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Sonja Aicha van der Putten

**Factors that Influence the Educational Aspirations of Young Adult
Women from Refugee Backgrounds**

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Editors:

**Antje Ellermann, Alessandra Santos, Matthew Wright,
and Gaoheng Zhang**

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Abstract

Many young adult women aged 19-30 years old from refugee backgrounds have missed out on formative years of education because of war and displacement. The factors that influence the ability of young adult women from refugee backgrounds to access higher education in Canada are impacted by three key factors: time and expectations, resource availability, and community. This study used a constructivist lens to analyze data collected from interviews and focus groups. The findings suggest that the time available to pursue higher education is directly related to the resources young adult women from refugee backgrounds have available to them upon resettlement. Further, the experiences these women have getting involved in their new communities and the social networks they are able to build for themselves are significant factors in determining their ability to pursue higher education in Canada.

Keywords: refugees; women; education; aspirations

Author

Sonja Aicha van der Putten is an educator and scholar whose research interests include equity-based education policy in both the K-12 and higher education systems. Her professional work and research use critical and feminist theory to help support marginalized students in British Columbia. The study that this article was based on was funded by a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Doctoral Scholarship. As an emerging scholar, Sonja aims to pursue scholarship that focuses on equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization issues in education. Dr. van der Putten can be reached at: svanderp@sfu.ca or sonja_vdp@hotmail.com.

Ethics Statement

Ethics Statement

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I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Introduction

Nearly half of global migrants today are women and girls who are migrating alone or as heads of their households.^{1,2} Hundreds of millions of these women and girls face unequal access to educational opportunities because of their refugee status.³ Yet, access to education is a universal human right centrally linked to poverty reduction, stable economic growth, and better overall lives for children, families, and communities.⁴ Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”⁵ Similarly, Article 13 of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights declares that “higher education shall be made equally accessible to all...by every appropriate means.”⁶ This sentiment is further supported by Article 28 of the most widely ratified treaty, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that “higher education [must be] accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means.”⁷ However, despite the global support for higher education as a human right, there has been very little exploration of the benefits of higher education accessibility in scholarship and policy and very little is known about the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education in Canada.^{8,9,10,11}

Young adult women aged 19-30 years old settling in British Columbia, Canada, from refugee backgrounds are too old to reap the benefits of the free supportive programming,

¹ Hanmer, Lucia, Jeni Klugman, and Elena Ortiz. "Poverty, Gender, and Displacement: A Policy Brief." (2022).

² “Five Reasons Migration Is a Feminist Issue.” 2018. Unfpa.org. 2018. <https://www.unfpa.org/news/five-reasons-migration-feminist-issue>.

³ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah, and Wenona Giles. "Higher education for refugees." *Refuge* 27 (2010): 3.

⁴ Dryden-Peterson, Sarah. "The politics of higher education for refugees in a global movement for primary education." *Refuge* 27 (2010): 10.

⁵ Rights, U. N. H. "Universal declaration of human rights." (1961).

⁶ United Nations. 1966. “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.” United Nations. December 16, 1966. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.

⁷ Assembly, UN General. "Convention on the Rights of the Child." *United Nations, Treaty Series* 1577, no. 3 (1989): 1-23.

⁸ Brewer, Courtney Anne. "An outline for including refugees in Canadian educational policy." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education/Revue canadienne des jeunes chercheuses et chercheurs en éducation* 7, no. 1 (2016).

⁹ Dryden-Peterson, The Politics of Higher Education.

¹⁰ Dryden-Peterson, and Giles, Higher Education for Refugees, 3.

¹¹ Baker, Sally, Georgina Ramsay, Evonne Irwin, and Lauren Miles. "'Hot', 'cold' and 'warm' supports: Towards theorising where refugee students go for assistance at university." *Teaching in Higher Education* 23, no. 1 (2018): 1-16.

including language classes and mentorship opportunities, provided in the K-12 public education system, and often find that existing adult newcomer programming does not meet their educational needs.^{12, 13} This article aims to illuminate the key factors that influence the educational aspirations of young adult women from refugee backgrounds who have goals of pursuing higher education in Canada. These factors include: time pressures and expectations, resource availability, and the social networks they are able to build within their communities.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, critical theory was used to apply Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of cultural capital and education, and Nancy Fraser's understanding of justice, to better understand the barriers faced by young adult women from refugee backgrounds in the transition from secondary to post-secondary in the public education system in British Columbia. Critical theories of education are responses to real world circumstances, which work to change the purpose and delivery of education, and to foster cultural and social change through individual growth.^{14, 15} This study explores the ambitions of young adult women from refugee backgrounds to pursue higher education with the hope that doing so would provide financial stability for their futures, advance their social mobility, and enable them to pursue meaningful employment. Bourdieu's work suggests that the education system rewards those who exist in the dominant class and disadvantages those who do not, specifically those new to the culture, such as refugees.^{16, 17} This form of social and cultural exclusion takes place both in the classroom where the refugee's knowledge and skills may be undervalued and, in the policies structuring the educational system

¹² Niemeyer, Maya. "The cultural and social capital of unaccompanied refugee children: a policy study of the education of unaccompanied refugee children in Sweden and Germany." (2015).

