

Ageing Equally

**A Case Study of Elderly Syrian Refugees
in Salford and Oldham**

A research conducted by

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1. Executive Summary

Salford and Oldham are two multicultural cities that host people from different backgrounds including Syrians. The majority of those Syrians came to Salford and Oldham as refugees after the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The focus of this research is on the category of old individuals within the Syrian community. This research seeks to examine what resources within Salford and Oldham elderly Syrians find useful and what other resources they find challenging or inadequate. Collectively, the aim of this research is to understand how both Salford and Oldham can be made a good place in which to grow older for Syrians.

A purposive sampling was used to choose 15 participants from different ethnic and social background. The operationalisation of walking interviews and photovoice as data collection methods enabled this research to gain a nuanced understating of how elderly Syrians construct their narratives on their neighbourhood verbally and visually.

The findings of this research suggest that the overlapping between the daily experiences of elderly Syrians and their experience as refugees in a new country shapes their perception on their surroundings. The research reveals that the main challenges that face elderly Syrians on daily basis and affect their wellbeing are language barriers, access to public transport and social and health services, clean neighbourhood and safe surroundings. Issues of integration, belonging, entertainment, social connection, income and jobs are also among the main challenges that affect the experience of elderly Syrians in Salford and Oldham.

While the number of the participants is small, the research provides a valuable insight of elderly Syrians' daily activities and concludes with some recommendations about the gaps that need to be filled in order to make Salford and Oldham age-friendly. Some of these recommendations are related to Syrians being new refugees such as offering them free English classes and interpretation services as well as helping them to connect with the local community while others are related to their experience being elderly people like providing them with suitable homes and offering them accessible public transport.

2. Introduction

It is arguable that Syrian refugees in the United Kingdom (UK) are vulnerable groups within a vulnerable group. Barriers of culture, age and language could potentially affect their integration and make their lives harder than most people in the UK. This research seeks to examine the lives of elderly Syrian refugees in Salford and Oldham and neighbouring area with the hope to understand their practises, preference, desires and concerns. The research aims to unmask what resources and assets within Salford and Oldham elderly Syrian refugees find useful and helpful and what other resources and assets they might find absent, challenging or inadequate. Collectively, the research's aim is to unfold how both Salford and Oldham can be made an even better place to live for elderly Syrian refugees.

This research project is part of a programme of Ageing Equally and is commissioned by "Ambition for Ageing" to explore what makes a good place in which to grow older for people who belong to specific minority community, in this case: elderly Syrians in Oldham and Salford.

The research is conducted by Rethink Rebuild Society (RR), a Manchester-based charity that works towards improving the lives of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants, in particular but not exclusively Syrians in the UK, helping them become positively established within British society.

The project itself is organised into five sections: The first section is executive summary, which is intended to give the readers a good overview about the project. The second section is introduction, which aims to explain the purpose of this research including the background and rationale and the research question. The third section is methods, which outlines the research approach and the sampling size. The fourth section is findings and discussion and the aim is to reveal the responses of the research respondents and what they mean in line with the research objectives. The fifth section is conclusion and recommendations. The aim is to tell the readers and policy makers what needs to be achieved based on the evidence presented in this research.

3. Research Methods

This project employs a case study research design with qualitative approach (Bryman 2012; Yin 2018). The use of case study as a research design is justifiable when an empirical analysis is needed to conceptualise and contextualise “a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context” (see Bryman 2012; Yin 2014:16; Yin 2018). The use of case study will enable this research to gain nuanced and deeper understanding of the experience of elderly Syrian refugees within the context of the research question and objectives.

This research used a non-random sampling method identified as “purposive sampling” for the selection of research interviewees (see De Vaus 2007). According to Bryman (2012), the purpose of using non-random sampling techniques, as opposed to random sampling techniques, is to strategically sample research participants so that they are relevant to the research’s goal and question.

The research sought to engage with fifteen (15) research participants aged over fifty (50) from the Syrian community in Salford and Oldham. The aim was to make this research as inclusive as possible; therefore, the research included male and female participants, single, married and widowed as well as participants from different ethnic background. The research also aimed to include participants who are disabled or with restricted mobility in addition to those with different levels of income.

A call for participants to take part in this study was done using different social media platforms including those of Rethink Rebuild Society. The first participants also connected the research team with other eligible individuals, some of whom accepted to participate in this study.

3.1 Walking Interviews

This research collected data from the field using walking interviews sampling technique (Clark and Emmel 2010). The purpose of using this technique is to comprehend how the Syrian elderly refugees conceptualise their experiences as refugees in Oldham and Salford. Additionally, this technique enables this research to gain a nuanced understanding on how the participants perceive, narrate and frame their environment through social practices.

Moreover, it helps the researchers to determine how the research respondents contextualise their experiences in relation to their neighbourhood (see Clark and Emmel 2010:1).

At the beginning, the research participants were informed about the research question as well as the purpose and scope of this study (Clark and Emmel 2010). In addition, this technique enabled the participants to decide on the route to be followed during the interview, allowing the researchers to discover how the respondents relate to specific places within their neighbourhood (Clark and Emmel 2010; Gardner 2011). Researchers joined the respondents in their daily activities in order to ask, listen and observe their physical and social interactions (Gardner 2011). This method remedies some of the shortcoming resulting from traditional interview techniques, which often examine a phenomenon out of its real life context (see Kusenbach 2003 as cited in Gardner 2011: 265).

