# Exploring the Transition to Post-Secondary Settings Among Refugee Girls and Women

by

Jasmine Alia Nathoo

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Department of Educational Psychology
University of Alberta

**Abstract**

For young refugee women, attaining a post-secondary education appears to be a personally important goal and has positive implications for their integration, with economic and social benefits. However, young refugee women face significant barriers that can make post-secondary attainment challenging. This study was informed by a transnational feminist lens, and addresses the question: *What are the strengths, challenges, and needs of refugee women and girls as they transition into post-secondary settings in Canada*? Using the Photovoice method and guided by a participatory research framework, this question was explored with six refugee women who are navigating the transition to post-secondary settings. Results provide an in-depth picture of the challenges faced by these young women on an individual, social, and systemic level, along with their self-identified strengths and needs. Results highlight the capacity of this group to develop agency and the ability to become a self-advocate and maintain hope in the face of challenges. Further, they articulated a need for more relational supports in the education system to help them in this transition. Implications for educational and counselling settings are provided along with limitations and directions for future research.

## Preface

This thesis is an original work by Jasmine Alia Nathoo. No part of this thesis has been previously published. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Exploring the Transition to Post-secondary Settings Among Refugee Girls and Women”, ID: Pro00109649, November 17, 2022.

**Dedication**

*To my grandmothers*
*The women who have inspired me, taught me, shaped me*

*To all the women who have come before us*
*And to those who will come after*

**Acknowledgments**

Thank you first and foremost to my participants. This project would not have happened without you graciously sharing your time, experiences, and wisdom with me. Thank you for trusting me with your stories, this is a responsibility I do not take lightly and I hope I have done them justice.

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To Jayce, you light up my world and inspire me every day. I'm so lucky to be your step-mom.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*We are not only refugees. We are like everyone in the world. We can do something, achieve something. We didn´t choose to leave our homelands. We didn´t choose the name refugee.*

*Yusra Mardini at International Olympic Committee Session, Rio, 2016*

Wars have occurred throughout human history, though the scale and level of destruction have increased over time. These conflicts have profound impacts on the lives of youth who experience them. Reduced access to basic needs and rights such as food, water, shelter, medical care, and education, as well as exposure to violence and death are just a few of the perils faced by youth living in conflict settings (Sherrow, 2000). Graça Machel's 1996 report titled *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children* (United Nations, 1996) played a crucial role in raising awareness for the plight of youth in conflict settings and laid the groundwork for efforts to address these concerns. This report identified youth as the primary victims of armed conflict, drawing attention to not only the physical impacts of conflict, but also the psychosocial impacts on youth in the aftermath of conflict. This report also began to hint at the importance of youth participation and involvement in peacebuilding, healing, and community-based recovery initiatives, an idea that was given even greater emphasis in the 10-year strategic review of the initial report (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2009).

Nonetheless, more recent reports continue to show the devastating effects of war and conflict on young people. The most recent *Annual Report on Children and Armed Conflict* (United Nations, 2020) indicates that children and youth in conflict settings are at risk of death, injury, abduction, being recruited as combatants, and being denied access to rights such as medical care and education. Girls and young women are also disproportionally at risk of sexual violence and forced marriage in the context of war and tend to be at higher risk of interrupted or

discontinued schooling (United Nations, 2009). Clearly, despite efforts to protect young people, war and conflict continue to impact them in physical, psychological, social, and cultural domains of their lives (Yohani, 2015). However, despite the impacts of war and conflict on youth, their wellbeing is influenced by a number of other inter-related individual, social, and contextual factors. Many youth who have lived in conflict settings are able to thrive in post-conflict settings when provided with adequate and appropriate support (e.g., Hadfield et al., 2017; Yohani, 2015). As such, an understanding of youth experiences in post-conflict settings must take these contextual factors into account.

Wars and conflict have invariably resulted in the need for people to leave their homes to find safety. The right to seek safety is ratified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 14, which states "everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). In 1951, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) developed the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (United Nations General Assembly, 1951) outlining the definition and rights of refugees, though it was not until 1988 that guidelines for child refugees were developed (Boyle & Ha, 2017). In recent years, the definition of refugees as individuals seeking safety from persecution has been critiqued for being too narrow and other threats to safety are being more commonly recognized, such as severe economic precarity, natural disasters, and impacts of climate change (Morrice, 2021). For many, escaping war, conflict, and other threats to safety is the beginning of a long and protracted journey before they begin the process of integration, building a life and a home in a new country.

In the Canadian context, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (2001) provides a legal framework for admission of refugees to the country. Its stated objectives include protecting

and providing safe haven to those who are being persecuted or are displaced, reunifying families, and fostering social and economic growth. This act is also framed as an expression of Canadian humanitarian ideals. Refugees can be resettled in Canada through several avenues, either from outside of Canada through the Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program or from within Canada through the In-Canada Asylum Program (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2019); this process is described in greater detail in Chapter 2. As they resettle, refugees are tasked with building new lives, which may include finding housing, employment, establishing social networks, and for some, pursuing education.

## Background

This research project has been influenced by my work as a research assistant with my academic supervisor (Dr. Sophie Yohani) and as a psychologist working in a post-secondary setting. As a research assistant I worked on a large community-based project exploring the psychosocial adaptation of the Syrian community in Edmonton (referred to moving forward as the Syrian Psychosocial Adaptation Project). This project was born out of a collaboration between academic researchers and community organizations supporting the Syrian community as they began to arrive in Canada in larger numbers. Service providers preparing to support Syrians wanted to better understand the needs of the individuals and families, recognizing that their situation and needs may differ significantly from the other refugee groups supported by their organizations. The Syrian Psychosocial Adaptation Project utilized a train-the-trainer model, wherein leaders from the Syrian community were identified and trained to lead Community Learning for Empowerment Groups (CLEGs) with seniors, men, women, and youth. These groups focused on psychosocial adaptation during early years of resettlement, but also allowed participants to reflect on their pre- and trans migration experiences. Groups were designed to

capture the religious, ethnic, age, and gender diversity of the Syrian community in Edmonton.

Of note, it was particularly challenging to recruit and retain female youth participants in the youth group. In consultation with community partners and other service providers it became clear that fewer females attended community-based youth programming and accessed services as compared to their male counterparts. As a result, it was difficult for the research team and community partner organizations to determine the needs of female youth and to investigate whether these needs were going unmet. A review of the literature (see Chapter 2) also revealed that the voices of girls and young women tend to be underrepresented in the research on refugee youth experiences (Knap, 2018). Since the psychosocial adaptation project has concluded, Canada has continued its efforts to resettle refugees in large numbers from countries experiencing war and conflict.

My research has also been influenced by my professional practice. As part of my graduate training program, I completed a practicum at an organization that supports refugees in their first year of arrival in Canada. I worked out of *Reception House*, the temporary accommodation for refugees in Edmonton where they live for up to two weeks. My clients were individuals, couples, and families who were within their first year of arrival in Canada. More recently, I completed my doctoral residency and am now working as a psychologist in a post-secondary counselling centre. These professional experiences have allowed me to develop an understanding of some of the challenges and needs of this group, as well as some of the gaps in existing research and supports offered.

To understand more about the experiences of female refugee youth and develop research questions, I consulted with service providers working within community organizations serving refugee families. These relationships were built in part through my research assistant position, in

which I collaborated with cultural brokers and assisted with the facilitation of youth CLEGs, and through my counselling practicum described above. I also connected and consulted with a small group of young women with refugee experiences who were interested in being part of the project, some of whom later went on to participate in the research. Research questions and procedures were developed in collaboration with this group of women, and were adapted in collaboration with participants.

## Purpose of Study: Rationale and Objectives

It is well-documented that refugee youth experience unique challenges and needs as they integrate into Canadian society, in part brought on by their migration history. Refugees are forced to leave their homes and may experience significant trauma in conflict and post-conflict settings. Youth may be particularly impacted by experiences in conflict settings, including exposure to violence and atrocities that increase risk for trauma responses (e.g., American Psychological Association [APA], 2011; Beni Yonis et al., 2020). Given their developmental stage, conflict-related risks such as family separation and the need to take on additional responsibility within the family may have greater impacts on youth as compared to adults (Boyle & Ha, 2017). Some pre-migration experiences may also differ by gender, in that girls are more likely to have interrupted schooling in conflict settings, and may have experienced numerous stressors, including lack of access to education and healthcare, exposure to gender-based violence, grief and loss, early marriage, and financial strain (Boyle & Ha, 2017; Javanbakht et al., 2018). While not all of these concerns are unique to girls, research suggests that women and girls are at higher risk of being negatively impacted by such stressors during conflicts (Hassan et al., 2015; Sami et al., 2014).

In transition settings, there is often a lack of gender sensitive support services available

for refugees, and even when supports are available, they tend to be under-utilized by girls and women (Ghumman et al., 2016; Yasmine & Moughalian, 2016). During the resettlement process, families often do not have choice with regard to resettlement location (Brewer, 2016), and youth in particular often lack decision-making power in the resettlement process. Even in cases where families do have choice, decisions tend to be made by parents or guardians on behalf of youth.

Upon arrival in Canada, youth are faced with the difficult task of integrating into Canadian society, and may experience shifts individually and in family, school, and community settings. There is some research suggesting that youth in particular may experience greater challenges in the adaptation process as compared to adults and younger children, and that these challenges may differ as a function of gender (Edge et al., 2014; Knap, 2018). Many of the integration shifts and challenges faced by youth are most apparent in the school setting, as this is youth's primary contact with Canadian society (Anisef et al., 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Significantly, education is an indicator of how youth are adjusting to life in Canada, and success in education is a predictor of positive adaptation (Cooper, 2014). When refugee youth are struggling with integration in school settings, they are at higher risk for poorer school performance, school withdrawal, poorer psychological health, and involvement in criminal activity (Anisef et al., 2010; Patel & Kull, 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

On the other hand, success in schools sets youth up for success later in life. For instance, research suggests that post-secondary education, particularly if completed in Canada, is one of the most important predictors of economic success and civic participation among individuals who arrive in Canada as refugees (Cooper, 2014; Wilkinson & Garcea, 2017). Furthermore, many refugee youth are highly motivated learners with goals of pursuing post-secondary education but unfortunately are faced with significant barriers that can make it more difficult to

realize these goals (Shakya et al., 2010; Que, 2020). Importantly, there is also some evidence to suggest that for girls in particular, education may be viewed as more vital for economic security later in life, but may also present unique challenges not encountered by their male peers (Knap, 2018). Unfortunately, the rates of post-secondary attendance are significantly lower among government-assisted refugee women than among female economic migrants (17% compared to 51%) or refugee men (22%) suggesting the presence of barriers to attendance specific to this group (Prokopenko, 2018). Clearly, a more in-depth understanding of these experiences is crucial for supporting these youth as they adapt to life and schooling in Canada.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of girls and young women with refugee backgrounds as they transition into post-secondary settings. I addressed the following question: *What are the strengths, challenges, and needs of refugee women and girls as they transition into post-secondary settings in Canada*? The research question was answered using a documentary photography method (Photovoice) and guided by a Participatory Research (PR) framework. In the next section, I elaborate on the theoretical underpinnings of my project and illustrate how this lens guided this research.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

My research is situated in the field of counselling psychology. Counselling psychology upholds social justice as a core value, emphasizing fairness and equity (Constantine et al., 2007; Kennedy & Arthur, 2014; Sinacore, 2011). This perspective encompasses consideration of power, privilege, and oppression as well as the need for action aimed at social change (Goodman & Gorski, 2015; Kennedy & Arthur, 2014). This emphasis is reflected in guidelines put forth by the American Psychological Association (APA), including multicultural guidelines (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017) and ethical social justice guidelines (Hailes et al., 2020)

which underscore the role of psychology in confronting systemic inequities. In research, counselling psychologists can address these factors through the implementation of a participatory methodology (described in Chapter 3) that amplifies the voices of marginalized communities and moves away from deficit-based perspectives (Strega & Brown, 2015; Tuck, 2009). In alignment with the values of the counselling profession and my personal values, I incorporate a theoretical perspective that makes room for the consideration of identity, intersectionality, and social context. To address these aspects, I draw on transnational feminism, as this approach makes explicit the role of systems in the lives of individuals and the ways in which these systems impact individuals differently as a function of their social location. It also centralizes the roles of gender and migration, alongside other intersections of identity, making it a good fit for framing research with refugee women.

**Contextualizing the Study: Transnational Feminism**

Women and girls in conflict and post-conflict settings are at significantly greater risk for experiencing violence and are disproportionally tasked with family-related responsibilities while navigating the challenges of migration (Oliver, 2017). The migration journey is fraught with challenges for refugee girls and women, and the intersections of identity fundamentally shape this experience. Therefore, transnational feminism is of particular relevance when considering the experiences of women with refugee backgrounds; it is concerned with the movement of people across borders and ways in which gender and other intersecting identities impact this experience. Beyond the observation of these identity variables, a transnational feminist viewing considers experiences from a systemic perspective, critiquing the systems and structures that create barriers for those who inhabit social locations that are afforded comparatively less power and privilege than dominant groups (Mohanty, 2003). Transnational feminist scholars push back

against the viewing of those who hold these identities as victims who need to be rescued, problematizing 'rescue politics' narratives that are pervasive in research and policy (Oliver, 2017, p. 185). Scholars also argue that change is created through pushing back against systems, rather than simply offering solutions on the individual level.

## Positionality and Critical Reflexivity

In qualitative research there is an understanding that there are subjective elements impacting the research process. These subjective elements are also recognized in the field of counselling psychology, such that the experiences, perspectives, values, and assumptions of researchers/practitioners will influence the work that they do, as they inform how one understands and makes meaning of their subjective reality (Dixon & Chiang, 2019). From a qualitative research lens, this subjectivity is often viewed as a tool in the research process, contributing to ethical integrity and quality of analysis (Mosselson, 2010). Further, an understanding of researcher identity and positionality are crucial to uncovering dynamics of power and privilege, and working towards establishing the equitable research relationships that are crucial to participatory research methodologies (Muhammad et al., 2015). Here I reflect on my own identity and experiences as they relate to my research project, to better understand my lens, role, and limitations in undertaking this work.

I have grappled with the concept of identity since childhood and have often had difficulty defining my own cultural identity. I grew up in a multicultural, bi-religious home, and while I was born in Edmonton (Canada), I moved with my family to Kenya at a young age and spent my childhood there. I am the oldest of three children. My mother is of European descent, born and raised in Canada and is Christian. My father is of Indian and Pakistani descent, born and raised in Kenya and is an Ismaili Muslim. I identify as a heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied woman,

and I am university educated, as are both of my parents. I am a dual-citizen, holding both Kenyan and Canadian citizenship. I recognize the privilege afforded to me by my social location, and have reflected in an ongoing manner on how my privilege has impacted the research process.

Given each individual's multiple and intersecting identities, there are areas in which researcher and participant identity overlap and areas which they do not, and these intersections will impact the research process. To illustrate this, Muhammad and colleagues (2015, p. 1052) write "Identity is not a static concept, and insider-outsider boundaries are ever shifting with tensions continually navigated". These insider-outsider boundaries are particularly relevant to this project, as there are aspects of identity that I may share with participants (e.g., being a young woman, experience of migration) and aspects that I do not share (e.g., having refugee experience, speaking multiple languages). As a doctoral-level researcher I am also part of the academic community, a position that comes with power, access to resources, and social capital (Ball, 2014; Flicker, 2008). This dynamic is particularly important to consider, given that my research was conducted with youth who were pursuing or intend to pursue university education. It was therefore important to be clear about research roles. However, my position allowed me the opportunity to engage in reciprocal partnerships with youth, such that I was able to offer information about post-secondary education, application procedures, and shared my own experience where valuable. Strega and Brown (2015) note that as an outsider, one must critically reflect on their reasons for conducting research with a given population and consider if they are able to conduct the research in a way that meaningfully engages and empowers communities. As such, throughout the research process I engaged in reflexivity (described further in Chapter 3) to continually reflect on how my positionality has impacted the research, the decisions that I make, and potentially add to the complexity and richness of the project (Mosselson, 2010). As a starting

point, I now turn to a reflection on how my experiences have led me to my research interests.

My research interests have been shaped in part by my own experiences moving to Canada when I was 17 with my mother and siblings, as well as my professional experiences in counselling settings. Arriving in Canada and transitioning into high school, I was fortunate in that my first language is English, and we arrived with cultural capital and a support system given that my mother is Canadian-born and we had family living locally. Nonetheless, I found the transition to life in Canada challenging, and felt that the education system in particular lacked effective supports that could have eased the transition to schooling in Canada.

My professional experiences also helped to shape my research interests. Beginning during my undergraduate program, I held a summer position assisting internationally trained professionals in finding employment in their field in Canada. As I listened to families speak about their challenges, I noticed that rarely were their experiences confined to the employment domain. Rather families often discussed challenges navigating educational barriers both for themselves and their children. Informed by these experiences, I became involved in a research project focusing on school integration among newcomer youth in my master's program, and my master's thesis project explored the experiences of pre-service teachers (teachers-in-training) who had worked or were preparing to work with newcomer youth. I conducted this research in 2016-2017, at a time when many Syrian refugees were arriving in Canada. In my doctoral training, to deepen my understanding I undertook a counselling practicum as part of an advanced multicultural practice course at a local community organization supporting refugee families and became involved in a research project examining psychosocial adaptation among the Syrian community (described above). These experiences have highlighted for me some of the barriers that refugee youth are facing, but also the resilience and strengths that they have cultivated that

have allowed them to flourish in Canada. While research detailing these experiences exists, it has yet to be explored in-depth with gender as a focus.

In the following chapters, I present my doctoral research project with the hope that it will shed light on the experiences of young women with refugee backgrounds as they navigate the transition into post-secondary settings. In the next chapter, I review the relevant literature on the adaptation process among refugee youth. In the third chapter, I outline the methodological framework I employed, and I illustrate the processes and procedures for data collection and analysis. I then present results with embedded discussion of findings in the fourth chapter. The final chapter describes implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, there are roughly 35.3 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023). Between 2015 and 2023, Canada resettled over 277,000 refugees, with the largest numbers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Eritrea (IRCC, 2023). Importantly, many of those arriving are young people with unique challenges. Youth and young adults undergo distinct transitions in various domains while resettling in Canada. First, they undergo a geographical transition during their resettlement journey, leaving their country of origin and often spending time in a transition country before arriving in Canada. As they resettle, they are also undergoing a psychological transition, from life in conflict settings to life in resettlement settings, which has implications for mental health. Third, youth are facing a developmental transition, moving from adolescence into young adulthood. This transition comes with its own unique challenges and needs. Finally, youth are also undergoing educational transitions. Upon arrival they were faced with integrating into Canadian schools, and just a few years later, many are tasked with transitioning out of high school and into either career or post-secondary education settings. For those who arrive when they are older, they may be transitioning directly into post-secondary. Again, this is a shift that can be laden with challenges but can also be very rewarding for youth.

In this chapter, I provide a narrative review (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016) of the existing literature on the experiences of refugee youth during the early years of resettlement in the geographical, psychological, developmental, and educational domains. This review provides a comprehensive analysis of current knowledge on adaptation and transition of these youth, for the purpose of identifying themes and gaps in the existing literature (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2016).

My analysis and critique of the existing literature is rooted in a transnational feminism lens. As described in Chapter 1, transnational feminism was born out of efforts to decolonize feminism, in order to bring to light and dismantle interlocking systems of oppression, with

particular attention to national boundaries and marginalization that can occur in these contexts (Mohanty, 2003; 2013). A critical concept within transnational feminism is intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Considering this concept involves attending to multiple and intersecting social identities or social locations of individuals, for the purpose of understanding how these identities may interact to contribute to privilege and oppression (Brown, 2017). Dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression and their relationship with social location are fluid, shifting with time and place. Importantly, an application of transnational feminist theory and the concept of intersectionality also includes attending to and critiquing social systems and structures that contribute to and maintain oppression (Rosenthal, 2016). An application of this theoretical lens in research involves not only attention to intersecting aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race, class, age, religion, (dis)ability, sexuality) and understanding how these social locations shape experience, but also attending to and critiquing social systems (Rosenthal, 2016). My project focuses on the experiences of female refugee youth; therefore, I attend specifically to gender in my analysis of the literature.

This literature review will attend to the interacting systems within which female refugee youth are functioning, and the ways in which these systems impact them differentially based on their social locations. The goal of this review is to identify key trends and critical gaps in the existing literature to frame this project. This review is structured around the transitions of refugee youth in four key domains (geographical, psychological, developmental, and educational) as they navigate the resettlement process. First, an overview of existing literature on the resettlement process for refugees is reviewed. Next, the psychological domain is explored, with a focus on refugee youth mental health in post-conflict settings. Then, the experiences of refugees are contextualized based on their developmental stage. Finally, the review focuses in on

experiences of youth within the educational domain, as this is a critical domain for the adaptation of youth and the focus of this study.

## Migration and Resettlement: Geographical Transition

When refugees arrive in a resettlement setting, the first few years typically involve a focus on establishing safety and navigating their environment to meet their basic needs (Bemak & Chung, 2017). In recent years, research has increasingly begun to focus on the resettlement and adaptation process of refugee youth who often have needs, challenges, and opportunities that differ from adults, particularly with regard to education (e.g., Shakya, Guruge, et al., 2010; Abdi et al., 2023). Fortunately, there is a growing body of research that explores the experiences of young refugees as they navigate new lives in resettlement countries. The following sections discuss the existing literature on the resettlement process, beginning with pre-migration experiences, migration pathways, and initial resettlement, with a focus on literature pertaining to the experiences of young women where it exists. It is crucial to understand the migration pathways of refugees both geographically and experientially, rather than simply focusing on experiences after arrival in the resettlement country, as the experiences over the course of migration shape the adaptation process.

### Refugee Resettlement in Canada

#### *Pre-Migration and Migration*

In order to understand resettlement, the pre-migration experiences of refugees must first be considered. It is the unique migration pathways and experiences of refugees that set them apart from other newcomers, and these journeys in part shape the types of supports required upon arrival and during resettlement (Arthur et al., 2010; Bemak & Chung, 2014). Much of the psychological literature to date on pre-migration experiences of refugees focuses primarily on

trauma in conflict and transition settings. For instance, research with Syrian refugees, the largest group of refugees resettled in Canada in recent years, details that they have survived multiple traumatic events, including combat situations, forced evacuation, forced separation from family, being forced to hide, destruction of personal property, lack of food/shelter/water, witnessing or experiencing serious physical injury, and murder or death of family members due to violence (Cantekin & Gençöz, 2017). In addition, estimates from 2015 suggested that 82% of those residing in Syria were living in poverty and access to education for youth throughout the country declined sharply after the start of the war (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015; UNICEF, 2015). Lack of safety and associated conditions in Syria put youth and their families at high risk for physical and psychosocial problems and led many to seek refuge elsewhere. For those in other conflict settings, findings are similar in that they are confronted with risks to safety, challenges meeting basic needs, and barriers to accessing education (Andisha & Lueger-Schuster, 2023; Ziaian et al., 2023).

Prior to permanent resettlement, many refugees are either internally displaced and/or live temporarily in nearby countries (transition countries). Living conditions in transition countries (both in refugee camps and other forms of housing) are often poor, and many refugees were faced with increased poverty and reduced access to basic needs, education, and healthcare (Hassan et al., 2016). Further, discrimination and marginalization of refugees in transition countries has been widely reported (e.g., Chatty, 2017; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Youth in particular report experiencing discrimination, rejection, and humiliation in transition countries, often in school and employment settings (Demir & Ozgul, 2019).

Girls also experience unique challenges in transition settings. Research with young Eritrean women in a transition country (Sudan) highlighted their perceptions of being in a

protracted waiting period at a critical time in their lives, awaiting the ability to start a full, meaningful adult life (Grabska, 2020). This study found that this was a uniquely gendered experience, as these women described a tension between differing perceptions of womanhood, woman as wife/mother and woman as educated/career oriented; they shared their challenges navigating these tensions while in an extended waiting period. A study conducted with young Syrian females and their parents in Lebanon also found that challenges such as financial pressures, loss of educational opportunities for girls, and fears around protection and honour of adolescent girls led to changes in marriage practices such that women were getting married at younger ages (i.e., 16-20 years of age) and with shorter engagements (Mourtada et al., 2017). Women in the study noted the negative consequences associated with early marriage, but for many the benefits afforded by marriage outweighed risks. To reduce child marriage practices and negative consequences of early marriage, authors recommended enhancing access to education and healthcare for girls and young women and provision of economic support for families.

Negative experiences in transition countries may contribute to high levels of stress, impacting overall wellbeing of refugee youth. A review conducted with families in transition countries (parents/other caregivers and children) detailed six domains of migration stressors, namely: (a) poor living conditions; (b) insufficient opportunities, services, and resources; (c) trauma, victimization, and safety-related concerns; (d) ongoing migration and family separation; (e) discrimination; and (f) detention and asylum seeking (Miles et al., 2019). These stressors impacted caregiver and child mental and physical health concerns, changes to parenting including child maltreatment or harsh parenting, and child exploitation including child labour and increased rates of child marriage.

The Miles and colleagues (2019) review also provided evidence for the compounding

nature of stressors, such that as stressors accumulate so too does caregiver psychological distress, negatively impacting parenting. Authors of the review point to several studies showing the promise of parenting interventions (e.g., El-Khani et al., 2016), yet it is evident from this review that literature on pre-migration experiences tends to focus on challenges, without attending adequately to strengths or resilience. From a social justice perspective, this exclusive focus on challenges or risk factors without a consideration of resilience and recovery results in an incomplete picture of refugee experiences and can lead to a deficit view of this group (Pieloch et al., 2016). However, some studies have explored the factors contributing to wellbeing among refugees in transition countries. A systematic review (Posselt et al., 2019) including studies with refugees aged 16 and older found the following factors played a role: (a) social support; (b) faith, religion, spirituality, and culture; (c) cognitive strategies including reframing, reflection, acceptance, and problem-solving; (d) finding work; (e) pursuing education or vocational training; (f) behavioural strategies including staying busy; (g) engaging in advocacy and activism; and (h) access to stable housing. Overall, research with refugee groups shows a complex interplay of risk and protective factors and a range of outcomes (Fazel et al., 2012). This would suggest that despite the overwhelming challenges they are faced with, many families show great resilience.

### *Refugee Migration Pathway to Canada*

There are several paths through which refugees can migrate to Canada. Those who are outside of Canada can seek resettlement through the *Refugee and Humanitarian Resettlement Program* (RHRP), while those already in Canada can apply to remain in Canada through the *In-Canada Asylum Program* (IRCC, 2019). Within the RHRP, refugees are identified through UNHCR and screened for resettlement. In coming to Canada, refugees may be funded by the government (Government Assisted Refugees; GARs), sponsored through private groups or

organizations (Privately Sponsored Refugees; PSRs), or receive funding from a combination of government and private sponsors (Blended-Visa Office-referred Refugees; BVORs) (Hyndman et al., 2017). In 2019, 64% of refugees came through the PSR program, 33% through GAR and 3% arrived through the BVOR program (UNHCR Canada, 2024). The Canadian government tends to prioritize individuals identified as *vulnerable* for resettlement, which included women, children, and those who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex (LGBTI) (Hansen & Huston, 2016).

### *Initial Resettlement and Ongoing Integration*

Upon arrival, refugees are tasked with meeting basic needs including finding housing and stable employment and may receive differing levels of support in navigating these tasks. GARs qualify for the Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP), through which they are provided with support in meeting basic needs and finding housing upon arrival and are also eligible for income support for up to a year (IRCC, 2019). For PSRs, sponsors themselves are responsible for providing financial and other resettlement supports required for up to a year. BVORs qualify for the RAP program for up to 6 months, and private sponsors may be responsible for the remaining 6 months of financial support as well as assisting refugees in meeting other needs (e.g., accessing healthcare or mental health support). Typically, the location of initial resettlement for refugees in Canada is selected for the individual or family, meaning that some may be resettled apart from existing support networks (Simich et al., 2002). Further, the types and accessibility of resettlement support available for refugees often differs by location (Hadfield et al., 2017), and often those settling outside of large urban centres or in more remote areas are left without access to important resettlement supports such as language and employment services (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018).

**Resettlement and the Family Context**

For refugee youth, an important part of their social context is the family environment, thus their resettlement process can be understood within the context of the family. The resettlement process can create shifts and, in some cases, cause tensions in the family. One critical shift in the family context during resettlement is related to family roles. In a study conducted by Yohani, Kirova, and colleagues (2019), cultural brokers supporting Syrian families in Canada expressed that shifting familial and gender roles, such as women going to school or finding employment outside of the home leaving men to care for children, were a source of distress for families. Research with African refugee families suggests impacts on family functioning due to changing gender roles among parents, along with parenting approaches that differed based on the gender of the child (Okungbowa, 2022). Importantly, studies on parenting tend to focus on younger children, yet young adults may experience unique challenges within the family context that are not fully captured within the frame of child-specific research.

Another consideration with existing research on the family context is that it tends to focus primarily on challenges faced, rather than strengths (Yaylaci, 2018). Interpreting these studies through a strengths-based lens, having family support, healthy communication within the family context, and family cohesion are factors that promote psychological resilience among refugee youth, serving as protective factors for positive mental health outcomes in the face of trauma (Panter-Brick et al., 2018; Pieloch et al., 2016; Yaylaci, 2018). Secure attachment relationships within the family can have a stabilizing influence for youth, providing them with a sense of safety from which to explore their new setting, thereby easing some of the challenges of resettlement (Juang et al., 2018). Clearly, the role of the family and familial relationships shapes youth experiences of resettlement. I turn now to an examination of the cultural context in the resettlement process.

**Cultural Context and the Acculturation Process: Berry's Acculturation Framework**

A key aspect of the resettlement process for all newcomers involves intercultural contact. When newcomers arrive in a host country a bi-directional change process takes place, often referred to as *acculturation* (Berry, 2006). These changes may occur at the individual, community, or cultural levels. Acculturation is a dynamic and ongoing negotiation of cultural identity and relationality (Berry & Hou, 2016; Collins, 2018).The acculturation framework rests on two central questions that occur for newcomers (typically members of non-dominant groups) in the context of intercultural contact, namely, *is it of value to maintain cultural identity and characteristics*, and *is it of value to develop and maintain relationships with the host society* (Berry & Sam, 1997). Considering these questions, Berry posited four unique strategies to acculturation (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Acculturation Model (Berry & Sam, 1997)*

| | | *Is it of value to maintain cultural identity and characteristics?* | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | YES | NO |
| *Is it of value to develop and maintain relationships with the host society?* | YES | Integration | Assimilation |
| | NO | Separation | Marginalization |

There is a breadth of research demonstrating that integration tends to be the preferred strategy among newcomers, and it is considered the most adaptive in terms of personal and sociocultural wellbeing (Berry et al., 2006). More recent research with immigrants in Canada

however suggests that while integration remains the preferred strategy by a significant margin, there are very few differences in wellbeing between those who acculturate using the integration strategy and those who assimilate (Berry & Hou, 2016).

The acculturation framework serves as an important starting point for considering the various ways newcomers may acculturate, but the framework itself does not shed light on how and why these strategies occur (Ward, 2013). Further, although the model presents a neat categorization system, it must be noted that the process is dynamic and often comes with challenges. Refugees, and youth in particular, may experience challenges in the acculturation process due to the involuntary nature of migration. These challenges are captured in the research on acculturative stress (Berry, 2006; Collins, 2018). Acculturative stress may include identity conflict, in cases where various aspects of identity may be in conflict such as religion and sexuality. Acculturative stress may be exacerbated in cases where youth do not have access to support, either from the host society or in their family or community contexts (e.g., Betancourt et al., 2015). The acculturation process can also be impacted by discrimination and oppression and can lead to a loss of cultural identity.

Further, although intercultural contact is thought to result in bi-directional change (i.e., within both the newcomer community and host community) Berry's model (Berry & Sam, 1997) focuses primarily on the change occurring at the individual level and within the newcomer group. A current critique of Berry's model is that it does not adequately reflect the global context in which acculturation takes place. For refugees in particular, migration pathways are diverse and complex, and it is increasingly rare that refugees are in solely bi-cultural contexts (Donà & Young, 2016). The rise of transnationalism (i.e., social networks that link people across borders), globalization, and increasing cultural diversity within countries have shifted the cultural contexts

that newcomers enter upon arriving in a host country (Van Oudenhoven & Ward, 2013). In response, Donà and Young (2016) call for a multidimensional and multidirectional approach to understanding psychological acculturation, that allows room for a broader range of options for acculturation that includes transnational connections.

### *Acculturation and Youth*

Berry and colleagues (2006) conducted a study exploring how the acculturation model applies to immigrant youth. Several findings are of note. First, and perhaps expectedly, the largest group of youth acculturated using the integration strategy (about 36%). Surprisingly however, a large number of youth also opted for the separation strategy, wherein about 22% of youth remained connected to their culture of origin and chose to limit connections with the host society. This finding was unexpected as many more youth opted for the separation strategy than is typically found among adult newcomers. The choice of either the integration or separation strategies could be partially explained by the finding that for refugee youth, maintaining a connection with one's culture of origin and religion can help to bolster psychological resilience (Pieloch et al., 2016). Relatedly, the smallest group of youth (about 19%) opted for the assimilation strategy. The last finding is perhaps most surprising, in that a large number of youth (about 22%) fell into the marginalization category, feeling disconnected from their culture of origin and the host culture. Authors note that this profile is often accompanied by feelings of ambivalence or confusion and suggest that this is troubling, as the marginalization strategy is associated with both psychosocial adaptation concerns and may be a signal that discrimination is occurring.

