



CASE REPORT / OLGU SUNUMU

Turkish Cypriot Women's Migration Experiences and Psychological Resilience: Case Narratives from North Cyprus

Kıbrıslı Türk Kadınların Göç Deneyimleri ve Psikolojik Dayanıklılıkları: Kuzey Kıbrıs'tan Vaka Öyküleri

N. Linda Fraim¹

Abstract:

This exploratory qualitative case study investigates the resilience-building strategies of Turkish Cypriot women who survived the Cyprus conflict from 1960 to 1974. Amid forced displacement and socio-political upheaval, the study examines the women's experiences through semi-structured interviews with five participants aged 75 to 90. These narratives provide crucial insights into how women navigated the challenges posed by the conflict and their strategies for coping with trauma. The findings reveal five key themes: psychological resilience, adaptation strategies, transformation of gender roles, intergenerational perceptions, and recommendations for younger generations. Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining hope and collective support in fostering resilience in the face of adversity, emphasizing that community bonds were critical to their survival. They identified social capital and economic participation as essential factors in adaptation, illustrating how traditional gender roles shifted as women took on new responsibilities. Furthermore, participants expressed concerns about the perceived deficiencies in resilience and self-reliance among younger generations, attributing these issues to overprotective parenting practices. Recommendations emphasized the need for self-reliance, responsibility, and strong family values as foundational elements for resilience in contemporary contexts. This study underscores the significance of preserving generational trauma narratives as vital resources for contemporary resilience-building, providing insights into the complex interplay between historical trauma and present-day coping strategies. Future research should explore intergenerational transmission mechanisms and cultural practices that influence resilience, further enriching our understanding of adaptive responses to adversity across different contexts and generations.

Keywords: Women, Trauma transmission, Resilience, Generational differences, Cyprus.

¹Cyprus Aydın University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Kyrenia, TRN Cyprus.

Address of Correspondence/Yazışma Adresi: N. Linda Fraim, Cyprus Aydın University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Psychology, Ozanköy, Kyrenia, TRN Cyprus, E-mail: lindafraim@cau.edu.tr.

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Öz:

Bu keşif niteliğindeki vaka çalışması, 1960-1974 Kıbrıs çatışması sırasında hayatta kalan Türk Kıbrıslı kadınların dayanıklılık inşa etme stratejilerini kapsamlı bir şekilde incelemektedir. Zorla yerinden edilme ve sosyo-politik kargaşa ortamında, çalışmada 75 ila 90 yaş aralığındaki beş katılımcı ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu anlatılar, kadınların çatışmanın getirdiği zorluklarla nasıl başa çıktıklarına dair önemli bilgiler sunarak, yaşadıkları travmaya karşı geliştirdikleri başa çıkma stratejilerini gözler önüne sermektedir. Bulgular, psikolojik dayanıklılık, uyum stratejileri, cinsiyet rollerinin dönüşümü, nesiller arası algılar ve genç nesillere yönelik öneriler olmak üzere beş ana tema ortaya koymaktadır. Katılımcılar, zorluklar sırasında dayanıklılığı artırmada umut sürdürmenin ve toplumsal desteğin kritik önemi üzerinde durarak, topluluk bağlarının hayatta kalmalarında oynadığı temel rolü vurgulamışlardır. Sosyal sermaye ve ekonomik katılım, uyum sağlamada belirleyici faktörler olarak öne çıkmakta ve kadınların geleneksel cinsiyet rollerinin nasıl değiştiğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca, katılımcılar genç nesillerde dayanıklılık ve öz yeterlilik konusundaki algılanan eksikliklerden endişe duymakta ve bu sorunları aşırı koruyucu ebeveynlik uygulamalarına atfetmektedir. Öneriler, çağdaş bağlamlarda dayanıklılık için öz yeterlilik, sorumluluk ve güçlü aile değerlerinin gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, nesiller arası travma anlatılarının korunmasının, çağdaş dayanıklılık inşası için hayati kaynaklar olduğuna dikkat çekmekte ve tarihsel travma ile günümüzdeki başa çıkma stratejileri arasındaki karmaşık etkileşimi aydınlatmaktadır. Gelecek araştırmalar, bu konudaki anlayışımızı derinleştirmek ve farklı kültürel bağlamlarda zorluklara yönelik adaptif yanıtları incelemek amacıyla nesiller arası aktarım mekanizmalarını ele almalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadın, Travma aktarımı, Psikolojik dayanıklılık, Nesil farklılıkları, Kıbrıs.