Each interview lasted for approximately 1-2 hours (depending on their daily activities). Auditory data were collected during the interviews. The participants were given a small recorder to carry in their pocket and a tiny microphone (see Gardner 2011). The aim of this method is to create a natural atmosphere where the conversations will develop spontaneously. In order to record the location/place where the interviews take place, the researchers mentioned the name of the place prior to the interview.

3.2 Photovoice

The research also included photovoice as another data collection method. Photovoice allows researchers to further investigate participants' perspective of their own daily lives (Mcintyre 2003). It further aids the researchers in determining the challenges Syrian refugees encounter in their daily lives and in developing policy recommendations on how to make Salford and Oldham a better place to live for elderly Syrian refugees. Through this technique, the participants had the opportunity to re-evaluate the relationship between themselves and their surroundings as well as their community and to (re)frame their experiences in imaginative ways. Furthermore, the researchers were able to explore the respondents' feelings of alienation from and identification with their neighbourhood (see McIntyre 2003).

Each participant was given a smartphone to photograph important events and places in their daily lives. These photos paved the way for subsequent interviews. The purpose here was to

facilitate the data collection process as well as to attract participants and encourage them to continue documenting their daily activities. Prior to the implementation of this technique, the interviewees received training on how to use the relevant apps on smartphones.

4. Findings and Discussion

This research engaged with fifteen (15) research participants aged over fifty (50) from the Syrian community in Salford, Oldham and neighbouring area. The following table (Table 1) provides a description of the research participants and the coding used to identify them.

This section aims to contextualise the responses of the participants with the hope to understand what makes a good place in which to grow older for Syrian refugees in Salford and Oldham.

Code	City	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Disability
R1	Oldham	Male	Arab	Widowed	N/A
R2	Oldham	Female	Arab	Widowed	N/A
R3	Salford	Female	Arab	Divorced	N/A
R4	Oldham	Male	Arab	Married	N/A
R5	Salford	Female	Arab	Married	N/A
R6	Salford	Female	Arab	Divorced	Disable
R7	Oldham	Male	Arab	Married	N/A
R8	Salford	Female	Arab	Widowed	N/A
R9	Salford	Female	Arab	Divorced	N/A
R10	Oldham	Male	Arab	Married	N/A
R11	Salford	Male	Kurdish	Married	N/A
R12	Salford	Male	Kurdish	Married	N/A
R13	Salford	Female	Kurdish	Married	N/A
R14	Oldham	Male	Kurdish	Married	N/A
R15	Salford	Male	Kurdish	Married	N/A

Table (1): List of Interviewees

4.1 Daily Challenges

This part highlights the main barriers and challenges facing elderly Syrians in their daily lives and interactions within the context of their neighbourhood in Salford and Oldham. There is often an underlying assumption that some Syrian refugees are not doing very much to their neighbourhood. However, conversations with the research participants show that elderly Syrians are undertaking different activities to engage with their neighbourhood although they admit that there are barrier affecting their current experience.

4.1.1 Language Barriers

The majority of the research respondents suggest that English language is gradually becoming an important tool of communication between elderly Syrians and their surroundings. They hold the view that the language proficiency is essential for accessing social services and establishing social connections. Yet, unsurprisingly, as Arabic or Kurdish is their native language, the research respondents find it difficult to interact in English. In their view, communicating in English is one of the main barriers affecting their wellbeing in Salford and Oldham.

R1 "... the main challenge is not being able to speak English properly..."

R2 "... communicating in English is really difficult..."

What is interesting to observe in this research, however, is the great resilience of some participants to recover from the difficulty of learning English. Whilst acknowledging that learning English is an obstacle and might take some time, some participants are determined to improve their English. They perceive English as an essential indicator for being actively engaged in their local communities.

R5 "At first, I was not happy about my English but I insisted to learn...English was a challenge...I was so excited when I entered college. My teachers are supportive. I know it is a long journey but I am determined to succeed in learning English."

R3 "... when I first arrived in the UK as a refugee, I had obstacles (with English being the main one)... but with time, obstacles began to fade. The more you are able to improve your English, the fewer obstacles you will have to face..."

On the contrary, some of the research respondents seem to be struggling in learning English. They think that it would have been easier for them to properly learn English had they learned it at a younger age. Meanwhile they find it too difficult because of their perception that they are getting older.

R10 "English is a barrier... we did not come to the UK at a young age..."

R12 "I am over 50. My ability to learn English is weak as compared with my kids... It is shame that I am unable to learn English properly..."

R13 "It took me a lot of time to learn the basic of English because of my age..."

The above excerpts suggest that the language barrier could indeed constitute an adversity to elderly Syrians in terms of establishing social connections with their surroundings. It could also put them in vulnerable position as they approach an age when they really need to get in touch with social and health care professional in order to discuss their health needs and wellbeing.

4.1.2 Access to Public Transport

Distance to shopping areas as well as other places and services in Oldham and Salford is another barrier affecting the daily experience of elderly Syrians. This is because the majority of the research participants do not have a car. Therefore, their journey to reach their destinations is often tiring, costly and time-consuming.

R2 “... I cannot find things I want in Oldham easily. Shops are far from me.”

R9 “... I live in Salford...shops next to me are expensive... I have to travel to find cheap market...”

R7 “I do not have a car. I have four kids in four different schools. Transport is our main challenge on daily basis. It is costly... It is time consuming.”