Importantly, these findings were from a large-scale study with immigrant youth from a variety of different backgrounds in 13 host societies. Therefore, although they can shed light on

the acculturation of youth in general, it is possible that there are differences across host societies and across cultures that were not identified in this study. Further, they do not distinguish between refugees and other newcomers, although differing migration pathways and associated experiences may impact the acculturation process. These findings do suggest however that there may be something unique about the acculturation experiences of youth, evidenced by the differences between newcomer adult and newcomer youth acculturation strategies.

## Young Adulthood: A Developmental Transition

In addition to the geographical transition that refugee youth are undergoing as they resettle in Canada, they are also undergoing a developmental transition. An understanding of the developmental stage of these youth is critical to contextualize the experiences of this group. Research suggests that age at migration impacts the resettlement experience, such that those who arrive in Canada as adolescents, and particularly as older adolescents, have a more challenging time adapting than those who arrive as young children (Juang et al., 2018). For all adolescents, this period of life is one of substantial physical, social, emotional, and cognitive transition, and the resettlement process adds an additional layer of complexity to this transition period for refugee youth. The following paragraphs review relevant literature on resettlement from a developmental perspective, with a particular focus on identity development in resettlement settings. What is provided here is a brief overview, as the fields of youth development and identity development (the intersection of which is referred to as youth-identity studies) are large in and of themselves (Côté, 2017).

Late teenage years and early adulthood are periods of great change and can significantly shape the trajectory of one's life. This period from about the late teens through the 20s has been referred to as emerging adulthood and has been described as subjectively and empirically

different from the life stages that precede and follow it (Arnett, 2024). Arnett (2000; 2024) proposes that in industrialized societies such as Canada, youth may be granted opportunities to delay taking on roles typically associated with adulthood, including entering into the workforce, getting married, or having children. Emerging adulthood in this context is a period marked by exploration and potential instability (Arnett, 2000; Qin et al., 2015). Youth at this developmental stage may pursue post-secondary education and engage in prolonged identity exploration and development in the areas of relationships, education, career, and values (Arnett, 2024). However, the experience of emerging adulthood as a period of exploration and deferral of adult roles is not universal, rather it is culturally bound and may also be class-bound (Hendry & Kloep, 2010).

It is clear that not all young people have the opportunity to delay adult roles while engaging in identity exploration, and there is some research with refugee youth that suggests that many are required to take on adult responsibilities at a younger age than many of their Canadian-born peers (e.g., McFarlane et al., 2011; Shakya, Guruge, et al., 2010). Youth may need to find employment during high school to contribute to family income and particularly in cases where youth are more comfortable speaking English than their parents, they may be more involved in day-to-day family responsibilities. Girls in particular are often required to take on more responsibilities in the home, caring for younger siblings, and may also get married significantly younger than boys (Hattar-Pollara, 2019). Nonetheless, research with refugee youth in Canada demonstrates that many also profess a desire to pursue post-secondary education and engage in identity exploration, suggesting that at least some of the markers of emerging adulthood may be relevant for this group (Shakya, Guruge et al., 2010; Qin et al., 2015). However, for refugee youth this period may be distinct from their Canadian-born peers, such that many take on adult roles and responsibilities from a young age and may have difficulty adapting to the roles

expected of emerging adults in North America (Qin et al., 2015). As yet, it remains unclear how this period of life is experienced by female youth in particular and the impact of gender on this process.

**Identity Development**

Theories of identity development tend to pinpoint adolescence as a crucial developmental period. For instance, according to Erik Erikson's theory of identity development, the developmental task of adolescence is to form "a firm and coherent sense of who they are, where they are heading, and where they fit into society" (Shaffer et al., 2002, p. 460). If youth do not form a coherent sense of self, they might find themselves in a state of role confusion, uncertain of who they are and the roles they ought to take on.

Erikson's theory outlines three levels of identity development (Erikson, 1959; McLean & Syed, 2015). *Ego identity* refers to one's ability to integrate their beliefs about themselves, to form a coherent sense of who they are. *Personal identity* involves defining one's beliefs, values, roles, and goals. Thirdly, *social identity* involves developing a sense of identity within one's social context, for instance cultural groups, gender, and family. When an individual engages with each of the three levels of identity development, they can arrive at *identity synthesis*, which is defined as "a process of reworking childhood identifications into a current self-representation that is coherent across time and contexts and is also represented by a commitment to adult roles that are valued in one's given society" (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 4). Importantly, this view of identity captures both the psychological and social aspects of identity formation, such that ways in which one develops a sense of self, and the content of that self-concept, is impacted by individual, cultural, community, and family contexts (Pittman et al., 2011). The contextual factors included in this theory of identity development are crucial to note, as psychological

approaches to identity development such as Erikson's have been critiqued for being an essentialist approach that decontextualizes and ignores subjective experiences of identity development (Côté, 2017).

### *Impact of Resettlement on Identity Development*

Experiences in conflict settings and subsequently in post-conflict settings can have considerable influence in shaping how young people perceive themselves, conceptualize who they are, and the roles they play in their family and in society (Silove, 2013). These impacts occur on the individual, family, and social levels. On an individual level, youth resettling in a country with differing cultural values from their family or culture of origin may be confronted with challenges in forming their own coherent set of values and beliefs as they engage in the developmental task of identity formation (Yohani, 2015). An Australian study conducted with refugee youth from various cultural backgrounds found that older youth were more likely than those who were younger to discuss identity and sense of self, and these youth emphasized the importance of embracing their sense of self and who they are (McGregor et al., 2016). Within the family, research demonstrates that youth may find themselves undertaking leadership roles as they learn the host language or find employment to make financial contributions. While in some cases these new roles may lead to higher rates of psychological distress, in other cases youth report that these new roles have allowed for personal growth and may have implications for identity in that youth see themselves as competent and capable (Hynie, 2018a).

On a social level, mass conflict and resettlement may also shift how one defines themselves in terms of ethnicity or nationality. Many refugee youth may have spent time in their home countries, transition countries, and in Canada, potentially shifting how they think about national identity and belonging. Further, experiences of discrimination based on ethnic identity

may impact how youth perceive their identity (Yohani, 2015). Identity can also be closely tied to one's culture and cultural symbols such as language (Berry, 2006; Qin et al., 2015). Ghadi and colleauges (2019) explored the relationship between language learning and identity with Syrian adults, finding that Syrians endorsed being a hard worker, employed and self-sufficient, Muslim, and parenting as key aspects of their identity, yet many of these markers of identity were challenged in the resettlement process often as a direct result of language barriers. This study provides an example of structural barriers (e.g., language classes that do not meet needs) that can impact identity for refugee adults in resettlement settings. However, it remains unclear how these types of barriers may impact the identity formation process among younger individuals. The following section explores cultural identity among refugee youth in more depth.

***Cultural Identity***

As described in the above section on acculturation, upon resettlement newcomers are often faced with challenges to their cultural identity. Resettling in a new country can come with challenges in determining how to integrate one's culture of origin with one's host culture, and deciding how to make sense of one's cultural identity in a novel context (Berry, 2006). Given that youth and young adults are in a stage of life where identity development is ongoing, navigating cultural identity is often particularly salient.

The relationship between cultural identity and mental health and wellbeing has been explored, and results generally show that having a positive sense of self-identity is crucial to many aspects of functioning, serving as a protective factor against many of the stressors and risk factors that may impact refugee youth including discrimination (Edge et al., 2014; Khanlou & Guruge, 2008). For example, Khanlou and colleagues (2018) conducted a study with 45 youth from four different cultural groups (Afghan, Iranian, Italian, and Portuguese) living in Canada,

exploring the links between migration, cultural identity, and self-esteem. They found that youth had complex and fluid definitions of culture, and for those who were newcomers, their migration journeys played a large role in shaping their cultural identity. Cultural identities were multiple, overlapping, and evolving.

### *Developmental Lens on Agency and Empowerment*

Along with identity development, the late teens and young adulthood tends to be a period in which youth take on additional responsibility, developing a sense of agency and autonomy (Arnett, 2024). This is also an important consideration for understanding the experiences and needs of youth in this age group. For instance, a study with refugee youth showed the importance of empowerment, agency, and self-determination in allowing these youth to cope with and respond to stressors effectively (Edge et al., 2014). A study with Syrian refugee youth in Toronto found that decision-making, autonomy over their time, and mobility were important capabilities for youth (Knap, 2018). However, these capabilities differed by gender, such that girls seemed to have reduced decision-making allowances, their time was limited by responsibilities in the home, and they also expressed less desire to leave the home as compared to their male counterparts. Knap (2018) also suggests the need for additional research with girls and young women in order to implement services and supports that adequately meet their needs but recommends that this research be conducted in a female-only environment that is more informal, where girls may feel unconfined by the need to perform gender roles and feel safer and more willing to disclose their needs and concerns.

## Mental Health in Post-Conflict Settings: Psychological Transition

### Resettlement and Mental Health

Given what is known about refugee youth experiences in conflict settings and along their migration journey, including high risk of exposure to violence, loss of loved ones, family

separation, and enduring poor living conditions, it is unsurprising that there has been a significant amount of research on the mental health of refugee youth. As early as 1988, a Canadian Task Force advocated for increased attention to the mental health of immigrants and refugees arriving in the country (Canadian Task Force, 1988). More recently, Agic and colleagues (2016) on behalf of the Mental Health Commission of Canada compiled a brief report on supporting refugee mental health in Canada, in preparation for the arrival of large numbers of Syrian refugees.

Unfortunately, despite the attention given to refugee mental health, refugee youth consistently report high levels of mental health concerns in resettlement settings. Fazel and colleagues (2012) conducted a large systematic review exploring risk and protective factors contributing to mental health among resettled refugee youth, finding that between 20% and 50% of these youth experience mental health concerns. The study looked at individual, family, community, and societal factors and found the following risk factors: exposure to pre and post migration violence, being female, being unaccompanied, perceived discrimination, multiple changes of residence, parental exposure to violence, poor financial support, living in a single parent home, and parental psychiatric concerns. The following protective factors were also found: parental and peer support, positive school experiences, and same ethnic origin foster care. A scoping review of Canadian studies between 1990-2013 also found that female refugee and immigrant youth experience more mental health concerns than males, though findings were mixed regarding differences between refugee and immigrant youth mental health with some studies finding higher rates of concerns among immigrant youth and others among refugees (Guruge & Butt, 2015). They also found that pre-migration experiences impacted refugee mental health significantly, along with the importance of family involvement and support within

educational settings. More recently, a study sourcing data from a Canadian national database found that refugees in general tend to have more mental health challenges compared to other immigrants and Canadian-born individuals, and major factors influencing this relationship were socioeconomic conditions (Ng & Zhang, 2020). Clearly, the relationship between resettlement and mental health is complex.

To better understand the contributors to refugee youth mental health concerns, Beiser and Hou (2016) compared immigrant and refugee youth mental health, finding that refugee youth showed a significant mental health disadvantage, both with regard to emotional problems and aggressive behaviours. Gender also played a role, such that girls (both immigrant and refugee) had higher rates of emotional problems, and boys demonstrated higher rates of aggressive behaviours. This study also showed important findings with regard to causes of mental health concerns, namely that while pre-migration traumatic experiences played a role in mental health, alarmingly the largest contributor was trauma in resettlement settings, and in particular discrimination. This finding speaks to the need to combat discrimination in the systems and communities that refugee youth find themselves in. Beiser and Hou (2016) note the potential of schools to function as a crucial site for mitigating mental health concerns (discussed below), and this finding was also illuminated in a scoping review on newcomer youth mental health (Khan et al., 2018). Other studies have explored protective factors, and findings with refugee adults show that a sense of belonging in Canada and building social networks in Canada (particularly for women) were important for positive mental health (Beiser & Hou, 2017).

### *Mental Health and Gender*

Several studies explored the relationship between refugee mental health and gender. Existing research suggests that in general women may be more likely to meet criteria for PTSD

despite higher rates of exposure to traumatic incidents among men (Tolin & Foa, 2006). However, a literature review exploring gender and PTSD among refugees found that refugee women tended to have higher rates of PTSD than men and tended to experience different types of traumatic events as compared to their male counterparts, with significantly higher rates of interpersonal trauma and in particular gender-based and sexual violence (Vallejo-Martín et al., 2021). This is an important finding, as it highlights the impact of gender identity on mental health of refugees.

Despite the high incidence of PTSD among refugees, it is critical to note that experiencing trauma does not necessarily lead to mental health concerns (Yohani, 2015), rather many individuals who experience trauma can cope well when provided with the conditions for recovery. Post-migration conditions and social determinants of health play a significant role in the mental health of resettled refugees, and this role likely increases with time spent in the resettlement country (Hynie, 2018b). These determinants include income, employment, housing, language skills, social support/isolation, and discrimination.

### *Critiques of Mental Health Research*

The findings in the studies above reveal the need to understand and address mental health needs among refugees and develop culturally appropriate and accessible support services (Hynie, 2018b; M'Zah et al., 2018). However, many of the studies looking at refugee mental health focus on prevalence of mental disorders and pre-migration impacts on outcomes (Frounfelker et al., 2020). Critiques of this focus on mental health disorders among youth and specifically on prevalence are three-fold. Firstly, the narrow focus on "disorders" leads to an unwarranted medical emphasis on trauma and PTSD, ignoring other equally important aspects of functioning and overall psychosocial wellbeing (Yohani, 2015). Secondly, a potential risk of this narrow

focus is that the resilience of refugee youth is missed. Relatedly, focusing only on mental disorders does not provide a holistic picture of the unique challenges and strengths of these youth, and can contribute to a deficit-based view (Knap, 2018).

A third criticism of the existing mental health research conducted with refugees is that it tends to focus on the individual, without attending to the ways in which the various systems and structures that individuals exist within may impact their wellbeing (Edge et al., 2014). Critics of the research on mental health concerns among refugee youth take issue with the conceptualization of trauma as a problem within the individual, suggesting that the medicalization of the experience of trauma takes away from the sociopolitical causes of the traumatic event (Tomasso, 2010; Zerbe Enns et al., 2020). Furthermore, diagnosing PTSD among survivors of trauma assumes that responses to trauma are universal, ignoring cultural differences and pathologizing the experience of trauma (Kienzler, 2008). Similarly, Collins (2018) problematizes the conceptualization of posttraumatic stress as a *disorder*, noting that this places the onus on the individual, and does not recognize the systemic influences that are central causes of the symptoms, as well as the systems-level changes that could prevent or be important in treatment of these concerns. Instead, trauma responses may be better understood as normal responses to abnormal situations, in which one's ability to cope is exceeded or overwhelmed. Burstow (2003, p. 1302) states "trauma is not a disorder but a reaction to a kind of wound". Many refugee youth have experienced significant loss and hardship, including the loss of family members, their home, and aspects of their identity and pathologizing this experience and the coping strategies that they develop is problematic from a social justice perspective (Burstow, 2005). Instead, a feminist conceptualization of trauma leaves room to understand diverse experiences of trauma, the various sociopolitical causes of trauma, and by de-pathologizing

reactions to trauma it may also help to reduce the stigma associated with these responses (Burstow, 2005). Burstow (2003) also notes that community and social contexts impact these responses, either by providing support and conditions for healing wounds, or exacerbating the trauma by failing to help in appropriate and meaningful ways.

### *Trauma and Resilience*

Some of the above critiques have been addressed by taking a strengths-based approach in mental health research with refugee youth. For instance, the concept of resilience may be helpful in shaping our understanding of how youth may endure traumatic experiences yet continue to thrive. According to Masten (2001), resilience is "good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (p. 288). This concept represents a shift away from a deficit-based lens, aligning more with a strengths-based perspective, and allowing room to focus on individual, community, and social factors that contribute to wellbeing. As such, refugee mental health may be better understood from the lens of psychosocial adaptation, which provides a more holistic picture of functioning (Yohani et al., 2019). Rather than solely focusing on diagnosed mental health concerns, a broader focus on the various conditions that contribute to adaptation can provide a more balanced perspective, allowing for both challenges and strengths to be addressed. Settlement factors such as language learning, housing, securing gainful employment, financial stability, shifting in family dynamics and roles, and re-establishing social support are key aspects of the resettlement process that impact psychosocial wellbeing.

Research with the refugee youth population has begun to focus on both strengths and protective factors (Yaylaci, 2018). While there is great value in considering the concept of resilience in research with refugee youth, some have suggested that the concept is individualized and does not adequately account for community and systemic factors (Anderson, 2019; Harris et

al., 2017). These authors caution that this could lead to interventions that maintain current systems that marginalize and oppress people. Therefore, it is critical to highlight individual and community strengths while also shedding light on the systems that perpetuate oppression and taking action toward changing those systems (Anderson, 2019; Vera & Speight, 2003). In the next section, I turn to the school system, and discuss the literature on educational transition of refugee youth.

## High School to Post-Secondary: Educational Transition

School is a critically important part of the resettlement experience of youth arriving in Canada. For many young people, schools serve as their first prolonged encounter with Canadian society and these encounters have a powerful impact on the resettlement process. Success in schools is a foundation for success in other areas of refugee youths' lives (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; Ager & Strang, 2008). In particular, experiences in schools can have a significant impact on the transition to post-secondary institutions for newcomer students (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019). As such, it is crucial to better understand these experiences. Unfortunately, service providers who work with recently arrived youth report that education continues to be a critical area of concern for them and their families, even several years after arrival in Canada (Cheyne-Hazineh, 2020). In the following paragraphs, the role of schools in the integration process is explored, with attention to the academic, social, and cultural domains. Next, literature on transitioning to post-secondary schooling is discussed.

### School Integration

There is a growing body of research that explores the process of integration into Canadian schools for newcomer youth (e.g., Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stermac et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). These studies reveal that youth face a

number of academic, social, cultural, and linguistic barriers that impact the integration process. However, many of these studies group together immigrant and refugee youth, often focusing primarily on language learning, thus they do not attend to the unique challenges and needs of refugee students (Ratković et al., 2017). Additionally, many studies focus primarily on academic achievement as a marker of successful school integration, without considering other aspects of psychosocial functioning. The research conducted with refugee students specifically shows that schools can serve multiple roles for students (Khan et al., 2018). In some cases, schools may be sources of insecurity, where youth feel excluded and experience discrimination. For others, often later in the integration process, school may become an important source of support, contributing to a sense of belonging within the school community, and within the wider Canadian community. The following paragraphs explore several key factors impacting school integration among refugee youth.

### *Age at Arrival and Language Learning*

Children who arrive in Canada at a younger age often have more time than older youth to learn the language and adjust to Canadian curriculum. Stermac and colleagues (2010) found that within about seven years, students who arrived in Canada from warzones performed on par with or even surpassed their Canadian-born peers academically. However, for those who arrive after the age of 15, educational integration appears to be more challenging (Brewer, 2016). Older youth may struggle with language learning, being placed in inappropriate grades or language classes that are not academically rigorous and as such do not meet requirements for entry into post-secondary. These challenges are particularly pronounced for refugee youth who had disruptions to their schooling in transition settings (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). A study with newcomer youth showed that while 10% to 15% of students who arrive at the age of nine do not

graduate high school, up to 25% of youth arriving in Canada after 13 years of age do not graduate (Corak, 2011). However, this pattern does not exist for those who come from English or French-speaking countries, suggesting that these challenges may be due at least in part to language learning (Corak, 2011). Further, policies that cap age for attending schools will also have more impact on the educational trajectories of youth who arrive in Canada when they are older (Stewart et al., 2019). These policies have tangible educational and financial consequences for youth, including delaying academic progress and eliminating access to in-school supports, adding additional systemic barriers to receiving education (Brewer, 2016; Hynie, 2014).

### *Discrimination in Schools*

Discrimination is a direct affront to not only youth safety, but also to their sense of belonging, and as such its severe impact on psychosocial wellbeing is not surprising (Edge et al., 2014; Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2021). In transition countries, refugees often experienced discrimination, marginalization, and even violence due to their ethnic identity, and for many, school was not a safe place, prompting some parents to withdraw children from schooling altogether (e.g., Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Beyond ethnic identity, youth who identify as Muslim also report experiencing Islamophobia in school settings from both teachers and peers often based on myths or stereotypes about their religion (Ahmed, 2022). The negative impacts of this discrimination can be compounded if schools in Canada are also not perceived as safe or welcoming spaces. Unfortunately, this is often the case for refugee youth. A report coming out of the Child and Youth Advocate Office in New Brunswick (2018) found that refugee youth experienced racism and discrimination in the school system on a daily basis, and alarmingly most often from adult authority figures. A recent incident with a public school board trustee in Edmonton demonstrated the pervasive nature of these ideas. In the context of a school board vote

regarding policing in schools, the trustee stated:

> my mind goes to the number of refugee students that come into our district that are from war-torn countries, that have never known school before arriving here. All they've known is violence. When those students sometimes enter our schools, they can be violent there as well (Edmonton Public School Board, 2020).

Comments such as these not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes, but also can have policy implications that negatively impact refugee youth. Similarly, Edge and colleagues (2014) found that youth experienced discrimination based on race and/or visible appearance, newcomer status, and language proficiency. Youth reported being labelled as "stupid" or "violent or dangerous", and also expressed that the term "refugee" itself was stigmatized, associated with vulnerabilities as opposed to strengths (Edge et al., 2014). Guo and colleagues (2019) found that Syrian refugee youth believed that teachers did not intervene in cases of discrimination, as they themselves held negative stereotypes about refugee students. In contrast however, other studies have shown that teachers were important sources of support, and students did not perceive racism or discrimination in the school setting (Massfeller & Hamm, 2019). These differences in perceptions could be due to differences across classrooms, or differences in perceptions of what constitutes discrimination.

These experiences of discrimination negatively impact youth in many facets of their life, including academic performance, school engagement, self-esteem, social relationships, and physical and mental health (Edge et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2018; Walker & Zuberi, 2019). Youth may cope by concealing their ethnic or religious identity, which can in turn negatively impact their self-esteem (Khanlou & Guruge, 2008). Racism and discrimination can be particularly challenging to address because it may be subtle or in other cases it may be embedded in systems

and policies that may appear neutral but have discriminatory effects (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). Given Canada's reputation as a welcoming country for refugee youth, many are resistant to the idea that racism and discrimination exists in Canadian schools and as such even when it is reported it may go unaddressed (Walker & Zuberi, 2019). Indeed, policy efforts tend to focus on embracing multiculturalism, rather than addressing the inequities faced by refugee and newcomer students in the education system, thus these inequities and discrimination may persist (Brewer & McCabe, 2014).

**School Integration among Recently Resettled Refugee Youth**

There are a number of studies with a focus on refugee youth looking at school integration and much of the recent research in Canada has focused on Syrian youth. The initiative to resettle Syrian refugees in Canada has led to a higher number of refugee students across the country arriving over a condensed period, many of whom are attending schools that have few or no other refugee students (Stewart et al., 2019). Despite the high numbers of new refugee students in Canadian schools, research suggests that school systems and educators who work within those systems remain unprepared to meet student needs (Ratković et al., 2017). For instance, a study conducted by Gagné and colleagues (2018) with educators in Toronto explored their perceptions of social and academic integration among their Syrian refugee students, and findings revealed that although educators had a high level of awareness of their students' needs, they felt unprepared to meet those needs. Educators perceived Syrian youth to be a heterogenous group with varying needs that depended on a variety of factors including SES, gender, language, previous educational experiences, and time since arrival in Canada. Yet teachers felt uncertain of how to effectively support these students in a classroom setting. This finding is echoed in several studies with educators working with refugee students more broadly, many of which highlight the

potential for additional mental health and settlement supports to be integrated into schools (e.g., MacNevin, 2012; Nathoo, 2017; Yohani, 2013). Educators' awareness of these variables is promising, as they are often well-positioned to influence policy and incorporate practices that address these factors. Unfortunately, however, awareness does not always translate into meaningful changes in educational policy and practice.

### *Youth Perspectives of School Integration*

In addition to the perspectives of educators, there is also a need to understand the perspectives of refugee students themselves (Ratković et al., 2017). Again, most Canadian studies conducted in recent years have focused on Syrian refugee youth, attempting to fill a gap in the literature. Several of these key studies have focused on experiences of these youth in Canadian schools (e.g., Guo et al., 2019; Massfeller & Hamm, 2019; Stewart et al., 2019). Guo and colleagues' study (2019) was conducted with children between the ages of 10 to 14, 13 of whom were male and five of whom were female. This study focused on the social domain of school integration, finding that although youth tended to feel safe in schools and were able to develop bonding relationships within the Syrian community, they struggled to build bridging relationships with youth in the broader Canadian community. Concerningly, youth also reported experiencing bullying and racism, as well as discrimination on the part of their teachers. In many cases, Syrian students expressed that they were troubled by reluctance of their teachers to intervene in cases of bullying and voiced that their teachers at times relied on harmful stereotypes.

Similarly, a study conducted with seven Syrian refugee students (four male, three female, 15-19 years old) in New Brunswick found that making friends with Canadian-born peers was fundamental to school integration (Massfeller & Hamm, 2019). This study also highlighted

student resiliency, demonstrated in their ability to overcome initial fear and adapt to the school environment, as well as in their appreciation and gratitude towards the school community and the broader Canadian community. Students shared that relationships with teachers and support during their initial resettlement period were crucial to this resilience, and based on findings, authors highlight the importance of a trauma-informed approach in schools and call for additional and prolonged support in the initial resettlement period. This study makes an important contribution to the literature in that it takes a balanced and holistic approach to exploring school integration of Syrian youth, but it focuses on the initial resettlement period and does not speak to the experiences of youth who have been in Canada several years, nor does it shed light on their experiences after high school.

Stewart and colleagues (2019) also explored school integration among newly arrived Syrians (within 12 months of arrival) between 11 and 35 years of age. Gender of participants was not mentioned, although authors note that they consulted with a youth advisory group of 10 Syrian males (14-21 years old). This study took a holistic perspective, to understand the ways in which schools and communities more broadly could support youth integration. Youth participants spoke about the impact of trauma on school integration, stemming from experiences in Syria, transition countries, and during the resettlement process in Canada (e.g., financial and housing concerns, difficulty learning English, feeling isolated). Participants also spoke about challenges they faced in the education system, primarily language barriers and educational gaps. Learning English while also trying to catch up to their peers academically meant students had an overwhelming workload. This was particularly the case for older students, as they faced additional pressure to catch up in a short period of time. Findings also suggest that many youth had post-secondary and career aspirations, but for some these seemed out of reach due to

language barriers.

Taken together, these studies highlight the social and educational needs of refugee youth upon arrival in Canada, suggesting the importance of relationships with Canadian peers and educators. They also highlight challenges posed in school integration for recently arrived refugees, such as the impact of trauma, language barriers, and discrimination, many of which are reflected in the broader literature on newcomer school integration. Importantly however, these studies were conducted shortly after youth arrived in Canada and underline the lack of understanding of their long-term educational needs. A more recent study with Somali refugee students found that this group experienced similar sociocultural and learning challenges despite having been settled in Canada for more than five years (Ayoub & Zhou, 2022). While this study sheds light on some of the long-lasting challenges in educational transitions, the students in this study tended to be younger and had not yet begun to consider post-secondary schooling. Further, none of these studies specifically addressed the impacts of gender in the school integration process.

## Post-Secondary Education

### *Importance of Post-Secondary Education*

Post-secondary attendance has important implications for youth and their families in that it contributes to increased social mobility and equality of opportunity for newcomers to Canada (Rae, 2018). For many, receiving post-secondary education enhances access to stable and gainful employment (Finnie et al., 2016). Employers are increasingly requiring post-secondary schooling, and individuals who have advanced education have higher earning potential across their lifetimes (Frenette, 2014). For instance, one study showed that over a 20-year period, university graduates earned twice as much money as high school graduates (Ostrovsky &

Frenette, 2014). In addition to economic benefits, post-secondary attendance can serve as a catalyst for integration, offering opportunities for peer support and inter-cultural exchange (Reddick & Sadler, 2019). In addition to the economic benefits for individuals, post-secondary attendance also has benefits to society, many of which are associated with the increased tax revenue and reduced crime (Baum et al. 2013; Rae, 2018). Increased tax revenue allows for reduced costs of healthcare and social services. Thus, post-secondary education serves as an important protective factor for youth, opening up social and economic opportunities and contributing to the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society.

### *Post-Secondary Attendance: Goals and Attainment*

Research with refugee youth living in Canada has documented the desire of many to pursue post-secondary education (e.g., Okungbowa, 2022; Stewart et al., 2019; Que, 2020). Research also suggests that not only do many refugee youth have hopes of pursuing post-secondary education, but encouragingly, after arriving in Canada, youth report that these goals feel more attainable (Shakya et al., 2010; Que, 2020). These educational aspirations can be viewed as proactive responses to experiencing previous and current hardships (Davy et al., 2014; Shakya et al., 2010). It is possible that youth desire to pursue post-secondary schooling as it is seen as an opportunity to secure a better future for themselves and their families, increasing access to employment (Stewart, 2011). For some, post-secondary education provides opportunities for youth to engage in reciprocity, supporting their families in recognition of the sacrifices that their parents made to allow youth to pursue such opportunities and build a better life (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019; Wong & Yohani, 2016).

Unfortunately, despite academic goals, there appears to be a significant gap between goals and achievement in post-secondary settings. For instance, Hou and Bonikowksa (2017)

found that for those who arrived in Canada before the age of 15, government assisted refugee (GAR) youth had significantly lower rates of university completion (29.7%) as compared to immigrant youth, over 50% of whom went on to complete university. Another study (Prokopenko, 2018) found a similar pattern, with only 22% of male GARs and 17% of female GARs between the ages of 25-44 attending post-secondary schooling within the first seven years of arriving in Canada, while 39% of male and 51% of female economic immigrants attended post-secondary schooling during the same time period. A particularly interesting finding in this study is the gender differences, such that fewer female refugees attended post-secondary schooling, while significantly more female economic immigrants attended post-secondary institutions as compared to male immigrants. However, this data was collected from those who arrived as adults (25-44 years old) rather than youth transitioning out of high school, thus it is possible that different gender patterns would emerge for younger individuals who are more likely to be unmarried and without children, particularly given that women often report that parenting and family responsibilities may limit educational opportunities (e.g., Hattar-Pollara, 2019).

Clearly, there are large gaps between immigrant and refugee youth in terms of accessing and completing post-secondary education, and there are also gaps between the goals of refugee youth to attend post-secondary institutions and completion. According to Hou and Bonikowksa (2017), family demographic factors played a large part in explaining differences in educational outcomes between refugee and immigrant youth. Specifically, parent level of education, language, and source region were key factors, though authors also recognize that some differences could be due to factors not captured in the study, such as unique pre-migration experiences. Interestingly, income after resettlement was not found to contribute significantly to differences in educational outcomes. Level of parental education has also been explored further

as an explanatory factor. Although parental education may help to explain the differences in educational outcomes between immigrant and refugee youth, it is also important to note that newcomer youth whose parents did not attend post-secondary have significantly higher rates of post-secondary attendance than Canadian-born youth whose parents did not attend post-secondary (Corak, 2008). Further, refugee youth who arrived as children continue to have higher rates of university completion than children with two Canadian-born parents but lower than economic immigrants (Hou & Bonikowksa, 2017). These findings suggest a high level of resilience despite challenges faced. While they illuminate the demographic trends among refugee youth, what is missing is a clear picture of the educational experience for youth that may shed more light on the barriers facing refugee youth and the ways in which the barriers may be addressed.

To explore educational experiences in Canada from the perspectives of refugee youth, a large qualitative community-based research study (Shakya, Guruge, et al., 2010) was conducted with eight peer-researchers and 57 refugee youth participants (Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese youth). The study demonstrated that educational aspirations were strengthened after arriving in Canada, often in part due to lack of access to quality education prior to resettlement. In particular, Canadian education opened up opportunities that were not available in pre-migration settings, including securing gainful employment, being able to support family, and give back to their communities (Shakya, Guruge, et al., 2010). However, youth also faced significant barriers that impeded them in their pursuit of post-secondary education, including enhanced family responsibilities, systemic barriers including lack of information regarding post-secondary options, language barriers, lack of academic preparation, lack of recognition of academic credentials from outside of Canada, financial barriers, lack of support services in post-secondary

settings, and discrimination (Reddick & Salder, 2019; Shakya, Guruge, et al., 2010). However, authors also highlighted youth resilience, such that they engaged in a variety of strategies to overcome barriers including help-seeking from friends and newcomer support services and expressed that they often needed to be persistent in the face of challenges. Shakya and colleagues' (2010) study makes an important contribution to the literature, delving into the experiences of youth themselves. However, in the time since this study has been conducted, demographics of recently arrived refugees may have shifted and educational policies and practices impacting the transition may also have been updated. For instance, Canada has and continues to increase the number of refugees resettled (IRCC, 2024), which may impact the types of services available and pressures on these services.

