



Navigating Barriers to Higher Education: Housing, Family Responsibilities, and Social Networks among Young Women from Refugee Backgrounds in Canada

Sonja van der Putten¹

¹ Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Canada
Email: sonja_vdp@hotmail.com

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the educational and career goals of young adult women from refugee backgrounds in Canada. This paper aims to examine how responsibilities related to gender may create barriers for these young women in pursuing their higher educational goals in Canada. This study was conducted using qualitative methods rooted in constructivist principles. Through an inductive process, data were collected through 18 interviews and four focus groups with 17 participants, which were then thematically analyzed. The study determined three main barriers to why young adult women from refugee backgrounds might not pursue higher education. First, access to safe and affordable housing is significantly influenced by gender and that the denial of this right place's women from refugee backgrounds in a position of heightened precarity and instability, negatively impacting their ability to pursue other life goals. The study also found that specific gender-based familial responsibilities can also impact the time and resources women have to pursue their personal goals. Thirdly, the study found that having minimal social networks in their new communities, limited the support they could access and negatively impacted the pursuit of their life goals.

Keywords: Education, Refugees, Women, Barriers, Aspirations

Introduction

Since 1980, Canada has welcomed over 1,039,275 people from refugee backgrounds, and this number continues to grow in-light of the ongoing global crises that emerge, including most recently Syrian refugees fleeing civil war, Afghani refugees fleeing Taliban rule, and Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russian invasion (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, 2025). In addition, there are thousands of displaced peoples and migrants

seeking asylum in Canada from Venezuela, South Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (UNHCR, 2025). Yet many of these people that arrive in Canada come with few financial resources and developing English/French language skills, making it difficult to pursue education and find stable employment to attain self-sufficiency (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, 2025). Studies on refugee settlement in Canada repeatedly show that people arriving from refugee backgrounds significantly contribute to Canada's economy with over 51% of refugees attaining higher education and working in high skilled jobs, including as doctors and software engineers (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, 2025; Statistics, 2022). This success is much more achievable for young people who arrive in Canada early enough to attain the benefits of a strong public education system and to develop the academic language proficiency skills needed to be successful in higher education.

Research shows that young adult women from refugee backgrounds who are trying to pursue higher education continue to face barriers due to their gender (Sirriyeh, 2024). By ignoring the impact of gender in the experiences of newcomers from refugee backgrounds, women's lives remain largely invisible, reinforcing patriarchal power and neglecting dimensions of gender-specific social, economic, and cultural barriers in conflict and post-conflict environments (Canefe, 2018). Women from refugee backgrounds are not a homogenous group, and there is no universal experience. Despite some shared experiences that refugees may have with immigrant populations in host communities, their experiences of displacement, separation, imprisonment, insecurity, and trauma influence their pursuit of education in unique ways, which must be considered in educational policy construction (Stevenson & Willott, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by two theoretical frameworks: critical theory as applied to education, and feminist theory. Using a critical social lens to examine barriers in existing policies and systems is necessary to exposing the challenges that young women from refugee backgrounds have in accessing post-secondary education and pursuing their career aspirations. Feminist theory as explored through Nancy Fraser's work on justice that suggests that injustice occurs when an individual's full participation in society is denied by the economic structures that exist; when an individual is prevented from interacting with parity because the institutionalized hierarchies deny them equitable status; and when an individual is impeded from participation because of decisions and rules that deny them an equal voice in deliberations and democratic decision-making (Fraser, 2009).

Methods

This study was conducted using qualitative methodological processes as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Qualitative research aims to help the researcher better understand how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and apply meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative research design is rooted in constructivist principles and is premised on the belief that knowledge creation is on-going and is co-constructed by participants as they make meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Constructivist principles maintain that participants make meaning of their experiences through what they already know and the experiences and individuals they encounter (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Richardson, 2003). In this way, meaning and experience are socially produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participant Recruitment