The views of the participants demonstrate that public transport is a major concern for elderly Syrians residing in Oldham and Salford. For instance, one participant indicates that the house that was offered to him in Oldham did not take into consideration his age and whether or not his house is close to public transport. He further claims that he walks 15 minutes to reach the nearest bus stop to his house adding that his house is located in a raised area of land making it more difficult for someone in his age to have a pleasant journey (see photo 1).

Photo 1: The participant (R4) states that he lives in a relatively raised area of land making his journey more difficult



Another interviewee from Salford complained that buses in her area are often late. Bus stops where she lives lack shelters making her journey more difficult especially in cold weather. Also, bus stops in that area lack chairs. This is really concerning for that interviewee who is over the age of 50 and suffers from joints problems (see photo 2).



Photo (2): A bus stop in Salford without a shelter or chair

4.1.3 Clean Neighbourhood

The responses of the interviews show that they have concerns about the cleanliness of their neighbourhood. For example, some interviewees from Salford indicate that rubbish remains in front of their house for a long time before they get removed. On the one hand, those respondents think that this delay in removing rubbish might result in negative perception on Salford and on the other hand, a less clean neighbourhood might lead to an unsettling experience for them (see photos 3 and 4).

R3 “Unfortunately, letters remain in front of our house for a long time. There are some people who have negative perceptions on Salford. We must change this!”

R12 “... all I want is clean area next to my house...”

R8 “As for letters, they are really disturbing and affecting the view in front of my house.”

The photo below (3) as provided by the interviewee (R8) shows a terrible view in front of her house in Salford.



Photo (3): Rubbish in front of a house in Salford

Another photo (4) is provided by the interviewee (R9) to show a poor view of Salford area in the aftermath of a football match at Old Trafford Stadium. The interviewee lives near Old Trafford Stadium. She says that her neighbourhood gets dirty after football matches and there is often a delay to clean it. The photo is displayed below.



Photo (4): Rubbish on the streets of Salford

4.1.4 Safe Surroundings

The data from the field shows that research respondents vary in their responses regarding the safety of their surroundings. While some participants are emphatic in their responses that their surroundings are safe and that they have never experienced safety challenges, others have growing concerns about their safety and feel that local authorities are not doing enough to protect them from any potential threats. The views of the interviewees are shown in the following excerpts.

R9 “... for me Salford is a safe place... I feel happy because I live in Salford...”

R11 “I feel safe [in Salford]. People are kind and supportive. People often complain about safety in Salford but I have not seen anything wrong.”

R3 “I do not feel safe in my neighbourhood in Salford. I am afraid to leave my flat when it is dark. If something happens to me I know that police will not have the ability to protect me... I know this is attributable to the lack of funding to police officers...”

R6 “Safety is a concern for me in my area [Salford]. I fear for myself and my daughter.”

During the course of this research, one participant from Salford (R8) showed a disturbing image of the window and door of her flat being vandalised. The participant, who is 70 years old, said that she is scared and she hopes that police will identify the culprits so she can live in Salford in peace. The following photos (5) and (6) show the front door and window of her flat.

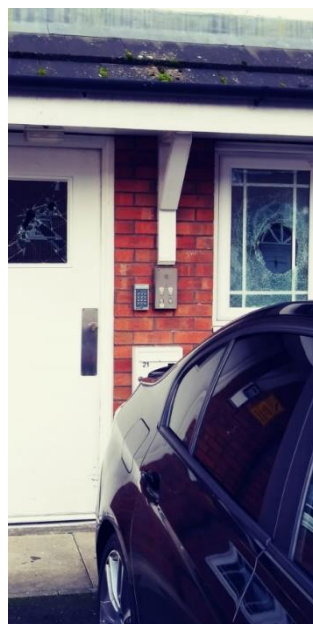


Photo (5): Vandalised window and front door of a flat in Salford



Photo (6): Vandalised window and front door of a flat in Salford

4.2 Integration

In this research, it is unsurprising that elderly Syrians differ in their framing construction of integration in their neighbourhood. Some research participants struggle to socially connect with their surroundings. They do not feel that they are part of their neighbourhood and rather feel disintegrated. For example, one participant (R3) from Salford attributes this feeling of disintegration to the perceptual inhumane treatment she received upon her arrival to the UK. This experience had an overall negative impact on the way she perceives her neighbourhood and her relation with the local community.

R3 “...I wish I could feel that I am part of the British society... the experiences I went through upon my arrival to the UK had a negative impact on my ability to harmonise with the new society...”

In addition, one participant from Salford (R9) holds the view that the feeling of disintegration among Syrian refugees emanates from the perception that local English are unwilling to build relations with new arrivals. In his view, integration is not only about speaking English. It is more nuanced than what someone might think. This stereotyping of local community could somehow socially isolate elderly Syrians from building network with the local community.

R9 “Integration is hard... it is not only about learning English...”

R2 “I feel that English people do not like to communicate with us... They do not help us to get integrated with them...”

Some participants have the impression that media plays a negative role in creating a rift between new arrivals and established residents. For instance, one interviewee claims that he reads a lot of negative comments about refugees on social media. In his view, offering a platform for perceptual hate speech and negative comments obstructs integration, and subsequently, marginalises and isolates Syrians from their local surroundings.

R4 "I feel that media influenced the way English people perceive us... I feel sometimes we are guilty until we are proven innocents. This could lead to isolation and marginalisation..."

On the contrary, some participants dispel misconceptions surrounding their experience as residents in Oldham and Salford. They indicate that at first they were criticised for living in Oldham or Salford that they could potentially face some sort of discrimination or prejudice but it turns that they had a rather blessing stay and they seem to get along with their English neighbours.