Country of origin can play a role in shaping educational experiences of refugee students in Canada, in part due to access to education in pre-migration settings. By way of example, educational attainment in pre-war Syria was significantly higher than in many other countries of origin of refugees with near-universal enrollment at the secondary level (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). In the decade prior to the Syrian civil war, the government had increased spending on public education with the goal of enhancing access, and as a result enrollment in post-secondary institutions nearly tripled over a ten-year period (Kabbani & Salloum, 2011). For women in particular, enrollment numbers were increasing sharply, such that by 2006 the number of Syrian women enrolled in university was almost equal to the number of men. Differences in post-secondary enrollment differed depending on whether students grew up in rural or urban areas, such that enrollment was 54% higher among those from urban areas. Therefore, for some Syrian youth, attaining post-secondary education may be expected, despite the challenges faced in the school system with language learning and catching up following interrupted schooling in

transition settings (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). While the majority of refugees resettled in Canada since 2015 are from Syria, the government of Canada has also pledged to resettle 40,000 refugees from Afghanistan in the coming years (IRCC, 2024). The education context in Afghanistan is quite different to Syria, with significantly greater barriers to accessing education. These barriers are particularly significant for females, as policies are in place in Afghanistan that currently limit their access to secondary education (Easer et al., 2023). The stark contrast in pre-migration access to education among the leading countries of origin for refugees to Canada suggests that the needs among this group will likely be diverse and supports will have to be robust to effectively address them. The following section addresses literature with refugee youth in Canada navigating post-secondary education.

### *Post-Secondary Experiences among Refugee Youth*

Existing research with refugee youth in post-secondary settings suggests that they are faced with a host of challenges as they navigate the transition to post-secondary schooling. Challenges included a lack of information in schools about post-secondary options, inadequate language-learning supports, a reduced academic focus in language-learning programs, and financial barriers (Que, 2020; Reddick & Sadler, 2019). An additional challenge was the lack of accessibility of educational options for youth who are outside of the high school age limit, as upgrading programs often come with prohibitive financial costs.

Nonetheless, the research also speaks to the resilience of these youth and their ability to seek out support when necessary. Supports were accessed through post-secondary institutions and the community more broadly, though these supports were not always sufficient (Reddick & Sadler, 2019). For instance, a study conducted by Wong and Yohani (2016) explored resilience among unaccompanied refugee youth in post-secondary settings in Canada. Results

demonstrated the importance of social supports and system-level resources that enhanced students' sense of belonging as they adjusted to university and life in Canada. In particular, connecting with resources such as religious groups, cultural communities, or university clubs was found to provide students with support that allowed them to be successful in Canada. This echoes findings by Edge and colleagues (2014), wherein participation in informal school-related clubs and groups that provide students with opportunities to build trust and form social connections can ease the school integration process. Another Canadian study explored the transition to university among refugee youth in small centres (Que, 2020), finding similar themes of hope and aspirations to complete post-secondary education. Promisingly, teachers and school-based programs were important resources in helping these youth navigate the transition to post-secondary education, though others expressed that school-based supports were insufficient and relied primarily on family and friends for support. Naidoo and colleagues (2018) also highlight the key role of community supports outside of educational institutions (e.g., community resettlement organizations, government, and community-academic partnerships) in easing the transition to post-secondary settings for refugee youth in Australia. These roles include, but are not limited to, financial support, academic support, bridging the transition from language courses to academic courses or from education to work, providing access to career services and counselling, and so on. Provision of these services translated to increased post-secondary enrollment numbers among refugee youth in Australia (Naidoo et al., 2018). Taken together, these studies speak to the importance of multi-level supports for refugee youth as they navigate the transition to post-secondary institutions. They also imply that in order to be effective, supports must be designed to meet the unique needs of the youth they are serving. While these studies provide an important picture of the transition to post-secondary institutions in Canada,

what is missing is a gendered and intersectional analysis of this transition. It remains unclear if supports are adequately meeting the needs of refugee women, and how additional supports could be put in place to ease the transition to post-secondary settings.

## Conclusion

In sum, the existing literature on resettlement of refugee youth highlights that they are faced with significant challenges upon arrival in Canada, and these challenges present at the individual, community, and cultural level. School in particular is a domain that presents with both challenges and opportunities for youth. Although there are exceptions, much of the literature on refugee youth focuses primarily on challenges they are faced with and can over-emphasize the mental health concerns. While an understanding of challenges is crucial in highlighting needs of youth, it can unfortunately promote a deficit perspective of refugee youth, contributing to marginalization. This marginalization can have devastating effects in schools and beyond, leading to discrimination and limiting the educational and economic opportunities of youth. Promisingly, in recent years there has been a growing body of research that applies a strengths-based lens to understanding the experiences of refugee youth in schools. Existing literature highlights that girls and young women may experience additional and unique challenges as compared to boys, but their voices are comparatively under-represented. To address this gap in the literature, this study explores the experiences of female refugee youth who are transitioning into post-secondary educational contexts. Using a transnational feminist lens, this project explores how aspects of identity such as gender and culture impact this transition.

# CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description and rationale for the methodology utilized to address the research question: *What are the strengths, challenges, and needs of refugee women and girls as they transition into post-secondary settings in Canada*? The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of qualitative inquiry and the methodological framework used in the study, and a rationale is provided for the use of this framework. Next, the research method is laid out, including procedures, participants, and data collection and analysis. Finally, the process for establishing rigor and trustworthiness is discussed, and ethical considerations specific to the study are outlined.

## Qualitative Inquiry

I have chosen a qualitative research approach to answer the research question. The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research defines this form of inquiry as:

> A situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. … This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denizen & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3).

Qualitative inquiry also describes a host of methodologies aimed at deepening our understanding of experiences and processes (Harper & Thompson, 2012). A qualitative approach was most appropriate to address my research questions, because it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the challenges, strengths, and needs of refugee women and girls transitioning post-secondary settings in Canada. Exploring this topic in-depth is crucial to allow for a contextualized understanding of these experiences, situating them within the various interconnected systems in which they take place. Qualitative approaches are unique in that they can capture a level of

complexity and diversity of experience that quantitative studies typically do not (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research also tends to align well with the values of the counselling profession, including the value of social justice, which is often at the heart of counselling psychology practice and research (Spong & Waters, 2015). This is not to imply that qualitative research is inherently socially just, rather there are points of convergence between qualitative research and socially just research, including attending to context, emphasizing the importance of relationships in research, and reflecting on the impact of these relationships (Lyons et al., 2013). Moreover, qualitative research questions are open-ended and exploratory, allowing opportunities to highlight the voices and stories of participants and communities, which is of particular importance when conducting research with marginalized groups.

There are many different methodological approaches that fall under a qualitative umbrella. To select among them, I considered fit with my research question and reflected on my values and epistemological assumptions, and I chose a research framework that aligned (Harper & Thompson, 2012). My research interests were shaped through involvement in a community-based research project with the Syrian community (see Chapter 1 for description) and were honed through my counselling work with post-secondary students with refugee backgrounds. In reflecting on my values, I felt it was important that my doctoral research project be useful to the community with whom I was working, and I also wanted to ensure that the project aligned with the social justice values of the counselling psychology profession and my personal values. To align with these goals, I employed a Participatory Research (PR) approach, a school that embraces collaborative development of research processes and outputs (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015; Jagosh et al., 2012). In the following sections, I first detail the philosophical assumptions underlying the project and research methodology, and then elaborate on the

adaptation and application of the PR framework.

## Philosophical Assumptions Guiding the Research

The ways in which a study is designed, the types of questions that are asked, and the way that these questions are answered are shaped largely by the worldview of the researcher and philosophical assumptions guiding a research project. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), these assumptions can be categorized into several categories: ontological (assumptions about the nature of reality), epistemological (assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and how these claims can be justified), axiology (assumptions about the role of values in research), and methodology (how research is conducted). In this section, I will focus specifically on ontology, epistemology, and axiology, as methodology is discussed throughout the chapter.

### Ontology

This project fits within a social constructivist paradigm wherein there is a recognition that our subjective realities are socially constructed (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism falls within the broader school of postmodernism, which contends that knowledge claims must be situated in context and one's perspective is impacted by lived experience and demographic factors such as race, gender, class, and age. Relativism is a key ontological assumption of social constructivism, such that reality is shaped by the experiencer, the experience, and the context in which the experience takes place (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Social constructivists reject the positivist notion that there is a single objective truth that exists and can be known (Crotty, 1998; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). While in some fields of study a positivist approach may be appropriate, an important critique of this view in counselling psychology is that it does not account for the existence of different perspectives and lived experiences (Keller, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1989). To this point, in this project I do not attempt to answer the

research question with a single truth, rather results are co-constructed through the research process with the recognition that these realities may be different across individuals. This is in keeping with participatory principles, which highlight the importance of attending to local conditions impacting communities and leveraging local knowledge to address concerns (Holland et al., 2010).

**Epistemology**

Given the social constructivist perspective that there are socially constructed realities rather than a single objective truth, it follows that knowledge claims must be contextualized. Rather than searching for an answer to a research question, social constructivists are engaged in co-creating knowledge with participants (Creswell 2013; Lincoln et al., 2024). The knowledge learned from research is specific to the people and context in which the research is carried out and is shaped by the participants' and researchers' existing knowledge and experience, social status, gender, culture, background, values, and so on (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2024). As such, the study design, analysis, and results reflect this contextualized approach. I have also positioned myself within the research (see Chapter 1), making explicit my own lens for viewing the world.

PR is also explicit in its consideration of epistemology. Drawing from its roots in critical pedagogy and feminist theory, PR moves away from the hierarchical approach to research, instead challenging ideas about what constitutes knowledge, who can create knowledge, and how knowledge can be transmitted and acquired (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015; Strega & Brown, 2015). For instance, historically it has been the voices of dominant groups and individuals with power and privilege that have been highlighted, and research related to non-dominant groups has been conducted "on" rather than "with" them (Strega & Brown, 2015). In

contrast, the attention to dynamics of power and privilege, along with attention to whose voices are being represented in research is a shift away from the hierarchical approach (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Given the intersecting identities of participants in the study, I have adopted a transnational feminist lens (Zerbe Enns et al., 2020). In this project, I attended to dynamics of power and privilege not only by situating myself within the research, but also by working to foster equitable research relationships and highlighting the value of experiential knowledge (Christopher et al., 2008; Minkler, 2004).

**Axiology**

As researchers, our values cannot be entirely removed from the research process. While these values can be and have been viewed as bias impacting the research process, my views align with the idea that the inherent subjectivity in qualitative research is a strength of this form of inquiry, contributing to the richness and depth of findings (Mosselson, 2010; Strega & Brown, 2015). Within this project, my own experience and lens has shaped the types of questions that I asked, the way in which I asked these questions, and the lens through which I analyzed the data. For instance, my experiences as a bicultural woman have led me to value differing perspectives and have driven my desire to understand how context shapes our experiences of the world around us. Some qualitative research schools of thought have attempted to address the impact of values on the research process by building in ways to manage researcher subjectivity, which may include bracketing out, or setting aside, one's own values and worldviews, to step into the shoes of the participants and to approach the truth as closely as possible (Gregory, 2019). Instead, social constructivists opt to make values transparent throughout the research process. To do this, I engaged in reflexivity, exploring my subjective stance by positioning myself within the research and using a reflective journal to understand my own values, beliefs, experiences and

perspectives to understand how these factors shaped my approach to the research and to ensure that it is my participants' stories and experiences being represented in the results (Creswell, 2013; Mosselson, 2010). Developing self-awareness of my values and perspectives allowed me to thoughtfully incorporate them into interpretations, while ensuring that participants' voices remained at the forefront (Morrow, 2005).

## Participatory Research (PR) Influences

PR is an umbrella term encompassing approaches that emphasize community engagement in the research process for the purpose of effecting social change (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Engagement can take many forms, but it is often in the form of collaboration between community and research team throughout the research process, from conception (i.e., identification of research questions and designing the research project) to completion (i.e., knowledge mobilization and dissemination of findings to interested parties). The extent and type of collaboration can be negotiated in the context of the community partnership (Holland et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study *community* is be defined broadly as "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings" (MacQueen et al., 2001, p. 1936). In this study, community is viewed in terms of shared experience, namely the refugee and student experiences. Participants were diverse in terms of cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds.

There are a number of different PR approaches that fall within this school, including Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), Participatory Action Research (PAR), and Cooperative Inquiry (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015). There is significant debate about differences between these approaches, and a lack of consistency in how these labels are applied

across fields (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Nonetheless, these approaches have much in common (including theoretical underpinnings and guiding principles) as outlined by Cargo and Mercer (2008) in their consolidation of an integrative practice framework for PR approaches. These authors suggest that using a PR framework allows for researchers to be guided by PR principles and values that fit for the community they are working with and tailor to the unique circumstances of the research. In the current study, the unique needs of young refugee women and circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the flexibility afforded by PR was helpful. To clarify my use of terms here, I will use PR as a general term to refer to the overarching framework employed in the current study. In the next section I provide an overview of specific principles from PR that have informed this study.

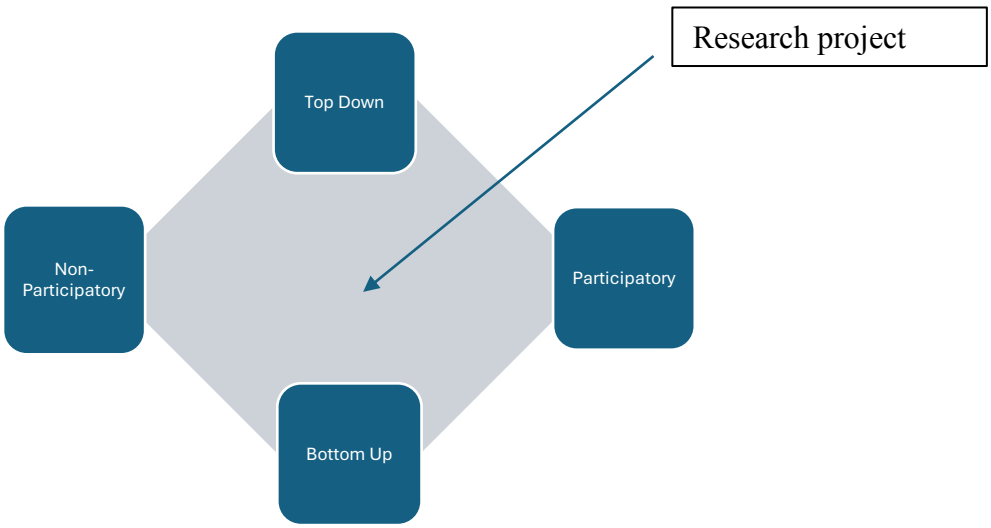
**PR Framework**

PR is an orientation to research, rather than a specific technique or method, and has been increasingly recognized in the fields of public health, education, psychology, and nursing among others (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). PR has three articulated goals: research, action, and education/co-learning (Cargo & Mercer, 2008; Hall, 1992). This orientation represents a shift away from conventional researcher-driven approaches in which the researcher selects research questions and makes decisions throughout the research process with little involvement of participants. In contrast, engagement of participants is emphasized in PR, such that the research is co-constructed by researcher and community (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Roy (2012) conceptualizes the continuum of community engagement in a quadrant, a format that is helpful in conceptualizing how engagement occurred in the current project. In this typology, project origins and management are represented on the vertical axis, ranging from a top-down approach (emerging from and managed by external agencies such as universities or funding

bodies) to a bottom-up approach (emerging from and managed by community). The horizontal axis represents level of participation. At the outset of this project, my aim was to have high levels of participation on the horizontal axis, and to be centrally-located in terms of project origins and management. In practice, these aims had to be shifted based on the needs and availability of the community. While opportunities for participation (horizontal axis) were offered throughout the research process, most participants stated a preference to be involved only in the data collection phase. On the vertical axis, the project was centrally located, as it originated from a community-university research partnership and consultation with community and service providers were central to developing the research questions. Furthermore, methods were adapted throughout the project in an effort to be responsive to feedback from the community regarding making participation more accessible. In terms of project management, as this project forms my doctoral dissertation, I have various responsibilities to funders and the university including management of funds, adhering to timelines, and communicating findings.

**Figure 1**

*Continuum of community engagement: From proposed to current project, adapted from Roy (2012)*



## Theoretical Underpinnings of PR

This project was developed with an underlying social justice stance, addressing social issues, equity, and power dynamics within the research process with a stated aim to work towards social change (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A social justice stance is at the heart of the counselling profession and participatory approaches to research (Spong & Waters, 2015), and it is also a value that I hold personally. Specifically, PR is rooted in Freirean critical pedagogy and feminist theory, each of which address social justice.

### *Freire and Critical Pedagogy*

Several Freirean concepts are foundational to PR. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire describes a critical pedagogy model in which the teacher-learner hierarchy is dismantled in favour of an equitable relationship, wherein the knowledge and experience of individuals is valued in the learning process, and learning is conceptualized as a shared two-way process between individuals. By engaging in dialogue, individuals and groups are able to develop an awareness of the tacit knowledge they possess, gained through lived experience. This type of relationship and dialogue allows for the development of critical awareness around social issues including those issues related to gender, race, and class, thereby setting the stage for subsequent action to resolve these issues. These concepts are reflected in PR, in the call for equitable research relationships, the equal valuing of experiential and academic knowledge, and the attention to social and contextual factors (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Additionally, the premise of engaging in dialogue to develop solutions and take action is based on Freirean ideals. As this project utilized individual interviews, dialogue primarily took place between me and individual participants. In these discussions I adopted a learner stance, taking the lead from my

participants and raising questions around social issues related to gender and race in the semi-structured interview protocol. Further, discussions were strengths-based and aimed at identifying solutions and actions taken to address challenges.

### *Feminist Theory and Intersectionality*

Hall (1992) states that the goals of feminist research are to give voice to participants, particularly those from marginalized groups, and challenge the dominant social structures. These ideas are embedded within participatory research as well. The concern with "who has the right to speak, to analyze, and to act" (Hall, 1992, p. 22) is at the center of PR, which challenges researchers to question whose voices are being heard, and to provide a platform for the perspectives of community members themselves, rather than academic researchers speaking on their behalf. With this, comes a consideration of power dynamics in the research relationships and social justice. These concepts are taken up in the context of this study through my attention to power dynamics in the research partnership. I attempted to reduce power differences through utilization of skills that I have developed in fostering therapeutic relationships in the context of counselling (Conlin, 2017; Spong & Waters, 2015). Furthermore, naming my role as a student-researcher as opposed to an academic helped to reduce the power differential somewhat.

## Incorporation of PR Principles into the Current Project

At the centre of PR are the values of inclusivity and engagement (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Regarding engagement, as described above, participants and those supporting them were engaged throughout the research process through consultation (e.g., with service providers supporting refugee women) and collaborative means (e.g., collaboration with participants regarding adaptation of research procedures and methods of knowledge mobilization). In this way, engagement can enhance the utility of the research, such that it is responsive to local and

immediate concerns with real-time benefits for participants (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015). Indeed, while systems-level change tends to be slow, participants shared positive impacts of being able to reflect on their experiences and have their voices heard.

Given its feminist roots, embedded in PR is a consideration of power and voice (Hall, 1992). In this study, I have attempted to centralize the perspectives of participants, recognizing the value of the local/cultural/experiential knowledge they hold and solutions that they are already enacting, a theme that runs throughout this study (Janes, 2016; Wood & McAteer, 2017). This was explicitly addressed through attention to strengths and exploration of solutions during interviews. Further, rich descriptions of participant experiences and quotes were included to amplify their voices along with acknowledging my own role in interpreting findings (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015).

As one way of incorporating these principles more fully, I was informed by a transnational feminist lens. This theoretical perspective contextualizes experiences not only through the lens of gender but also through other intersecting social locations, including global and regional contexts (Zerbe Enns et al., 2020). Transnational feminism aligns with social constructivist perspectives, such that lived realities are subjective and constructed rather than objective and essential (Collins et al., 2019). There is a move away from essentializing the experiences of those who live in non-western countries. This focus makes it a good fit for studying the experiences related to border crossings and migration.

Within a transnational feminist perspective, intersectionality is a critical concept (Zerbe Enns, 2020). Intersectionality, a term introduced by feminist and critical race theory scholar Crenshaw (1989), refers to the idea that the lives of individuals are impacted by multiple and interrelated systems of oppression that cannot be fully captured by a consideration of gender

alone. This theory developed from Black feminist scholarship as an approach to understand multiple oppressions of gender and race (Carastathis, 2014). Intersectionality is a recognition of the complexity of identity, and how aspects of identity contribute differently to experiences of oppression. These aspects of identity shape how we interact with the world. Aspects of identity may include gender, race, ethnicity, citizenship status, (dis)ability, age, religion, and so on. An intersectional lens is particularly appropriate in this project, as participants are self-identified women, arrived in Canada as refugees, and are youth or young adults. These concepts were considered in reviewing relevant literature, designing the research process, developing interview questions, and analyzing data.

**Rationale for Use of PR**

This research is largely guided by the principles and theoretical underpinnings of PR. Female refugee youth hold multiple marginalized identities (Gu, 2015) and aspects of their identity including their ethnicity, citizenship/refugee status, religion, age, and gender cannot only influence their experiences in Canada, but also contribute to marginalization (Hindman, 2011; Unangst & Crea, 2020). PR is particularly appropriate for working with members of marginalized communities, because the approach builds in attention to power and privilege, and also attempts to equalize power dynamics in research relationships. It moves away from a fly-in fly-out approach to research, centering the community in the work, and taking steps to ensure that it is the voices of participants that are heard (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). PR can be applied flexibly to different types of research questions (Higginbottom & Liamputtong, 2015; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). For the purposes of this project, I have drawn on PR principles as a framework, as articulated above, and utilized the Photovoice method to address research questions. This method is described in the following section.

# Methods

## Visual Methods in Qualitative Research

Arts-based research methods are those that utilize nondiscursive forms of representation, such as pictures, music, or dance (Barone, 2011). They may also include forms of representation such as poetry, story, and theatre. Arts-based methods in qualitative research have become increasingly utilized in the past several decades, as researchers have been called to engage in reflexive practice and anti-oppressive research that decolonizes knowledge and the process of knowledge co-construction. Arts-based methods fit well within a PR framework, because they are grounded in social justice, and attend to the process of knowledge production, rather than simply the outcomes (Finley, 2008). Art-based methods grew out of a history of using visual methods in research, including photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation methods are those that as a social science research method began to take hold in the 1970's and 1980's (e.g., Collier & Collier, 1986; Ziller, 1990). Since then, arts-based research methods have emerged as a means of conducting "critical, participatory, and politically relevant and decolonizing research" (Capous-Desylass & Morgaine, 2018, p. xii). Photovoice, the method utilized in this study, sits at the intersection of participatory research and visual research methodologies. Participatory photo-based methods, of which photovoice is one, provide opportunities for reflecting more deeply on experiences (e.g., through the act of selecting images), eliciting in-depth discussion of these experiences and engaging potentially interested parties (Switzer, 2018). These approaches also have the potential to reduce power differentials between researcher(s) and participants, positioning each as co-constructors of knowledge. Participatory photo-based methods have been widely used with youth and young adults and have been found to be both useful and rewarding for them (Lögdberg et al., 2020; Yohani, 2020a; Yohani & Larsen, 2009). The next section describes the Photovoice method in greater detail.

**Photovoice Method**

Photovoice is a documentary photography method that falls under the PR umbrella, grounded in principles of community participation throughout the research process (Wang & Burris, 1997). In this method, participants are given a camera and asked to take photographs with three main goals: (a) depicting the everyday realities of participants, (b) shedding light on community strengths and concerns through viewing photographs and engaging in critical dialogue, and (c) reaching policymakers (Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997). This method is known for its flexibility and applicability to a wide range of research topics and populations (Molloy, 2007; Wang, 2006). In particular, Photovoice was designed for use with marginalized populations (Sanon, Evans-Agnew, & Boutain, 2014), making it a good fit for this project. The application of the method is described in detail in the data collection section later in this chapter.

This method was selected because it fits well within the PR framework. Both Photovoice and PR aim to create social change by engaging in critical discussion to develop solutions to concerns that can be enacted at the community level, as well as reaching policymakers with the ability to enact change on a larger systemic scale (Molloy, 2007). Photovoice is also concerned with building community partnerships and is participatory in nature (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). In the Photovoice method, these goals are accomplished using photographs as a tool. The theoretical underpinnings of Photovoice also align with PR, as the method is grounded in Freire's writing on education for critical consciousness, as well as feminist theory and documentary photography (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Burris, 1994). According to Freire (1970), visual images can stimulate critical thought and discussion about social and political forces at play in one's community. Feminist theory informs the Photovoice method, in its attention to marginalized groups whose voices are underrepresented with the aim of promoting participants' voices to create systemic change (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016; Strega &

Brown, 2015). From documentary photography, Photovoice draws its techniques and the use of visual images to tell a story and raise social consciousness (Wang & Burris, 1997).

The Photovoice method is also appropriate for this project as it is particularly effective for enhancing youth participation and engaging young people in the research process (Wang, 2006). Photovoice has been used in a number of projects with marginalized youth to enhance engagement (e.g., Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010). Youth may be drawn to Photovoice projects because these projects provide them with the opportunity to express themselves creatively, to have an impact on their community, and to have a say in the decisions that shape their lives. Youth are viewed as competent, and their voices and opinions are viewed as essential to understanding and shaping the systems in which they operate.

## Research Procedures

### Interested Parties

I use the term *interested parties* to refer to groups and individuals who are involved in or concerned with the topic of study, the educational transitions of female youth with refugee backgrounds. I have chosen to move away from using the term stakeholder to describe these individuals/groups due to its colonial roots and connotations associated with hierarchical power dynamics (Hafferty et al., 2024). Interested parties in this research include participants, their families and cultural communities, the community organizations who support these youth, schools, and post-secondary institutions. I have connected with community organizations in Edmonton, Alberta, including Multicultural Health Brokers (MCHB), Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN), Multicultural Family Resource Society (MFRS), and World University Service of Canada (WUSC) at the University of Alberta, as part of my research study. These organizations work closely with local refugee communities and students. Specifically, I have consulted with service providers and volunteers at these organizations regarding their

observations about the most pressing concerns for young women with refugee backgrounds. Furthermore, it was through these partnerships, as well as my involvement as a research assistant with the project exploring the psychosocial adaptation of Syrian refugees (described in Chapter 1) that I was able to connect with participants and have formulated the research question in collaboration with them. The interested parties are also involved in knowledge mobilization efforts with me (described below).

**Participants**

Participants were six self-identified women who came to Canada as refugees, have arrived in Canada within the last 10 years (since 2013), and were between the ages of 21 and 30 at the time of the study (though anyone between 16-30 years was eligible to participate). The average number of years in Canada was 5.5. This timeframe allows for capturing the experiences of participants at various stages of integration. This age range was chosen as it encompasses youth who are at various stages in post-secondary. The wide age range allowed for capturing unique perspectives of youth who arrived in Canada at different ages, and various life experiences of prospective and current students. Interviews were conducted in English, with the option for an interpreter if requested. Providing the option to request an interpreter was considered in light of methodological and ethical implications. Indeed, the introduction of another person can impact the validity and reliability of data as participant voices are filtered through another individual who potentially makes choices about which aspects of a question or response are most important to emphasize (Egilsson et al., 2022). In addition, from an ethical standpoint, introducing another party can create challenges for ensuring confidentiality. For instance, in a small community people may recognize one another. This can also impact power dynamics and make it more challenging for the researcher to directly build trust with participants

(Egilsson et al., 2022). On the other hand, offering translation services allows for the voices of individuals who may otherwise be excluded from research to be represented and given the values underlying this project, I believed this to be an important option to provide. Despite the availability of this option, all participants opted to conduct the interviews in English without translation services. Participant demographics are further described through portraits in Chapter 4.

### *Sample Size*

Factors that are important in determining sample size are methodological considerations, rules of thumb, and considerations around whether enough information has been gathered to adequately address the research question (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024). While some researchers suggest data collection ought to continue until saturation is reached, or the point at which no new information is arising, Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that this may not be a theoretically consistent method to determine sample size when using reflexive thematic analysis. They indicate that saturation is a concept that aligns with a positivist or realist approach rather than a social constructivist approach. In reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher is actively engaged in data analysis and interpretation therefore it is feasible that new information may always arise in subsequent interviews and analyses. Instead, I have taken a "live and critically-reflexive" (Braun & Clarke, 2016, p. 743; Gill & Baillie, 2018) approach to determining sample size. After each interview I considered the extent to which data is sufficiently rich, diverse, and addresses the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I also took into account methodological considerations. According to Wang (2006), six to ten participants is optimal for photovoice projects, as this number allows for sufficient breadth as well as depth and richness of information. After completing and analysing six interviews, information appeared to be

sufficiently in-depth and rich, and to adequately address the research questions.

### *Sampling Strategy and Recruitment*

Through the connections I had built with community and campus organizations, it became clear that there were at least two distinct groups of refugees transitioning into post-secondary schooling: those who had come to Canada specifically to attend post-secondary and began schooling shortly after arrival, and those who had come to Canada and subsequently attempted to pursue post-secondary. Therefore, I engaged in purposive sampling to recruit participants who could speak to these diverse experiences (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024). Participants were recruited through existing partnerships with community and campus organizations (described above) and connections with community members formed through my work as a research assistant on a community-based project (Syrian Psychosocial Adaptation Project). I attended several youth groups offered by community organizations and provided information via circulation of a research poster to cultural brokers, community settlement workers, and campus volunteers. Information about the study was also circulated through university campus email listservs. However, the most successful recruitment strategy was snowball sampling and word of mouth from peers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). This could have been for several reasons, including that relatively few females attended youth groups, and those that did attend expressed that they were unable to take on any additional commitments. Further, word-of-mouth represents a more personal approach to recruitment that centers the relationship between engaged research and trust, particularly important when working with communities who have been marginalized (Strega & Brown, 2015).

## Data Collection

In this section, I outline the data collection process. Data collection involved three phases (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Phases of Research*

| Phase | Tasks |
|---|---|
| Phase 1 | ● Recruitment and eligibility assessment<br>● Individual Virtual/Phone Introductory Meeting (30 minutes): Review of consent and introduction to the project; Introduction of timeline activity |
| Phase 2 | ● Virtual/In-person Individual Interview (60-90 minutes): Review of timeline activity; Critical discussion of photographs and research questions |
| Phase 3 | ● Follow-up Virtual Individual Interviews (up to 60 minutes): Review of initial findings and gathering of participant feedback; Co-authoring of participant portraits |
| Phase 4 | ● Knowledge Mobilization (ongoing)<br>● KMb Meeting (60 minutes): Review findings and discuss options for dissemination<br>● Prepare dissemination materials and distribute to interested parties |

### Phase 1: Recruitment and Consent

In the first phase of the project, participants were invited to participate and were introduced to the project. Potential participants were invited to contact me through email or WhatsApp, a widely used messaging, voice, and video calling app with end-to-end encryption. In this initial contact, I described the purpose of the research and assessed eligibility to participate using brief screening questions (Appendix A). Participants who met eligibility criteria scheduled a telephone/video introductory meeting (30 minutes). Participants received consent forms via email to review in advance of the meeting (Appendix B).

In the introductory meeting, I introduced myself, reviewed consent with participants and

addressed any questions. In accordance with the Tri-council Policy Statement – Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018), ability to consent should be assessed based on decision-making capacity and in accordance with legal provisions. All participants were over the age of 18 thus there was no requirement for mature minor designation. In reviewing consent, participants were reminded that there is no penalty for withdrawing from the study, and they may withdraw at any time leading up to or during the interview. They were also given the option to withdraw their data until two weeks following their Phase 3 interview. Participants also had the opportunity to ask questions and offer their input on the project in this meeting. All participants expressed understanding of consent procedures.

This introductory meeting also offered an opportunity to build a relationship with participants. Relationship building is a key aspect of engaged research (Tremblay et al., 2018). In this meeting, I gave participants information about research questions and study procedures. I briefly described the photovoice method, discussed the format for discussing photographs, and ethics of using photography in research (Wang, 2006). I also introduced a timeline exercise activity (Appendix E) to elicit reflection on participants' educational and migration journeys leading up to the interview. To further build rapport and position myself within the project, I shared my own educational and migration timeline as a sample. Most participants opted to complete the exercise following the meeting and bring the completed timeline to the interview. Lastly, participants were given the research questions and instructions for uploading photographs to a Google Drive folder. Participants were able to use smartphones to take photographs, or use photographs they had previously taken. Some participants also opted to use online images to

represent their experiences. These instructions were also sent via email. Time between the introductory meeting and individual interview was about 1-2 weeks for most participants.

**Phase 2: Individual Interview**

Participants were provided with the following questions to guide their image selection: (a) What is your experience of transitioning into post-secondary settings in Canada? (b) What challenges/barriers have you faced in this transition? And (c) What strengths/supports have helped you to navigate this process? Participants were invited to select between three and six images (one or two images per question) and upload these to a Google Drive folder shared with them in advance of the interview.