To conduct this study, participants were recruited online by contacting 41 refugee serving agencies, organizations, and educational institutions throughout Greater Vancouver. These institutions were selected because of the settlement and educational work that they do with newcomers from refugee backgrounds. No participants who expressed interest and met the participant criteria were turned away. A total of 18 individuals participated in the interviews and 17 individuals participated in the focus groups. Interviews lasted for 60 minutes – although some went longer with the consent of the participants. Four focus groups (of 4-5 participants in each group) were conducted after the interviews were completed. Out of the 18 interview participants, 17 participated in the focus groups. Focus groups lasted on average 60 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed, and the original recordings deleted. Transcriptions were emailed back to participants who had the opportunity to review, edit, and amend them as they saw fit.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, data collection involves collecting data, coding and organizing data, creating categories and sub-categories, and then representing the data and forming an interpretation of them (Creswell, 2011, p. 179). This data collection strategy was structured around open and selective coding. Open coding requires the researcher to label concepts thematically and then create categories based on similarities amongst the concepts (Allan, 2020; Basit, 2003). Selective coding tries to make links between the categories of data and the study's core questions (Allan, 2020; Basit, 2003). When coding, the researcher analyzes phenomena to find commonalities and differences, as well as patterns and structures (Allan, 2020; Basit, 2003). For this study, data was collected

through interviews and focus groups.

Interviews

A research interview, in its most common form, is person-to-person, where one person elicits information from another – like a conversation with a purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The specific purpose of conducting interviews in this study was to obtain information from study participants regarding their experiences in the Canadian education system; these interviews were conducted person-to-person virtually through a private Zoom meeting.

The study used a semi-structured interview method which was guided by a set of questions that were related to the study's key questions and allowed flexibility in the interview questions and responses. This strategy enabled me as the researcher to respond to the topics raised by the participants and be open to the various ideas and worldviews that the participants might identify.

Focus Groups

Four 60-minute focus groups were also conducted. A focus group is a group interview on a topic with a selection of participants who are knowledgeable on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition to interviews, focus groups were selected as a method of data collection because the interactive discussion which creates the data in the focus group changes the type of data that might be available through interviews alone (Hennink et al., 2017). During focus groups, participants share their beliefs and collective experiences, as well as consider those of others, which may impact their own views and attitudes (Hennink, 2017). In total, four focus groups were formed with 17 of the 18 interview participants participating in them. Focus group questions were also semi-structured but were built from the interview questions and responses.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research methods, data analysis is the classification and interpretation of data to make meaning of the information (Flick, 2014). Data analysis should be an ongoing process that begins as data is being collected (Flick, 2014), and my data collection began by participating actively in the interviews, and also in the transcription phase of data collection. Data collection began in the interview and transcription phase of the data collection. Each interview was audio recorded, and transcribed. The transcribed interviews were shared with the participants, who were asked to review them and provide any clarification, corrections, amendments, or general feedback

they felt was necessary.

A constant comparative method as outlined by Glaser and Strauss was also used to organize data and group them according to themes (2017). Upon data collection, the process of open coding began where data was broken down into key categories, from which sub-categories emerged. In total there were 15 broad themes, 56 categories, 87 sub-categories, and 4 general categories that seemed relevant across multiple themes and in differing contexts. Themes, categories, and sub-categories were reviewed to make connections and identify patterns related to the study questions. While the process began inductively, throughout the analysis data collection began to shift to a more deductive process in which more evidence was found to support the main themes that had emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Results

The results from this study will discuss how gender impacted the settlement experiences of the young adult women in the study and influenced their personal goal making. Specifically, the study found that access to safe and affordable housing is significantly influenced by gender and that the denial of this right place's women from refugee backgrounds in a position of heightened precarity and instability, negatively impacting their ability to pursue other life goals. It also found that specific gender-based familial responsibilities impacts the time and resources women have to pursue their personal goals and further determined that social relationships in the lives of women, specifically newcomer women with few social connections and limited social networks, are significant and important to the pursuit of personal aspirations in their new communities.

