in Canada?

One of the aspects of Smith’s (1986) definition of ethnic group was geographic territory. Modern cities are spaces where citizens live together outside of the context of past associations with traditional geographic territory. Many people have come from somewhere else. All of the Afghan Canadians I interviewed came from urban areas where this sense of geographically-based identity is lost. In cities, immigrants experience multiple ethnicities that are not contextualized by the original geography of the former home. I asked my interview subjects, most of whom were from Kabul, about whether they had a sense of being Tajik or Pashtun and so on, as opposed to being Afghan while they were living in Afghanistan. Responses showed no consistency, some perceived real differences, others felt that the press exaggerated these differences, and still others, that they had no Afghan experience of this. Perhaps a pattern of response might emerge with a larger sample, or perhaps it would confirm the diversity of experience that I found.

I have been uncomfortable with the use of the term ‘tribe’ when referring to these groups. ‘Tribe’ potentially invokes the category of the ‘primitive’. Sometimes I used the word ‘ethnic’ and also the term ‘group’ during the interviews. Yet, the term ‘tribe’ was used by most of the women I interviewed, except in one instance by interviewee 5:

Rob: You are I believe from the Tajik group?

Interviewee 5: I don’t know how do you call it, group? But my nation is Tajik.

The use of “nation” here is interesting, but what can be made of it? The interviewee’s second language is English. The choice of this word may be completely arbitrary or it may carry a sense of pride or autonomy within Afghanistan. In the Canadian context, the Québécois consider themselves a “nation,” and our First Nations might consider themselves a nation or multiple nations. Are these uses of the word “nation” comparable?

One interview candidate asked me not to use any statements referring to conflicts between the ethnic groups. Others seemed to want to suggest that the differences between ethnic groups shouldn’t be affecting relationships between Afghans, that their hope was the groups would get along, that there would be peace.
Rob: The Afghans that speak Dari and the Afghans that speak Pashto, do you have a sense of them relating to each other in the Afghan community here?

Interviewee 5: In Afghanistan, from my understanding, I never realize this point in Afghanistan. If he or she is Pashtun or Tajik. I had friends from Pashto speaker [sic] provinces. They were even closer than family members living far from you. . . . For me it is not a big deal. . . . I never see any difference. Afghans are Afghans.

Interviewee 9, working in Afghanistan in the fall of 2002, had this conversation with the staff working at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs:

Interviewee 9: The first day I’m at work, the girls like “Where are you from?”

“What do you mean, Canada? I’m Afghan but I live in Canada.”

“No, no, no no, Where are your parents from?”

“What do you mean? My dad is Pashtun, my mom is Tajik.” And she’s like “Oh - who do you relate to?”

“Nobody, I’m just an Afghan, I don’t take sides. Here I’m an Afghan, and when I go back [to Canada] I’m an Afghan. . . . I’m an Afghan period. . . . So why are you asking me this question? . . . I don’t care about my background or where are my parents from.” They’re like, “Oh we do, everybody does.”

Rob: Has this changed from when you were there?

Interviewee 9: Yes, I think having all the different groups take over, . . . people pick sides. . . . I was so shocked. They never said that they are Afghan.

Rob: How does this translate here? Do you have a sense that there are those affiliations here between these groups?

Interviewee 9: A lot of people just say that they are Afghans, but I guess if you are involved in politics and if your parents are involved in politics or taking sides and stuff, . . . I guess the kids will do the same, take sides. The people I hang around with know I’m Afghan. They don’t care what part of the country, I’m Afghan Canadian, that’s what counts.

Rob: Is the fact that your parents are from different groups, opened this up?

Interviewee 9: Yes I think it is. Being exposed, growing up in Kabul . . . there is no caste system but there is a class system. . . . I grew up I guess in the upper middle class. Coming from a rural area into Kabul you are concerned about your ethnic group.

So, experience of these differences seemed to be quite individual. Interviewee 9 mentioned the movement of rural people into Kabul and the ethnic group identity being brought with them. What
happened over time, however, to the children going to schools where there are Afghans of mixed ethnic groups? Language and religious differences can create additional reasons for ethnic group identities.

Adeena Niazi, the Executive Director of the AWO, explained how ethnic identity had become politicized in Afghanistan. Perhaps this explains a reticence to talk about it – or perhaps my being an outsider was the more significant factor here. According to Ms. Niazi:

The division in Afghanistan is political. The warlords started fighting for power. . . They used Afghans against each other on an ethnicity basis. There are supporters in Canada for these different groups. This causes tensions here in the Canadian community.

Interviewee 4 revealed how it is not as simple as thinking of Afghans as being from one ethnic group or another:

As I mentioned the first language I learned was Dari and this is not the language of Pashtun people. This is for Tajik people. Since I was raised in Kabul, and I was born in Kabul, so I learned to use this language and my family is using this language, however they are Pashtun. . . . I don’t have this sense of being different from Tajiks, or not being a part of Pashtuns. I am something like mixed person, something between – in between Pashtun and Tajik. I’m a Sunni, but I don’t mind a Shia person to be with or get involved with.

So how does identity tied to tribal or ethnic groups in Afghanistan translate in Canada? Is this translation the same for those who arrived in Canada after the Russians occupied the country in 1979 as it is for those who are arriving now after twenty years of internal conflict? Interviewee 9’s comments would lead me to believe that there would be differences. I was interested in both Afghan Canadians’ and non-Afghan Canadians’ views on identity distinctions between the tribes. On the latter, most interviewees thought Canadians had no sense of their being from a distinct ethnic group within Afghanistan, which certainly conformed to my experience before beginning research on this paper. One interviewee said that it was good for Canadians to generalize and not make these distinctions. Could it be that for immigrant groups with internal divisions, Sarna’s (1978) theory, that a generalized ethnicity is formed as immigrants interact with the institutions of the host society, may actually serve to benefit these groups?

Rob: You are Pashtun. Does that have any particular meaning within the Afghan community here? I mean do those distinctions between Tajik, Hazara exist here in Canada?

Interviewee 4: Unfortunately yes. They are united in their own community. They have their own groups.

Rob: Is it more a religious distinction between Shia and Sunni or also between being a different tribe?

Interviewee 4: Mostly because they are different tribes.
Not all the interviewees agreed with Interviewee 4 that there were distinctions between these ethnic groups in Canada. But I wondered whether this was an expression of how things should be and not how they are. It is clear, however, that while theories of identity attempt to explain patterns of behaviour, such theories often do not provide the context within which they might operate. The actual lived experience of people is highly contextualized and specific.

Adeena Niazi spoke about the role of the AWO in the Afghan community here, and the politicization of ethnic groups now transplanted to Canada:

The majority of the community members appreciate and like us. We stood for truth. We did not cite any of the political parties; we just talked about the reality. Of course there were a small number of community members who expected us to talk in favour of certain political parties. But the majority of Afghans here are not belonging to these groups.

Over and over I got a sense of hope from the Afghan Canadians I interviewed that the ethnic groups would settle their differences in Afghanistan, and also here in Canada. They appeared drawn to the idea of an Afghan identity, and their identity seemed much more tied to that of being an Afghan than to being a member of a specific ethnic group within Afghanistan.

Sarna (1978) proposed that while newcomer identity initially centres around the home city, or town, interaction with the government and other societal institutions in the new land, for instance the media, begins a process of group identity-formation with other immigrants from the same country of origin, even though they might come from different communities with different traditions (Sarna 1978, 371). From the heterogeneity of a minority group, then, can evolve a collective identity shaped both by the minority group and by the dominant society (Isajiw’s double boundary).

While I interviewed only two non-Afghan Canadians, I suspect that the majority of Canadians have no sense of Afghan Canadians being identified by sub-national ethnic groups. Non-Afghan Canadians are clearly not a factor in maintaining these constructions. For the Afghan Canadian community here, it seems evident that there are perceived differences by some Afghan Canadian individuals, perhaps even supported by some nonprofit organizations. Adeena Niazi, speaking of the Mothers’ Day event that the AWO holds each year noted:

This year we didn’t have the celebration because some other organizations said they were doing it as well, so as not to have the division we didn’t have ours. Three or four Afghan organizations did this. We didn’t want to be part of the division.

The Greater Muslim Community

As part of this research project, I investigated the question as to whether Afghan Canadians had a sense of themselves as Muslims, and whether they experienced a sense of community with non-Afghan Muslims. The Canadian Muslim population according to the 2001 census more than doubled in ten years to 579,640, making Islam the fastest growing religion (Galloway 2003b). Each interview began with a survey aimed at quickly capturing background information (see Appendix B). One question probed whether they would describe themselves as Afghan, Canadian, Afghan Canadian,
Muslim, or if they identified more strongly with one of the tribes. The responses seemed to indicate a comfort with being Afghan Canadian. Answers to questions like this may be suspect, however, because this is the answer that makes sense in the context of the interview situation where the interviewer is a fourth-generation Canadian from the dominant culture. When I discussed this further during the interview, most said that they felt more connected to the Afghan community than to the greater Muslim community. Indeed, most of the daily social contacts these women have are with other Afghans.