Introduction

Forced displacement has been a recurring global phenomenon, but the 20th century has witnessed unprecedented population movements, with millions acquiring refugee status (Braun & Dwenger, 2020). The concept of historical trauma extends to groups affected by cultural and historical oppression, including Cyprus (Kirmayer, Gone, & Moses, 2014; Altun, 2016; Keser, 2006). As aging survivors of major displacements die, essential experiential knowledge about adaptation and survival risk is being lost, including strategies for navigating political, social, economic, and health-related hardship during crisis.

Trauma also has intergenerational consequences, with documented psychophysiological impacts on survivors and descendants (Greenblat-Kimron et al., 2021). Collective trauma—shared first-hand traumatic experiences—can be transmitted via parenting and family dynamics, community relations, and national narratives, shaping values, perceptions of safety, and collective identity (Kira, 2001; Kirmayer et al., 2014; Küçükertan & Karancı, 2023; Volkan, 2008). Transmission may appear as communal shame, humiliation, victimization, survival guilt, and “invisible wounds” in relatives who did not directly experience the events (Mollica, 2000; Volkan, 2008). Descendants may also develop empathic traumatization through internalized narratives, although transmission is not universal (Lerías & Byrne, 2003; Kira, 2001).

Paradoxically, trauma can be conveyed through both silence and repeated storytelling: the “taboo of silence” leaves unspoken events powerfully communicated, while repeated discussions may unintentionally pass on fear and survival strategies (Baranowsky et al., 1998; Danieli, 1998). Descendants can show heightened distress even under minor stressors (Solomon et al., 1998). Resilience—positive adaptation over time after adversity—develops through challenging experiences and may buffer transmission, with higher parental resilience linked to fewer trauma-related symptoms in offspring (Pfefferbaum et al., 2007; Sippel et al., 2015; Erbekir & Direktör, 2025).

Cyprus has long been shaped by intersecting political and cultural orders. After the Ottoman conquest in 1571, the settlement of a Muslim Turkish population contributed to the formation of two primary communal groups, Turkish and Greek (Altun, 2016). Successive administrative transformations under Ottoman and later British rule culminated in the 1959 Zurich–London Agreements and the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960, founded on constitutional power-sharing between Turkish and Greek Cypriots (Altun, 2016; Baytal, 2021; Keser, 2006). This framework unraveled in 1963 when Greek Cypriot leadership sought constitutional changes, and intercommunal violence escalated under the Akritas Plan, paralyzing state institutions. From 1964 onward, although the Republic continued legally, Turkish Cypriots were excluded from governance, while attacks and forced ghettoization—intensifying by 1967—deepened separation between the communities. In 1974, a Greek-backed coup and Turkey’s intervention under the Guarantee Treaty entrenched the island’s de facto division (Altun, 2016; Keser, 2006).

Between 1958 and 1974, violence and instability produced extensive forced displacement among Turkish Cypriots (Keser, 2006; Volkan, 2008). After 1963, over a hundred Turkish villages were partly or fully evacuated, and tens of thousands sought refuge in safer enclaves. Many Turkish Cypriots in the south were relocated to British bases or besieged settlements under severe movement restrictions. After 1974, diplomatic arrangements enabled large-scale movement to the north, and the 1974 population exchange effectively concluded this forced migration. These demographic shifts underscore that the Cyprus problem reflects not only political conflict but also profound humanitarian crises (Keser, 2006).

The Present Study

This exploratory qualitative narrative case study examines the resilience-building strategies employed by Turkish Cypriot women who survived the 1960-1974 Cyprus conflict. The goal of this exploratory study is to also seek answers to the following questions: (1) Which strategies

were used to build and maintain resilience? (2) Which factors aided in adaptation after the forced displacement? (3) Were there any changes in gender roles due to the forced displacement? (4) How does this generation view the current generation? and (5) What would this generation recommend to today's younger generation?