Housing

The most significant daily stressor faced by study participants was finding safe, affordable, and accessible housing. Many study participants moved on average three or more times prior to settling in Greater Vancouver. Constant moving was in direct relation to income affordability, and the ability to secure livable wage employment. These women found it difficult to find part-time jobs that paid more than minimum wage and believed this to be in relation to their lack of Canadian-based work experience, their emerging language skills, and their gender. Asylum-seeking participants initially stayed with family members but were also significantly challenged in finding stable and affordable housing, both before and after they attained permanent residence. Study participants who arrived on privately sponsored scholarships did not face the same housing challenges, at least upon first arrival, as the terms of their scholarship included accessible, on-campus, paid-for

housing.

Government-Sponsored Study Participants Challenges with Housing

The twelve women in the study who arrived through government sponsorship lived in a variety of residences, including basement suites, apartments, townhouses, and single-family homes. These women overwhelmingly ended up in low-income neighbourhoods. They shared stories of how these neighbourhoods were often rife with open drug use, homelessness, and exposed them to the sex trade, which was unexpected, and initially shocking. Participants noted that these neighbourhoods could sometimes be unnerving when navigating access to public transit in the early/late hours of the day to get to/from work or school. Habibah shares how on the first night at their new home, some children's items that had been donated to her family were stolen from their porch, and how her mother was too afraid to leave the house for the several months they lived there.

I kept thinking, like this is Canada? I didn't know Canada looks like this...my mother was too scared to leave the house, so we had to take the younger children, to school, everywhere. Still, my mother and father did not want us to leave the house though.

(Habibah, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Habibah continued to explain that her mother had lived her entire life in/out of war zones and conflict areas that were unsafe for women to travel alone, and that these experiences further heightened her uncertainty in her new community. This fear to go outside, placed significant stress on the family, as Habibah had to take on parental responsibilities, such as navigating the new community and services within it, for her family members.

Several participants shared housing concerns over the lack of affordable and accessible rental housing in Greater Vancouver, the long waitlists for British Columbia Housing subsidized housing accommodations, which develops, manages, and administers subsidized housing options in the Lower Mainland, and the disruption that constant moving caused in their lives. Affordable housing was particularly difficult to find for participants with large families, as many affordable options such as apartments and basement suites were too small to host their entire families. Another participant shared that they had lived in a two-bedroom apartment with five-to-seven family members illegally over the allowable rental occupancy rate, but that the landlord shared their ethnicity and was trying to "do them a favour". In return, however, this participant felt that they were at the mercy of the landlord who could decide to raise the rent or evict them whenever he pleased.

Daleela shared that even after several years of moving and renting within one low-income community, her family was being forced to move again. As a result, her family had started to look at moving to a different province, with a lower cost of living.

...the landlords don't accept large families and you know, the house rent, for the two-bedroom house it's going to be like \$4-5,000 and above, it's just like, so expensive.

(Daleela, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Participants who had moved several times continued to share the challenges of doing so while trying to hold down a part-time job, take courses, and maintain social networks. Olya who had to move with her family several times, shared how doing so increased her school commute to over four hours a day, roundtrip, but that she continued to do the commute because she wanted to maintain the social connections with support services and agencies that she had first established. This sentiment was shared by other participants who asserted that moving often was disruptive to their settlement.

...you know, you get to know the space...the people, schools and universities and everything, right. You have your own work here...if we move again, it will be another challenge, you know, trying to find work, trying to get it into another university - and then it's not like one or two members that [need support] it's like the entire family.

(Habibah, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Study participants also cited that developing English language skills and new cultural expectations challenged their ability to fully understand everything from their tenancy rights to their housing contracts, to where to turn to for support if needed. The lack of affordable rental housing made it more likely that these women would be forced to stay in unsafe living environments that may heighten their risk of exploitation and abuse.

Privately Sponsored Scholarship Participants Experiences with Housing

The six participants who had arrived through privately sponsored scholarships did not face the same amount of housing instability as government sponsored participants because their accommodations were initially found by their institutions and were located on university campuses. However, two of these participants did change residences on the same campus, for instance from an international student residency to a more integrated student residency. Others moved from one campus residence to another residence on a campus located in a different city. These study participants moved residences within or between campuses to find new friendship groups, be closer to part-time jobs, or live in more diversified neighbourhoods – which was particularly important to several older scholarship students. However, several of these women were forced to find housing with roommates that they found online, to subsidize the cost of their accommodations. While these women were strategic and cautious about who they shared accommodations with, the reliance on sharing costs with a stranger can place women in a vulnerable position. Olya explains that when looking for accommodations without having met her potential

roommates in person, she felt confident that her experiences of migration and moving, had provided her the skills to confidently assess peoples' character, but that a little bit of luck and hope are also involved in the process.