In contrast, the identity of the non-Afghan, Muslim, senior government official I interviewed seemed very much tied to Islam and less so to his South American origin. Consider the following response from Interviewee 7:

The Muslim community is not a homogenous community. It is very heterogeneous. It is a community of communities. We have a long way to go the overcome the linguistic and ethnic barriers. You have Indo-Pakistani centers, Arab-Lebanese, Afghans. There are mosques referred to as an Afghan mosque, or Pakistani mosque. We have to do a better job of being more inclusive. I am the president of an institution to attract people from different ethnic and geographic regions. Six months ago I was approached by an Afghan. He said it was the first event he had attended that was a multi-ethnic event.

This individual, thus, described a sense of linkage between the various Muslim communities through his use of the phrase “community of communities,” yet he acknowledged the existence of ethnically specific mosques. Also not surprisingly, we have confirmation that some Canadian Afghans do attend multi-ethnic Muslim events here. Does attending a multi-ethnic event mean that this Afghan shares an identity with other Muslims? I would think that, at least to some extent, he must share some sort of connection to this larger community, or at least have the desire for such a connection.

Given the limited number of my interviews, I cannot make any definitive statements as to whether Afghans generally feel part of the larger Muslim community. It seems as though there are individual responses to this question of identity within a larger religious context. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say “yes,” but the problems in Afghanistan are so urgent that much of the Afghan Canadian community’s energy is focused on conditions overseas in their homeland.

The Media

Images and language used by the media often shape society’s sense of ethnic identity for a given group. Moreover, events in society covered by the media help to demarcate the external societal boundaries of ethnic identity. For example, while this was not a constant theme, the 11 September 2001 attack on the New York City’s World Trade Centre came up in several interviews. Interviewee 6, in reference to an Afghan she talked to observed:

One the guys there wouldn't tell people around 9/11 they were Afghani [sic] because of all the backlash. He would tell people he was Chinese.
Furthermore, Interviewee 7 argued:

9/11 has set us back a decade or so. It has made people a bit more reserved, a bit more reluctant. People who might have been more accommodating are less so. Not only people but institutions. . . . Mosques are being monitored, and donations being reviewed. Muslim individuals are afraid to give a charitable donation.

What one is called, or what one chooses to call oneself, is an important part of identity. In the quotes above you will notice the word “Afghani” is used. While I was aware that the proper term is “Afghan,” during a meeting with two staff members of the AWO at the beginning of this project, I inadvertently said “Afghani” and was immediately and firmly corrected. I have not been able to question further what was going on there, but the received meaning I took from this exchange was that the term “Afghani” was not acceptable.

When I asked Adeena Niazi how non-Afghan volunteers found out about the AWO, she told me about the influx of concerned Canadian women who called after the attack on New York:

Adeena: After September 11 we had a big list of volunteers who offered their services. It was because of the media.

Rob: Do you feel that there are more connections between AWO and non-Afghan women because of September 11?

Adeena: Yes. There is a positive and negative side. . . . The media has created a wrong picture of Afghan women. . . . Afghan culture and religion has been blamed for the situation of women in Afghanistan. People here don't know the reality of Afghan women. The problems are more political. The pressure is from the outside countries. It is the culture of war and war was imposed on Afghanistan; the Russians, then US involvement. All the blame comes on Afghans. They have created the situation that all Afghans are fighting all the time, but there are other countries in the region involved.

When you look at the Afghan women through the Canadian media, you see victims, weak, suffering. But when you go to Afghanistan, the women are really strong. They have surviving skills, they are not appreciated. . . . They are strong, determined . . . talented. The picture that is created here is really different. That’s the negative side.

Rob: So many volunteers had a misconception. Do you think this situation has changed since they worked with you?

Adeena: Of course we worked with them and there is now an awareness and understanding.

The 9/11 media coverage resulted in the AWO engaging some thirty non-Afghan Canadian women in a dialogue concerning the identity of Afghan women overseas and, in the process, provided by example an image of Afghan women here in Canada. Images of strong, capable women are found for example in numerous essays written by Afghan Americans in a book edited by Sunita Mehta (2002)
Women for Afghan Women, produced by a US group by the same name. Interviewee 6, the non-Afghan photographer who produced a photo essay on Afghans in Toronto, also spoke of the media:

Interviewee 6: By meeting these people they don’t fit into the stereotype of what an Afghani [sic] is supposed to be or even look like.

Rob: Do you have a sense of that, of a stereotype, a Canadian stereotype?

Interviewee 6: I think we have the stereotype of that National Geographic picture of the little girl. Just the way people dress. Just what you see in the news really.

Rob: Is it more of a rural sensibility?

Interviewee 6: Yes rural, like peasants, that third world kind of . . .

The various labels used in the academic literature, the media, and by Afghans themselves to describe their culture groups within Afghanistan are partly responsible for shaping the perceptions of both Afghan and non-Afghan Canadians. Tribe, ethnic group, and nation are three labels that I’ve heard. Each conjures up a different image – an image that means something different for each of us because it is bound up so much with culture and history. Tribe, for me, has anthropological roots, and perhaps some connection to colonialism and slavery.

Transnationalism

Another theme with all interview candidates concerned the nature of their connections with Afghanistan. I was interested in the extent to which Afghanistan figured in their daily lives. This, I thought, might be measured in terms of the frequency of their connections to people and organizations there, and their involvement in activities here that worked in support of Afghan women overseas.

Transnationalism has recently surfaced as a conceptual tool in academic discourses of ethnic identity. Kivisto (2001) critiqued the various uses of the term and the dynamics that brought it into play. He surveyed work by Steven Vertovec, Alejandro Portes, Thomas Faist, and others in an attempt to untangle the use of the term. He ultimately located it as a subset of assimilation theory. Portes (1999, 217, as quoted by Kivisto 2001, 560) provided his own definition of transnationalism: “persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders.” These, and other characteristics, fall under three categories: economic, political, and socio-cultural transnationalism.

Portes (1996) provided examples of transnationalism that were important to this study of the Afghan Women’s Organization. For example, Portes looked at a Mexican enclave in Brooklyn that collaborated with its home village in Mexico to create a safer water-delivery system. He argued that modern communication and travel technology have increased the ability for immigrants to act on their desires to retain links with the homeland (Kivisto 2001).

For its part, the AWO supports programs for the education of women and children and an orphanage in Afghanistan, among other programs. This link, which was established through NGO
working in Afghanistan and through family and friends still in Afghanistan, is a central focus of the AWO ‘community,’ and, indeed, of the community of Afghan Canadian immigrants within which the AWO exists.

Circumstances in both the adopted country and the homeland affect the identity of transnational immigrants. Faist (2000) spoke about “transnational social spaces,” a term that refers to “the construction of border-crossing social spaces” (as quoted in Kivisto 2001, 567). According to Kivisto (2001, 565), Faist defined this as “a boundary-breaking process in which two (usually) or more nation-states are penetrated by and become a part of a singular new social space” that provides for “the circulation of ideas, symbols, and material culture” (Faist, 2000). Faist included transnational communities in his framework, and described these as “networks of organizations that can be found in a least two geographically and internationally distinct places” (Faist 1998). Kivisto summed up transnational identity in the following manner:

Borrowing from the novelist Salman Rushdie – the idea of translated people, writing that ‘Migrants are continually engaged in translating languages, cultures, norms and social and symbolic ties’ [sic]. In other words, transnational migrants forge their sense of identity and their community, not out of a loss or mere replication, but as something that is at once new and familiar – a bricolage (italics in original), constructed of cultural elements from both the homeland and the receiving nation (Kivisto, 2001, 568).

The women at the AWO are involved in projects to support women and their families in Afghanistan. This would seem to fit Portes’ (1996) ideas around connections between communities that cross national borders. All of the Afghan women I interviewed have some contact with relatives and friends in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or India. Five of the seven women I interviewed did not seem to fit this idea of transnationalism, simply because they were not traveling between the countries. Of course, this may be primarily because of financial considerations. Two of the women I interviewed have traveled to Afghanistan and seemed very involved there. I asked Adeena Niazi to describe her ongoing involvement with Afghanistan:

_Adeena:_ I travel to Afghanistan, at least once a year, but sometimes twice a year... . I usually go for a month or one and a half months. This time it was two months. . . It was the first time we went with a funded project. . .

_Rob:_ You live in Canada, you are Canadian. Where is your home? Where do you call home?

_Adeena:_ Now I call my home Canada because I’m based here. I don’t have my immediate family members or close relatives and friends there, most of them are out. . . [Afghanistan] is my original home, but I have made Canada my home now. If there is an issue in Afghanistan or trouble or something I feel very much Afghan. But my heart is always there.