R7 "My neighbourhood is full of English... I like them. They are so kind...although at first, I was criticised for living in Oldham that I could face some sort of discrimination. I have not seen something like that"

R1 "... I feel like I have the tendency to integrate... English are respectful and they respect new comers regardless of their background..."

R11 "I live in Salford...I did not face any sort of prejudice...I regularly visit all my English neighbours and they visit me. We support each other as a community..."

R8 "Integration has never been a problem for me. My English neighbours are kind."

Furthermore, one participant from Oldham indicates that his English colleagues support him to improve his English and do not give him the impression that his English is poor. While some jobs might be solitary than others, the nature of his job encourages him to actively interact with English colleagues and customers. For him, he wants to establish social connections, and work, he argues, is an important tool for integration and socialisation with others.

R10 "... my colleagues at work always help me to improve my English. They do not give me the impression that my English is poor. When I make a mistake they correct me."

The following photo (7) as provided by the participant (R10) shows how he managed to secure a job at Oldham. He seems to be happy and enthusiastic about his job.



Photo (7): Participant (R10) at work in Oldham

4.3 Belonging to Salford and Oldham

It is arguable that some research respondents are attached to their homeland Syria. They hope to return home when the war is over and spend the rest of their lives in the place of their birth. Yet, as the situation in Syria remains ambiguous and the war is far from over, other participants prefer to continue their older years in Salford and Oldham, which had gradually become their home. In this research, some research participants consider Oldham and Salford as their “home”, because they feel comfortable, safe and respected. In addition, they have easy access to a range of facilities including shopping centres and places of worship.

R1 “In Oldham I feel I am home...”

R4 “Oldham is home... there are shopping centres, mosques and public transport...”

R7 “Oldham is my home... I feel comfortable there... I feel safe...”

R3 “I love Salford...”

R9 “With time I feel a sense of belonging to Salford...”

R11 “In Salford I feel as if I am in my hometown in Syria... People do not treat me as a stranger”

Interestingly, one participant (R4) from Oldham indicates that whilst he enjoys his stay in Oldham, he hopes to move to Manchester because in his opinion, it is more vibrant and

diverse. He feels that his family will enjoy their life if they live in Manchester. Other participant (R10) thinks that he would have enjoyed his stay in Oldham had he been surrounded by a larger Arab community. He indicates that he feels home in Manchester because there is a large Syrian and Arab community in Manchester as compared to Oldham.

R4 "...I prefer to live in Manchester though because it is more vibrant and diverse... there is a large Syrian community there... I am saying this not for my sake, but for my family..."

R10 "The Arab community in Manchester is larger than the Arab community in Oldham. I wish we had a larger Arab community in Oldham."

Conversely, other interviewees feel uncertain about their stay in their neighbourhood. This feeling of uncertainty about what "home" entails is mainly attributable to the fact that some participants feel homesick. Their fond and most precious memories were in Syria and all of sudden they were forced to leave everything behind. They did not imagine or expect that they would eventually end up living out of their "place". The fact that they have unexpectedly left their home, make them scared that no matter where they live, they could be forced to leave their new home again .

R5 "I fear tomorrow... I feel that I might leave my place at any moment although everything is available for me in Salford... I have insomnia... I am in perpetual pain...I am uncertain about my future..."

The following photo (8) is a drawing that was made by one research participant (R5) from Salford to represent how she feels about home. The traumatic experience that this participant went through by being forcibly displaced from Syria made her feel that her home is, metaphorically, her "suitcase". She feels that she has no permanent home. She rather feels like a traveller and that her stay in Salford is temporary.



Photo (8): Home as imagined by one of the research participants

4.4 Entertainment and Wellbeing

Entertainment and leisure activities can be considered as antidote to loneliness and social exclusion in that that they keep elderly people active and engaged and can provide a sense of meaning and belonging to their neighbourhood (see Oglak and Hussein 2016). When asked about the places in Oldham and Salford that they would like to visit for enjoyment and wellbeing, the interviewees expressed a range of activities which could be undertaken in their neighbourhood. However, broadly speaking, their responses varied according to their conceptualisation of entertainment and how it is recognised in light of their location, income and circumstances.

In this research, it is interesting to note that location is a factor affecting the experience of older Syrians in terms of accessing leisure activities or lack thereof. The bulk of research participants like to go to local libraries, gym, café, restaurants, and tourist attractions as a means to entertainment, learning English and socialising with others (see photos 9 and 10). Yet, other participants face challenges to access leisure activities because they live far from those places or simply because there are limited potential convenient locations and venues nearby their areas.



Photo (9): Local libraries are seen as a means for socialisation and wellbeing for elderly Syrians residing in Oldham and Salford



Photo (10): Gym and leisure centres are seen as a means for socialisation and wellbeing for elderly Syrians residing in Oldham and Salford

Three research respondents from Salford indicate that Salford is very well-served in that they have easy access to leisure centres such as fitness clubs and tourist attractions such as Old Trafford stadium, Media City UK and Salford Quays (see photos 11 and 12). It seems that wellbeing of elderly Syrians can emanate quite naturally from their environment. Those who live in that great part of Salford have more options that allow them to socialise and enjoy as opposed to other Syrians who live in less privileged neighbourhoods in Salford or Oldham.

R9 “Salford is well-served... the gym is next to my flat... restaurants are nearby...the Lowry is not far either ... every weekend I go out with sun to have dinner together...”