We have to arrange accommodate and everything ourselves...I will be sharing with four other people...I have had a few call with them, so we'll see, fingers crossed.

(Olya, Interview, July 28, 2020)

Familial Responsibilities

Familial responsibilities impacted the personal aspirations of young adult women in several ways. The gendered responsibilities that disproportionately impacted study participants on the basis of their gender were childcare, domestic duties, mental health support, and expectations of marriage. These responsibilities were particularly significant for large families, in which there were several school-aged children, siblings, and/or cousins, experiences with mental health challenges, and limited educational opportunities.

Childcare

Limited childcare spaces and costly programming prevented many of the study participants' families from accessing childcare for the out-of-school-aged children, living in their homes. While none of the study participants disclosed that they had any children of their own, many of them found themselves living in cramped quarters sometimes with several young infants, and toddlers who were most commonly siblings, cousins, and family friends. Western socially constructed views of mothering constructs biological and adoptive mothering as specific roles played within the nuclear household, limit our understanding of the types of child-rearing and care responsibilities that these young women were and are responsible for (Glenn, 2016). Approximately nine of the study participants cited that they had additional childcare responsibilities, including supporting education, providing financial support, and helping access medical care for the children, often younger siblings or cousins, in their homes, that required significant time and energy to fulfill. Several study participants noted that this was particularly disruptive to their attempts to focus on their educational goals because of the constant distraction but also because of the expectations that they participate in childcare responsibilities. Daleela reinforced that childcare in the home, especially for young children, continued to be the dominant responsibility of women.

I am like so tired of, you know, dealing with my siblings...there is always noise [when studying], we want them to go to like a preschool or daycare or somewhere. So, I filled out the forms, then I just needed the doctor's note, you know, like the signature to apply for the subsidy, and then from there, I can send the forms...and we can get a

subsidy and they can go to the preschool...and then [my mom] can continue with her English classes.

(Daleela, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Daleela's experience also showed that because her English skills were stronger than those of her mother, she became responsible for registering her siblings for childcare, organizing forms, medical authorization, and proof of low-income status, so her siblings could qualify for preschool or daycare. She spent further time placing her siblings on childcare waitlists, due to the lack of childcare availability that existed in her community. Other participants noted that they brought their siblings to free-childcare programming, but that they were expected to stay for the duration of the programming, which detracted from their ability to take English courses or pursue employment. One participant also noted that she felt ignored by program staff, and unwelcome, treatment that might be further attributed to race and ethnicity based social stratification harboured by program staff and amongst community members (Palmary et al., 2010). Based on this experience, Daleela decided to not return.

Domestic Responsibilities

Generally, participants had varying experiences with gender-based domestic responsibilities. Several participants perceived gendered differences in their domestic responsibilities compared to their male counterparts but did not necessarily view this as unfair; rather they saw this as a role that everyone was expected to contribute to the family in some way. One participant mentioned that her family was more comfortable with her brother working outside the home.

When I arrived here, we all wanted to work because we knew that in order to learn more about the Canadian culture, you can work and talk to people and gain more confidence...but my uncle was like 'Oh, you [girls] shouldn't go to work,' ... if someone asks, your son works, not your daughters.

(Daleela, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Daleela justified her uncle's perspective by noting that his primary reason for not wanting the girls to work outside the home was in wanting to keep the girls in the family safe from a new and unknown environment. However, the high cost of living in Canada, compounded by her father's inability to secure full-time employment, put pressure on Daleela and her siblings to find jobs.

Conversely, another participant mentioned that her father would take on more domestic responsibilities, such as vacuuming or cooking so that she could go to school. She believed that her dad was only relying on her to help domestically when he was unable

to do so because of his work schedule, which she felt was fair. However, because her dad could only get precarious and unstable employment, that often included fluctuating hours, Uhee's help in the home was more often relied upon than not.