Methods

Participants

Five Turkish Cypriot women, who experienced the 1960-1974 Cyprus conflict firsthand, were recruited through snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria for this study were being female, aged 65-90 years, of Turkish Cypriot ethnicity, and having migrated from the South of Cyprus to the North between 1960 and 1974. Participants' ages ranged between 75 and 90 years. Recruitment challenges arose from the researcher's non-Cypriot status, necessitating assistance from a local intermediary. Initially, 15 participants were contacted; however, 10 declined because they live in a small community and feared being identified through their stories. The final sample size (n=5) remains methodologically appropriate for case study research (Creswell, 2002).

Procedure

Initial contact with the participants was made through a Turkish Cypriot intermediary, and subsequent telephone communication by the researcher established the study parameters and scheduled interviews. All participants provided written and verbal consent to participate in interviews, to be recorded, and to have data published. The semi-structured interview protocol comprised 17 open-ended questions developed through an extensive literature review. Interviews were conducted in Turkish and lasted 45-60 minutes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis—a methodology identifying recurring patterns while minimizing researcher interpretation (Anderson, 2007). This approach provides rich, detailed data representation across essentialist, realist, and constructionist paradigms, with the underlying assumption of narrative accuracy (DeSantis & Ugarizza, 2000; Sandelowski, 2010).

Ethics Committee Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. Ethics approval was obtained from the Cyprus International University Ethics Committee (decision number EKK22-23/013/008, dated 11/05/2023).

Findings

This exploratory case narrative aimed to examine the resilience-building strategies used by Turkish Cypriot women who migrated from southern Cyprus to the North and who had firsthand experience of the conflict between 1963 and 1974. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews. In addition to the extracted themes, experiential commonalities were found. Firstly, most of the participants were teenage or young adult women who had married early and had multiple children when the conflict erupted. Many initially sought protections at British Military bases in southern Cyprus before developing strong motivations to relocate northward. Their husbands were typically imprisoned and subjected to torture, while participants remained vulnerable to potential attacks and psychological abuse from Greek Cypriot forces. Also, migration patterns showed remarkable consistency: four participants reached the northern

territories through clandestine routes despite substantial personal risk, while one crossed the official barricade with paternal assistance. These dangerous journeys parallel other historical forced migrations, with comparable elements of peril, loss, and determination characterizing participants' experiences despite having differing historical contexts (Erbekir & Direktör, 2025; Frelick, Kysel, & Podkul, 2016; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016).

Answers to five research questions were sought by examining themes extracted from the thematic analysis: psychological resilience and hope maintenance; displacement and adaptation; transformation of gender roles; intergenerational perceptions and cultural transmission; and general recommendations.

Psychological Resilience and Hope Maintenance

Research question #1 examined strategies for building and maintaining resilience. Participants' narratives reveal sophisticated psychological coping centered on maintaining hope, supporting frameworks that identify hope as essential to resilience during prolonged adversity (Pine, 2014). For Participant #1, hope persistence was absolute and community-based: "*She never [lost hope] and that was what kept her going.*" The protective function of collective support is evident in her description that "*everyone stuck together with tightly knitted bonds, which in turn functioned as a source of support and hope,*" aligning with research on collective resilience in displaced populations (Sousa, Haj-Yahia, Feldman, & Lee, 2013; Ungar, 2011). Recent evidence further suggests such resilience mechanisms may mediate protection and reduce the intergenerational transmission of trauma symptoms (Erbekir & Direktör, 2025). Participant #3's account reflects the fluctuating nature of hope during a prolonged crisis: "*There were times where she lost hope; however, when she heard that Turkey came and took over half of the island, her hope was restored.*" Her testimony about sustaining family connections despite deception—"*they still continued to make food and sent it to their husbands and took every opportunity to see their husbands, even though it was from a great distance*"—shows how tangible actions reinforced psychological resilience (Teodorescu, Heir, Hauff, Wentzel-Larsen, & Lien, 2012). Similarly, Participant #5 described hope restoration through communication: "*When the United Nations helped her and other families communicate with their families, her hope was restored,*" underscoring the importance of access to information for adaptation to forced displacement. The necessity of acquiring primary information in humanitarian contexts and its link to adaptation processes are emphasized by Nickerson, Bryant, Silove, & Steel (2011).