_Rob:_ So that sense of being Afghan, being Canadian, being Afghan Canadian, we talked about this before, It sounds like that fluctuates depending on if there is [sic] big issues happening?
Adeena: But issues are always happening, my heart is always there. . . . I want to work to bring changes and do programs and projects. But I find it difficult to live there for many reasons. One is that I have my family and friends here. I cannot be separate from them. . . . The other is because of the situation in Afghanistan. It is really difficult to be part of that with human rights abuses and all going on there.

So is Ms. Niazi living in a “transnational social space”? I get a definite sense of “there” and “here” from her comments; yet there is also a sense of always being connected, but this connection is always changing as issues arise. The fact that she spends one to two months a year there is significant, and leads me to imagine she fits the concept of living in a transnational space, as a transnational citizen.

The second woman, Interviewee 9, a young woman under twenty-five, organized a conference last year in Canada on UN resolution 1325. In the fall of 2002, she spent three months working for the Ministry of Women in Afghanistan in Kabul. As she observed:

I went there as a UN volunteer, working with the United Nations development program. I was based in the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, basically training the women in Office Management, computers, English, . . . time management, stress management. . . . [The] people that I worked with were mostly my age or a little older and they haven’t worked all their life. . . . [They] didn’t know what to do, so I was to train them in office management, how to handle clients. . . . I was brought there under the UNVDP United Nations Volunteer Development Program. I worked with the ministry for three months.

Interviewee 9 also told me:

I would go back to volunteer for another three months in a second. . . . I would go for temporary, not long term that would be quite hard.

It is the country that I was born in, . . . I will always relate to it, but it is not my home, my home is here. . . . I have more ties to here than I do there.

So, is Interviewee 9 occupying a transnational space? The answer is not clear, and her case underscores the complexity of transnationalism. Her sense of home is in Canada, yet she wants continued involvement in her homeland.

My research into the existence of other Afghan organizations, particularly ones in the media, led to an interesting discovery. In the Spring of 2003, Maryan Mahboob, the editor of Zarnegaar, a Toronto-based Afghan bi-weekly newspaper, spent about six weeks in Afghanistan. In the summer of 2003, Roshan Khadem, producer of York University’s CHRY program “National Voice of Afghanistan,” (a program he’s run for fourteen years), spent about two months there. While over-generalization would be unwise, contacts with these few organizations and individuals lead me to a perception that there are quite a number of Afghan Canadians traveling and maintaining connections with people and organizations in Afghanistan. In Calgary, a chapter of the national coalition group

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18 UN resolution 1325 focuses on getting women involved in the formation of a new government in Afghanistan.
“Women in Support of Women in Afghanistan” provides the funding for the new girls’ orphanage that the AWO has recently started in Kabul. This is creating connections between non-Afghan and Afghan Canadians across Canada and between these groups and Afghans overseas. Can we say these people are living in transnational spaces? Given advances in communications technology, it seems less important that the transnational space be a physical space, as opposed to virtual or metaphorical space in which communication and relationships can be created and maintained. Transnationalism is a complex concept that I expect will be rigorously debated by academic researchers for many years to come.

Gender and Gender Relations

Gender is a central concept in the area of theories of identity and it is also a central issue in the definition of culture and community. Gender relations are the primary mechanism through which gender identity is worked out. Gender relations are deeply embedded in cultural practices and symbols. Yuval-Davis elaborated on this point by suggesting:

Gender relations often come to be seen as constituting the ‘essence’ of cultures as ways of life to be passed from generation to generation. The construction of the ‘home’ is of particular importance here, including relations between adults and between adults and children . . . out of which a whole world view, ethical and aesthetic, can become naturalized and reproduced. (Yuval-Davis 1997, 43).

Attempts by women to make social change within community are often seen as a threat to the status quo, both by community members and also by the greater society (Kennedy, Lubelska, and Walsh 1993). Burlet and Reid suggested a rethinking of women’s resistance by examining the complexities of social reality and the ways in which ethnicity and gender interact (Burlet and Reid 1998). Seeking a voice and forming a political constituency involve challenges to a community’s construction of identity. Observed from both within and outside the ethnic community, when these challenges occur, the veneer of ‘community’ homogeneity is torn off and the community no longer possess only one voice and one set of values.

I considered how relations between the genders had or had not changed since these Afghan women came to Canada. From my interviews, I cannot pin down definitively to what extent the AWO’s organizational setting provided opportunities for shifts in gender relationships. The following statements, however, seemed to suggest that the AWO does have a role, though not perhaps a direct interventionist role, in such dynamics. It focuses more on support for women in the context of their families and settlement needs, but such support inevitably causes shifts in gender relations for some women. Interviewee 3a spoke directly to gender relations in Canada and compared these to her experiences in Afghanistan:

Men think we have more freedom here. They can do anything they want - men are suspicious of the women. In Afghanistan men have all the power. While we worked there and had professions we had to follow what our husbands say. Women had to let them have the power. . .
Several women echoed this sense of difference between Afghan and Canadian culture with respect to gender relations. I asked each of the interviewees whether things had changed with their husbands since arriving in Canada. Again, the answers on this varied:

Rob: Have you noticed changes with your husband being in the Canadian context?

Interviewee 4: Mostly in our community [in Afghanistan] you are not praising your wife so much, . . . or giving some presents. But here, I see changes in my husband. Once, even I didn’t remember my birthday, but he brought me a bucket of flowers and a bottle of perfume, and on Mothers’ Day they had a secret shopping with my daughter. These are the positive changes. I like it.

Rob: Is this because circumstances here are better, that you have time to think about each other more?19

Interviewee 4: This is because we have time to think about each other. It was a surprise for me because I wasn’t used to it and I didn’t expect it. Because I knew his nature that he was not doing any of these positive things before it is almost ten years since we are married. It was the first time that I got a bucket of flowers . . . even when he was my fiancé, I didn’t receive anything. But here I got it. This is the positive influence of Canadian culture.

Rob: In Afghanistan then was it partly cultural circumstance then?

Interviewee 4: Yes, because mostly gifts arrived through the family connection, through the father or mother of the groom, not the groom directly. Mostly the relationship between husband and wife are [sic] very private. They didn’t exchange words or hugs . . . when they are around the family. But now you see these changes and here in community they hug their wives in front of the families or say thank you or I love or these (sic) stuff. These are the positive changes. I really love it.

By contrast, in the Globe and Mail on June 28, 2003, a photo essay about recent immigrants to Canada featured, among others, two immigrants from Buenos Aires who made this comment about Canada: “people don’t demonstrate what they feel in public. In Argentina, they show their feelings. You can embrace your wife and kiss her and it’s nothing strange” (Dunfield and Gower 2003, F5). So Canadians are “reserved” to some immigrants and “overly expressive” to others. Reactions to one’s public identity and what’s permissible here are highly individualized, and all newcomers are faced with bridging the gap.

Another interviewee told me about a woman whose husband had not let her go out of the house, but he finally allowed her out to do the shopping, and she went to one of the AWO’s centres. With support from an AWO counselor she was able to ask her husband for permission to take ESL classes, to which he eventually agreed. This story would seem to provide evidence that the AWO’s presence in the community is having an effect on gender relations for some Afghan women in the Toronto Afghan community.

19 This is an example of poor interview technique, I’m “leading the witness.” Another reason for “better circumstances” could be financial.
Identity as an Individual

I wanted to understand, if possible, to what extent the Afghan women I interviewed had a sense of their identity as individuals outside of the context of the family. This interest in individual identity developed during the course of the first few interviews, as the importance of “the family” emerged as a central focus for Afghan identity. My socialization process emphasized the importance of the individual, of individual achievement and recognition. This emphasis on relationships being between individuals embedded in a family context differed from my own experience of identity. I wondered whether part of the settlement process also might mean immigrants shifting the “base” from which their identity is anchored. The interviews did not answer this question, but they did provide glimpses of a sense of identity outside the family context. During the interviews, I had to devise strategies for approaching this, by trying, for example, to ask the question without actually using the word ‘identity.’

Rob: When you think of yourself and your life. What I hear is your closeness to your family, and this is a very central important thing in your life. Do you have a sense of yourself as a woman outside of the context of the family?

Interviewee 5: I think of myself as a mother because I am a mother, and I have a good, a great sympathy with them [the clients]. . . .

Also consider this response from Interviewee 4:

Interviewee 4: We are all friends. We are meeting outside, going to each others’ houses. We are connected. We were introduced to each other here, in AWO, but since we have this common goal to provide help to our community here and to give some services for newcomers here. If you notice we are all at the same age. We get along with each other. We are all women. We have such a great sense of cooperation.

Interviewee 5, and the other women I interviewed, spoke about working for their community and the importance of helping other Afghan Canadians. Interviewee 5 claimed to have gained a sense of herself as being important to her community through her work at the AWO in a role that was separate from her role in her family, yet she connected the value of her role at AWO with her experience as a mother.