R13 “We never feel bored in Salford... if we feel bored we walk by the river. We go to Salford keys. We go to the media city. It is beautiful...”

R14 “I live near Old Trafford stadium. I am happy that I can go there to attend games...”



Photo (11): Walking by the river in Salford offers some elderly Syrians the opportunity to connect with their neighbourhood



Photo (12): Attending football matches in old Trafford offers some elderly Syrians the opportunity to connect

As for the research participants from Oldham, some of them indicate that they like to go to leisure centres but the main problem is the lack to transport near their area. They do not often consider Oldham as their first option when it comes to entertainment and rather prefer other places (e.g. Manchester) for socialisation and connection with the wider society. Paradoxically, some older Syrians live physically inside Oldham but mentally outside of it as their neighbourhoods do not seem to offer them the kind of comfort and entertainment that they are identifying with.

R4 “I like to travel to Manchester to enjoy my time... I like to go Trafford Centre where I meet people but the main problem is that is [the lack of] public transport in my neighbourhood...”

R2 “There is nothing in Oldham... I sometimes go Rusholme in Manchester but the journey is not straightforward. I need to use three buses to be there...”

Another factor affecting the engagement of elderly Syrians in leisure activities is their perceptual high cost making them unaffordable for some of them. For instance, one research respondent from Salford (R11) states that he likes to go to cinema and attend football games but they are expensive. He said that there are a lot of wonderful places nearby but he cannot financially afford to visit them.

R11 “I like to go to cinema and football games but they are expensive... I wish I could afford to buy tickets for my kids... There are a lot of wonderful places but I cannot afford to visit them.”

In contrast, some research participants have different conceptualisation of entertainment. They do not identify it through the lenses of socialisation with others. Rather, they see it through spending quality time on their own. For example, one research participant from Salford (R8) when asked about wellbeing and entertainment, she answered that she prefers staying home drawing, sewing, praying and listening to music (see photos 13 and 14).



Photo (13): Drawing as a means of entertainment for some elderly Syrians



Photo (14): Drawing as a means of entertainment for some elderly Syrians

Interestingly, this research also points to other participants who do not seem to have the chance to entertain themselves. This is because they dedicate their free time for their kids and do not mind sacrificing their own time to make their kids happy. For those participants, if there is a plan for entertainment, it will only be dedicated to their kids.

R7 "I do not often entertain myself. I only care about entertaining my kids... I have diabetes... I know I need to relax but my medical condition does not enable me to stay outside my home for a long time so I prefer to stay home."

The above excerpt also points to the medical condition of the research participant (R7), which seems to suggest that people like him need to be noticed and looked after. Those often invisible elderly Syrians might be suffering from disadvantages both socially and financially but they are not getting enough support to counter existing challenges.

4.5 Social Connections

The data from the field reveals how being part of a social community or hub is important for the wellbeing of elderly Syrians. In Manchester, there is a Syrian community centre that works towards improving the lives of Syrians. The existing of those hubs plays a fundamental role in informing Syrians about the nature of their life in the UK and helping them overcome any challenges that could affect their daily experiences.

R3 "I was lost until I heard about the Syrian community centre in Manchester. It helped me a lot..."

R1 "...the Syrian community in Manchester helps refugees and guide them on how to overcome barriers... we need a network between Syrians... we need to build network to share experience..."

Those hubs form a key part of older Syrians' main activities within the Syrian community. They serve as a catalyst for obtaining employment opportunities and exchanging of information. Moreover, they pave the way for building a network among Syrians (see photo 15).

Photo (15): The Syrian community in Manchester offers a hub for Syrians to socialise and exchange information



Some participants hold the view that their social relations have been badly affected as a result of living in Salford and Oldham. They indicate that their social connections would have been improved had they lived in Manchester. This is arguably attributable to the presence of a relatively larger Syrian community in Manchester and hence the possibility of gaining a lot of friends over there.

R7 "My relations would have been improved had I lived in Manchester."

R3 "Living in Salford somehow affects my communication with Syrian friends who are based in Manchester. In Syria I used to have an excellent network of friends and colleagues. I lack this atmosphere in Salford."

One of the problems that encounter the research participants is the lack of a Syrian community in Oldham and Salford. For instance, one research respondent from Oldham (R1) indicates that he feels a bit sad that there is a small Syrian community in Manchester and admits that he struggles to find Syrians whose age is similar to his age.

R1 "... the lack of Syrian community in Oldham reduces the opportunity of social gatherings and interactions among Syrians... there is some kind of sadness... I only go out once a week when my son is free...I wish I can hang out with people whose age is similar to mine but in Oldham I only know two Syrian families and we rarely meet..."

Interestingly, the participant (R1) has a son who used to sell Syrian sweets in a Syrian shop in Manchester. He used to travel with his son from Oldham to Manchester. In the shop, the participant used to meet hundreds of Syrians and Arab customers on a regular basis. This experience of traveling with his son from Oldham to Manchester made him so happy and offered him the opportunity to socialise with others (see photo 16). Unfortunately, the participant thinks that this homely atmosphere is missing in Oldham. He argues that the majority of Syrians in Oldham are youth. Moreover, when his son stopped working in Manchester and applied for a job in Oldham he felt lonely and the feeling of loneliness is increasing gradually.