...my dad supports me...my dad is very helpful...like he's a good cook, so I don't have to worry about the food, I don't have to worry about cooking...if my dad and my uncle are in the house [not working] they stay with the kids...and I can just do my own thing.

(Uhee, Interview, November 24, 2020)

Study participants' varied experiences with domestic responsibilities were impacted by the size of the family, the age of the young children in the family, the employment hours held by family members, and the adherence to gendered expectations held by the individual's family. Ultimately, these additional familial tasks took time away from being able to attend school and study.

Mental Health & Wellbeing

In addition, playing a supportive role in the mental health challenges faced by family members was mentally and emotionally exhausting for several study participants. Those whose family members were particularly in need of mental health support found they were taking on significant additional responsibilities while trying to navigate the health care system for their family. They often found themselves taking on the traditional responsibilities of parents, including organizing the children for school, helping with homework, implementing disciplinary measures, making appointments, liaising with teachers, in addition to navigating appointments and the health care system generally. Some found they were also navigating the foster care system and trying to keep their family together, while they and their parents struggled with mental health challenges related to war-related traumas. Still others were monitoring the physical and mental health of siblings, calling ambulances, communicating with doctors, paying specialized medical bills, and so forth. There was a desire by participants for their family members to become self-sufficient, but they were often negotiating the time it would take to teach their family members these skills, compared to what they needed to complete in their own time.

...for an appointment for my mom, I could make it in two minutes by phone call or a quick email, but my mom took the whole day to figure that out. That made me feel very guilty. At the same time, because of me being away [at school] and my mom having all that responsibility...[it] actually pushed her to do those tasks herself and to learn. Like now, she's able to do all her banking herself, she's able to do appointments herself, she's able to go to talk to the teacher herself and got that confidence back herself....it was like tough for both of us, for her, it was tough for me to accept, but it's a good thing, we don't

have a dependency. I think that's healthy.
(Olya, Interview, July 28, 2020)

Supportive Relationships Among Women

The young adult women in the study shared many examples of the positive impact that other women have had on their settlement experience and in the pursuit of their personal aspirations. These women came from a variety of backgrounds – some were peers, some employers, and some strangers met on public transit. Friendships and relationships developed with community members played a significant role in the building of social networks for the women in the study and helped them navigate their new communities safely. However, several young adult women in the study found it challenging to meet trustworthy and supportive people, willing to take the time to befriend them.

Friendships

There was a strong desire amongst study participants to develop friendships with other women close to their age and with whom they could ask questions, turn to for advice, and explore their new environments generally. Yet, many found it difficult to make Canadian-born friends, particularly if they were not in school and were not immersed in a community of their peers. For those who were working to save money for school, they found it particularly difficult to form friendships with age-appropriate peers. For study participants who arrived in secondary school, many felt socially isolated from their Canadian-born peers. They shared that in classes, their peers tended to ignore them and several thought this was because of language barriers. Ada conveyed how difficult it was not having any friends in Canada to provide social support, but that social media provided new ways to make and sustain friendships.

Most of the people I know are immigrants, when we moved, we didn't have any friends...maybe on a Facebook group or like a Persian group...I still don't have many friends.

(Ada, Interview, November 20, 2020)

Building friendships and relationships with people in the community made study participants feel like they had a social support network and people they could turn to for advice and guidance. Several participants noted the importance of avoiding social isolation, and one way of doing so was by building new friendships. Several other participants who were in later adulthood noted that it was difficult to make friends with Canadian-born peers and that friendships could be superficial and fleeting. Amira conveyed how friendships in Canada were fleeting.

...I got to learn that friendships in Canada are not like friendships back home...all the neighbours would know each other...you would just go and have a coffee with your neighbour...for me, it definitely has been one of my culture shocks coming here.

(Amira, Interview, November 13, 2020)

Similarly, Oadira conveyed how her interaction with Canadian-born peers has been very limited, even three years into her settlement.