I interviewed a mother and her daughter separately as part of the research. Interviewee 9 commented about her identity outside the family:

Rob: Do you see yourself outside of the context of the family? Inside but also outside of it?

Interviewee 9: Yes my family is important to me and I relate to my family but I’m also an individual. . . . I see them both as important. . . . It’s me first and then my family, but when it comes to others and my family, it will be my family always. . . . I have to live my life. . . .
Rob: Has your experience organizing conferences and that kind of thing, I mean has that shaped your sense of identity, or sense of being an individual rather than being only in the context of being part of a family?

Interviewee 9: I guess it has. . . . Growing up having my mother and Adeena as a role model. . . . I thought If they could do it, I can do it too. . . they had their life all set up and then it crashed, so they started all over again. . . and looking at these two people, . . . yes I could have my family and also have my Afghan identity and being a woman is very important to me especially being an Afghan-Canadian woman.

Rob: You have a sense of your mom being an individual?

Interviewee 9: She’s also a great mother but she’s also doing what she believes in.

Interviewee 9 came to Canada when she was twelve, and, so, was socialized here as a teenager. She clearly has a sense of being an individual outside of the family context, and she sees her mother’s role at the AWO as “doing what she believes in.” The notion of the AWO providing role models seems important here as well. By setting an example, Adeena Niazi and the other AWO staff are affecting some women’s sense of themselves, who they can be, and what they can accomplish with their lives.

The Second Generation and Public School Socialization

Since Afghan immigration has been relatively recent, the second generation is still quite young. The public education system for Afghan Canadian children provides the most direct and prolonged contact with other young Canadians. I had not planned to explore this area, but it kept coming up in the interviews. I heard about the difficulties of cultural gaps between Afghan Canadian children’s home life and school life from the mothers I interviewed. It also emerged during the session with Interviewee 9 who had been to Grades 8 to 13 here. Consider the following examples:

Interviewee 4: This is something very strange for me. For me this is a kid using some shiny stuff on her face. She brought some make-up from one of her Canadian friends. She told me that it was a gift from her. She told me she wants to use it. I told her, “No it is not the right time to wear make-up. She doesn't look good using that much make up at this time.” I went to her school and talked with this friend and told her “I hope you don't mind she is not using all these make-ups” [sic]. My daughter told me that she felt a bit embarrassed when I returned all this stuff.

Interviewee 3b: The children have more freedom here. Other Canadian kids at school have more freedom, therefore I have to follow this.

Interviewee 3a: I want to choose best from all cultures, I want the positive side. I want to keep my culture but learn about Canadian culture. I need to be strict with them [my children], to keep the culture but it is a problem, it creates distance between me and my children. My behaviour with my children is less strict here than in Afghanistan. I want both cultures to mix and to live peacefully in this world.
Interviewee 9, speaking of her experience as a student in the Toronto Public School System: I went through the process of having a double identity – Go home you’re an Afghan, go out you’re an Afghan Canadian. And you have to sort of . . . its just very hard for kids these days to keep these two identities. It’s too much for them and they want to let go of one or both identities. I’m just going to be a Canadian or I’m going to be an Afghan. . . . There’s lots of kids having difficulty handling that and there’s nothing out there to help them.

All of the Afghan mothers I interviewed made comments about the public school system; these included references to the pull of western consumerist culture and the sense that other children had more freedom. Several mothers also spoke about the need to keep their cultural traditions, yet they wanted their kids also to fit in. This tension reflected the reality of integration processes, with the tensions associated with the need to guard against assimilation by retaining cultural practices and values, and the need to fit in.

To address this gap between Afghan Canadian children and their parents, the AWO started youth programs. About 50 youth participate in these programs. Adeena Niazi spoke about why they were started:

There is a big problem with the youth when they come here. Especially there is a cultural gap between the youth and their parents at home. There is lots of conflicts. Some youth are ashamed of their cultural identity because they want to identify with the Canadian culture. Some of them stick too much with their culture and suffer isolation. . . . We work for a balance . . . the youth first of all are proud of who they are and proud of their own cultural identity and heritage. We establish the acceptance of Canadian culture just to balance our focus on that. We have a mentoring program [modeled on the] Big Brother, Big sister program . . . it is within the Afghan community.

The AWO is clearly engaging in retentionist cultural preservation here, but who are the clients, the youth, their parents, or both? Interviewee 9 expressed some frustration with AWO Youth Programs:

Interviewee 9: The Afghan group is more geared towards bringing them back to being an Afghan, and that’s what they want to escape from, . . . so they don’t come out. Last year we had this big picnic at High park, and oh my god we had such a great turnout, they played, barbequed. . . . Recently, we’ve had classes lecturing about various topics . . . and they’re like "we don’t want to do that."

Rob: Do you have a sense then that the focus of the programs is cultural preservation?

Interviewee 9: Yes it is. And it should be that to some extent.

Interviewee 9, despite a frustration with the ‘lectures,’ did acknowledge the value of having some cultural programming, but sensed that the youth were not really interested in it. The AWO sees its role as assisting parents in maintaining Afghan cultural ties in the Canadian context. So, it is on the one hand, assisting Afghan refugees with language and job search skills towards economic integration
and, at the same time, offering Afghan cultural ‘anchors’ with a goal of cultural preservation. To what extent is the AWO able to provide effective programming for youths who are socialized here and to the increasing numbers of second-generation children? What would be required for them to effectively provide cultural heritage programs to second-generation youth?

The AWO, at least for the youth who do get involved in their programs as volunteers, does provide both opportunities for learning leadership skills and access to women leaders who can serve as role models. Interviewee 9 has volunteered for the AWO since it started, and readily commented on her experience as a volunteer:

. . . the focus of the organization being women . . . I met a lot of fantastic women, like Marilou McPhedran, Senator Mobina Jaffer, Sally Armstrong, they are great women and great role models. If I wasn’t involved in Afghan Women’s Org, I wouldn’t have had this opportunity to branch out and to meet other people, networking and stuff like that.

The AWO as ‘Family’

The metaphor of family applied to the staff and volunteers at the AWO emerged as a theme. In this section, I will focus on two “groups:” the Afghan Women’s Catering Group and the Part-time staff.

Rob: You’ve used the word “community” around the AWO.

Adeena Niazi: Sometimes I feel AWO is a family. In terms of the cooperation and commitment, the work they are doing; we are not working for a pay cheque, but for the changes.

Rob: Who is in this family?

Adeena Niazi: The staff and volunteers. . . . Also clients and members. . . . The staff and volunteers work closely together.

I wonder if Ms. Niazi was referring to family as in, “We’re one big, happy family?” That is, we all get along, there are no problems, tensions, and so on. Families have their own internal power relationships, for example, between parents and children. Adeena Niazi, as leader of this family, might be seen to occupy the role of “mother.” Conceptions of mother include not only notions of loving, caring, and nurturing but also those of discipline, setting boundaries, establishing expectations, and instilling values. As advocates for children tell us, families are institutions with built-in power relationships between parents and children.

The term “community,” which is enshrined in the AWO’s formal name, has also been used by Ms. Niazi and the other women I interviewed. I have used it in this paper without defining it; for it is a difficult concept to pin down. Sometimes it is defined in a geographic sense, and at other times it is used to refer to the members of a particular group, such as the Black community or the Chinese community, even when such groups are marked by great diversity of interests and backgrounds.
Recently, in our national newspapers we’ve seen the term used in the context of the SARS outbreak of 2003. Numerous articles speculated on the danger of SARS moving out into “the community,” by which was meant the escape of the disease from the confines of hospitals. This is a rather broader use of the word than is intended here.

Community figures strongly in theories of identity, since the identity of most individuals is bound up in affiliations with and/or exclusions from one or more communities. Alleyne (2002) attempted to unpack the concept of community. He looked at the history of community as a sociological object, and targeted its use with respect to ethnic community. He suggested that it originally connoted small towns in pre-industrial Europe in comparison to a sister concept, “society,” which connotes modernity (Alleyne 2002, 608). According to Alleyne, “the modern West had developed society from diverse community, and this development was accompanied (even made possible) by the emergence of the individual (Alleyne 2002, 611).” He posited that the term ‘ethnic community’ came “to be a privileged marker of difference for all non-white persons in Britain” (Alleyne 2002, 612).

In Britain, colonialism created a language of race relations and ethnic communities. Alleyne (2002) argued that the individual and “culture” co-create each other, that culture creates people, and people create culture in the same way that ‘culture’ creates and is created by ‘community’ and, as such, ‘community’ is culturally bounded.

Viewed by outsiders, an ethnic community takes on a veneer of sameness whereby differences of gender, age and class are erased. As always, such stereotypes are unwise:

The phrase ‘the Community’ . . . obscures differences within an identified community, notably those of gender and of class, and fails to recognize the range of opinions held in a community (The Bradford Commission Report 1996, 92, as quoted in Burlet and Reid 1998).