Displacement and Adaptation

Research question #2 aimed to identify the factors that facilitated these women's adaptation after forced displacement. The 1974 Peace Movement precipitated significant forced displacements among Turkish Cypriot women, necessitating complex adaptation mechanisms during transition. Social capital, defined as "an individual's ability to access resources within a particular social network" (Allen, 2009), emerged as a critical factor in successful adaptation to displacement trauma. Participant narratives reveal the formation of spontaneous support networks that functioned as psychological buffers against displacement stress. As Participant #1 articulated: "*When the Peace Movement in 1974 took place, the women from*

our town stayed at the British military base for approximately six months... Because there were many women from different locations, they all stuck together, which helped greatly during the adaptation process." This observation aligns with research suggesting that social capital significantly mediates displacement-related psychosocial outcomes (Hung, Xiao, & Yang, 2013; Loizos, 2008). Social isolation presented substantial adaptation barriers, as evidenced by Participant #3's account: "Initially, I faced adaptation problems because I was lonely. All my family was in Britain. I arrived in an unknown place with nobody from Limassol." Her testimony further illustrates the gender-specific security concerns that compounded adaptation challenges: "I was warned by my husband not to enter the empty homes at night as some soldiers did many wrongs to the women who came from the south." This account corresponds with literature documenting heightened vulnerability among displaced women in conflict zones (Bryant, 2012; Hadjipavlou & Mertan, 2010; Loizos, 2008). Participant #4's testimony: "Everyone was from a different place, and they were all strangers. Our friends and acquaintances were killed. When we first came to the Turkish side, we faced so much sorrow and hardship, but this changed when we found jobs." This demonstrates how economic participation eventually facilitated adaptation, supporting research on employment as a critical factor in post-displacement recovery (Pine, 2014; Voutira & Dona, 2007; Zetter & Ruadel, 2018).

Transformation of Gender Roles

Research question #3 aimed to identify any changes in gender roles during this period. The conflict catalyzed significant shifts in traditional gender norms in Cypriot society, consistent with research showing that displacement often reconfigures gender roles (Hadjipavlou & Mertan, 2010). Participant #1's observation illustrates this transformation: "Women did not work back then; they were responsible for only taking care of the house and children; however, the men did work. When they were brought over to the Turkish side the women had to work because they had nothing." The participant's assessment that "this was a good thing because the women learned to stand on their own two feet and their self-confidence that they once lost was replenished" reflects the complex ways in which conflict-induced necessity can paradoxically create opportunities for women's empowerment and autonomy, which is also explained in Nche & Endeley (2023) and Ranabahu & Tanima (2021). However, participant #2, who "did not work [but] was at home with her children while her husband was taken prisoner for 3 months," demonstrates the heterogeneity in women's experiences even within similar circumstances. Manchanda (2005) suggests that these types of perspective discrepancies associated with conflict-induced displacement may exist and should be interpreted with caution.

Intergenerational Perspectives and Cultural Transmission

Research question #4 aimed to portray how this generation perceives today's younger generation. Participants' membership in the Silent Generation (born 1925-1945) was characterized by high resilience following significant collective trauma, as explained by Lissitsa, Zychlinski, & Kagan (2022), which contextualizes their evaluations. Narratives consistently identify perceived deficiencies in younger generations' resilience and self-reliance.

Participant #1 assessed that "today's generation is care-free and gets fed up too easily" and predicted that, in similar circumstances, younger generations would just run off to a better location and not deal with the troubles involved, reflecting concerns about diminished collective resilience (Hasler, Korn, & Halperin, 2023). Participant #2 critiqued, "Today's generation's biggest problem is that they are irresponsible and always used to having everything done for them, as they do not know how to do anything". This identifies a paradox: parental overcompensation, "they went the extra mile to do everything for their children so that their children did not suffer," potentially undermining offspring resilience, as suggested by Urone, Segrin, & Givertz (2024).