...it was always a battle to find people who I could interact with...my interaction with Canadians was very limited. I didn't have interaction at a friendship level with people my age, I was a little disappointed just because I love experiencing new cultures...that's still the case after three years now. So, my main interaction is just finding international people who don't have any family here and are willing to spend time with me.

(Oadira, Interview, November 10, 2020)

Several study participants mentioned that developing deeper friendships with Canadian-born peers would help them better understand Canadian culture, increase their sense of belonging, and may even provide peer-based advice and guidance more specific to their unique needs, as newcomer women trying to pursue education and employment.

Community Relationships

Developing a strong support system with trusted people was important to the young adult women in the study. Being able to meet new people with diverse perspectives and different networks opened new opportunities for them and encouraged them to explore different aspects of Canadian identity and cultural life that they otherwise may not have access to. This in turn encouraged them to think about different educational and career pathways. However, many found it challenging to meet trustworthy people, and were more likely to trust someone if they had been introduced or recommended by someone they already trusted, such as a teacher or settlement worker.

Community relationships were often formed with supportive teachers, community groups – including religious organizations, settlement agency employees, youth workers and mentors met through scholarship opportunities. Study participants noted that instructors, teachers, and instructors were the most accessible resources of support, and provided detailed guidance on their educational pursuits, which they found helpful. Other participants found support from religious community members, even if they were of a different religion. Several participants received guidance and even financial support from community faith-based groups, despite differing faiths. In addition, specific individuals met through settlement service agencies, helped provide several participants with ongoing settlement guidance and advice.

Through [this settlement agency] I got to know one other person...she is a fricking angel. Seriously, she helped me a lot...I sat with her for two hours, she would just talk to me and ask me what I was doing in my life, and then she would write down the notes and then she showed me how to put it in my resume. She was like, you use this word and this one, and you do that, right in front of me.

(Amaal, Interview, October 27, 2020)

Study participants noted that it was a specific teacher, youth worker, or settlement worker, who provided them extra attention and focus, that made a significant impact on their lives. These impactful individuals were identified based more on their personal characteristics, than on their specific roles. The qualities of patience, clear communication, ability to teach skills, general availability, and responsiveness to questions, were important for many study participants in the personal qualities of the individuals with whom they felt most connected and whom they felt were most supportive.

Discussion

When examining the role of gender in refugee experiences, it is necessary to understand that there is no one Universal woman or experience and that “woman-ness” is a social, political, and cultural construction (Dağtaş et al., 2018; Indra, 1993). The experiences of women from refugee backgrounds must be considered in the broader context of patriarchy, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression, as well as in relation to the interdependencies of systems of oppression based on ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status (Dağtaş et al., 2018). The gender-based barriers faced by the young adult women from refugee backgrounds in this study were intersectional and varied based on individual circumstances. The main gender-based barriers faced by participants were finding safe and affordable housing, navigating familial responsibilities, and developing supportive social networks.

Safe and Affordable Housing

Housing stability is essential to health and well-being (Decter & Rogers, 2018). Accessing safe and affordable housing was a significant challenge for most study participants and their families. Safe and affordable housing is a gender issue because safe and affordable housing prevents violence and reduces poverty for women and their children (Decter & Rogers, 2018). Over half of all homeless people in Canada are women and girls (Berman, 2009; Decter & Rogers, 2018). Disproportionately represented in this group are racialized and newcomer women, as well as women with disabilities, including mental health challenges, who experience high levels of domestic violence, which places them at

a heightened risk of homelessness (Berman, 2009). Single mothers from refugee backgrounds are five times more likely to live in poverty in Canada than non-single mothers and seven study participants were living in single-mother-headed households (Decter & Rogers, 2018). Housing instability can exacerbate mental health challenges, worsen chronic health conditions, and heighten crime (Dohler et al., 2016). For young adult women, a lack of safe housing can result in exploitative situations and increases in domestic violence if they are forced to live in substandard housing or under the control of an abusive landlord (Dohler et al., 2016). The high costs of housing in Greater Vancouver and the limited rental supply are institutional forms of discrimination where housing and settlement policies have not kept pace with the number of newcomers needing to meet basic housing needs in British Columbia (Decter & Rogers, 2018; Francis & Hiebert, 2014).