This tendency to homogenize a minority community into one static, simple, and knowable object is fostered by leaders who are said to “represent” the community. Leadership involves power and appropriation of power within a minority community. To be recognized as a leader by both the institutions of the dominant society and by the members of the minority group, leaders of minority communities must maintain the fiction that the community is homogeneous (Gilroy 1993). The appropriation of power involves the silencing of voices speaking from gendered, generational, and class-based positions. Inevitably, leadership roles (the primary political linkage to the dominant society) are commandeered by men (Burlet and Reid 1998).

Interviewee 7, the senior government official I interviewed, is a leader in the Muslim community. Yet, clearly, he perceived the Muslim community to be heterogeneous and did not maintain a fiction of homogeneity. He recognized the need for the community to work through its differences for the purpose of acting as one community in order to gain access to political policy-making institutions.

The staff at the AWO include four non-Afghans who are considered part of this family. The other women I interviewed talked about sharing food at lunch, visiting each other in their homes, and volunteering for projects outside of their normal responsibilities. On the days I was interviewing there, I observed what seemed, to my Anglo-Canadian eyes, elaborate and intimate goodbye rituals with
women kissing three times on each cheek. This ritual was described in Hosseini’s recent novel *Kite Runner* (2003, 146).

One particular group, the Afghan Women’s Catering Group, began in 1997 with twenty women receiving training in running a catering business. The intention was that the business would become independent of the AWO once they were established. Ten of the original twenty women who were trained did not know each other before the group formed. The ten women who are presently active in the business feel a close connection to the AWO, and have retained a close affiliation. I interviewed two of these women for this paper.

*Interviewee 3b:* We are all working together. We are happy to make money. If I have a sorrow, I share with them, contact by phone, about money problems, about everythings [sic].

The catering business provides employment opportunities for women, who would not normally be working outside the home, to do so in a way that their husbands can visibly support by helping to deliver food, for example. The men support their efforts because they are doing traditional women’s work, it is adding income to support their families. Moreover, as Ms. Niazi pointed out to me, the women work only with other women so the environment is culturally acceptable to the men.

The catering work gives these women a sense of identity outside the home, while being connected to their role as mothers. In terms of identity, each of these women thinks of herself as being a member of a group of women who share a business that has fostered ongoing emotional ties. The clients who use the Afghan Catering Group’s services are mostly non-Afghan. Many of the new clients find out about the Catering Group from former clients. In the early days, the church that provided the kitchen space used their catering services, and word spread from there. Opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges are happening in the course of running the catering business.

I asked Ms. Niazi about the part-time workers who provide child-care services to the clients attending the ESL classes at the AWO’s four sites. Her responses were revealing:

*Rob:* It seems to me that, in a sense, focusing on hiring Afghan women part-time was - would you say in a way - it was a program on its own? They are hired as staff to provide childcare for the ESL programs, but in another sense they are getting Canadian work experience, they are gaining some income?

*Adeena Niazi:* Yes, exactly.

*Rob:* Was this a conscious decision to say well here’s a way we can . . . ?

*Adeena Niazi:* Yes, it is a program where the childcare benefits the workers and the workers benefit the childcare. . . . We have a list of Afghan women who have applied for work, so we tried to accommodate as many a possible. . . .

*Rob:* How do their husbands respond to working outside the home?

*Adeena Niazi:* Because it is an all-women environment the men are happy with this.
Rob: It’s a motherhood kind of role.

Adeena Niazi: It’s more important for the men that it’s an all-female environment.

Rob: Has this work changed these women’s sense of independence?

Adeena Niazi: Of course. They feel more independent, because it is their money. This is really helping them.

Rob: Can you comment on the exposure to children of other cultures and their parents when they come to pick them up? What effect does this have on these women?20

Adeena Niazi: For these women, it is the first time they are working with people from other cultures. They seemed to be comfortable. They know that the expectations are different, and they try to be very sensitive to that.

Here again we see the AWO operating within cultural restrictions. It is important that no men be working alongside the women. This assures a context acceptable both to the women and their husbands. The women, at the same time, gain an opportunity to work outside their homes, and are meeting other Canadians in the process. Their experiences with these other immigrants and their children, the other immigrants’ experiences with them, and having a role in the community outside the home, serve to shape their identities as women.

I found especially noteworthy the entrepreneurial strategy employed by the AWO to hire forty-one Afghan-Canadian women using CIC funding to provide child care for others who were participating in ESL programs. The AWO has, in a sense, developed a program within a program, whereby the workers are engaged in a program of work outside the home, with the permission of their husbands. No written objectives exist for this program. But from the interviews with the women who worked in the child-care services area, I could imagine the following, as program objectives:

• To provide hard-to-get Canadian work experience
• To practice English language skills
• To provide training in child-care practices in an institutional setting under government guidelines
• To provide income support for Afghan Canadian families
• To enable Afghan Canadian women an opportunity to contribute to society outside the home; to engage them in community capacity-building work through the utilization of their skills as mothers and as professional child-care workers, to care for the children of clients attending the ESL classes
• To provide for cross-cultural exchange
• To do all of the above while engaging the support of these women’s husbands in a non-threatening way within accepted cultural parameters
• To potentially set the stage for “next steps” for those women who seek a further role in society outside the home.

20 Here is an example of a good open-ended question. I interviewed Ms. Niaizi last, and by then I was getting better at this.
The AWO as ‘Extended Family’

Continuing this metaphor of family, I considered two events organized by the AWO, as ways through which the organization fostered a sense of being an extended family within the Afghan community in Toronto: Mothers’ Day and the AWO picnics.

When Mothers’ Day was first mentioned during the interviews, I thought I was seeing an adaptation of a Western tradition by Afghan Canadians. It made me think about how immigrants adapt mainstream culture for their own purposes, creating something entirely new. Examples of this would include the batmitzvah for Jewish girls and Jewish Thanksgiving. However, this proved not to be the case. Ms. Niazi confirmed that this tradition also exists in Afghanistan, but with some important differences in comparison to the way in which it is celebrated by non-Afghan Canadians:

Rob: Mothers’ Day. Is there an equivalent in Afghanistan?

Adeena Niazi: We have an equivalent in Afghanistan. But now they are celebrating more "woman’s day" than “Mothers’ Day.” But we kept that tradition. When I was in Afghanistan, Mothers’ Day was a very important day for us, and we kept that tradition. We have poetries [sic], speeches, and music, and also we recognize and honour outstanding mothers. . . . Very much like in Afghanistan.

Interviewee 9, as a young person, experienced the AWO Mothers’ Day events rather differently:

Interviewee 9: I didn’t see it as Mothers’ Day, I saw it as this party. They still had speeches and stuff, but we were having a fashion show, we were having a concert afterwards, there was great food. That’s what I see it as. I didn’t see it as Mothers’ Day. Mothers’ Day to me is just my family and my Mom.

Hundreds of people, men, women, and children attend these events. Afghan Mothers’ Day is significantly different from the Anglo-Canadian observance, as it is celebrated by the whole community together, with public acknowledgment of role of women in the family. Western-style Mothers’ Day is often celebrated within each nuclear family, not as a large event with public speeches recognizing women’s contribution as mothers. Interviewee 9, socialized in our Canadian public school system, would seem to relate more easily to Mothers’ Day as celebrated within the immediate family. Perhaps as Zhou (1997) suggested, Afghan women have “unpacked” this tradition because it is an important Afghan cultural tradition, and because it does not seem so foreign or out of place here.

The AWO did not sponsor a Mothers’ Day event in 2003 because some other Afghan organizations were also running such events. There seemed to be a sense that organizations were not working together on this. Ms. Niazi expressed the hope that it might be possible to address this issue by getting these organizations together and attempting to coordinate their efforts. Potentially, this could have the effect of increasing social capital in the Afghan Canadian community.

All of the Afghans I interviewed mentioned the importance of picnics, as did the two non-Afghans that I interviewed. According to Adeena Niazi, picnics are a tradition in Afghanistan. I also found a reference to this in Khaled Hosseini’s recent novel, The Kite Runner (2003, 38). These picnics
may consist of one extended family or an organized event. The AWO holds a picnic at least once a year. Last year, over a thousand people showed up. This represented almost ten per cent of the Afghan community in Toronto.

I did not ask my interview participants what the significance was of these events. I believe these events serve to anchor Afghan Canadian identity in several ways. Afghan Canadians experience being together as a community of families. The picnics serve as a confirmation in the Afghan diaspora of cultural and religious connections being maintained, of a tangible presence as a community. They generate an experience of being visible both within their community and to those outside their community, by occupying public space. The picnics also serve as an experience of being a community that is organized.

I asked Adeena Niazi about the picnics that AWO organizes. She suggested:

*Adeena Niazi:* One of the good things about our picnics, people from different backgrounds come together. It is just to have a happy time . . . to be far from the politics. Especially for kids, we have the traditional games, and food, dress they are wearing.

We call our members, we advertise in *Zarnegaar.* Sometimes we were expecting three or four hundred, but over 1000 people showed up.