Participants were offered the option to attend interviews in-person or virtually via videoconferencing platform. One participant attended in-person, while all others opted for videoconferencing due to convenience. Use of videoconferencing platforms offered several advantages, including enhancing accessibility and eliminating travel time (Archibald et al., 2019). Importantly, emerging research suggests that there do not appear to be losses in data content or quality when utilizing online data collection methods (Gray et al., 2020; Woodyatt et al., 2016).

Interview duration was about 90 minutes. Participants discussed each photograph in terms of the SHOWeD mnemonic (Wang, 2006): (a) What do you *S*ee here? (b) What's really *H*appening here? (c) How does this relate to *O*ur lives? (d) *W*hy does this situation, concern, or strength exist? and (e) What can we *D*o about it? A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix F) was developed based on a review of the literature to elicit further discussion on the research topic. Practical guidelines, solutions, and strengths were a particular focus of this discussion (Wang, 2006).

**Phase 3: Follow-up Meetings**

Following the completion and analysis of individual interviews, follow-up meetings were conducted virtually via videoconferencing platform, lasting 30-60 minutes. The purpose of these meetings was to address any areas of clarification required from the initial interview, review initial findings, get participant feedback as a form of member checking, and capture participant reflections on the research process (e.g., Teti et al., 2013). Participants also co-authored their personal introduction (See Portrait of Participants section in Chapter 4). We also discussed ideas for knowledge mobilization and participant interest in being part of knowledge mobilization efforts.

**Phase 4: Knowledge Mobilization**

A key aspect of PR is knowledge mobilization, fundamental to the goal of fostering social change. To work towards this goal, findings were compiled in a report and presentation to be delivered to service providers and other relevant policymakers. Plans for knowledge mobilization are to continue beyond the completion of the project, including publication in a relevant peer-reviewed journal, presentations at academic and practice-related conferences. Results will also be presented to service providers (e.g., cultural brokers, counsellors) who support refugee youth. Importantly, a participatory approach to knowledge mobilization is being taken, such that participants have the option to be engaged in the process to the extent that they wish (Yonas, Burke, & Miller, 2013). To this end, participants will continue to have the opportunity to collaborate with me on these knowledge mobilization efforts and can be named as co-presenters if they wish.

An important criticism of many Photovoice research projects is that there can be a tendency to over-promise and under-deliver with regard to policy-level change, such that despite referring to goals of social action, outcomes tend to be academic in nature (Golden, 2020). In the

current project, I have attempted to be realistic about potential outcomes, and have focused on smaller, community-level action. To this end, an important outcome of this project is the planning of a follow-up group to discuss options for knowledge mobilization that fit for participants. Potential knowledge mobilization strategies could include preparation of visual materials to be distributed to interested parties and/or a mentorship workshop or group bringing together participants in the current study with refugee and newcomer women/girls who are hoping to apply to post-secondary. Participation in this follow up group is optional, however several participants have expressed interest in being part of this initiative.

## Data Analysis

Data was collected in the form of images and transcripts from individual interviews. Upon completion of audio recorded interviews, recordings were transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software (Woods et al., 2016). The software was used to organize and prepare data for analysis, code transcripts, and compile themes from codes following steps outlined in the reflexive thematic analysis method.

### Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) is a method of data analysis frequently used in qualitative research to identify and report themes in data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes and codes can be identified at different levels, the semantic (manifest) level, which is descriptive in nature and highlights surface-level meanings, or the latent (implicit) level, which is interpretive in nature, and goes beyond what the participant has said to identify underlying ideas or assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2016). This analysis includes both semantic and latent level coding and theme generation.

There are a number of different models of thematic analysis, but for the purposes of this

project, I refer specifically to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), a more recent iteration of Braun and Clarke's (2006) original work on thematic analysis. Authors re-named their approach to clarify misconceptions and differentiate between thematic analysis applied from a positivist framework (as a tool for analysis) and reflexive thematic analysis grounded in a post-positivist qualitative framework and philosophical assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The reflexive thematic analysis approach differs from other analysis approaches in terms of how themes are defined and identified. Authors are specific in their description of what counts as a theme, stating that a theme must identify core concepts that highlight shared meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2018). Importantly, themes go beyond summaries of participant responses to a particular domain (known as domain-summaries) and require the researcher to identify underlying unifying patterns in the data. Relatedly, the Braun and Clarke method takes an organic and active approach to identifying themes, wherein the role of researcher is to develop themes, rather than to reveal or discover themes that are pre-existing within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The researcher holds an active role in data analysis and interpretation, and researcher subjectivity is inherent within the analysis process. Researcher subjectivity is viewed as an important tool in qualitative research, enhancing the depth of analysis and richness of results (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Mosselson, 2010).

Reflexive thematic analysis is a data analysis method, it is not a methodology in and of itself (Clarke & Braun, 2018). It can be applied flexibly within a number of qualitative approaches across a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and it has been used in community-based projects and applied to analyze data collected using the Photovoice method (e.g., Vélez-Grau, 2019). To analyze interview data, I applied Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2024) six step approach to reflexive thematic analysis. This approach

was selected because of its flexibility, its applicability to research within counselling and education, and its clearly outlined procedure which offers methodological soundness. Importantly, as analysis is an iterative process, I engaged in these steps alongside the data collection process, such that findings from early interviews informed subsequent interviews. In the following paragraphs, I describe Braun and Clarke's (2019; 2024) six-step process.

***Step 1: Data Familiarization***

I familiarized myself with the data by transcribing recordings of interviews. During this process, I engaged in memo-ing, noting any initial responses, thoughts, or ideas that arose. After transcribing, and prior to beginning to code, I re-read each transcript in its entirety to get a sense of it as a whole.

***Step 2: Generating Initial Codes***

Next, I reviewed each transcript line-by-line to identify interesting features that appeared in the data. I coded these features in ways that highlighted meaningful aspects regarding the research topic, while remaining close to the raw data. The coding process was conducted using NVivo software. Rather than being selective, I coded any units potentially relevant to the research questions. I did an initial coding of each transcript, then reviewed and tweaked codes during a second read-through. Once coding was complete, codes were collated in NVivo. At this stage, I consulted with my supervisor and we reviewed and discussed codes.

***Step 3: Generating Initial Themes***

Using the collated codes generated in step 2, codes were grouped and organized into preliminary or candidate themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), theme generation is an active process in which the researcher incorporates their stated theoretical lens and assumptions. Therefore, in this stage of the analysis, the collating and grouping of themes was informed

largely by a transnational feminist lens. For example, when reviewing codes, I considered whether there were references to intersections of identity and/or power dynamics being elucidated by participants. Once codes were grouped, relationships between codes and these candidate themes were depicted in a thematic map and discussed with my primary supervisor. In follow-up meetings, I reviewed with participants the code grouping and naming process using de-identified data, to gauge whether the candidate themes rang true for them.

***Step 4: Reviewing Themes***

Candidate themes were reviewed at two levels to refine them. First, themes were reviewed at the level of the code. Data extracts (quotes) associated with each code were reviewed to determine whether they were grouped appropriately and formed a pattern. Second, themes were reviewed at the level of the dataset, to determine whether themes captured the meanings being communicated in the data. This stage also provided an opportunity to review the dataset to code any additional quotes that may have fit under the established themes.

***Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes***

Upon developing an updated thematic map, themes and sub-themes were named in ways that captured underlying meanings and patterns. I was also informed by a transnational feminist lens in this process, such that I used language and definitions consistent with this theory in naming and defining themes. I consulted with my supervisor during this process. The consultation process is described in more detail below.

***Step 6: Producing the Report***

Finally, results were written in a way that provides evidence for themes, drawing on rich and vivid extracts from the data. Photographs from participants who provided consent were also included in the report.

## Evaluating the Study

When conducting research, there needs to be a mechanism in place to assess the research, and to answer the question "are we doing research well and with quality?" Typically in qualitative research, rigour and trustworthiness are the concepts that researchers rely on to assess the quality of their research and ensure that checks and balances are in place (Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Rigour

Rigour answers the overarching question *how do I know I am doing quality research*? Quality of findings (i.e., a focus on the data) is one aspect of this, but rigour is built into the research process itself (Morse, 2018). In the context of participatory research, the truth value (or validity of the research) comes from the extent to which there is authentic participation, and the potential for the research to produce action (or usefulness) (Springett, Wright, & Roche, 2011). This is not typically reflected in the consideration of rigour in conventional qualitative research (e.g., transferability, confirmability, dependability, and credibility, discussed in detail below). Therefore, for this project, I used Mercer and colleagues' (2008) guidelines to better capture what quality research looks like from a PR approach. These guidelines attend to four key areas central to the PR framework: (a) participants and the nature of their involvement, (b) shaping the purpose and scope of the research, (c) research implementation and context, and (d) nature of the research outcomes.

#### *Participants and the Nature of their Involvement*

This area is concerned with representation both of participants and other interested parties, to ensure that groups that might be otherwise underrepresented are included in the research. In my research, I took steps to reduce barriers to participation, including shifting from group to individual interviews, and offering options for online or in-person interviews. I

attempted to build trust with the community before beginning the research by connecting with the community through volunteering, assisting with a research project with refugee youth, and taking time for rapport building with participants. However, this proved to be challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, pandemic restrictions led to the cancellation of various groups, and even after the lifting of restrictions, many community organizations had lower attendance and faced funding cuts. These factors made community engagement in the years after the pandemic more challenging, particularly as an outsider to the community. As such, despite attempts to build connections through community organizations, most participants came to the project via word of mouth and referrals from their peers.

### *Shaping the Purpose and Scope of the Research*

This concept evaluates the extent to which research questions were developed or refined collaboratively with participants and other interested parties, and applying their knowledge and experience in designing the research. This area also explores the extent to which there are opportunities for mutual learning and capacity building within the community, as well as considering contextual factors and multiple levels of determinants of health. This project has been shaped collaboratively, in the sense that it grew out of a large research project with the Syrian community. The process of developing my research proposal involved consulting with interested parties including community members (female youth with refugee backgrounds who were pursuing post-secondary schooling), and the community organizations who support them, to develop a research question that would address the needs and challenges of this group. The research process was updated collaboratively, such that participant suggestions and feedback were discussed and implemented.

### *Research Implementation and Context*

This area attends to the extent to which the knowledge and expertise of interested parties is applied, opportunities for learning are provided, and decision-making is collaborative. It also explores the extent to which participants are involved in the analysis process. Participants were provided with opportunities to learn about the research process and participate in decision-making. While the individual interviews themselves offered relatively few opportunities for capacity building, extending the option to participate in knowledge mobilization has provided some opportunities.

### *Nature of Research Outcomes*

This area is concerned with the dissemination of findings as well as the application of findings (or action). I continue to work collaboratively with participants on ongoing knowledge mobilization efforts, including creation of a presentation to be delivered to interested parties. Ownership of data and findings were discussed, specifically participants retaining ownership of their photographs, and having the option to provide permission to use photographs for this dissertation and knowledge mobilization.

In this overview, it is clear that although the research was informed by PR principles, there was space to adapt the project to better meet the needs of participants. In addition to addressing quality of the research process, there was also a need to address the quality of findings. Indeed, for research to form the foundation of policy or action in another form, findings must be evaluated in a way that ensures we can trust them and should act on them (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). For this, we turn to the concept of trustworthiness.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to a specific way of addressing the quality of research findings and answers the question *how do we know that we can trust these findings* (Creswell, 2013; Creswell

& Poth, 2018). Trustworthiness is similar to establishing validity in quantitative studies. In other words, it addresses the issue of "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including the self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 290). While there is an array of guidelines available to answer this question, perhaps the most well-known and cohesive set of procedures are Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for establishing trustworthiness (Taylor & Medina, 2013). They include the following criteria: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability.

### *Credibility*

Credibility is concerned with the truth value of the findings, referring to the accuracy with which participants' experiences are reflected in the research results (Cope, 2014). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility can be established through prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation (or cross-checking), peer debriefing, and member checking. Each of these strategies is implemented in some respect in this project. Before starting this project, I built research relationships through my role as a research assistant, and engaged in discussion with refugee youth and those who support them about the types of questions and problems they would like addressed in my research. While it was challenging to maintain these partnerships throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, during the research process I focused on building and maintaining research relationships with participants. Triangulation, or making use of multiple sources and methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018) was built into the research procedure with the use of both images and interviews. I also debriefed with my research supervisor on a regular basis to discuss the research process and work through any challenges or questions that arose, and kept a reflective research journal. An additional strategy for establishing credibility is member checking. This strategy involves the researcher checking in

with participants to ensure that their experiences are accurately reflected in research results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I engaged in member checking during the follow-up interviews in which preliminary themes were reviewed, and participants were invited to give feedback on identification and naming of these themes.

### *Transferability*

Transferability is similar to the quantitative concept of generalizability, in the sense that it refers to the extent to which findings may be applicable to others in similar settings (Cope, 2014). Importantly, the goal of transferability is not for results to be generalizable to a large group, rather it is to be clear about communities or individuals for whom results might be relevant. In line with the ontology of qualitative social constructivist research, participants' social contexts were explicitly described, and thick description allows readers to determine whether findings may apply to individuals in similar contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, situating the findings in the existing literature and applying a theoretical lens can enhance the influence of findings (Bingham, 2023).

### *Dependability*

Dependability refers to the extent to which results are consistent and the study could be replicated (Cope, 2014). In a quantitative context, dependability is the parallel criterion to reliability, or the extent to which similar results could be expected if the study was repeated. Again, in the context of qualitative research informed by a social constructivist framework, the goal is not to ensure that the same results would arise, as findings from this project are unique to the social and individual circumstances of participants, rather dependability is concerned with painting a clear picture of the research process. To this end, I kept a clear audit trail of the decisions made throughout the research process (Bingham, 2023; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Specifically, I used memos during the data collection and analysis phases and kept a research journal throughout the research process to ensure that research-related decisions could be followed. The inclusion of thick description is also intended to allow for readers to understand contextual factors.

***Confirmability***

Confirmability involves the ability to demonstrate that findings come from the data rather than from the biases of the researcher (Cope, 2014). As noted previously, qualitative research cannot be completely free of subjectivity or influence of the researcher, nor is that the goal. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), when employing a reflexive thematic analysis approach the researcher is inherently bringing the self into the research process and this subjectivity is viewed as valuable. However, I have included checks to reduce the potential for bias. First, I have practiced reflexivity, bringing to light my own experiences, values, and assumptions and reflected on how they have shaped my work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). From a social constructivist perspective, researchers engage in a meaning making process based on their experiences and values (McNamee, 2004). Incorporating reflexivity into the research process by reflecting on my role as a researcher and on the various social, cultural, and historical contexts of participants, I was better positioned to engage in accurate analysis and identify potential limitations (Dixon & Chiang, 2019). To do this, I have positioned myself within the research (Muhammad et al., 2015), and I kept a reflective research journal (Jasper, 2005). Participants also had a role in shaping findings, and thick descriptions were used to make clear the links between data and resulting themes. Finally, my supervisor reviewed my analysis and results to perform an external audit (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to following the above guidelines, a key aspect that needs to be attended to in

ensuring quality research, is ensuring that the research is ethical. Good research is ethical research (Lincoln et al., 2018). As such, in the next section I turn to a discussion of ethical considerations that guided my research.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this research were informed by the Tri-council Policy Statement – Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018) and the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association [CPA], 2017). These guidelines are similar in that they are aimed at protecting participants in research, with a focus on respect for human dignity, concern for welfare, justice, and the responsibility of the researcher in caring for participants and society more generally. These considerations have been woven into the research design. In this section, I focus on specific ethical considerations in the context of PR, Photovoice, working with youth and populations who have been marginalized.

### Ethics in PR

Given that PR takes a decolonizing and anti-oppressive stance, conducting ethical research is a central consideration within this framework (Minkler, 2004). In a narrative literature review, Kwan and Walsh (2018) highlight several key ethical considerations in participatory projects. These authors highlight several risks that can arise from PR research, including risk of essentializing identity or re-stigmatizing marginalized groups. To this end, I was cautious of the language used and framing of findings, such that communities are not harmed. In particular, it was important to avoid taking a deficit-based perspective and failing to recognize existing strengths, resources, and capacities (Kwan & Walsh, 2018). I built this into the research questions, and in the analysis highlighted the ways participants and communities

have drawn on strengths to overcome systemic barriers. Also, it is crucial that resulting social actions are culturally appropriate, and the risks of social actions are explored and mitigated to the extent possible (Kwan & Walsh, 2018). In this project, social actions were determined in collaboration with participants, and actions that best fit the needs of the community were identified. For example, an important consideration in this project was the time commitment. One of the most significant barriers to participation and continued involvement in the project was time and having many other commitments including work, school, and family-related commitments. Therefore, it was important that participation and action be meaningful, but require limited time from participants and community members who were already stretched thin.

**Ethical Considerations in Photovoice**

With regard to the Photovoice method, the following key ethical considerations have been proposed in the literature: (a) privacy of individuals and property which may be identifiable in photographs; (b) safety, or potential for harm resulting from use of images that may include incriminating activity; (c) photo selection and presentation, which may or may not be done with consent or knowledge of participants; (d) influence of researchers in subject matter for participant photographs, such that participants may capture images that they believe the researcher wants to see rather than those that reflect their experience; (e) the question of photograph ownership, wherein participants may be required to release ownership of photographs to the researcher rather than maintain ownership and control of how their voice and image is represented; and (f) advocacy, or the autonomy of participants to advance their interests in policy change efforts (Evans-Agnew & Rosemberg, 2016). In this project, each of these concerns was directly addressed in consent forms and in discussion of consent and ethics in a pre-interview meeting. In keeping with PR values, participants were viewed as having agency in

the research process and maintained ownership of their photographs such that they had the right to decide which images were presented to the public and how their images and voices were represented. Further, for participants with privacy concerns they were able to use pseudonyms and found images rather than personal photographs.

There is also some evidence to suggest that when implementing photovoice with young adults, specific considerations should be made. Young people may be particularly vulnerable as they may underestimate risks associated with taking and circulating photographs (Tremblay et al., 2018; Wang, 2006). Therefore, I clarified risks and steps to mitigate them in consent procedures. Three separate consent forms were used, as recommended by Wang (2006). First, a consent form to participate in the project was reviewed with participants (Appendix B). The second consent form was to be used by participants to secure consent from the subject of their photographs before being photographed (Appendix C). These consent forms were reviewed in detail in the pre-interview meeting to ensure that participants understood potential risks and benefits of participation. All participants opted to use photographs that did not include other people, and some opted to choose images found online rather than personal photographs due to privacy-related concerns. The third consent form allowed youth to consent to have photographs disseminated or displayed (Appendix D). Finally, while it is crucial to examine risks, ethical considerations can also take into account benefits. Research has shown a number of benefits for young adults participating in Photovoice projects, including but not limited to enhanced sense of agency, empowerment, and self-efficacy, building tangible skills (e.g., photography, leadership), and relationship-building (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2019). In this study many participants expressed they enjoyed the interview process and felt it was valuable to be able to share their story.

### Ethical Considerations for Working with Refugee Populations

A central ethical consideration in working with participants with refugee experiences involves recognizing the impact of surviving trauma on the research process (Liamputtong, 2007). This involves preparing for the possibility that discussions may be uncomfortable or emotionally distressing. To mitigate this, I incorporated trauma-informed interviewing strategies, including: ensuring participants were aware they were not required to answer any questions or share about topics they felt uncomfortable with, inviting participants to do interviews in a safe space (including virtual options), attending to non-verbal cues, validating and holding space for emotion, building rapport before asking about more sensitive topics, and allowing space at the end of the interview for participants to debrief with me (Isobel, 2021). As a psychologist I practice from a trauma-informed perspective, and I believe these skills translated well to the interview process. I also ensured that risks were made clear during the informed consent process (Liamputtong, 2007), and had resources available for ongoing support should participants have requested it. It is also important to recognize that research shows the risk of re-traumatization and distress from participating in research interviews is very low (Voith et al., 2020), and the study was framed from a strength-based approach and was not focused on the retelling of traumatic experiences.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical underpinnings of this project and methods used to conduct the research and analyze data. The project was situated within an overarching PR research framework, and a Photovoice method was employed to collect data. Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis and viewed through a transnational feminist lens. The following chapter outlines findings and includes an embedded discussion.

# CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I present findings from interviews with participants. I chose to include a description of findings and embedded the analysis and discussion of the results for cohesiveness. Results address the research question: *What are the strengths, challenges, and needs of refugee women and girls as they transition into post-secondary settings in Canada?* I open with a brief introduction to each of the six participants. Then I delve into challenges faced by participants, followed by strengths they demonstrated, and needs articulated.

## Portraits of Participants

In terms of participant demographics, the age range of participants is 21-30 years, and the mean age is 24.5. All participants are women of colour. Five participants are Muslim and wear a hijab and one participant is Christian. Five participants engaged in some form of language learning programming upon arrival in Canada. All have completed high school or academic upgrading and are either attending post-secondary institutions or have applied for post-secondary programs.

I include brief introductions for each participant to provide context for the findings. Research findings derived using thematic analysis are situated and context-dependent (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and the following vignettes give insight into the stories and experiences of participants and provide a necessary framing for viewing results. All but one participant (Natalia) were available for follow-up and co-authored their introductions. Some details have been masked to protect privacy by participant request. Participants were provided the option to select their own pseudonym or use their real name, and their own words were used when naming their identities. I have also woven in my own reflections on meeting these women, elaborating on the aspects that stood out to me in our conversations.

**Rowley**

Rowley is a 25-year-old who self-identifies as a South-Sudanese woman. She was born in South Sudan and is Christian. She is currently a permanent resident in Canada. Rowley left South Sudan when she was about 11 years old to escape war. She relocated to Kenya on her own, where she lived with her maternal aunt. Her sister and brother remained in South Sudan with her grandmother. In 2016, she attended boarding school in Kenya until she graduated high school in 2019. At this time, she returned to a refugee camp in Kenya where she gained community service hours teaching at a local school. While living in this camp, she applied for a scholarship through the Student Refugee Program at World University Services of Canada (WUSC) to attend university in Canada. She moved to Alberta in 2022 on her own and is currently attending a large university there. She is in her second year studying nutrition and dietetics and hopes to continue her education in pharmacy in the future. She sees herself as a lifelong learner and looks forward to continuing to learn and grow in different ways throughout her life.

The initial interview with Rowley was conducted in-person over two sessions to work around her busy work and class schedule. She came prepared with many photos and videos and was excited to share them with me. As she looked at her images, she was able to connect with and talk about the emotions they evoked for her. I was struck by her willingness to be vulnerable in the interview setting, as well as her remarkable ability to articulate complex emotions with vivid detail and profound insight, capturing the nuances of her experiences. What stood out to me from our interviews was the depth of loneliness she experienced in her transition to life in Canada, along with her ability to persevere in the face of obstacles.

**Sophia**

Sophia is 30 years old, and she self-identifies as a woman. She was born in East Africa and lived there with her family until about 18 years old. She is Muslim and wears a hijab. She is

a Canadian citizen. Prior to moving to Canada, Sophia relocated from East Africa to a Middle Eastern country on her own to pursue an undergraduate degree there. While living there she learned to speak Arabic. Sophia came to Canada through a refugee sponsorship program to attend university. Upon arrival in Canada, she opted to spend several months strengthening her English language skills. She then applied and was accepted to a graduate program. She is currently pursuing her PhD.

When I met Sophia, she was preparing for her PhD candidacy exam. Her dedication to her schooling was clear, along with her enthusiasm for her research area. We connected over our shared experiences as PhD students, both the challenges and excitement of being at this stage in our educational journeys. In our interviews she was thoughtful in her responses, reflecting not only on her own experiences but also of those around her. She spoke with intentionality about sensitive topics, recognizing the weight of her words, and checked to ensure that I had understood and would represent her statements accurately. Her commitment to her schooling and her intelligence and humour was particularly evident in our time together.

**Amna**

Amna is 23 years old and self-identifies as a woman. She was born in Syria. She is Muslim and wears a hijab. She left Syria in 2011 after the start of the civil war to seek safety in Lebanon with her family. She lived in Lebanon for about 5 years. Her family applied to migrate with UNHCR and was offered to come to Canada through the Government-Assisted Refugee program. This application took about a year and a half to process. Amna completed grade 7 in Syria but was unable to continue schooling once the war started and was unable to resume schooling in Lebanon due to cost and lack of government support for refugees. While in Lebanon she was employed and earned money to help to support her family. In 2017 she moved to Canada

with her parents and several of her siblings. She was 17 years old at the time and did not speak any English. When she arrived in Canada, Amna attended high school and learned English. After 2 years in high school, she took English language learning courses and academic upgrading. She is now transferring into a post-secondary program and hopes to pursue a career in dental technology.

Amna and I scheduled our meetings between her classes. We were introduced through her involvement in a previous research project on psychosocial adaptation and she shared with me that she was glad to participate in another research project. She was kind and generous, both with her time and with her expressions of gratitude for the opportunity to be involved. She shared with me her experiences in Canadian schools and of learning English in school. She went above and beyond to make sure I understood this experience, and even sent me a paper she had written about learning English. I was struck in particular by her dynamic and spirited nature and her optimistic outlook.

**Linna**

Linna is a 21-year-old who self-identifies as a woman. She was born in Eritrea. She is a Muslim and wears a hijab. She left Eritrea at age 4 and moved to Sudan with her mother, while her father moved shortly after. When she was 16, she moved to Canada with her family (parents and siblings) as a refugee. She came through the private sponsorship program, sponsored by a family member living in Canada. Upon arriving in Canada, she needed to learn English and took English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes in high school. She speaks Tigrinya, Arabic, and English. She is enrolled in post-secondary to pursue a career as a lab technician; however, she is currently taking a semester off to work full-time due to financial pressures.

Linna heard about this study from a friend and expressed eagerness to participate. When

we first met, her friendly nature stood out to me. She spoke with the openness and genuineness of someone who had known me much longer. Her care for her community shone through in our conversations, as she discussed her involvement in initiatives to support newcomers in the cultural and academic communities she is a part of. She seemed able to handle setbacks with grace and maintained a positive outlook even as we discussed more difficult topics.

**Mira**

Mira is a 23-year-old, who self-identifies as a woman. She is Muslim and wears a hijab. Mira was born in Syria and was about 10 years old when civil war broke out in her country. She left Syria with her family and sought refuge in Jordan. She shared that Jordan felt safer than Syria, and people spoke the same language, however she had to repeat grade 6 and found school very different. When Mira was in grade 12 in Jordan, she learned that she and her family would be moving to Canada through the Government-Assisted Refugee Program. Mira was 18 when she arrived in Canada, and initially settled in a small town in Alberta. She was placed in grade 10 and had to learn English when she arrived. After a year, she moved to a larger city with her family to pursue higher education and for her family members to find better employment opportunities. Mira got her high school diploma in 2021 and started her post-secondary program in Fall 2022. She hopes to pursue a career as a dental technologist.

Mira and I first met in early 2020 through a mutual friend and colleague. I met with Mira and a few of her friends after school to discuss ideas for my doctoral research. It was through this conversation and others like it that the idea for my research project was first developed. Mira was eager to be a part of the project and shared how she felt it might positively impact her community. Unfortunately, the project was delayed several years due to the COVID pandemic, however Mira remained eager to participate. In our conversations, she was thoughtful and

curious, and shared insightful reflections on her experiences. Her hopefulness was contagious, and I left our meetings feeling excited about the research process and potential outcomes.

**Natalia**

Natalia is 25 years old and self-identifies as a woman. She is of Middle Eastern descent and was born in Syria. She is Muslim and wears a hijab. She is a Canadian citizen. Natalia was about 11 years old when civil war broke out in Syria and was unable to continue attending school at this time due to safety risks. She migrated to Turkey in 2012 with her immediate family to escape the civil war. She had to learn Turkish when she moved. She attended school in Turkey, graduating from high school in 2016 and starting college in 2017. In 2018, Natalia came to Canada with her family through the Government-Assisted Refugee program and began learning English. She was 21 at the time and therefore was unable to attend high school due to age limit policies, so she took a language learning program through a local college for two years and then did academic upgrading. She has now applied for post-secondary schooling in pharmacy technician and dental technician diploma programs.

Natalia and I first met on a particularly cold and snowy day. We met virtually and lamented the challenges of living in such a cold part of the world. Natalia used humour and communicated with directness and a great deal of insight. What struck me most in our interview was her reiteration of her gratitude and her determination to persevere through challenging times. She emphasized she was grateful to be here and that life in Canada was good, despite my questioning about the challenges she encountered.

## The Viewing: Situating Findings

As discussed in the previous chapter, results were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These authors differentiate between domain summaries and

themes, such that domain summaries are structured around a central topic and themes are structured around shared meaning. I analyzed findings from a transnational feminist lens (Zerbe Enns et al., 2020). Below is a chart detailing the findings.

**Table 3**

*Research Findings*

| **Topic area: Challenges** | |
|---|---|
| **Themes** | **Sub-themes** |
| 1. Geographic Transition: Recognizing Losses and Beginning Again | a. Loss and Leaving Behind Family, Home, and Way of Life<br>i. Family separation<br>b. Everything is New in Canada<br>i. First experience of winter analogy<br>c. Emotional Adjustment: Hopeful, Overwhelmed, Grateful<br>d. Mental Health Struggles Post-Migration<br>i. Recognition of mental health challenges<br>ii. Factors impacting help-seeking |
| 2. Cultural Transition: Culture of Freedom, Independence, and Isolation | a. Formalized Learning of Canadian Culture<br>b. Layered Culture of Independence<br>c. The Contradiction of Freedom for a Religious Woman in Canada |
| 3. Social Transition: Unveiling Discrimination | a. Initial Perspectives: Freedom from Overt Discrimination<br>b. Insidious Nature of Discrimination<br>c. Multiple Marginalizations |
| 4. Academic Transition: Systemic Barriers in the Education System | a. Burden of Language Learning: ELL Students Work Twice as Hard<br>i. Emotional toll of language barriers<br>b. Inconsistent Post-Secondary Admission |

| | Policies |
|---|---|
| **Topic Area: Responses to Challenges: Strengths & Needs** | |
| **Themes** | **Sub-themes** |
| 5. I Can do it Myself: Individual Agency | a. Determination and Tenacity: Just Keep Going<br>b. Self-Reliance and Self-Advocacy: You Are on Your Own<br>c. Resistance: Pushing Back Against Barriers |
| 6. Holding Hope During Flight and Resettlement | a. Migration and the Mutability of Hope<br>b. Education as a Primary Source of Hope |
| 7. Life is about Social Connections: Centrality of Community | a. Navigating Belonging<br>b. Relational Supports |

In the following sections, I discuss each theme along with interpretations. I have organized findings around seven key themes. I begin by presenting these themes, then consider them in the context of the educational transitions undergone by participants. In presenting the results, I will begin with themes that highlight challenges faced by participants. Next, I will move to themes that highlight responses to challenges, framing them from the perspective of individual responses (strengths) and systemic responses (needs). Several participant images are included in the following sections, and all are included in Appendix G. Images that were sourced online were replaced with hand-drawn diagrams due to copyright.

## Challenges

### Geographic Transition: Recognizing Losses and Beginning Again

This theme describes participants' experiences transitioning geographically. While the focus of the study is on educational transitions, all participants spoke about navigating aspects of

geographic transitions as an important contextual factor influencing their educational transitions. They viewed their transition experience holistically; as Rowley described, "everything falls under me being here for school. So… experiences, all the other things that came with it. They are all part of my transitioning here". These experiences appear to be inextricably connected, and to ignore the geographic transition would be to overlook meaningful aspects informing educational transitions among refugee women. The sub-themes that follow describe various challenges participants encountered in their geographical transition, and connections are made to educational transitions. These challenges are viewed and analyzed from a transnational feminist perspective.

***Loss and Leaving Behind Family, Home, and Way of Life***

All participants noted challenges related to the geographic transition and these challenges differed somewhat based on country of origin. The three participants from Syria spoke about the challenges of living through war, and described how their lives were interrupted by war. For example, a significant source of distress was not being able to go to school. Natalia shared:

> I stopped going to school in my country, I was disappointed and depression. Because like in, my mother, I told my family there is no future for me. And I can't go to school, my father told me, "It's really dangerous, if you want, go, but I can't let you go, it's really dangerous" so I was disappointed and depression, I felt like my dream, there is no more hope to continue, I'm just staying in my home and doing nothing.

Participants also spoke about losing their homeland, acknowledging that their home country no longer exists as it did pre-war, that few family members and friends remained in their country of origin, and that they have no option to go back home. For several participants, the migration experience was marked with social losses, including losing their homes, communities, friends,

and family. Amna shared the following:

> Speaking for myself, I left everything behind me. Friends, family, home, childhood memories. I took a one-way but I didn't know what will be the end of the way. I came, with a little stuff, and with my family. And I don't know what I was doing. I was lost. So it describes that I left everything behind me, and I am just walking, but I don't know where.