¹³ Shakya, Yogendra B., Sepali Guruge, Michaela Hynie, Arzo Akbari, Mohamed Malik, Sheila Htoo, Azza Khogali, Stella Abiyona, Rabea Murtaza, and Sarah Alley. "Aspirations for higher education among newcomer refugee youth in Toronto: Expectations, challenges, and strategies." *Refuge* 27 (2010): 65.

¹⁴ Apple, Michael W. "Can schooling contribute to a more just society?" *Education, citizenship and social justice* 3, no. 3 (2008): 239-261.

¹⁵ Mellor, Rebecca, Neil Cottrell, and Monica Moran. "'Just working in a team was a great experience...'"—Student perspectives on the learning experiences of an interprofessional education program." *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 27, no. 4 (2013): 292-297.

¹⁶ Bourdieu, Pierre. "The three forms of theoretical knowledge." *Social Science Information* 12, no. 1 (1973): 53-80.

¹⁷ Dumais, Susan A. "Cultural capital, gender, and school success: The role of habitus." *Sociology of education* (2002): 44-68.

where credentials are not recognized. Bourdieu (1973) further believed that education should act as a means to improve individuals' social mobility. Bourdieu argued that the lack of cultural capital, specifically embodied forms (for example, knowledge of the dominant culture) and institutionalized forms (for example, educational credentials) possessed by the non-dominant class of students, such as refugees, limited their success in the education system, and therefore, would limit their social mobility.

Nancy Fraser explores the idea of cultural recognition and examines the concept of justice: what it is, as well as who it applies to, and how it should be carried out. Fraser suggests that injustice occurs when an individual's full participation in society is denied by the economic structures that exist; when an individual is prevented from interacting with parity because the institutionalized hierarchies deny them equitable status; and when an individual is impeded from participation because of decisions and rules that deny them an equal voice in deliberations and democratic decision-making.¹⁸ Applied to women from refugee backgrounds, Fraser's theory would suggest that they must have a stronger voice in the policies and decision-making that influence them directly.¹⁹

Methods

This article is part of a larger study that explored the educational and career aspirations that young adult women from refugee backgrounds have in the pursuit of higher education in Canada, as well as the barriers they face in pursuing higher education and the impact of gender on their ability to pursue higher education. This research was conducted using qualitative methodological processes rooted in constructivist principles, which is based on the belief that knowledge creation is on-going and is co-constructed by participants as they make meaning of their experiences.²⁰ Constructivist principles support an inductive method of analysis. Inductive

¹⁸ Fraser, Nancy. "Reframing justice in a globalizing world." *Global inequality: Patterns and explanations* (2007): 252-272.

¹⁹ Fraser, Reframing Justice, 252-272.

²⁰ Merriam, Sharan B., and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

analysis was used to facilitate a detailed reading of the data collected in interviews and focus groups and to create themes and categories upon which interpretations were made.²¹

This constructivist lens was further influenced by a critical research perspective. This critical research approach was drawn from feminist theory and critical social justice theory. It assumes that power relations are historically and socially constructed and that there is a need to confront the injustice.²²

Through interview and focus group data analysis, this article focuses on the key factors that influence the educational aspirations of young adult women from refugee backgrounds who have goals of pursuing higher education in Canada. I am a teacher-scholar who lives and works on the unceded lands of the Coast Salish. From an emic or insider's perspective, I identify as female who is also in the process of pursuing my own educational and career aspirations. From an etic or an outsider's perspective, I identify as a second-generation Canadian, born to immigrant parents of North African and Western European descent. I am not between the ages of 19-30 years old, I am not from a refugee background, and I am not a racialized woman. As an educator who has taught newcomer students from refugee backgrounds, I have a unique perspective into the challenges these women have faced and the stressors they are confronted with daily as they navigate the policies and practices of the Canadian education system. But I do not experience the same intersecting biases and modes of discrimination that the study participants experience. In my position of power as an educator and researcher, study participants may have been hesitant to share their true lived experiences with me. For instance, they may have been reluctant to share stories that may negatively reflect on the education system or that may draw attention to discrimination they experienced based on race or class. Similarly, my data interpretation may have been impacted by my professional experiences and subsequent views on the education system and the barriers I perceive to exist. For instance, implicit assumptions about the education system that I may hold, such as the barriers and challenges that exist within it and the rationale behind specific policies, may have impacted my data

²¹ Thomas, David R. "A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data." *American journal of evaluation* 27, no. 2 (2006): 237-246.

