6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

The primary purpose of the present study was to understand the Mizo women in mid life experience of meaning in life. For these purposes, three research questions were delineated:(1) Are socio demographic factors related to meaning in life for Mizo women in midlife? (2) What is the level of presence of meaning in life and level of search for meaning in life? (3) What do Mizo women in midlife consider meaningful in their life? This research was largely exploratory using both quantitative and descriptive qualitative design to gain understanding of the experience of meaning in life of Mizo women in midlife.

For the research question one -five socio demographic variables were related to meaning in life for the Mizo women in this study, these are: education, family income, religion, post menopause and hobby. The data analysis revealed that women's education was associated with meaning in life. Likewise family income was related to meaning in life for the Mizo women. The majority of the income level 66.7% had a household income of Rs. 300000 or less and 33.4% reported an income level of Rs. 300000 or above. Hobbies significantly related to meaning in life. Menopause was also analysed at to determine its link to meaning in life. It appears that post menopause is related to meaning in life for this sample of Mizo women. The same significant association is also seen for hobby and religion with meaning in life.
For research question two: After the analysis of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) data revealed that of the 743 samples 72% (n = 534) are searching for meaning in life and 1.5% (n = 11) have high presence of meaning in life. Search for meaning in life in this sample of Mizo women fit with other data (Steger et al., 2009) that suggest meaning is an important resource. Several explanations could be the Mizo women continue to seek out richness in their experiences and the need for new roles in the midlife transition.

For research question three: A qualitative data with in-depth semi structured interview divulged four global themes that give meaning to the Mizo women in this sample: 1) Family care and support give meaning, 2) Serving God provide purpose in life, 3) Search for meaning is a lifelong project and 4) Midlife provides independence and ability to contribute to society.

As in previous research it is seen that women who had more education find meaning in life in educational accomplishments and careers (Smithson, 2011). Alternatively it could mean the nature of occupation pursued following higher education is likely to be meaningful, or education cultivates a way of thinking and living that increases meaning in life as supported by a study done by Waddell (2012). Meaning may also be found in the high social status and recognition that accompany higher education in the small Mizo community. The positive relation with family income and meaning in life for Mizo women in midlife could link to having a personal pay check and professional identity. For Mizo women this is a paradigm shift from past traditional roles
of marriage and staying at home caring for children and family. With higher education came work and career that provided the Mizo women independence, competence and mastery leading to generativity, which shaped their identity formation.

The in depth interviews highlight that the women in this study did not express hardship in their combining roles of grandmother, mother, wife and career women. All were content with who they were, there were positive attitudes towards excellence and obtaining success or advancement in their careers.

Contrary to literature that portrayed midlife women as depressed, irritable, frustrated and intellectually dull (MacPherson, 1995 and Markson & Taylore, 2000), the present Mizo midlife women were attractive, fit and on the go, had an infectious ‘can do’ quality in them. These women did not exhibit decline and degradation. There was little pressure of age and time. The narrative revealed Mizo women in midlife were adaptable, engaged, participating in projects outside the home and developed several interests.

6.2. Significance of the study

The study of Mizo women in midlife is largely unexplored. Most studies have been on women and the church. Mizo women in midlife were considered old and were called ‘aunty’ or Kapi. This term is reserved for married and elderly women. Meaning in life as seen in literature does not represent all women’s experience, as women are
heterogeneous. The myths about midlife crisis and depression are focused on during midlife. Listening to Mizo women’s stories and how they create meaning in their lives and their experiences at midlife is valuable. These discoveries are significant to know more of how Mizo midlife women feel which explains their behaviour and what their concerns are.

This study is a discovery of Mizo women through the lens of Mizo women’s eyes. Therefore the insight gained from this study can contribute to understanding Mizo women’s perspective on middle age, quality of life, meaning in life and well being. This is valuable for Counsellors who will be working with women in their midlife and how their experience affects them psychologically. This may also raise consciousness to health care planners to develop effective awareness on midlife women’s health and develop programs to promote wellness.

Existential questions are not usually associated with midlife and this is not easy as there are internal conflicts between what one is and what one can be, the real self and the ideal self. As counsellors and clinical psychologists, we need to be aware of these issues because to develop in a healthy psychological way and to cope with and overcome difficult life events people need to have a sense of meaning in their lives, particularly at the midlife transition.
6.3. **Implications for counselling**