Here Amna sheds light on the vastness of her loss, having to leave behind everything she knew with no expectation to return ("I took a one-way"). Some participants also described more subtle losses, such as loss of connection to their culture and language. Rowley described beginning to forget her first language, "For me now I am even starting to forget some words because I rarely talk with people using that language", and a lack of access to cultural foods:

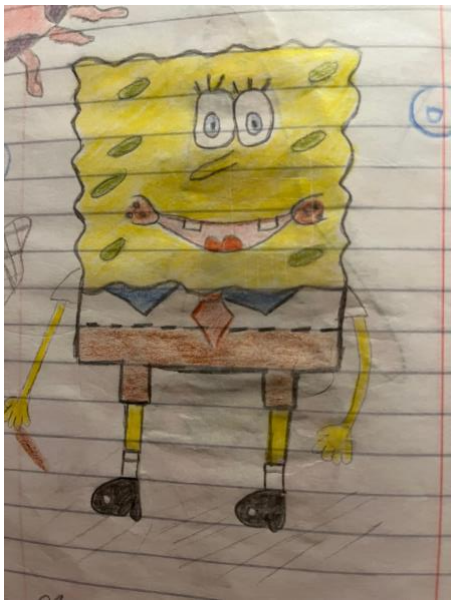
> You go to the cafeteria and you see the things they have cooked and you don't know anything, or if you know something they have cooked it differently. Yeah. So, that one was much of a challenge for me. And you cannot … there are no equipment for making you traditional meals, and looking for maize flour like actually looks like the one back home that you can use to make your traditional meal.

Natalia discussed exposure to violence, and her subsequent use of coping strategies. She shared the following about her photograph (Figure 2):

> There was no electricity, and I was not able to go to school because it was really dangerous to go to school so I stopped to go. So for that reason, my favourite hobby is drawing. So I used to keep myself always busy. I heard the explosion, always, everyday. I was scared! So I found it the best way to keep myself busy so I draw a lot of animation.

**Figure 2**

*Natalia: Cartoon Drawing from Time in Syria*



As such, she and other participants utilized strategies like distraction and relying on parents and family members to provide some sense of safety. Natalia's photograph (Figure 2) was of a drawing she did as a child during the war in Syria. She chose to draw characters from television shows she used to watch as a child, recreating the characters she was no longer able to watch. The childlike quality of the drawing is a stark contrast to the violence Natalia described witnessing at the time, and she shared that she used drawing to escape or avoid thinking about what was happening around her. This can be viewed as an example of acting with agency, an idea that was highlighted by several participants as they described their attempts to cope. Here agency refers to the ability to define and act on goals using means available to them (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). This will be discussed further in the strengths/needs section below.

**Family Separation.** All participants also referred to the impacts of family separation.

Four participants came to Canada with their families, while two came alone through a program sponsoring refugee students. Those who came with family spoke about this as one of the most important sources of support. They shared that family provided emotional and practical support, and kept them connected to their language and culture. Family offered a sense of safety and stability for them. Mira described "I am really grateful for them. My mom was really supportive. Sometimes I came and cried, 'school is hard for me I can't do it' but she kept telling me to go forward, to do the best". Mira was able to turn to her mother when she needed encouragement to persevere and she described it was helpful to know that her mother believed in her as this allowed her to believe in herself.

Those who came without family (Rowley and Sophia) shared that the lack of practical support made it more challenging to keep up with their studies. For example, having no option to take time off work during busier times of the academic year due to financial pressures, having no one to cook for them, or encourage them in the way that Mira had described. Both Rowley and Sophia also shared that refugee students who come alone face the additional challenge of having to financially support their families (also known as remittances). That is, they have the sole responsibility of sending financial support home while also trying to keep up with a full academic schedule. Sophia aptly described the challenge of navigating these two demands as a refugee student:

> The other thing that I wanted to maybe, highlight is that a lot of refugee students here have families back home. So, one factor is that you are not here that long, you still also worry about your family back home, their wellbeing, sometimes their financial status. So you still try to help them. So it's kinda like something that a lot of refugee students face, I know at least a few students who tried to take a break from their education to support their families

because they couldn't, really, like keep studying and helping the family. So it is something that is cultural. It is cultural. We know that our families are there and we have to help them. So, it is not that it is only you and transitioning, it's you and also trying to help your family.

This is an additional responsibility that many of their peers do not have to face, however Sophia was clear that she does not view this as a burden, but rather something she wants to be able to do. For others however, the pressure to provide this financial support can be overwhelming. For example, Rowley shared that to cope with this challenge, she focused on herself and connected less with family, further compounding the sense of loneliness she had described. This responsibility to provide support to family members is a common experience among newcomers, but pressures may particularly be felt by women due to gendered expectations that they be caretakers for family (Espín & Dottolo, 2019). Financial support may be viewed as a form of care that women can provide for families when they are abroad and are not able to fulfill other care needs or tasks that they had formerly taken on.

***Loss and Leaving Behind Family, Home, and Way of Life: Analysis***

This sub-theme and its focus on losses highlights part of what differentiates the experiences of refugees from that of other newcomers. Much has been written about the refugee experience of severed ties to homeland, but from a transnational feminist perspective these losses must be considered in light of gender, race, age, class, and immigration status. For instance, regarding immigration status, transnational connections among those migrating can offer a source of support, particularly in a society where newcomers feel a lack of belonging (Espín & Dottolo, 2019). The weakening or severing of these connections among refugees as described by participants can lead to not only feelings of grief and loss but also leave them less supported than other newcomers.

The experience of loss and family separation can also be considered through a gendered lens, notably illustrated through participants' discussion of remittances. Remittances are a growing source of income for families in developing countries, often providing some financial stability in the face of natural disasters, war, or in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ratha, 2023). While newcomers regardless of gender are often expected to or have a desire to send remittances, this issue is gendered in many ways. Both in Canada and internationally the burden of care falls disproportionally on women (Government of Canada, 2023). For women who are separated from their families in conflict settings or transition countries, their ability to fulfill the gendered expectation of caretaking is hampered and they may attempt to find other ways to provide care and support and for some this may be in the form of remittances, though this is not equally distributed across genders. Globally female migrants tend to earn lower wages and send a larger portion of their income to their home countries, despite the increased likelihood that as compared to men their wages were more negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bosch & Mavrotas, 2022).

For participants in the current study, sending remittances is further complicated by their position as students. Many newcomer students hold part-time employment while in school and have difficulties balancing employment and academic work (e.g., Naidoo, 2021), yet the stakes are often higher for those who are working to support themselves and their families. Sending remittances can be an important way to maintain relationships (Bosch & Mavrotas, 2022) and these relationships are a protective factor in buffering the stressors of migration and educational transitions (e.g., Panter-Brick et al, 2018). This can put them in a difficult position, wherein a choice to pursue employment over education could allow them to support their families more readily, yet it would take them further away from their educational goals. This example speaks to

the need to consider refugee women's intersecting identities to better understand the impact of losses and the new roles that they may be taking on as refugee students.

Even as participants discussed losses, they also shared the things that kept them going, and for many it was hope for a better future. For example, Rowley shared:

> It is just crucial to realize that it is a normal human feeling, feeling lonely, you miss your home, you miss your people, but sometimes it is good to know that it is for a good cause. You came to study, just try to put everything back, you are going to visit them or they are going to visit you at one point in time. It is just a matter of time.

This will be discussed further in the section on responses to challenges, however it is important to note that in these discussions, participants did not seem to dwell on their challenges, rather they presented them alongside the things they did to cope with these challenges. This is in contrast to much of the literature on the experiences of refugee youth and young people, which tends to centralize the losses and trauma and their impacts on refugee mental health (Yohani, 2020b). The picture painted by participants in the current study is one of agency, such that the experience of loss was inextricably connected to coping and moving forward. The next sub-themes focus on participants' experiences upon arrival in Canada. Their experiences differed based on their entry pathway, however there were some commonalities, described in the following sub-themes.

***Everything is New in Canada***

Many participants discussed the unfamiliarity of life in Canada. Several likened the experience to being a newborn baby, including Amna who stated "It feels like you are a newborn baby but with an adult body. Learning every step needs to be going on with your new life" and Rowley who shared "when you are in a new place you are like a newborn, you don't know

anything. It is like you are blind totally". This language paints a clear picture of beginning again, but also hints at a feeling of helplessness that necessitates involvement of others.

This sub-theme also speaks to the inseparability of various transitions. While this sub-theme is included under geographic transition, participants highlighted that part of what makes the integration experience so challenging is that they are undergoing multiple transitions at once, including in geographic, social, cultural, and educational domains. Sophia shared, "there is a phase that you have to come home and think of all the information that you collected. So, this is the phase that you are feeling 'Oh this is too much! Too much, too much!'…" Sophia came to Canada through a program sponsoring refugee students and was expected to begin school shortly after she arrived, creating a significant time pressure. However, she was well-resourced. On the other hand, for participants who arrived through the GAR pathway this transition may have been even more difficult due to lack of readily available supports and clear direction regarding navigating educational settings. Amna described:

> The hard part was overthinking if I would be, go through all the difficulties without having any someone support me emotionally or physically. You know. Like when you came here everyone is focusing on their life, and trying to achieve something, but when you came here and you went through all of the difficulties you say "oh my god, I need support, I am really tired, I need someone to give me a plan, what I have to do, how I have to speak, learn the language, communicate with others, building my life from zero".

Here Amna highlights the lack of direction she received in the school system and in integrating more broadly. She is faced with the challenge of navigating unfamiliar systems in an unfamiliar language and speaks to the overwhelming nature of this task, particularly as she is expected to do it alone. This suggests a need for a clarification of educational pathways available to refugee

students and assistance in selecting a pathway that fits best for the individual student, a sentiment that is reflected in the broader literature on refugee resettlement and educational transition. For example, studies highlight refugee students face barriers to accessing information and support that would facilitate their transition to post-secondary settings (Bajwa et al., 2017; Ramsay & Baker, 2019).

**First Experience of Winter Analogy.** When describing their initial adjustment to life in Canada, most participants discussed their first experience of winter. In many ways, this discussion mirrored participants' descriptions of their experiences of life in Canada more broadly. Most participants described an initial awe and wonder upon arrival which began to fade and was replaced with frustration and anguish as the realities of challenges and barriers set in. Invariably, they mentioned initial excitement at the first sign of winter. Rowley shared "it was cold but I couldn't feel it because I was happy". This eventually faded as the challenges of navigating Canadian winters became clear. Some of the challenges of winter described by participants were physical in nature, such as dealing with the discomfort of the cold, others were practical, such as difficulty with mobility (delayed buses, dangerous driving conditions) and the financial burdens of acquiring winter clothing. Other challenges were emotional, such as maintaining hope and optimism during long, dark, cold winters. For most, this then gives way to a balancing of one's perspective, acceptance of difficulty and factors outside of one's control, and new learnings about how to navigate the current conditions, climate-wise and generally. Rowley described her image (Figure 3):

> It is going to be like part of my life forever. I am here, a permanent resident, and that was my first time experiencing snow, and probably every other subsequent snowfall is going to be a part of me, like my new life.

They also shared that there is no substitute for learning through personal experience. Sophia shared: “I think it is experience. Although we got warnings when the weather is extreme, please don’t stay outside. At the first time it happens to you, you don’t really know what it means”. She makes clear that although others can offer advice, to some extent you must go through it yourself to fully understand the experience.

**Figure 3**

*Rowley: First Experience of Winter*

***Everything is New in Canada: Analysis***

The psychological experience of newness and unfamiliarity within refugee transition is well-documented in the literature. These findings illustrate an important component to this experience which is the simultaneous desire for help in mapping the integration process and educational transitions, coupled with the idea that personal experience, developing familiarity, and “going through it” oneself is the only way to really move through this transition. Participants are illustrating here the shift towards an individualistic approach to navigating integration espoused in Western hegemonic views (Savaş & Dutt, 2023), but also voicing a desire for help and support that they found to be largely unavailable or falling short when it did exist. This is a

common motif across findings and will be elaborated on throughout this chapter. The next section discusses emotional adjustment in greater detail.

***Emotional Adjustment: Hopeful, Overwhelmed, Grateful***

All participants spoke to their emotional adjustment upon arriving in Canada. All described feeling mixed emotions upon arrival. For example, Sophia's image (Figure 4) highlights the mix of emotions she felt upon arrival in Canada. She elaborated on this in our interview:

> Interviewer: When you look at these pictures, can you tell me, what do you see in these pictures?
>
> Sophia: Okay, great question. I see in this picture a refugee student who is starting to travel to Canada and during the travel and the transition period, they are facing a lot of emotions. As you can see, the first time when you are travelling, all your focus is just to keep your travel documents safe, to just to have everything there. And once you land - well when you are on board you are so excited. Really. This phase, excited phase, that you are so excited that you are gonna go to a new country and start a new life, and start to be educated. And, you know, you are really excited. Just excitation mode. And then... there is another phase that comes slowly, which is the worried phase. And you just start to worry about everything. Like, oh, how life is gonna be. How am I gonna handle all of this, like, life change and transition that I am doing. Am I gonna be succeeding in my studies. Am I gonna be, like ... all, those future perspectives come to your mind and you are so worried. Then you get to this phase, which is the hopeful and optimism state. Which is the phase of oh everything will be okay. Everything will be going smoothly. You will get a lot of support, you will get a lot of help. You will go through it. So, it is kind of like hopeful and optimistic phase. And then the

> last one, which is like you really, now, are in Canada and you have to start the actual life here. And you start doing that phase of okay, now, where do I start. Where do I start. Okay. I know there were a lot of help and support at the beginning, but you still feel like, as a person, because you just transitioned, you still have to figure out what you are gonna do, how you are gonna deal with this stuff, with a lot of change. This is kind of like the transitions of the phases and emotions felt during the transition.

Sophia's story vividly paints the experience of initial arrival with its emotional ebbs and flows and allows the reader to feel along with her. She described both practical details of the transition (e.g., travel documents) along with the larger sense of the experience (e.g., starting a new life) and the need to balance each of these. Several other participants spoke about similar emotions to Sophia, including feeling hopeful, optimistic, and excited upon arriving as illustrated by Natalia in this quote:

> Moving to Canada was a dream for me. Because, yeah, I heard about a lot of beautiful things about Canada, I had the opportunity if I came to Canada, there is a lot of things to do, there is a future here. In Turkey, there is no future even if I graduated from high school, even if I went to college, but there is no future for me, especially I am a refugee. They told me like there is no future for you. Because yeah, I think you understand that way. When I moved to Canada I told my family there is a hope in my heart, I can keep myself going, I can continue my future here! There is a future here in Canada if I study, I graduated, I went to college, so I can build a new life here! The people here is so friendly, I appreciate everything here. I'm so thankful for all people here in Canada.

Perceived ease of access to education seemed to spark feelings of hope and excitement for participants along with a warm reception from Canadian people. On the other hand, upon arrival

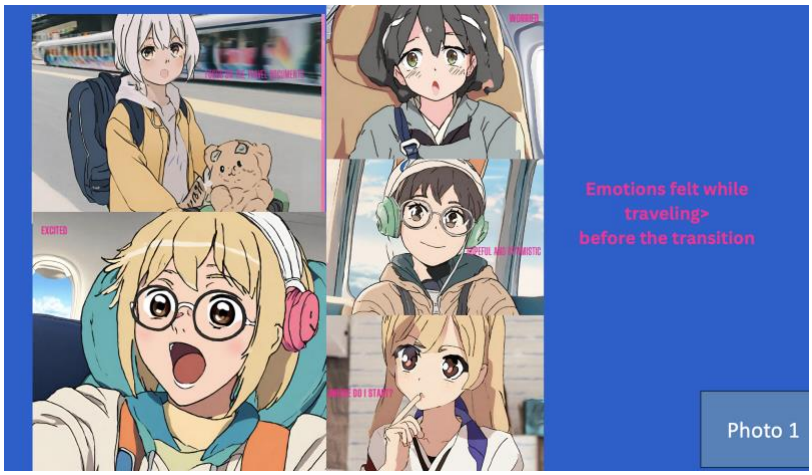
several participants also shared that they felt worried, overwhelmed, and even a sense of despair. Amna described:

> I was overwhelmed, because why I have to do this, why I am here? Why God gave me this country? Why I left my country? Why everything happened to me, what happened in my country? Why I should everyday fight and then what I will have in the future.

As seen here, Amna find herself facing existential questions. She is trying to make sense of her experience and the transition to a new country, and the enormity of these questions are overwhelming. Not surprisingly then, she also shared a need for emotional support in particular, "when you came here and you went through all of the difficulties you say 'oh my god, I need support, I am really tired, I need someone to give me a plan'" and she added "I got support physically. I got support, money. But something emotional [was missing]".

**Figure 4**

*Sophia: Collage of Mixed Emotions*




***Emotional Adjustment: Analysis***

The juxtaposition of gratitude as shown in Natalia's quote alongside the challenges that at times felt insurmountable as described by Amna and portrayed in Sophia's images warrants attention. Considering these differences, it may be important to interrogate the conditions that

prompted the expression of gratitude, including potential power imbalances in the research interview that mirror power imbalances in society (Hyndman & Giles, 2016). It is possible that some participants may not have felt they were able to be openly critical of systems in Canada, out of fear of being identified or even perhaps offending me or other Canadians. This concern with being openly critical was evident in Sophia's interview, when she asked me to omit a particular story that could have been seen as a systemic criticism. Hyndman and Giles (2016) also highlight that for many refugees there exists a view that they are benefitting from resettlement in Canada and therefore are beholden to an unspoken expectation that they portray gratitude. This expectation may apply in particular to women and from an intersectional perspective, it may be important to consider how multiple marginalizations, including racial, religious, and gendered may differentially impact refugees in upholding an image of being grateful (Hyndman & Giles, 2016; Paz & Kook, 2021).

Participants seemed to be aware of this view of themselves as beneficiaries. For example, Amna shared that she was approached by a woman who told her to leave the country, and her response was: "I am not that person. I came here and I will work. And even I will pay the tax, I will help the new people, the newcomers when they come. I will do everything so the life it is balanced". She alluded to the pressure she felt to give back in return for what she has received as a newcomer. Amna's experience sheds light on the impact of xenophobia present in Canadian society and potential safety risks that can occur as a result. Alarmingly, hate crimes in Canada increased by 72% between 2020 and 2021 largely on the basis of religion, sexual orientation, and race (Ndegwa & McDonald, 2023). Being faced with xenophobia and related safety threats can put pressure on women to present positive representations of Islam, women, and refugees to counteract negative media or public representations (Miled, 2020). For many, this may

unfortunately mean restricting their responses to highlight more positive emotions such as hope and gratitude and aligning with the view that they are indeed beneficiaries of Canadian generosity and perpetuate the feeling that they need to repay this in some way.

The idea of refugees as beneficiaries is also present in Canadian policy, positioning Canadian refugee policies as benevolent and furthering the notion that by accepting refugees into Canada they are being rescued from unsafe and unstable conditions, in contrast to economic migrants who are seen as contributing to Canadian society (Viczko & Matsumoto, 2022). This contributes to the "othering" of these individuals, again particularly those whose minoritized identities may be more visible. The visibility of Muslim women's identities is described further in the social transition theme; however, it is crucial to note the role that gender and race play in participants emotional adjustment. The expectation of gratitude and lack of safety to express discontent can mean that for refugee women of colour these challenges unfortunately often go unnamed and unaddressed.

### *Mental Health Struggles Post-Migration*

**Recognition of Mental Health Challenges.** Four participants discussed mental health in the context of educational transitions. Each described that the challenges they encountered led to impacts on mood. Rowley and Sophia both shared that they began to experience depressed mood as a result of isolation. Sophia shared "when you are really busy, busy with the studies, your social integration becomes less. More isolated, and that comes with maybe some kind of like, depressing mood sometimes". Rowley contrasted the vibrant and connected nature of life in East Africa to a more isolated life in Canada, "coming here, you don't hear anything. Almost like going into depression because it is just you and silence, nothing else". Amna described feeling anguish upon initial arrival, "I was overwhelmed, because why I have to do this, why I am

here?" and Mira described impacts to her mood as follows: "So I was doing the final exams and I was on the LRT and it was really cold. I was almost depressed". Evident in each of these descriptions is that mental health and mood struggles seem to be brought on by challenges encountered in their current environment. This runs counter to the idea that refugee students' mental health concerns are related to traumatic experiences in their countries of origin and challenges the stereotype of the traumatized victim (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021).

**Factors Impacting Help-Seeking.** Despite the recognition of challenges related to mental health and mood, none of the participants in this study sought mental health support themselves for various reasons. Mira shared that in the aftermath of a natural disaster in her country of origin she was interested in accessing supports offered through school, however her class schedule prevented this, and services were not offered outside of school hours. She suggested that mental health supports in the immediate aftermath would have been nice to have but did not feel compelled to seek them out on her own.

Rowley shared that she talked to her physician about feeling tired and her physician suspected these symptoms may have been due to stress or depression. She elaborated that despite her doctor's suggestion to seek mental health support through the university counselling centre she opted not to go: "if I have to seek a therapist, or mental health specialist, I will feel like I'm mad and the thought will stress me even more. So I was trying to convince myself that I was okay". She describes here how her view of herself, and others view of her would potentially be impacted if others in her community found out she was seeking support. She is also alluding to her conceptualization of mental health problems, suggesting that if she sought support this would mean she is "mad". Previous research has demonstrated higher rates of mental health stigma among racial and ethnic minorities in North America (Misra et al., 2021) and while in part this

could be due to differing cultural conceptualizations of mental health and illness not reflected in Western views of mental health (Atilola, 2016), other factors may play a role too. Among groups who are already marginalized such as young women with refugee backgrounds, there may be fear of further marginalization or lack of trust in the healthcare system to adequately address their needs (Wells et al., 2020).

Indeed, Rowley described the worry that she would not be understood, or that there was nothing useful that could be offered through seeking supports of this type. In her words:

> I knew deep down that the doctor may not understand. And even if they understand, they may not have the solutions. And even if they have the solutions, I might not apply them because they don't apply to my situations. Because, they might tell me: sleep early. … I don't know what else they can tell me. But I feel like sleep cannot come if I am still thinking. [laughs]. And they cannot stop me from thinking. It is only me that can stop myself from thinking.

Rowley's statement suggests a need for both understanding and relevant solutions, and her view that neither would be available to her through conventional mental health supports. Rowley's comment that "It is only me that can stop myself from thinking" alludes to both the external nature of the problems she is facing and the sense that if one cannot change the external conditions she must put on a show of strength and get through them herself. This perspective is shared by other participants, who noted that although they recognize the importance of mental health supports for others, they did not perceive themselves as needing them or having the potential to benefit from them, particularly as they had other supports in place. Natalia said: "I didn't think about the mental health. Because I just keep my mind always positive. I told you, God [is] with me so I'm good. And my family supported me a lot. So I am good with them".

These statements may suggest a need to re-conceptualize how mental health is viewed and provided within post-secondary settings. Indeed, refugee women's decisions not to seek mental health support is well-documented in the literature along with recommendations that more social and community-based supports that exist outside the medical model may better meet the needs of this group (Agha et al., 2024).

### *Mental Health Struggles Post-Migration: Analysis*

Viewing refugee women's mental health from an intersectional feminist lens, it may be important to further interrogate why services in their current form are not being accessed and not considered a fit for these women, despite their recognition that they are experiencing mental health impacts. The medical model of mental health situates the problem within the individual, and the participants in the current study have shared that the factors contributing to these challenges are largely environmental, demonstrating a lack of fit between the needs and resources provided. Further, findings in the current study speak to the impact of post-migration stressors, while much of the research on refugee mental health treatment focuses on pre-migration trauma. The tendency to focus on pre-migration trauma in treatment settings may lead to a lack of attention to post-migration factors including economic hardships, racism, and discrimination that play a role in refugee mental health (Andisha & Lueger-Schuster, 2024; Goodkind et al., 2021;Yohani, 2020b). These post-migration factors can themselves contribute to mental health concerns or exacerbate the impacts of pre-migration trauma. As such, it is essential that providers of mental health care are attuned to their clients' conceptualization of the problem and can address it in a culturally relevant way. In a healthcare setting, this could involve the use of tools such as Kleinman's protocol (Kleinman et al., 1978) that elicit clients' understanding of their concerns and ways to address them.

Rowley's and Natalia's perspectives also highlight important considerations for mental health services aimed at supporting the needs of refugee students and suggest that resources beyond conventional counselling such as family, community, and spirituality may be considered equally important mental health supports. I delve into these considerations in greater detail in the implications section.

## Cultural Transition: Culture of Freedom, Independence, and Isolation

In this theme, participants spoke in-depth about the cultural transition they underwent as they integrated in Canada. This seemed to be an important part of the resettlement process for them affecting multiple areas of their lives. The sub-themes below describe participants' reflections on navigating cultural differences and the impacts on educational transitions.

### *Learning Canadian Culture*

Participants described a number of cultural differences between Canada and their countries of origin. Linna, Mira, and Amna referred to experiencing "culture shock" upon arrival in Canada. Linna's image (Figure 5) illustrates her experience upon arrival, such that not only did she have to navigate differences between her culture of origin and Canadian culture, she was also surprised by the cultural diversity present in Canada. When describing her image, she shared the following:

> So the picture, I would say, there's lots of differences, like multicultural people here. It's different than I'm used to before. Because when I used to be [in] high school in Sudan, it's like we're all the same like there is no people from other cultures, you know. I would be the only different person that, coming from a different place was immigrant to Sudan. But here, like there was like from everywhere, people from everywhere. Yeah, which is which is good, which is like, I like having to know more people different people than we used to

be before. But yeah, like, it's different.

She shared that in general she viewed this diversity positively, but it was the unexpected nature that made it challenging to navigate. She described that although she expected some differences between her life in Sudan and in Canada, she was shocked by the extent to which life was different and noted that orientation received through school along with community support from was helpful in settling.

**Figure 5**

*Linna: Culture Shock*


Other participants shared Linna's view that life in Canada was different than expected and discussed feeling some bewilderment upon arrival. Several participants suggested it may be helpful to take a course on Canadian customs and common practices to ease this aspect of the transition. For example, Natalia shared:

> Every country has their own culture. So, it's really helpful for them, if some people teach the newcomers the culture. This is a rule, the rule of Canada. So when I came I didn't know every rule here. So the rule is important to learn here.

Several participants had similar recommendations for formalized learning opportunities regarding Canadian culture.

### *Learning Canadian Culture: Analysis*

Several participants referenced the unspoken cultural "rules" that newcomers are often unaware of. Not adhering to these cultural rules can make visible their newness and create a sense of not belonging. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital may offer a framework for understanding the culture-related concerns discussed by participants. Cultural capital refers to the cultural knowledge, skills, and behaviours that an individual has and can use to gain or maintain social status (Bourdieu, 1997). Not having ready access to these cultural "rules" could be viewed as a lack of cultural capital, which impacts their ability to access social power. Interestingly, pursuing education at the post-secondary level can be conceptualized as a method of building cultural capital (Akua-Sakyiwah, 2016).

### *Layered Culture of Independence*

While participants articulated several cultural differences, a common reflection was around the culture of independence and valuing of productivity and busy-ness in Canada. For example, Linna shared "life is there like more slower [in Eritrea] than here. Here's everything like fast fast, you know". In her follow-up interview, she shared that she is considering returning to Eritrea in part due to greater feelings of peace and calm experiences while visiting there.

Indeed, the culture of independence seems to be a layered experience, such that it is particularly prevalent in post-secondary settings. While there has been some research demonstrating the value of post-secondary settings as a source of community (Edge et al., 2014; Yohani & Okeke-Ihejirika, 2018), participants in the current study seemed to have a different experience. They spoke about the culture of independence in post-secondary settings, wherein they felt isolated and had few opportunities to connect with peers and build community. For example, Rowley shared the following about her experience in university classes: "You can't

even make friends. How are you going to pick out one person out of 400? Like come on. I've seen you, can we be friends? No, it doesn't make sense. Sometimes you just do your thing and go". When asked further about building community on campus, she shared:

> Maybe I wasn't oriented into it much, but I never made an effort to know the different kinds of communities like activities that are in the campus. So, I came to find out about the poetry club, there are so many clubs in the school which you can join, interact, showcase whatever you have. I am really good with poetry, so that is something I might have missed. Had I made an effort from the beginning, I would have been part of a community. With the things I have seen on the campus side, I think they have tried to build community. But it was a failure on my side, I didn't try to venture into those things.

Rowley and other participants noted the options to join clubs on campus, but shared that they did not join for several reasons, including lack of time available due to academic and work demands, and lack of awareness regarding what is available.

Participants also shared that the help-seeking structure in post-secondary settings follows a similarly independent and isolating structure. Rowley compared the relational supports she received in a transition country:

> Here, the lecturer just comes and talk, talk, talk, and if you don't go follow up, study for yourself, review, all that, you may not pass. But back home, sometimes a teacher can call you in your home and ask you, did you do this or that. If you are close with the teacher they can really help you. You can even be going to their home. And they help you.

Similarly, in her description of her image (Figure 6) Mira shared the following about the transition from high school to post-secondary: "They have different classes, even the students there are mature, and the, even the teachers there, they aren't, they help you but not like when

you were in high school. You need to do your own thing in the college". She also shared differences in how she interacted with her friends: "in high school there are friend groups who are willing to help each other. But, in colleges people tend to be more independent and do their own things". She shared that she acclimatized to this and began to take a more individualized approach to her studies. This theme highlights two comparisons participants are making, comparisons between Canadian education systems and education systems in their home country (as illustrated by Rowley) and comparisons between high school and post-secondary institutions in Canada (as illustrated by Mira). Both comparisons shed light on reasons why post-secondary refugee students may feel particularly isolated, including the expectation of more distant or absent personal relationships with instructors along with fewer opportunities to connect with fellow students.

***Layered Culture of Independence: Analysis***

While participants experienced barriers at all levels of schooling (see section Systemic Barriers in Education Systems for details), this form of isolation and push for independence seems to be particularly prevalent in Canadian post-secondary settings. From this perspective, these institutions can be seen as a microcosm of Canadian societies, lacking relational supports which thereby necessitates the adoption of an individualized approach to coping. While this is arguably a relevant concern for all post-secondary students, it may create additional barriers for students who hold cultural values of relationality and prioritize relational ways of knowing and learning. For refugees whose relationships may be fractured due to forced displacement as described earlier, educational settings as a site for relationship building may be particularly important. Furthermore, relationality in education spaces may also be a gendered experience, as research has found that women with refugee backgrounds tend to particularly value and

centralize their relationships as sources of learning (Brigham et al., 2018). It is unfortunate then that the proposed solutions to the challenge of isolation (e.g., joining extracurricular activities) do not fit with the lived realities of the students who are most impacted, given the financial and academic pressures they face (Pio, 2019).

**Figure 6**

*Mira: Any Help?*

### *The Contradiction of Freedom for a Religious Woman in Canada*

In her interview, Amna spoke explicitly about the experience of making this cultural transition as a woman. She shared that some people around her had expressed concerns about what life would be like as a woman in Canada, and this made her feel worried about what the transition would entail. She described feeling some pressure to stay in the transition country, as others had suggested it offers what they believed she needs (ability to get married, have a family). She shared:

> Someone came to me and said, "Canada will be so difficult for you, especially because you are a girl. There is a lot of freedom and you will lose your culture, your religion, and you don't have a chance to finish your school because the language is not easy. And even, like, the life there will be so different. And you are the same, you old enough to go to school. You

> don't have to go. This age you should go to work, or get a husband, get married, have children." … A little bit it made me sad.

In this quote, Amna reflects on how some individuals around her viewed freedom and the challenges she may face as a woman.

Amna went on to share her own conceptualization of freedom. She mentioned that freedom in Canada affords her access to independence and legal protections as a woman. She explained: "anyone can leave their home and be independent and live separate from their parents. If I want something I will do it because the law is with me". Alongside this however, she shared her fear that if she chose to access this freedom, it would lead to a loss of her culture and values. She described: "the people around me, they will change me, and lost my religion or even my culture. I will try to follow them, you know, like to go in another way than I grew up". In these quotes, Amna is highlighting her perception of both the benefits and the drawbacks of "freedom" as it is conceptualized in Canada.

Amna also shared that those around her spoke to how access to freedom in Canada may affect her differently, due to her intersecting gender and religious identities. She shared: "they said, for the men, or for the boys, it is easier. They can go, work, get money, building their life and everything. But for the girl, it's like unsafe, especially for the Muslim girls, because they are wearing hijabs. Maybe they will get some racism from the people and they will see you different from them because you are wearing hijab". This highlights the idea that while men may benefit from freedom as it allows them the ability to access opportunities, women remain vulnerable to safety threats due to their visibility as Muslims. As such, freedom does not go hand-in-hand with safety for women in the same way that it might for men.

Another similar example regarding the contradictions of freedom and associated tensions

for women was encountered by participants around religion in the school system, wherein they were allowed to practice their religion freely, however they faced challenges doing this in a system that was not set up with them in mind. For instance, they needed to leave during class if they wanted to pray, forcing them to miss valuable learning opportunities. Amna alludes to a similar idea when she shared: "Canada is more freedom so maybe you don't have a chance, or some places here don't allow you to be, to take your religion seriously". While there are no overt restrictions on practicing religion in Canada, and individuals have freedom to practice religion, there are systemic barriers that may prevent individuals from practicing religion in the way in which they want to.