²² Kincheloe, Joe L., and Peter McLaren. "Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research." In *Key works in critical pedagogy*, pp. 285-326. Brill, 2011.

interpretation. Overall, I aimed to use this research to help find solutions to barriers faced by women from refugee backgrounds arriving in Canada and hoping to pursue higher education here.

Participants

This research was conducted in compliance with “Vancouver Universities” Office of Research Ethics. Study participants were recruited through a purposive sampling process which narrows down participants to a select group of people who fit specific criteria.²³ Participants included in the study were those who identified as young adult women from refugee backgrounds, who were between the ages of 19-30 years old, who had been in Canada for up to ten years, and who possessed a working level of the English language. Participants’ countries of origins were diverse, ranging from South Asia to the Middle East. Below is a table providing more detail on the participants. The table shares the age of participants, the number of years they have been in Canada (median years, $\bar{x} = 3$), the region of their origin, their sponsorship type, previous levels of educational attainment, and the generations of displacement in their families.

Table 1.1: Young adult women from refugee backgrounds – Study Participants

Name	Years in Canada	Region of Origin	Migration Journey	Previous Education	Generations of Displacement
Aaliya (28 yrs old)	3	South Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Master’s Degree	First generation
Ada (30 yrs old)	1.2	Middle East	Government sponsorship - family	Undergraduate degree	First generation

²³ Merriam, and Tisdell, *Qualitative research*.

Name	Years in Canada	Region of Origin	Migration Journey	Previous Education	Generations of Displacement
Amaal (29 yrs old)	4.5	Middle East	Private sponsorship - Academic scholarship	Undergraduate degree	First generation
Amira (30 yrs old)	3	Middle East	Private sponsorship – Community group	Undergraduate degree	First generation
Asmaan (21 yrs old)	6	Central Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Some high school	First generation
Calla (20 yrs old)	3	Middle East	Government sponsorship – family	Some high school	Second generation
Chanvatey (24 yrs old)	10	Southeast Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Some high school	First generation
Daiba (21 yrs old)	3	South Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Some high school	First generation
Daleela (22 yrs old)	5	Central Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Some high school	Second generation
Habibah (21 yrs old)	5	Central Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Some high school	Second generation

Name	Years in Canada	Region of Origin	Migration Journey	Previous Education	Generations of Displacement
Hakimah (22 yrs old)	1.5	Middle East	Private sponsorship - Academic scholarship	Incomplete Undergraduate degree	First generation
Iman (20 yrs old)	6	Central Asia	Government sponsorship - family	Some high school	First generation
Nabihah (23 yrs old)	3	South Asia	Government sponsorship - family	High school diploma	First generation
Oadira (28yrs old)	2	Middle East	Private sponsorship - Academic scholarship	Undergraduate degree	First generation
Ojala (26 yrs old)	2	Middle East	Private sponsorship - Academic scholarship	Undergraduate degree	First generation
Olya (24 yrs old)	10	Central Asia	Government sponsorship - Family	Some high school	First generation
Rafeeqah (21 yrs old)	3	Middle East	Government sponsorship - family	High school diploma	Second generation
Uhee (20 yrs old)	3.5	Western Asia	Community group - Private sponsorship	Some high school	Second generation

Data Collection

Data was collected through 18 person-to-person interviews and four focus groups. Interviews and focus groups were conducted over Zoom and each lasted roughly 60-minutes. The study used a semi-structured interview method which was guided by a set of questions that were related to the study's core themes and allowed flexibility in the interview questions and responses. This strategy enabled me as the researcher to respond to the topics raised by the participants and be open to the various ideas and worldviews that the participants identified. For example, participants were asked to describe their educational experience prior to coming to Canada and to explain what their educational goals were for the future. In keeping with constructivist principles, members of the same family were interviewed separately to allow each participant to express their own unique experiences.²⁴

In addition to interviews, focus groups were selected as a method of data collection because the interactive discussion which creates the data in the focus group changes the type of data that might be available through interviews alone.²⁵ In total, four focus groups were formed, with 17 of the 18 interview participants participating in them. The participants were assigned a focus group that consisted of three to five participants from a diversity of backgrounds and with a diversity of educational aspirations.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research methods, data analysis is the classification and interpretation of data to make meaning of the information.²⁶ Data was grouped into themes, upon which open coding began to break down data into key categories, from which sub-categories emerged. Examples of such themes included "Personal Goals, Family Expectations, and Networks in the Community." These were further broken down into sub-categories such as "Education Goals, Career Goals, Settlement Goals; Family Expectations at Home, in the Workforce, in Relation to

²⁴ Merriam, and Tisdell. *Qualitative Research*.