*Rob:* Are there multi-cultural Muslim picnics?

*Adeena Niazi:* We haven’t been part of them. But our youth program have [sic] this. We have participated, but we have not organized this ourselves.

I asked Interviewee 6, a non-Afghan Canadian, about the Afghan picnic that she photographed while creating her photo essay on Afghans in Toronto:

*Interviewee 6:* The picnic was, like, my highlight. I didn’t have any contacts. I had to just like find an Afghani [sic] family in the park.

So, I wandered around the park. There were a lot of people speaking Farsi, but at the end of the peninsula, I saw this big group there, and I turned away . . . cause it was, like, they looked so good, and maybe they are from Afghanistan, but how do I, like, ask them?

I hear this guy call out “Hey why don’t you take our picture?”

Ok! And I waddled over. The first thing they said, “We’re from Afghanistan.”

And then they asked me, *Where are you from?*

“I’m from Canada, from Vancouver.”

“No, where are you really from?”
Well, I’m half-Iraqi.

Ahhh . . .

It was a family of, like, 50 people sitting on this huge Afghan carpet. A huge extended family. . . . I just sat with them, and they were great.

The men and women were separated, but the older women really almost became like androgynous people. They would be wherever they wanted to be. They would sit with the men sometimes. They would sit with the women.

They saw a likeness in me through my eyes. Because I have eyes from that area of the world and I’m here, so something happened to me to bring me here from there. I think that that was my extra access that I got.

They are in Oshawa and they drive in to have the picnic there.

All of them seem to have this real tie to being from Afghanistan. Some were religious, some weren’t.

There are photographs, which I don’t have permission to reproduce here, that show a huge carpet spread out on the grass with lots of Afghan food. Adults, many in Western-style dress, but some in more traditional garb, are sitting, while children of all ages are playing. Cans of coke on the carpet and in peoples’ hands suggest the integration processes that are inevitably taking place as these Afghan Canadians find themselves in this new land. I read in these photos a sense of space occupied in a way that a nuclear family does not occupy space, and a sense of a family as a community.

**Conclusion and Implications**

The objectives of this research study were twofold. I wanted to see to what extent various theories of immigrant identity, both the assimilationist and retentionist paradigms, applied usefully to immigrants settling in the Greater Toronto Area, especially with respect to Afghan refugees. I intended to clarify my understanding of immigrant identity theory by applying various theories to the experiences of real people. I also hoped that I could assess the relevance of these various theories to a specific ethnic group (Afghans), gender (women), geographic location (the GTA), host country (Canada), and time period (the last twenty years).

The second aspect of my research project involved an investigation of the ways in which nonprofits provide spaces for immigrants to negotiate/co-create their immigrant identity. As this study focused on one nonprofit, The Afghan Women’s Organization, and involved a limited number of interviews, I cannot extend any generalizations about the AWO to conclusions about the roles of other nonprofits in identity formation processes of immigrants and refugees. The study did, however, provide some concrete examples of how one nonprofit, the AWO, provided opportunities for the women I interviewed to explore identity issues with each other, and with non-Afghan Canadians, through negotiative and co-creative processes.
As to the first objective, my work clarified a number of connections between the lived experience of the refugees I interviewed and various theories of immigrant identity. The women and men I interviewed provided examples of identity-formation processes that connect to both the assimilationist and pluralist frames. But the plurality of responses by my interviewees on issues like the framing of identity as Pashtun or Tajik, and as Afghan or Muslim, complicated theoretical formulations. Immigrant identity theories attempt to generalize individual experience in order find the over-arching patterns from which the dynamics of group identity can be interrogated. Individual experience, in its uniqueness, exhibits a range of possibility, whereas theory necessarily addresses general patterns. Theory exists to predict and explain patterns of behaviour that ultimately cannot be predicted with certainty.  

My second objective assumed that nonprofits do have a role in shaping the identity of immigrants, and I sought to find examples of this. The AWO offered numerous examples of deliberately and accidentally created spaces in which immigrant identity formation processes do occur. 

This study explored several aspects of immigrant identity theory, using the framework outlined by Gans (1997), which takes into account both the assimilationist and the pluralist approaches. The AWO helps new immigrants and refugees, both Afghan and non-Afghan, to settle in Canada through programs for ESL, job search skills, finding a home and a job, and Canadian culture orientation. The AWO thus acts as an assimilationist force that focuses on immigrants learning about Canada, adopting a new language, and learning how to access services from Canadian government and non-government institutions. The organization devotes most of its resources towards an assimilationist agenda, with the majority of its budget directed to assimilationist activities. As an organization, its motivation for doing so flows from a belief that mothers are the focal point of the family, and if mothers can be supported in their adjustment to life in Canada, the lives of their children and husbands will be improved.

On the basis of this research, it is clear that the AWO provided opportunities that served to shape identity in a number of areas. Some of these opportunities were deliberately constructed (for example, the Youth Programs), while others seem to occur without any conscious program design. The interview data show that the AWO created roles for staff and volunteers outside the home, and opportunities to work with other professional women as colleagues, and perhaps to serve as role models. It also facilitated cross-cultural interaction and negotiation of ethnic boundaries.

For staff and volunteers, the AWO provided opportunities to serve in the community. A number of the women commented that this role outside the home and outside the context of their family gave them a sense of identity separate from their status as mother or wife. Yet, these women consistently articulated their experience, at least metaphorically, as being part of a family, the AWO family, and they related their ability to perform their jobs successfully to their experience as mothers. It would seem that the central unit of Afghan relationships – the family – is re-constructed at the AWO as the context within which AWO staff and volunteers experience themselves as individuals and as citizens with agency in the community.

The husbands of many of the part-time staff would not normally have allowed their wives to work outside the home. These women, through their work at the AWO, served the community and

21 Outside the frame of this paper falls a discussion of how theory serves as much as a tool of status acquisition for academic researchers as a tool of investigative inquiry.
engaged in childcare as professionals. In this context, they were able to explore gender boundaries in
a ‘culturally-safe’ environment. At the same time, they were also able to gain opportunities for cross-
cultural connections with the parents of the children in the childcare program, connections not
normally available to these women. They, thus, experienced themselves working together as Afghan
women providing services to other ethnic groups. Interviewee 3a told me: “In Canada we never feel
we are from another country because of the diversity. This is my country.” The experience of these
women working in a multicultural context may have helped to shape this belief. The data provided
by the interviews were not sufficient to allow me to determine how this cross-cultural context affected
the negotiation of ethnic boundaries. To do so would require a wider interview base than was possible
here, so this remains as an area in need of further research.

I offer here some observations preliminary to such further investigation. Perhaps non-Afghan
Canadians, upon seeing the AWO staff in traditional child-care roles, are likely to find their cultural
stereotypes reinforced. Yet, these women do work outside the home, and, in this regard, they serve
to counter media portrayals of Afghan women under virtual house arrest during the Taliban occupation.

The programs for Afghan Canadian youth offer the most obvious example of the AWO
advancing a pluralist agenda. The interviews uncovered perspectives from both AWO staff and from
a youth program volunteer (Interviewee 9). This latter individual, a woman in her twenties, offered a
view perhaps closer to the youths’ actual perspective on these programs. Interviewee 9, socialized
from the age of twelve in the Canadian public school system, and has negotiated the cultural gap
between life at home and life at school. She spoke, for instance, of being an Afghan at home and being
an Afghan-Canadian at school. One of the AWO’s objectives is to ‘balance’ the effects of popular
culture and the socialization processes of our Canadian school system by providing Afghan-Canadian
youths, many of whom are first generation, with exposure to Afghan traditions. Breton’s theory of
institutional completeness comes into play here Breton (1964 and 1991). Heritage programs require
both organization and resources, and often are developed and run by ethno-specific organizations. The
AWO, as one of the first Afghan-Canadian nonprofits in Toronto, sensed a need for it to play role in
providing Afghan-Canadian youth with a sense of pride in their cultural heritage. The difficulty seems
to be that these youth may be more concerned with fitting in. Interviewee 9 indicated that perhaps it
is later, during their adult years, perhaps as parents, that today’s Afghan-Canadian youth may find
more reasons for Afghan cultural heritage to become a renewed focus of identity. Referring to
Afghanistan, Interviewee 9 observed:

. . . I want it to be a normal country, so I could go for a vacation. . . . I can’t see
myself going back there for a long term. I would love to take my kids there and say
this is where I was born . . . and look how much they have achieved.

The Afghan Women’s Catering group is another example of women experiencing themselves
as productive individuals who were running a business, outside of the family context, in the greater
society, yet using skills they have developed in their traditional role as mothers. This group is a
separate entity from the AWO, but the women initially met through their involvement at the AWO,
with which they have chosen to remain affiliated. As with the part-time staff providing childcare
services, they have the support of their husbands, who, despite the increased independence of their
wives working outside the home, remain comfortable with their wives’ work because of the all-female
environment. The catering business, thus, provides its participants with an opportunity to explore
gender roles – for example, women as entrepreneurs – within the context of activities that flow from
traditional women’s roles. I cannot provide a definitive mapping of the space this creates for these
women, nor the dynamics that allow them to re-shape their identities as individuals and as mothers, but their experience as women running a catering business clearly affects their sense of themselves as women and provides a venue for exploring their identities as Afghan Canadian women.