How Gender impacts Familial Responsibilities

In examining the role gender-based familial responsibilities play in the lives and goals of study participants it is essential to consider the Western lens through which family and responsibilities are understood.

Arab cultures, from which most participants originated from, are believed to be more collectivist than Western cultures, and identity is more likely based around social systems, including family and friend networks (Azevedo et al., 2002; Buda & Elsayed-Elkhoully, 1998). Therefore, when examining the familial responsibilities that study participants took on, it is important to note that these duties were not necessarily viewed negatively by participants themselves but may have been understood as a typical role within the family.

Childcare

Childcare was a significant challenge for young adult women in the study. None of the study participants disclosed that they had any of their own children, but ten participants were responsible for the childcare responsibilities of their younger siblings/cousins who lived in the home.

Many of the pre-school-aged children in participants' homes were not in any form of early childhood education programming, due to prohibitively high costs, inaccessibility (for example, inconveniently located far away), or lack of availability (for example, waitlisted). Yet there is a significant desire on behalf of women from refugee backgrounds to have their children in early childhood education programming and vast appreciation for the benefits of this type of programming (Eastern, 2021). Childcare affordability has been a federal government recommendation dating back to 1984 in Canada but has yet to be acted upon (Hibbs, 2021). Despite the 2021 federal government proposal to invest over

\$30 billion in childcare in the next five years, progress in BC has been slow and there continues to be insufficient number of spaces, unequal access across communities, and educator shortages (A Canada-wide Early Learning, 2021; BC Ministry of Education, 2026; Coalition of Child Care, 2025). As a result, several study participants took on the responsibility of applying for government subsidies for childcare and for finding childcare in their neighborhood for their younger siblings and cousins. Ultimately, long waitlists, high costs, and long distances to travel by walking (as many newcomer families' only mode of affordable transportation is walking, particularly during the COVID19 pandemic when many were hesitant to take public transit), prevented many participant families from enrolling young children in childcare programs. This is problematic, both for the young children not receiving an early childhood education, which is essential to long-term equitable educational access, brain development, and economically provides substantial returns on investment for society, but also for the young adult women and their mothers, who are unable to pursue educational and language training, because of childcare responsibilities (Dhuey, 2024; Mitchell, 2009).

There is an implicit expectation in Canadian society that the support and care of dependent family members, such as children or the elderly, be done outside the home by professionals, while women work outside the home (Turcotte, 2014). Yet, women continue to maintain the dominant care roles in the home, creating a double-work day for many, in the public and private spheres (MacDonald et al., 2005). Repeated studies on the economic benefits of women participating in the workplace, the economic impacts of educated mothers on their children (MacDonald et al., 2005), and so forth, make it very difficult for women to work both fulltime within and outside the home, particularly if they have multiple dependent family members for which they provide support. Study participants worked hard to support their mothers and, in some cases, take on maternal responsibilities if a mother figure was unavailable and/or unable to do so. If it is an underlying premise of women's evolving roles in the Canadian economy that their domestic responsibilities, such as child and elderly care, are outsourced, then subsidies and other economic incentives to low-income earners, such as refugees, must be made available to support work and study both inside and outside the home.

Domestic Duties

Study participants were also more likely to take on several traditional domestic responsibilities in their homes, such as cooking and cleaning, to support their families. However, there was considerable variability as to what this looked like amongst families. Roughly twelve study participants acknowledged that everyone played a role in their family home and in the domestic duties of the home. While four participants noted that their male family members were responsible for generating an income, roughly six

participants shared that their fathers or other males in the home would also engage in domestic responsibilities if they had the time outside of work. This is inconsistent with the literature that portrays certain cultures, specifically Arab Middle Eastern cultures, as patriarchal and portrays Arab women as the “other” to be confined to the home and subjected to the demands of the males in their family (Afshar, 2004). Rather, study participants conveyed that while they did have domestic responsibilities, they were a normal part of their collectivist culture, that everyone in the family had a role to play, and that they would help each other out if/when needed. This is consistent with literature acknowledging the changing roles of both women and men in refugee families upon resettlement (Asaf, 2017).