²⁵ Hennink, Monique M. "Cross-cultural focus group discussions." *A New Era in Focus Group Research: Challenges, Innovation and Practice* (2017): 59-82.

²⁶ Flick, Uwe. "Mapping the field." *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis 1* (2014): 3-18.

Education; and Social Networks, Professional Networks.” These themes, categories, and sub-categories were then analyzed in relation to the question of what aspirations young adult women from refugee backgrounds in Canada have. There were 15 broad themes, 56 categories, 87 sub-categories, and 4 general categories that emerged as relevant.

Findings

The women from refugee backgrounds in this study have high aspirations to participate in higher education and see higher education as a route out of poverty and exclusion. Study participants set ambitious academic and career goals for themselves, including those of pursuing education and careers in medicine, law, neuroscience, diplomacy, social work, and software-engineering. Like other adolescents and young adults in their 20s, the study participants were searching for meaning and purpose in their lives.²⁷ The study participants’ personal goals were influenced by the new, but also limited, opportunities that were available to them in Canada, such as specific academic programs of study that they may not have had access to in the past.

In the findings, section 1 highlights the three key factors that most influenced the ability of young adult women from refugee backgrounds to pursue higher education here in Canada: time and expectations, resource availability, and community. Although these findings are not generalizable, they were consistently identified as barriers to pursuing higher education amongst the 18 study participants.

Time and Expectations

How study participants set higher educational goals for themselves was a constant cost-benefit analysis: assessing the benefits of their actions in relation to the associated costs with taking that action. This was a shared commonality amongst most study participants. Costs were not just monetary but were also based on how much time a pursuit would take away from the

²⁷ Tanner, J. L., J. J. Arnett, and J. A. Leis. "Learning and Development During the First Stage of Adulthood." *Handbook of Research on Adult Development and Learning* (2009): 809.

pursuit of other responsibilities, and the costs of expectations, both fulfilling their own expectations as well as meeting the demands of their families and sometimes extended family.

Balancing Demands on Time

Study participants valued their time greatly. As Nabihah explains below, many participants felt that they had lost a lot of time or had wasted a lot of time waiting in refugee camps, waiting for documents to be processed, waiting for decisions to be made that were out of their control, and waiting to access education.

Look, it's difficult, like people are just starting quarantining now, [but] I have for four years of my life, I just stayed in quarantine...so...give us jobs, we want jobs!

(Nabihah, Interview, November 17, 2020)

Participants were eager to get their education started so that they could pursue new careers in their new country of settlement. This feeling of having 'wasted time' was especially true for older participants, several of whom had already attained a bachelor's or master's degree before coming to Canada and were now being told they had to start their post-secondary education over from the beginning.

The seven participants who had arrived in Canada young enough to have spent at least two years in a Canadian secondary school did not seem as pressured by time constraints. These participants typically had been exposed to diverse forms of acquiring information about higher education options and career planning, making them confident in their decision-making. Such information came from having taken classes such as Career and Life Education, a mandatory course in the British Columbian Curriculum for secondary students, which aims to teach students about career-life choices and decision-making, provide mentorship opportunities, and support students in cultivating personal and employment networks.²⁸ Getting advice from multiple sources of information, including teachers and peers, seemed to strengthen the confidence of

²⁸ "Building Student Success - B.C. Curriculum." n.d. Curriculum.gov.bc.ca. <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum/career-education/all/career-life-education>.

younger study participants both in setting educational goals for themselves, as well as in better understanding the steps and processes needed to achieve their goals.

I was talking to just my classmates and seeing where they were going. Some people were also applying to “West Coast” College, so I was able to have a conversation with them about how they’re doing it, the process of doing it, the time needed to do it...it was an easy transition.

(Calla, Interview, November 11, 2020)

Some participants felt that the limited amount of time they had spent in secondary school had not prepared them for the demands of higher education and that they needed stronger academic and specifically literacy skills prior to entering post-secondary education. These participants worked incredibly hard to meet the graduation requirements of secondary school in a limited amount of time, in order to enter into a post-secondary program straight from secondary school. Typically, these participants had two or less years in public secondary school, before entering directly into a post-secondary program. Yet, despite having worked hard and gained entrance to these programs, three participants failed out of their programs. They attributed their lack of academic success to various factors, including higher workload expectations and their still-developing academic language proficiency skills, as explained by Habibah:

I wanted to become a nurse, but like when I went to university and took classes I failed those classes because of the environment...everything was new. I didn’t have friends...the biggest obstacle was the language...I still have difficulty with saying or speaking or sometimes listening to somebody [else]...I was so depressed [because] I failed those classes... and I realized that I cannot take classes at the university...I’m working on Math now [at the Adult Education Centre]. I want to go back to university...I’m just very lost...I don’t want to disappoint my mom and dad.