Photo (16): A participant accompanying his son to his work to socialise with customers

Similarly, two participants from Oldham (R10 and R2) indicate that they are sociable persons in nature. They love meeting people but unfortunately, their social interaction is decreasing with time because they live in Oldham. They feel a sense of loneliness in Oldham and they do not find what they call a supportive environment for establishing strong social connection

within their neighbourhood. They wish they could move to Manchester because their like-minded friends live there.

R10 "I am a sociable person. I love meeting people... my best friends live in Manchester but because I am in Oldham, my communication with them decreased...yes; there is a sense of loneliness in Oldham... I admit..."

R2 "My social interaction is decreasing with time. I wish I could move to Manchester... I do not like Oldham....there no supportive environment..."

Yet, the research points to other research participants whose main concern is to communicate with people in their neighbourhood and do not mind if they are Syrians or non-Syrians. They indicate that they struggled at first to build relations with their surrounding but now they adapted to the new environment and they are happy with their social network.

4.6 Income

In this research, the bulk of research respondents under the age of 65 live on universal credits only, which are benefits for working-age people, designed to make claiming benefits easier, whereas those who are over the age of 65 live on pension credits, which are rather at a minimum levels. The findings of this research suggest that the level of income that older Syrians receive on monthly basis is insufficient, hence negatively affecting their wellbeing and the potential to entertain themselves as residents in Oldham and Salford. Some interviewees claim that prices in Salford and Oldham have increased whilst the benefits they receive remained the same. They wish if they could increase their benefits or reduce their bills.

R3 "...the income that every Syrian refugee receives is insufficient. It only covers basic human needs... prices in Salford have increased and our benefits remained the same ... there is a problem in the system and dealing with refugees needs reconsideration..."

R1 "...I got universal credit of £317/month, which is not enough to cover my monthly expenses...we have travel expenses, food, bills, council tax and so on... it is really difficult..."

R5 "Income is inadequate and this puts me under pressure all the time..."

R8 "Electricity and water bills are biggest financial struggle for me... I wish they could either increase my benefits or reduce my bills..."

R6 "...my income is barely enough to cover expenses but not enough to entertain myself..."

R2 "...My income is insufficient... towards the end the month I really struggle to cover basic expenses..."

The participants think that policy makers need to reconsider the amount of income they assign to Syrians so that they can cope with perceptual rising living costs in their neighbourhood. The alarming aspect pertaining to low income is that it puts some older Syrians under tremendous physical and mental pressure at a time they desperately need a rest.

4.7 Finding a Job

Finding a job is another challenge facing elderly Syrians living in Oldham and Salford. Some participants indicate that finding a job is essential for financial security and integration. They do not mind shifting or degrading their career in order to gain sustainable income and stop relying on benefits.

R4 "I am 55. I have limited time to reach the age of 60. They asked me to do a lot of trainings and studies, which are time consuming. I am not 20 years old. I just want to secure a job as soon as possible."

R10 "I am very realistic. I want to work. I am ready to do everything. Working is essential for financial security and integration..."

R11 "I had over 20 years' experience as a nurse. I wanted to work as nurse here in the UK but was uneasy. It is not easy to find new jobs when you are over 50...If I had a job, my financial situation would have been better, the future of my children would have been secured... I do not mind working as a taxi driver or a barber...but I need support to access work places."

The above excerpts show that it is really difficult for some participants to find a job in the UK whilst they are over the age of 50. What is worrying is that those participants are required to undertake a lot of training courses in order to access work places but as one participant indicates that elderly Syrians have limited time to reach retirement age and they want to find a job as soon as possible before it is too late.

4.8 Accessing Social and Health Services

The findings of the research suggest that the majority of interviewees do not often know how and where to access social and health services in their neighbourhood when needed. This might be attributable to the fact that some of them have limited knowledge of how the system of services in the UK operates. It is also attributable to the perceived unfamiliarity with technology and lack of English proficiency among some research respondents.

R7 "...Understanding technology is essential for accessing services... I am not familiar with technology but now I understand that it is becoming indispensable..."

R8 "...I do not know how and where to access services... I think it is a common problem among newly arrived Syrians that they do not know how the system works here. They do not know how to access services..."

R9 "Sometimes, I do not know how the system works... I do not know what my rights are... I need to search to know my rights... sometimes we do not get the chance to be told what our rights are..."

R10 "There is a system in this country and we are unable to understand it..."

R2 "I do not know how to access services... I sometimes use taxis because I fear to get lost... not everyone is willing to help..."

The excerpts above reveal an important point relating to the delay in accessing services. One respondent from Salford indicates that it takes a lot of time to book an appointment with her general practitioner (GP). She claimed that they do not appreciate the fact she is disabled and that she needs an extra support. Another respondent from Oldham indicates that when he calls his GP to get an appointment, they ask him about his name and date of birth. They know that he is over the age of 50. Nevertheless, they keep him waiting for weeks. He says that when people get older, their health decrease and in his opinion, those who are over 50 should be given priority in accessing GP as opposed to younger people who can possibly wait.

5. Comparisons between Place and Gender

The above discussion reveals that there are difficulties which seem common among research participants irrespective of their place or gender. This includes for instance integration, language barriers and access to public transport. Yet, after thorough observation, the research reveals that there are difficulties which seem to relate more to men than women or more to participants from Salford than participants from Oldham and vice versa. This separation may be beneficial for broadening the understanding of the experiences of elderly Syrians living in Oldham and Salford. The shortcoming of this separation, however, is the small research sampling. This means that the research findings cannot be used to generalise into the wider elderly Syrian population in Oldham and Salford. Therefore, it is really difficult to draw comparisons between Oldham and Salford or between men and women on the basis of small number of participants (15 participants).