The results of this study have many implications for counsellors who work with adult women. Cultural stereotype of the midlife period suggests that women in midlife are seen as physically unattractive, menopausal, depressed, irritable, frustrated and intellectually dull. However the results of this study have indicated that today’s Mizo midlife women are active and vibrant. Counsellors can benefit from developing an awareness of the life tasks of this population and becoming educated on the importance of self awareness and self exploration. Different domains that are central to women in midlife should be discussed including: culture, family, career, education, parenting, relationships and spirituality. From this study we have seen how terminal illness can impact a woman’s life, so creating a safe dialogue space is important. Counsellors need to encourage women to reflect on life goals and perhaps reappraise aspirations as they enter midlife. Counsellors should also explore current levels of satisfaction, since this life phase may be one of reinvention and transformation as women re-evaluate life goals, values, aspirations and desires. We have also seen in the findings of this study the role of serving others and helping others and the influence to generativity and connecting with younger generation to share skills.
As counselling psychologists how can we assist never-married, midlife, heterosexual, childless women with the resolution of their intra psychic issues, how to assist women with developing meaningful satisfying relationships if none have existed in the past or have been limited, what types of relationships should be developed or avoided, and how to work with women from various cultures and socioeconomic groups to resolve these same issues. Other understudied, important groups of women whom we have yet to learn about are midlife childless women, heterosexual women of other cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic groups and lesbian women.

Exploring leisure pursuits may enhance psychological well being during midlife as we have seen in this study. In the quantitative study there was significant relation of hobby with meaning in life, which was supported in the in-depth interviews, the women expressed several leisure interests. It is possible that women in midlife forego leisure for more pressing obligations. That a little bit of ‘me’ time does not mean we are being selfish, but actually can relax our whole being, promote well being, it also means we care and value ourselves. Encourage leisure pursuits for women in midlife.

Counselling professionals may be working with midlife woman adjusting to new roles, care giving, being a new wife, newly single or widowed or returning student. Some may feel overwhelmed at the transition meeting them. By using strengths-based approach and wellness orientation, counsellors can educate the midlife clients about making choices. But the good things of midlife do not just happen; the meanings should be actively searched for through creative work, experience of love and fortitude and
acceptance and ‘owning’ of the whole self. In doing so, one can deepen the meaning of one’s own existence and continue on the path of personal growth. Counsellors that are informed of the unique developmental challenges that usually occur in this age group would be better equipped to help facilitate a better sense of identity formation for female midlife clients in the domains of spirituality, gender, vocation, and sexuality, as well as assist clients in working through challenges related to roles in the family, working world, and community. Furthermore, since the literature suggests a strong link between a woman’s wellness and her social connections and sense of meaning in life, counsellors must be purposeful about staying alert to such information and applying appropriate interventions to strengthen social bonds and encourage the pursuit for meaning in life.

A variety of counselling methods can be used to facilitate this exploration including art therapy, genogram creation, career goal exploration, happiness assessment and flourishing, life satisfaction and meaning in life questionnaire.

Family and couples counselling are valuable to enrich marital life, as this is a time when the children have flown the nest or moved out of town for further studies or for jobs and now its just the both of them.

Group therapy can also prove to be very helpful for this population, where in a group setting women in midlife could explore personal growth, nurture social relations. These interactions could serve as valuable experiences toward greater feeling of confidence, identity, purpose and mental health and wellness.
6.4. **Recommendations for future study**

As society continues to change in relation to culture norms and gender roles for women, future studies should look at theories that stereotype women or developmental stages and seek evidence to confirm or challenge them. Gender based studies could also look at differences or similarities for men in the same life stage including exploring meaning in life, life satisfaction, psychological well being and overall wellness. More studies are needed that that elucidate women’s interpretation of aging: meaning of aging. As women achieve retirement age there is a need to investigate the readiness for retirement as a life transition.

6.5. **Limitations of the study**

This study presented findings on Mizo women in midlife experience of meaning in life. A limitation is the focus on individual studies, which can ‘tend to masquerade as a whole when, in fact, they are but a part - a slice of life’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The study only included a particular age group, single sex cohort, so that the results may simply indicate the time period under investigation. These findings could be viewed as a function of the time period in which this group were socialised in Mizoram, since the development process is influenced by social historical time, and by the scope and range in which the women are involved.

Despite differences in socio-economic backgrounds the women in the qualitative sample were essentially middle class Mizos, since it appeared to assume that individuals have time, and the desire, to engage in introspection, to travel.
For the qualitative study a divergent experience was purposefully obtained and participants came from only one region. The themes cannot be considered sufficient to represent the population of Mizo women.

The second limitation is in the selection of the sample for the qualitative study. Except for one woman who lived in the vicinity of Aizawl, the rest were from the main town. It is possible that living in Aizawl may influence their worldview and challenges and opportunities and their experience of meaning in life.

The third limitation of the study was it was based on self-report. Participants may misinterpret questionnaire items, which could flaw the data.
6.6. Summary

A total of 743 midlife Mizo women aged 40 to 55 participated in this study on meaning in life in midlife for the quantitative study and five women participated in the qualitative in-depth interview.

In essence the findings of this study provided insight into the experience of Mizo women in midlife. Women witness and experience multiple changes as well as social norms and expectations of appropriate behaviour and roles for Mizo women in midlife, all which influence the developmental process.

This study is notable in that it provides an insight to exploration of contemporary women’s midlife experience, the complexity of their lives. The study also provides empirical evidence to the instrument Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). This study provides important background information that can inform the work of counselling practitioners and future research.