(Habibah, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Chanvatey shared similar struggles in her attempt to complete both high school and then later a post-secondary program. Chanvatey dropped out of both programs (restarting at different

times) because she was unable to meet the program expectations while simultaneously dealing with the familial and personal mental health challenges—a direct consequence of her refugee experience of war, violence, and displacement.

...I was in grade four when we left [my home country] and [when I came to Canada] I dropped out [of high school because] I would not have gotten full credits to actually graduate because I was doing ESL [ELL] classes...I earned a few credits in like regular classes...but I wouldn't have gotten enough credits to graduate...I had to pretty much start off over again...there was a lot of problems in my home, you know because of the war and stuff...it was my foster mom that encouraged me to go back to school. She took me to school, signed me up, and said, like, 'you have to finish your school.'

(Chanvatey, Interview, September 5, 2020)

Expectations

In addition to time constraints, 16 of the 18 study participants noted that they were constantly balancing their own expectations with those of their families, and sometimes, this came at a significant personal cost of strained family relationships or tension in the home. Study participants generally had high personal expectations of themselves. They were enthusiastic to take advantage of the new educational and training opportunities that they found in Canada, and many of their personal goals started to shift and change as they discovered more options available to them. All study participants demonstrated high levels of intellectual curiosity, as they were eager to engage in new learning and were willing to accept the social, physical, and financial risks to acquire the new experiences, which included time away from family, long commutes, and low-wage work to pay for their education.²⁹ Many participants saw a Canadian education as a way out of poverty, a way to contribute positively to their communities, and a way to create a meaningful life for themselves and their families. Despite having to start their educations over again, there was a perception that a higher education credential attained in

²⁹ Kashdan, Todd B., David J. Disabato, Fallon R. Goodman, and Patrick E. McKnight. "The Five-Dimensional Curiosity Scale Revised (5DCR): Briefer subscales while separating overt and covert social curiosity." *Personality and Individual Differences* 157 (2020): 109836

Canada would help them attain their personal goals. Several participants noted that education was a way to make meaning out of their refugee experience and that their academic goals had changed to fields of study that would help them better understand, process, and deconstruct their personal journeys. For instance, one participant chose to study sociology to better understand human social behaviour which she reflected upon to better understand her personal experiences of conflict and migration, as she shared in the quote below.

I want to like study sociology...I took it because I already had experienced, you know, some of the social issues, that you know, I feel like others wouldn't understand, but we experienced it... your experiences impact you. They can change the direction of what you want to do...

(Daleela, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Similarly, another student was using their academic scholarship to pursue a field of study that would allow them to explore their own personal gender identity and to better understand themselves, an opportunity denied to them in their home country.

However, these goals were in frequent negotiation with the influence of familial expectations. Generally, families conveyed a high level of support for their daughters' educational pursuits. Several participants acknowledged that their parent/s recognized that they had missed out on significant developmental and educational opportunities, sometimes entire childhoods, and that they saw great value in pursuing education. Yet, even in families where parents tried to encourage their daughters to pursue higher education, the study participants still carried the weight of familial responsibility with them.

I don't think I have the freedom to do what I want to do, they [my family] are always in the back of my head, even if I'm ignoring it...I want to meet my parents' expectations or my family expectations...I would have to eventually get a good job to be able to help out with my family...I try to ignore it, however, it is always here...something I have to think about and keep in my mind.

(Calla, Focus Group #2, November 21, 2020)

Participants were continually thinking about their families' needs, which is consistent with literature that argues women take on the majority of the emotional and physical care burden within families.^{30, 31} This was particularly true for participants who had younger siblings or cousins. These participants expressed the pressure they felt to be good role models, while also supporting their younger family members' learning, growth, and development.

I'm the oldest of all my cousins and my sister, so I kind of have to be a role model for them in a way...I don't have any other option, I have to be something good. I have to end up in a good place, so I can you know, give them the confidence that they need...I feel like if I fail then they're going to lose hope... I can't ever make mistakes in my life. That's kind of making a lot of anxiety [in] my life, but I'm trying to look at it in a positive way.

(Uhee, Interview, November 14, 2020)

These additional familial responsibilities significantly impacted study participants' personal time to pursue their own goals, as well as contributed to significant demands on their cognitive load and general mental energy, which increased their stress and anxiety.