Two kinds of events organized by the AWO allowed the Afghan Canadian community in Toronto to experience itself as an organized community. One event, Mothers’ Day, occurs within the closed context of their community at rented facilities, whereas the organized picnics take place in public spaces where Afghan Canadians experience themselves as a visible ethnic group within a multicultural Canadian context. These events serve to anchor a sense of Afghan identity within the Canadian context. The Mother’s Day events, for example, feature Afghan music, food, a fashion show, and a celebration of mothers. Clearly, here the AWO is providing opportunities for the greater Afghan community in Toronto, along with other Afghan organizations sponsoring similar events, with opportunities to engender cultural expression and the experience of being part of an ethnic community. Picnics organized by the AWO take place in public spaces where the Afghan community can experience itself as Afghan-Canadian. In such public spaces, they are highly visible to non-Afghan-Canadians as an organized, identifiable ethnic community. In this shared public space, ethnic identity is shaped through the perceptions, assumptions, and questions of those passing by. Outdoor spaces are often the only way large numbers of people can gather without the expense of rented facilities. These events create spaces where differences in language, religious practices, political ideology, and ethnic affiliation are subsumed under a larger umbrella of Afghan-Canadian identity. Such dynamics invite an interrogation of the ways civic spaces, such as public parks, enable both internal (group centered) and external (society centered) ethnic identity formation as well as the ways these public spaces affect the cohesion of ethnic communities.

Sarna’s (1978) theory of ethnic identity as the result of a generalization process has some relevance here. Whereas Sarna referred to ethnic groups interacting with the institutions of the dominant culture, at the picnic and Mothers’ Day events, Afghans come together to experience a sense of being Afghans within Canada. If one is born in Canada, and someone asks where one is from, the likely answer will be a city name, such as Toronto or Mississauga. If one is asked the same question while on holiday in another country, the likely response is “I’m Canadian.” Our homeland takes a prominent place in our identity when we are not living there. When we are, finer distinctions such as city or neighbourhood or ethnic group become more prominent elements of our identity. The first thing the Afghan family that Interviewee 6 met on her photo assignment said was, “We’re from Afghanistan.” Perhaps this was a self-conscious utterance in a public space where being visibly different from the main-stream required an immediate explanation, or perhaps it was national pride, or perhaps this Afghan man simply understood the question most on Interviewee 6’s mind, a question polite Canadians hesitate to ask one another: “Where are you from?”

Some of the women at the AWO are extensively involved in programs either in Afghanistan or in the refugee camps outside Afghanistan. Adeena Niazi; Interviewee 9; Maryam Mahboob, editor of Zarnegaar; and Roshan Khadem, producer of “National Voice of Afghanistan” are examples of people who travel regularly from Canada to Afghanistan. Kivisto (2001) provided an extensive review of the literature on transnational immigration. Portes’ (1996) investigations, concerning transnational communities with links across state borders developing between communities, most closely described what may be going on in Canada in general and at the AWO specifically.

The AWO’s involvement in programs overseas, such as schooling for girls, and economic development work, such as sewing skills for women and chicken raising, involve the coordination of
resources with other NGOs, and the formation of relationships with the communities targeted by the projects. The funding of the Kabul orphanage by a group of women in Calgary provides a particularly vivid example both of transnational community formation and also of internal links within Canada being formed between Toronto Afghan Canadian women and non-Afghan Canadian women in Calgary. Cross-cultural connections within Canada are being fostered because Canadian women are seeking connections with each other through shared concerns as women. Unfortunately, Portes did not deal with the dynamics of how communities within a country may share a common space through a cross-border connection, and the question warrants further study. A preliminary search found some two-dozen Canadian organizations with at least some focus on Afghanistan. This list is, by no means, complete; but it provides a basis for assessing the extent of the ties between Canadian citizens working through Canadian nonprofit organizations, with individuals, organizations, and communities in Afghanistan. Hundreds of Canadian citizens, working collectively through nonprofit organizations, clearly play major roles in the creation of these transnational spaces of cooperation.

How extensively can the reader apply the insight of the present study generally to other ethno-specific nonprofits? Further study of other organizations with a specific focus on one ethnic group is required, but I am inclined to hypothesize that a substantial number of these organizations support a sense of ethnic identity in Canada through cultural pluralist activities. COSTI, for example, founded in 1962 by the Toronto Italian community, primarily served Italian immigrants in its early days, but for many years since then it has operated as a multi-ethnic service agency. A study of how its programs changed as it moved from a single ethnic to multi-ethnic focus might provide useful data to add to this discussion.

One area that opened up for me in this research, but which proved to be beyond the scope of this paper, was a nuanced interrogation of the ways in which feminist perspectives are embodied in nonprofits that deliver services to women within traditional cultural contexts. Such an approach would lead to several research questions. How are these perspectives advanced, while seeming to operate within traditional gender boundaries? In what ways do culturally-situated feminist agendas mitigate the gender boundaries of men and women who engage with these nonprofits? What effects can be observed within the larger ethnic community? What dialogue is occurring between Western feminists and Muslim women working towards equality as defined within traditional Muslim cultures?

Also ripe for further investigation are the ways in which events in the homeland and/or the adopted homeland strengthen (or weaken) ties with the immigrant diaspora, and also how these events may affect ethnic identity in the adopted home. The media play a huge role in shaping ethnic identity. Sally Armstrong’s 1997 article, “Veiled Threat,” which appeared in *Homemakers Magazine*, has been credited for beginning the awareness in North America of the horrendous circumstances of Afghan women. She has since that time been involved with many organizations working in support of Afghan women. The arrival of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1994, and subsequent media coverage as the lives of both women and men radically changed, has had a huge impact on the ties between the Afghan diaspora and those living in the homeland. Several of the interviewees stated that September 11th had an impact on the identity of Afghans and other Muslims here. With reference to Isajiw’s (1974) double boundary, a study of how ethnic identity is re-drawn both by greater society and by the affected ethnic group in response to events, such as 9/11 and the rise of the Taliban, might yield important information about ethnic identity formation processes of immigrants. This would be useful for immigrant groups

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22 For the record, the AWO also serves Kurds and other Muslim groups, but primarily within the context of the CIC funded programs.
as well as for government institutions wanting to develop effective strategies for moderating the negative effects of such events. Questions such a study might ask are: What are the dynamics that link events in the homeland or host country with the immigrant diaspora? Can a theory be developed that explains the effects of 9/11 on Muslim identity in North America? If Afghanistan stabilizes and becomes prosperous, what will the impact be on the identity of Afghan Canadians? What happens to the transnational spaces created by numerous volunteers and organizations? If the relations between ethnic groups within Afghanistan shift when there is peace, how does this translate to these ethnic groups now living in Canada? Are there patterns from which a useful theory can be developed?

I have tended to attribute a sort of collective agency to nonprofits as entities. Yet the staff, volunteers, members, and clients all shape what a nonprofit does and what a nonprofit’s goals and actions are. One can hardly separate the entity we call a nonprofit from the people who keep it going. When I asked my interviewees about their wishes for Afghanistan, this sense of the individual being the agent for building a country surfaced. Here is one of those responses when Interviewee 9 was asked: What are your wishes for Afghanistan?

Interviewee 9: Ah, wow, there’s too many. It took 25 years to demolish a country, I’m sure its going to take another 25 or 30 years to build a country. I’m just hoping that once it’s built, it’s built on a solid ground. . . . There’s so many people that want to attack for no reason. People have become so protective of their identity and themselves that they don’t want to give in. The people I worked with had so much hope. . . . They can’t reach that level until Afghan Canadian or Afghan Americans or Afghans everywhere . . . help out in whatever way they can.

If Afghanistan is to recover from decades of interference from other nations, from internal ethnic tensions and conflicts, it is surely the women and men of Afghanistan working collectively, often through nonprofit organizations, that will be making it happen.

Sunita Mehta, editor of the marvelous book, Women for Afghan Women – a compilation of essays and writings of panelists attending a November, 2001 conference in New York City, critiqued and dispelled several of the myths about Afghan women. Together these contributors to this volume underscored the determination and spirit of many Afghan women struggling to balance religious identity with personal autonomy. (Mehta 2002, xi) Two of the writers (now living in the US), provided a glimpse into this process of identity re-creation. They “describe through personal testimony the existential dilemma and experiences of being in two worlds and reconciling the American with the Afghan self, especially at a time when the two nations are a war” (Mehta 2002, xii).