### *The Contradiction of Freedom for a Religious Woman in Canada: Analysis*

Five participants in the current study wore the hijab, and each of them spoke about this in reference to their cultural transition. Much has been written about the misconceptualization of the hijab as a symbol of oppression and lack of freedom, although this stereotype does not align with the perspectives of Muslim women themselves (Paz & Kook, 2021). Indeed, the restrictions and backlash directed at women who wear hijabs by Western societies that proport to espouse the values of freedom is particularly telling. In the Canadian context, Quebec passed a secularism law (Bill 21) that prohibits wearing religious symbols in public servant roles, including teachers, government officials, and law enforcement officers (Bill 21, 2019). Under the guise of freedom, this is a move that severely restricts the freedoms of a minoritized group (i.e., Muslim women), contributing to a system where they may be forced to choose between a career and religion, creating the very conditions for these women that Western notions of freedom claim to oppose. While no such laws exist in other Canadian jurisdictions (and within Quebec there has been significant criticism of Bill 21), the oppressions that lie at the intersections of religion, race, and

gender were nonetheless felt by all participants in this study.

**Social Transition: Unveiling Discrimination**

Participants described their experiences of social transition as they navigated educational settings in Canada. They shared a number of challenges, including difficulty connecting with community and making friends, along with experiences of discrimination. I cover social connections in the strengths and needs topic area, and here I focus on a discussion of discrimination and associated challenges as described by refugee women navigating educational transitions.

***Initial Perspectives: Freedom from Overt Discrimination***

Many participants shared their perspectives upon arrival that Canada was free from discrimination and a place where racial, ethnic, gender, and religious diversity could be embraced. For example, Amna shared her surprise at the racial and ethnic diversity in Canada when discussing figure 7: “I thought all Canadian people were white with blue eyes or green eyes and how they mix up with dark skin, white skin, or in the middle. That is really interesting and lovely. It told us, like, everyone is equal”.

**Figure 7**

*Amna: Cultural Diversity*

Regarding gender, participants shared their perspectives that their opportunities were not limited due to gender in Canada, as Amna said in the following quote:

> Here in Canada, I can take the bus or train alone I can walk by myself without feeling scared or fear from someone else. Security everywhere. I have a chance to work, to go to school, even if I get married and have kids, there is a chance. There are more opportunities for the women to do here.

Sophia mentioned: "My gender did not affect my graduate studies or my opportunities", and Natalia said: "I am allowed to go to school, I am allowed to work, do whatever I want to. There was no difference between male and female". In these quotes, participants illustrate the lack of overt gender-based discrimination in Canada, and the absence of policies that explicitly disadvantage women in educational and economic contexts.

However, when asked about differences in experiences of the educational transition across gender, several participants alluded to challenges they faced that their male peers did not. For example, both Rowley and Sophia discussed difficulties they faced coming to Canada alone as women. Sophia shared: "I'm a female, alone, so you just feel it's harder than when you are a man for example. It's harder then, it's harder to be female and alone and surviving and you know, doing all this on your own". Rowley highlighted specific challenges she faced, as the other students who came from her community were men and culturally it is not always appropriate for men and women to mix. She shared that she received criticism from her community back home given that she lived alone:

> They will be like "why! A girl is not supposed to stay alone". In my community, a girl should not stay alone. It is either you are staying with your parents or with your husband. Because they believe if a girl is staying alone, men are able to come to her any time they want and they view that negatively.

Here Rowley is alluding to the idea of differing expectations across genders within her

community and elucidates the ways in which these expectations can narrow opportunities or create barriers to pursuing educational opportunities. To accept her scholarship offer and pursue post-secondary, Rowley had to migrate to Canada on her own. She lacked choice regarding where she would relocate to and was placed in a city where she did not know anyone. She has since built connections with others belonging to her cultural community and now lives with a female roommate who is also from South Sudan, however she sheds light on the additional barriers she faced due to her gender, that her male counterparts in Canada did not have to contend with.

***Initial Perspectives: Freedom from Overt Discrimination Analysis***

While participants observed that there were no explicit barriers to accessing education based on their gender, the experience is clearly impacted by gender. It seems that refugee women were faced with additional layers to navigate, including cultural expectations and gender roles, that their male peers are not. Despite these differences, higher education in Canada is often positioned as equally accessible with women accessing post-secondary at higher rates than men (Statistics Canada, 2023) though this pattern differs somewhat for refugees (Propenko, 2018). However, this positioning of higher education as a gender-neutral space can lead to overlooking inequitable learning environments that disadvantage women, including in the valuing of productivity over other responsibilities or care tasks that may be unequally distributed in favour of women (David, 2022).

An interesting observation from Mira was “I feel like boys don’t really like to study! Girls I think like to study and focus on their education. From what I see, most of my friends (girls) are more focusing on their studies”. Though this could speak to differing interests, when considered in light of participants’ statements that their education was necessary to secure a

stable future, it could also highlight that males have more options available to them and greater access to jobs providing financial stability thereby allowing them to contribute to the family income more immediately, and without requiring post-secondary education. This may particularly be the case in Alberta, where there remains a significant pay gap between men and women, despite women tending to have high levels of formal education (Government of Alberta, 2024a). Alberta's pay gap may be in part due to the gender distribution across industries, such that men tend to be over-represented in construction and resource extraction industries (e.g., oil and gas) with high wages while women tend to be more highly represented in health and social services jobs which may have higher educational requirements but comparatively lower wages (Schirle & Sogaolu, 2020). Importantly, differences in representation across industries is not solely due to preference, and is also impacted by factors such as discrimination and social expectations.

### *Insidious Nature of Discrimination*

Participants also discussed the process of questioning whether discrimination was occurring. Most participants reported experiences where they thought they may have been treated differently due to race, gender, or religion, but were unable to confirm this due to the covert nature of these experiences. For example, some described microaggressions, such as Rowley's experience of feeling pressure to look presentable as a Black woman:

> Back home sometimes I would shave and you don't care. But here you feel awkward, like, eh, if I shave [my hair] how will I look like, or how people are going to mistake me for someone else or they will be asking for my gender because they can't really place me where I belong. So at least if you have good hair or you are looking good then, yeah. You will look like a girl.

She also shared challenges with accessing affordable hair care in Canada and having to learn skills to do her own hair. Other participants described being treated differently in public settings, and wondering if it was due to discrimination. Sophia shared:

> You still feel like, am I discriminated because I am wearing hijab or Muslim? Am I discriminated because I am a Black person, a person of colour? It is the fact that you don't know if it happened. Sometimes you feel like it's that, but you can't say for sure if it is that. You know?

Here Sophia is alluding to the experience of questioning whether discrimination is occurring and wondering if she can trust her own judgment. Experiences such as these make it challenging to address discrimination because those on the receiving end feel uncertain as to whether it occurred and if or how to respond. While most of these experiences did not happen within the educational context, participants shared that they were left questioning whether they belonged and feeling hesitant to reach out for help at school as Amna shared:

> I felt lonely, I was afraid if another side didn't accept me or didn't want to speak with me, and even, I don't know if especially for the women who are wearing a hijab… anyone, would be scared because they don't know if the person in front of them accepts their religion or their culture. They don't know what they are thinking about us. So it is taking me time. I don't speak with anyone, unless if they want to speak with me. It took me time to make friends because I don't know what they think about us.

Amna is describing the impacts of covert discrimination, such that fear of being excluded or being on the receiving end of discrimination made it more challenging to create connections and cut her off from potential sources of support (e.g., peer support).

***Insidious Nature of Discrimination: Analysis***

Experiences such as the one described by Sophia can be considered microaggressions, in that they perpetuate harmful stereotypes, may be intentional or unintentional, can be ambiguous, yet often have a significant impact on the targeted individual (Williams, 2020). These encounters may be difficult to identify, particularly for those who may have experienced more extreme and overt forms of discrimination or persecution based on race or religion (e.g., in their country of origin or transition country). Indeed, while participants described noticing no overt discrimination upon initial arrival, their experiences in the transition process highlight the more subtle but nonetheless harmful forms of discrimination they encountered in the Canadian context. This finding is reflected in the literature on perceived discrimination, such that recently resettled newcomers to Canada tend to report lower levels of discrimination as compared to Canadian born individuals and those who had been resettled more than five years ago (Vang & Chang, 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that covert forms of discrimination and racism tend to be much more common than more overt forms in Canada and these experiences can impact mental health, sense of identity, and leave those on the receiving end feeling isolated (Hunt et al., 2020).

### *Multiple Marginalizations*

All participants discussed intersecting identities and interlocking oppressions they faced. These identities included gender, race, religion, and refugee status. For participants the visibility of these identities played an important role in overt oppression. Most notably, five participants were Muslim women wearing a hijab, and each of them spoke about this aspect of their identity. Several participants shared that they were approached and harassed in public (e.g., in the street, train, or bus) due to their identities. Linna described:

You're always gonna find someone who is not just accepting you as you are. I've, I've faced

> so many times like it's hard when you are, let's say someone with colored skin and hijab at the same time, because I know some people are like white and hijabi. They face discrimination, and some people with the colored skin color. They face discrimination, but when they are both at the same time, it's even way harder.

They also shared that men seem to be somewhat more protected from these experiences of discrimination due to less visible identities. Mira shared feeling that she did not belong in the classroom:

> Coming as a woman here in Canada is much harder from the man, because I am wearing the hijab, the life is different. Being different it is a bit hard. Even in your class, you are the only one who is wearing the hijab, you feel more different than other students. But for men, they don't wear the hijab so they feel like they are more in the class.

Amna spoke about feeling unease and mistrust, and the ways in which these feelings were compounded by not knowing English:

> I didn't speak any word in English. even "hi", I didn't know how to say it. And when someone spoke with me, I feel like "I don't know what they are talking with me, what they are saying, if it is a bad word or good, I see their smile but I'm not sure".

These experiences described by Mira and Amna highlight the impact of discriminatory encounters, such that they no longer felt safe or welcome in the classroom. This lack of safety can in turn impact their participation in academic settings and contribute to barriers that impede their ability to progress in these settings. For instance, experiences like those described above may make it more difficult for students with multiple marginalized identities to feel they can access help and support in the school system.

***Multiple Marginalizations: Analysis***

Participants in the current study described being on the receiving end of discrimination, racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia. Similar themes are reflected in the broader literature as well, such that Muslim women, and particularly Black Muslim women, tend to be particularly impacted by discrimination that can trouble their sense of identity and belonging (Hunt et al., 2020). These findings raise the concern of the erasure of social power of Muslim women, who have their voices silenced through harassment and discrimination (Miled, 2020). Unsettling experiences such as the ones described above can leave Muslim women feeling that they need to stay quiet and avoid attention or risk enduring harassment. Further, the normalization of othering and exclusion can set the stage for violence (Canning, 2017) and as discussed earlier, there has been a concerning increase in hate crimes in Canada in recent years (Ndegwa & McDonald, 2023). Despite the perception that Canada offers relative safety from violence, for Muslim women in particular this may not be the case (Alizai, 2021). Incidents such as the ones described by participants create a sense of fear, isolation, and fuel a sense of non-belonging among Muslim women of colour in Canada. A more detailed discussion on belonging can be found below in the section on responses to challenges.

Despite the barriers to accessing social power and safety for those experiencing multiple marginalizations, participants in the current study did not view themselves as victims. Rather they viewed themselves as agents for change, shattering stereotypes through their achievements and giving back. Amna discussed representation, and described seeing many negative representations of Muslims in the media and the need for more positive representations. She shared her view that she and her community could serve as positive representations: “I’m sure if they are learning from us, seeing we are... we did something, we achieve, we help others, we did good for others, they will change their minds. They will love us more”. Amna also highlighted

the need to educate others as both prevention and a response to discrimination. She shared: "Educate the people. This is the only way. Trying to give them a clear picture about the culture, the religion, because not everyone is the same, and each person has a different life". The attribution of racism or discrimination to a perpetrator's ignorance as seen here has been framed as a form of resistance, in that it undercuts the oppressive power of such a statement and positions the perpetrator as not-knowing and the subject as an empowered educator (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2020). On the other hand, some Muslim women have shared that this burden to educate others puts them in an uncomfortable position and requires significant energy on their part (Hunt et al., 2020).

**Academic Transition: Systemic Barriers in the Education System**

All participants discussed their experiences in the education system. All were highly motivated, and shared the notion that post-secondary schooling would pave the way to a better life for them. Unfortunately, they also described a number of systemic barriers they faced in the education system described through the following sub-themes.

***Burden of Language Learning: ELL Students Work Twice as Hard***

Several participants discussed language learning as significantly impacting their educational transition. Rowley and Sophia had to demonstrate competency in English to be eligible for the refugee student sponsorship program prior to arrival in Canada, although Sophia opted to take additional language courses upon arrival. This structure filters out students who may otherwise benefit from such programs who have lacked access to English language learning opportunities in their countries of origin. All four participants who came through other (non-academic) avenues were faced with having to learn English upon arrival. These participants invariably shared that language learning was a very difficult part of their transition experience

and particularly impacted their academic trajectory. Participants had to pass language benchmarks to be able to move toward their academic and career goals, and several participants shared frustration with the length of time this took. Natalia stated: “you have to pass level 4, 5, 6, 7, that’s a lot. It is a long time, yeah. Long time. And it’s only English. I don’t know. But LINC language was helpful, but I wasted my time”. They shared that while focusing on English, they were missing out on academic subject content which they later had to catch up on.

This time pressure was particularly significant due to the age at which participants arrived. They shared that younger children had sufficient time to learn English and catch up to same-age peers during their time in the K-12 schools, however these participants faced additional pressure due to aging out of the school system. In Alberta, students who are 20 years of age or older are considered adult learners and are no longer able to attend high school (Government of Alberta, 2024b). Although other options exist for pursuing continuing education, these options are not always clear for students, as highlighted by Linna: “never someone explained to me, ‘Oh, you can make it even after higher school, like, there is this upgrading classes that you can take in college and stuff like this’ I thought like I have to finish it here, or I will never”. Several participants shared a similar sentiment that they were left to decipher other options on their own, made more challenging by language barriers. Furthermore, students are also responsible for covering the financial cost of adult learning (Government of Alberta, 2024b). Policies such as these create additional educational barriers for students who arrive in middle to older adolescence (Stewart et al., 2019).

Several participants also shared frustrations about having to re-learn information that they knew in their first language or having to learn both the language and subject matter for the first time. Participants described that being an English language learner effectively doubled their

workload, as described by Amna in her description of Figure 8: “If they [English-speaking students] will work just once, we have to work twice. If they want to speak one word we have to speak two words to ourselves before we share our information”. This additional burden requires time and emotional energy which often goes unrecognized in the education system and by instructors.

**Figure 8**

*Amna: Adult Learning*

Furthermore, participants described experiences in English as an Additional Language (EAL) classrooms during high school. While specific EAL learning strategies fall outside the scope of this research, it is notable that several participants mentioned the impact of not being allowed to speak a language other than English in the classroom. Several participants discussed that their personality factors such as shyness made it more challenging to take risks in these settings, and therefore they avoided speaking up or asking for help. For example, Amna shared several experiences where she was called on in class and felt embarrassed. Linna shared; “I was always like shy as well like to speak. Am I doing something like saying something wrong? Is the person in front of me gonna understand me or no”. She went on to describe she has difficulty asking for help: “I am the person who can’t ask for help, and sometimes, like, I like to learn by myself. But when it’s a different language. You always need someone to show you what this

mean and what this is". Indeed, participants shared that taking these risks and learning to speak up and ask for help is what eventually allowed them to learn English. This may highlight the important role of creating emotional safety in language learning spaces. Linna described feeling significantly more comfortable in one-on-one tutoring sessions and described these as fundamental to her language learning process:

> I would really like recommend those people because they sit like one-to-one person like, with you only. It's more helpful than in class, especially if someone like me, like I'm a very shy person in, especially in class, that in front of a group of people I can't talk like, I can't ask for help. I can't tell the teacher 'Oh, can you explain this again' or something. But when there's like only one person with you, so you have like more space to speak the way you want.

This quote highlights the emotional and relational safety offered in a one-to-one setting that can help to level the playing field for refugee students. However, there may be barriers that make accessing these types of supports more challenging, including having time available outside of class.

**Emotional Toll of Language Barriers.** Beyond the classroom setting, participants shared that language barriers impacted their ability to connect with others and left them feeling like they did not belong. Amna shared:

> Communicating with others, making new friends, trying to get help is really difficult. If you want to ask for help if you don't speak English, it is really bad to depend on the phones because they won't help you in real life. I remember when I was in high school in level 1, I want to share my stories with the teacher and my classmates, but I didn't know how. So, I didn't share anything. … Even if you want some help from the office, or library, if you want to try to do some activities, playing games and you don't speak English, how you will do all

the things? You will feel, I felt lonely, like I am not in this world, I should leave". Several participants shared that this feeling of isolation and low confidence continued even after learning English, as they worried about whether others would understand their accents. Notably, in their interviews several participants asked if I could understand their accent and apologized for potentially being unclear. This type of exchange led me to ponder what experiences they may have had that raised such concerns for them. Given that these concerns appeared very prevalent for these participants, I wondered whether some potential participants may have opted out of participating in my research due to this concern. To address this participation barrier, I had included the option to have an interpreter present for the interview, however this could have created concerns regarding confidentiality. Indeed, this is an area that warrants more attention.

***Burden of Language Learning: ELL Students Work Twice as Hard Analysis***

Language learning can be framed as a social justice issue, such that it can facilitate integration and allows for meaningful participation in multiple facets of society (Ives et al., 2022). Overall, participants in the current study highlighted the additional burden and the silencing effect of being a language learner. They also shared the impacts on their sense of confidence and social connections. The broader literature on language learning shows similar themes, including the challenges for students learning English as an additional language to learn day-to-day language along with academic and subject specific language (Millon-Fauré, 2019). Research also suggests that enhancing English language skills can have benefits for refugee emotional wellbeing as it allows for enhanced connection between recently arrived refugees and host country citizens (Tip et al., 2019).

Another important finding from this study was the importance of creating emotional safety in language learning classrooms. One element that may be useful in enhancing emotional

safety is allowing for a translanguaging environment wherein students are able to blend languages and other forms of communication in a fluid and flexible way, rather than a restrictive English-only policy that privileges English over other languages and forms of communication (Wei, 2018). A translanguaging environment has been shown to create emotional safety and reduce anxiety among newcomer language learners and allow them to express the fullness of their cultural and linguistic identities (Dryden et al., 2021). This approach can be seen as an act of restorative justice in classrooms and a step toward decolonizing language instruction, chipping away at colonial notions which privilege "academic" English over other forms of language (de los Ríos et al., 2019; Wei & García, 2022).

Despite the challenges faced regarding language learning, participants shared their view that they had no choice in facing this challenge - learning English was a priority and a non-negotiable task when living in an English-speaking province as it is required for educational and employment opportunities as well as building community and belonging in their new home. However, it is a task fraught with challenges and systemic barriers for ELL students. The silencing of voices of those who are particularly vulnerable in the school system can be dangerous both academically and psychologically, as these students are at risk for slipping through the cracks due to the lack of accessible and language-inclusive support. Critically, viewing language learning as a social justice issue puts the onus not only on language learners but also on the host societies and institutions to develop and implement accessible language learning supports that facilitate academic and social integration and promote student inclusion and wellbeing (Ives et al., 2022).

### *Inconsistent Post-Secondary Admission Policies*

Participants described various policies that slowed their progression through the

educational system and impacted their goals to complete post-secondary schooling. Several of these policies were related to language. For example, Mira described different policies regarding English exams, wherein some colleges required students to take standardized tests while others did not. She described this as particularly challenging for students who are aging out of high school and want to continue academic upgrading from where they left off in high school but who, based on standardized results, sometimes had to repeat grades or take additional EAL courses. She stated:

> If you are doing high school, and you wanna go to college to continue the high school, they may ask you to do an English exam, which can affect your classes. If you are in grade 11 they may take you back to grade 10. Some colleges have this policy. Really strict policy.

Interestingly, participants shared that the education system's response to the COVID-19 pandemic often worked in their favour, such that they were able to skip standardized exams or provide alternative measures of competency. For example, one participant described using the Duolingo English Test to demonstrate competency. This test is easily accessible online and is more affordable than other alternatives (Duolingo, 2023).

The enhanced flexibility because of the pandemic is an interesting finding, as literature generally suggests a negative impact of the pandemic on refugee students. Studies suggests students were faced with structural barriers such as lack of access to technology and high-speed internet as well as challenges for parents trying to support students in at-home learning (Edmonds & Flahault, 2021; Santiago et al., 2021). Participants did highlight facing some of these challenges, for instance Mira noted "me and my sister we used to have one laptop. And I be studying and my sister be waiting, then my sister she studied". Linna described increased difficulty asking for help in online settings and also shared she no longer had access to a tutor:

> Asking for help was even harder then, like you are in class with people that you don't even know how they look like or what their name is. They're just in a screen, you know. and you can't just interrupt the teacher and tell them, can you do this like? Well, some people does. It's easy for them, but not when you are someone was already shy to ask for help, you know. but it was fine, and sometimes, like it gave me more time to go through whatever I'm doing to study, for example. And also I miss the tutoring thing that we were doing after school every time. So yeah, I had to do extra work, maybe myself just at home.

Despite these challenges, they also shared that the pandemic required institutions to be more flexible (as described above for English testing). Semesters were also shortened, allowing students to progress more quickly through courses, and participants noted this helped them to catch up to peers. Interestingly, these adaptations highlight the capacity of educational institutions to change policies and develop alternatives when needed.

***Inconsistent Post-Secondary Admission Policies: Analysis***

Undeniably, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted underlying disparities that existed in education systems and in society more broadly. Radical flexibility in educational systems could serve as a response to some of these disparities. This flexibility goes beyond simply lowering benchmarks or shifting learning outcomes; it is aimed at making learning more equitable, accessible, and functional, considering the varying communities and responsibilities that shape the ways in which learners interact with educational systems (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2020).

The description of systemic barriers here is not exhaustive. Participants also referenced a number of other structural barriers that impacted their academic progression, including financial security, housing, and increasing cost of living. These financial barriers have been documented in several other Canadian studies (e.g., Anderson, 2020) and also with refugee students (e.g.,

Wong, 2013). Most participants shared that they needed to work while attending school and described challenges balancing these competing priorities. For instance, Linna noted that she is currently taking time off from her post-secondary program to work to pay for her program. Rowley shared that even when students had access to financial resources, including scholarships and funding, they were not always taught how to manage these finances. She said:

> I think it is really important that you utilize financial literacy, it is really important so that when you receive whatever you receive from the school if you have a scholarship, so you know how to manage it. You don't send back home and you remain with nothing or whatever you remain with is not enough to make yourself beautiful or to eat and stuff like that. So it is good to know how to manage your funds.

She shared that a particular challenge was receiving large lump sums and trying to make this last for the semester. She recommended gaining skills in budgeting and financial literacy to offset this challenge. While financial challenges are common concerns for many students, regardless of migration status, the burden may be particularly difficult for female refugee students, due to the pressures described above to provide financial support to family members.

In general, these barriers created additional burdens for refugee students to navigate, exacerbating the academic stressors and barriers described above. In the following section, I turn to a discussion of how participants responded to the challenges they described.

**Summary and Reflections: Challenges**

Participants shared a myriad of challenges that influenced their transition into post-secondary settings. These challenges cut across domains of integration, including migration and resettlement, social, cultural, and academic areas. Challenges included those experienced on an individual level (e.g., mental health and emotional adjustment), interpersonal/community levels

(e.g., loss and leaving behind family, experiences of discrimination), and cultural/systemic levels (e.g., culture of independence, post-secondary admission policies). The ways in which participants' identities and systems within which they find themselves have impacted their educational transition were explored. Notably, although participants discussed many challenges they faced, they consistently and largely without prompting highlighted the ways in which they were able to persist, resist, and overcome these challenges. In the next section I turn to the topic area on responses to challenges, which encompasses both participants' strengths and their needs as they navigate educational transitions.

## Responses to Challenges: Strengths and Needs

### I Can Do it Myself: Individual Agency

At its most basic level, agency is defined as the ability to identify goals and act on them (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). There is a history of viewing refugees, and in particular refugee women as passive or victims of circumstance (Canning, 2017). Participants in the current study did not fit within this conceptualization. Rather, they described themselves as active agents in their day-to-day lives. Agency is a feminist concept that describes the ability of individual actors to push back against oppression in all its forms. However, more recently this view has been criticized for being too narrow and entrenched in western worldviews, ignoring other forms of action in the everyday lives of minoritized women (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). Here we must hold the tension that those who are vulnerable or who are minoritized and acted on by systems of oppression can themselves be actors with agency. The findings of the current study were consistent with this broader view of agency, and in the following sections I conceptualize the everyday actions of participants in pursuit of their educational goals as a form of agency. Indeed, all participants spoke in depth about the need to develop a sense of personal agency and hone the ability to keep moving towards their goals despite challenges and setbacks.

***Determination and Tenacity: Just Keep Going***

As described above, participants spoke about various challenges they encountered, both within the education system and outside of it, and shared that often what got them through was emotional strength, determination, and tenacity. For example, Rowley shared: "You are not going to lock yourself in your room and start crying and all that. You have to learn to be emotionally strong". In particular, participants highlighted determination to achieve their academic and career goals, and tenacity or the quality of persistence in the face of obstacles. Tenacity implies a prolonged commitment to goals, which was the case for participants as many encountered years-long setbacks in their progression through the education system. Natalia shared:

> Because life is full of challenges. Here in Canada or another country, there is always a challenge in your life. It is nothing easy. So you have to continue. Yeah? Here or another country there is a lot of challenges. So we just keep continue. Not giving up.

Amna had the following response when she was told it would be difficult to achieve her goals in Canada:

> A little bit it made me sad. But I am a person who if I want something, I don't listen to others. So I avoid everything, and then I say, I don't know, if this is the plan for God, what will happen, it will happen, here or there. So, I went to Canada, actually, it wasn't easy. I had a cultural shock and everything. But, I survived.

In this quote she described her resolve to focus on her goal, having faith, and enduring in the face of challenges. Mira shared the following image (Figure 9) and described how she is able to motivate herself to keep going:

**Figure 9**

*Mira: The LRT Window*

> I took this picture because it was a tough time for me. So I was doing the final exams and I was on the LRT and it was really cold. I was almost depressed. So I took this picture to remind me of the hard times when I graduate. It was a long day of studying and doing things. I was standing on the LRT, I took this picture. … I like to take pictures when I am in the hard time so when I see them I feel proud, I have made it.

Similar to Amna and Mira, other participants specified several aspects that helped them to keep going when confronted with challenges, including: staying positive and hopeful, focusing on small things, believing in yourself and your capacity to accomplish your goals, and reminding yourself of the reasons you are pursuing these goals. Participants highlighted that these aspects contributed to their continued ability to take action towards their goals in the face of challenges.

### *Determination and Tenacity: Just Keep Going Analysis*

This idea of not dwelling on challenges and keeping a focus on one's future has been conceptualized as a survival strategy used by refugee women (Yohani & Okeke-Ihejirika, 2018). I argue that the tenacity and determination shown by participants is a survival strategy and beyond this it is also a form of everyday agency (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). This viewing is influenced by research examining agency among Muslim women in Egypt (Mahmood, 2005). This author problematizes the dichotomy of women as either passive and oppressed or agents who resist and subvert social norms. She views survival and enduring as examples of agency, a stance that is reflected in my analysis of participants' experiences transitioning into post-secondary settings. While many of the actions of participants described here may not be conceptualized as acts of resistance as they do not seek to subvert norms, they can nonetheless be viewed as a form of agency. The tenacity and determination to respond to rigorous demands and manage multifaceted expectations placed on them is an act of agency.

### *Self-Reliance and Self-Advocacy: You Are on Your Own*

In navigating the transition to post-secondary and the accompanying challenges, participants referred to the need to be self-reliant as they were very much on their own. They spoke about feelings of loneliness and isolation upon arriving in Canada, and particularly those who came without family felt they had to solve problems without help. For example, Rowley shared the following about losing her community after migrating to Canada:

> That experience has taught me to be self-reliant in so many things. Like, yeah. Many other things like when I am sad and maybe listen to music. Or when I am … like normally back home when you are sad you just go to talk to your cousins. You just find people. But right now, you just find ways of making yourself better without maybe disturbing others who are

> sleeping maybe because of time difference and all that. If you are hungry, you cook for yourself, you don't go to your cousin's place like "have you cooked something" or "can we go and order something", no. If you are hungry you cook or if you have money you go and buy.

Sophia shared that it was not her studies that were most challenging, but navigating the graduate application process on her own as she hoped to change programs:

> You know, only me, investigating a lot of steps to just get into the graduate program. And I think that might have been the hardest challenge for me surprisingly. A lot of people say education is so hard and studying is so hard, but I felt for me at that time, getting into the graduate program was the hardest step for me.

Amna highlighted the importance of being able to rely on yourself, as you cannot expect others to be available to help you:

> Be dependent on yourself. Don't expect to get help every day from everyone. They should depend on themselves. And they have to plan what they want. So I told you like when I came I was overwhelmed because I didn't know what I had to do… But that's it.

Mira similarly shared that she had to gather information on her own:

> If you have nobody, even if nobody helps you, just don't give up. Do your research. When I came in here, most people don't really know what should I do. I was asking people a lot, I was like doing the research, I had called many schools, and I have been through many things just to continue my education.

She shared that information received through her school regarding post-secondary was generic and options that better met her needs were not presented to her. This mirrors findings from a Canadian study on informational barriers among refugee students entering post-secondary, which

illustrated a dearth of information on navigating entry pathways into post-secondary, challenges accessing professional support, and a need to rely on word of mouth (Bajwa et al., 2017). These informational barriers are similarly described by students who belong to underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, particularly those who are the first in their families to attend post-secondary schooling and suggest a need for additional institutional supports (Michalski et al., 2017). Informational barriers may be due to a lack of accessible information or in other cases it may be due to educators' assumptions about their students. For example, a study with newcomers to Canada with African backgrounds showed that stereotypes held by educators and career counsellors led to a lack of effective guidance offered to these students regarding post-secondary options (Shizha et al., 2020). Lack of access to information from family members may also create the need for young adults to develop self-reliance. Most participants in the current study shared that they were the first in their families to attend post-secondary, therefore although they had family support and encouragement, they had fewer opportunities to learn about post-secondary settings before entering this setting (Stephens et al., 2012).

Overall, participants highlighted that they needed to develop this ability to be self-reliant and to advocate for themselves, as they found themselves in a sink-or-swim environment. There was a sense that if they did not help themselves, no one would help them. This is particularly notable, given the metaphor used by several participants to describe themselves as newborn babies described earlier, which elicits a vision of helplessness and the need for support.

### *Self-Reliance and Self-Advocacy: You Are on Your Own Analysis*

The development of self-reliance is a critical aim of refugee resettlement according to criteria put forward by the UNHCR, and refugees are often selected for permanent resettlement based on their perceived ability to achieve self-reliance (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). However,

this drive toward self-reliance can be viewed as entrenched in western valuing of independence over interdependence (Savaş & Dutt, 2023). Earlier, I reflected on challenges participants faced in adapting to the culture of independence espoused in Canadian society and post-secondary institutions. Developing self-reliance can be viewed as a direct and active response to this challenge, thereby framing it as an act of personal agency.

Regarding self-advocacy specifically, several participants shared that they found it challenging to advocate for themselves due to shyness. For example, Linna shared: "So just don't be shy, like I used to be in the beginning. I just go for it. I would say. Okay, yeah, I always ask for help." Mahmood (2005) describes the Islamic virtue of al-haya' which she translates as modesty or shyness and views it not as a virtue contributing to the subjugation of women but rather a virtue through which women can perform action in a way that fits for them. Here participants describe their transition away from shyness as this is incompatible with self-advocacy. However, it appears they were able to do so in a way that allowed them to stay connected with their sense of identity and cultural values. Amna described:

> When you came here you were going to a new culture and new life but you don't know if you will lose your identity because, you know, the identity is the new me, the new things in your life, to handle it for yourself, to teach your kids in the future, to teach your people who are going here. The identity, it makes you unique in this world.

Through the migration journey and transition into post-secondary, participants learned more about themselves and their capacities. Though these learnings were born out of hardship, participants viewed them as valuable and helpful. They came to appreciate the new sense of self they developed, which is particularly meaningful given that young adulthood is a critical period for identity development and specifically development of one's sense of agency (Arnett, 2024;

Hynie, 2018). While previous studies had found that limitations on autonomy impacted this aspect of identity development for young women (e.g., Knap, 2018), these findings highlight a different perspective such that women found ways to develop agency and autonomy that fit for them. In the next sub-theme, participants shared more about the growth they experienced as a result of the transition.

***Resistance: Pushing Back Against Barriers***

Participants also spoke about how they made sense of and found ways to cope with the challenges and barriers they encountered. Several participants spoke to how their difficult experiences allowed them to grow, as expressed by Mira:

> If I was staying in Syria, I am gonna be the same shy person I am. Because my family with me, they support me and that's it. But going and experiencing many things, especially being a refugee in Jordan and experiencing many difficult situations I had been through right, I have seen many difficult things in my life. It made me tough and wise and now I think different and act different than I was in the past.