Familial responsibilities extended to gender-based domestic responsibilities which were impacted by the size of the family, the age of the young children in the family, the employment hours held by family members, and the adherence to gendered expectations held by the individual's family. One participant mentioned that she was not allowed to work outside the home, and rather, her family was more comfortable with her brother working outside the home.

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

³⁰ Dean, Liz, Brendan Churchill, and Leah Ruppanner. "The mental load: Building a deeper theoretical understanding of how cognitive and emotional labor over load women and mothers." *Community, Work & Family* 25, no. 1 (2022): 13-29.

³¹ Power, Kate. "The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families." *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 16, no. 1 (2020): 67-73.

(Daleela, Interview, September 22, 2020)

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

Further, limited childcare spaces and costly programming prevented many of the study participants' families from accessing childcare for the out-of-school-aged children, living in their homes. Approximately nine of the study participants cited that they had additional childcare responsibilities that their male counterparts, brothers, and cousins, did not have. These included supporting education (such as by attending parent-teacher conferences), providing financial support through part-time employment, and helping access medical care for the children and the elderly in their homes (such as by scheduling, attending, and translating at doctor's appointments). Several study participants noted that this was particularly disruptive to their attempts to focus on their educational goals because of the constant distraction but also because of the expectations that they participate in childcare responsibilities. Additionally, the closure of public libraries and other communal public spaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic further prohibited study participants from finding safe and quiet places to study. Daleela reinforced that childcare in the home, especially for young children, continued to be the dominant responsibility of women.

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

(Daleela, Interview, September 22, 2020)

Daleela's experience also showed that because her English skills were stronger than those of her mother, she became responsible for registering her siblings for childcare, organizing

forms, medical authorization, and proof of low-income status, so her siblings could qualify for preschool or daycare. She spent further time placing her siblings on childcare waitlists due to the lack of childcare availability that existed in her community. Other participants noted that they brought their siblings to free childcare programming, but that they were expected to stay for the duration of the programming which detracted from their ability to take English courses or pursue employment.

Resources

Educational and career goal setting for young adult women from refugee backgrounds was heavily influenced by the availability of resources accessible to themselves and their families post-arrival. The method of migration that brought these women to Canada – private or government sponsorship – greatly influenced the types of resources they could access. Study participants arrived in Canada through one of two ways: (1) Private sponsorship (n = 6), those sponsored by a scholarship, a community group, or family; or, (2) Government sponsorship (n = 12), including a few participants who had initially arrived in Canada as asylum seekers.

The method through which study participants arrived in Canada directly impacted the resources they had available to them to set and pursue goals. For instance, those who arrived through government sponsorship and were provided one-year of minimal financial support, were less likely to have the necessary financial resources to be self-sufficient, and were more likely to pursue part-and-full time employment to meet their basic needs. This was similar for those who were privately sponsored by family, as their families often had limited resources to support them once they arrived here. Alternatively, participants who were privately sponsored by a group or organization had more resources to support them, as well as a wider social network to draw upon for extra support, whether it be generalized settlement support or more targeted support, such as for mental health.

A common struggle amongst 16 of the 18 study participants was how to balance the resources they had available to them to support their families. Such resources included being able to meet their basic needs for survival, such as food or shelter, as well as additional important needs such as money or technology. These 16 study participants shared the common goal of supporting their family, whether their families were here in Canada or abroad. The families of study participants relied upon them financially, as cultural brokers between families and

institutions and services, and in supporting day-to-day family duties including childcare, cleaning, and errands. This limited the time participants had available to pursue their own goals. While no participants viewed this as a burden, several did mention that their home environment was too chaotic to focus on studying or that they were taking fewer courses than they would have liked to so that they could continue to work part-time and contribute financially to their household. This entailed continual negotiation between participant's families' needs and the resources participants had to pursue their educational aspirations.

Academic Scholarships Recipients

The participants who arrived in Canada alone on an academic scholarship were more likely to have their basic financial needs met by the comprehensive terms of the scholarship. For many, a scholarship was their only hope at pursuing higher education.

...the scholarship was the only solution for me...my family didn't have that money to send me to the study abroad...so scholarship was the only hope I had...

(Hakimah, Interview, October 27, 2020)

These scholarship-sponsored participants noted that because they had their basic needs covered, they were able to better take advantage of the vast number of extra-curricular opportunities available to them on their university campuses. They shared how they were able to explore many different groups, clubs, and committees on-campus, attend several different events weekly, and were able to explore their interests and different aspects of their personal identity through these opportunities. Participants were able to meet many different people within the academic community, including peers and professors, who had varying perspectives, experiences, and life journeys, which provided insight into Canadian culture and enabled them to build a supportive social network.