Participant #3 testified, "Everyone at home had their chores to do. My oldest sister cooked and took care of the children, my other sister was responsible for cleaning, and I was responsible for shopping". Participant #3 also indicated that contemporary children "only know computers and the internet and do not have any responsibilities," suggesting a shift in childhood responsibilities across generations (Erstad, Kjallander, & Jarvela, 2024). The ambivalence in Participant #4's statement, "I would have loved to be like this generation," while acknowledging "maybe I made a big mistake by giving endless opportunities to my children," reflects contradictory attitudes of trauma survivors toward subsequent generations' privilege (El-Khalil, Szymanski, & Rosenfeld, 2023). More positively, participant #5 denoted that "This generation would find a way to survive if a similar event to what happened in 1974 were to occur today," recognizing different adaptive capacities despite concerns about technology dependence (Kuş, 2025).

Participant Recommendations

Research question #5 examined the recommendations this generation had for today's younger generation. Participants' recommendations represent valuable experiential knowledge with potential applications for contemporary resilience-building interventions. Their emphasis on collective support aligns with current research on social capital as a protective factor during crises (Allen, 2009). Participant #3's emphasis on self-reliance—"This generation should learn to stand on their own two feet"—while simultaneously advocating for strong family cohesion, reflects the complex balance between independence and interdependence that characterizes effective resilience, which is also supported in Ishikawa, Rickwood, Bariola, & Bullar (2022). Her advocacy for psychological reframing—"Where there is love and respect, a person will feel fulfilled and satisfied, even with a single slice of bread"—aligns with contemporary positive psychology approaches to adversity management (Malin, Morton, Nadal, & Smith, 2019). Also, participants' consistent emphasis on relationship values as a strong foundation for resilience, which was exemplified by recommendations associated with "mutual trust, respect, and love". This too offers important insights for contemporary family resilience frameworks, suggesting that interpersonal ethics remain central to collective adaptation regardless of technological and cultural transformations (Elsayed, 2024).

While the narratives provided by these women offer different and personal perspectives, which may be considered biased, it is evident that they also provide valuable data associated with gender-specific experiences of conflict, displacement, adaptation mechanisms, and

intergenerational transmission of resilience factors as set forth in Niyonsenga, Jansen, Rutembesa, Hermans, Monacelli, & Caricati (2025). Each of these factors contributes to our understanding of historical trauma responses and contemporary approaches to managing adversity across diverse contexts.

Discussion

This exploratory qualitative case study examined resilience-building strategies among Turkish Cypriot women who survived the 1960-1974 Cyprus conflict. Five research questions guided the inquiry: how resilience is built and maintained; relocation-based adaptation; changes in gender roles; generational perspectives for today; and recommendations for today's younger generation. Participant narratives reveal intergenerational knowledge transmission occurs through two pathways: explicit, detailed accounts and implicit, partial disclosures that contextualize present circumstances. This dual pathway aligns with current understandings of how families discuss difficult pasts and how event centrality shapes trauma narratives across generations (Greenblatt-Kimran et al., 2021). Understanding ancestral trauma experiences constitutes a significant epistemological resource for contemporary generations. Recent work suggests memories of trauma survivors serve as living repositories of adaptive knowledge, acting as present-day coping mechanisms (Niyonsenga et al., 2025). The transmission of survival strategies from collective trauma offers insights that transcend time and space. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes bidirectional transmission of intergenerational trauma, encompassing both vulnerability factors and protective mechanisms that shape how later generations respond to adversity (El-Khalil et al., 2023; Greenblatt-Kimran et al., 2021).

A significant finding concerns participants' perceptions of generational capacity differentials. Women consistently expressed skepticism about younger generations' ability to navigate comparable traumatic circumstances, citing technological dependence and underdeveloped practical competencies as vulnerability factors. This concern aligns with empirical work showing complex relationships among technology, cognitive development, and household dynamics, suggesting that digital immersion can alter patterns of skill acquisition across generations (Kuş, 2025; Erstad et al., 2024). Generational research also confirms substantial differences in digital engagement and psychological orientations between older and younger cohorts, corroborating participants' observations of meaningful intergenerational disparities (Lissitsa et al., 2022; Cirilli et al., 2019). Participants self-critically recognized their role in shaping these gaps, partially blaming themselves for raising offspring who had access to resources they did not have during the trauma era. This reflects compensatory parenting—attempting to shield children from hardships—which can complicate the transmission of resilience. Research on parental self-efficacy in the face of adversity shows that survivors often overcompensate to protect their children from hardship (Scannell, 2020). Participants described creating a “lazy generation” marked by technological dependence and reduced self-sufficiency. Recent work indicates excessive parental protection can impair developmental outcomes in emerging adulthood, diminishing adaptive capacity and self-sufficiency (Urone et al., 2024). Participants identified specific deficiencies in psychological resources