She described the ways in which encountering difficult circumstances changed her and made her stronger. This is reminiscent of the concept of posttraumatic growth, which is defined as "positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances" (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). While this view represents an important shift away from deficit-based understandings of the refugee experience navigating education systems, it can ignore the socio-political context that led to the challenges these women are facing. I posit an alternative way of viewing this experience of growth and change, one that highlights the intentional seeking out and building of skills to help them to overcome challenges. For example, Rowley discussed the ways in which she dealt with loneliness:

> I talked to my doctor, my doctor told me to talk to the wellness… school wellness or something. But I did not. So what I started doing was putting more time into travelling, making new friends, reading a lot. I read, but I started reading more. Also I found a job, so that one kept me busy during the times when I was… yeah. So right now I am good.

Her rejection of Western approaches to healing (attending therapy) and developing her own way to cope can be viewed as a form of resistance. From a feminist perspective, resistance is often conceptualized as actions aimed at dismantling systems of oppression, however it may be important to broaden this view to understand ways in which participants enacted forms of resistance more readily accessible to them that did not jeopardize their position in the education system. Further, as participants are students, they hold comparatively less power in educational systems, therefore may need to find ways of enacting resistance that do not risk their ability to progress towards their educational goals, which themselves offer increasing stability.

Other participants shared that they used their newly developed skills and information to support other newcomers. For instance, Mira shared:

> I have some friends who I was chatting with them and I was asking, there was a teacher that told me "go to Norquest college and do your schools" but I didn't wanna go to the continuing education in college, so I did my research and I attended Metro which was similar to high school. Maybe the last year I saw a student she was in the same situation I was in, I told her to come to Metro because it is really helpful and the curriculum there is like similar to the high school here, even the classes and the questions. So I have gained many experiences and I see a student who is struggling I would be willing to help them because I know how hard it is.

Mira, along with other participants, shared several examples like this that highlighted helping

other students, including with system navigation. This can be viewed as an attempt to create change within the education system so that other newcomers have different experiences and greater access to support than they had.

### *Resistance: Pushing Back Against Barriers Analysis*

While the examples described above may look different than conventional notions of resistance such as activism and policy-level advocacy, these actions are nonetheless aimed at creating change. Indeed, the conventional view of feminist resistance is rooted in Euro-western individualist values, whereas the forms of resistance practiced by participants in this study are relational in nature (Zerbe Enns et al., 2020). It is also important to note that although participants may not identify these actions as resistance, and perhaps even distance themselves from political spheres holding the belief that they have little power to create large-scale change, they are not disconnected or passive members of their community (Kallio et al., 2021).

Through individual action, the women in this study sought to defy commonly-held notions of refugee women as disempowered victims to be saved (Pio, 2019). They did so through everyday agency (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021), or enduring in the face of obstacles. Due to a lack of adequate supports in place they learned to rely on themselves, and they developed skills that allowed them to resist systemic barriers they encountered by continuing to persist in systems that were not built for them, finding a way through, and in turn taking steps to offer the very supports that they themselves could have benefitted from. I agree with authors who suggest a need to broaden definitions of agency and resistance to be culturally relevant (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Mahmood, 2005; Zerbe Enns et al., 2020).

## Holding Hope During Flight and Resettlement

Participants in the current study described their experiences of hope and the buoying role

it played in keeping them motivated to continue during difficult times. In the following sub-themes, I illustrate how participants' sense of hope shifted over the course of their migration journey and consider hope in the context of educational transitions.

***Migration and the Mutability of Hope***

Several participants spoke about hope as a resource they drew on as they navigated their transition into post-secondary. Broadly, participants spoke about the hope for a better life in Canada. Natalia stated:

> When I moved to Canada I told my family there is a hope in my heart, I can keep myself going, I keep, I can continue my future here! There is a future here in Canada if I study, I graduated, I went to college, so I can build a new life here!

Natalia described that her experience of hope shifted through her migration journey, such that upon learning she would be able to leave Syria for Turkey she felt hopeful about the future due to an increased sense of safety. However, after arriving in Turkey, this hope began to fade for Natalia. Despite safer living conditions, she and other participants shared that in many ways their lives were very difficult in transition countries including due to anti-refugee sentiments, particularly in countries hosting many refugees. The discrimination they faced is addressed in the challenges section, however I mention this challenge here due to its impact on hope. Natalia shared that despite her initial feeling of hope upon leaving Syria, this hope was lost: "In Turkey, there is no future even if I graduated from high school, even if I went to college, there is no future for me, especially I am a refugee. They told me there is no future for you".

In some ways, this pattern of dampening hope repeated upon arrival in Canada. For instance, as shown in Natalia's quote, there was the sense for some that life in Canada would come with economic stability. This illustrates a widely-held assumption that migration to the

global North is a pathway to greater opportunity. This assumption was reflected in some participants' responses to finding out they would be relocating to Canada, although this view was not shared by all participants. For some, there was a sense that although there were educational and economic opportunities, this comes at the expense of cultural, linguistic, religious, and familial ties as described by Amna:

> Here [in Canada] the life is so busy, you wake up early, going to school, going to work, doing your stuff, doing your homework, if you have something you have to do, and then time flies so fast. … And that didn't give you a chance to practice your language, to stick in your culture. You will follow the people you meet everyday, especially at school or at work. So if you have friends from Spain, and you are from Syria, and everyday you see them, and you speak English, day-by-day it is easy for your mind to forget.

Further, resettlement in Canada did not bring with it the hoped-for and promised opportunities for many participants. They faced significant precarity, challenges, and barriers within economic and educational structures. For several participants, the hardships encountered were somewhat unanticipated, leading to the suggestion that refugees be prepared prior to migration (e.g., Gulanowski et al., 2022).

On the other hand, some participants talked about hope as the thing that kept them going through challenging times. Sophia described:

> To be hopeful and optimistic is part of the survival mode (going through the challenges). Now there is no way you could be moving forward unless you are so optimistic and hopeful to hope that everything will be okay. To hope, like a better outcome. You will just be, like, doing like, things that will help you to go to a good direction.

Other participants shared similar sentiments to Sophia. Mira and I had the following discussion about her image (Figure 10):

**Figure 10**

*Mira: Muffin and Milk*

Mira: I was doing in mathematics class, in 10-C I guess, and the teacher was like "whose name is Mira", and I said "that's me" and she said "Oh Mira you're so lucky, you have won a free lunch" …It was my first time being a winner.

Interviewer: Tell me what that represents for you?

Mira: Yeah. Like, first day in centre high was hard for me because I had no friends at the time. I was just stressful because I needed to do all the high school classes in there and I wanna get my diploma and stuff. It was a lot for me to do. It was really stressful. But when the teacher said my name and said "Oh Mira you won a card" I was like, "that's me?! It's gonna be a good year for me". I felt like it was gonna be a good year for me.

Here Mira suggests that small moments or interactions can provide glimmers of hope that can shift the tide and lead to an overall more hopeful view.

***Migration and the Mutability of Hope: Analysis***

In this sub-theme, participants highlighted the ways in which hope shifted across the migration journey. Participants described a general pattern of an initial surge of hope after leaving their home country. For those who first spent time in a transition country, as reality set in this hope was dampened. Upon arriving in Canada a similar pattern played out, with an initial increase in hope followed by a dampening. However, despite challenges, participants found ways to restore and maintain hope for the future. The belief that things would work out and hoping for a positive outcome after going through challenges contributed to participants' tenacity described above. This approach to maintaining hope is reminiscent of radical hope, a concept articulated by Lear (2006) and other feminist scholars. Radical hope refers to a response when one is confronted by goals that feel out-of-reach. Rather than falling into hopelessness, individuals may instead focus on the present moment and define specific actions they can take in the here-and-now, leaving space for an open-ended potentially positive future (Kallio et al., 2021; Lear, 2006). This can be seen in participants' use of vague language when discussing the future, including "a better outcome", "a good direction" (Sophia), "a better life" (Linna), "there is a future here" (Natalia), "I am hopeful about a better future" (Rowley). In contrast to the vague conceptions of the future, participants discussed concrete present-moment actions that they were taking to maintain their hope. For many this included academic steps. Kallio and colleagues (2021) argue that these everyday actions aimed at building a better future are another form of agency which refugees may more readily access in comparison to political activism.

***Education as a Primary Source of Hope***

Participants mentioned several sources of hope, including religion and education. Numerous studies identify religion as a source of hope for refugee women (e.g., Hasan et al., 2018). In addition to religion, education was a primary source of hope for participants in this

study. Interestingly, even when the education system was a source of the challenges they were facing, participants drew hope from the notion that they were working towards completing their education. For example, Mira said "I need to go forward with my life because I can't come back to Syria where people are killed, you know. I decided that studying is the only way I can do for a, for my future".

Participants described selecting post-secondary programs that would lead to steady employment as evidenced by Natalia's quote: "for pharmacy technician, my friend told me that this program is so good for you, and there is a lot of opportunity so if you graduated you can find a job for this program". Several participants described selecting shorter diploma programs with good job prospects (e.g., pharmacy technician, dental technician) rather than selecting 4-year degree programs. Amna explained that having post-secondary education allowed for mobility across countries and provided proof of employability: "when you go and ask them for work in some companies the first thing they are asking is do you have a certificate? do you have a degree?" Participants also highlighted that completing their education would also allow them to be able to support their families, as described by Mira: "I was like with my sister, 'we need to do it, we need to study, we need to get a job and provide something for our family'", and by Sophia: "this is the opportunity that you will help yourself, and your family back home". I once again draw on the concept of radical hope here, as focusing on their next steps in the education system allowed participants to see a path forward to a better life.

***Education as a Primary Source of Hope: Analysis***

Participants shared that in the face of great hardship and struggle, it was often the hope of pursuing higher education that kept them going. Post-secondary studies were viewed as a pathway to a "better life" that allows for safety and stability. The ultimate goal of safety and

stability is notable, as it differs somewhat from studies conducted with newcomer youth more generally, who tended to describe personal ambitions to achieve prestigious and meaningful careers (Gallucci & Kassan, 2019).

This can also be considered from a gendered lens and in doing so brings together several ideas from earlier in this chapter. For women, post-secondary can be particularly important as it opens opportunities for gainful employment and higher paying jobs. The higher paying jobs available in Alberta that do not require post-secondary tend to be in male-dominated fields wherein women have reported experiencing discrimination (Nagy & Teixeira, 2019) and it is unclear how these experiences may be different for women of colour. As such, post-secondary is often seen as the only viable path for women to secure a future for themselves and their families. Participants also highlighted the significance of being able to give back or provide for their families, perhaps alluding to one way of fulfilling the gendered caretaking role which can include financial care (Espín & Dottolo, 2019).

**Life is about Social Connections: Centrality of Community**

All participants discussed the importance of community in navigating the transition to post-secondary. They described numerous sources of community, including religious, cultural, local (small town), work, and school. Notably in school settings participants described an easier time making friends in high school and language classes as opposed to post-secondary, due to the culture of isolation in post-secondary described above. In the following sub-themes, I elaborate on community building among participants and shed light on its impact on the educational transition process.

***Navigating Belonging***

As discussed in the challenges section, participants explained that the loss of social

connection and social support was a particularly difficult aspect of transitioning to life in Canada and this was compounded in post-secondary settings. For some, community was woven into the way of life back home, as described by Rowley: “Back in Africa, we stay as a group. We go out with people. Yeah. But here, it is hard, like everyone is so busy”. She compared ‘back home’ to life in Canada: “Here in Canada everybody is on a run, there is never that time whereby you will just sit under the tree, many people, talking, making your hair, making stories and that. There is no that time”. When drawing comparisons between social life in Canada and her county of origin, Rowley describes the value of unstructured time, building community through storytelling and providing and receiving relational care through doing one another’s hair. Furthermore, Rowley specifies missing her connection with women, and shared an important turning point in her transition to post-secondary when she was approached by and able to connect with a woman from her home country (South Sudan). She described going with her new friend to church: “at her church I felt like I really really really belonged”. Similarly, Linna shared that she felt a deepened sense of belonging in her school community as there was a large Muslim community:

> I was lucky about this, the school that I was in there used to be lots of Muslim community, cause I’m Muslim. There used to be so many Muslim communities there, and I think I’ve never felt that in school especially.

Participants highlighted that connecting with their religious and cultural communities allows them to feel seen, providing a source of both tangible and emotional support, and belonging.

Other participants shared similarly that building community at school was a turning point for them wherein they began to feel a greater sense of belonging. Mira described that attending a high school to do academic upgrading was a turning point for her because she made friends:

> The friendships were helpful because they had been through experiences, yeah, and they helped me with my classes and even if I had something hard, they would be teaching me. I remember I had science, some points when I struggles and they would be like sitting with me, and helping me.

These friendships offered her not only emotional support and connectedness, but also academic support. Several participants offered the recommendation to make new friends as soon as possible after arriving in Canada.

One particular benefit of building community that participants discussed was the positive impact of building community with other newcomers and connecting through shared experience. They described that this helped them to feel less alone, gave them a site to express their feelings with people who understood them, allowed for information sharing and benefiting from one-another's learning experiences, and gaining a sense of hope from hearing the stories of others. Participants also found creative ways to feel less alone. For example, Mira described watching YouTube videos of newcomer women graduating, and shared that this encouraged her to believe that she can do it too. She shared the following about the videos:

> Some women they be talking about how much they struggled or their own experience. Watching these videos make you to gain a strong, more variable thing. Watching videos, like other people graduating makes you feel like it's like a competition. You need to do it, you wanna be like one of them. Being like other people who are a success, really doing things.

This suggests the importance of representation, where seeing other women persevere and go on to achieve helps them to feel not alone, and also gave participants a sense that it was possible for them to experience similar achievements. This may be viewed as a hope-building process rooted in community.

### *Navigating Belonging: Analysis*

This sub-theme speaks to the importance of developing a sense of belonging in post-migration and educational settings. Indeed, a sense of belonging has been viewed as a psychological protective factor among refugee youth in the face of discrimination and other forms of exclusion (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). This may be particularly important for those holding multiple marginalized identities as the participants in the current study did. Belonging is also a gendered issue. The forms of connection and care described by Rowley and other participants have a long history among women and have been conceptualized as forms of resistance and agency (Mahmood, 2005). Rowley's quote highlights tensions between Western values and ways of being (e.g., independence, focused on productivity) and non-Western value systems with a greater focus on relationality and care. This tension is further elaborated in Sodhi's embodied ethic of care framework and its application with international students in Canadian post-secondary settings (Sodhi & Martin, 2023). These authors highlight that an embodied ethic of care that prioritizes relational caring has the potential to disrupt colonial practices in educational settings. Participants also highlighted their values of relational caring through their actions aimed at creating welcoming spaces for other newcomers.

### *Relational Supports*

Participants discussed the kinds of supports that they found most helpful. For most, these supports were situated within community and were relational in nature. For instance, Amna shared:

> Maybe someone who came or who survived from… or someone who was an immigrant and who came to Canada, had all the experience, and they know everything here and they are trying to give them support to others who will come to Canada. So, for example, if the

> government trying to hire the people who was an immigrant, to help others, this would be wonderful, because it really helps us when someone gives a hand and puts it on our shoulder and says “don’t worry you will get what you want and try your best and you will achieve”.

Here Amna explains the significance of receiving support from someone who has personal experience navigating the challenges newcomers to Canada are facing. She alludes to the relational nature of support using the phrase “gives a hand and puts it on your shoulder”, reminiscent of someone walking the process alongside you. Linna shared supports specific to the school system and indicated that relational assistance found in one-to-one supports were most helpful. Along with tutoring she also mentioned settlement workers/social workers in school programs:

> I remember there used to be some social workers who used to take us around, you know. show us the city, show us everything, and some of them even used to make those events, for like not only the students, but even with their families. So I think those stuff like in the beginning helps a lot like it’s better than just knowing everything by yourself.

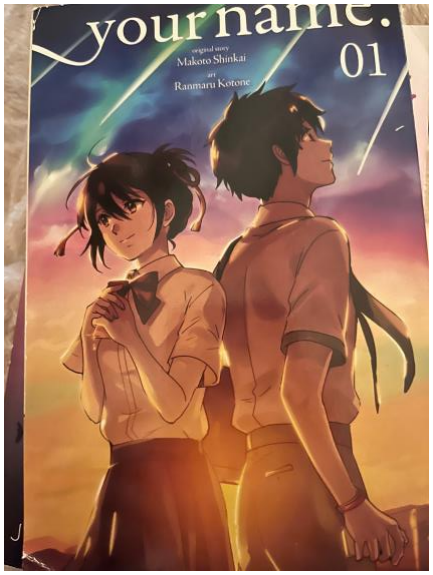
Unfortunately, despite the positive impacts for newcomer students and families, settlement workers in school programs are often met with push-back from educational institutions including limited communication, withdrawing resources and access to students, and even racism and discrimination directed at both students and the support workers themselves (Allen et al., 2021). Linna described that she was fortunate enough to have access to these programs, however she also raised a concern that not all students are aware of them.

Unfortunately, not all students have access to newcomer support programs in schools. Despite this, one participant (Natalia) shared that her teacher was able to offer her relational support in a typical classroom setting. She said in her description of Figure 11:

> My teacher brought me this book. it was like, it's a really beautiful gift for me. And he told me it's easy to read and improve your reading skills. So I really really love this book! It's like, a beautiful gift from my teacher, and he helped me a lot so that's why.

**Figure 11**

*Natalia: Book from teacher*




Natalia described that her teacher approached her and provided her with reading materials that he believed would fit her interests and her reading level (Figure 11). This small, personalized gesture helped her to remain engaged in her learning and opened the door for her to reach out for help as needed. This act of care was similar to Rowley's description of student-teacher relationships in her country of origin wherein she received a greater degree of support, also mentioned earlier:

> Here, the lecturer just comes and talk, talk, talk, and if you don't go follow up, study for yourself, review, all that, you may not pass. But back home, sometimes a teacher can call you in your home and ask you, did you do this or that. If you are close with the teacher they can really help you.

### *Relational Supports: Analysis*

Participants generally shared that they were much more likely to receive relational supports in high school as compared to post-secondary, the latter during which classes took a lecture format. Indeed, a critique of modern neoliberal post-secondary institutions is that they are built on Western individualist notions and prioritization of productivity over relationship (Sodhi & Martin, 2023), and competition over cooperation such that independence and the ability to navigate systems on your own is a perceived goal. However, it is important to recognize that this privileges some post-secondary students over others, and those who inhabit the most marginalized identities are at a distinct disadvantage compared to their peers. The concept of relational supports in post-secondary is explored further in the implications section.

## Summary and Reflections: Strengths and Needs

It is interesting to note that despite the need for community-building and relational supports illuminated by participants, most participants found it necessary to rely on themselves. As described above, many participants shared their perception that others were busy, and that there was no one to help, so they developed ways to help themselves. This highlights an important gap in services and supports for refugee women transitioning into post-secondary. The participants in the current study turned to agentic practices situated within the self, despite expressing a need for and in some cases a preference for community-based supports. They shared that many of their peers opted to leave the education system altogether in favour of employment or having a family. While these are valid and viable choices, they ought to be choices that refugee women are able to make freely knowing that they have adequate supports in place to support their educational journey should they choose to pursue it. In the following chapter, I will elaborate on recommendations based on these findings. I will also present

limitations and directions for future research.

# CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored the experiences of young women with refugee backgrounds transitioning into post-secondary settings. A review of the literature revealed a need for research exploring refugee experiences in post-secondary, particularly given benefits to the individual, family, community, and society when these students are able to pursue and find success in post-secondary settings (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). In this study, I considered the impact of intersecting identities and the ways in which these identities shaped the educational transition processes among refugee women.

In the previous chapter, I outlined and analyzed findings from a transnational feminist lens (Mohanty, 2003). Specifically, results demonstrated that young women encountered systemic barriers in the education system, including inconsistent post-secondary admission policies and the additional workload placed on students who are learning English, and revealed the emotional toll of navigating these barriers. In general, these findings aligned with those from previous studies on the experiences of refugee youth navigating the education system in Canada (e.g., Brewer, 2016; Stewart et al., 2019). Participants also shared important reflections on challenges they faced when asking for help. In a similar vein, results also revealed that participants experienced overt racism and discrimination that was most noticeable on an individual level, and in many cases, they responded in active ways including by engaging in discussion and trying to overturn stereotypes. Despite these significant challenges early in their educational integration, this study shows the important role of hope, tenacity, and social connections among refugee women. I frame these as ways of enacting agency in the face of systemic barriers and oppression.

Furthermore, findings suggest that integration into education systems cannot be considered in a vacuum. Participants in this study highlighted the concurrent losses and gains

associated with the migration journey, and the emotional impacts of this geographical transition. While many previous studies focused on the impact of repeated traumatic experiences occurring in pre-migration settings, transition settings, and resettlement settings ("triple trauma") and a subsequent loss of hope (e.g., Stewart et al., 2019), the current study presents a somewhat more nuanced picture of highs and lows in the migration process. Participants spoke about hope in a dynamic manner and shared that with time they settled into their ability to envision a positive future for themselves. They viewed education as a critical vehicle for building this future.

Participants also discussed supports that would be most helpful in navigating the transition to post-secondary settings. A major finding in the current study was that across settings, a relational mode of delivery for support is crucial. Many of the specific supports deemed useful by participants are also represented in previous studies, including wrap-around supports such as settlement workers or social workers in schools, financial supports, and educational supports (e.g., Reddick & Saddler, 2019). Yet accessing these supports remained challenging for participants, and even when these supports were available, they were often unaware of them or viewed them as ineffective. This was exemplified through participants' perspectives on mental health supports; although participants recognized they were experiencing stress and/or mental health challenges, there was a lack of fit between the models of service delivery and their needs. Participants shared that the lack of accessible support left them feeling isolated, and put them in a position to have to rely on themselves if they wished to continue their educational journeys. This is discussed further in the implications section, with specific attention to post-secondary settings.

In the following section, I will discuss the implications and recommendations based on this project. I will begin with implications for educational settings, first discussing the period

leading up to the transition, and next the transition into post-secondary institutions. Then I address implications for mental health and the field of counselling. I will end with limitations and directions for future research.

## Implications for Education

### Practical and Informational Supports to Navigate Educational Transitions

Education systems in Canada are built around the assumption that students will progress uniformly through educational milestones and therefore be eligible for access to post-secondary settings (Malkki, 1992; Morrice, 2021). However, migration across borders complicates this process, particularly for refugees for whom relocation is unplanned and who may also have interrupted schooling or unrecognized education credentials (Morrice, 2021). Many participants in the current study shared significant challenges in navigating educational transitions. They expressed that determining the pathway to post-secondary was a stage in the transition where they felt particularly alone. For example, those who were transitioning into post-secondary from high school who needed to upgrade their academic credentials were often unsure of the available options or how to select a path forward. This aligns with research suggesting that informational barriers, including lack of access to information and vulnerability to misinformation from uninformed sources can delay or even halt refugee students' educational progress (Bajwa et al., 2017; Reddick & Saddler, 2019). Clarity in the form of informational support may be particularly valuable for students navigating transitions. These supports could include creating a centralized source of information that is tailored to and easily understandable for students who are learning English or the provision of multilingual supports (Ramsay & Baker, 2019). Beyond the availability of a resource like this, community outreach and partnerships between secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, and newcomer-supporting organizations could be a valuable step (Arar, 2021).

Participants also spoke about the value of one-to-one and in-person interactions, therefore opportunities to connect directly with representatives from institutions could be beneficial. For example, having representatives from universities and colleges come into the classroom to discuss entry requirements and application processes with students along with answering questions could be of value. In addition, availability of career counsellors could also be helpful as this could be a resource accessed by students who benefit from one-to-one personalized support (Abkhezr & McMahon, 2017). None of the participants in the current study discussed meeting with a career counsellor, but it is unclear if they had access to this form of support. Indeed, participants noted in general that they were often unaware of available supports, which speaks to the importance of bringing them directly into the classroom and creating space for personal connections to be built.

In the absence of these informational supports, participants described seeking support from others who have been through similar experiences and found this form of guidance to be most useful. These experiences tended to happen organically, often by connecting with others with shared experiences and backgrounds. For instance, several participants shared examples of approaching or being approached by others who had identified them as members of their ethnocultural community. Offering sites for this type of connection may also be valuable. For example, group mentorship opportunities may be valuable when delivered in a way that is integrated into educational settings and do not require youth to attend after-hours when they may be otherwise engaged with employment or family responsibilities. It may also be helpful to embed informational supports in this setting, given that word-of-mouth information from other students may not always be accurate (Bajwa et al., 2017).

Many of the challenges refugee women face in educational transitions occur before they

even enter post-secondary. These barriers mean that many students with hopes of pursuing post-secondary may not be able to realize these goals. While the supports discussed above do little to remove systemic barriers present in the education system, what they can do is make a meaningful shift away from a culture of isolation towards the creation of spaces where refugee women feel supported and find success. In doing so, this fosters a sense of belonging within educational settings and plants seeds of hope for the future.

**Re-Imagining Relational Post-Secondary Institutions**

The focus of this study was exploring educational transitions among refugee women into post-secondary settings specifically. Findings highlighted systemic barriers impacting this transition, including inconsistent admission policies, and the unequal burden on those who are tasked with learning English. Participants also discussed the structure of post-secondary schooling, in particular the expectations placed on them to be self-reliant and address their needs independently. They talked about the various ways in which this was challenging for them. In exploring implications based on these findings, it is important to understand the existing structure of the university and the factors that have shaped it. The university is an institution built on colonial ideals and was created primarily by and for White European upper-middle class men (Henry & Tator, 2018). These institutions have in some ways failed to evolve with a changing student body that presents with diverse needs. There is a growing discourse around practices aimed at decolonizing institutions, meaning practices that "(1) critique ways of knowing, being, and relating that are premised on systemic and ongoing colonial violence and that (2) gesture toward possible futures in which these colonial patterns of knowledge, existence, and relationship are interrupted and redressed" (Stein, 2022, p. 2). Interestingly, in this study participants primarily spoke about systemic barriers that created challenges for them to access

post-secondary education (burdens of language learning and inconsistent admission policies) and shared relatively few explicit comments about the systemic or structural barriers they faced within post-secondary institutions. This could be in part because most participants were fairly early in their post-secondary journeys, with the exception of one participant who was in graduate school. However, findings from the current study illuminated that the culture of independence in post-secondary settings contributed to feelings of isolation and challenges accessing support among participants, even in cases where supports may have been available. Participants shared that supports that were available tended not to be relational in nature and the onus was placed on students to seek out support services without assurance that their needs would be met. This perpetuates a culture of independence, which can be viewed as a Eurocentric value embedded into post-secondary structures that can be uncovered and addressed through decolonization efforts.

One approach that has been posited as an avenue to decolonizing post-secondary institutions is an Embodied Ethic of Care Framework (Sodhi & Martin, 2023). This approach has been applied to international student education and is built on Black and Indigenous knowledge systems (e.g., Collins, 2022). This framework has five components: (a) value for individual uniqueness, (b) appropriateness of emotions in dialogue, (c) capacity for empathy, (d) disrupts colonial violence, and (e) supports self and community integration. Several aspects of this framework were touched on in findings in this study, including most prominently participants viewing themselves as relational beings and integrating the self in community. Some participants responded to the culture of independence by developing the ability to be self-sufficient but did so out of necessity rather than choice. Regarding a way forward, authors of the Embodied Ethic of Care Framework argue against prescription of specific processes related to education and in

favour of a shift in how post-secondary education is viewed, questioning and challenging dominant perspectives and structures (Sodhi & Martin, 2023). That said, given the practical needs expressed by participants, there may be some tangible steps that could have positive impacts for refugee women in post-secondary settings.

Based on suggestions from participants, examples of re-imagining post-secondary education may include re-thinking the role of instructors, towards a consideration of pedagogical approaches that foster relationality and community building in the classroom setting. Participants in the current study shared that they were often unaware of or did not have the ability to engage in community-building efforts outside of the classroom, given the demands on their time and prioritization of academics, yet this left them isolated and disconnected. A reframing of the post-secondary classroom away from a unidirectional site for knowledge transmission (from instructor to student, prioritizing Western Eurocentric ways of knowing) toward a more relational knowledge sharing and community building site could have positive implications for all students (Haji Molana, 2022). Efforts to decolonize pedagogy are ongoing in various fields including education (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021), psychology (Carrero Pinedo et al., 2022), mathematics (Garcia-Olp et al., 2022), environmental sciences (Bratman & DeLince, 2022), and geography (Haji Molana, 2022) among others. However, these efforts tend to be carried out by individual instructors and faculty members rather than at an institutional level. At the institutional level, efforts could involve development of policies that include relational knowledge sharing, along with capacity building among educators to engage in relational pedagogy. Efforts towards decolonizing post-secondary learning environments often come from Indigenous lenses, and interestingly highlights a similar value of relationality in learning environments (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; Poitras Pratt et al., 2021). Integrating these types of

approaches in post-secondary settings could benefit not only women with refugee backgrounds, but the diverse student body as a whole.

## Implications for Counselling

### Addressing Barriers to Access

This study did not focus explicitly on mental health or psychotherapy for refugee women. However, mental health was discussed with participants, and their responses provide some important insights for the field. Most significantly perhaps, none of the participants in the current study accessed therapy. While for one participant this was due to access issues, the other five participants did not conceptualize therapy as an avenue of support that would be beneficial for them, either because they did not think they needed it or because they did not think they would be understood (i.e., the methods did not align with what they needed). This may be in part due to the individualistic nature of counselling in Western countries, as participants in the current study shared they preferred to handle problems on their own, or rely on family or their faith. This finding may also highlight the prevalence of mental health stigma, suggested by participants' statements that to seek mental health support would be evidence that there is something wrong with them or that they would be labelled as "mad". Literature on psychotherapy motivation among refugees presents similar findings, with refugees holding more negative attitudes towards mental health service utilization compared to residents in Western countries (Schlechter et al., 2023). Low psychotherapy motivation was associated with different views on how to approach psychological distress, preferring to discuss physical as opposed to psychological symptoms, and holding low expectations for change as a result of engaging in therapy (Schlechter et al., 2023).

To tie the findings to the larger picture on refugee youth mental health, it may be useful to consider the findings from other Canadian studies, for instance those in a review conducted by Marshall and colleagues (2016). In discussing the mental health challenges facing refugee youth,

authors suggest that the multiple losses incurred by refugees in pre-migration settings and through the migration journey set them apart from other immigrant populations. Refugee youth may also be more likely to travel to Canada on their own, forcing them to build a support network from the ground up. Authors also suggest that migration can impact cultural identity of refugee youth and create challenges regarding self-esteem. These ideas align with findings from the current study, however this study provides an intersectional lens on these experiences, including highlighting how these experiences present unique challenges for women. For example, unaccompanied women may feel particular pressure to provide support to family members back home, and Muslim women may face particular challenges in navigating cultural identity when confronted with an undercurrent of Islamophobia in Canada.

The review paper (Marshall et al., 2016) also explores factors influencing mental health outcomes for refugee youth, and they highlight that these factors occur at the individual, family, and community levels. Critically, findings in the current study are in alignment with this review paper in cautioning that not all refugee youth will have mental health challenges; this assumption is based in a deficit-centered view of refugees (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2020). The findings in this study go further to suggest that even when refugee women do encounter mental health concerns, traditional counselling may not be the only or the most appropriate intervention available. Specifically, counselling does not always adequately address community-level factors related to mental health. Factors related to acceptance, belonging, and discrimination can significantly impact mental health among refugee youth, and these factors may be best addressed in community rather than in individual counselling.

Studies have also identified several barriers to accessing mental health services, including distrust of authority (including due to power imbalances with therapists), mental health stigma,

linguistic and cultural differences, and other priorities (Marshall et al., 2016). With regard to mental health stigma, suggestions to address this are often aimed at raising awareness and access to education about mental health from trusted individuals or supports. They also suggest embedding mental health services in other supports being accessed by refugee students and provide the example of educational settings. However, the findings from the current study suggest that barriers continue to exist in these settings and have much to do with the view of mental health supports as not being culturally relevant or useful in addressing the problems that the women were facing. Indeed, counselling is often critiqued for being aligned with a Western perspective on healing and wellbeing (Zerbe Enns et al., 2020).

A meta-synthesis on the experiences of refugees in therapy found that these experiences were varied (Khairat et al., 2023). This study found that some individuals experience benefits from therapy such as increases in hope for the future, particularly when they are able to develop a trusting therapeutic relationship with a culturally competent therapist. For others however, a dearth of practical interventions aimed at addressing social issues facing refugees and a lack of informational supports left them feeling lost. This suggests that refugee clients may find limited value in therapy if they are unable to address their basic needs first or in the context of therapy. Another point of convergence between the meta-synthesis and the current study was the concept that therapy did not align with the way some refugees viewed their distress. For some this was due to cultural beliefs and stigma regarding mental health, while for others this was related to the notion that their distress was caused by contextual and social factors, therefore individual therapy could do little to help, and healing was more likely to happen through different channels.