Another writer, Siam Wali, described the women she interviewed while in the refugee camps in Afghanistan. Her observations are relevant here:

Many women I spoke to were new arrivals who had just crossed the border, fleeing drought and war. They were activists and leaders who, to the best of their ability, tried to provide education, health and social services to war-affected Afghans both inside Afghanistan and within Pakistan. They were fighters for human rights, fiercely dedicated to a vision of dignity, safety, and freedom for Afghans (Wali 2002, 2).

Women like these will help to rebuild Afghanistan if given the chance. For those who choose to leave, women like these will rise to the challenges of settlement here in Canada. It is the agency of
individuals working together, pooling skills and resources, connecting with each other, both through informal associations and through formal nonprofit organizations, that will build better communities. And in working together in associations that they consciously name, with names that give them a group identity, they will find opportunities for individual and collective expression. In the process of shaping their communities through group action, they will also shape their sense of identity as immigrants, as women and as Canadians.
Appendix A

Selected Demographic Details of the Individuals Interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Time in Canada</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Role at the AWO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>13 months</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Client - ESL Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13 months</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Client - ESL Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a*</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Catering Group - Full-Time Staff, Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b*</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Catering Group - Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.5 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Staff - Full-Time, Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Staff - Part-Time, Volunteer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Born here</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>N/A - Senior Government Official</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (Adeena Niazi)</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Executive Director and Founder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>&lt;30</td>
<td>Volunteer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These interviews were conducted at the same time.
Appendix B

Survey of the AWO Community:
A Research Project on Afghan Identity in Toronto

The purpose of this survey is to provide some valuable information on the background of Afghan women involved with the Afghan Women’s Organization for two purposes: 1) A masters degree student from York University is interested in the AWO and its role in the Afghan community in Toronto. 2) The survey will prove valuable to the AWO and to the Afghan community.

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. The information you provide will only be used to provide statistical information, for example: we might find that “75 per cent of the AWO membership surveyed come from urban areas in Afghanistan as opposed to 25 per cent from rural” or that the average age of the membership is “48”. The survey is not about you as an individual but about what the AWO community looks like as a group, its profile.

You do not have to provide your name and you do not have to answer all of the questions, only the ones you would like to.

1. Are you □ an AWO member □ a client □ a volunteer □ Staff
   (Check all that apply):

2. Please tell us your age: □ under 20
   □ between 20 to 29
   □ between 30 and 39
   □ between 40 and 49
   □ between 50 and 59
   □ between 60 and 69
   □ 70 and over

3. Tell us about your family situation. Are you:
   □ single □ married □ widowed □ divorced

4. Do you have children? □ Yes □ No
   If Yes How many children do you have? ____________

5. What is the first language you learned to speak?
   □ Pashto □ Dari □ English □ Other: ________________

6. When you lived in Afghanistan, where did you live?
   □ Urban area (a city) □ Rural area (village/town or countryside)

7. Where did you live, immediately before you came to Canada?
   □ in a rural area in Pakistan
8. Who did you come with when you came to Canada?
☐ I came alone (I am single with no children)
☐ I came with my husband and all my children
☐ I came with my husband and some of my children
☐ I came alone with all of my children
☐ I came alone with some of my children
☐ I came with my parents
☐ I came with sisters/brothers
☐ Other (please describe) ______________________

9. Under what immigration program did you arrive here?
☐ refugee/refugee claimant
☐ independent
☐ sponsored by relatives in Canada
☐ sponsored by an organization:
   Name of the sponsoring organization: __________
☐ sponsored by the government
☐ business class

10. How long have you been in Canada?
☐ less than one year
☐ between one and two years
☐ between two and three years
☐ between three and five years
☐ between five and ten years
☐ between ten and fifteen years
☐ more than fifteen years

11. When I was in Afghanistan, I was:
☐ a member of the Pashtun community
☐ a member of the Tajik community
☐ a member of the Hazara community
☐ a member of the Uzebek community
☐ a member of another community: Please indicate which community/cultural
group with which you affiliated:
___________________________________________________________________
12. Check as many statements below that describe you. Assign “1” to the statement that describes you best; “2” to the statement that describes you second best, etc.

In Canada, I think of myself as:

☐ an Afghan Canadian
☐ an Afghan
☐ a Canadian
☐ a member of the Muslim community
☐ Other ________________________________

13. Do you work?

☐ I work in the home (e.g. unpaid work such as childcare/homemaking)
☐ I do paid work in the home (e.g. babysitting for other families etc.)
☐ Paid work outside the home: ________________________________
   Please state what sort of work

14. When did you become connected with the Afghan Women’s Organization?

☐ before arriving in Canada
☐ within a month of arriving in Canada
☐ between one and six months of arriving in Canada
☐ between six months and a year of arriving in Canada
☐ between a year and three years of arriving in Canada
☐ more than three years after arriving in Canada

15. How did you find out about the Afghan Women’s Organization?

☐ They sponsored me
☐ from relatives here in Canada
☐ from friends here in Canada
☐ from another organization such as an immigrant service agency
☐ from a Government/immigration official
☐ from an advertisement or article about the AWO
☐ Other: Please describe:

16. Describe your involvement in the AWO: (Check all that apply to you)

☐ Volunteer
☐ full or part time staff member
☐ Board Member/volunteer
☐ client/I use the services provided by the AWO
☐ Other: Please describe:
17. What other Afghan organizations are you involved in? (If more than two, write on the back of this survey.) Provide: Name of this organization Describe your involvement (e.g. volunteer, client, employee, etc.)

For the next two questions, please mark one box that best describes how true/untrue you feel the following statements are for you:

18. “My involvement with the AWO has helped me feel more strongly connected to the Afghan community in Toronto.”

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

19. “Through my involvement with the AWO I have met people from other cultures (non-Afghans). This makes me feel more strongly connected to the greater multicultural society.”

☐ Strongly Agree  ☐ Agree  ☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree
Appendix C

Summary of AWO Programs

Settlement and Personal Counseling Services:
• Funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada and the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture
• Employment search, landlord and tenants rights, ESL, literacy, cross-cultural issues, OHIP, legal matters etc.

Translation and Interpretation:
• Translation of documents, regulations, support for medical, social services, public school appointments

Employment Training:
• Referrals to new jobs, and training
• Employment Support workshops: job search techniques, labour laws health and safety and volunteering
• Compilation of an Employment Services Directory translated into Dari and Pashtu

Language Skills:
• LINC: ESL programs for newcomers
• Literacy for Seniors
• Heritage language classes

Senior’s Afghan Women’s Circle:
• Services to socially isolated and mostly housebound Afghan seniors
• Information sessions, social activities
• Joint programs with youth

Youth Programs:
• Activities to increase pride in Afghan culture is achieved through social activities such as celebration of Eid and Norooze
• Buddy, Big Sister, Big Brother programs
• Workshops such as Toronto Response for Youth (TRY) focus on cross-cultural understanding, conflict resolution

Health Workshops/Counselling:
• Health issues
• Training for professional caregivers
• Family crises and Wife Assault

Afghan Women’s Catering:
• Ongoing affiliation and support with this group that started in 1996

Cultural Events:
• Mothers’ Day celebration
• Annual picnic
Appendix C continued

Sponsorship:
• Sponsorship of Afghan families

Advocacy:
• Human Rights advocacy work with Afghan refugee women overseas

Sample of current and previous projects


Afghan Women’s Leadership and Governance Training Program:
• Conducted in partnership with York University; 3 day workshop Feb 2002

Overseas Projects:
• Pakistan: chicken raising
• Afghanistan: sewing
• Kabul: girls’ orphanage
• School program for girls (during the Taliban)
• Carpet weaving project
• Beekeeping/silkworm raising for mothers and widows
• Informal schooling for boys and girls

Source: *Afghan Women’s Counselling and Integration Community Support Organization 21001 – 2002 Annual General Report*
Appendix D

AWO Organizational Chart
Appendix E

Afghan oriented Media Organizations

CHIN 100.7FM: radio program once per week in Dari and Pashtun

CHRY 105.5FM radio program “National Voice of Afghanistan” Thursdays at 8pm in Dari and Pashtun
- In existence for 14 years
- Now syndicated via the internet with an international audience

Zarnegaar bi-weekly newspaper, Maryan Mahboob, editor
Available in Afghan stores on the Danforth
- Started in 1966 written in Farsi (Dari)
- News on both Afghan and Muslim issues
- Free

Afghan Post monthly newspaper, began two years ago

Shortwave Radio: from Los Angeles for Afghans
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Afghans in Canada for 1996 and 2001 Census year:
http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/standard/themes/RetrieveProductTable.cfm?Temporal=2001&PID=62124&APATH=3&GID=431515&METH=1&PTYPE=55440&THEME=43&FOCUS=0&AID=0&PLACENAME=0&PROVINCE=0&SEARCH=0&GC=99&GK=NA&VID=0&FL=0&RL=0&FREE=0


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- Canadian Heritage (Multiculturalism),
- Human Resources Development Canada,
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation,
- and Solicitor General Canada.

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