among younger generations, notably patience, responsibility, and delayed gratification. These traits, deemed foundational for survival during displacement and adaptation, reflect an appreciation of resilience factors rooted in their primary experiences. Studies link self-reliance, autonomous functioning, and purpose to resilience and coping in the face of adversity, supporting participants' assessments (Ishikawa et al., 2022; Malin et al., 2019).

Recommendations for younger generations emphasize resilience-building: cultivating patience, embracing responsibility and accountability, preserving family values, and pursuing education and career advancement. These align with frameworks that strengthen internal resources alongside social connections (Niyonsenga et al., 2025). Emphasis on women's financial independence signals a shift from pre-displacement views, suggesting trauma can reshape gendered beliefs about economic autonomy as a resilience factor. This echoes findings that collective hardship catalyzes changing gender-role attitudes, positioning women's economic agency as a key post-displacement empowerment strategy (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2018). Only one participant supported full intergenerational trauma narrative transmission, reflecting tension between preservation and retraumatization; reviews note secondary traumatization risks despite benefits (El-Khalil et al., 2023; Greenblatt-Kimran et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study investigates trauma-informed survival strategies and resilience among Turkish Cypriot women displaced prior to and during the 1974 conflict, revealing findings that diverge from expected frameworks. Hope maintenance emerged as the primary psychological survival mechanism, buffering against repeated traumatization, harassment, and lethal threats. Paradoxically, each traumatic exposure strengthened resilience, aiding the transition and adaptation to a new geography. This contrasts with contemporary youth, who tend toward premature goal abandonment and consumption-oriented behavior. Compensatory parenting minimized offspring's exposure to hardship, suggesting that overprotection may undermine the transmission of resilience.

Economic adaptation formed a second key dimension. Despite limited post-displacement infrastructure availability in north Cyprus, participants leveraged pre-existing skills—notably sewing/seamstress abilities—to achieve economic viability. While husbands found security or factory work, women's contributions were essential to household sustainability. This contrasts with recent observations of prolonged economic dependence among young North Cypriot adults, hinting at a disruption in the transmission of self-sufficiency.

Relationship maintenance was a major finding. Participants showed flexibility and tolerance toward husbands' post-traumatic symptoms after imprisonment, yet accommodation expectations were one-sided, leaving women to absorb spouse trauma despite their own. Documenting generational trauma is vital to preserving knowledge of resilience; transmission is hindered by the risks of retraumatization, though each retelling adds insight.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size is small, which limits generalizability to the broader population, though it is acceptable for exploratory case studies. Second, the age group is restricted to a specific generation; including more generations would enable generational comparisons and analyses. Third, analytical constraints arise from small sample sizes, which limit opportunities to explore nuances in depth and may hinder corroboration.

Future research could adopt mixed methods to provide deeper contextual information. It should also examine the specific strategies women used to adapt economically during displacement as part of their empowerment experience. Further work could investigate the mechanisms of silent versus narrative transmission, including cultural practices and rituals that sustain trauma across generations. Additionally, future work should explore how technological solutions might displace experiential wisdom and shape resilience among generations with limited direct exposure to trauma. Finally, cross-conflict cultural comparisons could reveal universal and culturally specific coping mechanisms.

Declarations

Funding Support

No funding was received for this study.

Ethics Committee Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. Ethics approval was obtained from the Cyprus International University Ethics Committee (decision number EKK22-23/013/008, dated 11/05/2023).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Statement of Data Availability

Raw data will be provided upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflict.

Authors' Contributions

All procedures, including study conceptualization, planning, interviewing, data collection, data coding, analysis, and writing of the manuscript, were carried out solely by the author.

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