Outside of counselling, other spaces may be better suited to serve as sites for healing, community building, and collective action. For instance, the creation of collective safe spaces by

and for refugee women may contribute to solidarity building (Nasr, 2022). Applied to education settings, these spaces may be physical or temporal in nature (e.g., women's-only gathering spaces or women's groups) wherein participants are able to foster shared identity and function outside of oppressive structures that typically operate in education systems. This may allow for the development of feminist solidarity as described by Mohanty (2003), such that relationships are based on shared interests, collaboration, and accountability and are aimed at decolonization of existing structures. Within educational settings, this can be viewed as an opportunity for women with refugee backgrounds to come together in a way that fosters individual agency, builds community, and perhaps creates space for the re-imagining of an inclusive and decolonized education system. Indeed, there may be additional value in creating and accessing such spaces, beyond what is gained through counselling.

**Counselling as a Site for Hope-Building**

Despite barriers, some refugee women do access and find value in therapy (Khairat et al., 2023). The findings from the current study offer insights into ways that they can be supported in counselling settings. For example, participants highlight the value of receiving support from those who have been through the experience before, suggesting that increasing diversity in the counselling field may help to increase access to counsellors who have been through and can relate to their experiences. Providing opportunities for peer support, such as through offering process or support groups, could also be of value. Furthermore, participants in the current study discussed hope as a buoying force in navigating the transition to post-secondary. This could suggest hope may be a valuable resource to build in therapy. The literature on hope in counselling is vast and has even been addressed in relation to working with refugee clients (Ataman & Uysal, 2023; Umer & Lazarte Elliot, 2019; Yohani, 2010). In general, these studies

point to the valuable role of hope as a protective factor in navigating challenges faced in post-migration settings, along with the role of helpers in holding a hopeful outlook for those that they work with.

Snyder's (2000) conceptualization of hope may fit particularly well with the findings from the current study. Snyder's theoretical framework on hope involves five factors, namely: (a) A goal or valued outcome an individual wishes to work towards; (b) a pathway, or perceived route through which the goal can be realized; (c) agency, or perceived capacity to take steps toward one's goal; (d) the ability to develop alternate pathways in the face of barriers; and (e) thoughts, such as viewing oneself as agentic and the ability to envision alternative pathways, drives emotional response such that hopeful thinking drives a more positive emotional response (Snyder, 2000). Significantly, participants in the current study discussed their experiences in a way that fit within this theoretical framework. Each illustrated their goals regarding post-secondary attainment and highlighted that this was an important source of hope for them. They were able to envision pathways to achieve this goal and find alternatives in the face of barriers. Each described viewing themselves as an active agent in this process. Lastly, they were able to maintain a sense of hope despite setbacks and challenges in the present, allowing them to feel more positively about their future. This may suggest that interventions aimed at hope-building that fit within this framework could be valuable for this population. However, given findings from the study, these interventions should be delivered in a contextualized way that takes into account the various systems in which barriers are encountered.

In addition to hope, participants described several individual attributes that allowed them to continue their educational journeys. These included determination, tenacity, and self-reliance. These noncognitive skills have been posited as factors that aid students in viewing themselves as

a whole person and supporting them in being active participants in school and later in the workplace (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). The cultivation of these skills has been celebrated as a move away from what is arguably an over-emphasis on intellectual and reasoning abilities in educational settings. Indeed, participants in the current study spoke about how these skills served them well when they encountered barriers in the education system, particularly those related to language learning. However, these capacities must be viewed in the context of the capitalist and individualistic societies in which they were developed. Participants' development of these capacities may speak to their adaptability, or their ability to build the skills that allowed them to respond to their new environment (Corcoran & Vassallo, 2021). In supporting refugee women who are transitioning to post-secondary settings, it may be important to acknowledge the value of these skills in allowing them to move through education systems to build a life that offers stability, while simultaneously challenging the systems themselves that put them in the position to require these skills.

**Counselling as a Site for Advocacy**

One way that psychologists can work towards challenging systems is through advocacy. The most recent iteration of the Canadian Psychological Association's code of ethics for psychologists (CPA, 2017) makes mention of advocacy as part of the role of psychologists particularly when confronted with systems that ignore the rights of certain groups. A topic of some debate in the field is the extent and methods through which psychologists ought to engage in advocacy. While research suggests psychologists generally have a positive attitude toward advocacy, low levels of engagement in advocacy-related action are reported (Forestieri et al., 2024). This may be due in part to a lack of time and a lack of training, as psychology training tends to focus on working with individual clients rather than system-level advocacy (Ali &

Sichel, 2019; Forestieri et al., 2024). Various guidelines have been posed to support the development of this capacity among psychologists (Melton, 2018). These guidelines include a consideration of locations and forms of advocacy a psychologist may engage in. This consideration may also be relevant in post-secondary settings wherein psychologists and academics may consider their roles as advocates on campus (Quaye et al., 2017). Unfortunately, participants in the current study shared a sense of being on their own and having to learn how to ask for help and advocate for themselves. While they framed self-advocacy as a useful skill, they did not generally discuss system-level advocacy or activism. This aligns with findings in other studies showing that activism may not be accessible or without repercussions for those who have been marginalized (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Kronick et al., 2021). This may mean that researchers and practitioners with access to greater power and privilege can take on these roles while being cautious to do so without speaking for others.

In sum, this study has several important implications for counselling. First, it may be important to consider whether counselling is the most appropriate form of support for refugee women transitioning to post-secondary, and consider that other practical supports such as financial and informational supports may be more important at least during the initial transition. Counselling that has a focus on hope and relationship building along with meeting tangible needs may be important. Further, recognition and bolstering of clients' personal agency and strengths may be helpful. Lastly, counsellors may also consider their role as advocates, particularly given findings in the current study and other findings that refugee women may not have access to the same power and privilege that allows them to advocate politically.

## Limitations and Lessons Learned

While this study offers implications for the fields of education and counselling, there are

several limitations that must be noted. Many of these limitations are related to adaptations made to the project during the research process, some of which were due to ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, this study was initially designed as a community-based participatory research project, but needed to be adapted to a participatory approach that saw a decreased level of community engagement. I had planned to begin this study in 2020, however due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I opted to delay it. Unfortunately, the nature of pandemic restrictions in place meant that it was more difficult to maintain research relationships and to be actively engaged in the community. For example, prior to the pandemic I had been volunteering with an after-school program for newcomer girls but this program was suspended indefinitely due to the pandemic and a loss of funding. While technology offered some opportunities for engagement, attempts at online engagement often had limited uptake. One reason for this may have been the pandemic-related stressors occurring at the time, such as balancing multiple roles in the home, coping with economic insecurity, and feeling burnt out due to demands of online schooling (Santana et al., 2021). Furthermore, although online formats may reduce time and cost barriers of attending such programming, it can be more challenging to replicate the informal discussions and relationship-building that often occurred in these settings (Schwarz et al., 2020), thereby making it more challenging to engage organically with communities. Given these factors, I had to adapt recruitment procedures to be more in line with conventional research approaches such as snowball sampling.

Further, the research protocol was adapted to be responsive to the needs of participants. This project was initially designed as a series of focus groups, however feedback from potential participants led me to adapt to individual interviews. They shared that focus groups were challenging for their unpredictable work and school schedules and required a significant time

commitment that created barriers to participation. In an effort to reduce barriers, I shifted to individual interviews and shortened time commitment. I also provided options for virtual or in-person participation, and five opted for virtual while one participant opted for in-person. These adaptations are in line with suggestions put forward on youth engagement during the pandemic to account for the additional challenges facing youth during this time (Allemang et al., 2021). Similarly, in alignment with community-based approaches, I offered opportunities for ongoing engagement in the research process. Participants generally expressed that they were unable to commit to ongoing involvement due to demanding schedules, therefore they were less involved in the analysis process as compared to the original study design. While this is a move away from a participatory research design, I felt it was important to be responsive to the needs of participants and minimize barriers to participation to ensure that the voices of this group (and in particular those who might otherwise be excluded due to the demands on them) were heard. The research process has remained co-led, in that decisions and adaptations were guided by feedback and suggestions from participants regarding barriers to involvement.

In considering limitations of this study, it may also be important to consider sample size and diversity. While generalizable findings are not the goal of the current study, it is important to note that findings capture a moment-in-time snapshot of the experiences of a small group of women with refugee backgrounds transitioning into post-secondary studies. There is significant diversity among this group across variables including age, race, religion, country of origin, and educational backgrounds. I believe that diversity is a strength of this study as it illustrates commonalities among the participants as well as differences in experiences to present a rich picture of this process. I have attempted to show that this group is not a monolith, thus broad claims cannot be made about their experiences and needs. This is however a complicating factor

for transferability, as it is more difficult to determine for whom these results may be applicable. For example, at the time of writing, Ukrainian and Afghan refugees are arriving in Canada in higher numbers than in years past, and it is difficult to determine if results may be applicable to these groups. Nonetheless, it is likely that systemic barriers identified in the current study will also impact more recently arrived refugees as they navigate the education system in Canada to some degree.

**Considerations for Implementing Photovoice: Lessons Learned**

I chose to utilize the Photovoice method due to its demonstrated ability to engage participants, particularly youth, in the research process (Guerrero & Tinkler, 2010). This decision was informed in part by my experience as a research assistant working on a project with Syrian youth; in this project arts-based methods were incorporated in an effort to enhance youth engagement in the research process, and this was found to be very effective. My hope was that this method and the use of images would elicit critical discussion that may not otherwise have emerged through reliance on interview questions. Indeed, the process of implementing this method with young refugee women led to several valuable learnings that may inform future research. For instance, I was surprised that three participants opted to use images sourced online rather than their own photographs. One participant cited privacy concerns as the reason for this choice, while the other two described finding it useful to be able to search for images that more directly depicted their message (e.g., images that included words). In contrast, those taking photographs were required to reflect on how they could visually represent their experiences, and as such discussions of these photographs were particularly rich and personally meaningful, and therefore often elicited more emotion as compared to online images.

The use of images sourced online also raised concerns regarding dissemination.

Participants did not own these images, therefore copyright needed to be considered, and this prevented sharing the images directly in public spheres which has implications for knowledge mobilization (Cosgrove et al., 2023). Use of online images was initially offered as an option to mitigate any potential barriers due to pandemic restrictions, though at the time of data collection no restrictions were in place. A potential alternative to the use of online images might have been to invite participants to draw/paint/create their own images though some participants expressed this may create barriers for participation due to the time-intensive nature of the task.

The unanticipated shift from focus groups to individual interviews was a direct response to the needs of participants, however it may also have led to missed opportunities for discussion amongst participants and generation of novel ideas. Further, while participants generally shared that they enjoyed participating and found healing in sharing their stories and being heard, there was a missed opportunity for them to connect with others with shared experiences and feel less alone (Cosgrove et al., 2023). Reflecting on this change, I cannot help but view it in light of the research finding regarding the importance of community building. In attempting to set up focus groups, we faced many of the same barriers that youth participants discussed in the Syrian CLEG project and that they faced when trying to build community in school settings (e.g., difficulty scheduling meeting times around busy work and school schedules). As researchers, it may be important to anticipate these barriers ahead of time and take steps to counteract them. For instance, working with groups that have already been formed (e.g., homework clubs, student groups, etc.) and collaborating with schools could be beneficial. Further, the needs of participants can be centered, such that there are tangible benefits of attending the group sessions. In the current project, participants were offered opportunities to collaborate and be credited on publications or presentations that are being produced as a result of this project. However, more

immediate benefits such as providing opportunities to ask questions about post-secondary and/or connect with mentors could have been helpful.

## Directions for Future Research

This study was conducted with young adult women who came to Canada as refugees. Participants in this study discussed competing priorities and impacts this had for their educational journeys. However, they also shared observations that for others who had married and had children who wanted to pursue education, this journey was significantly more challenging. A relatively under-researched area is the experiences and needs of refugee women with children who are hoping to pursue post-secondary education. Given research findings on shifting gender roles in transition and resettlement countries that may set the stage for women with families to seek employment, and the benefits of education in particular for women in terms of increasing earning potential, this may be an important avenue to explore further. This population is perhaps more difficult to reach, given the significant demands on their time, however this means that their voices are largely missing from the research. This, along with other atypical education pathways, may be particularly important to explore from a transnational feminist perspective.

Additionally, all participants in the current project had been successful in entering post-secondary. It may be important to explore the experiences of those who chose not to pursue post-secondary, or attempted to pursue but changed their minds. This might shed more light onto the barriers that exclude some from the educational arena. While participants shared numerous barriers in the current study, they had successfully overcome them. In another vein, it may be valuable to explore experiences of those who arrived as refugees as they complete university and enter the workforce. Participants in the current study held the belief that post-secondary studies

would offer greater stability and a better life, and this view offered them a sense of hope. However, it may be valuable to explore whether this hope is indeed realized after graduation, or whether the promise of socioeconomic mobility is a source of disappointment (Stein, 2022).

It may also be valuable for future research with refugees, and in particular with refugee women, to be conducted in an engaged participatory framework (Kronick et al., 2021). Given the inherent power imbalances in research with communities who have been marginalized, attention to the dynamics of power and privilege at play in the research process will continue to be important. While this type of research is more time-consuming and can present challenges for the researcher, if done well it can be more equitable, and produce results that contribute not only to the academic understanding of this group, but also to tangible changes for the community. Researchers ought to avoid damage-centered research that presents a deficit-based perspective of populations that have been marginalized as it can continue to perpetuate at best inaccurate and at worst harmful stereotypes (Tuck, 2009). Research relationships must be ethically fostered, in a way that centres the experiences of participants rather than viewing their voices as commodities to further researchers' agenda (Gavilanes, 2022).

## Concluding Statements

Forced migration is occurring at high rates in the current global conditions. There are a number of ongoing wars and active conflict zones, and mass displacement may increase in years to come due to pressures related to the climate crisis (Kronick et al., 2021). As such, supporting the needs and wellbeing of those who are forced to leave their home in search of safety and stability will continue to be an important project. Given that these challenges are occurring on a global scale, they necessitate an in-kind response, moving away from responses that are embedded in Western ways of knowing, and instead opting for a decolonized approach.

In this study, I have explored the strengths, challenges, and needs of young women with refugee backgrounds transitioning into post-secondary settings. This research has challenged my own way of thinking about the needs of those with refugee backgrounds, such that I am more attuned to the intersectional aspects of this transition and my view on resilience and agency has been transformed. My hope is that this research will contribute to the conversation on easing the transition to post-secondary for refugee women, providing them with supports that will allow them to flourish and find success in Canadian society.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

Eligibility Screening and Demographics Questions:

**Name:**

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**Where were you born:**

**Where did you grow up** (please list all countries in which you lived for period of 6+ months):

**Immigration status on arrival in Canada:**

**Citizenship status**

Canadian Citizen (circle): YES NO

Permanent Resident (circle): YES NO

Other (please fill in):

**When did you arrive in Canada:**

**Age at arrival in Canada:**

**Current grade/level of education:**

I am in high school (Circle): YES NO

I have completed high school (circle): YES NO

I am in post-secondary (circle): YES NO

If in post-secondary, current program:

If none of the above please describe current level of education:

***If you are in high school*, after high school, you intend to** (Circle):

Find Work Attend Post-Secondary Both Other

# Appendix B

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

University of Alberta, Education North

11210 87 Avenue

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T6G 2G5

Tel: 780-492-1164

## PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER – INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW VERSION

**Study Title: Exploring the Transition to Post-Secondary Settings among Refugee Girls and Women**

**Research Investigators:**
Jasmine Nathoo (Doctoral Student)
Counselling Psychology Program, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
Email: janathoo@ualberta.ca

Sophie Yohani, PhD. (Supervisor)
Counselling Psychology Program Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
Email: sophie.yohani@ualberta.ca

**Invitation to Participate:**
You are being asked to participate in this research project because you self-identify as a girl/woman refugee experience who is interested in or is currently attending post-secondary.

**Background and Purpose:**
We are researching the experiences of refugee girls and women as they transition into post-secondary settings. From this research we wish to learn about the challenges you have faced, the things that you found helpful, and the needs that you have as you make this transition. The results of this study will be used to improve educational and support services for refugees arriving in Canada.

**Study Procedures:**
This study is an arts-based photography study. You will be invited to join a 30 minute one-on-one briefing about the study, one 60-90 minute initial interview, and a follow-up 60 minute interview. Interviews will be conducted online using a secure videoconferencing platform (ZOOM) or in-person at the University of Alberta. You will receive instruction in technical and artistic aspects of photography. You will be asked to bring photographs that represent your experiences transitioning to post-secondary and bring 3-6 photographs or objects to the initial interview. Interviews will be recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. Preliminary results will be shared with you and you will have the opportunity to give input and feedback. You will also be invited to showcase your photographs in a presentation or exhibit if you wish to

do so.

**Benefits:**
If you choose to participate in this study, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences transitioning to post-secondary. You will also receive instruction in a photography-based research method. The results from this study, in which your own identity will be protected, will be published and presented (e.g., at conferences, community workshops) in order to bring attention to the findings. Findings will be presented to schools, post-secondary institutions, support workers, psychologists, and counsellors, and will inform efforts to support newcomers as they integrate into schools and pursue post-secondary education. If you wish, there may be opportunities to participate in preparation and delivery of presentations. There are no foreseeable financial costs to you associated with being in this study.

**Risks:**
The risks in participating in this study are minimal, but it is possible that you may experience some emotional distress or fatigue if difficult topics are discussed. To ensure you are as comfortable as possible, the research team member facilitating interviews has training in trauma-informed practice and support, and you will be given a list of mental health supports available within the community. You can also choose to not answer any questions that may lead to discomfort, and if you would like to speak to someone after the interview you may contact the researcher identified above. The study will use ZOOM videoconferencing platform to collect data for online participation, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. ZOOM collects IP addresses, and there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the research team. To reduce this risk, recordings will be saved on the researcher's computer rather than on ZOOM. In-person meetings will be held in a private space on campus.

**Voluntary Participation:**
You have the right to refuse this invitation to participate. You can also withdraw from the study at any point. You will only need to let the research team know and you will be withdrawn from the study. If you withdraw from the study you will still be eligible to retain the honorarium (gift card).

**Research Data and Withdrawal:**
Research materials will include transcripts of interviews, written notes taken during the interviews and photographs of images, objects or creations relating to the topics being discussed, that you may bring or create during the groups. Photographs of your objects or images and creations developed during the study will be collected by the research team, but any information that leads back to you will be removed to protect your identity, unless you choose otherwise. You can choose to have your information removed up to 2 weeks after each interview takes place. This two-week limitation is in place as data analysis in qualitative studies occurs at the same time with data collection to inform questions in the next interview.

**Confidentiality:**
Research materials will be kept confidential and only the academic members of the research team will have access to this information. Any identifying information that can be linked back to you will be removed before publishing or distributing any findings. All electronic data will be password protected and all research materials will be stored in locked file cabinets in the research lab that only the research team will access.

**Honorarium:**
You will be provided with an honorarium of a $50 gift certificate to thank you for your participation in this research project and you will be provided with a certificate of completion. Gift certificate will be sent via email or provided in person. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any point you will still be eligible to receive/retain the $50 gift certificate.

**Additional Information:**
The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta (Ethics ID# Pro00109649). For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

University of Alberta, Education North
11210 87 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T6G 2G5
Tel: 780-492-1164

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Study Title: Exploring the Transition to Post-Secondary Settings among Refugee Girls and Women**

**Research Investigator:**
Jasmine Nathoo (Doctoral Student)
Counselling Psychology Program, Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
Email: janathoo@ualberta.ca

Sophie Yohani, PhD. (Supervisor)
Counselling Psychology Program Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
Email: sophie.yohani@ualberta.ca

*Please circle your answers:*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| I understand that I have been asked to participate in a research study. | Yes | No |
| I understand the objectives and procedure of this study. | Yes | No |
| I have read and understood the attached information sheet. | Yes | No |
| I understand the benefits and risks involved in taking part in this research study. | Yes | No |
| I have had an opportunity to ask any questions and discuss the study. | Yes | No |
| I understand that I am free to leave this study with no repercussions, and the final date up to which I can leave the study has been explained to me, including the reasons for having a set point. | Yes | No |
| I understand my identity will not be included in all research materials and I know who will be allowed to access to the data collected. | Yes | No |
| I understand that my photographs of images, artifacts and creations developed during the study will be collected by the research team and that all my identifying information will be removed before inclusion in publications. | Yes | No |
| I have decided to have my name and affiliation with this project revealed and I can change my mind at any time. | Yes | No |

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

Participant Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

## Appendix C

Photography Subject Consent

I, _____, give permission for _____, acting on behalf of the University of Alberta research project, **Exploring the Transition to Post-Secondary Settings among Refugee Girls and Women**, to take my photograph. By signing my name below, I understand that this photograph may be used in a public display for publication, presentations, and educational awareness purposes.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

If subject is a minor:

Parental Consent: _____

Date: _____

## Appendix D

**Study Title: Exploring the Transition to Post-Secondary Settings among Refugee Girls and Women**

**Photography Release Form**

Photograph General Release

I, _____, give permission for the University of Alberta research team to use and publish my photographs developed during the research project *Exploring the Transition to Post-Secondary Settings Among Refugee Girls and Women*. They are free to use the photographs for publication, presentations, and educational awareness purposes. I understand that if I consent to release of photographs, information in the photographs could be identifiable.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

## Appendix E

TIMELINE EXERCISE

Instructions: Create a timeline that represents your educational and migration journey. Please add as much detail as you would like.

# Appendix F

Interview Outlines

**Individual Introductory Meeting (~30 minutes):**
Meeting conducted virtually via ZOOM or in-person at University of Alberta (depending on participant preference)

Topics covered:

- Review Consent and parameters of research (10 mins)
- Address questions about research process and get participant input on the project (e.g., preference for in-person vs. virtual meetings, scheduling of focus groups, opportunities for ongoing participation in research process)
- Context/get-to-know you activity: introduction; where did you come from, what were your educational experiences; where are you at now (educationally) – create a timeline of their educational and migration journey.
- Provide brief training in arts-based methods and photovoice (10 mins)
- Provide training on taking photographs using smartphone or digital camera (if needed)
- Ethics of photovoice discussion (5 mins)
- Provide interview/photography guiding questions, and instructions to bring 3-6 photographs to interview. Participants will be invited to share photographs with the researcher in advance via Google Drive folder.
- Framing questions:
    - *What is your experience of transitioning into post-secondary settings in Canada?*
    - *What challenges/barriers have you faced in this transition?*
    - *What strengths/supports have helped you to navigate this process?*

**Individual Interview (1-1.5 Hours)**
Meeting conducted virtually via ZOOM or in-person at University of Alberta (depending on participant preference)
Review consent, address questions

Review timeline exercise as relevant – pre-migration, transition setting, post-migration education.

*Purpose of interview is to understand your experiences of transitioning to post-secondary settings in Canada, and to explore challenges, needs, strengths with the aim of creating change*

- Participant will be reminded of framing questions (see above) and will select 1-2 photographs to discuss for each question.
- SHOWeD mnemonic used to guide discussion of photographs (Wang et al., 2004)
    - What do you *S*ee here?
    - What's really *H*appening here?
    - How does this relate to y*O*ur lives?
    - *W*hy does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
    - What can you *D*o about it? And/or who might you reach out to, to do something

about it? What might this person/group/resource bring to make a difference?

- Informal discussion of all photographs:
    - What are the main themes, issues, ideas that arose from the photographs?
    - What are practical guidelines, solutions, or strengths that may emerge?
- Probe topics/questions, drawn from literature review:
    - How has this experience of transitioning into post-secondary been impacted by your gender? *(as self-identified in eligibility screening)*
    - How have pre-migration educational experiences and/or post-migration educational experiences impacted your transition to post-secondary?
    - Have you experienced discrimination (individual/systemic) based on your gender/race/religion/age and what has the impact been on your transition to post-secondary?
    - In what ways has your gender/race/religion/age been a strength during your transition to post-secondary?
    - What has your experience been of help-seeking in transitioning to post-secondary? E.g., informational support? Mental health support? Academic support? Other?
    - How has this impacted you? Did it impact your mental health? [probe further here]
    - Impact of COVID?
    - Based on your experiences, what do you have any recommendations for changes or action:
        - At the policy level? E.g., admissions policies, other systemic changes
        - At the practical level? E.g., supports you would have benefitted from receiving? Accessibility of supports? Etc. Mental health, career counselling, academics [frame based on my position at CCS]
- Participants will be asked to provide a title for each photograph (Plunkett et al., 2013)
- Is there anything else you want to add that has not been covered in the conversation?

**Follow-up Individual Interviews -OPTION A (1 hour) OR Follow-up Focus Group (OPTION B)**

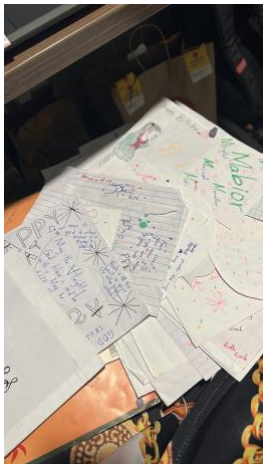
Meeting conducted virtually via ZOOM or in-person at University of Alberta (depending on participant preference)

- Follow-up interviews will be conducted with participants. Semi-structured interview guide will be developed based on findings from focus groups. Participants will also have an opportunity to express ideas privately and anonymously. Reflections on research process will also be explored.
- For those who are able to/who choose to participate in a follow-up focus group, similar questions will be asked. The focus group will allow for mutual sharing, provision/receiving of peer support.

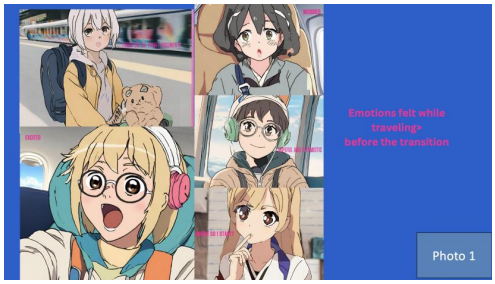
# Appendix G

## Photovoice Images

**Rowley**

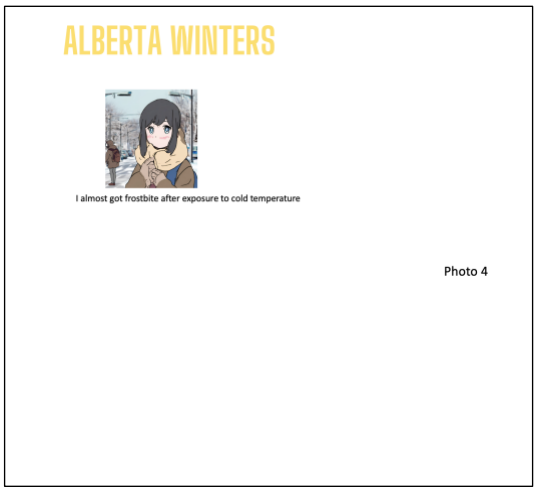


**Sophia**

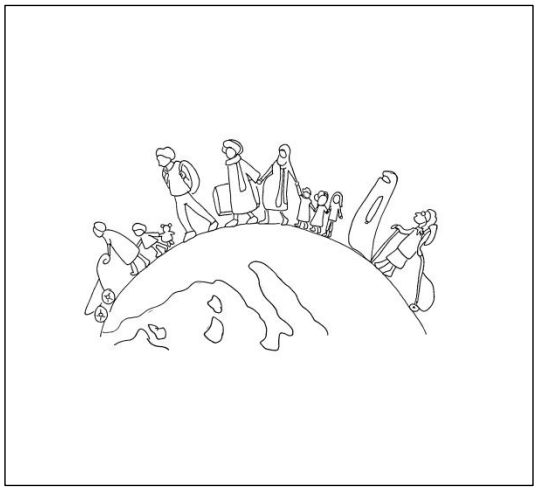

Emotions felt while traveling> before the transition
Photo 1

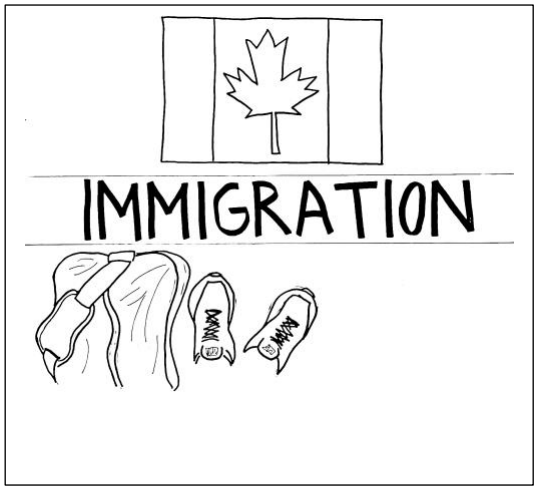

STUDENT CONSEL MEETING
Information overload!
Me alone at home trying to process the information
Photo 2

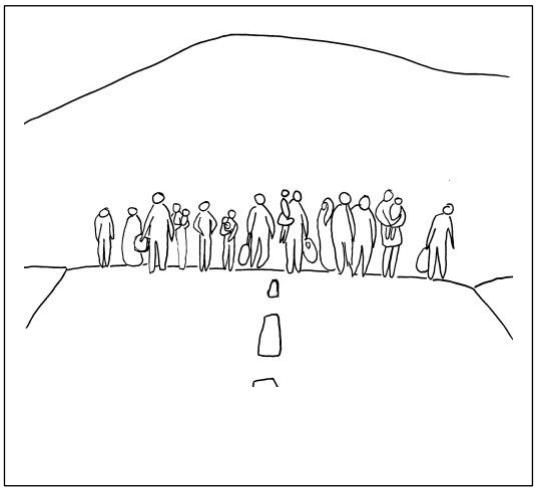

Navigating graduate program admissions
Graduate studies
Photo 3

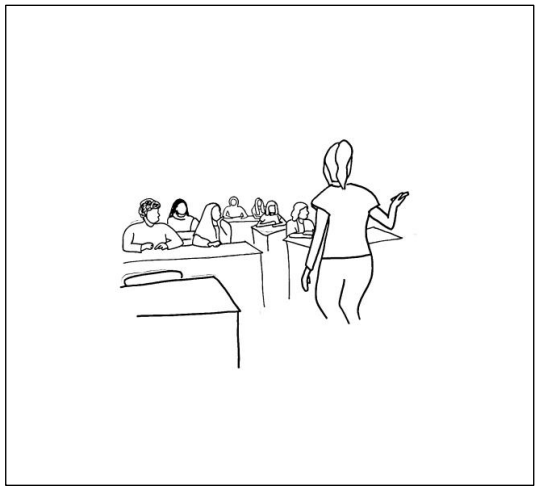

ALBERTA WINTERS
I almost got frostbite after exposure to cold temperature
Photo 4

**Amna**



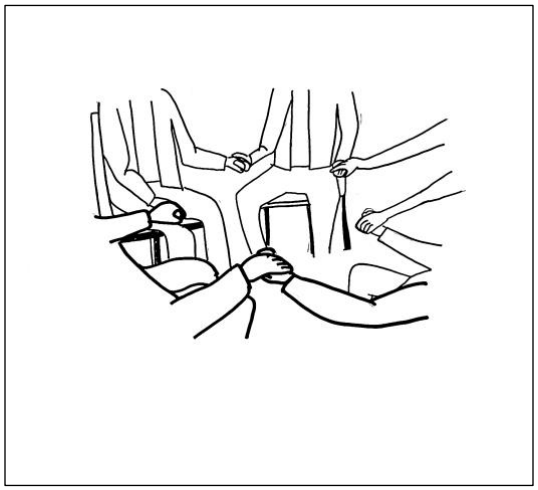


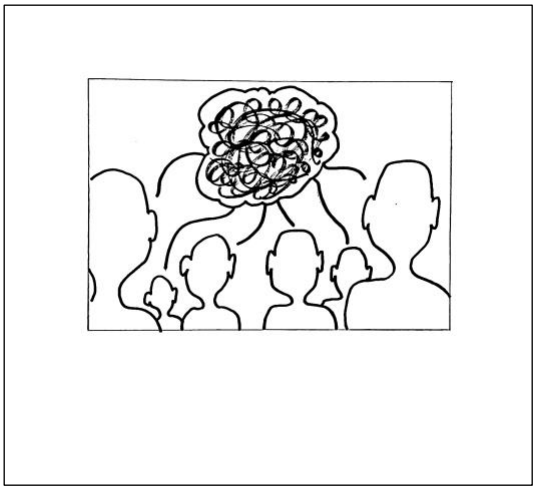



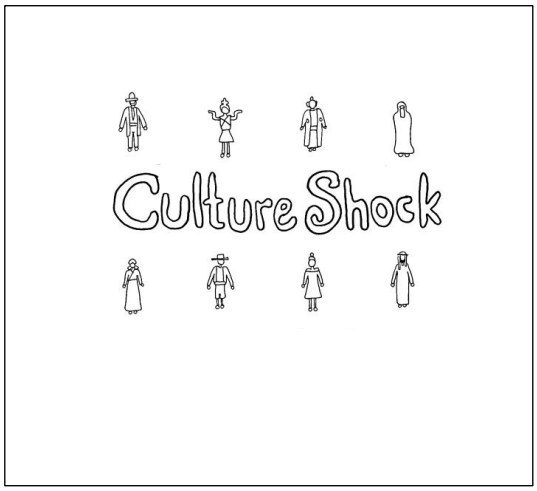


*Please note that for copyright purposes original images were replaced with diagrams

**Linna**






*Please note that for copyright purposes original images were replaced with diagrams

**Mira**


**Natalia**