The findings of this research suggest that “clean neighbourhood” and “safe surroundings” are considered as major concerns for several elderly Syrians in Salford as compared with elderly Syrians in Oldham. The need for clean and safe neighbourhood is mentioned frequently by participants from Salford as opposed to participants from Oldham. In contrast, there are difficulties which seem to relate more to respondents from Oldham than respondents from Salford. This includes specifically the “lack of considerable Syrian community/hub” and the “inadequate number of close and accessible leisure centres”. It also includes the “lack of social connections and entertainment facilities” that are suitable for the age and experiences of elderly Syrians residing in Oldham. As one participant (R1) from Oldham puts it, “social life that is suitable for elderly Syrians is almost absent in Oldham”.

As for differences in experiences between genders, the research explores some difficulties which seem to relate more to women participants than men participants. For example, the research notes that several female participants use the terms “isolation” and “loneliness” to construct their narratives on their social life in Oldham and Salford. Some females feel lonely because they are single mothers or widowed or because they are not surrounded by their close relatives, who give them the sort of comfort they need to cope with difficulties. They also miss the homely atmosphere and daily gatherings that they used to enjoy with their neighbours and friends on regular basis whilst they were in Syria. Other females feel socially

isolated because they spend the bulk of their time looking after their kids or because they do not get enough support or understanding on how to socially engage with their surroundings. Other difficulties are related to the outlook of some elderly Syrian women, who mention that on several occasions, their outfit or appearance, which reflect their Muslim/Syrian identity made them subject to some sort of discrimination. Moreover, uncertainty about their situation in the UK or the situation of their loved ones in the UK or Syria is another factor that causes anxiety and mental health problems to some female participants.

As for men, it emerges from the data that the main challenge that faces them is finding a suitable job. Men in this research are over the age of 50 and are newcomers to the UK and therefore, accessing a new job in a new environment is uneasy for them. Some are required to undertake a lot of training courses in order to be qualified for work. Unfortunately, finding a suitable job is not always guaranteed let alone that some participants do not often know how to get the required support to access work places. In this context, one participant (R1) from Oldham suggests that policy makers “need to understand the skills of refugees and how to benefit from them”. He also suggests that helping elderly Syrians to find a job is “necessary to help them feel that they can identify with their surroundings”. Collectively finding a job for elderly Syrians will help them to balance their lives, to entertain themselves, to support their families and more importantly, to secure their future.

6. Conclusion and Implications for Practise

The aim of this research is to understand what makes a good place in which to grow older for elderly Syrians residing in Oldham and Salford. The research employed a case study research design with a qualitative approach. The data were gathered from the field using walking interviews and photovoice methods. A purposive sampling technique was used to choose fifteen (15) research participants aged over fifty (50) from the Syrian community in Salford and Oldham. While the number of the research participants is small, the data provides a valuable insight of elderly Syrians’ daily activities in Salford and Oldham and suggestions of the neighbourhood and places they would like to access.

The findings of this research suggest that the overlapping between the daily experiences of elderly Syrians and their experience as refugees in a new country shapes their perception on their surroundings. In line with the research findings and discussion, this section seeks to summarise the challenges that affect the wellbeing of elderly Syrians and the proposed implications for practise in order to overcome them. It reflects on the issues that require further research and exploration and offers examples of what could be beneficial for the wellbeing of older Syrians. The collective objective is to make Salford and Oldham age-friendly and sociable for elderly Syrians.

Overcoming Language Barrier

- The findings (in 4.1.1) reveal that learning English is an essential tool for wellbeing and interaction between elderly Syrians and their neighbourhood. The more English older Syrians will speak, the fewer barriers they will face in terms of connecting with their surroundings. Therefore this research suggests further research on the possibility of offering elderly Syrians English classes specially designed for their age and at the same time increasing interpretation services in order to enable elderly people benefit from all available essential and recreational facilities.

Having Accessible Public Transport

- It emerges from the data (in 4.1.2) that the research participants need to have an easy access to public transport. The places where they live need to be close to bus stops. The bus stops need to be located in flat areas and have shelters and chairs to facilitate the daily experiences of elderly Syrians.

Creating Safe Space and Clean Surrounding

- The excerpts (in 4.1.3 and 4.1.4) show that there should be some proper procedures established to ensure personal safety and regular cleanliness of Salford and Oldham neighbourhood. It is thought that living around a safe and clean neighbourhood will have a positive impact on the daily experiences of elderly Syrians.

Providing a Friendly Environment

- The discussion (in 4.2) suggests that negative perceptions among some participants on their neighbourhood emanate from the problems they encountered when they first

arrived in the UK. The perceptual discriminatory treatment that some participants receive upon their arrival in the UK negatively affects their relationship with the host community as well as their overall opinion on their surroundings. Therefore, this research suggests further work on exploring the importance of creating a friendly and welcoming environment for elderly Syrians as a means to change their perception on their new “home”. It is thought that if elderly Syrians are being looked after as soon as they arrive, they will be mentally happy. More importantly, they will feel a sense of belonging to their neighbourhood.

Understanding the Intricacies of the Relationship between Host Societies and New Arrivals

- The findings (in 4.2) also indicate that communicating in English means fewer barriers but does not necessarily mean full integration. The research offers an example of what would be beneficial for older Syrians in terms of their integration. It suggests that establishing formal/informal connection between host societies and new arrivals is essential for dispelling misconception surrounding the relationship between elderly Syrians and their surroundings. Whilst the research established that securing a job is an important factor for integration, there are other unarticulated factors that need to be further examined in order to facilitate interaction between elderly Syrians and their place.