Government-Sponsored Study Participants

The resources available to participants and their families who arrived through government sponsorship were significantly less than for scholarship participants. Participants and their families on government sponsorship received a maximum of one year of supportive

financial funding, as well as settlement support upon arrival.³² They are also responsible for reimbursing the Canadian government for their transportation costs, as well as their medical examinations prior to coming to Canada, which adds to their often large, pre-existing debt-load.³³ These participants all initially arrived at a Greater Vancouver Welcome Centre which covered their immediate basic needs upon arrival (for example, shelter and food) and provided opportunities for them to develop their resumes and connect with career advisors and settlement workers. However, several participants felt that this support did not last long enough. They indicated that it took many months for educational institutions, government agencies, and employers to assess their credentials, read their resumes, or set up language or skill-based exams.

Several government-sponsored participants noted that their first jobs upon arrival were on-call, or had irregular and inconsistent hours, forcing them to take night transit to or from work (which they had varying levels of comfort doing), and that the jobs did not pay a livable wage.

...[my job] was over an hour and a half each way...bus, then sky-train, and then bus again...two buses and the sky-train...I would come home always at like 8-9:00 pm, and I would stay up until like 2-3:00 am to study...

(Olya, Interview, July 28, 2020)

Two participants noted that because of this type of precarious employment, they had significant difficulty making friends with peers their age because they were working with older adults while their peers were at school (so they perceived). One participant even stated that after two years in Canada, she still did not have any friends her age.

Community

³² Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. "Government of Canada." Canada.ca, February 1, 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-outside-canada.html#countryasylum>.

³³ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. 2015. "Government-Assisted Refugees Program." Aem. November 10, 2015. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/help-outside-canada/government-assisted-refugee-program.html>.

Study participants generally agreed that community involvement, through volunteering or participating in community events, gatherings, teams, or clubs, enabled them to become better acquainted with their new culture and meet others in their community who helped guide their aspirational pursuits. These peers introduced them to new opportunities, including career pathways, that they might not otherwise have known about. In addition to helping inform educational and career pathways, the relationships that they developed with others through these opportunities enhanced their mental well-being and their sense of belonging.

Connections are also important to build a support system for yourself here, especially if you're by yourself...I didn't want to fall into depression...[and] you never know what doors they open.

(Hakimah, Interview, October 23, 2020)

Several study participants also mentioned that participating in and contributing to their community was an important way to feel valued in their new country. These same participants noted that they did not feel like victims of war or “helpless refugees,” that they were intelligent, hard-working, resourceful, and capable, and wanted to be perceived as such.

I want to be useful...so many people [have] help[ed] us, I am not used to taking...I want to be valuable in my community.

(Calla, Interview, November 11, 2020)

For study participants who arrived in Canada alone or missing family members, creating their own social support network was extremely important in feeling connected to others, limiting feelings of social isolation, and learning more about Canadian culture and the opportunities available here. Several study participants found themselves volunteering with organizations that they had first used upon arrival to Canada, including settlement agencies and the Food Bank. In these roles, participants met a diversity of people, including youth, as well as settlement-, multicultural-, and case-workers, who, through both formal and informal conversations, helped them better understand their new Canadian culture and provided them a trusting person to ask questions to. Several participants noted they had to make a significant

personal effort to participate in and generally just attend these programs, as they felt a certain level of personal risk, both of the unknown environment they were entering into and of personal rejection. However, these same participants noted a variety of benefits that emerged from their community experiences, including new friendships, mentorship opportunities, as well as free training and certifications. These participants also found part- and some even full-time jobs through these experiences. Participants also noted volunteering as an opportunity to explore personal interests and different aspects of their identity in a supportive environment, strengthening their confidence in their decision-making and ultimately enabling them to take small risks in meeting others, trying new things, and exploring their communities, which contributed to the formation of their personal aspirations.

Study participants used social media, specifically Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as ways to explore different clubs and groups, to find like-minded peers, to search for new opportunities (for example, educational, volunteering, or job opportunities), to connect with family and friends, as well as to assess the safety and reliability of such opportunities. Several participants mentioned that they would be more likely to attend opportunities such as events, volunteer opportunities, and job fairs that were posted on social media outlets such as Facebook, if they were recommended by people they knew and trusted, such as friends, support workers, or faculty. This was a way of cross-checking the safety and authenticity of an event, which was important in participants' comfort level and overall willingness to attend an event. Two participants noted that they were even more likely to attend an event if the person who recommended the event was willing and able to attend with them or meet them there.

In navigating these new online communities, participants began to better understand themselves, their interests, and their values. Online communities allowed them to explore different aspects of their personal identity and expanded their awareness of educational and career opportunities available to them which was a significant factor in their personal goal setting.

Discussion

Young adult women from refugee backgrounds are underrepresented in the Canadian higher education system.³⁴ This article aimed to better understand what factors were most significant in shaping the aspirations of young adult women from refugee backgrounds.

Bourdieu argues that the dominant class has high levels of cultural capital and that a lack of such cultural capital would lead to social and cultural exclusion.³⁵ The young adult women from refugee backgrounds in this study typically had low levels of cultural capital as a direct result of their migration and displacement. For instance, being forced to move to a new society in which one may know little about the dominant culture would minimize one's level of embodied capital, or having one's education interrupted by war would minimize one's institutionalized capital. Study participants also lacked more symbolic forms of capital, including material belongings required for academic success such as personalized computers and smartphones, which are often unwritten requirements in higher education.³⁶ Higher educational policies that require, for instance, that a course must be attended in-person, and unofficial policies that require, for instance, the latest computer technology, are prohibitive to study participants because of the inequitable demands on their time and the lack of expendable resources.

Despite possessing the "right" attitudes, behaviours, and valuing education (common aspects of Bourdieu's argument of cultural capital), study participants still struggled to find success in higher education. One key factor was the lack of social and professional networks participants had. They often lacked a trusted network of advisors, friends, and mentors that they could turn to for advice and guidance. This frequently left them feeling unclear about their educational options and lacking confidence in their personal and family decision-making. Participants largely acquired knowledge of the dominant culture through social media but were struggling to find a supportive network of like-minded peers. Educational institutions should coordinate with settlement service agencies to create sustainable programs that are accessible for newcomer women and that focus on building community and strengthening connections both

³⁴ Shakya et al., *Aspirations for Higher Education*, 65.

³⁵ Bourdieu, Pierre. "1977 Outline of a Theory of Practice." *Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press* (1972).

³⁶ Duhaney, Devon C. "Technology and higher education: Challenges in the halls of academe." *International Journal of Instructional Media* 32, no. 1 (2005): 7.

professionally and socially. If strong networks of community can be formed, they would provide newcomer women with mutual support networks that could help them navigate their settlement.^{37, 38}

Nancy Fraser suggests that justice can be understood in two separate but interrelated ways: distributive justice, or a more equitable distribution of resources; and recognition justice, the recognition of differences between social identities and groups.³⁹ For young adult women from refugee backgrounds to have an equitable chance at success in higher education, policies and practices must account both for their unique needs and allocate resources to address these needs. For instance, study participants identified familial responsibilities as taking up much of their expendable time. Resources to support family members settlement, including mental health and well-being, childcare support, and housing, must be made available to newcomers, so that the young adults in the family can have the time to pursue higher education. Recognition justice must acknowledge the intersectionality of newcomers, including gender, age, class, and race, as well as the impact of disrupted education in key formative years on learning and development.⁴⁰ A holistic and individualized approach taken to assess the resource needs of women and their families from refugee backgrounds would help support their academic aspirations.

Conclusion

As Canada continues to search for ways to fill an increasing labour shortage, newcomers play a significant role in the ongoing growth and prosperity of Canada. During the time this study was conducted, Afghan refugees escaping Taliban rule, Colombian refugees escaping a deadly civil war, and Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russian invasion were amongst the thousands of people seeking asylum in Canada.⁴¹ As Canada welcomes more refugees every year, there is a responsibility to provide these newcomers, specifically those from refugee backgrounds, with the

³⁷ Dunwoodie, Karen, Susan Webb, Jane Wilkinson, and Alexander Newman. "Social capital and the career adaptability of refugees." *International Migration* (2020).

³⁸ Goodson, Lisa, and Jenny Phillimore. "A community research methodology: working with new migrants to develop a policy related evidence base." *Social Policy and Society* 9, no. 4 (2010): 489-501.

³⁹ Fraser, Nancy. "Injustice at intersecting scales: On 'social exclusion' and the 'global poor'." *European journal of social theory* 13, no. 3 (2010): 363-371.

⁴⁰ Fraser, Injustice at Intersecting Scales, 363-371.

⁴¹ Immigration, Refugees. "Citizenship Canada (IRCC): Ottawa." *ON, Canada* (2021).

skills training and resources they need to be independent. Doing so will help to build a strong economy with skilled workers and employees who feel a sense of belonging and a commitment to positively contributing to their new country, while also ensuring that Canada's public sector, including educational and health services, remain strong, healthy, and resilient. This will require an intersectoral approach where public and private institutions, organizations, government, and industries in Canadian society work together to support the needs of these newcomer populations.

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