Social Capital

Building one’s social capital through friendships and community connections was significant to women from refugee backgrounds. Fostering friendships with Canadian-born peers was important to study participants to alleviate social isolation, enhance their sense of belonging, and build a support network. Lacking social connections for women from refugee backgrounds is also believed to negatively influence their ability to integrate into society (Goodson & Phillimore, 2008). Friendships in the lives of women can positively impact their mental, physiological, and sociological well-being, the absence of which can contribute to depression and psychosomatic illness (Goodson & Phillimore, 2008).

Study participants were actively involved in various forms of community, online, and in-person work through which they met many people. However, they noted that it was difficult to develop genuine friendships with people whom they trusted. Those who were able to form these friendships noted that the support they felt from peers, friends, and mentors, was based on the specific qualities and traits of individual people, rather than on types of jobs. For instance, individuals in roles that were meant to provide a specific service, such as settlement workers or educational advisors, were not necessarily supportive. Rather, it was a select individual and personality type across a diverse spectrum of fields with whom study participants built trusting relationships. For instance, considerate teachers who took the time to get to individually know participants, patient advisors who sat down and helped participants apply for specific jobs, and inclusive youth workers who took participants to community events, were examples of supportive individuals found in the community. This is consistent with the literature, which conveys that individuals from refugee backgrounds may engage with a social network but not necessarily a trusted social network (Dunwoodie et al., 2020). If trusting relationships are able to be formed, these social networks become beneficial to women from refugee backgrounds in their settlement as they help provide mutual support and help work through conflicts that may arise in these women’s lives (Dunwoodie et al., 2020).

Building a social network is not easy to do. The young adult women from refugee backgrounds in the study were looking for other young women in their peer group, from whom they could ask questions and help navigate their new experiences in Canada. For study participants, these individuals were most often other newcomers, who were also looking to build their support network. Yet, many study participants noted the vast benefits of having individuals in their social network who were Canadian-born. The knowledge and experience of Canadian-born friends from whom they could seek advice and guidance on the local system and new culture was found to be very helpful. This is consistent with literature that reinforces that specifically combining newcomers with locals through such initiatives as mentorship programs, can have vast settlement benefits for both groups (Mansson & Delander, 2017). For young adults from refugee backgrounds, these opportunities can positively impact academic success and can help them integrate into their new labour markets (Mansson & Delander, 2017; Vickers et al., 2017). With the right training and support, mentors themselves also benefit from getting to know the newcomers in their community, which can build compassion, empathy, and support, inadvertently addressing potential issues of racism, discrimination, and social isolation (Mansson & Delander, 2017). As mentioned in the literature review, there are many different mentorship models that higher educational institutions, government agencies, and workplaces are developing to meet the specific needs of their newcomer refugee population. Such models must be further developed with the support and input of young women from refugee backgrounds so that they can reflect and be responsive to their specific needs and goals.

Conclusion

The findings in this study demonstrate that despite the challenges faced by young adult women from refugee backgrounds throughout their migration experience and into resettlement, they remain hard-working, dedicated to pursuing higher education, and committed to making a positive impact in their new communities in Canada. These women often missed out on educational opportunities in their most formative developmental years, which places them at a heightened disadvantage in pursuing their educational and career journeys here in Canada. Compounding these gaps in learning, are educational policies and practices that are generalized and do not specifically acknowledge the individual and unique circumstances faced by women from refugee backgrounds, by not taking into account their experiences and the various barriers they encounter daily.

There is generally, a greater need for recognition of cultural and gender differences by policy makers in Western society to be able to understand and redress the class, race, and gender-based injustices faced by newcomer women upon resettlement (Crenshaw, 2017). Justice within the education system for young women from refugee backgrounds

requires a recognition of the additional barriers that these women face because of their gender and their refugee experiences, both in and outside the classroom. Misrecognition of the value and worth of women leads to exclusion and marginalization of all women from the public sphere and results in the perpetuation of patriarchal decision-making bodies (hooks, 2000).

Ethics Statement

REB: 20200228

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

- c. as a co-investigator, collaborator, or research assistant in a research project approved in advance.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed with the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

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