Establishing Community Centres and Syrian Shops in Oldham and Salford

- It emerges from the data (in 4.3 and 4.5) that the wellbeing of elderly Syrians would have been improved had they lived in Manchester because of the presence of a larger Syrian community there. This implies that in order for elderly Syrians to enjoy their stay in Oldham and Salford, they need to be surrounded by a larger Syrian community where they can potentially find like-minded people. The research suggests the establishment of Syrian shops and restaurants as well as informal community centres in Salford and Oldham, where elderly people, regardless of their background, can find more people to interact with. Those facilities could serve as a hub for building network and circulating relevant information.

Offering Leisure Facilities

- The data (in 4.4) establishes that elderly Syrians enjoy visiting leisure centres such as shopping centres, cinema, café, gym but they argue that some services are costly or far from their place. As a result, this research suggests that future research may be needed to explore the possibility of establishing of close and affordable leisure and community centres in Oldham and Salford so that elderly Syrians can easily access them.

Maintaining Regular Contact with Elderly Syrians

- The findings (in 4.4) point to some research respondents who struggle physically, mentally or financially and therefore, they do not have the opportunity to entertain themselves. Consequently, the research suggests that identifying elderly Syrians who reside in Salford and Oldham and maintaining close connection with them will potentially help them to get the required support they need to carry on in their life.

Re-evaluating Benefits to Elderly people

- The discussion (in 4.6) reveals that the monthly income that elderly people receive is barely enough to cover their monthly expenses. This in turn negatively affects their wellbeing and happiness. The research encourages policy institutes and academics in the UK to reassess the monthly income provided to elderly people and to explore whether it is possible to increase it in order to enable them cope with rising living costs.

Enabling Elderly Syrians to Secure a Job

- The data (in 4.7) suggests that finding a job is linked with security and happiness— two aspects that could have positive impact on the wellbeing of elderly Syrians. An example of what could be beneficial for older Syrians in terms of accessing job is to offer them a feasible plan that helps them to access work places as soon as possible before they reach retirement age.

Helping Elderly Syrians Understand Health and Social Services

- The data (in 4.8) reveals that the bulk of research respondents do not know how and where to access health and social services in Oldham and Salford. The research encourages further research on how to best assist older Syrians to understand health and social services. In addition, the research suggests that offering training courses in Arabic Kurdish and English for newly arrived Syrians on how and where to access social services could be beneficial for them. In keeping with these principles, the research also suggests, as an implication for practise, to teach elderly Syrian how to use relevant online materials. It might be beneficial if online materials can have sections in Arabic and Kurdish to enable elderly Syrians make the most of their stay in Oldham and Salford.

Providing Suitable Homes

- The discussion (in 4.3) indicates that the traumatic experience that some research participants go through as a result of the war in Syria and missing their homeland is affecting their mental health. An example of what could be helpful for those participants is to locate them in a place where they can receive care, comfort and security, and more importantly, get the required emotional and mental support to cope with past memories and homesickness.

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Appendices

Appendix One

Interview Questions

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the main barriers facing you in your <u>daily lives</u> and interactions? (English, computer, internet & smart phones).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the obstacles affecting your <u>integration</u> in Salford and Oldham?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you see communication in English language as a barrier affecting your experience and daily activities in Oldham or Salford?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you view your experience as a refugee in Salford and Oldham? <u>(Negative, positive, happy, sad, feelings ...)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there misconceptions painting/affecting your experience as a refugee in Oldham or Salford? Have you faced any sort of racism, prejudice or discrimination for being resident in Salford or Oldham?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you consider Salford or Oldham as your <u>“home”</u>? Do you feel a <u>“sense of belonging”</u> to your neighbourhood?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the places in Oldham and Salford that you like to visit? <u>(Enjoyment and wellbeing)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the activities/places you miss the most and you would like to have in Salford or Oldham?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you view your social relations and interaction with others as a result of being a resident in Salford or Oldham as opposed to other cities and towns in the UK? Do you see a decline/deterioration in your social relations and interactions?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you know how and where to access care/support services if needed?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the challenges and concerns you face in terms of gaining <u>access to public service</u>? <u>(Restaurants, Leisure centres, hospitals, libraries, community centres, museums, parks etc....)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are there any financial challenges you face as a resident in Salford or Oldham? Is your <u>level of income</u> affecting your experience as resident there?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there a Syrian community in your area? Do you see this as a positive or negative factor in your wellbeing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the kinds of leisure activities or places you would like to have in your neighbourhood? <u>(mosque, leisure centre, café, community centre and so on)</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the gaps that need to be filled in order to make Salford and Oldham age-friendly and sociable?

Appendix Two

Consent Form

Title of Project:

Ageing Equally: A Case Study of Elderly Syrian Refugees in Salford and Oldham

1. I agree to take part in this research.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time
3. I understand that data collected about me during this research will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication.
4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded

Please tick box if
you agree with
the statement

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Appendix Three

Consent Form for the Use of Quotes

Title of Project:

Ageing Equally: A Case Study of Elderly Syrian Refugees in Salford and Oldham

1. I agree for my quotes to be used in this research anonymously
2. I do not agree for my quotes to be used in this research

Please tick box if you agree with the statement
<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature